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Modeling the experiences of customer-customer encounters (CCEs) in event tourism

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MODELING THE EXPERIENCES OF CUSTOMER-CUSTOMER ENCOUNTERS

(CCES) IN EVENT TOURISM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

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Wei Wei

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For My Parents

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I was "alarmed" a long time ago that a dissertation could be a dreadful and seemingly never-ending journey. Standing here and looking back, I've found that my dissertation can better be depicted as a monk's trip seeking Buddhist scriptures in the West, which definitely demands firm will and strong persistence to conquer various challenges but is never a solo journey. I have to say, I have been blessed with tremendous support from faculty, friends, and family throughout the completion of this bittersweet journey.

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acknowledgements by quoting a line from Dwight Frindt: "Acknowledgement and

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Looking forward, I am in full swing!

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ABSTRACT

Wei, Wei. Ph.D., Purdue University, May 2015. Modeling the Experiences of Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs) in Event Tourism. Major Professor: Li Miao, Liping A. Cai.

Over the last two decades, the increase in research into the event industry is testimony to the importance of this industry to the burgeoning tourism economy. Despite a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees at in-person events, a comprehensive review of related literature indicates a lack of theories explaining the process and rationale behind interpersonal interaction phenomenon at events. This dissertation promotes a deeper understanding of how interactions among attendees are subjectively experienced and has implications for the context of the most competitive segment of the business sector of events--conferences.

The empirical investigation of this dissertation includes a qualitative study and a quantitative study. The qualitative study was conducted to explore how attendees subjectively experience interpersonal encounters with other attendees. A total of 26 informants who have attended various association conferences in the past five years were invited to participate in an in-depth interview. Data analysis of these interviews leads to a flow of attendees' subjective experiences at customer-customer encounters (CCEs), to instrumental-hedonic dual motivations that drive attendees to participate in CCEs, to

three typical types of CCEs, and finally, to four major functions served by CCEs accompanied by four processes these functions are perceived to facilitate. These functions and processes propose a multidimensional conceptualization of attendees' CCE experiences. This dissertation also identifies three levels of salient situational factors that affect attendees' experiences at CCEs. Lastly, two special types of CCEs stood out, which are reported to stay "sticky" after attendees' conference participation.

The quantitative study was administered to investigate the underlying mechanism through which attendees' CCE experiences can impact attendees' self-view and conference experience. Drawing upon Self Concept and Social Identity Theory, this dissertation proposes a positive relationship between attendees' CCE experiences and their self-esteem as well as transcendent conference experience, which is mediated through attendees' group identification with the conference group. Attendees' CCE experiences are operationalized into know-how exchange and social-emotional support attendees received at CCEs. In total, 821 participants were recruited to fill out an online questionnaire regarding their interaction experiences at association conferences they attended in the past five years. Structural Equation Modeling results demonstrate that as expected, attendees' CCE experiences positively affect their self-esteem and transcendent conference experience, which is partially mediated through attendees' group identification with the conference group. In addition, the path coefficients indicate that compared with know-how exchange, the social-emotional support attendees obtain from other attendees at CCEs plays a more significant role in facilitating their identification process with the conference group and in leading to their transcendent conference experience.

This dissertation contributes to emerging consumer research on the influence of other consumers and consumer experience by exploring subjective experiences at CCEs in an interaction-driven industry--the conference industry. Drawing upon theories and empirical findings from a variety of study fields including social psychology, consumer behavior, organizational behavior, event management, and marketing & branding, this dissertation develops a consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism. This consumptive model reveals the "black box" in the behavioral process in consumer literature by uncovering the multidimensionality of CCE experiences and the impacts of CCE experiences on attendees' self-view and conference experience. The consumptive model developed in this dissertation further advocates for and advances an integration of experiential focus in consumer behavior studies. The findings offered in this dissertation are also practically meaningful to the hospitality and event industry. Specific findings associated with attendees' multidimensional interaction experiences at three major types of CCEs and the mediating role of attendees' felt identification in attendees' overall experiences provide hospitality and events practitioners with an enhanced understanding of attendees' subjective experiences at CCEs. Such an enhanced understanding helps hospitality and events practitioners increase their competitive edge by strategizing best practices to engage attendees at CCEs, to add value to attendees' overall experiences, and to enhance events-marketing with a focus on experiential CCEs. Hospitality and event practitioners are further offered strategic suggestions to collaborate with the host destination and the event venue in order to improve attendees' interaction and event experiences and to sustain the development and success of the event industry.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

People have a need to assemble--to socialize, celebrate and conduct business

(Getz, 2012, p.38 & 60). Historically, in both Western and non-Western societies, face-

to-face meetings have played a significant role in individuals' social and political lives

(Schwartzman, 1989). In modern times, in-person events occur each year throughout the

world and dominate the media; occupy transportation systems, hotels and venues; achieve

business goals; motivate communities and bring in both positive and negative impacts

(Bowdin, Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2006, p. xxvii). Despite advances in

information technologies, virtual events communicated through various media, especially

in businesses' operations, are perceived as unable to replace or compete with the power

of a personal, face-to-face event (Fletcher & Major, 2006; Masoodian, Apperley, &

Frederikson, 1995). Regardless of the adoption of new technologies, there seems to be no

significant diminution in the importance of face-to-face meetings in many critical aspects,

and it is not likely to occur over the next decade or two (Winger, 2005). Continuing

significance is placed on face-to-face gatherings for both individuals and society as a

whole (Lu, 2011).

In light of this trend, a question is raised: what are the subjective experiences that

attendees desire to gain from an in-person event? A PCMA (Professional Convention

Management Association) Survey in 2010 pointed out that conference attendees expected to encounter more leisure time, an increased number of team-building activities, and greater opportunities to interact with others. Compared with other settings, however, interpersonal experiences in a conference setting seemingly remain less understood. Among fifteen service settings that have been frequently studied in previous customer-customer interactions research, however, the focus on customer-customer interactions in a conference setting is absent (Zhang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2010). A few conference studies have acknowledged the positive effects of interactions among attendees which include: exchanging knowledge (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2007), and building social networks (Mair & Thompson, 2009), as well as enhancing education, career development (Zhang, Leung, & Qu, 2007), and self-esteem (Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007). These studies have, nonetheless, prioritized the instrumental outcomes of interaction experiences and have not placed the interaction experiences themselves at the center of their discussion. Attendees' subjective experiences during encounters with others are still underappreciated.

In-person conference experiences feature a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees who gather for the same conference theme. To the extent that the presence of other attendees is highly salient in a conference setting, conference experiences are perceived to center on the quality and frequencies of interactions among attendees, including both managerially planned and personally initiated interaction incidents (Nicholls, 2005). Considering the significant role that interaction experiences play in improving attendees' transcendent conference experience, it is valuable to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of how the interactions among attendees at

conferences are subjectively experienced. Previous researchers have noted a lack of theories to explain the process and rationale behind customer-customer interaction phenomenon at events, ranging from antecedents to attending events (e.g., needs, motives, constraints) to the social constructs that give events broader meanings and importance within society and cultures (Getz, 2012). Getz (2012) further suggested that events researchers should emphasize "holistic, integrated research, the generation of a theoretical body of knowledge, an interdisciplinary focus, clearly explicated theory and methodology, and the application of qualitative and quantitative methods, positivist and non-positivist traditions" (p. 8).

To address this call (Getz, 2012, p. 7), this dissertation is aimed at modeling attendees' interaction experiences in a conference setting by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, through which perspectives from various fields of study (psychology, social psychology, customer behavior, organizational behavior, event management, and marketing & branding) are incorporated to provide a more holistic understanding of attendees' subjective interaction experiences at conferences.

1.2   Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this dissertation is to model conference attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters, which was achieved through two studies at two phases: a qualitative study and a quantitative study. The qualitative study focused on exploring the experiential aspects of conference attendees' interaction experiences. Four specific objectives were proposed:

Objective 1: To develop a classification of typical customer-customer encounters at conferences.

Objective 2: To examine the motivations of conference attendees' participation in customer-customer encounters.

Objective 3: To explore the underlying dimensions of conference attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters.

Objective 4: To investigate the salient situational factors that affect conference attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters.

The quantitative component of this dissertation centers on the impacts of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters: how conference attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters will contribute to their satisfaction with the conference. Anchored in branding, marketing, and social psychology literature, this dissertation adopts Self-Concept and Social Identity Theory as its theoretical bedrock to investigate the underlying psychological mechanisms through which experiences at customer-customer encounters influence attendees' conference experiences via building attendees' group identity within the conference group. Two specific objectives were therefore proposed as follows:

Objective 5: To investigate the impacts of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters on their conference satisfaction.

Objective 6: To examine the mediating role of group identity in the impacts of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters on their conference satisfaction.

1.3   Significance of the Research

1.3.1   Theoretical Significance

The research objectives of this dissertation are of both theoretical and practical importance. From a theoretical perspective, this dissertation contributes to previous customer behavior studies and events studies. Specifically, this dissertation extends previous studies on customer-customer encounters in general hospitality and tourism settings to a setting where customer-customer encounters have not received sufficient investigation--the event setting.

First, this dissertation provides a framework for understanding customer-customer encounters in events tourism, which is one of the first attempts to systematically present key issues associated with attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. This framework explores the perspective of attendees and thus contributes to events studies that have so far focused primarily on management perspectives. This framework also prioritizes the commonalities between conference experiences regardless of the specific themes of the conferences, aiming to yield generalizable academic implications for event studies.

Second, this dissertation contributes to previous studies on customer-customer encounters by providing an understanding of what are regarded as typical customer-customer encounters at events by event attendees. While diverse forms of customer-customer interactions or encounters have been widely studied in retailing and general service settings such as supermarkets, gyms, and libraries, systematic investigation into typical interactions between customers in an event setting is lacking. By developing a classification of typical interaction incidents during customer-customer encounters

throughout various conferences, this dissertation provides insight into the range of forms that customer-customer encounters take at conferences, thus increasing the knowledge base of previous customer-customer encounter studies and offering a platform for future event studies.

Third, this dissertation suggests a multidimensional conceptualization of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters during events. While different dimensional structures were adopted to understand interaction experiences in other settings, a similar practice is lacking for the conference setting. To fill this void, this dissertation explores the multidimensional pattern underlying attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters, indicating that the influences of other attendees in a conference setting can take place at multiple levels. By drawing attention to the multidimensional pattern of experiences during customer-customer encounters, the findings of this dissertation will also shed light on the development of assessments measuring attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters for future studies.

Fourth, this dissertation will present a dynamic flow of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters. Espousing perspectives from the fields of psychology, social psychology, consumer behavior, and event management, this dissertation provides a deeper understanding of what motivates conference attendees to engage in customer-customer encounters and what may influence conference attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters. As a result, rather than only focus on the antecedents to attendees' engagement in customer-customer encounters, this dissertation examines factors that are salient throughout attendee's experience during a customer-customer encounter, thus accounting for both individual and situational factors.

Fifth, this dissertation will further empirically assess the significance of attendees'
experiences during customer-customer encounters. By adopting an interdisciplinary
approach, this dissertation will incorporate perspectives from social psychology,
organizational behavior, and marketing/branding to generate a more thorough
understanding of the underlying mechanisms through which attendees' experiences at
customer-customer encounters can make an impact. By exploring the potential mediating
role of constructed group identity in a conference setting, this dissertation intends to
assess psychological implications of customer-customer encounters.

1.3.2   Practical Significance

This dissertation also yields essential managerial implications for the hospitality
and events industry that could improve attendees' conference experiences and sustain the
development and success of the industry.

First, this dissertation alerts hospitality and events practitioners to the significance
of customer-customer encounters at conferences. By providing empirical evidence for the
impacts of other attendees on focal attendees' conference experiences, this dissertation
seeks to raise hospitality and events practitioners' awareness and encourage them to
invest in the management of an important interpersonal domain in a conference setting:
customer-customer encounters.

Second, this dissertation provides practical guidance for hospitality and events
practitioners to manage social elements. By developing a classification for typical
customer-customer encounters, this dissertation intends to fill a potential gap between
how customer-customer encounters are defined by practitioners versus by attendees. Thus

far, practitioners have focused their attention on structured and planned encounters among attendees. The findings of this dissertation will provide hospitality and events practitioners with a better understanding of potential encounters that may add value to attendees' experiences.

This dissertation strives to assist hospitality and events practitioners towards a better understanding of attendees' expectations for their experiences during encounters with other attendees. This dissertation provides empirical evidence for the multi-dimensional impacts attendees exert on other attendees during customer-customer encounters. Such findings will help conference planners provide attendees with a range of tangible and intangible benefits, and improve planners' abilities to better meet attendees' expectations for human interactions when attending conferences, thus ensuring attendees' satisfaction with their conference experience.

Fourth, this dissertation explores potential situational factors that are acknowledged by attendees to be associated with their experiences during customer-customer encounters. Learning about the salient factors of customer-customer encounters will help practitioners design and manage environments and situations. Findings in this dissertation provide specific suggestions for practitioners to strategically facilitate attendees' engagement in customer-customer encounters and indirectly influence their encounter satisfaction.

Fifth, this dissertation provides rich implications for the marketing of the events industry. The findings of this dissertation offer insights into the marketing of interaction opportunities as a unique experiential dimension of conferences, differentiating them from standardized conference provisions by highlighting the intangible benefits of their

promotional offers. In summary, this dissertation raises an important consideration for the future development and marketing of the meeting and event industry.

CHAPTER 2.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1   Overview

This dissertation centers on subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters in event tourism. In Chapter 2, the theoretical background of modeling such experiences and the conceptualization of the hypothesized relationships are discussed. Chapter 2 consists of four parts. The first part introduces previous literature on event tourism as a field of study. The focus of this dissertation on association conferences, a key segment under the umbrella of event tourism, is hereby put forward. The second part reviews the theoretical work on interactions during customer-customer encounters in general service settings. The characteristics of interactions during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are then discussed. The third part provides the theoretical underpinnings of the nature of experiences at customer-customer encounters in general service settings, starting from the manifestations of interactions, to the motivation of their engagement in customer-customer encounters, to the dimensions of interaction experiences, and concluding with a discussion of potentially influential factors in the customer interaction experience. A lack of systematic research on these aspects of customer-customer encounters in a conference setting is recognized, leading to the first set of objectives of this dissertation. The fourth part reviews the current literature on the likely construction of group identity based upon interpersonal interactions in diverse

settings. Drawing from this review, this dissertation proposes a psychological mechanism through which attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters facilitate their identification with other attendees at the conference, which influences their conference satisfaction.

2.2   Previous Literature in Event Tourism and Conferences

2.2.1   Previous Literature in Event Tourism

Event tourism is perceived to exist at the nexus of tourism and events and is generally recognized to consist of all planned events in an integrated approach to development and marketing (Getz, 2008). On the one hand, tourists constitute a potential market for planned events (Getz, 2008). On the other hand, planned events are highly valued as attractions, place marketers, and image-makers for tourism. For instance, meetings and conventions are recognized as potential aids in minimizing seasonal effects on hospitality and tourism businesses (Cai, Bai, & Morrison, 2001). Furthermore, as an umbrella term for the vast scope of the meeting and event professions encompassing festivals, conferences, celebrations, entertainment, recreation, exhibitions, sport events, and others (Bowdin et al., 2006, p. xxviii; Getz, 2008), the event industry is growing rapidly and becoming a significant contributor to business and leisure tourism (Bowdin et al., 2006, p. xxv). Drawing upon the link between tourism and planned events, both tourism and event studies are called for to provide a better understanding of the event tourism experience (Getz, 2008).

The events sector, however, was not recognized as an independent study area in the 1960s and 1970s. Among the few published articles that were identified in event

tourism during this time period, most of the leading ones centered on event economic impact assessments (e.g., Della Bitta, Loudon, Booth, & Weeks, 1978). The 1980s saw dramatic growth in event tourism as a research topic, manifested by studies on festivals (Coopers & Lybrand Consulting Group, 1989; Gunn & Wicks, 1982), and exposition (Gartner & Holecek, 1983), as well as hallmark events (Burns, Hatch, & Mules, 1986; Syme, Shaw, Fenton, & Mueller, 1989). Event management literature in the 1990s featured published articles on festival management and event tourism (Uysal, Gahan, & Martin, 1993). Entering the 20th century, research in the events sector was further boosted by the vast number of special events taking place during that time (Dwyer, Mellor, Mistillis, & Mules, 2000). In addition to the greater attention that has been given to the economic aspects of event tourism, social and cultural impacts of events have received increasing investigation in the last decade (Fredline, 2006; Xiao & Smith, 2004). In the current decade, event-specific research is manifested in various divisions of events-related impacts, policy, planning, business and management (Getz, 2008).

2.2.2   Conferences as One Type of Planned Events

Planned events encompass a variety of types. Event experiences are unique because of the range of specific types of events. Drawing upon a typology of planned events developed by Getz (2008), planned events consist of six categories based primarily on their forms: cultural celebration (e.g., festivals, heritage, and religious rites), business and trade (e.g., meetings, conventions, fairs, exhibitions, educational and scientific congress), arts and entertainment (e.g., concerts, show, theater), sport and recreation (e.g., sport festivals and fun events), political and state (e.g., summits, military,

political congresses), and other private functions (e.g., parties, reunions, weddings) (Getz, 2008). Some of these types aim to foster civic pride and cohesion, while others typically target the facilitation of competition, fun, business and socialization.

Among the above-mentioned types of planned events, the business and trade sector is one of the event types that has attracted the most attention from researchers and practitioners (Getz, 2008). This sector encompasses meetings, incentives, conferences, fairs, and exhibitions (trade and customer shows), and is frequently referred to by use of the acronym MICE (Getz, 2008), with the "C" sometimes referring to conventions and the "E" sometimes referring to events (Weber & Ladkin, 2004). This dissertation targets convention/conference experiences. The value of the convention/conference industry is high, elevated by substantial market growth in recent years (Leask & Spiller, 2002). The first convention bureau in the United States was established in 1896 (Spiller, 2002) and the International Association of Convention Bureaus was founded in 1914. The modern convention/conference industry grew in concert with the progress of industrialization and the growth of trade and associations in the late nineteenth century and through the twentieth (Spiller, 2002).

Among the sub-categories in the business and trade sector of events, conventions and conferences are often used synonymously or indiscriminately, denoting a type of event that includes association meetings (e.g., Oppermann & Chon, 1997), educational programming, networking activities, and in some cases also an exhibition (e.g., Severt et al., 2007). However, strictly speaking, conventions and conferences are different from each other. Conventions often represent a general and formal meeting of a legislative body, or a social or economic group with the purpose of providing information on a

particular topic in order to deliberate and establish agreement on policies among participants (Rogers, 2008, p. 17). According to Getz (2012), conventions are usually referred to as large assemblies of people, and convention delegates must go through a screening process. In Europe, the term congress is used in place of conventions for the same purpose.

Conferences primarily denote assemblies of any organization, private or public body, scientific or cultural society, and corporation or trade association in order to meet and exchange views, to share messages, and publicize opinions on a specific topic (Rogers, 2008, p. 16). Compared with conventions, conferences are usually on a smaller scale in order to facilitate interactions, promote a higher level of social connectivity, and establish position reports and discussions (Getz, 2012; Rogers, 2003, p. 16). For instance, academics hold many themed conferences on certain topics of broad interest within a field of study. In this dissertation, the term conferences was chosen over conventions and used consistently in the discussion for two reasons. First, the relatively small scale of conferences is perceived to be more conducive to attendees' interpersonal interaction, which is the key interest of this study (i.e., attendees' interaction experiences). Second, using the term conferences consistently rather than using the two terms interchangeably ensures the clarity of discussions throughout this dissertation.

2.2.3   Previous literature in the conference industry

Over the last two decades, the increase in research concerning the conference industry is testimony to the importance of this industry to the burgeoning tourism economy (Jago & Deery, 2005). The research on the conference industry centers on a

number of key streams. These key streams include site selection choices (e.g., Bonn, Brand & Ohlin, 1994; Choi & Boger, 2002; Crouch & Ritchie, 1997; Grant & Weaver, 1996; Rockett & Smilie, 1994), top destination locations (e.g., Baloglu & Love, 2001), image of the destination city (e.g., Fenich, 1992; Oppermann, 1996), satisfaction with conference facilities (Rittichainuwat, Beck, & Lalopa, 2001), and the influence of conference participants on conference decision-making (e.g., Ngamsom & Beck, 2000; Oppermann & Chon, 1997).

As a major sector of the wider tourism industry, however, the conference industry is often undervalued. As with much of the research on the conference industry, the exploration of conferences is incidental to the main issue, which concerns conference attendees' experiences. Most of the above-mentioned studies represent findings from the managerial perspective of planners and organizers (Severt et al., 2007). While much customer behavior research is applied to the satisfaction of meeting planners in regards to site selection choices, it hardly has been applied to conference attendees (Baloglu, Pekcan, Chen, & Santos, 2003; Cai et al., 2001; Lee & Back, 2005). Conference experiences from attendees' perspective (Malekmohammadi, Mohamed, & Ekiz, 2011), especially in the context of interpersonal interactions, have not been studied extensively. In addition, a strong conceptual foundation is needed in empirical studies on conference tourism. Future researchers are advised to employ a more balanced approach by producing methodologically sound research articles with appropriate statistical techniques based on strong theoretical frameworks to further advance conference tourism as a recognized field of study (Yoo & Weber, 2005). It is, therefore, critical for hospitality and tourism

researchers and practitioners to understand, appeal to, and satisfy attendees' subjective experiences at conferences rather than merely the perceived features.

Conferences can be further grouped into corporate conferences and association conferences according to their buyers (Rogers, 2008, p. 28). Corporate conferences are organized for and/or by corporate organizations, the prominent sectors of which include oil, gas and petrochemicals, medical and pharmaceuticals, computing/IT and telecommunications, and others. Association conferences are staged for and/or by a wide range of organizations that are not work-related, such as: social groups, military groups, educational groups, religious groups, fraternal groups (i.e., SMERF), political organizations, charities, voluntary associations, and others (Rogers, 2008, p. 33).

When compared with corporate conferences, association conferences constitute a major segment of demand for conference businesses (Davidson & Rogers, 2012, p. 6). Association conferences have a longer duration and are larger in size and in number of attendees (Getz, 2012). Association conferences constitute the largest sub-segment in terms of direct expenditure (71%) (Alkjaer, 1993) and number of attendees (78%) (Edelstein & Benini, 1994) within the conference segments and are recognized as the most competitive segment of the industry (Crouch & Ritchie, 1997; Loverseed, 1993). Such a two-to-one split explains why convention and visitor bureau marketing efforts are aimed predominantly at associations (Leigh & Adler, 1998). Given the increasing intensity of competition for attracting international attendees among host destinations and associations (Lee & Back, 2008), association conferences have become an increasingly significant market for business tourism destinations (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Malekmohammadi et al., 2011). The United States hosts the largest number of

association conferences (ICCA rankings, 1999-2001). There are more than 147,000 associations in the United States with 1000 new associations being created every year (Baloglu & Love, 2005). As non-profit organizations, associations represent a wide variety of industries, professions, charities, and interest groups, contributing more than $56 billion annually to the $83 billion meetings industry through the employment of meetings, expositions, and conventions (Baloglu & Love, 2005). Around 66 million trips have been generated by association conferences in the United States (Opperman & Chon, 1997).

According to a recent meeting market trends survey conducted among more than 800 meeting planners by Meeting Focus at the end of 2011, 18.1 percent of association planners indicated that they expected the number of meetings they will hold to increase by up to 10 percent (Davidson, 2012). However, survey results also pointed out several challenges that association conferences would face in 2013, led by increasing costs (42.6%) and declining attendance (27.4%), both of which appear more serious than those of corporate conferences (respectively 37.2% and 10.4%). While the economy (74.5%) is recognized as the biggest threat to association conferences, planners who participated in the meeting market trends survey indicated that the perceived value of association conferences (8.9%) is the second biggest threat. Given that attendees' participation in association conferences is voluntary in nature and attendees are usually responsible for the expenses of the conference (Getz, 2012), the association conference segment shares great similarities with leisure travel with regards to the decision-making process (Mair & Thompson, 2009). The perceived value of one's experience at an association conference, therefore, plays a significant role in his or her decision-making process regarding

conference participation. This dissertation focuses on understanding attendees' subjective experiences at association conferences.

2.3   Experiences at Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs) In a Conference Setting

2.3.1   Customer-Customer Interactions (CCIs) VS. Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs)

In previous studies on service management, the words "interactions" and "encounters" tend to be used interchangeably. For instance, Parker and Ward (2000) defined a service encounter as the interaction between service providers and service customers. Customer-customer interactions (CCIs) literally mean a customer's interactions with other customers (Johnson & Grier, 2013). Such interactions may take a variety of forms such as verbal versus non-verbal interactions, direct versus indirect interactions, and positive versus negative interactions. For instance, Venkat (2007) defined CCIs as the active or passive interaction between two or more customers inside or outside the service setting, which may or may not involve verbal communication.

Compared with customer-customer interactions, encounters between or among customers have not been well defined in previous literature. Based on a review of previous literature associated with service encounters, this dissertation proposes a concept for the encounters between or among customers: customer-customer encounters (CCEs). In service settings, encounters are conceptualized as a period of time. For instance, Shostack (1984) proposed that service encounters represent "a period of time when a customer interacts with a service" (p. 134). Wu (2007) defined service encounters as face-to-face interactions between a buyer and a seller in a service setting. Service

encounters are further perceived to involve the interface in which customers interact with physical facilities and other tangible elements in the service environment, as well as the interface in which human interactions take place (Miao, 2008; Wu & Liang, 2009). The human element has long been recognized as an indispensable component of service encounters (e.g., Bitner, 1992). Service encounters have been regarded as involving a lapse in time between beginning and end that lends itself to opportunities for both the service provider and the customer to communicate service-related and personal information (Ligas, 2004).

In addition to customer-service provider encounters, researchers started to systematically model customer responses to behaviors of other customers in service encounters (e.g., Miao, Mattila, & Mount, 2011). For instance, it was acknowledged that from a customer's perspective, a service encounter is the moment of interaction between a customer and a service provider (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Price, Arnould, & Tierney, 1995). Based on the dramaturgical metaphor widely used in service research, a service encounter is described in terms of actors, audience, setting and performance: the customer and service provider are the "actors" (Grove, Fisk, & John, 2000) and the term "audience" is used to capture how customers may influence one another (Nicholls, 2011).

Drawing upon the above-mentioned characteristics of service encounters, the concept of customer-customer encounters (CCEs) in a conference setting is proposed in this dissertation as *a period of time when interpersonal interactions between or among customers take place during their conference participation*, which is expected to be more prevalent in situations where attendees have to share space and time with one another.

Although the use of both interactions and encounters reflects an emphasis on interpersonal relationships among customers, the term CCEs is argued to capture a broader scope than CCIs. Interaction could ensue as the result of an encounter with an environmental condition or fact (Ozcan, 2004). To the extent that CCIs are perceived to take place at a specific interpersonal encounter (Martin, 1996), CCEs are predominantly composed of CCIs but also capture the other elements accompanying the occurrence of CCIs. For instance, in Ligas's study (2004), the informants were asked to detail all the events that surround a specific encounter, one of which was interactions. The scope of this dissertation goes beyond the interactions. Specifically, this dissertation explores manifestations, antecedents, subjective experiences, and potentially influential factors, as well as the outcomes of attendees' interaction experiences at encounters with other attendees in a conference setting. Therefore, to more accurately represent the broad scope of this dissertation, this dissertation adopts the term customer-customer encounters (CCEs) over customer-customer interactions (CCIs) in its investigation of attendees' conference experiences at the interpersonal level.

Within the context of this dissertation, a definition of customer-customer encounters is proposed based on the previous literature. Specifically, a customer-customer encounter in a conference setting is defined in this dissertation as an encounter that encompasses the presence of four elements, including two or more attendees, shared space and time between or among the attendees (i.e., the physical proximity), the physical elements where interactions among attendees take place, and other situational factors that affect attendees' interaction experience at customer-customer encounters. To further

investigate one's experiences at CCEs in a conference setting, the following section

presents a review of previous literature on experiences at CCEs in general service settings.

2.3.2   Experiences at Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs) In Service Settings

Encounters are frequently defined in the form of interactions and used

interchangeably with interactions in previous studies (e.g., Parker & Ward, 2000). The

majority of the studies on encounters among customers in service settings have adopted

the term "interactions." Therefore, the literature review of studies on customers'

experience during encounters with other customers was dominated by use of the keyword

"interactions," supplemented by the terms "customer compatibility" and "customer-to-

customer relationship."

In the past three decades, the increase in research into other customers present in

service settings is testimony to the importance of customer-customer encounters to

customers' service experiences. Starting from the late 1970s, encounters among

customers have received increasing attention in academia. In the year 1977, other

customers present in the service setting were included in the Servuction System Model

and termed as "Customer B" (Eiglier & Langeard, 1977). In late 1980s, Martin and

Pranter (1989) differentiated between direct and indirect interactions among customers,

where direct interactions are defined as specific interpersonal interactions between

customers and indirect interactions denote a situation in which other customers are just

part of the encounter. In the 1990s, Martin and Clark (1996) conceptualized the

interactions among customers as part of a network of many relationships in service

encounters (i.e., relationship between customers). Entering the 20th century, researchers

started to investigate the interaction experiences among customers at a deeper level. Adopting both conceptual and empirical approaches, these studies centered on multiple aspects of customer-customer encounters, such as the classification and the dimensions of interactions among customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2004), the role of interactions among customers (e.g., Baron & Harris, 2007; Parker & Ward, 2000), the individual differences or other influences associated with interactions (e.g., Harris & Baron, 2004; Johnson & Grier, 2013; Moore, Moore, & Capella, 2005), the management of interactions (Nicholls, 2007), and the impacts of interactions on both customers and the company (Gruen et al., 2007; Harris & Baron, 2004; Huang & Hsu, 2010; Wu, 2008). Among these studies, both positive and negative experiences at customer-customer encounters are recognized (Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Nicholls, 2005; Thakor, Suri, & Saleh, 2008).

The above-mentioned studies on customer-customer encounters have covered a wide range of settings, including retailing (e.g., DIY superstore, furniture store, grocery store) (Baron, Harris, & Davies, 1996; Parker & Ward, 2000), leisure (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007; vom Lehn, 2006), marketing, tourism and hospitality (e.g., restaurants, cruises, sports, hotels/motels, parks), and other service settings such as museums, trains, airplanes, buses, doctors' offices, hair salons, banks, libraries, and so on (Zhang et al., 2010). However, discussion on encounters in a conference setting is underrepresented. To the extent that experiences at customer-customer encounters are perceived unique in a conference setting, it is critical for hospitality and events researchers and practitioners to gain a better understanding of conference attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters and furthermore, how attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters shape their conference satisfaction. In the following section, the

characteristics of customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are discussed in greater detail.

2.3.3 Characteristics of Customer-Customer Encounters in a Conference Setting

Conferences are not a typical customer service setting or a hospitality event. First of all, in typical hospitality and tourism service settings such as hotels and restaurants, customers happen to be present at the same service encounter with fellow customers and share the physical environment and service providers (e.g., Anderson & Mossberg, 2004). Customers are thus less likely to know what customers they will encounter prior to the service consumption experience. In the case of conferences, which are usually centered on specified topics or themes of broad interest (Getz, 2012, p. 60), attendees often have some prior knowledge as to who will be in attendance or have perhaps had previous encounters with other attendees. Therefore, the interpersonal dynamics at customer-customer encounters are expected to be different from typical social or service settings: what people talk about, why they participate in the encounter, and how they may evaluate the encounters in a conference setting may be dissimilar to general social or service settings.

Secondly, the salience and the role of service providers in a conference setting may be quite unlike that of common service settings. In common service settings, such as amusement parks, planes, or restaurants, the presence of service providers is salient and indispensable during customers' service experience, playing a key role in customers' experience (Lee, Lee, Lee, & Babin, 2008; Ryu & Jang, 2008). The customer-service provider encounters have, thus, received great attention from academia. On the contrary,

in a conference setting, service providers seem to be more invisible to attendees during attendees' conference experience. When an activity or an event at a conference is in session, attendees' engagement in interactions with each other becomes more prominent and plays a more dominant role in driving attendees' conference experience (Jones, 1995; Nicholls, 2005, 2007).

Third, attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters are more central to their overall experience in a conference setting than in common service settings. Despite the acknowledged influence of experiences at customer-customer encounters on consumption experiences, such influences can turn out differently depending on the specific settings in which the interactions take place. Varied settings hold different positions on the continuum of customer-customer encounter centrality. Customer-customer encounters in many service settings are either exclusive (e.g., psychological counseling), coincidental (e.g., grocery stores), or additional (e.g., hotels). For example, restaurants represent a service environment where interpersonal interactions at customer-customer encounters are part of the total customer experience. In contrast to these service settings, customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are perceived to be desired, purposeful, and an integral part of their conference experiences (Parker & Ward, 2000). Conference experiences feature a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees who gather for the same conference. According to Jones (1995)'s three-fold classification of services based on customer enthusiasm for interactions, conference attendees expect to engage in interactions with others and such expected interactions with other attendees form an integral part of attendees' conference experiences. Consistently, Nicholls (2007)'s customer-to-customer contact classification denotes that interactions

among attendees are a desired, planned, and indispensable element of services provided by conferences. Attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting, therefore, are regarded as one of the main sources of value creation.

The discussions above jointly suggest that, experiences at customer-customer encounters play a significantly key role in attendees' conference experiences. A number of empirical studies supported that social and networking opportunities at customer-customer encounters are of significant importance in attendees' decision-making process as well as their evaluation of conference experiences (e.g., Zhang et al., 2007). To the extent that in a conference setting the presence of other attendees is essential and interactions among attendees are highly salient, conference experiences are perceived to be centered on the quality and frequencies of interactions among attendees, including both managerially planned and personally initiated interaction incidents (Nicholls, 2005). It is, therefore, critical to understand how conference planners and organizers can effectively engage in this aspect and harness the power of attendees' interactions with each other to create added-value for attendees. Nicholls (2010) has acknowledged that there is a lack of existing studies of service settings where interpersonal interactions among customers are the main source of value creation. Compared with other service settings, studies on customer-customer encounters in a conference setting seemingly lag behind. The above-mentioned differences between a conference setting and other social and service settings have implied promising demand and opportunities for future studies to address customer-customer encounters in a conference setting.

2.3.4 Experiences at Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs) In a Conference Setting

This section is designed to uncover attendees' subjective experiences at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. It was suggested that experiences should be conceptualized and studied in terms of their inter-related dimensions (Getz, 2008), from the motivations which drive the actual living experience, to reflections on the meanings and influences of these experiences. To obtain a deeper and more holistic understanding of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters, five aspects of customer-customer encounters are discussed, including: what are the typical customer-customer encounters in which attendees engage, why do they participate in customer-customer encounters, how do they evaluate their subjective experiences at customer-customer encounters, what may influence their experiences at customer-customer encounters, and how do their subjective experience at customer-customer encounters make an impact.

2.3.4.1 Typical Types of CCEs

In the past few years, researchers started to conceptualize the experience at customer-customer encounters as a theoretical construct. Venkat (2007) pointed out that the interactions among customers may exist throughout a purchase experience, including the pre-purchase, and purchase, as well as post-purchase stage. Nicholls (2010, 2011) focused on interactions during customer-customer encounters in service settings and regarded them as one of the most common types of human interaction that takes place between customers within a physical service setting. More recently, Johnson and Grier

(2013) defined interactions during customer-customer encounters as the active or passive interactions between two or more customers inside or away from a service setting.

A number of classifications for the interactions at customer-customer encounters have been put forward to clarify the theoretical meaning of customer-customer encounters. In chronological order, these clarifications include direct and indirect interactions (Martin & Pranter, 1989), physical, intellectual, and emotional interactions (Meyer & Westerbarkey, 1994), overt and covert interactions (McGrath & Otnes, 1995), task-related and non-task-related interactions (Martin & Clark, 1996), gregarious, grungy, inconsiderate, crude, violent, malcontent, and leisurely behavior (Martin, 1996), product-related, directions, procedures-related, physical assistance and other interactions (Baron et al., 1996), protocol incidents (i.e., physical incidents in line, verbal incidents in line, other incidents in line, other protocol incidents) and sociability incidents (i.e., friendly and unfriendly incidents, ambiance incidents) (Grove & Fiske, 1997), intragroup (between companions) and intergroup (between strangers) interactions (Pearce, 2005), as well as verbal and nonverbal interactions (Venkat, 2007). Harris and Baron (2004) have synthesized previous literature and proposed a unifying framework for verbal interactions among customers who are strangers in service settings. In this framework, the manifestations of verbal interactions among strangers are classified in terms of their content, the process they go through, and the roles that customers play in an interaction. Further, Nicholls (2005) presented a comprehensive classification of interaction incidents among customers, consisting of six main categories: time, space, information, assistance, verbal behavior, and non-customer activity.

To the extent that the largest number of dissatisfying incidents resulted from customer-to-customer interactions (Grove, Fisk, & Dorsch, 1998), some efforts have been made particularly to classify the negative interactions at customer-customer encounters. For example, Harris and Reynolds (2004) explored the activities and motivations of "deviant" or "dysfunctional" customer behaviors that deliberately cause problems for the firm, employees, or other customers (i.e., "jaycustomer" behavior) to advance the understanding of different forms of jaycustomer behaviors. Their empirical findings supported a classification of eight types of jaycustomers, including compensation letter writers, undesirable customers, property abusers, service workers, vindictive customers, oral abusers, physical abusers, and sexual predators.

Based on the discussion above, it becomes quite evident that interactions during customer-customer encounters take a variety of forms. Classifications of such diverse interactions can equip service managers with the needed guidance to audit the types and forms of interactions among customers relevant to their organization (Nicholls, 2005). In a conference setting, however, the interaction incidents during customer-customer encounters have not yet been studied in a systematic way. While the need for developing a classification of general or all-encompassing interaction incidents at customer-customer encounters has been recognized, such efforts have been mostly anecdotal or conceptual in nature. How do attendees define a customer-customer encounter in which they participate with other attendees? What are the common settings where attendees encounter other attendees? What do attendees usually do at those encounters? Given the lack of understanding of interaction incidents in a conference setting, the first objective of this dissertation is put forward below:

Objective 1: To develop a classification of typical customer-customer encounters at conferences.

2.3.4.2   Motivations of Participating in CCEs

Understanding why attendees participate in customer-customer encounters has both theoretical and practical meanings. The interactions during customer-customer encounters in general are perceived as "...instances of productive cooperation that are based neither on the price system nor on managerial commands" (Benkler, 2004, p. 279). In a conference setting, attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters are more difficult to harness. People commonly go to conferences for information, inspiration and interaction. While meeting planners can more easily guarantee that attendees will get information and inspiration from the speakers and the sessions, it is much harder for meeting planners to ensure that "attendees make contact with others on more than a superficial level" (Baber & Waymon, 1996, p. 1). Meeting planners must pay attention to the ways in which values are created at customer-customer encounters.

The values generated from customer-customer encounters will not be fully realized until customers, who have an interest but are not obligated to participate, decide to interact, i.e., are motivated (Gruen et al., 2007). How are people motivated to engage in CCEs? Why do people participate in CCEs? Previous studies have shed some light on the antecedents of interactions among customers. Based on a synthesis of previous literature, Harris and Baron (2004) presented four stimuli of verbal interactions among strangers in service settings that have been identified in previous studies: individual

characteristics of customers (i.e., demographics, the level of personal interest and involvement, and the willingness and ability of individuals to respond to requests for product-related information), needs of customers (i.e., need for risk reduction and for social contact making), service employee actions/inactions, and the service environment (or servicescape). In a conference setting, given the less salient presence of service providers compared with that in general service settings, attendees' motivations, individual characteristics, and the service environment are expected to play a more dominant role at customer-customer encounters. In this section, attendees' motivations are discussed first to explore why they engage in customer-customer encounters when attending conferences.

Motivations are commonly referred to as the forces that drive individuals toward goals (Gruen et al., 2007). Research in marketing frequently explores ways in which customers can be motivated to engage in certain behaviors, make decisions, and/or process information (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989; Hoyer & MacInnis, 1997). In the context of face-to-face interactions at conferences, motivations of interactions with other attendees are defined as one's readiness to engage in encounters with other attendees (Gruen et al., 2007). The motivated attendee is thus expected to be energized, ready, and willing to engage in the value-creating activities with other attendees.

Instrumental motivations of interactions have been implied in previous studies. Benkler (2004) suggested that it is instrumental motivations that drive customers to engage in interactions with each other. In a study that examined the antecedents of customer-to-customer exchange in the context of face-to-face networking behaviors at professional association meetings, the authors emphasized the instrumental domain of the

antecedents of customer-to-customer exchange (Gruen et al., 2007). Specifically,

provided that existing scales were not available, the authors developed a composite

measure consisting of four items for the motivations of customer-to-customer exchange

at professional association meetings, centered on developing professional networks and

meeting new people. Gruen et al. (2007) further provided empirical support for a positive

influence of attendees' motivations to engage in customer-to-customer exchange on the

level of their actual engagement in customer-to-customer exchange at professional

association meetings.

Such instrumental perspectives into individuals' motivations for interacting with

others are also implied in studies comparing experiences at face-to-face conferences to

those of digital communications. From a business perspective, people's need to meet and

interact can be driven by the perceived productivity and efficiency of face-to-face

interactions. By being physically close to each other in face-to-face settings, personal

characteristics are, in most instances, noticeable and salient when people interact with

one another (D'Souza & Colarelli, 2010). Not only verbal content, but also nonverbal

cues, such as sight, sound, smell and touch, all come into play in the face-to-face setting

(Winger, 2005). Face-to-face interactions can also ensure engagement and drive

participation, to the extent that the opportunities for distractions are small compared with

those when interacting over the phone or internet (Prophisee, 2009). In addition, the

information communicated between people who share physical proximity can be

instantaneously received (Galin, Gross, & Gosalker, 2004) while digital communications

can be often delayed, not received, or disrupted due to technical problems. The high

speed of transmission during face-to-face interactions thus facilitates the flow of tacit knowledge in business meetings (Krog, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000).

The psychological motivations for interactions are also implied in previous literature. From a psychological perspective, people's need to meet and interact with others is rooted in their social wellbeing, which can be manifested by the widely recognized human needs for belonging and interpersonal connectedness. Human needs for belonging and interpersonal connectedness indicate that individuals need to feel a sense of belonging to either large social groups or small social connections by sharing thoughts and feelings (Alderfer, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Maslow, 1943). Such need for belonging and interpersonal relatedness is perceived to be realized by close interactions and extensive communications in face-to-face meetings (D'Souza & Colarelli, 2010). Despite these studies discussed above that directly investigated or indirectly implied the motivations of people's engagement in customer-customer encounters, few studies have systematically or holistically examined this topic in a conference setting. To fill this void, the second objective of this dissertation is to uncover the motivations that drive attendees to participate in customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. Objective 2 is formalized as follows:

Objective 2: To examine the motivations of conference attendees' participation in customer-customer encounters.

2.3.4.3   Dimensions Underlying Attendees' Experience at CCEs

How do people evaluate their experience at CCEs? What aspects or dimensions do attendees value and appreciate when evaluating the quality of their experience at CCEs? Previous researchers have implied various dimensions when conceptualizing the interaction experience at CCEs as a construct. One approach to explore the dimensions of experiences at CCEs is to focus on the types of exchanges at customer-customer encounters. Research in the area of brand communities acknowledged that a variety of resources such as social, economic, and knowledge are shared during informal know-how exchange among customers (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; von Hippel, 1988). Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) also categorized the types of exchanges in servicescape into economic exchange, socioeconomic exchange, and societal exchange. All three types of exchanges are found to take place in many retail stores, which are perceived as a meeting place for customers who value informational, and social, as well as material exchanges (McGrath & Otnes, 1995). The economic exchange is perceived to dominate in non-interactive, self-service servicescapes where customers essentially seek use-values. The socioeconomic exchange in a servicescape occurs more frequently in customer-service provider interactions. By comparison, societal exchange is most reflected in the need of a customer to have a linking value with other customers to satisfy his/her social need for a sense of community (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999).

Face-to-face interactions are fundamental to social interaction as one of the most natural, enjoyable, and effective ways to fulfill people's social needs (Gatica-Perez, 2009). The interaction incidents at CCEs in service settings are prominent illustrations of customers' desire for social exchange, such as the customer-customer relational closeness

in a fitness club (Guenze & Pellono, 2004), the abundance of social interaction during a journey (Arnould & Price, 1993), and the social-emotional support in a gym setting (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007).

The interactions at customer-customer encounters can also be reflected by the instrumental or intellectual aspects of the experience. The "sharable good" in such an exchange is the participants' own education and experience (Benkler, 2004). For example, the interactions with other attendees can highlight the exchange of information, advice, help (help seeker, proactive helper, reactive helper), the offer of expertise in IKEA (Baron et al., 1996), and the guidance and instrumental support in a gym setting (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007).

Face-to-face meetings also provide a forum for members to seek and provide emotional support that may be less straightforward or less convincing in digital communications. In some studies dealing with people's living experiences during social interactions, the socio-emotional aspects (e.g., enjoyment) and feelings of acceptance (e.g., being liked by others) are also considered besides the instrumental dimension (e.g., influence) (Nezlek, Schütz, Schröder-Abé, & Smith, 2011). For example, in a recent study on mimicry interactions (Stel & Vonk, 2010), the emotion scales (i.e., tense, enthusiastic, pleased, worried, irritated, angry, confused, cheerful, dreary, happy, and sad), the bonding scales (i.e., the closeness to interaction partner), and the smoothness of the interaction are incorporated to capture the quality of people's interaction experience. In another study in a cruise setting (Huang & Hsu, 2010), the quality of people's interaction experience with fellow passengers is operationalized by measuring its valence

(i.e., harmonious or clashing, hostile or friendly, interesting or dull, unequal or equal, competitive or cooperative) and intensity (i.e., close or distant, intense or superficial).

Particularly in a conference setting, the quality of interaction experience at CCEs has received insufficient attention. Among the few studies that examined attendees' interaction experiences, the single-item scale has been used frequently to measure attendees' overall satisfaction with their networking experience. One study in the professional meeting setting developed a scale to measure the quality of attendees' experience at CCEs (Gruen et al., 2007). Specifically, this study has proposed a one-dimension scale including 6 items, measuring attendees' experience quality of exchanging resources (i.e., customer-to-customer exchange), including the valuable contacts made at the conference, the attachment to other attendees at the conference, the valuable partnerships with other attendees, the exchange of valuable information with other attendees, and the value of networking provided by the conference. Along this line, this dissertation is proposed to explore the dimensions underlying attendees' experience at CCEs, with a purpose of identifying the underlying patterns that researchers and practitioners can use to visualize attendees' experience quality. The third objective is thus presented below:

Objective 3: To identify the underlying dimensions of conference attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters.

2.3.4.4   Situational Factors at CCEs

Understanding potential factors that could influence customers' experiences at customer-customer encounters can help managers design strategies to facilitate positive interactions and mitigate the effects of potentially negative interactions between customers. While the importance of facilitators and/or constraints in interaction-related experience is acknowledged in other settings, a broad range of these factors have yet to be systematically considered in a conference setting. Therefore, using a qualitative approach, this dissertation is to examine the potential factors that may affect one's experiences at customer-customer encounters.

People's tolerance for public behaviors is individual and situation specific (Martin, 1996). Specifically in the context of customer-customer interactions, Martin and Clark (1996) pointed out that personal, relational, and environmental factors could influence customer-to-customer interactions. Consistently, Getz (2008) suggested that the potentially influential factors for attendees' interaction experiences can be categorized into one of the three groups: the intrapersonal (e.g., one's personality and attitudes), interpersonal (e.g., a lack of interaction partners), and structural (e.g., time, accessibility, facility) factors. In this section, a review of previous literature is presented to examine the potential impacts of both controllable and uncontrollable factors on customers' experience of customer-customer encounters in service settings, including the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors.

At the intrapersonal level, one's response to customer-customer encounters is expected to vary among customers (Raajpoot & Sharma, 2006). One recognized non-demographic factor at the intrapersonal level is one's ability to engage in customer-

customer encounters. Ability in general is defined as the extent to which one has the

necessary resources (e.g., knowledge, intelligence, money) to make a certain outcome

happen (Hoyer & MacInnis 1997). Harris, Baron, and Davies (1999) recognized that

customers vary in their ability to engage in observable oral participation with strangers in

service settings. Gruen et al. (2007) also found out that in a professional meeting setting,

attendees' skills or proficiencies to engage in valuable exchanges with other attendees

positively and significantly influenced their level of engagement in customer-to-customer

value exchanges with other attendees.

Other factors at an intrapersonal level are found to influence how customers

perceive and react to their compatibility with others who are present and further impact

on their experience at customer-customer encounters in service settings. For example,

demographic, social, and cultural differences are identified as influential to customer

perception of incompatibility with other customers (Martin & Pranter, 1989) and further

impact experience. Raajpoot and Sharma (2006) provided empirical evidence that non-

demographic individual variables, including customers' mood, control over outcome, and

prior expectations regarding compatibility, could impact customers' evaluation of

perceived incompatibility with other customers, thus further influencing one's

experiences during customer-customer encounters and one's behavioral responses

(Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003).

At the interpersonal level, previous literature regarding customer

compatibility/incompatibility with others in service settings has provided insights into

potential factors in a conference setting (Raajpoot & Sharma, 2006). For instance, in a

study investigating the impact of customer-customer interaction and customer

homogeneity on customer satisfaction in tourism service, customers' marital homogeneity was found to have a positive influence on their evaluation of fellow customers in a travel setting and further on their travel satisfaction (Wu, 2007). The impact of customer compatibility can also be interpreted by the similarity effect. A recent study (Brack & Benkenstein, 2012) applied the similarity effect to customer-customer relationships in a service context and found out that the overall similarity to other customers has positive effects on the focal customers' attitudes towards the service experience, and attitudes towards other present customers, as well as intentions to choose a service provider and recommend the service provider.

On the contrary, public behaviors such as cutting in line and smoking may cause negative feelings in others, such as frustration and anxiety, leading to perceived incompatibility (Fisher & Byrne, 1975). Such incompatibility with others can bring about customers' dissatisfaction with their experience in that very setting and negative behavioral responses like negative word-of-mouth, complaining, and switching (Bougie et al., 2003). Thus, compatibility management is essential. Compatibility management often represents a process of attracting homogeneous customers to the service environment (Martin, 1996; Martin & Pranter, 1989; Pranter & Martin, 1991) and then actively managing both the physical environment and customer-customer encounters to mitigate the effect of incompatibility (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Compatibility is often suggested to firms for designing strategies to enhance satisfying encounters and minimize dissatisfying encounters (Martin & Pranter, 1989). Customer compatibility is of particular relevance and significance in service settings where customers are in close physical proximity, verbal interaction among customers is likely, customers are engaged in

numerous and varied activities, and the service environment attracts a heterogeneous customer mix (Martin & Pranter, 1989). In a conference setting that features a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees, the compatibility among attendees is, therefore, expected to play a significant role in influencing attendees' experience at customer-customer encounters with other attendees.

At the structural level, factors like time, accessibility, and facility are recognized to influence one's interaction experiences (Getz, 2008). These factors are termed as the opportunity of interacting with others in some studies, which are argued to contribute to attendees' likelihood of engaging in customer-customer encounters. Opportunity reflects the extent to which a situation or an environment can be conducive to achieving a goal. Relevant situational factors that can either enhance or impede the goal include the time available, attention paid, or number of distractions (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989). In service settings, the opportunity offered by the service environment is recognized as a key stimulus for observable oral conversations among strangers, such as the chance for contact and proximity (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999; Dallos, 1996; Fehr, 1996), the amount of time in the system (Davies, Baron, & Harris, 1999), the product/service range and availability (Harris, Baron, & Ratcliffe, 1995), and the elements of the physical environment (Bitner, 1992). In a professional business meeting setting, the opportunity of interacting with other attendees was measured by the available time for networking, the general atmosphere for building professional networks, and the planned activities for networking (Gruen et al., 2007).

Servicescapes are suggested to be designed to facilitate the interactions among customers by creating a context conducive for such interactions (McAlexander et al.,

2002) and overcoming situational elements that complicate and impede the opportunity

(MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). In a time-constrained situation such as face-to-

face user gatherings or association meetings, the situation needs to be designed to

increase the opportunity to participate (Gruen et al., 2007). The discussion above

regarding potential factors for experience at customer-customer encounters has revealed

three groups of factors in general service settings, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and

structural factors. Given the characteristics of CCEs in a conference setting, the third

objective of this dissertation is to identify the potential factors associated with attendees'

experience at customer-customer encounters when attending conferences.

    Objective 4: To investigate the salient situational factors that affect conference

attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters.

2.3.5   The Impacts of Experiences at CCEs

    This section will discuss the psychological mechanism through which attendees'

experiences at customer-customer encounters may impact their conference satisfaction.

2.3.5.1   Attendee Experiences at CCEs

    Despite a lack of established measurement scales for attendees' interaction

experience at conferences, the interviews conducted in the first part of this dissertation

provided some insights into the dimensions of attendees' experiences at customer-

customer encounters. Specifically, two dimensions related to attendees' interaction

experiences were brought up frequently when interviewees talked about the customer-

customer encounters in which they often engaged with other attendees at conferences: the instrumental dimension and the experiential dimension. The instrumental dimension of interaction experience centers on the exchange of information, expertise, and network, while the experiential dimension focuses on the social, emotional and psychological support attendees were able to obtain from their interactions with each other. Based on the findings of the interviews, this dissertation operationalized experiences at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting as a two-dimensional construct in its quantitative component, including the instrumental dimension that captures the quality of customer-customer exchange during customer-customer encounters (e.g., Gruen et al., 2007) and experiential dimension that measures attendees' social and emotional support experienced during customer-customer encounters (e.g., Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007).

2.3.5.2   Social Identity at Conferences

The "brand community" literature provides great insights into how attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounter may influence attendees' conference satisfaction. It was discussed above that customers desire to have a linking value with other customers to satisfy their social needs for a sense of community (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999). In a review of previous social psychology literature, Rovai (2002) identified the features of the sense of a community: "... mutual interdependence among members, sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (p. 4). Specifically, a brand community is perceived to build upon a structured set of social relations among

admirers of a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). From a customer-experiential perspective,

a brand community represents a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated

(McAlexander et al., 2002). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), more vividly, envisioned a

brand community as a customer-customer-brand triad (see Figure 2.1). 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

(McAlexander et al., 2002).
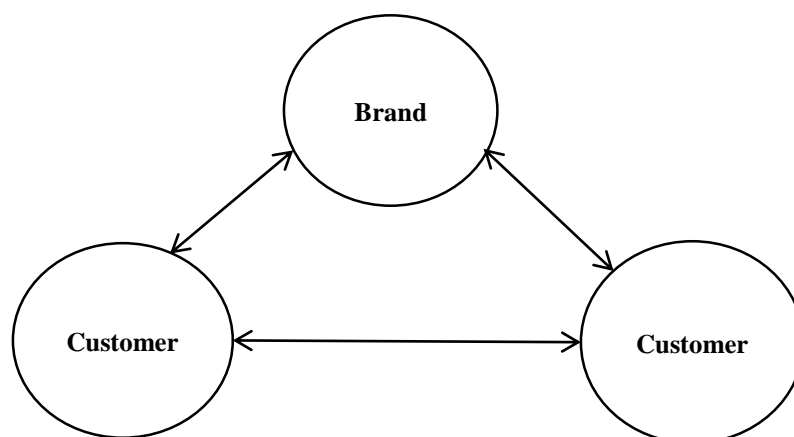
Figure 2.1 Brand Community Triad (Muniz & O'Gulnn, 2001)

Based on the characteristics of conferences, conferences are perceived to bear

resemblance to a brand community. Similar to a brand community, conferences feature a

high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees who gather for the same

conference theme. Besides resembling the role of customer experience in a brand

community, attendees' experience of interpersonal interactions is regarded as a key

element in the success of a conference. Therefore, based on the customer-centric brand community triad, this dissertation depicted conferences as an attendee-centric conference community triad. This conference community triad is built upon a fabric of interactions and relationships among attendees.

This dissertation further proposes that the multiple dyadic relationships manifested in the conference community triad help to explain the construction of an attendee's collective self-concept through his or her participation in a conference. Self-concept is perceived as being multidimensional in nature with three levels: personal self, relational self, and collective self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The personal self refers to one's sense of unique identity, which is held by each individual attendee at a conference. The relational self focuses on the sense of self defined by relationships with significant others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), which is perceived to emerge from an attendee's interactions with fellow attendees in a conference setting. The collective self signifies the social identity represented by membership in social categories (Turner et al., 1987), which in a conference setting, can be manifested through attendees' membership with the conference.

Combining the brand community triad (Muniz & O'Gulnn, 2001) and self-concept (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), this dissertation proposed a conceptual framework for its investigation of the impacts of experiences during customer-customer encounters. Specifically, in a conference setting, an attendee's interpersonal interactions during customer-customer encounters are expected to contribute to the construction of his/her sense of collective self-identity, or the bond building between him or herself and the conference as a whole, such that one is able to identify him or herself with the conference

(see Figure 2.2). The bond building between an attendee and other attendees at the conference is expected to further influence attendees' conference experience. The mediating role of attendees' built sense of collective self-identity from their experiences at customer-customer encounters is discussed in detail in the following section.
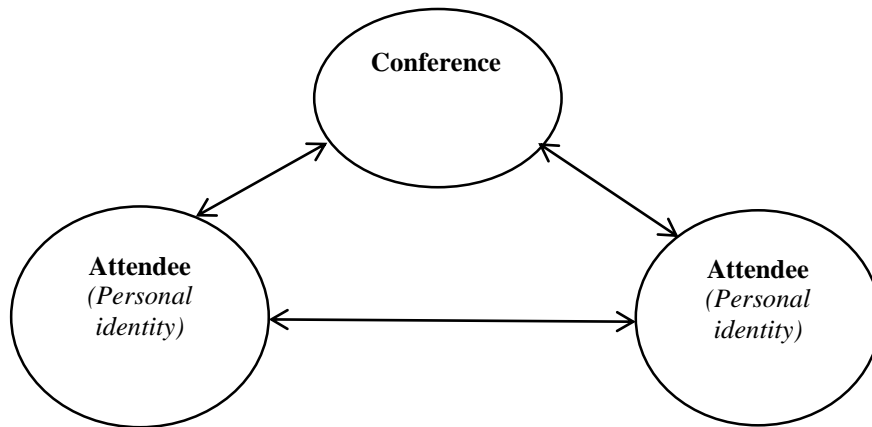
Figure 2.2 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Identity has been argued to be a fundamentally relational and socio-cultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interactions between the self and others. Rather than emerge at a single analytic level, identity operates at multiple levels simultaneously. This dissertation focused on the construction of identity at an interactional level. As suggested by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), this approach allows a view of identity that is inter-subjectively rather than individually produced and emerges from interaction rather than being assigned in an a priori fashion. Identity positioning is, therefore, occasioned by interactional demands. In the development of the operational framework and hypotheses for Objective 5 and 6, this

dissertation employs Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as its theoretical bedrock to underlie the construction of attendees' collective self-identity through their experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. Social identity theory asserts that individuals derive their identity or self-concept from their knowledge of perceived membership in a social group (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002; Tajfel, 1981). It is an individual-based perception of what defines the "us" associated with any internalized group membership.

Based on the seminal definition of social identity by Tajfel (1978), Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) proposed three empirically distinct components for the concept of social identity: cognitive, evaluative, and emotional components. Consistently, Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) and Jeong and Moon (2009) examined social identity as a three-dimensional concept in their empirical studies, including the cognitive component (i.e., social identification), the evaluative component (i.e., group-based self-esteem), and the affective component (i.e., affective commitment). In line with previous literature, this dissertation conceptualizes social identity as a three-dimensional concept to fully capture the psychological mechanism underlying the interaction phenomena.

An individual's social identity can be derived from diverse sources, such as his or her organization, work group, department, union, lunch group, age cohort, fast-track group, and so on (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In this dissertation, attendees' group identity with other attendees attending the same conference is of interest. Insomuch as social identification and group identification were used interchangeably in previous studies (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989), the term "group identity" is used in this dissertation to highlight conference--situated social identity and to improve the clarity of the discussion. The

following section will tap into each of the three components (i.e., cognitive, evaluative, and emotional component) and discuss how experiences at CCEs lead to the construction of attendees' group identity with other attendees of the same conference.

2.3.5.2.1   Group identification

Group identification is viewed as the cognitive component of group identity, or the cognitive awareness of one's affiliation in a social group (Ellemers et al., 1999). Group identity theory suggests that individuals classify themselves in various social categories in order to facilitate their identification within their own social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group identification is perceived connectedness to various human aggregates (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and shapes individual identity (Tajfel, 1978).

Specifically, during the cognitive process of categorization, one forms similarities with others in a particular social group and comes to identify him- or herself as a member of that social group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Such commitment to a particular identity is termed as identification (Foote, 1951). As the identification with a group increases, an individual becomes depersonalized and perceives him or herself as a representative of the group (Turner, 1985). As a result, one perceives him or herself to have built cognitive connection between the definition of that group and that of him or herself (Dutton, 1994), to belong to the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and eventually to achieve a group identity within the group (Tajfel, 1978).

2.3.5.2.2 Group-based self-esteem

The evaluative component of group identity refers to the positive or negative

values that one assigns to a group membership, which has been frequently captured by

group-based self-esteem in previous studies (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Ellemers et al.,

1999). While self-esteem has traditionally focused on the evaluative attitude toward the

personal level of the self-concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), group-based self-esteem

is more specifically defined as the evaluations of one's self-worth or self-concept derived

from his or her membership with a group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), or the value

connotation attached to that particular group membership (Ellemers et al., 1999; Tajfel,

1978). Given the context of this dissertation, group-based self-esteem is employed to

directly explore the value connotation of a conference group, which forms the evaluative

component of group identity in a conference setting.

2.3.5.2.3 Affective commitment

The emotional component of group identity describes the affective commitment to,

or the emotional engagement with a social group (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Ellemers et al.,

1999; Meyer & Allen, 1997). Affective commitment is defined as "identification with,

involvement in, and emotional attachment to the organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1996, p.

253). Affective commitment is perceived to be manifested by two fundamental positive

emotional categories: joy and love. Joy represents the happiness derived from a social

group; love indicates the emotional attraction to the group (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, &

O'Connor, 1987).

2.3.5.3   Impacts of Experiences at CCEs on Group Identity at Conferences

Previous studies in varied settings have implied that individuals in a particular group can develop the three components of group identity through appropriate social interactions with other members in the same group (Maltas, 2004). Studies on organization identity have provided great insights into the relationship between the interactions during employee-employee encounters and the formation of organizational identity. Organizational identity concerns one's perception of "oneness" with an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This construct has firm roots in social identity theory. Tajfel defined the organizational identity as the "cognition of membership of a group and the value and emotional significance attached to this membership" (1978, p.63). It conveys the extent to which an individual perceives him or herself as belonging to the organization group and as being a typical member of it. One critical management instrument for engendering organizational identity is to facilitate organizational interactions among employees. For instance, Cheney (1983) suggested that interactions among employees help facilitate the identification process of an organization. Turner (1984) and Hogg and Turner (1985) also pointed out that interpersonal interactions could be used as bases for categorization. Ashforth and Mael (1989) further argued that interpersonal interactions among organization employees can augment their perceived external prestige and affect the degree to which individuals identify with a group.

Empirical studies on customer-customer encounters in service settings have also implied that a relationship exists between the interactions during customer-customer encounters and the formation of a sense of belonging. For instance, in a study on customer-customer encounters while out shopping in garden centers, Parker and Ward

(2000) found that one of the key positive outcomes of observable oral participation between strangers was individuals' social involvement, or, the sense of being part of society (Harris & Baron, 2004). By the same token, in a conference setting, attendees' interpersonal interactions with other attendees during the customer-customer encounters are expected to facilitate their construction of group identity at the conference. Individuals are apt to develop social "identities" (i.e., how they define themselves in terms of group membership with face-to-face contacts). In general event settings, previous research provided evidence for the existence and importance of "communitas" (i.e., everyone becoming the same) at events. For instance, Hannam and Halewood (2006) found that group identity was fostered in the context of Viking festivals. Fairley and Gammon (2006) also pointed out the importance of sport fan communities.

The formation of group identity is perceived to be more relevant and salient in a face-to-face conference setting. Schwartzman (1989) addressed in her book: "meetings are an important sense-making form for organizations and communities because they may define, represent, and also reproduce social entities and relationships (p. 39)." Attending conferences and interacting with others helps individuals develop a better understanding of how they "belong" to a group and the nature of their relationships with other group members. Nardi and Whittaker (2002) also pointed out the importance of face-to-face activities in facilitating social bonding and showing commitment through "showing up" in person, touching, and engaging in mutually meaningful activities in a shared physical space. Due to their personal and informal nature, face-to-face interactions enable people to develop strong social relationships that cannot always be achieved via other forms of communication, and help to maintain established social relationships that

are required by remote collaboration (Kira et al., 2009). The interactive nature of face-to-face interactions also offers attendees opportunities to develop mutual trust, which is an integral part of interpersonal relationships that results from one's repeated personal interactions with one another (Kira et al., 2009).

In summary, attendees' face-to-face interaction experiences during customer-customer encounters are expected to contribute to their group identity with other attendees at the conference, through facilitating their identification with other attendees, enhancing evaluations of their self-worth derived from their identification with other attendees, and further increasing their happiness and emotional attraction to other attendees. In sum, it is proposed that:

H1: Attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters have a positive effect on their sense of group identity with other attendees of the conference.

H1a: Attendees' *know-how exchange* during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *identification with the conference group*.

H1b: Attendees' *social-emotional* support during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *identification with the conference group*.

H1c: Attendees' *know-how exchange* during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *group-based self-esteem* at the conference.

H1d: Attendees' *social-emotional support* during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *group-based self-esteem* at the conference.

H1e: Attendees' *know-how exchange* during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *affective commitment* to the conference group.

H1f: Attendees' *social-emotional* support during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *affective commitment* to the conference group.

2.3.5.4   Impacts of Group Identification on Group-Based Self-Esteem and Affective
   Commitment

  Group identification is anticipated to lead to one's group-based self-esteem and affective commitment. Group identification is found to lead to intragroup pride (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), cohesion, altruism, cooperation, and positive evaluations of the group (Turner, 1982, 1984). To the degree that group identity is a salient foundation of one's self-worth, an individual is motivated to maintain and enhance his or her self-esteem when identifying with a group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

  Social Identity Theory also suggests that group membership creates self-enhancement in ways that favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Previous literature has documented the association between one's identification with a group and accompanying in-group favoritism. For instance, visible characteristics such as age are

frequently used by individuals to categorize themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups, which is likely to lead to one's differential attitudes and behaviors with respect to these groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1999). The examples of minimal group studies also showed that the mere act of individuals categorizing themselves as group members was sufficient to lead them to display in-group favoritism (Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Such in-group favoritism is expected to elicit conference attendees' greater group-based self-esteem and enjoyment of others within the group. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H2: Attendees' identification with the conference group has a positive effect on their group-based self-esteem.

H3: Attendees' identification with the conference group has a positive effect on their affective attachment to the group.

2.3.5.5   Impacts of Group Identification on Conference Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction in general refers to "the customer's fulfillment response…it is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment" (Oliver, 1996, p. 87). Customer satisfaction is regarded as one of the key elements of marketing initiatives, and it suggests areas for improvement, and determines the extent to which an organization has successfully and efficiently satisfied the needs and wants of its customers (Severt et al., 2007).

In hospitality and tourism studies, researchers have undertaken extensive effort to understand customer satisfaction in diverse contexts, such as golf travel (Petrick, 1999), sports festivals (Madrigal, 1995), entertainment vacation (Petrick, Morais, & Norman, 2001), tourism destination (Birkan & Eser, 2003), hotel services (Getty & Thompson, 1994), and restaurant services (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002). In the context of a conference, while most studies focused on attendees' satisfaction with destination choice, a limited number examined attendees' satisfaction with the conference itself (Severt et al., 2007).

To measure customer satisfaction, the key variables adopted by hospitality and tourism researchers include desire (Spreng, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 1996), pre-experience comparison standards (e.g., expectations) (Cardozo, 1965), performance (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982), or disconfirmation of the pre-experience standard and performance (Oliver, 1996). Churchill and Suprenant (1982) suggested that for non-durable goods, such as a conference within the context of this dissertation, the normal confirmation/disconfirmation paradigm should be appropriate. However, due to the complicated nature of measuring attendee expectations prior to their participation in a conference (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), many studies measured the perceived performance as a predictor of attendees' satisfaction. Along the same vein, in this dissertation, attendees' subjective experience at the conference was chosen in determining their level of satisfaction with the conference.

Customers' subjective experience at general events (e.g., festival) is perceived as "out of the ordinary" (Falassi, 1987). Customers willingly travel to, or go to an event-specific place for certain periods of time, to participate in activities that are atypical and to gain experiences that transcend the routine-experiences that are unique to the traveler

or the event-goer. Such "flow" or "peak" experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) suggest event designers facilitate flow experiences for maximum engagement. Furthermore, event tourism experiences are perceived as transforming, in such a way as to change beliefs, values or attitudes, which can occur as a part of social bonding (i.e., "communitas") (Getz, 2008).

To acknowledge the above-mentioned experiential aspects of attendees' subjective experience in a conference setting, the construct "transcendent customer experiences" is chosen to capture attendees' satisfaction with their conference experience (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). Transcendent customer experiences are often used to feature one's felt self-development or self-transformation, separation from the mundane, and connectedness to larger phenomena outside the self, as well as one's emotional intensity, peak enjoyment, novelty of experience, and the testing of personal limits (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). This construct has been used in diverse consumption settings, such as hotel stays (Pullman & Gross, 2003), consumption of arts (Joy & Sherry, 2003), and other outdoor recreational activities (Arnold & Price, 1993). To the extent that the construct "transcendent customer experiences" puts an emphasis on the experiential aspect of one's consumption experience, this dissertation employs this construct with the goal of capturing attendees' satisfaction with their subjective conference experiences. To reflect the context of this dissertation, the original construct is reworded as "transcendent conference experience (TCE)" in the rest of the discussion.

Drawing upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) literature, attendees' group identification with other attendees at the same conference is expected to lead to their

satisfaction with the conference experience, or, their transcendent conference experience. Specifically, the previous SIT literature suggests consequences of group identification in organizations, which provides some insights into the proposed impacts of group identity on attendees' transcendent conference experience. Individuals are more likely to engage in activities consistent with their group identity and are more likely to report their satisfaction accordingly (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For instance, individuals holding a salient religious commitment were found to spend more time on that commitment and derive satisfaction from it (Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Similarly, in Mael's (1988) study, the identification that alumni built with their alma mater was found to predict a higher level of commitment to and support for the organization's activities as well as satisfaction with the alma mater. To the extent that attendees tend to be more engaged in activities congruent with their group identity at the conference, it is expected that attendees are more likely to obtain novel experience, feel more connected to a larger group, and gain a greater sense of self-development, all of which highlight attendees' transcendent conference experience (Schouten et al., 2007). Taken together, attendees' sense of group identification developed in a conference setting is anticipated to contribute to their satisfaction with the conference experiences, which is conceptualized by transcendent conference experience in this dissertation. The hypothesis is formalized below:

> **H4:** The identification that attendees developed with the conference group has a positive effect on their transcendent conference experience.

2.3.5.6 Impacts of Experiences at CCEs on Conference Satisfaction

Customers' experiences during customer-customer encounters are an integral part of the hospitality consumption experience (Chan & Wan, 2008). Service consumption often involves sharing the physical environment with fellow customers, such as dining at restaurants or attending conferences, where customer-customer contact is inevitable (Martin, 1996). As the interactive (Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991) and social dimension of service settings, interpersonal experiences at customer-customer encounters are increasingly recognized (Baker, 1986). From the theatrical perspective, memorable experiences can be staged or created by customers themselves through their interactions with other customers who are present (Lugosi, 2008). In many service settings, other customers play an active role in customers' consumption experience through various forms of interactions, where they serve as active players (Bowen, 1986), contributors to service quality (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996), or partial employees who can offer on-site information to help fellow customers (Harris, Baron, & Parker, 2000). In these situations, values can be created through the "interaction among buyers who produce the service between themselves if the seller provides the right systems, environment and supportive personnel (Gummesson, 1987, p. 14)." Even seemingly passive observers of a ski race or a festival can contribute to the overall quality of the experience by their very presence (Thakor et al., 2008). The encounters among customers are, therefore, often regarded as a critical factor in the delivery of experience and the success of the service (Martin & Pranter, 1989).

In a conference setting, given the high level of interpersonal interactions and the significance of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters in attendees'

conference expectation (Jones, 1995; Nicholls, 2005, 2007), this dissertation proposes a positive impact of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters on their conference satisfaction. The hypothesis is formalized as follows:

H5: Attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters have a positive effect on their transcendent conference experience.

H5a: Attendees' know-how exchange during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *transcendent conference experience.*

H5b: Attendees' *social-emotional support* during customer-customer encounters has a positive effect on their *transcendent conference experience*.

For Objective 5 and Objective 6 of this dissertation, the proposed mediating model of impacts of customer-customer encounters is presented in Figure 2.3.
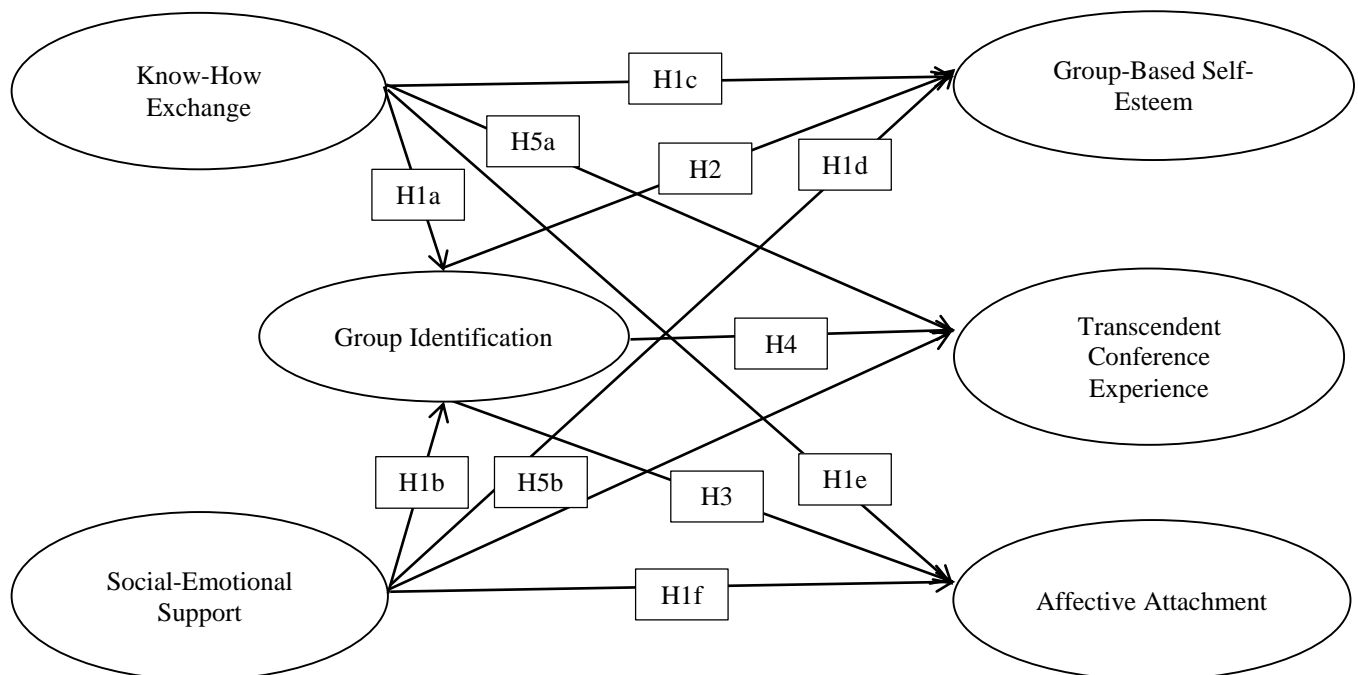
Figure 2.3 Proposed Mediating Model of Impacts of CCEs

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This dissertation consists of a qualitative and a quantitative component. Qualitative methods explore research problems by obtaining in-depth information, analyzing words, and building complex and holistic pictures of the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 1998). Quantitative methods are grounded upon precise measurements of constructs, hypotheses, and statistical analysis of numerical data (Matveev, 2002, p. 69). A review of previous literature supports the adoption of a qualitative method and a quantitative method for this dissertation. First, there is generally a lack of research on the classification, the motivational aspects, and the dimensions, as well as the influence of customer-customer encounters in the conference setting. As a result, there are no established scales to reliably measure these aspects of customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. Studies using a qualitative approach are preferred as they enable researchers to achieve holistic and insider perspectives as well as capture the multi-dimensional, multiphase and dynamic nature of experiences (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010, p. 83). Therefore, this dissertation uses qualitative methods to achieve research objectives related to the nature of conference attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters (Objective 1, 2, 3, and 4).

Existing conferences, psychology, and customer behavior research has provided measurement scales that can be adopted to measure the quality of interaction experiences

during customer-customer encounters, the sense of group identity, and the attendees'

satisfaction with their conference experience. To that end, this dissertation uses the

quantitative method to achieve research objectives related to the impacts of experience

during customer-customer encounters (Objective 5 and 6).

3.1   Qualitative Study

3.1.1   Research Design

For the qualitative component, this dissertation adopts in-depth interviews as the

main approach. In-depth interviews are regarded as a powerful and revealing method to

gain a deeper understanding of people's experiences with a phenomenon (Thomas &

Esper, 2010). In addition, in-depth interviews can elicit participants' post-event

recollection, which is perceived as the single most important source of information that

participants will use in making a decision in the future and thus has great implications for

practitioners (Morgan et al., 2010, p. 117).

As advocated in previous studies, a semi-structured approach using open-ended

questions and conversational-style interviews is chosen to elicit, in depth, the nature of

attendees' subjective experiences of customer-customer encounters at conferences. A set

list of interview questions was developed to mirror the research objectives. These

questions were adopted from previous literature that has a focus on the experiential

domains of experience (e.g., Lofman, 1991; Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). Then, the

questions were evaluated by a researcher who has expertise in customer-customer

interactions research. The revised questions were then pre-tested by interviewing two

random attendees of association conferences. Taking into account their comments,

revisions were made to the interview questions to further improve their wording and clarity. As a result of this process, the set of interview questions was confirmed to effectively and accurately elicit interviewees' verbal statements reflecting feelings and perceptions that relate to the experiential domain in their interaction experiences (see Appendix A). During the interviews, interviewees were encouraged to provide as many details and descriptions as possible (e.g., Parker & Ward, 2000). Findings from the interviews were grounded on participants' own descriptions, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the research.

To improve the comprehensiveness as well as the credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings regarding the diverse forms of interaction incidents at customer-customer encounters, this dissertation adopts the data triangulation method. Triangulation introduces ways to test and maximize the validity and reliability of a qualitative study (Golafshani, 2003). Traditionally used for improving the reliability and validity of research and for confirming and generalizing the results, triangulation has emerged as an increasingly important methodological approach in qualitative study to minimize bias and establish valid propositions (Mathison, 1998). This method instructs researchers to adopt multiple investigators (e.g., engaging participants or peer researchers), methods (e.g., observation, interviews) or data sources to present a more complete picture of different realities (Patton, 2002). During this procedure, researchers often search for convergence among multiple sources of information to build themes, categories, and subcategories (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Any exception along this process is recommended to be used for modifying the theories or conceptual understandings developed in a qualitative study (Barbour, 1998).

Particularly in the Grounded Theory Approach, previous researchers have suggested that the reliability issue can be addressed well by using multiple sources of data (Berg & Smith, 1988; Eisenhardt, 1989). Getz (2008) further pointed out a need to look deeper into the experiential realm through phenomenological methods such as in-depth interviews at events and anthropological methods like direct observation of participants (e.g., Getz, O'Neill, & Carlsen, 2001). In this dissertation, therefore, data was collected through two different methods (i.e., individual in-depth interviews and field observations). While the individual in-depth interviews were used as the primary approach, field observations were conducted at three conferences organized by different associations during July of 2013, September of 2013, and January of 2014. Such field observations were to complement and/or validate the findings from the anecdotes of interviewees regarding a classification of typical incidents during customer-customer encounters at conferences. Triangulation across these two data sources is expected to reveal a high level of consistency. The findings from these resources were then integrated for developing an inventory of interaction incidents at customer-customer encounters, which were further analyzed by content to develop a classification of the salient interaction incidents at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting.

3.1.2   Sample and Data Collection

Potential interviewees were recruited through a university-wide e-newsletter in a Mid-western town located in Indiana of the United States. The e-newsletter is sent via emails on a weekly basis with a web link to more details concerning this interview opportunity. All potential interviewees were invited to participate in an interview about

their association conference experience. A screening question about potential interviewees' previous experience of attending association conferences was placed in the e-newsletter: "Have you attended any kind of conferences organized by any type of associations in the past five years?" A detailed explanation of association conferences was offered alongside to improve the clarity of the screening question and the rigor of the data collection process. Only those who have shown interest in the interview and have attended at least one association conference in the past five years were instructed to schedule an interview with the researcher via email.

While the selected sample is directly or indirectly affiliated with one organization as a result of the recruitment process, such a purposive sampling technique was adopted as this sample had the capacity and willingness to contribute appropriate data to this dissertation, in terms of both relevance and depth. Specifically, this sample was appropriate for this dissertation for three reasons. First, attending conferences is a common experience among this population, an important consideration in light of the context of this dissertation. All interviewees reported that they had attended an association conference at least once in the past five years (18 had attended once to five times, seven had attended six to ten times, and two had attended more than ten times). This sample was thus perceived to be able to provide the information of interest. Second, this sample represented a diverse population across demographic and socioeconomic strata. The readers of the university-wide e-newsletter represent a population including faculty and students across disciplines, administrative personnel such as directors and assistant managers, clerical staff such as secretaries and service staff such as schedule deputies, as well as specialists. Third, the sampling technique was designed to maximize

the diversity of conference experiences embodied in this study. This sample provides a reasonable range of the type, scale, and geographic locations of conferences. Given that the focus of this dissertation is the commonalities of attendees' conference experiences across different types of conferences, such a wide variety of conferences help to achieve the objectives of this dissertation.

All interviews were conducted in the same area on campus from October of 2013 to December of 2013, except for a few that took place in the interviewees' private offices due to unexpected location change or upon the interviewees' request. Interviews lasted 19 to 60 minutes, with an average length of 28 minutes. A $10 Starbucks gift card was given to each interviewee in order to compensate them for their devotion of time and effort. Written notes and audiotape were used to record the interviews for accuracy. The audiotape was later transcribed into text for data analysis. All the coding and analysis was undertaken using well-known qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 10).

3.1.3   Interview Questions

At the beginning of each interview, interviewees were provided a brief verbal introduction on the interview topic and were encouraged to freely talk about their personal experience. The same message was shared with all interviewees: "Thank you very much for coming. Today, we are here to talk about your interaction experiences at association conferences. There will be no right or wrong answers. It is all about your personal experience: what you did and how you felt." All interviewees were then asked to report the total number of association conferences they had attended in the past five years.

3.1.3.1   Interaction Incidents at CCEs

The main interview questions were grouped into three parts. In the first part, a brief statement was shared at the beginning to set the stage for the subsequent conversation: "Based on your past experience, you know that when you go to a conference, you meet a lot of people there: you go to a presentation session where there are other attendees, you meet another attendee at the elevator, in the hallway, or, you talk to people during lunch who are sitting at the same table with you." Then, open-ended questions were asked to solicit information from the perspective of interviewees, as to how they define customer-customer encounters at conferences. One leading question was: "Now, according to your past association conference experiences, please recall those common settings where you encountered other attendees. Please describe to me as many such encounters as you can." According to the principles of the "laddering" technique in marketing (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), follow-up questions were asked for discovering richer information. Examples are "Where did you usually encounter other attendees?" and "What did you usually talk about?"

After conducting the first few interviews, the interviewer found that when interviewees talked about their experience during common customer-customer encounters, two types of interaction partners were consistently referenced: strangers and acquaintances. Following the constant comparison method suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher added several new questions in the rest of the interviews to yield a more thorough understanding of the phenomena of interest and to "stimulate thought that leads to both descriptive and explanatory categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 341)." Example questions were: "Who do you find yourself usually interacting with,

people who you knew already versus those you just met at the conference?" and "Did you find the focus of your interactions with people who you already knew different from others who you just met at the conference?"

3.1.3.2   Motivations and Subjective Experiences at CCEs

The second part of the interview questions consisted of several open-ended questions soliciting interviewees' motivations for engaging in customer-customer encounters and their subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters when attending conferences. While the first part of the interview was targeted at generating a broad range of customer-customer encounters, the second part of the interview questions focused on experiences related to one's most memorable or vivid customer-customer encounter. In detail, this dissertation adopts the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), which was widely used in previous research related to customer-customer encounters. For instance, when examining the impact of the interaction relationship among customers on their satisfaction and loyalty, Guenzi and Pelloni (2004) measured customers' interaction relationship with one particular customer. A more recent study on interaction experience during cruise travels (Huang & Hsu, 2010) also targeted one fellow passenger with whom the respondent had the most interactions, arguing that this person was most likely to have an impact on the respondent's cruise experience, either positively or negatively. Considering the significant impact of a critical incident on attendee's memory and experience, in this dissertation, interviewees were instructed to recall their past

conference experiences and describe the most vivid encounter involving another attendee(s).

In detail, interviewees were asked, "Among those common encounters you have just recalled when answering my earlier question, if I ask you to recall one encounter with other attendees, which one comes to your mind immediately, or let's say, the one that you are able to recall more easily than others? Please describe this encounter to me, just like telling a story." Probes were used to facilitate interviewees' responses concerning their motivations for engaging in this particular encounter, which were open-ended or specific to the interviewees' comments. Example questions were: "How did that encounter take place?" "Can you elaborate on what happened specifically at that encounter?" "Who were you interacting with?" and "What made you stay in that encounter?"

Then, interviewees were instructed to talk about their evaluation of their subjective experience at that recalled encounter with other attendees. Example questions were: "Overall, how would you describe this experience?" "If I give you a scale of 1 as representing awful to 10 representing wonderful, what number are you willing to assign to your experience at this encounter?" "What made it an x (x is replaced by the number provided by the interviewee)?" and "How did you feel during the encounter? Were you happy? Tense? Pleased? (Stel & Vonk, 2010) Why?" This procedure was to elicit verbal statements reflecting perceptions and feelings. Probing questions were used to encourage participants to think on a deeper level, including: "Can this face-to-face interaction experience at customer-customer encounters be replaced by online communication?"

"What does that encounter mean to you?" and "Why was this encounter more vivid to you than others?"

To identify potential factors that have influenced attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters, interviewees were asked to recall anything that had positively or negatively influenced their encounter experience. Example questions included: "Did any factors influence the encounter experience you have just described?" and "Do you think your experience during the encounter which you have just described could be improved? How?"

Lastly, attendees' negative experiences during customer-customer encounters were examined to generate a more holistic understanding of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters. In detail, interviewees were instructed to think back to their past conference experience and recall any encounters with other attendees that they would regard as negative. The question was worded as "According to your past experiences at conferences, were there any encounters you had with other attendees that made you feel negative in some way? How?"

3.1.3.3   Conference and Demographic Variables

The last part of the interview questions gathered information about the conference where the recalled encounter took place, including the name, location, time, size, and scale of the conference. Interviewees' basic demographic information was also collected for debriefing purposes, including their gender, age, educational background, and occupation or study area.

3.1.4   Data analysis

The transcripts were analyzed to develop a model delineating the classification, the motivations, the dimensional structure, and the influences for the experiences of customer-customer encounters at conferences. The researcher began by reading each transcript carefully and highlighting all text that appeared to describe issues pertinent to the first four research objectives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Then, three types of coding were conducted in order to analyze the transcripts following the coding procedure introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

3.1.4.1   Open Coding

First, open coding was conducted to disaggregate the text into meaningful and related parts relevant to the structure and objectives of this study (Strauss, 1987). Such initial organization of data is regarded as important in helping researchers make sense of the raw data and reducing the large quantity of text to a smaller set of manageable parts.

Line-by-line open-coding (i.e., word by word, phrase by phrase) was conducted initially to generate categories. Specifically, during this analytical process, concepts were identified and their properties and dimensions were explored. To uncover concepts, specifically, raw data was exposed, broken down into discrete parts, scrutinized carefully, and compared for similarities and differences. Commonalities and differences between concepts were identified following theoretical comparisons; those with similar conceptual meaning (i.e., properties or characteristics) derived from data were grouped together to form a category with more abstract explanatory power (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102).

These commonalities within a category and differences between categories should be sufficient to characterize the respective category conceptually. Such a process of grouping concepts into categories is vital as it reduces the number of units of analysis for researchers and also endorses categories with more theoretical weight and analytical power for further analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 113). When labeling the categories, some titles were derived from excerpts of interviews, some came from concepts discovered in the data, and others were based on discussions with colleagues. Previous literature also provided insight as to how the concepts and categories could be labeled when the concepts and categories emerging from the data were also well established in previous literature with strong conceptual meanings.

Then, a detailed analysis required the researcher to go beyond the surface of the categories and derive their properties (i.e., specific characteristics) and dimensions (i.e., the range of meanings) from context. The act of naming or labeling categories should take into account not only their properties and dimensions but also the context of the events surrounding them. Such delineation of properties and dimensions gave the categories precision, and as a result, patterns emerged from the data.

During the analysis process, the number of codes was expected to increase as more themes were identified from the data. In case a newly identified theme from the raw data did not fit the codes that had already been identified, a new code was developed to reflect the theme in the subsequent analysis. Memos or a running log was used to document the researcher's analysis, thoughts, explanations, and other questions and suggestions for further data collection, leading to a dynamic and interactive data collection and analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 110, 153).

3.1.4.2 Axial Coding

Second, axial coding was used to link coding categories to subcategories along their properties and dimensions in order to provide a more complete and precise understanding of the phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Axial coding focuses on emerging themes from the original descriptions of interviewees.

This dissertation follows the procedural tasks for axial coding introduced by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, the researcher scrutinized all data within a particular category and outlined the properties and dimensions of a category that was identified during open coding. Then, the researcher specified the category with the diverse conditions, actions, and consequences. Third, the researcher coded around the "axis" of categories and linked categories to their subcategories with an explanation of how they were related. Some categories were combined whereas others were split into subcategories when an appropriate fit was identified. The subcategories provided further clarification and specification for the category they belong to and were thus perceived to have greater explanatory power by offering information such as the "when," "where," "how," and "who" of a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Last, the researcher revisited the data and demonstrated how core categories can be interrelated to each other. Categories and subcategories were further examined and organized into a hierarchical structure when possible. Axial coding, thus, added depth and structure to categories and built a dense texture of relationships (Strauss, 1987, p. 64).

Line-by-line open coding and axial coding were termed as microanalysis, which called for closer attention to the subjects which interviewees discussed and the phenomena of interest was described (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher was recommended to go

back and forth during these analysis processes to constantly refine the coded categories, subcategories, and their interconnections. Microanalysis, therefore, helped the researcher to avoid relying on initial interpretations of the data and instead, focus more on alternative explanations of the data by taking into consideration the interviewees' interpretations.

3.1.4.3   Selective Coding

Third, selective coding was conducted for the examination of data and for integrating and refining the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). Given that the end goal of this dissertation was to model the experiences of customer-customer encounters at conferences, rather than list themes, the researcher aimed to develop a theoretical framework made up of a set of interrelated concepts. At this stage, categories and their interrelationships were refined and integrated to develop a theoretical structure, which had a high expectation for the researcher's interpretation and selectivity over time.

Specifically, based on the interrelationships among categories developed earlier, the researcher validated these relationships. The researcher revisited the original dataset and conducted several iterations of re-categorization (Berg, 2009). During this process, the researcher reviewed the scheme for internal consistency and logic flow and filled in poorly developed categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 156). The commonalities were converged and differences were identified. Within each subcategory, in the event of inconsistent data collected from different sources, the differences were reconciled either

with additional data sources or by clarifying with the original informants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yan & Gray, 1994).

Based on the refined categories and subcategories as well as the validation of their interrelationships, the researcher developed an integrated and logical framework that illustrates the motivations, the typical encounters, and the dimensional structure, as well as potential influences of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters.

As others have stated, analysis of qualitative data "is not a structured, static, or rigid process" but rather a dynamic and fluid process during which researchers need to move back and forth among types of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 58). While the three types of coding mentioned above provided a practical guideline for the logical and procedural steps involved in the data analysis, the researcher combined them and used different types of coding freely in response to the varied analytic tasks present in diverse situations.

3.1.4.4   Reliability of Data Analysis

To safeguard the reliability of the qualitative analysis, codebooks were developed by the researcher for textual data analysis (see Appendix B). The codebooks provided specific coding categories with exemplars for each category (Yan & Gray, 1994). An independent coder who was unaware of the purpose of the study was asked to code a random sample of 4 interview transcripts (15% of the full sample) (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken, 2004) independently from the researcher after being trained in the utilization of the codebooks. The inter-rater reliability between the

researcher and the independent coder was then calculated to make sure that a high

consistency between the two coders' analysis of textual data was reached before the final

structure was established. The inter-rater reliability was shown by "percentage agreement"

statistics: the number of times both coders agreed divided by the number of possible

instances of coding (Boyatzis, 1998, p.152-159). The inter-reliability between the

researcher and the independent coder was 80.7%, showing a relatively high consistency

between the two coders' analysis of textual data. During this procedure, another

researcher was invited to act as an auditor to verify both the process (i.e., the specific

steps followed by the coders) and the results of data coding (the categories and sub-

categories derived from the interview transcripts as well as the developed framework)

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several rounds of examinations were conducted before a final

structure was established.

To minimize the potential intrusion of subjectivity into the analysis, the researcher

adopted the analytical strategy recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 45).

Specifically, the researcher occasionally checked out assumptions with interviewees and

against incoming data. The researcher simply explained to the interviewees what she

thought she was finding in the interview and check with the interviewees whether the

interpretation matched their experiences. In the event that the interviewees pointed out an

inconsistency, clarification was obtained to improve the accuracy of explanation and to

further provide a reasonable and impartial representation of the problem under

investigation.

To reduce potential bias caused stereotyping, the researcher followed the

suggestion by Parker and Ward (2000) who did a study on customer-customer encounters

in service settings. In detail, each text unit (i.e., each response to an individual question or prompt) (Dey, 1993) was labeled with a code, linking it to one of the interviewees. This approach was to eliminate information that could potentially bias the process of coding. The demographic information of each interviewee was made available to the researcher at the appropriate point (i.e. when factors such as age and gender were the topic of investigation).

3.2   Quantitative study

3.2.1   Sample and Data Collection

The quantitative component of this dissertation examines how experiences during customer-customer encounters contributed to the construction of attendees' group identity and further influenced their responses. Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted in December of 2013 and in January of 2014 to check the face validity and design of the questionnaire. The pilot study used a convenience sample, consisting of 33 participants that were acquaintances of the researcher who were identified to have attended any type of association conferences in the past five years. In addition to completing the questionnaire, participants of this pilot study were encouraged to provide their comments on the questionnaire regarding its readability as well as how it could be improved. In general, the design and the clarity of the questionnaire was acknowledged. For example, one of the comments read that "This [questionnaire] was well laid out and held my attention." Minor revisions were made specifically to refine the wording of the questions and to improve the clarity of the questionnaire. For instance, one revision was

made to improve the comprehensiveness of options offered for a demographic question related to participants' occupations.

The online data collection for the main study occurred in early April of 2014. The recruitment of potential participants and the distribution of online questionnaires were conducted with the help of a professional research software company, Qualtrics. Consistent with the qualitative component of this dissertation, a screening question was used in order to only select participants who had attended any type of association conferences in the past five years to complete the online questionnaire. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were instructed to think of one of the most vivid association conferences they have attended in the past five years (or since 2008). Based on participants' accumulated experiences at this recalled association conference, the quality of their experiences during customer-customer encounters, and sense of group identity at that conference, as well as their responses including satisfaction and behavioral intention were measured. An attention filter was used to help ensure better data quality. Specifically, two extra statements were inserted in which respondents were instructed to select a specific choice. If the respondent answered incorrectly, their participation was terminated due to the potential of providing careless responses.

3.2.2 Measurements

The questionnaire consisted of five parts (see Appendix C). The following section presents details of each part.

3.2.2.1   Conference Variables

The first part of the questionnaire instructed participants to recall the most vivid association conference that they had attended in the past five years. Questions in this part were prepared to collect information about the association conference they recalled. Specifically, participants were instructed to provide the name, the number of the attendees, the scale (i.e., regional, national, international), and the type of the association that organized the conference they recalled. The total number of participants that had attended the conference was also collected.

3.2.2.2   Experiences at CCEs

Part 2 centered on attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters. The instrumental dimension of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters was measured by six items. These six items were developed by Gruen et al. (2007) to measure the exchange of resources in a professional meeting setting and were therefore adopted to capture the instrumental dimension of interaction experience. The scale includes items such as "Overall, I made many new valuable contacts at this conference in the past" and "Overall, more than the number of contacts I made at this conference, the most important value of networking was provided through one or two critical contacts." All items are measured on the seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7. Participants were instructed to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the items.

The social-emotional dimension of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters was captured by a social-emotional scale used in a study by Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007). This scale was used to measure one key type of support that customers often receive from other customers in a service establishment: social-emotional support (i.e., companionship and emotional support). The scale consists of eleven items that were modified in the present study to reflect a conference setting. For each item, respondents were asked to indicate how often other attendees at this association conference engaged in each of the eleven situations, such as "reassured me about things," "showed me understanding," and "sympathized with me." All items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7. Participants were instructed to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the items.

3.2.2.3   Social Identity

Part three of the questionnaire was about attendees' constructed social identity at the recalled conference, which was composed of three dimensions: social identification, affective commitment, and group-based self-esteem.

Social identification. The scale of social identification was adopted from a study by Jeong and Moon (2009), consisting of a largely visual item (see Figure 3.1), which was also used in the study by Bergami & Bagozzi (2000), and two verbal items. First, participants were provided eight cases and were told to "Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each row represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at

the right represents the identity of the conference group. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the levels of overlap between your own identity and the identity of the conference group: _____."

Then, participants were instructed to express the degree to which they felt a connection between their self-image and the image of the conference group on two verbal items. The two items included "I believe I am similar to other attendees at this conference" and "I perceive an overlap between my self-identity and the attendees at this conference." For each item, participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7.
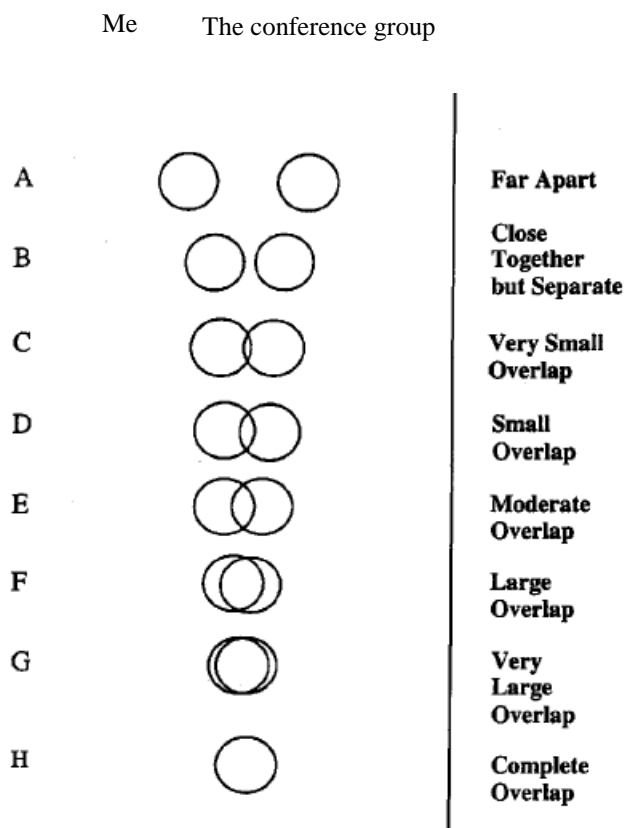
Figure 3.1 Direct Measure of Social Identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000)

Group-based self-esteem. The scale of group-based self-esteem was adapted from Bergami and Bagozzi's (2000) scale, which was originally used to capture self-esteem derived from organizational membership. The scale consists of six items and all participants were reminded to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the six statements as a result of their experiences during customer-customer encounters at the conference. The six items were worded as: "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt confident about my abilities," "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt that others respect and admire me," "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt as smart as others," "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt good about myself," "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt confident that I understand things," and "Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt aware of myself." All six items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7. Participants were instructed to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the items.

Affective commitment. The affective commitment scale consists of five items (Jeong & Moon, 2009) that were originally derived from the study by Allen and Meyer (1996). Items included "I was emotionally attached to the group of attendees at this conference," "I felt a sense of belongingness towards the attendees at this conference," "I was happy to spend time with the attendees at this conference," "I enjoyed discussing the attendees at this conference with people outside it," and "The attendees at this conference have a great deal of personal meaning to me." All five items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7.

Participants were instructed to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the items.

3.2.2.4 Transcendent conference experience (TCE)

Part four of the questionnaire asks for attendees' satisfaction with their conference experience. The TCE scale was adapted from Schouten's et al. (2007) study to capture important experiential phenomena that characterize flow and/or peak conference experience. The scale consists of 14 items, such as "Attending this conference made me feel differently about myself" and "Attending this conference made me feel more positive about myself." All 14 items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale anchored by "strongly disagree" at 1 and "strongly agree" at 7. Participants were instructed to indicate their agreement/disagreement with each of the items.

The order that all items within a construct appeared in the questionnaire was counterbalanced to guard against the potential order effect.

3.2.2.5 Demographic Variables

The last part of the questionnaire collected the participants' basic demographic information for debriefing purposes, and included their gender, age, educational background, ethnic background, occupation, and perceived experiences of themselves at the conference (i.e., newcomer vs. veteran) compared with other attendees at the association conference they recalled.

3.2.3   Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, a measurement model or confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and a subsequent structural model were administered. The measurement model specifies causal relationships between measures and illustrates ways in which the latent constructs are operationalized through their indicators (i.e., observed variables). First, the multiple-item scales of seven constructs were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether the observed variables reflected the hypothesized latent constructs based on the covariance matrix. Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability were computed to check the measurement's reliability. Convergent validity and discriminate validity were tested by checking factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). After the measures were validated, structural equation modeling (SEM) was then examined to test the relationships among constructs in the proposed model.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 21.0 and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 16.0 statistical programs were used for the statistical analysis of this study. SPSS was used to conduct descriptive statistics, assumption tests of structural equation modeling (SEM) (i.e., outliers, missing data, nonnormality and multicollinearity of the data), and reliability tests on domain scores. AMOS, one of the most commonly used SEM software applications (Nachtigall, Kroehne, Funke, & Steyer, 2003) was utilized to determine the overall fit of the measurement and structural models using the maximum likelihood method of estimation (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The models were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation and reported as

standardized estimates for ease of interpretation. The chi-square was used as the first fit index. Given that chi-square has been found to be sensitive to sample size (Byrne, 2001), other fit indices were necessary. Goodness of fit index (GFI; Joreskog & Sorbom, 1989), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Statistics (AGFI; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008), Normed Fit Index (NFI, Bentler & Bonett, 1980), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), were included in the study. Values for GFI, AGFI, NFI, and CFI range from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1.00 indicating a good model fit (Byrne, 2001; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010; Mulaik et al., 1989).

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 Results of the Qualitative Study

People go to conferences for information, inspiration, and interaction. While planners organized various kinds of activities for achieving the three objectives, the minds and perceptions of attendees remain elusive. Data analysis of the interview transcripts in this study led to findings concerning the experiential aspects of CCEs at conferences. First, this section presents the informants' profile. Then, this section presents discussions on experiential aspects of CCEs, including the motivations of attendees' engagement in CCEs, the typical types of CCEs, the functions that CCEs served to attendees along with the processes that attendees went through at CCEs, and the situational factors that affected attendees' experiences at CCEs. This section concludes with a discussion on a special type of CCEs that emerged from informants' description.

4.1.1 Informants Profile

Informants' profiles of the interviewees are presented in Table 4.1. Among 26 informants, 20 were females and six were males. Five informants were between the ages of 18 to 24 years, 11 between the ages of 25 to 34 years, four between the ages of 35 to 44 years, three between the ages of 45 to 54 years, two between the ages of 55 to 64

years, and one above the age of 65. In terms of educational level, 11 informants had a

Bachelor's degree or lower, 14 had a post-graduate degree, and one had an associates.

With respect to ethnical background, 21 were Caucasian, three were Asian and two were

African American. The sample of informants also represented a population with

substantial variation in their reported occupation, led by faculty and students across

disciplines, administrative personnel such as directors and assistant managers, clerical

staff such as secretaries, and service staff such as a schedule deputy, as well as specialists.

Concerning informants' past experience at association conferences, 17 had attended

association conferences 1 to 5 times in the past five years, 7 had attended 6-10 times, and

two had attended more than 10 times. The reported association conferences represented a

broad scope, ranging from conferences organized by professional associations, to

conferences organized by educational organizations, to conferences organized by

religious organizations. Five of the 26 reported that conferences took place at a regional

level, 14 were on a national level and 7 were on an international level.

Table 4.1 Informants Profile

Informant	Gender	Year of Birth	Education	Occupation	Frequency (times)	Ethnicity	Conf. Name	Conf. Location	Conf. Size	Conf. Scale
A	Female	1982	B.A.	Director of Student Programs at University Alumni Association	5	Caucasian	Council for Advancement and Support of Education	Chicago, IL	1000	International
B	Female	1983	B.A.	Senior Compensation Specialist in Human Resources	2	Caucasian	Colleges and Universities Professional Association	Boston, MA	N/A	International
C	Female	1993	High School	Student in Liberal Arts	3	Caucasian	Younger Leader's Conference	West Lafayette, IN	100	Regional
D	Female	1955	B.A.	Assistant Manager in Dining Court	3	Caucasian	Menu Directions	New Orleans, LA	200-250	National
E	Female	1967	M.S.	Graduate Student in Educational Psychology	7	Caucasian	American Education Research Association	San Francisco, CA	15,000	National
F	Male	1979	Ph.D.	Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology	20	Asian	Special Interest Group in Computer Science Education	Raleigh, NC	N/A	International
G	Female	1951	B.A.	Service Administrator	3	Caucasian	National Association of College and University Food Service	Washington, D.C.	400	National
H	Male	1964	Ph.D.	Clinical Associate Professor in Veterinary, Pet Wellness Clinic	25	Caucasian	Association Conference of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians	Indianapolis, IN	200	National
I	Female	1989	M.S.	Assistant Director of Academic Enhancement and Student Success	7	Caucasian	Southeastern Association of Housing Officers	Mobile, AL	N/A	Regional
J	Female	1989	M.S.	Student Affairs Professional	7	Caucasian	American College Personnel Association	Louisville, KY	1000	National
K	Female	1947	M.S.	Retired. Previously College Administrator	1	Caucasian	National Alliance on Mental Illness	Indianapolis, IN	350	Regional

Table 4.1 Continued

L	Female	1979	M.S.	Graduate Student in Chemistry Education	5	African American	American Chemical Society	Indianapolis, IN	N/A	National
M	Male	1992	High School	Student in Selling and Sales Management	3	African American	Alpha Tao Omega	St. Louis, MO	350	National
N	Female	1983	M.S.	Assessment Specialist for College Student Success	3	Caucasian	College Student Educators International	Las Vegas, NV	1000	National
O	Female	1990	B.S.	Graduate Student in Agronomy	3	Caucasian	The Agronomy Society of America	Tampa, FL	2000-3000	National
P	Female	1982	B.S.	Funding Specialist in Research Development	3	Caucasian	National Organization of Research Development Professionals	Austin, TX	500	National
Q	Female	1991	High School	Student in Natural Resources and Environmental Science	1	Caucasian	Annual Pollution Prevention Conference	Plainfield, IN	100	Regional
R	Female	1984	M.S.	Pathologist's Assistant	2	Asian	American Association of Pathologist Assistant	Portland, OR	100-200	National
S	Female	1988	B.A.	Graduate Student in Chemistry Education	4	Caucasian	Chemical Education Research Conference	Miami, FL	50-60	National
T	Female	1970	Associates	Schedule Deputy	2	Caucasian	International Association of Administrative Professional	Anaheim, CA	1800	International
U	Female	1983	M.S.	Graduate Student in Entomology	8	Caucasian	The American Education Research Association	San Francisco, CA	12000	International
V	Male	1983	M.S.	Graduate Student in Chemistry	7	Caucasian	Gordon Research Conference: Water and Aqueous Solutions	Holderness, NH	100-150	National
W	Female	1965	M.S.	Senior Conference Coordinator	8	Caucasian	Association Collegiate Conference Event Directors International	Notre Dame, IN	60	Regional

Table 4.1 Continued

X	Female	1985	M.S.	Tax accountant	2	Asian American	Faith Biblical Counseling Training	Lafayette, IN	2000	International
Y	Female	1978	Ph.D.	Professor in Education Studies	10	Caucasian	The Council for Exceptional Children	Boston, MA	4000	International
Z	Female	1990	B.A.	Conference coordinator	3	Caucasian	HSMAI-MEET, the national conference for the meeting planners	Washington, D.C.	1000	National

4.1.2 Motivations

Based on informants' descriptions, their engagement in CCEs when attending a conference was predominantly driven by two motivations: <u>long-term instrumental needs</u> and <u>transient hedonic desires.</u>

First, informants demonstrated that a key drive for them to engage in various types of CCEs was their need for building professional collaboration and exchanging information and experience. Such needs seem to be explained by the instrumental perspective that gives priority to benefits or outcomes, such as knowledge and social networks (Mair & Thompson, 2009). To the extent that the informants in this study emphasized their needs for the exchange of information, expertise, and networking prior to engaging in CCEs, this type of motivation was labeled as <u>long-term instrumental needs</u> in the context of this study.

> *And so I really just was doing the, "Get your business cards, talk to people and everything." And honestly that was the first session, those were the only two people I proactively went to and everything is like, ok checking that off my to-do list cause I wasn't entirely comfortable doing that right then. (Informant N, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *Yeah, in my area there's not many people doing research on it…it's a really challenging area and no one wants to research it because no one knows much about it…and then the other girl was also interested in spectroscopy as well so we found that out just through mutual colleagues and wanted to discuss it with each other because I wanted to collaborate with them because there's not a lot of people that do anything like what I want to do. If you want to go anywhere you need to build your network…I'm thinking who I can connect that who is interested in this and who will have classes that we'll be able to implement them in. (Informant S, Female, 26 yrs., participated in association conferences 4 times since 2008)*

A second major motivation underlying attendees' participation in CCEs as described by informants was their desire for relaxation and fun at that very moment and

their desire for breaking the silence in a shared physical environment. Such desires were

reported to become more dominant when attendees felt exhausted by conducting

themselves in a professional manner for long periods of time. Given that such desires are

akin to the hedonic motivations that were widely discussed in the domain of consumer

experience (Arnold & Price, 1993; Miao & Wei, 2013), transient hedonic desires was the

term used to capture attendees' momentary longings for relaxation, fun, and enjoyment

when engaging in CCEs in a conference setting.

> *…it was just in general kind of an interesting and engaging conversation…it is about we spent all day being very professional…I don't remember exactly what topics [we have talked about], but it was non-professional topics. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *…and then you know the kind of awkward silence of two people sitting in a large lecture room when there's not that many people there and we're sitting right next to each other. I think it would be more awkward if I didn't say anything to him so I could at least introduce myself since we were both part of the same national fraternity…Just to start up conversation to kind of clear the air and make it a little bit more comfortable cause we were sitting right next to each other and there was basically nobody around. (Informant M, Male, 22 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

4.1.3   Types of CCEs

Once motivated, attendees proceeded to engage in interactions with others in

various situations. Findings of this study, based on the descriptions of informants,

revealed how CCEs occurred in a conference setting, lending increased understanding to

generic types of CCEs in a conference setting. According to the typical CCEs described

by informants, CCEs were classified into three primary types according to their

occurrence. They have been labeled staged CCEs, spontaneous CCEs, and underground

CCEs. The following section describes each of these three types of CCEs in detail.

4.1.3.1   Staged CCEs

When asked to think back to typical CCEs at conferences, informants frequently indicated that they were often "forced" by the conference organizers to engage in a series of staged CCEs with strangers. Such forced or staged CCEs were reported to occur in two forms: formal sessions and social activities. As perceived by informants, formal sessions like presentations, poster sessions, and meetings staged more structured interactions surrounding certain topics. Social activities, such as: meals, coffee breaks, and various forms of networking gatherings (e.g., morning run, organized tour, parties), facilitated more casual conversations.

Informants further acknowledged that while in general, approaching strangers at conferences was challenging for them, especially those who are self-reportedly introverted, staged CCEs by the conference organizers helped them overcome the silence by providing an icebreaker and spurring more side conversations.

> *The whole session was kind of a focus group study, so you worked with people at your table and came up with ideas and then you presented them to the whole group, so that was another way to kind of...it was forced anyway, but then it breaks the ice at the table, so we had more side conversations afterwards to talk and, kind of network, and have business related or non-business related conversations. (Informant Z, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *Well usually at the conferences you have, like a main meeting session where you might eat breakfast together so that you get kind of a basic ice breaking kind of deal where you warm up to somebody. And then the other connection we made was over lunch. It was structured in that we were all supposed to eat lunch together but it wasn't structured in that we were going to talk about anything in particular. And then there's the keynote speaker usually where you sit in a large room and you listen to one person talk but there's side conversations, you know that spark up. (Informant M, Male, 22 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

While there is a reported tendency for attendees to stay with acquaintances rather than engage with fellow attendees with whom they are unfamiliar at conferences, certain cues or signals emerged from the interview data, which are recognized by informants to have facilitated their engagement in staged CCEs.

4.1.3.1.1 Conducive context

Conducive context describes situations in which attendees felt they were unable to find familiar faces or stick to a cohort of acquaintances at a conference. Informants shared that when they were alone or did not know many people at a conference, they were more likely to push themselves to engage in staged CCEs.

> *I've gone to conferences where I was by myself and not with anybody else that I knew and so that was a good way to be able to still go out--I'm a kind of an introverted person so I like having some ways to kind of forced interaction because sometimes I would rather not. (Informant P, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *It forces you when you go to a conference where you don't know somebody it forces you to meet people whether you want to or not. (Informant D, Female, 59 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *I've been to a conference before twice and I knew absolutely no one there and no one from my university was going to be there and I met a lot of different people and I interacted with people because you know you have to or otherwise you are sitting there by yourself so you are more apt to get involved. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

4.1.3.1.2 Sensory cues

Sensory cues reported by informants include both visual and auditory cues, which informants found helpful at staged CCEs. Informants shared that the other's facial and

verbal expressions served as a signal that influenced their intention to engage in staged

CCEs with a stranger.

> *I think I try to approach people with a look that they are open, which is kind of difficult to describe, the people who were smiling, walking around with their heads up, versus looking down. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *Well, I think definitely seeing people, the look on people's faces, is always a big key: are they following you? Do they understand what you said? Or, especially when we are talking about our kids, the sympathetic kind of like, well you have been, like, you know, a lot of non-verbal stuff. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *....but with people I just met, they don't have any idea who I am. I don't know anything about them, their background. I don't know if they're someone I can work with or if they're going to turn around and say my research is worthless, which I've had that happen before. So you kind of just have to look for the clues when you're talking with them. Do they have the facial expressions that show that they're actually caring? Do they ask the important questions or is it just, "so where are you from?" (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

4.1.3.1.3   Mutual network

The shared mutual network within an interaction pair was also found to have

facilitated one's engagement in a staged CCE. Informants reported that they were more

likely to engage in a staged CCE with a stranger when they recognized that they knew

someone in common.

> *I mean I certainly interact with people who I already know but I also meet people that I don't know. It is mostly I meet people that I don't know through the people that I know. So I meet them that way. (Informant F, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 20 times since 2008)*

> *I met a guy from Web design, but I met him because of a connection through our research group. So a lot of it is meeting people through the connections that you already have. (Informant S, Female, 26 yrs., participated in association conferences 4 times since 2008)*

4.1.3.2   Spontaneous CCEs

When recalling typical CCEs at conferences, quite a few informants referred to

spontaneous interactions in which they had frequently participated. As perceived by

informants, spontaneous CCEs were not staged by conference organizers. Compared with

staged CCEs, interactions at spontaneous CCEs are impromptu and organic. According to

informants, spontaneous CCEs occurred in three major areas within the conference venue.

These settings include: public areas, private areas, and food and beverage venues.

Informants reported that public areas like elevators, hallways, check-in/check-out

desks, various waiting areas, and even restrooms were typically conducive to organic

interactions and were thus favored by them.

> *But usually the unplanned ones are the ones I like the best. Like you meet a*
> *strange person at the elevator…I really like meeting in the hallways because*
> *you're like, "oh, you're going to the same place. I've seen you a couple of times.*
> *Let's sit together." (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association*
> *conferences 8 times since 2008)*

> *The ladies room! (Laughs) You know, there are the common areas in that high*
> *traffic bathroom…you've gotten ten minutes before the next session starts so you*
> *might be talking about the session you just went to or "where are you going next"*
> *or things like that. (Informant N, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association*
> *conferences 3 times since 2008)*

Private areas within the conference venue, such as hotel guestrooms, were settings

where spontaneous CCEs were reported to take place.

> *But the thing about conferences, especially in graduate school, is you usually end*
> *up sharing room with other people in your program, at least I did because all of*
> *us are on graduate school budget. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in*
> *association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

You know, it was really, it was our free time but it was what we are interested in, we are excited, so we keep talking all night. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

Food and beverage venues and other entertainment outlets within the conference setting were also recognized by informants as typical locations that could spur spontaneous interactions.

...and that evening, I was just getting dinner in the hotel, and a gentleman walked up and he saw me at the conference, so we started to bounce ideas to each other, how we could collaborate and work together more in the future. (Informant Z, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

While most of the recalled spontaneous CCEs at conferences occurred within the conference venue, a few informants pointed out that spontaneous CCEs can also take place outside the conference venue, such as in transit to the conference venue and through local tours in which attendees engaged on their own accord.

And because these conferences are usually located all over the nation so you get to travel to different places. So we're kind of like tourists to those cities as well, so we travel together. For the past one I went to, I met a new friend, a friend there that I never met before. We traveled; we visited some tour sites together. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

Hmmmm, well I guess there was a dinner, that was planned, but once the dinner was over, the people you are kind of hanging out with, we kind of went out into a more social setting, so that was not really planned, it was kind of spurred at the moment, spontaneous. (Informant B, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

4.1.3.3 Underground CCEs

A third type of CCEs that emerged from informants' descriptions was underground CCEs, the name of which was endorsed by one of the informants. Similar to

spontaneous CCEs, underground CCEs were not staged by conference organizers.

However, underground CCEs were not as organic and impromptu as spontaneous CCEs.

If a line were to be drawn between being "staged" and being "spontaneous," underground

CCEs would fall in the middle. Specifically, underground CCEs are initiated by a group

of attendees who share the kinship, such as alumni of an organization or researchers in a

particular field. Underground CCEs are not publicized to the entire conference as staged

CCEs. Instead, they are "underground" and the "admission ticket" that an individual

needs for entrance is their shared kinship with others attending this underground CCE.

> *I think probably at one of my major conferences that I go to every April, one of the sub-divisions that I have been very active in, we have social during the conference every year. It is not publicized, it's kind of like underground. (Informant Y, Female, 36 yrs., participated in association conferences 10 times since 2008)*

> *One was with another woman I met at this year's conference. She's got older kids, and her advisor is one of my advisors' best friends, and we happened to meet up with the graduate students for our special interest group had a get-together at a bar. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

Across all three types of CCEs, an interesting observation emerged from

informants' descriptions. Based on informants' descriptions, they tended to stay in their

comfort zone, that is, when they went to a conference with someone they already knew or

when they were able to find familiar faces at the conference, they tended to stay close to

acquaintances who are labeled as "buddies." Informants reported that when they

interacted with "buddies," less social energy was expended and they could embark on

interactions without having to "pave" the way. Additionally, staying close to a conference

buddy provided a sense of togetherness. For the sake of ease and comfort, attendees tended to stick by their conference buddies.

So it is just easier if you are with somebody you know to not to have to spend the social energy to reach out. It is just there are so much conversation you have to get through, like "where are you from," "what do you like," I would rather go and hang out with someone who I have already done that ground work with. Like personally, rather than trying to figure out, ok, so if I suggest do something, is that something they are going to like, or, will they feel obligated to go but actually don't want to go? (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

Well, usually I don't know too many people at the conferences I've been too. Where I've gone with people I've known, I would say I don't get to branch out as much and talk to people I don't know….Yeah, if I'm with people from my research team then we, I know that's not what you're supposed to do, but I think we do tend to not, I don't tend to necessarily go out and talk to people. (Informant L, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 5 times since 2008)

A lot of times, it is the people who I know already, like if we are all in a session together, it will be me talking with my friend who has gone to that session with me, and engage in with that. That is because I personally find trying to make new friends and acquaintances it takes a lot of effort. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

On the other hand, while it was reportedly easier to stick with a conference buddy, informants admitted that it was less beneficial when compared with interacting with new contacts.

But sometimes to really learn new perspectives and new ideas, it's better to interact with people from other place and people that you haven't talked with before. (Informant K, Female, 67 yrs., participated in association conferences once since 2008)

But as the conference goes on, you meet more people, I think it's always interesting and beneficial to talk more to people that you're not familiar with and to strike up newer conversations, expand your network because I think that's what you're there for. (Informant M, Male, 22 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)
So I actually thought that was more productive to go without knowing anyone. Because I was forced to get out of my comfort zone, and I was forced to meet

people than I was just goanna sat there. So, I think honestly, I got more out of it by not knowing any other people because that way, I can come back, and I brought ideas back to the office as far as, hey this is what I heard, this is the connection I have made, versus all five of us are from the office, we would fill up our table, so…. (Informant Z, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

4.1.4   Subjective Experiences at CCEs

During attendees' participation in CCEs, it was of interest in this study to uncover what they did and how they evaluated their experience. This section centers on the underlying dimensions of attendees' experiences at CCEs that are recognized and valued by attendees. Data analysis of interviews revealed that informants demonstrated four processes they underwent at CCEs in a conference setting: collaborative learning, relationships building, mutual affirmation, and empathetic resonance. These processes captured well the dimensions of attendees' experiences at CCEs. The following section provides a detailed illustration for each of the processes.

4.1.4.1   Collaborative Learning

Informants indicated that CCEs at conferences is akin to that of *a sounding board*. At CCEs, they were provided a sounding board for information exchange and idea generation. This process can be explained by the collaborative learning process. Collaborative leaning is broadly defined as a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together (Dillenbourg, 1999). In this study, informants shared that at CCEs, they often exchanged information with their interaction partners and the concepts they "bounced off" each other sparked new ideas. Informants described that

they were also able to obtain guidance that facilitated their coping or problem solving

skills, by way of the directions offered by interaction partners' who had experienced

similar challenges and difficulties. CCEs, therefore, served as a sounding board for

attendees to be involved in collaborative learning.

> *I was able to, kind of like a sounding board, to bounce ideas to each other because we have different demographics. Sometimes I meet people that have the same [ideas] or are new in the field who came from different fields and have different perspectives. So it was very productive. (Informant Z, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *It [The conference] had all the features that I was looking for. I got to hear a lot about what other people were doing and learned a lot from them. I got to share what I was interested in and what I was doing. (Informant V, Male, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *Well for my profession, a lot of times we're either working alone or we're working with another pathologist assistant so when we go there it's nice to hear everyone talk about their own jobs and how it varies. We like to share techniques. Because we're all over the nation so everyone's really different. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

Informants further implied that the function of CCEs as a sounding board for

collaborative learning was more salient and effective when the shared information was

up-to-date, relevant and diverse, which made it more practical.

> *Because if you write a journal paper, that research is typically 1-2 years old by the time it is published. Conferences are the places where people are presenting more up-to-date current research, right? (Informant F, Male, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 20 times since 2008)*

> *Oh, I loved it. I loved just learning what other people are doing throughout the U.S. Actually there are a lot of international people that come as well and it's great to know what other people are doing and how they feel about different subjects. (Informant O, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *I don't remember anything about the room or anything. I just think they were sales people but they very much believed in their product. Something in what they*

said and did convinced me it was something that was easy enough for our cooks to use and do and sounded like it was possible for us to get it. So all the things made it be that yeah, there would be an outcome that we could do this. (Informant D, Female, 59 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

4.1.4.2   Relationship building

The second process that attendees go through during CCEs is relationship building. Data analysis of this study showed that CCEs in a conference setting resemble *a magnet*. By serving the function as a magnet, CCEs brought people together and facilitated the process of connecting with each other and cultivating long-term relationships. One prominent type of such relationship building in a conference setting was described as a professional collaborative network.

We kept seeing each other everywhere the whole rest of the conference, since then we become good friends, and so it was almost like a magnet, something put us there, so we can talk. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

Um, obviously you go to a conference to network. I met a girl who was interested in similar research to what I am interested in. There's not a lot of--well, we don't know of anybody who's doing research on it, and so we found that out and we're like, "Let's collaborate in the future." So that was really cool. And then we met another girl who was also in to something similar. And so now the three of us would like to work on similar projects in the future. We'll probably hope to collaborate. So that was something that was definitely really neat that came out of the conference. (Informant S, Female, 26 yrs., participated in association conferences 4 times since 2008)

He was very much interested in future things and past things, "why did I choose this and where am I going with it?" Then he wanted to know how it is connected with what he was doing if I wanted to continue that relationship in the future. And it wasn't just, "Here's my card. You email me if you want to know." He was, "where's your card? I'm going to email you." I thought, "I'm never hearing from this guy again." But he did and it was pretty cool. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)

A large number of informants shared that the relationships they built extended beyond the professional scope to a deeply personal level, which brought them closer to each other.

> *You just feel, I think, with a lot of interactions you have, you interact on a profession basis with a lot of people and talk, but sometimes it, with certain people here and there, it just feels a little more personal, more like a real connection where you could make a friendship with somebody if they were closer or something, or someone you might be more likely to talk to the next time if you see them at another conference. (Informant P, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *I felt like we connected. Everybody there you could call your colleague, everybody there is a colleague. But with him I feel like I made a friend so it's different. He's a friend and a colleague. Those are bonuses when you can combine those two. Being able to actually connect at a deeper level is special. Conferences you don't always get to do that. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

A number of informants indicated that the magnet function served by CCEs is also manifested in how they helped attendees reconnect with those they had enjoyed in the past, thus reviving their previous network and paving the way for future collaborations.

> *Going to meeting friends at grad school at conferences is fun, you know. Collaborations will happen because of this. Previous collaborations have been revived by going to conference from grad school. (Informant F, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 20 times since 2008)*

> *There was a classmate that I haven't seen since we probably graduated. So that was really interesting to see where his career is gone, where my career is gone, we again knew each other because we had an interest back to school. So, getting an opportunity of getting caught up, seeing someone that I haven't seen in a while, sharing common experiences not just professionally….enjoying what we are doing, we again, brought back a lot of memories. (Informant H, Male, 50 yrs., participated in association conferences 25 times since 2008)*

4.1.4.3   Mutual Affirmation

Informants shared that when participating in CCEs, they also frequently sought or provided validation and encouragement. Such a process can be explained by a phenomenon defined in counseling and clinical psychology: mutual affirmation. Mutual affirmation captures the mutual respect and affective attachment present in an interpersonal bond (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999). In this study, informants indicated that CCEs in a conference setting resembled the function *of a pep rally* where members of a group motivate each other through validation and encouragement. In the context of this study, informants shared that attendees usually assure each other that they are worthwhile and valuable by validating the other's thoughts, ideas or professional development path. As a result, attendees gained a sense of confidence and respect.

> *It was nice to know I was not the only one. I felt like, my thoughts were validated, because other people felt that way. (Informant B, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

> *This was someone who didn't try to fit me into something he already knew. He's like, "wow, that's different. Let's talk about it." It has meaning to me because he sort of validated my research. So that was nice to know especially when I found out he was at Harvard. That's really nice. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

> *Talking to my teaching assistant at the conference, I know that I have stability in a job when I graduate and have that potential, because she impacted me most and reassured me that way. (Informant Q, Female, 23 yrs., participated in association conferences once since 2008)*

> *Sometimes being a grad student is really hard and sometimes you don't get the gratification that you need because it seems like you never get anything done, but meeting him kind of inspired me to have the energy to keep going and keep researching because I want to find out what he has. So I don't know, it's just given me some more energy to just go at it. (Informant O, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

Informants shared that during CCEs people also affirmed each other by acknowledging individual's self-values. During this process, attendees were able to see their value to others at a macro level and therefore, their self-esteem was reinforced.

> *It is kind of like a future leader's conference, and it helped me get a sense of how people here, they want you, care about contributing to society and helping make a difference. (Informant C, Female, 21 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *It was nice to know that there was somebody who could connect and remember. It meant something to me that she remembered me. That made me feel good that we had that connection or that she took the time to talk to me. She didn't have to, you know. And that made me happy as a person that she would, she took the time to talk to somebody that she does not know well, and to share her experiences with me like that, that was something I valued. [I am] really just pleased that somebody would take the time to do that when they didn't have to, that is something that is meaningful to me. (Informant Q, Female, 23 yrs., participated in association conferences once since 2008)*

> *So I felt really good that I could provide a resource to him that he never would have had if he didn't stop at my poster. That felt really great and I thought, "Look, I have a purpose. I'm going to do my research." (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

4.1.4.4   Empathetic Resonance

When recalling their experiences during CCEs, quite a few informants referred to the concern, affection, and especially, empathetic resonance they received from interaction partners. This function of CCEs is akin to that of *a support group*. Members of a support group go through therapeutic alliance for a sense of belonging (Mejias, Gill, & Shpigelman, 2014), during which they engage with each other and develop a collaborative and affective bond that promotes beneficial changes. Within the context of this study, informants implied that CCEs served as a support group, fostering the effective development of a sense of belonging among interaction partners. In this support

group offered by CCEs, attendees shared joint concerns, experienced a sense of

connection between themselves and others at that CCE, and developed empathetic

resonance or sympathy with each other based on their common passions, similar

hardships, and life experiences. Such empathetic resonance helped to further enhance the

psychological connections between attendees and thus alleviated individuals' negative

emotions like anxiety and frustrations.

> *It felt, it felt good, yeah, I just felt like, I wasn't alone…It really, it is just kind of you know at conference you see someone, you talk to them about that, and it just helped you feel you kind of belong a little bit more to the overall conference, you were not just there on the outside looking at it. So [that feeling] made this conference kind of seem smaller. (Informant B, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

> *She has a daughter and I have a, I have two daughters. Yeah...a lot of same kind of issues, like anxiety with little kids, what do you do when….you know, how do you manage. It's a different world. So it was fun to talk to her about how different it is. We both agreed some people's kids are just easier than others. So we really enjoyed talking to each other about how you managed all of this. I have my kid older than hers so I was able to give her some advice and tell her what I have been through, and she was a sympathetic listener, and I listened to what she had to say, so it was good. It was really meaningful. I meet so many people and most of them don't have children, or even older than young, you know babies are babies, I don't meet a lot of people with kids, over two. And so to meet somebody who is a mom, and a researcher, doing all at the same time kind of thing, which is really, it was nice, it was, it made you feel like you were not alone. It was up firming. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *Well, I think that there is a myth that people just get out of undergraduate, they go right to graduate school, they get out of graduate school, and they have a happy easy life. And I know it is not true for anybody. But for those of us who are doing this, in leading our lives, and doing it with kids, and husbands, and everything else, we look at that myth, we are just like, we just feel like, ah...the world isn't made for us, this is the situation, set up for us, it is totally true, you know that. But you really feel like you are, you know it is like you are running, you are never going to catch up, and there is nobody else doing what you do, and it was really nice to sit and talk to another mom, who is doing what I am doing, and managing it successfully too, and encountering the same problems that I am encountering, how long it takes, how everything takes longer when you have to worry about*

your kids. So it was nice to hear from her that it is hard for her too. We are both in this together, we all support each other. Feeling like, you really do feel like you are not alone. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

Informants' descriptions demonstrated that CCEs' function as a support group is especially beneficial when people who share similar experiences are few and when people who share similar experiences are less likely to gather otherwise.

Not only just information exchange, but also, there's only maybe 1,000 or 2,000 or our profession so there's only so many people that understand exactly what we do, what we go through. So it's like everyone you meet there is friend because we have a view that's different from everybody else because only we do what we do. It is more like building a community. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

I get to meet other advanced graduate students that are doing what I do and have the same interest. Often at your university, you are probably the only one doing what you do, but you can meet other people that are interested in the same things….and people that are in the same places in their graduate training as you are, understand the hardships and the humor, you can all laugh about the same thing, so…. I really like that part of it. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

As mentioned above, four primary functions of CCEs and their respective processes emerged from informants' personal descriptions to capture the dimensions of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs. The analysis of interview transcripts in this study further revealed that interactions at CCEs throughout these four functions and processes flow through a series of steps from self-reported disclosure to turn-taking disclosures to deeper interactions. Informants reported positive affiliation and interpersonal outcomes as a result of the disclosure process, such as: closeness, similarity, and enjoyment.

Informants reported that initially, they were forced into CCEs where more structured, formal and mindful conversations took place.

> *I think all of the conferences I've gone to, you know, you sit, you listen to a presentation, and you might have the open lunch where you can mingle. But these focus groups, I think, they helped you interact because you had a conversation starter where you were a little more focused. (Informant P, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *Yeah. I don't really do well with just approaching people on my own. You have to have some sort of context that I can fit it in. For me things like poster sessions help a lot because then I have an excuse to go talk to somebody. And I'll be like, "Oh, tell me about your poster," and if I'm interested I can keep talking to them and it can go into whatever. (Informant V, Male, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

After the initial disclosure, informants indicated that they proceeded to establish common ground and pave the way for structured conversations on a deeper level. Such groundwork is primarily accomplished by the disclosure of personal information with each other.

> *Whereas if I'm meeting someone from a school in another part of the country, I might have to ask that person for a little more background, a little more history, just so I can better understand their…try to establish something. (Informant K, Female, 67 yrs., participated in association conferences once since 2008)*

> *You do talk about your research but you also try to branch out a little bit more and talk about your personal things to get to know the person. (Informant S, Female, 26 yrs., participated in association conferences 4 times since 2008)*

> *Generally, I think it's more of, "where are you from?" "Minnesota." "It must be freezing there." So you know it's still more of weather types of discussion, or discussing about our lunch, "Oh, I wish they really had salad here." You could say it is a little more superficial but I think it takes a little more comfort level for people to have a more free discussion. (Informant X, Female, 29 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

Lastly, informants reported that established common ground paves the way for conversations concerning varied topics, during which deeper and more intimate self-disclosures are spurred. Such reciprocal self-disclosure proceeds in a gradual and orderly fashion, as a result of which closeness between the interaction partners develops.

> *Well, usually I don't know the person so usually it starts with something context specific…If we realize that we have a lot of things overlapping, it will eventually get to the, "what do you do? Why are you interested in this?" It is sort of explaining yourself, like an elevator speech. And if it really gets interesting it will be, "Well what are you doing later?", "Oh, you're going to the same talk as mine. When is your talk?" that kind of thing. You make like "conference buddies." (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

4.1.5   Situational Factors

During interviews, informants were instructed to recall any situational factors that affected their interaction experiences during the CCE they had recalled. The following section presents the findings on the key situational factors which emerged from interviews. Consistent with previous literature in general service settings, informants' descriptions of these factors fall into three major categories: <u>intrapersonal factors</u>, <u>interpersonal factors</u>, and <u>structural factors</u>.

4.1.5.1   Intrapersonal Factors

Several informants referred to reasons related to their own personal characteristics at the conference when describing factors that influenced their experiences during CCEs. The discussed intrapersonal factor was primarily centered on one's *dominant persona*lity that is most salient in a social setting. The more extroverted one is in a social setting, the

easier and more comfortable one finds the interaction experience to be. By contrast, the

more introverted one is in a social setting, the harder and more uncomfortable one feels

when interacting with others.

> *I am very outgoing, so I think that helps. I can talk to anybody. (Informant F, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 20 times since 2008)*

> *I am not extremely extroverted in large group settings, so I was very content to sit out to the side and just talk to one or two people. (Informant Y, Female, 36 yrs., participated in association conferences 10 times since 2008)*

4.1.5.2   Interpersonal Factors

A sizable number of informants recalled factors related to the dynamic within an

interaction pair. Such factors are labeled as interpersonal factors. One group of

interpersonal factors represented the characteristics of the interaction partner. Informants

shared that their *interaction partner's level of expertise* and/or *personality* could enhance

or weaken their interaction experiences during CCEs.

> *He sounded really knowledgeable and sounded like he knew what he was doing so I wanted to know who he was so that I could tell my professor later…and of course he was really knowledgeable so he would not stop me at some points so I think that's, that has probably influenced my experience a little bit. (Informant O, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *I guess he's more like a fatherly figure, wise, because he's older. He was actually originally a pathologist. He was a Pathologist in China but then when he came here he didn't want to go through med school again so he became a pathologist assistant instead. So he had a lot of wisdom, and yeah, I kept asking him questions. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)*

> *She was just very open and congenial and just friendly person and so it was easy to carry on a longer conversation. (Informant P, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

He was really interactive and hands on which was great. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)

Another group of interpersonal factors were related to the dynamics between attendees, which highlighted *the level of affinity or similarity* between interaction partners. Informants reported that in a conference setting, they were more likely to interact with people who they perceived to be similar to them. Such reported affinity or similarity was manifested in various aspects, including experiences and interests, networks, and individual traits. Informants indicated that, they were more likely to engage in CCEs and enjoy the experience at CCEs when they shared common experiences and interests, a mutual social network, and similar individual traits with their interaction partners.

Interviewer: So, here, do you enjoy interacting with people when you go to conferences?
Informant C: Yeah.
Interviewer: Why?
Informant C: Because I know we share the same interest…Maybe like personality, because he was like, also kind of a nerd. (Informant C, Female, 21 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

And we both obviously have passions for hiring and working with students, we shared a lot of stories back and forth about the students we have interacted with…so, it was just really good to get to know that other people are sharing the same passions…It turned out we have similar personalities, and just a direct way of speaking. Not sure what exactly drew us together but we had a good conversation. (Informant G, Female, 63 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

But I think another factor is that we have mutual friends so that conversation is not just one-on-one. They were friends' friends and we're also part of the same church so you feel a little more comfortable to ask a little bit more. (Informant X, Female, 29 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

In addition to the individual effects of each of the two types of factors discussed above, these factors were identified to interplay with each other during CCEs based on

informants' descriptions. The influence of attendees' dominant personality during CCEs

and their engagement in CCEs could be moderated by interpersonal factors. For instance,

when the interaction partner appeared to be inviting and interactive, informants found it

easier to carry on the interactions despite their contextualized individual traits in that

situation. For another instance, whereas group size was not raised when informants

shared any interpersonal factors that they had experienced, informants indicated that

when the group size was smaller, the environment was more conducive to interacting and

thus the impeding influence of a dominant personality in that encounter could be

diminished or overridden.

> *I'm not that outgoing to go asking people. It's more comfortable for me in a setting where people seem to be more inviting. (Informant V, Male, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)*

> *I am not extremely extroverted in large group settings, so I was very content to sit out to the side and just talk to one or two people. (Informant Y, Female, 36 yrs., participated in association conferences 10 times since 2008)*

4.1.5.3   Structural Factors

At the structural level, factors including *the atmosphere, the physical environment,*

the available time, and *the services* were recognized by informants to have influenced

their interaction experiences at CCEs. First, *the atmosphere* of a specific encounter was

recognized to have determined attendees' intention to engage in that encounter and their

comfort level in that moment.

> *The next day when the conference begins, it was kind of quiet in the morning, there wasn't a breakfast. I think if they would have breakfast, it could have been more conducive to break that ice. Everyone just looked at their talks but no one kind of spoke. (Informant Z, Female, 24 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

This is not an environment which I would expect to be very professional where we talk about student safety; this is an environment where everyone is having fun as expected, so the other thing is that we all are in more casual clothing which helps, because at the conference we all are kind of dressed up business, at least business casual, the minimum for student conferences, when you can just put on a clothes you want to wear, it is a lot easier to connect to people, because you are not trying to put on that professional kind of person. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

It made it easier to talk once we were out in the hallway. There were lots of people around. In one respect that made it easier because everybody else was doing exactly what we were doing. And so that was, that made it more comfortable. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The physical environment of a CCE was perceived to either facilitate or inhibit interactions based on whether or not it created a context conducive to them. The commonly recognized elements of a physical environment in a conference setting include background music, space and seating, lighting, and temperature.

I think it is easier when the room feels inviting, or when there is music playing, just so it is not silent, you are not the person who breaks the silence. I think that is always being helpful. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

But because it was so noisy, it did make us have to stand a lot closer together. So it felt like a little more of an intimate conversation than if I'm way far away from you on the other side of the poster. It probably helped because if he had been farther away, it may not have been as interactive. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)

I think the number of people makes it nerve racking for me. Mobility to move around…I don't really like that many people I would say, because it was a little of violation of personal spaces, so that influences my mobility. (Informant Y, Female, 36 yrs., participated in association conferences 10 times since 2008)

It was a room that was…it was kind of cloudy out and they didn't have any lights on and was kind of dark like you could have taken a nap. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)

And the bar, we ended up finding a place to get together, but this bar wasn't a hotel bar, it was just kind of a local big bar with a party room at the back. Still like, we were all just…frying…but, you know. We didn't leave, we were having fun, but at an organized conference setting, I think, you would be a big picture, maybe nicer facilities, and air conditioning. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The time made available to attendees for interactions was of key significance. Informants shared that when they participated in a CCE at a conference, they usually found themselves in a situation in which there were time constraints, such as a spontaneous pass-by in the hallway or an organized association meeting. The feeling of time pressure thus negatively influenced their experiences during CCEs. Encounters were suggested to be designed in such a way as to increase the opportunity to participate.

I think it is really structured and people always have to be somewhere, I think that could impact the dialogue just because they are always trying to go to the next activity, so I think it is a good idea to have a built-in open time, so you don't feel rushed. (Informant A, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 5 times since 2008)

Once the conference starts we're sitting in lectures so you don't really get to interact with anybody because you are just listening to the lecturer. So the only time you get to actually interact with other people is breakfast and then if you meet somebody and you plan to do something together after the conference in the evening. I think that's the point of the event which is amazing. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

It [The conference] is so big. It's hard to meet people because there's just so much going on and anything you attend is so big. So you try to meet people but it's more challenging. It's more detached. (Informant S, Female, 26 yrs., participated in association conferences 4 times since 2008)

While it seemed that CCEs occurred within interaction pairs that were beyond the control of service providers, data analysis of interview transcripts revealed that services in certain aspects were expected by attendees. According to informants, the lack of these

services negatively influenced attendees' interaction experience during CCEs. Specifically, the expected services in a conference setting included name tags and clearer titles for sessions.

Certainly, everywhere we go, we have name tags, and titles, so we know if we are going to something in common. (Informant A, Female, 32 yrs., participated in association conferences 5 times since 2008)

I am trying to think of a few times when I have to be the person who introduced myself, I think name tags always help me, because then you can kind of look around the room and see people's names, or what schools they are with, and sometimes there are some institutions that I consider as peer institutions, that encouraged me to open up. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The biggest thing I had that I think would make interactions better is if I could have been able to tell by the title of the session a little bit more about what the programs were going to be about because there were a number of things where I went in expecting to hear something, and it was really not a topic of interest to me or it wasn't really at the level that I was looking for. So overall to improve interactions, it would help if had been able to know about [the content]: ok this session, the title of the talk is this, but what does that really tell me about what's happening. So if they could have found a better way to kind of let the people know what the talks were actually going to be about, that would have been nice for facilitating interactions with anybody. (Informant L, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 5 times since 2008)

4.1.6 "Sticky" CCEs

During in-depth interviews, a special group of CCEs emerged from informants' descriptions. These CCEs differ from generic ones in that attendees were able to recall them more easily and immediately than others. To the extent that these CCEs remain "sticky" to attendees' mind over time, they are labeled as sticky CCEs. Informants described two sub-types of CCEs that can be regarded as sticky CCEs, respectively labeled as "extraordinary CCEs" and "negative CCEs".

4.1.6.1 Extraordinary CCEs

Extraordinary CCEs represent CCEs that informants referred to as memorable, meaningful, or surprising, and are thus labeled extraordinary CCEs. Particularly, these extraordinary CCEs are characterized by the three elements they embody: *intensified emotions*, *ignited sparks*, and *unexpected surprises*.

4.1.6.1.1 Intensified emotions

Intensified emotions indicate the emotions that were aroused and experienced by attendees throughout a CCE. Such intensified emotions were readily recalled after the CCE experience, thus making the experience during a particular CCE stand out. Quite a few informants emphasized that the emotions they experienced during a particular CCE made that experience fresh and memorable. Specifically, certain types of emotions were brought up most frequently when attendees described their CCEs experience in a conference setting. These included: excited, exhilarated, comfortable, interested, relieved, free, relaxed, and refreshed.

> *I'd say to your points, it's how you felt afterwards. (Informant M, Male, 22 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

> *I think because I was so nervous heading into it, I had a lot of emotional memory with it as well. I remember being nervous. I remembered feeling not lonely, but a little bit isolated because I was going into a situation where I didn't already know anyone. (Informant N, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)*

4.1.6.1.2 Sparks

A second element that was recognized as characteristic of an extraordinary CCE was the sparks it ignited between the interaction pairs in the moment. Informants reported

that due to the commonalities they shared, they felt compatible with each other and experienced synergy. Such synergy sparks a high level of interest and engagement in the encounter, and "spark" moments keep the memory alive over time.

I met a woman at a conference, very sweet, and we hit off right away…our actual interaction that we did talk was very positive and actually good. (Informant B, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

[Sparks are], um, just that in the moment your interest is very high…Yeah, I mean I felt fine but at that stage I was really engaged with what the person had talked about and presented. (Informant L, Female, 35 yrs., participated in association conferences 5 times since 2008)

I met a woman named Rebecca, we were both waiting for the previous session to be over and we both got there early so we strike up a conversation. It turned out my advisor was her graduate mentor the year before, and we are interested in the same thing, in research. We both were married with kids and her son was really little. It was like a synergy. You know, we just happen to be interested in the same study, the same interest because we went to the same session. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

4.1.6.1.3   Surprises

What attendees did not expect but were happy to have accomplished at CCEs was acknowledged by informants as another key element that differentiated a sticky CCE from a generic one. This "surprise" element was often characterized by the revival of lost friendships, the making of unexpected personal connections, and/or the establishment of professional networks.

You know, it was almost like, wow, you do that I do that; you know that, I know that; you know her, I know her too, you know, that kind of ... wow, I can't believe this, I mean, magic sounds silly, but it was definitely synergistic where we are just like unexpected, and exciting, and almost surprising. (Informant E, Female, 47 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

When you go to a conference you expect to learn something. The whole conference you go to lectures, I did learn a lot. But those don't stand out because you go expecting to learn it. But you don't go expecting to meet a friend. So that's

why it's extra special. (Informant R, Female, 30 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

I did not know he was going to be there. I haven't really interacted with him in over 20 years. Yeah, it was unexpected. So, I got an opportunity of getting caught up, saw someone that I haven't seen in a while, shared common experiences not just professionally, but then career wise. (Informant H, Male, 50 yrs., participated in association conferences 25 times since 2008)

It is a very salient moment, because it was like, I never would have thought that a potential job could come out of at social interactions at a professional organization that just happened because we said hello to each other. I thought that is a formal way that you need to apply, this was like literally like we just started talking, I said "Oh I am finishing up, I am looking for a job." They are like "Oh, we have a job open." Then they start to talk about the institution. (Informant Y, Female, 36 yrs., participated in association conferences 10 times since 2008)

Extraordinary CCEs were recognized by a few informants as the highlights of their overall conference experience, driving their intention to return for future conferences.

I would say because it was just a highlight at the conference at the time, because I remember feeling refreshed by the content from the conversation. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

One of the highlights of the conference for me was having him come up certainly. He looks different. We have changed a little in 20 years, so that was great to get caught up even for that 15 minutes. That was a highlight of that meeting. (Informant H, Male, 50 yrs., participated in association conferences 25 times since 2008)

Interviewer: So do you perceive that your overall conference experience is enhanced by this interaction?
Informant X: Oh yeah. Definitely. (Informant X, Female, 29 yrs., participated in association conferences twice since 2008)

4.1.6.2   Negative CCEs

While the discussions on sticky CCEs have so far centered on positive CCEs at conferences, it is worth noting that negative CCEs exerted powerful impacts on attendees both during and after their conference participation. In this study, the typical negative CCEs denoted those CCEs that made attendees feel negative, inhibited attendees' engagement in future CCEs, and tainted attendees' conference experience, even harming their psychological well-being. The following primary causes of negative CCEs were brought up by informants and discussed in this section in details.

4.1.6.2.1   Attendee B

When recalling negative CCE experiences, informants frequently referred to other attendees who were present and made them feel negative in certain ways. The term Attendee B was adapted from service literature to explain the first key cause of negative CCEs as perceived by informants. In service literature, the term Customer B was incorporated in the servuction system model to reflect the negative influence of other customers present in service settings (Eiglier & Langeard, 1977). To reflect the conference setting of this dissertation, the term Customer B was modified to be Attendee B to refer to other attendees who were present at the same CCE with focal attendees and displayed certain types of behaviors that negatively impacted focal attendees. Four exemplars of Attendee B were discussed by informants.

The first exemplar of Attendee B was a dissatisfying speaker or presenter who failed to deliver the level of information that other attendees expected to receive.

A lot of them have to do with presenters, in terms of judging the values of their presentations, and interacting with them based on the questions. Because when I think about negative things that I take away, it is not so much about the general. If it is in a presentation, you make a note that it is completely useless, and what institution that person works at, what do they do. You can make sure that you start to build your kind of catalogue: these are good people, these are the ones you want to avoid. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The second exemplar of Attendee B was <u>fake or superficial interaction partners</u> who were perceived to only give an "elevator speech" or engaged in "inauthentic interactions."

And then, people that may just seem fake in general. For me, it is about quality. If I only meet 5 people, but I feel like these 5 people, if I have questions, I can contact, then to me that is a harvest, versus people, some of them were even like colleagues, sometimes it is almost like a number game, like how many hands I shook, I got 15 business cards today, to me it is not reaching out to people actually. So for me, it is always a negative. I almost feel disinterested or disengaged, you just kind of ask a fair amount of questions and move on. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The third exemplar of Attendee B was <u>attendees displaying socially inappropriate behavior</u> in public areas.

I would say I had several negative experiences. And a lot of them have been, I would say, sometimes more socially inappropriate. Somebody had consumed too much alcohol, which is very negative. He kept talking about his dissertation, and the challenging part was that, he was friends with a lot of people there, and so nobody really likes to step up and to kind of control and manage him. (Informant I, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

It is not even necessarily that I am having a conversation with them. A lot of times in conference settings it is in the hotel, and the lobby, the conference area, it is usually inconsiderate behavior in terms of, like attitude towards, you know, maybe the hotel staff, or like attitudes towards those around them. It is all your observation of the situations, like people who have really loud conversations in places where people are trying to be quiet. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

The last exemplar of Attendee B were monopolistic attendees who dominated the CCE and left no opportunities for others to engage.

> *Well I guess there have been instances where you'd be in a small group or even a large group, when it comes to people asking questions that sometimes they would monopolize the session and just want to ask one question after another and be very aggressive. So if they're not sharing the floor, I find that irritating. So then I would always be frustrated with whoever was in charge of the session. Because there's a facilitator there, do your job. (Informant K, Female, 67 yrs., participated in association conferences once since 2008)*

4.1.6.2.2 Social exclusion

A few informants described a negative CCE as one that made them feel rejected or excluded. Such phenomena can be explained by the term social exclusion that is well defined in social psychology (Williams, 2007). Within the context of this study, informants recognized that when participating in a CCE, socially exclusionary behavior their interaction partners displayed exerted negative impacts on their affective responses. Particularly, such negative impacts occurred when attendees' ideas or experiences were rejected by others, which made them feel undervalued and discouraged. Besides, informants reported that they also felt unwelcomed when they sensed they were being excluded from other attendees' discussions or activities.

> *It was [negative] because my research is sort of in the middle of a lot of things so I get a lot of people who tell me, "oh, that's weird" and then they leave. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)*

> *There's [a negative] one where I sat at a lunch and I told the person next to me calmly just what we were doing. I told her what I did and she told me that that sounded like a vast waste of time. I had one person, when I gave a talk, tell me that insects were not important and we shouldn't study them and when I tried to calmly explain that they outnumber us and they'll survive when we are gone, they told me that I should probably quit now and just go teach elementary school*

because that was all I was good for. It's more about the value of my research usually. A lot of entomologists don't understand what I do and some of them are vocal about it, usually negatively. (Informant U, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 8 times since 2008)

I don't know if there was a negative experience but one of them, I was the only undergraduate there. It was an academic conference so it was like professors reading their papers out loud and I didn't really talk with too many people there I just sat and listened but I didn't really interact because people there seemed already knew each other. It was not really about networking at all. I wasn't really looking for interactions but it still feels very cold. You feel like people are just interested in learning and maybe talking to people that they already know but not really meeting new people. (Informant C, Female, 21 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

4.1.6.2.3 Energy drain

CCEs that drained attendees' energy were also given a negative evaluation. For some attendees, interacting with others at conferences was an energy-consuming activity. In the event that a CCE was exhausting, attendees tend to place a negative label on it.

At some point you kind of become overwhelmed by all your options and all the people and all the things that are going on around and you're just kind of like, "I'm done. I need some alone time." So that's the only negative thing I can think about a conference. It's an intense experience and at some point you have to determine where your breaking point is. (Informant N, Female, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 3 times since 2008)

I personally, at the end of the day, would be like I don't want to see anybody, you know. I would go to the socials in the evening. During the sessions, I would not really talk to too many people; I would have maybe short conversations with people who stands next to me. (Informant J, Female, 25 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

4.1.6.2.4 Controversial topics

At some CCEs, when the topics of discussion were controversial, informants reported having less than positive memory.

Um, I haven't, personally with me, I haven't really had negative interactions. I know that other people have. Sometimes people get into heated debates about a controversial topic in the field. I've been witness to some of those where people would get into arguments about different views on a particular thing. Generally negative things would be when people, there's sort of an unsettled issue and people are on different sides of it and then when they are going to try and interact with each other, depending on how strongly their convictions are, there can be some conflict there. (Informant V, Male, 31 yrs., participated in association conferences 7 times since 2008)

So there are a lot of things in medicine that are controversial. There are a fair amount of things even in university politics that are controversial. So it is not always an exciting part to talk about those challenges or the frustrations. For me, it is not fun, but it is still an important part of going over challenges, sharing frustrations, so that is not necessarily this terrible thing. (Informant H, Male, 50 yrs., participated in association conferences 25 times since 2008)

4.2   Results of the Quantitative Study

In this section, the results of the statistical analyses for hypothesis testing are presented. First, this section presents the descriptive analysis of respondents' demographic characteristics and conference-related information. Then this section proceeds to provide the results of testing the proposed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) model after data screening. Finally, this section reports the analysis of a Structural Equation Model (SEM) testing the multivariate relationships hypothesized among experiences at CCEs, group identity, and transcendent conference experience. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; Version 21.0, Chicago, IL, USA) was first used to conduct descriptive statistics, tests of assumptions, and reliability tests on domain scores (Opperman, Benson, & Milhausen, 2011). Then the Analysis of Moment Structures Program (AMOS; Version 21.0, Chicago, IL, USA) was administered following Maximum Likelihood estimation procedures (Bentler & Wu, 1993) for CFA and SEM testing.

4.2.1 Descriptive Analysis

4.2.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 4.2.1. Among 821 respondents, the gender composition of the sample was 57.4% female versus 42.3% male. Approximately 7.8% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, 20.1% between the ages of 25 and 34, 16.2% between the ages of 35 and 44, 17.5% between the ages of 45 and 54, 24.0% between the ages of 55 and 64, and 14.3% above 65 years old. With respect to the educational level of the participants, 68.9% had a Bachelor's degree or lower, 25.3% had a post-graduate degree, and 5.7% had a professional degree (JD, MD). In terms of ethnic background, 81.0% were Caucasian, 7.1% were African American, 5.2% were Asian or Pacific islanders, 3.8% were Hispanic, 0.6% were Native American, and 1.9% indicated that they belonged to the "other" group. Respondents also came from all walks of life with substantial variation in their reported occupation, led by management professional (15.2%), education, training, or library professional (14.4%), sales (7.3%), health practitioners and technical occupations (5.2%), management, business or financial operations occupations (4.9%), health care support (3.9%), office or administrative support (3.8%), computer or mathematical professions (3.7%), and arts, design, or entertainment (3.7%). Approximately 4.3% were students. Concerning respondents' past experiences at association conferences, 87.0% of the respondents reported that they had participated in association conferences once to five times in the past five years (23.1% once, 25% twice, 15.7% three times, 7.7% four times, and 15.5% five times). Among the 821 responses, 41.8% of the respondents perceived

themselves as a newcomer at the association conference they recalled when compared

with other attendees, while 58.0% perceived themselves as veteran.

Table 4.21 Demographic Characteristics (N=821)

Variables	N	Statistics (%)
Gender		
Female	471	57.4
Male	347	42.3
*Unanswered	3	0.4
Age		
18-24	64	7.8
25-34	165	20.1
35-44	133	16.2
45-54	144	17.5
55-64	197	24.0
65 and over	117	14.3
* Unanswered	1	0.1
Educational Level		
Less than High School	2	0.2
High School/GED	44	5.4
Some College	150	18.3
2-year College Degree	86	10.5
4-year College Degree	283	34.5
Master's Degree	174	21.2
Doctoral Degree	34	4.1
Professional Degree (JD, MD)	47	5.7
* Unanswered	1	0.1
Ethnical Background		
Caucasian	665	81.0
African American	58	7.1
Hispanic	31	3.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	43	5.2
Native American	5	0.6
Others	16	1.9
*Unanswered	3	0.4
Occupation		
Management Professional	125	15.2
Education, Training, or Library Professional	118	14.4
Sales	60	7.3
Health Practitioners and Technical Occupations	43	5.2

Table 4.21 Continued

Management Business or Financial Operations Occupations	40	4.9
Student	35	4.3
Health Care Support	32	3.9
Office or Administrative Support	31	3.8
Computer or Mathematical Professions	30	3.7
Arts, Design, or Entertainment	30	3.7
Life, Physical, or Social Science	24	2.9
Financial Specialist	21	2.6
Community and Social Services	20	2.4
Others	188	22.8
*Unanswered	24	2.9
Participation Frequency		
1	190	23.1
2	205	25.0
3	129	15.7
4	63	7.7
5	127	15.5
6-10	107	13.0
Experience at the Recalled Conference		
Newcomer	343	41.8
Veteran	476	58.0
*Unanswered	2	0.2

*This category indicates that the question was not answered by respondents.

4.2.1.2   Conference Characteristics

The characteristics of the conferences respondents recalled are presented in Table

4.2.2. Among the reported association conferences, 54.4% were organized by

professional or trade associations, 13.4% were organized by educational organizations,

7.4% were organized by religious organizations, 7.1% were organized by social organizations, and 4.8% were organized by voluntary organizations. Regarding the size of the reported conferences, 44.6% were hosted for more than 500 attendees, 47.2% for 51-500 attendees, and 7.8% for fewer than 50 attendees. Regarding the scale of the reported conferences, 44.3% were at a regional level, 38.7% were at a national level and 15.3% were at an international level.

Table 4.22 Conference Characteristics

Variables	N	Statistics (%)
Conference Type		
Professional or Trade Associations	447	54.4
Education Organizations	110	13.4
Religious Organizations	61	7.4
Social Organizations	58	7.1
Voluntary Organizations	39	4.8
Military Organizations	21	2.6
Political Organizations	20	2.4
Charity	15	1.8
Fraternal Organizations	10	1.2
Others	36	4.4
* Unanswered	4	0.5
Conference Size		
0-50	64	7.8
51-100	85	10.4
101-250	140	17.1
251-500	162	19.7
501-1000	141	17.2
1000+	225	27.4
* Unanswered	4	0.5
Conference Scale		
Regional	364	44.3
National	318	38.7
International	126	15.3
Others	7	1.0
* Unanswered	6	0.7

*This category indicates that the question was not answered by respondents.

4.2.2   Data Screening

4.2.2.1   Detection of Missing Data and Outliers

The use of two attention filters terminated respondents who were not paying attention, resulting in a total of 821 responses. The 821 responses were then screened for potential problems related to missing data (Kline, 2011, p. 51). Kline (1998, p. 75)

suggested that missing data should constitute less than 10% of the data. Based on a preliminary examination of the data in this study, the proportion of the data points missing is small (96/36945=0.26%). Kline (2011, p. 55) also indicated that a few missing values, such as less 5% on a single variable, in a large sample can be of little concern, especially when the reason for data loss is random. In this study, a total of 39 variables out of 45 were found to have missing data and of these 39 variables, there is only a small percentage of missing values, ranging from 0.1% to 0.7%. A total of 76 cases (9.26%) were identified to have missing data points, ranging from 1 to 4. Little's Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) Test was then conducted to determine whether the incomplete data was random or not. The result showed that the missing data is completely randomly (MCAR) (Chi-Square = 2189.21, df = 2095, p>.05), meaning that the missing items are independent of the values of the measured constructs, as well as of the values of other variables (Little & Rubin, 1987; Rubin, 1976).

Given the small proportion and random nature of the missing observations, a decision was made to impute missing observations using the model-based expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm method. Specifically, this method first replaced missing observations with predicted scores in a series of regressions in which each incomplete variable is regressed on the remaining variables for a particular case. Then, the whole imputed data set was submitted for Maximum Likelihood estimation. The two steps were repeated until a stable solution was reached across maximization steps (Kline, 2011, p. 59). In addition, based on examination of stem-and-leaf plots as well as normal Q-Q plots generated for all variables in the hypothesized model, no extreme outliers were detected.

4.2.2.2   Testing of Assumptions

The data of the 821 complete cases was then screened to examine assumptions expected by estimation in structural equation modeling (SEM) in the analysis of covariance and mean structures, including the normality of continuous endogenous variables (i.e., dependent and mediating variables) (Byrne, 2009; Kline, 2011, p. 60; Opperman et al., 2011) and absence of multicollinearity (Kline, 2011, p. 60).

Kline (2011, p. 60) suggested that instances of multivariate non-normality are detectable through inspection of univariate distribution. Therefore, the normality distribution of endogenous variables was investigated in SPSS. Skew and kurtosis are two ways that describe a non-normal distribution. Although there appears to be no clear consensus as to how large the absolute values of skew index (SI) and kurtosis index (KI) should be before conclusions of extreme kurtosis can be drawn (Kline, 2005), variables with absolute values of SI >3.0 and of KI > 10.0 are defined as extremely skewed (Kline, 2011, p. 63). Following this rule of thumb, a review of the Skewness and Kurtosis values for all items in the hypothesized model of this study indicated no serious skewness (|SI|'s <1.60) or kurtosis (|KI|'s <4.60). The Maximize Likelihood (ML) parameter estimates used in this study are regarded as fairly robust to any degree of violation of the normality assumption (Savalei & Bentler, 2006, p. 16).

Multicollinearity was tested using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The variables are redundant when VIF>10.0 (Kline, 2011, p. 54). Given that all VIFs are far smaller than 10.0 (VIF's <4.62), multicollinearity of variables did not exist in the present data.

4.2.3   Measurement (CFA) Model

SEM analysis usually requires that the constructs should first be assessed and

measured rigorously by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Following the two-step approach suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), this study first

conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with a maximum likelihood to estimate

the measurement model by verifying the underlying structure of constructs. Model

specification was done using AMOS Graphics. Six latent variables include Customer-

Customer Know-How Exchange (KHE), Social-Emotional Support (SES), Group

Identification (GI), Group-Based Self-Esteem (GBSE), Affective Commitment (AC), and

Transcendent Conference Experience (TCE). Each measurement item (observed variable)

was loaded on its prior construct (latent construct), and constructs were allowed to be

correlated in the analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

4.2.3.1   Measurement Model Fit

The overall model fit for CFA was assessed by the Chi-square test and a number

of goodness-of-fit indices.

4.2.3.1.1   Model Chi-Square

Chi-square value evaluates the overall model fit and the magnitude of discrepancy

between the sample covariance matrices and the fitted covariance matrices (Hu & Bentler,

1999). Chi-square value is sensitive to the sample size and thus the relative/normed chi-

square (chi-square/df) is recommended (Wheaton, Muthen, Alwin, & Summers, 1977): a

range from 5.0 to 2.0 is recommended as an acceptable ratio for a good model fit
(Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

4.2.3.1.2 Goodness-of-Fit Statistic (GFI) and the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Statistics
        (AGFI)

GFI represents the amount of variance that is accounted for by the estimated
population covariance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). A cut-off point of .90 has been
recommended and a cut-off point of .95 is recommended for a small sample (Miles &
Shevlin, 1998). Given that GFI is sensitive to the degree of freedom, AGFI is
recommended which adjusts the GFI based on the df. The value of an AGFI above .90 is
recommended as an indication of a well-fitting model (Hooper et al., 2008).

4.2.3.1.3 Normed Fit Index (NFI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI)

Bentler and Bonett's (1980) Normed Fit Index (NFI) has been the practical
criterion of choice. However, addressing evidence that the NFI has shown a tendency to
underestimate fit in small samples, Bentler (1990) proposed the Comparative Fit Index
(CFI) as a revised form of the NFI that takes sample size into account (Bentler, 1990).
The statistics of both NFI and CFI assume that all latent variables are uncorrelated
(null/independence model) and compares the sample covariance matrix with this model.
Values for NFI and CFI range between 0.0 and 1.0: the closer the value is to 1.0, the
better fit the model is. A cut-off criterion of value ≥ 0.95 is indicative of a good-fit model
(Hu & Bentler, 1999).

4.2.3.1.4 Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)

RMSEA describes how well the model with optimally chosen parameter estimates would fit the populations covariance matrix (Byrne, 1998). The value of an RMSEA below .08 indicates a good fit, a RMSEA between .08 and .10 is recommended as an indication of mediocre fit, while values above .10 indicate a poor fit (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996).

In this dissertation, the above common model-fit measures produced by AMOS are used to assess the initial measurement model's overall goodness of fit. The chi-square model value is significant ($\chi 2$ (930) = 6053.608, p = 0.000), a finding not unusual with large sample sizes (Doney & Cannon, 1997). The ratio of Chi-Square to degrees of freedom is 6.509, which can be considered extreme, indicating a poor fit. Other widely used fit indices consistently indicate a weak model fit (GFI = 0.627, AGFI = 0.585, NFI = 0.786, CFI = 0.813, RMSEA = 0.082). Therefore, although both standardized and unstandardized regression weights for all items are significant, suggesting significant factor loadings of observed variables on latent factors, the model fit failed to reach the level of acceptance. This dissertation proceeded to model modification to improve the model fit.

4.2.3.2 Reliability

Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability were computed to check the measurement's reliability. As presented in Table 4.2.3, Cronbach's alphas for all seven constructs exceeded the minimum requirement of 0.7, ranging from .762 to .924

(Nunnally, 1978). Thus, the measurements for all seven factors indicated adequate to strong levels of internal consistency (Nunally, 1978). Composite reliabilities for all seven constructs were over the cutoff value of 0.70, ranging from 0.816 to 0.921. Therefore, the internal consistency of multiple items for each latent construct was ensured in this study.

Table 4.23 Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the Measurement Model

Constructs And Indicators	Standard Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Customer-Customer Know-How Exchange (KHE)		0.860	0.862	0.555
KHE1	0.74			
KHE3	0.71			
KHE4	0.78			
KHE5	0.69			
KHE6	0.80			
Social-Emotional Support (SES)		0.914	0.907	0.551
SES1	0.70			
SES3	0.71			
SES4	0.77			
SES5	0.81			
SES6	0.80			
SES7	0.68			
SES8	0.72			
SES11	0.74			
Group Identification (GI)		0.762	0.816	0.598
GI1	0.70			
GI2	0.87			
GI3	0.74			
Group-Based Self-Esteem (GBSE)		0.918	0.921	0.702
GBSE1	0.83			
GBSE3	0.81			
GBSE4	0.90			
GBSE5	0.89			
GBSE6	0.75			
Transcendent Conference Experience (TCE)		0.924	0.912	0.598
TCE2	0.70			
TCE4	0.80			
TCE7	0.86			
TCE8	0.69			
TCE9	0.84			
TCE10	0.82			
TCE12	0.68			
TCE13	0.72			
TCE14	0.68			

4.2.3.3   Measurement Model Modification

The source of misfit in this model was first identified based on standardized factor loadings and standardized residual covariances. As a result of this step, 10 items were dropped according to their poor factor loadings (i.e., <.60) or large standardized residual covariances with others (>4.0). Then, modification indices (the Chi-Square statistics with one degree of freedom) (Joreskog & Sorborn, 1996) were referenced for spotting the pairs of error items that can be correlated to improve the fit of model (Gerbing & Anderson, 1984). Based on modification indices, correlations were added to pairs of error items within the same latent constructs.

After the modification, the fit of the modified measurement model was marginal (χ2 (529) = 1851.279, p = 0.000); χ2/df = 3.50; GFI = 0.875, AGFI = 0.851, NFI = 0.915, CFI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.055). However, an analysis of the correlation estimates indicated a high correlation between construct Affective Commitment and Group Identification (r=.833) and between Affective Commitment and Transcendent Conference Experience (r=.911). Further validity tests demonstrated that while the average shared variance (AVE) of all constructs exceeded the cut-off point 0.50, AVE of Affective Commitment is much smaller than its squared interconstruct correlations with Group Identification and Transcendent Conference Experience, failing to provide evidence for its discriminant validity. Such statistical evidence demonstrates that conceptually, there appears to be significant overlaps between the construct of Affective Commitment and the construct of Group Identification and between the construct of Affective Commitment and the construct of Transcendent conference experience. The construct of Affective Commitment is not truly distinct from other constructs conceptually. Given that the

construct of Affective Commitment and Transcendent Conference Experience are both

hypothesized as outcome variables with exploratory intention in the proposed model, it is

concluded that the conceptual overlaps between Affective Commitment and other

constructs imply the redundancy of using the construct Affective Commitment. Hence, an

adjustment was made to the above model by dropping the construct Affective

Commitment, as indicated in Figure 4.1 below. As a result of dropping affective

commitment, hypotheses 1e, 1f, and 3 would be dropped from testing accordingly.

This change was further supported by the common model-fit measures produced

by AMOS for assessing the overall goodness of fit of the modified measurement model.

The Chi-square test of the modified measurement model in this study was significant (χ2

(383) = 1225.759, p = 0.000). The ratio of Chi-Square to degrees of freedom is 3.2,

which falls below the suggested cut-off point 0.50 for accepting the model fit. Although

AGFI falls a little bit below the cut-off point 0.90 (AGFI = 0.885), the value of GFI

statistic reaches 0.905. The values of normalized fit index (NFI) (0.920) and comparative

fit index (CFI) (0.942) exceed respective common acceptance levels suggested by

previous research, indicating a good model fit of this measurement model with the data

collected. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (0.052; LO = 0.049,

HI = 0.055) falls below the suggested cut-off point 0.80 for accepting the model fit.

Furthermore, the difference in Chi-square value between the model with the construct of

Affective Commitment (χ2 (529) = 1851.279) and the modified model without it (χ2 (383)

= 1275.759) was significant at 0.001 level, demonstrating that the modified model was a

significant improvement. The quality of fit is perceived to depend heavily on model

characteristics including sample size and model complexity (Paswan, 2009). Given the

large sample size of this study and the number of variables in the model, both global fit indices and incremental indices indicate that the modified measurement model was a good fit for the data.
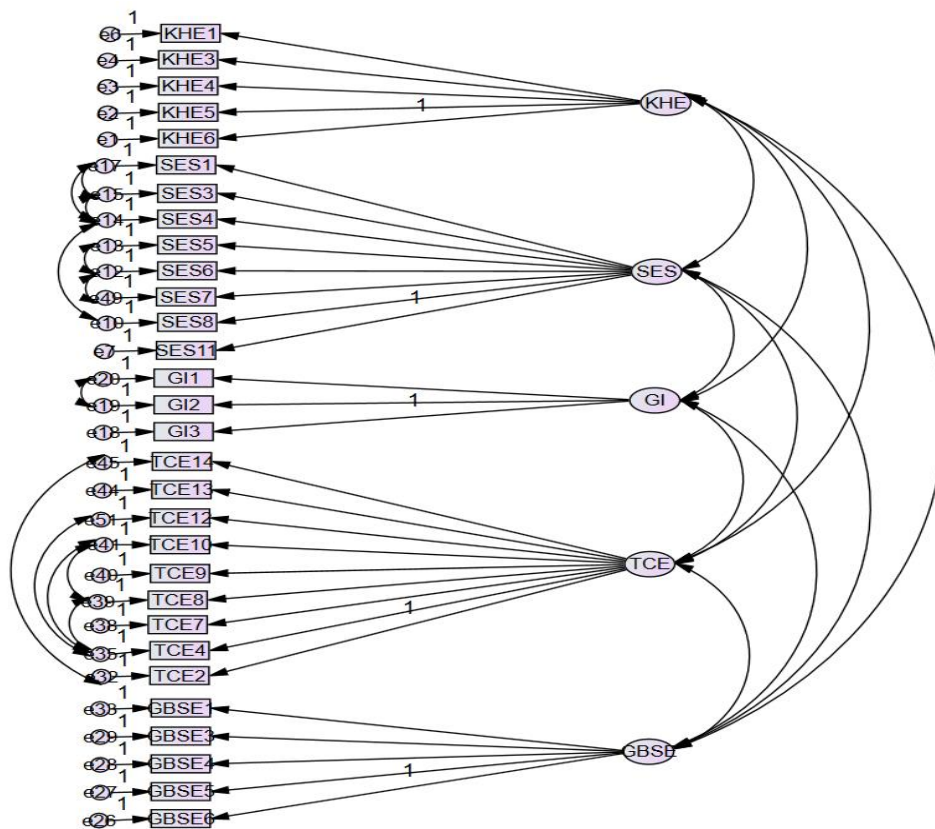
Figure 4.1 Measurement Model

4.2.3.4   Validity

Convergent validity was tested by checking factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Convergent validity was satisfied in this study, in that most of the items had relatively high standardized factor loadings on their underlying latent constructs (values ranged from 0.68 to 0.90), and were all significant at an alpha level of .001 (See Table 4.3) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Furthermore, the average variance extracted

(AVE) from all constructs exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.50, indicating that a large portion of the variance was explained by the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 1998).

Discriminant validity was examined by comparing AVE values for each construct and the squared correlations between the paired constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 4.2.4 shows that the AVEs for all constructs were greater than the squared correlations between any pair of constructs, demonstrating that a construct does not significantly share information with the other construct, which met the requirement of discriminant validity.

Table 4.24 Comparison of AVE and Squared Correlations of Paired Constructs

Constructs	KHE	SES	GI	GBSE	TCE
KHE	**0.555**				
SES	0.471	**0.551**			
GI	0.271	0.365	**0.598**		
GBSE	0.291	0.320	0.391	**0.702**	
TCE	0.438	0.523	0.484	0.479	**0.598**

Note: AVE is on the diagonal. Squared correlations of paired constructs are on the off-diagonal.

In summary, the assessment of the research instrument showed good evidence of reliability and validity for the operationalization of the latent constructs. The five-factor confirmatory measurement model demonstrated the soundness of its measurement properties and was both substantively meaningful and statistically well fitting.

4.2.4   Structural Model

4.2.4.1   Model Fit

While the testing of a measurement model (CFA) deals with the links between the latent variables and the respective observed measures, the assessment of a structural model centers on the links among the latent variables (Byrne, 2001). After ensuring that the overall measurement model was valid and acceptable, the structural model was tested for the hypothesized regression structure among the latent variables in the proposed model.

A series of goodness-of-fit indexes were referred to determine whether the structural model exhibited a good or poor fit to the sample data. The estimation produced the following statistics: $\chi2$ (384) = 1282.387 (p = 0.00), $\chi2/df$ = 3.34, GFI = 0.903, AGFI = 0.992, NFI = 0.926, CFI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.053. The model's fit as indicated by these indexes was deemed acceptable/satisfactory; thus, it provided a good basis for testing the hypothesized paths. Given that the measurement and structural models were valid and reliable, the path relationships among the different constructs were tested and the values of standardized path coefficients were referenced for hypothesis testing (See Table 4.2.5).

Table 4.25 Structural Parameter Estimates

Hypothesized path	Standard path coefficient	t-value	Results
H1a: know-how exchange → group identification	0.199	3.830***	Supported
H1b: social-emotional support → group identification	0.478	8.555***	Supported
H1c: know-how exchange → group-based self-esteem	0.198	4.278***	Supported
H1d: social-emotional support → group-based self-esteem	0.169	3.336***	Supported
H2: group identification → group-based self-esteem	0.446	9.786***	Supported
H4: group identification → transcendent conference experience	0.399	9.966***	Supported
H5a: know-how exchange → transcendent conference experience	0.238	5.858***	Supported
H5b: social-emotional support → transcendent conference experience	0.319	6.980***	Supported

Note: ***indicates significant estimates at the 0.001 level

4.2.4.2   Hypotheses Testing

4.2.4.2.1   Impacts of CCEs on group identity

Hypothesis 1a, which hypothesized a positive relationship between customer-customer know-how exchange and group identification, was supported ($\gamma 11 = 0.199$, t = 3.830, p<0.001). Hypothesis 1b for predicting a positive relationship between social-emotional support and group identification was supported ($\gamma 21 = 0.478$, t = 8.555, p<0.001). The results of the first two hypotheses show that the know-how exchange and social-emotional support attendees received from other attendees present during CCEs in a conference setting facilitated their identification process with the conference group, while social-emotional support played a more important role. As predicted by hypothesis 1c and 1d, know-how exchange ($\gamma 12 = 0.198$, t = 4.278, p<0.001) and emotional support ($\gamma 22 = 0.169$, t = 3.336, p<0.001) significantly influenced attendees' group-based self-esteem.

4.2.4.2.2 Impacts of group identification on group-based self-esteem, affective

      commitment, and transcendent conference experience

As predicted by hypothesis 2, group identification significantly influenced attendees' group-based self-esteem ($\gamma 21 = 0.446$, $t = 9.786$, $p<0.001$). As expected in hypothesis 4, group identification had a significant impact on attendees' transcendent conference experience ($\gamma 22 = 0.399$, $t = 9.966$, $p<0.001$). The findings suggested that attendees' sense of identification with the conference group was a significant predictor of attendees' self-esteem at the conference and their transcendent conference experience. A strong sense of belonging may be required to reinforce attendees' self-awareness and confidence and elicit attendees' positive evaluation of their conference experience.

4.2.4.2.3 Impacts of CCEs on transcendent conference experience

As expected in hypothesis 5a and 5b, know-how exchange ($\gamma 13 = 0.238$, $t = 5.858$, $p<0.001$) and social-emotional support ($\gamma 23 = 0.319$, $t = 6.980$, $p<0.001$) had a significant impact on attendees' transcendent conference experience, while social-emotional support was found to contribute more to attendees' transcendent conference experience.

4.2.4.2.4 The mediating role of group identification

To further investigate the mediating role of group identification, the structural model was re-estimated by removing the latent factor Group Identification. As suggested by Baron and Kenny's (1986), four conditions need to be satisfied in establishing a mediation effect between a predictor variable and an outcome variable:

(1) The predictor variable should significantly affect the presumed mediator;

(2) The presumed mediator should significantly affect the outcome variable;

(3) The predictor variable should significantly affect the outcome variable;

(4) The strength of the relationship between the predictor and the outcome variable is significantly reduced when the presumed mediator is added to the model.

The first three conditions were met in the original structural model. Know-how exchange and social-emotional support had significant effects on group identification (H1a & H1b) and on group-based self-esteem (H1c & H1d) and on transcendent conference experience (H5a & H5b). Group identification had significant effects on group-based self-esteem (H2) and on transcendent conference experience (H4). The fourth condition would be met if the parameter estimates between know-how exchange and social-emotional support and group-based self-esteem and transcendent conference experience in the mediating model became insignificant (full mediation) or less significant (partial mediation) than the parameter estimate in the constrained model.

As seen in Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3, the results of this study showed that group identification was a partial mediator for all the relationships since the standardized regression weights in the mediating model became less significant than in the model without the mediator for the path of know-how exchange → group-based self-esteem (b = .198, t = 4.278, p<0.000 (mediating model) vs. b = .278, t = 5.603, p<0.000); for the path of know-how exchange → transcendent conference experience (b = 0.238, t = 5.858, p<.000 (mediating model) vs. b = 0.31, t = 7.003, p<0.000); for the path social-emotional support → group-based self-esteem (b = 0.169, t = 3.336, p<0.000 (mediating model) vs. b = .41, t = 8.006, p<0.000); and for the path social-emotional support → transcendent

conference experience (b = 0.319, t = 6.980, p<0.000 (mediating model) vs. b = .53, t = 10.886, p<0.000).

Moreover, the difference in Chi-square value between the model without the mediator ($\chi2$ (308) = 1186.606) and the mediating model ($\chi2$ (384) = 1282.387) was significant at 0.10 level, demonstrating that the mediating model was a moderate improvement over the model without the mediator. This result supported the mediating role of group identification between attendees' experiences at CCE and transcendent conference experience. Besides, when the mediator is not included in the model, social-emotional support contributes much more to attendees' group-based self-esteem (b = 0.41) and to transcendent conference experience (b = 0.53) than know-how exchange does to attendees' group-based self-esteem (b = 0.28) and transcendent conference experience (b = 0.28).
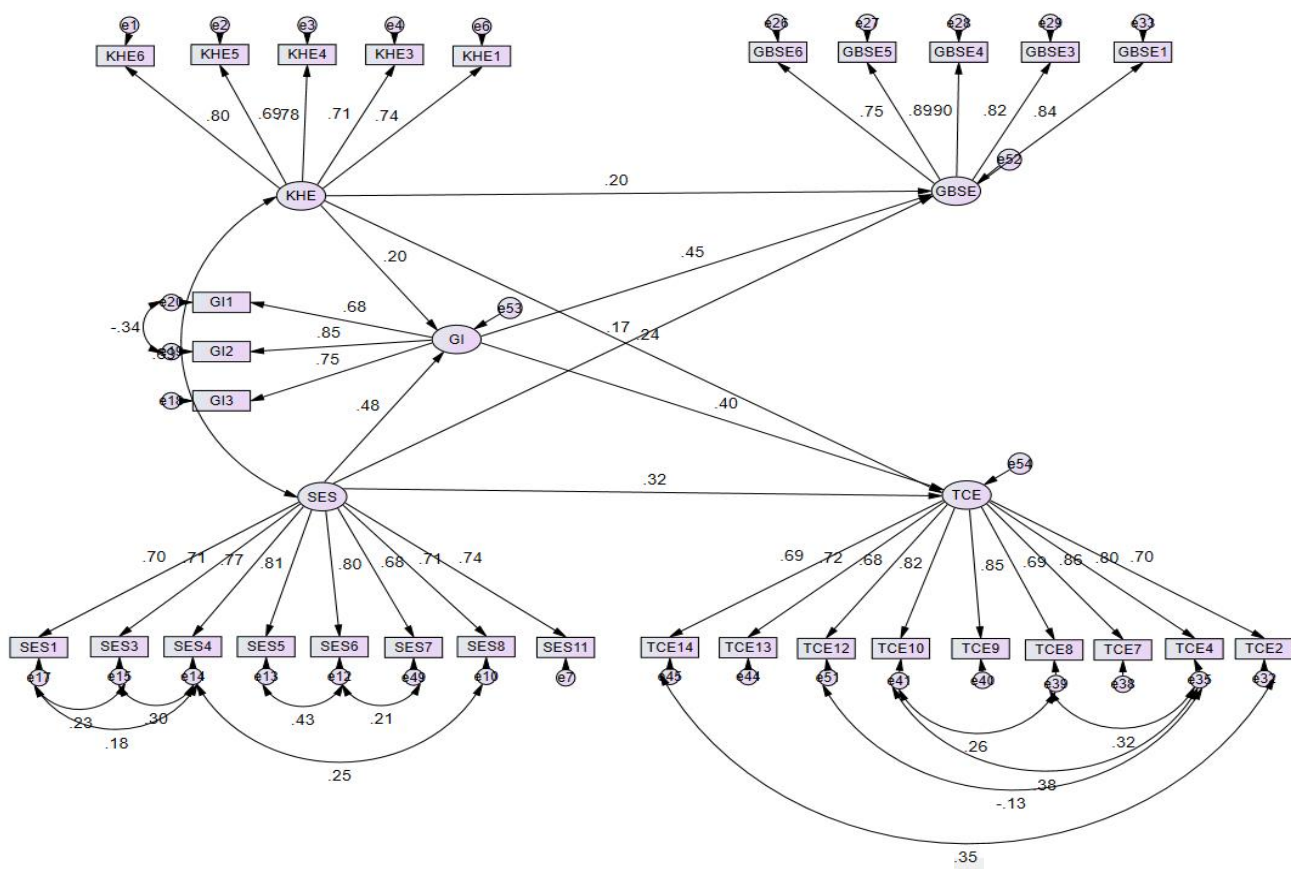
Figure 4.2 Structural Diagram with Parameter Estimates
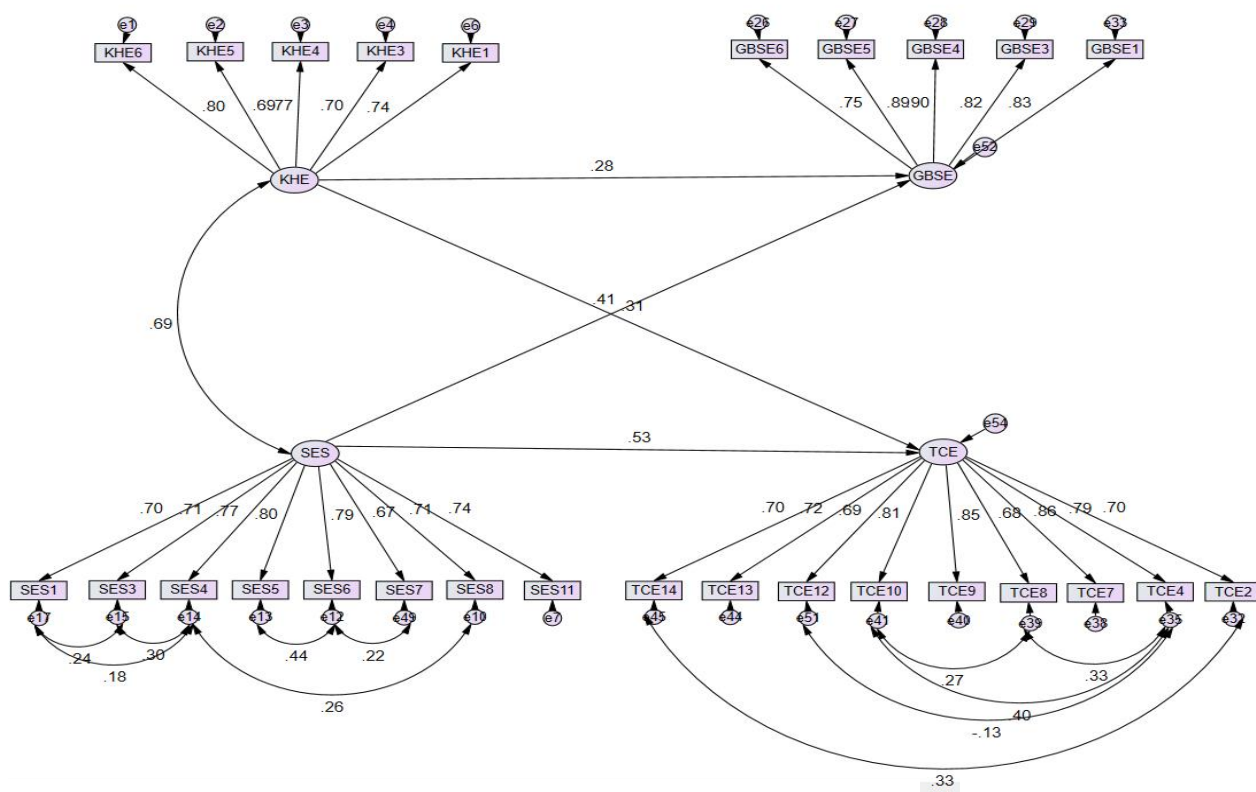
Figure 4.3 Structural Diagram without Mediator

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESULTS

This Chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this dissertation. An overview of the qualitative study is presented first, followed by a general discussion of the findings. Next, an overview of the quantitative study is provided, preceding the discussion of its findings. This Chapter concludes with an overview of the framework developed from both qualitative and quantitative findings.

5.1   Overview of the Qualitative Study

The objectives of the qualitative study were: 1) to develop a classification of typical customer-customer encounters at conferences; 2) to examine the motivations of conference attendees' participation in customer-customer encounters; 3) to explore conference attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters; and 4) to investigate the potential situational factors that affect conference attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters.

The empirical investigation of these objectives was accomplished through the administration of in-depth personal interviews. The sample of in-depth interviews was composed of 26 informants that had attended at least one association conference in the past five years of 2013 (i.e., since 2008). The data analysis of interview transcripts led to a deeper understanding of attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer

encounters by presenting major issues associated with customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. As discussed, attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters flow from two salient motivations that drive attendees to participate in customer-customer encounters, to three typical types of customer-customer encounters, and to four major functions served by customer-customer encounters accompanied by four processes that reflect attendees' multi-dimensional experiences during customer-customer encounters. Three levels of situational factors were identified to affect attendees' subjective experiences at customer-customer encounters. Lastly, two special types of customer-customer encounters stood out during in-depth interviews, to the extent that such encounters were reported to become attendees' "sticky" memories after their conference participation.

5.2   Discussions of the Findings of Qualitative Study

5.2.1   The Instrumental-Hedonic Motivations of Participation in CCEs

Given the central role of customer-customer interactions in one's conference experiences (Baber & Waymon, 1996; Jones, 1995), this study explores the motivations specific to attendees' engagement in an important social encounter in a conference setting: the customer-customer encounters. The results of this study point to two motivations that play a leading role in driving attendees towards customer-customer encounters: long-term instrumental needs and transient hedonic desires. This finding demonstrated that in a conference setting, attendees expect to derive both instrumental values and hedonic values from their interactions with other attendees. It offers empirical evidence for the Experiential Value Scale (EVS) proposed by Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001).

EVS reflects the psychometric properties of experience and suggests that consumption experience generates both extrinsic and intrinsic values (Babin & Darden, 1995). Extrinsic values (i.e., efficiency, economic value, and service excellence) are instrumental in nature and focus on economic outcomes (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The finding of this study concerning long-term instrumental needs is consistent with the instrumental perspective dominant in previous conference/meeting studies; the instrumental domain, such as attendees' desires for exchanging knowledge, building social network (Gruen et al., 2007; Mair & Thompson, 2009), and enhancing education and career development (Zhang et al., 2007) was emphasized in their interpersonal interactions.

In contrast to previous studies that have prioritized an instrumental perspective in conference/meeting research, findings of this study pointed out the salience of intrinsic values as the expectation of conference attendees. Intrinsic values (i.e., visual appeal, entertainment, escapism, and pleasure) are subjective in nature and emphasize the consumption of fun, enjoyment, and playfulness rather than their consequences (Lofman, 1991). Prior research implies that intrinsic values can be derived from customer-customer encounters in general settings. For instance, Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) examined the pleasantness, diversity, and approachability of customer-customer encounters. The findings of this study regarding transient hedonic desires suggest that playfulness values acknowledged in EVS appear to be a salient expectation at customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. Playfulness values are regarded as the fun consumers derive from their engagement in activities and the resulting feelings of pleasure that the engagement evokes (Klinger, 1971). This study indicates that attendees expect relaxation and

enjoyment when engaging in an encounter with others, such that they derive intrinsic playfulness values from interacting with other attendees when attending a conference.

5.2.2   Staged, Spontaneous, and Underground CCEs

The findings from both interviews and field observations suggest that customer-customer encounters in a conference setting can be classified into three primary types based on the ways in which they occur, respectively labeled <u>staged CCEs</u>, <u>spontaneous CCEs</u>, and <u>underground CCEs</u>.

Informants shared that at staged CCEs they often felt "forced" and their conversations tended to be more structured, especially when such encounters took place with strangers. , Informants preferred spontaneous CCEs where informal and impromptu interactions took place. Spontaneous CCEs occurred not only while the conference was taking place but also prior to and following attendees' conference participation, which supports Venkat's (2007) argument that customer-customer encounters in general service settings occur both while the service is happening and pre- and/or post-purchase. Underground CCEs occurred by "invitation only" to a subgroup of attendees at the conference, thus the interactions tended to be more intimate given the shared "kinship" or the "common bound" between or among interaction partners. While staged CCEs have so far received the most attention from both academia and practitioners, less structured CCEs that occurred beyond the direct control of conference organizers were recognized in this study as having the potential to affect attendees' transcendent conference experience.

Analysis of informants' descriptions and field observations also revealed what attendees did and who they talked to during typical CCEs. While prior research acknowledged the importance of socializing and networking in order to fulfill one's expectation of conference experiences, the findings of this study revealed the phenomena that as attendees tended to stick to their acquaintances during the conference, socializing and network building did not turn out to be as salient an as expected. This finding offers empirical evidence for the argument that people tend to socialize only with those whom they already know at meetings (Hovav & Mandviwalla, 1998).Therefore, the need exists for conference planners to help attendees develop new networks in addition to enhancing their existing relationships.

5.2.3   CCEs Facilitate Four Processes that Attendees Undergo

The analysis of interview transcripts suggested that attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are reflected through four processes they underwent when participating in encounters with other attendees. These four unique processes along with the four functions served by CCEs in a conference setting provide empirical support for the proposed multi-dimensional conceptualization of interaction experience quality in general service settings (e.g., Miao et al., 2011).

First, the function of CCEs as a sounding board for facilitating collaborative learning reflects the *intellectual* dimension of experiences during customer-customer encounters, which is highly consistent with the know-how exchange acknowledged in prior research (McAlexander et al., 2002; von Hippel, 1988). The function of CCEs as a

magnet for facilitating relationships building reflects the *social* dimension of experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting. Such findings provide empirical support for the salience of the social domain of interaction experiences discussed in various service settings, such as a fitness club (Guenze & Pellono, 2004), a journey (Arnould & Price, 1993), and a gym setting (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007). Social exchange prevails when customers desire or need a sense of community (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999). Events are inherently social experiences, (e.g., Formica & Murrmann, 1998; Li & Petrick, 2006; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001; Severt et al., 2007). Particularly in the context of this dissertation, the social nature of interaction experiences appeared salient as attendees held a strong desire for making social connections at conferences.

The function of customer-customer encounters as a pep rally for facilitating mutual affirmation reflects the *psychological* dimension of interactions during customer-customer encounters, owing to the findings that attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters were recognized to have strengthened their perception of self-value. Such finding advances prior research that incorporated the construct self-esteem into their investigation of conference experience. While prior research identified attendees' self-esteem as either a motivator or a performance evaluation index for their conference participation (e.g., Severt et al., 2007), the finding of this study contributes to a deeper understanding that attendees' subject interaction experience with others helped to reinforce their self-esteem at a conference by fostering the mutual affirmation among attendees.

The function as <u>a support group</u> for facilitating <u>empathetic resonance</u> reflects the *emotional* dimension of interactions during customer-customer encounters. Echoing previous literature (e.g., Marroquín, 2011), this dissertation found that attendees sympathize with others who share similar experiences, especially those involving struggles and frustrations. Informants also stressed that the greater the perceived similarity they found between themselves and others, the more salient and effective a CCE's function would be as a support group. This finding is consistent with Thoits' statement that "effective support is most likely to come from socially similar others who have faced or are facing the same stressors…empathy and sympathy from similar others is a crucial condition for the seeking and acceptance of coping assistance" (Thoits, 1986, p. 420). Further, human need for belonging has multiple effects on one's emotional patterns, the absence of which may cause social anxiety and clinical depression (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A recent article in the "New Yorker" discussed the impact of social isolation and indicated that: "simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people" (Hellhole, 2009, p. 36). Informants of this study reported that the empathetic resonance they experienced with others in a conference setting helped alleviate their negative emotions, which suggests that face-to-face meetings provide a forum for attendees to seek and provide concerns, affection, and empathetic support, leading to the mitigation of individuals' feelings of isolation and stress.

In sum, while prior research tend to treat attendees' CCE experiences as a uni-dimensional construct in their empirical investigation, the above-discussed multidimensionality of attendees' CCE experiences offers empirical evidence that people's living experiences during social interactions extend beyond instrumental aspects

to social-emotional aspects and feelings of acceptance (Nezlek et al., 2011). In addition, in the context of this dissertation, the more attendees open up and share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, the more trust they may develop and the more likely it is for a connection to be built. As a result of such reciprocal self-disclosure within an interaction pair, informants reported positive affiliative interpersonal outcomes such as closeness, similarity, and enjoyment.

5.2.4 CCE Experiences are affected by Factors Present at Three Levels

The findings of this study further suggests that CCEs should be perceived as open and dynamic systems, as attendees' experiences throughout CCEs are found to be affected by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors.

At the intrapersonal level, this study identified that the most relevant and salient individual trait in interpersonal interactions in a conference setting was the aspect of personality based on the introvert-extrovert dimension. This finding advocates the application of social interaction anxiety to interaction experiences in a conference setting. Social interaction anxiety denotes one's representative reaction to situations that involve social interactions in dyads or groups (Brown et al., 1997). This construct has been frequently used to capture one's distress when meeting and talking with other people who may be members of the opposite gender, strangers, or friends. The acknowledged key contributors to one's feeling of interaction anxiety include fears of being boring, inarticulate, sounding stupid, not knowing what to say or how to respond within social interactions, and of being ignored (Mattick & Clarke, 1998). In a conference setting that features a high level of interpersonal interactions among attendees with varying levels of

acquaintance, individuals are more likely to experience social interaction anxiety. The findings of this study indicate that an individual's sense of social interaction anxiety can be moderated by one's activated or dominant personality in that interpersonal environment, such that introverted individuals in social settings experiences less social interaction anxiety than extroverted individuals do. Social interaction anxiety thus plays an important role in explaining how different individuals experience interpersonal encounters with other attendees in a conference setting. Therefore, for studies on interpersonal interactions, constructs that can capture an individual's contextualized reaction to social settings, such as social interaction anxiety (Brown et al., 1997), need to be included to offer a better understanding of different individuals' interaction experiences during customer-customer encounters.

Different from a point of view in social psychology that individual traits, to a great extent, can determine one's behavioral tendency, the impacts of intrapersonal factors were found in this study to be overridden when certain <u>interpersonal factors</u> were salient. For instance, while informants shared that it was more difficult to carry on interactions at staged CCEs with strangers, certain cues facilitated their engagement, including the interaction partner's facial and verbal expressions and a mutual network shared between the interaction pair. This study further identified that factors specific to an interaction pair are highlighted by *the level of affinity or similarity* shared by interaction partners which can weaken the impacts of individual differences on attendees' interaction experiences. Within the context of this dissertation, the most salient aspects in terms of similarity shared by interaction partners included attendees' common experiences, passions, interests, and networks.

This study further pointed out that interpersonal factors associated with the dynamics of an interaction pair played a significant role in moderating the impacts of attendees' individual differences on their interaction experiences during customer-customer encounters. For example, analysis of interview transcripts suggested that despite one's natural tendencies at interpersonal encounters with other attendees, when the group size is smaller, informants reported that the inhibiting role of an introverted personality can be significantly weakened, and they experienced a more positive interaction experience. This finding proposes the salient effects of group size on one's reaction to customer-customer encounters through regulating one's sense of social anxiety in a conference setting. Social anxiety is rooted in the process of impression management (Geen, 1991; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Impression management describes a process during which people regulate others' impressions of them by modifying their public behaviors (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). The fundamental motivations that drive people to engage in impression management activities consists of gaining rewards or presenting selves in a manner consistent with the personal identity they would like to construct (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In a conference setting, social networking has been identified as one of the leading motivations for attendees' conference participation (Mandviwalla & Hovav, 1997). For the purpose of socializing and networking, attendees' motivation to present a desired image is expected to be activated and prominent in a conference setting. The feeling of social anxiety is fundamentally derived from one's fear of failing to present a desired impression to others (Geen, 1991). Such fear of negative outcomes can increase when one has more concerns over his or her ability to present a desired self-image (Baumeister, 1982). Therefore, as the audience

increases, social anxiety is expected to become stronger (Seta, Seta, Crisson, & Wang, 1989). In a conference setting, a smaller interaction group may result in less complex group dynamics. Attendees' fear of negative outcomes of their self-presentation behavior, or social anxiety, decreases. Therefore, the presence of a smaller number of attendees at a CCE in a conference setting can weaken one's sense of social anxiety. Together, interpersonal factors and contextualized intrapersonal factors cannot be discussed separately in understanding one's interaction experiences.

Both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors could become irrelevant if attendees are not offered ample opportunities for engaging in CCEs. Findings of this study suggest that opportunities for interactions in a conference setting could be facilitated through the designing of key structural factors identified in in-depth interviews. These factors include tangible elements, such as the atmosphere, lighting, space, seating, and directions; and intangible elements, such as available time for interactions in a customer-customer encounter. Findings regarding structural factors embody three implications. First, the elements of music, space, seating, lighting, and temperature were perceived as having the greatest importance in comprising the physical environment of a customer-customer encounter in a conference setting. Prior research has called for practitioners to actively design physical environments which facilitate interactions among customers (MacInnis et al., 1991), such as arranging seating to stimulate conversation among customers, providing ample seating to allow customers a choice, and/or maintaining a pleasant decor to relax customers (Martin & Pranter, 1989). While the physical environment was given more attention by conference organizers for staged customer-customer encounters, designing physical environment for facilitating spontaneous customer-customer

encounters deserves equal if not greater attention as attendees perceive spontaneous customer-customer encounters as an essential part of their overall conference experience. Second, whereas interactions between or among attendees, especially spontaneous ones, are more difficult to harness, services in certain aspects such as communicating accurate session titles and offering clear signage for designated areas facilitate spontaneous interpersonal interactions by creating a context conducive to such interactions. Third, these structural factors indirectly strengthened the argument that experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are a more hedonically-driven consumption experience. In hedonically-driven consumptions, consumer experiences are often multi-sensory (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). In this study, both tangible and intangible elements were found to affect conference attendees' interaction experiences by regulating their sensory reactions. Consistently, at the center of tourism studies, a growing intellectual interest in sensory experience has been recognized (Crouch & Desforges, 2003). In tourism settings, senses including sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch help consumers become aware of and interpret their environment, enabling consumers to assign meaning to a destination.

     5.2.5   Extraordinary CCEs and Negative CCEs Stay "Sticky" Over Time

     Apart from generic CCEs, two special types of CCEs emerged from in-depth interviews as they were reported to "stick" in attendees' mind over time after their conference participation. Such CCEs include extraordinary CCEs and negative CCEs.

5.2.5.1   Experiential Elements Characterize Extraordinary CCEs

Three elements were identified as making a customer-customer encounter extraordinary. Intensified emotions during a customer-customer encounter were found to have made the encounter memorable to attendees and helped them call to mind their interaction experiences, which further generated positive effects on attendees' overall memory of their conference experience. Specifically, findings of this study showed that in a conference setting, the most frequently mentioned categories of intensified emotions at a customer-customer encounter were excitement, exhilaration, comfort, interest, relief, freedom, relaxation, and refreshment. This finding supports the trend of increased attention being paid to the emotional aspect of the consumption experience (e.g., Mattila, Hanks, & Wang, in press). Consumption experience embodies a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun, which is encompassed by the experiential perspective of consumption or consumers' subjective and emotional reactions to product consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). In a recent study on mimicry interactions (Stel & Vonk, 2010), for instance, one's emotional state (i.e., tense, enthusiastic, pleased, worried, irritated, angry, confused, cheerful, dreary, happy, and sad) was incorporated to capture the quality of his or her interaction experience. In the hospitality and tourism industry, given the nature and the intangibility of its products, the experiential perspective is argued to be a natural lens through which a comprehensive understanding can be enhanced as to how consumption experience influences tourist satisfaction and post-consumption behavior (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). For instance, a recent study on a cruise setting (Huang & Hsu, 2010) measured the quality of people′s interaction experience with

fellow passengers by its valence (i.e., harmonious or clashing, hostile or friendly, interesting or dull, unequal or equal, competitive or cooperative) and intensity (i.e., close or distant, intense or superficial).

The above-mentioned emotional aspects along with the two additional elements that made a customer-customer encounter extraordinary signify the experiential focus on one's emotional intensity that highlights one's transcendent experience (Schouten et al., 2007). Sparks make an interaction experience stand out by the synergy that occurred between interaction partners, thus creating a memorable encounter. Surprises denote the "disconfirmation" moment when attendees caught up with old friends or established meaningful networks unexpectedly during a customer-customer encounter. Customer-customer encounters thus serve as a stage for "miracles" to happen. These findings reflect the "flow" or "peak" experiences acknowledged in an events setting. As discussed, atendees' experiences during general events are "out of the ordinary" as they intentionally travel to events in order to participate in activities and experiences that are unique for them and transcend their normal routines (Falassi, 1987). Such experiences are defined as "flow" or "peak" experiences, which are suggested to be designed for attendees' active engagement in events (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Findings of this study thus suggest that flow or peak experiences in a conference setting can be created by designing customer-customer encounters, such that the context is more conducive for sparks and surprises to take place between an interaction pair.

5.2.5.2   Negative CCEs Exert Long-Lasting Impacts on Conference Experiences

Negative CCEs form another special type of CCEs that could influence attendees' long-term memory of their conference experience. In a conference setting, Attendee B was identified as a major cause of negative customer-customer encounters, which were further classified into *dissatisfying presenters/speakers*, *fake interaction partners*, *attendees displaying socially inappropriate behavior*, and *monopolistic attendees*. The vast majority of the discussed negative interaction experiences in service settings were associated with customer B in the context of "deviant" or "dysfunctional" customer behaviors, which intentionally caused problems for a company, employees, or other customers (Harris & Reynolds, 2004). For instance, inappropriate public behaviors such as cutting in line and smoking caused frustration and anxiety for others (Fisher & Byrne, 1975). Such deviant customer behaviors further led to customers' engagement in negative word-of-mouth, complaining, and switching behaviors (Bougie et al., 2003).

Apart from Attendee B that was identified as the primary cause of negative CCEs in prior consumer research, the findings of in-depth interviews pointed out that a great number of informants attributed negative customer-customer encounters to situations in which they experienced being socially excluded. This finding stressed the salience of attendees' fundamental human needs in a conference setting. One such fundamental need is the *Need for Belonging* (Maslow, 1943). *Need for Belonging* indicates that individuals need to feel a sense of belonging to either large social groups or in small social connections by being able to share their thoughts and feelings. The absence of a sense of belonging may cause social anxiety and clinical depression (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this study, attendees reported a sense of discouragement when their ideas were rejected.

The identified social exclusion phenomenon also implies the salience of another fundamental human need, *Need for Esteem* (Alderfer, 1969). Self-esteem denotes the evaluative attitude toward the personal level of the self-concept (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Alderfer pointed out in his E.R.G. Theory (1969) that personal development and growth motivates one to be productive towards both oneself and the environment. This study found that, when attendees sense that they are being excluded from others' circles, they report a feeling of being disrespected and devalued. Consistent with prior research that recognized the harmful effects of social exclusion such as threatening one's needs for belonging, self-esteem or control (Geen, 1991; Williams, 2007) and leading to a decrease in positive mood ratings (Seidel et al., 2013), within the context of this study, the findings offer empirical evidence that social exclusion in a conference setting is present and harmful by weakening attendees' sense of belonging and sense of self-esteem that they expect to achieve by interacting with others.

Attendees further named energy drain and controversial topics as two reasons they were left with negative impressions. During in-depth interviews, attendees acknowledged that when customer-customer encounters made them feel "exhausted" due to tight schedules or "uncomfortable" due to controversial topics, the encounters were perceived as negative. Such findings empirically support attendees' expectation for hedonic consumption in their conference participation, which becomes an increasingly important topic in service literature. Since the 1980s, consumers were found to be increasingly driven by their desire for hedonic pleasure and excitement in consumption experience (e.g., Cotte, 1997). Consumption experience has thus begun and will continue to embody a steady flow of feelings and fun (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). To the extent that

customer-customer encounters in a conference setting were found to play an inevitable role in affecting attendees' hedonic experience, findings specific to negative CCEs advocate the adoption of an experiential perspective on customer-customer encounters by emphasizing customers' enjoyment and entertainment in general service settings (Lofman, 1991).

5.3 Overview of the Quantitative Study

While the qualitative study focused on exploring the nature of attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters, the quantitative study centered on the impacts of attendees' subjective experiences at customer-customer encounters. The objectives of the quantitative study were two-fold. The first objective was to examine the effect of attendees' experience quality during customer-customer encounters on their sense of group identity within the conference group. The second objective was to investigate the impacts of attendees' sense of group identity with the conference group on their perception of self-esteem and transcendent conference experience. This study hypothesized that attendees' conference experience quality during customer-customer encounters would exert a positive effect on the construction of their group identification within the conference group, increasing attendees' self-esteem and transcendent conference experience.

The empirical investigation of the quantitative study included one pilot study and one main study. All respondents for the pilot study and the main study had attended at least one association conference in the past five years of 2013 (i.e., since 2008). The pilot study was conducted using a convenience sample consisting of 33 respondents to refine

the measurements for the main study. The main study was conducted for hypothesis testing using a sample of 821 respondents. In the main study, a measurement model was first administered to verify the underlying structure of constructs. A structural model was then tested for hypothesized structural relationships among constructs. Results showed that as predicted, attendees' sense of group identity within a conference group plays a mediating role between their interaction experience quality and their self-esteem and transcendent conference experience.

5.4   Discussions of the Findings of Quantitative Study

5.4.1   CCE Experiences Lead to Group-Based Self-Esteem and Transcendent Conference Experience

The survey results support the hypothesis that attendees' experience quality at customer-customer encounters positively affects their group-based self-esteem. This finding indicates that as a result of engaging in positive customer-customer encounters at conferences, attendees gained a greater awareness of their ability and their values, such that their experiences at CCEs transformed them to be less shy and more confident in future encounters. This finding also supports the proposition that attendees' experience quality at customer-customer encounters is positively related to their transcendent conference experience. Particularly in this study, as attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters were conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct, the findings provide insights into the respective importance of the instrumental dimension (i.e., know-how exchange) and experiential dimension (i.e., social-emotional support) of attendees' interaction experiences.

On the one hand, findings of this study offer empirical support for the positive impacts of attendees' information exchange and networking outcomes on their conference satisfaction (Gruen et al., 2007; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Zhang et al., 2007), which is consistent with previous studies. On the other hand, findings of this study promote the values of the experiential dimension of attendees' consumption experiences, which has not received sufficient investigation in prior research. The survey results pointed out that while both instrumental and experiential dimensions showed significant positive impacts on attendees' transcendent conference experience, the experiential dimension of attendees' experiences at customer-customer encounters was found to play a more important role. In contrast to previous studies that measured attendees' overall conference satisfaction, this study used attendees' transcendent conference experience to reflect the experiential aspect of attendees' consumption experience in a conference setting. Findings suggested that while the opportunities for exchanging information, ideas, and networking with others are a fundamental expectation that attendees hold prior to attending a conference, they are merely one avenue for ensuring attendees' transcendent conference experience. Social-emotional support contributes more to attendees' transcendent conference experience than know-how exchange. Together, the social-emotional support that attendees obtain from other attendees wields more power in leveraging attendees' transcendent conference experience, specifically, attendees' peak enjoyment and highlights at the conference.

5.4.2   Group Identification Serves as a Partial Mediator for the Impacts of CCE

Experiences

This study explored the potential mediating effect of attendees' group

identification with a conference on the relationship between attendees' experiences at

customer-customer encounters and their self-esteem and transcendent conference

experience. Moore et al. (2005) suggested that customer-customer interactions are not

directly linked to customer satisfaction within the firm. The analysis and results of survey

data in this study put forward a partial mediating effect of attendees' group identification,

offering a better understanding of the underlying mechanism through which attendees'

interaction experiences make an impact on their perception of self-esteem and

transcendent conference experience.

5.4.2.1   CCE Experiences Facilitate Group Identification

Findings of this study suggested that attendees were able to identity with a

conference group based on their positive interaction experiences with other attendees

present at the conference. Such findings are consistent with previous studies that suggest

a positive relationship between interpersonal interactions and one's group identity or

sense of belonging to a group. Previous studies in organizational identity (Ashforth &

Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983), social psychology (Hogg & Turner, 1985; Turner, 1984), and

retailing settings (Parker & Ward, 2000) jointly advocated that interpersonal interactions

among individuals provide the basis for categorization or one's cognition of a group

identity, such that he or she perceives him- or herself as belonging to the group as a

typical member of it. Considering the recognized importance of "communitas" in general face-to-face event settings (Fairley & Gammon, 2006; Hannam & Halewood, 2006), findings of this study suggest that the formation of communitas in a conference setting can be realized by facilitating positive interaction experiences among attendees.

Unlike prior research, the results of this study provide further insight into the various aspects of interaction experiences and their contribution to the construction of attendees' group identities in a conference setting. In previous discussions on the impacts of interaction experience, interaction experience was evaluated by its quantity (e.g., Nezlek et al., 2011) and/or quality (e.g., Huang & Hsu, 2010). Quantity was measured by the number of interactions per day and time spent in interactions per day (e.g., Nezlek et al., 2011). Quality was measure by emotions, bonding (Stel & Vonk, 2010), mutual support (Frey & Lüthje, 2011), valence, intensity (Huang & Hsu, 2010), and relationship closeness (Guenzu & Pelloni, 2004). The quantitative study of this dissertation prioritized the quality of interaction experiences in a conference setting. With reference to a recent study in a gym setting (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2007), this study measured know-how exchange and social-emotional support during customer-customer encounters to reflect both instrumental and experiential dimensions of interaction experiences as recognized in consumption experiences (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). The results indicate that in a conference setting, one's sense of belonging to a communitas or identity with the conference group is developed through two routes: the instrumental route and the experiential route. The instrumental route centers on exchanging information and network. The experiential route focuses on establishing social and emotional bonds with others. Previous studies pointed out that people develop social memory with others so

that diverse people come to think of themselves as members of a group with a shared (though not necessarily agreed upon) past (French, 1995). The findings of this study demonstrated that in a conference setting, while both the know-how exchange attendees accomplished and the social-emotional support attendees received from other attendees significantly facilitated their identification process with the conference group, social-emotional support that attendees were able to harvest plays an even more important role in increasing attendees' sense of belongingness to the conference. Attendees, to a greater extent, identify with the conference group through the experiential route in a conference setting.

While Gruen et al. (2007)'s study discovered the significant impact of know-how exchange on attendees' conference satisfaction, the survey results of this study identified the positive relationship between social-emotional support at a customer-customer encounter and one's identification with a group as the strongest amongst tested relationships. Such a predominant role of social-emotional support in constructing one's group identity is consistent with prior research that acknowledged the importance of the relational domain in one's consumption experience (e.g., Guenzu & Pelloni, 2004). Previous studies indicated that social bonding and commitment can be developed among individuals in a shared physical environment (Nardi & Whittaker, 2002). Interpersonal interactions enable people to reproduce communities and develop social relationships (Kira et al., 2009; Schwartzman, 1989), facilitating one's construction of a group identity. An integral part of such social relationships highlights the mutual trust developed among individuals through their personal interactions with one another (Kira et al., 2009). Findings of this study imply that social support and emotional connections that attendees

obtain during customer-customer encounters may play a dominant role in their process of

group identification by facilitating relationships building and the development of

interpersonal trust and rapport in a conference setting.

5.4.2.2   Group Identification Cultivates Group-Based Self-Esteem and Transcendent

Conference Experience

The survey results demonstrated that attendees' identification with a group in a

face-to-face conference setting significantly increases attendees' sense of group-based

self-esteem and positively affects their transcendent conference experience. While

previous studies have tested the influence of group identity by combining the individual

contribution of its sub-dimensions and used one composite construct in their analysis

(e.g., Jeong & Moon, 2009), findings of this study imply a causal relationship between

the cognitive dimension (i.e., identification) and evaluative dimension (i.e., group-based

self-esteem) of group identity, which empirically supports a process perspective in the

construct of group identity (e.g., Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

Another notable finding from the regression analysis of survey data is that

compared with the impacts of know-how exchange and social-emotional support one

receives from others, one's group identification with a conference group has the greatest

power in leveraging their transcendent conference experience. Attendees' positive

interaction experiences during customer-customer encounters, especially the experiential

domain of their interaction experiences, significantly contributed to attendees' group-

based self-esteem and transcendent conference experience. Such positive impacts were

found to be predominantly explained by attendees' sense of connectedness with other attendees at the conference based upon attendees' interaction experiences with others.

In general, the qualitative study and quantitative study jointly offered a deeper understanding of attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters. On the one hand, the qualitative study, which used in-depth interviews and field observations, focused on exploring how attendees subjectively experienced customer-customer encounters. On the other hand, the quantitative study, which employed surveys, underscored the impacts of such experiences during customer-customer encounters. Based on the findings grounded on both textual data and the results generated from quantitative analysis of the survey data, this dissertation developed a diagram that illustrates the flow of attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting.

As indicated in Figure 5.1, attendees' experiences during customer-customer encounters in a conference setting are manifested through their inter-related dimensions. Attendees were found to be first motivated by their long-term instrumental needs and/or transient hedonic desires to engage in three identified types of customer-customer encounters. Particularly for staged CCEs, despite the reported difficulty of branching out to strangers, engagement could be facilitated by the context when attendees were alone, and by certain sensory cues, as well as by the mutual network they shared with their interaction partners. Attendees' multidimensional experiences during the identified three types of customer-customer encounters were then found to be represented by four processes that were facilitated by customer-customer encounters. Such multidimensional experiences viewed through the lens of these four processes were further affected by

situational factors that were present at three levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels. In-depth interviews revealed that, as time went by, two specific types of customer-customer encounters stood out from generic ones, consisting of extraordinary customer-customer encounters that were characterized by attendees' emotional intensity and high peak experience and negative customer-customer encounters caused by four reasons that were salient in a conference setting. At last, the findings of the surveys offered empirical evidence for the impacts of attendees' subjective experiences during customer-customer encounters on both their self-esteem and transcendent conference experience as a result of attendees' sense of belonging to the conference group.
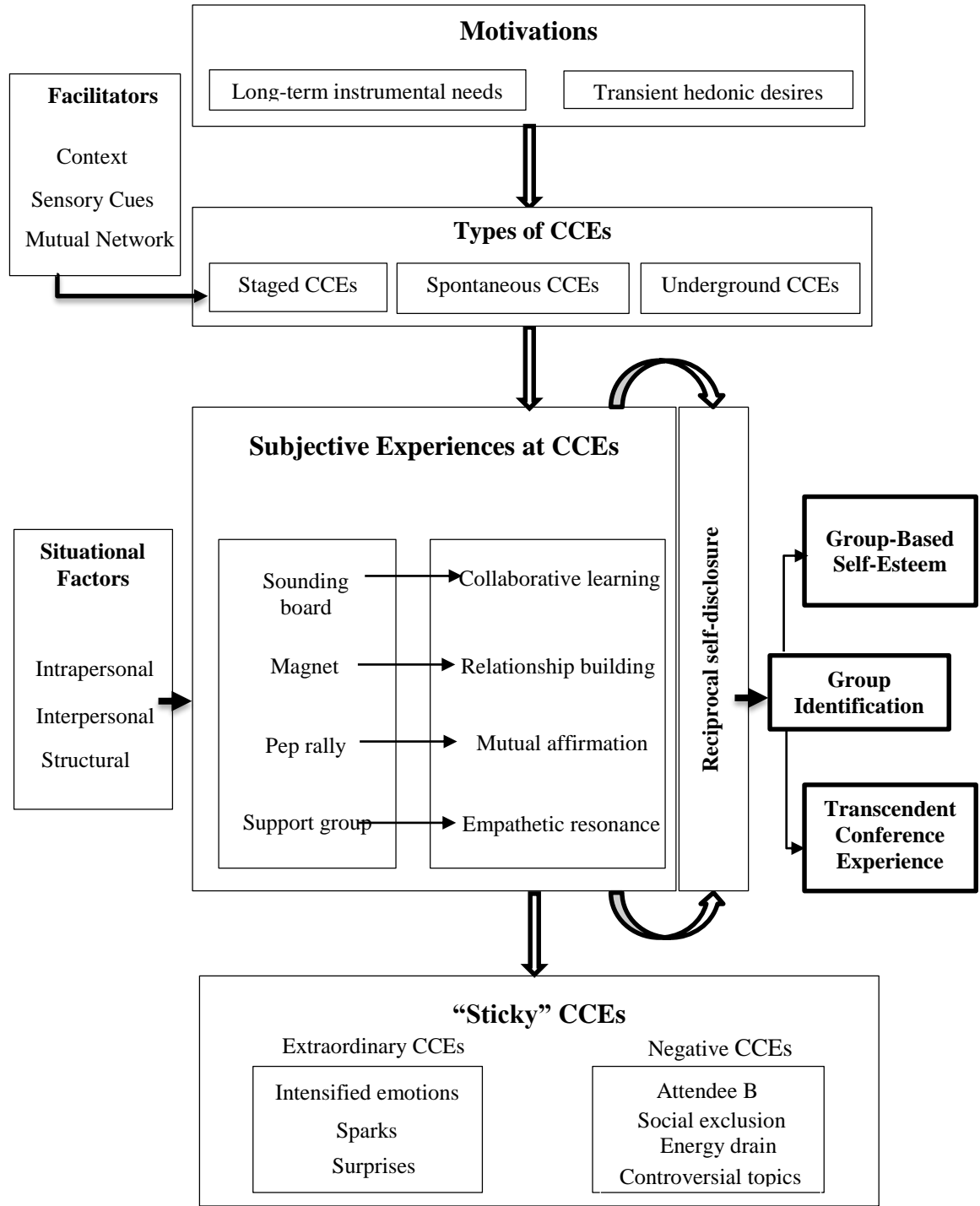
Figure 5.1 Framework of Experiences at Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs)

CHAPTER 6. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS, MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEACH

This chapter provides a discussion of the contributions of this dissertation, consisting of four sections. The first section presents theoretical contributions of this dissertation. The second section delineates managerial implications of the findings. Limitations of this dissertation are then discussed, followed by suggestions for future research.

6.1   Theoretical Contributions

6.1.1   A Consumptive Model of Experiential CCEs in Event Tourism

This dissertation contributes to literature on the influence of other consumers and consumer experience in general hospitality and tourism settings by exploring interaction experiences in an interaction-driven industry, the conference industry, an industry which has receive insufficient attention in spite of the centrality of interactions to the consumption experience. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation incorporates perspectives from various fields of study such as social psychology, consumer behavior, organizational behavior, event management, and marketing & branding to provide a framework that offers a deeper understanding of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs in a conference setting (see Figure 5.1). While prior

research has implied the importance of CCEs in service settings (e.g., Arnold & Price, 1993; Harris et al., 1995; Johnson & Grier, 2013;Wu, 2008), their findings seem fragmented with a focus on one or two aspects of the customer-customer phenomenon with few exceptions (e.g., Harris & Baron, 2004). The framework developed in this dissertation, based upon findings of in-depth interviews, field observations, and surveys, represents one of the early attempts to systematically model attendees' CCE experiences in event tourism.

First, this framework contributes to event management literature by shedding light on attendees' interpersonal experiences from the perspective of attendees. With few exceptions (e.g., Lu, 2011), research efforts have focused primarily on the planners of meetings and conventions, leaving the characteristics of attendees, the end users of this business, less understood in the interpersonal domain. The framework offered in this dissertation thus contributes to events studies that have predominantly explored management perspectives. Second, this framework models a dynamic flow of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs. The key issues associated with CCEs presented in this framework, such as dual motivators and multidimensional interaction experiences, reveal the complexity of the interaction phenomenon. Third, this framework presents attendees' encounter experiences across different types of association conferences, aiming to yield generalizable academic implications and building blocks for future events studies. Fourth, this framework presents findings that offer empirical support as to how theories in multidisciplinary fields, such as psychology, social psychology and social cognition, can be borrowed to explain phenomenon in conference settings. This

contribution helps advance an understanding of the phenomenon of interest using an interdisciplinary approach, in response to the task set forth by Getz (2012).

Furthermore, while the discussions above appear to have a focus on conferences and events given the context of this dissertation, the findings presented in this framework contribute to studies in the broader context of event tourism given the recognized link between events and tourism. Event tourism is perceived by Getz (2008) to exist at the nexus of events and tourism, which is generally regarded to include all planned events. Studies in both event and tourism settings have been called for to offer a deeper understanding of consumer experience. Positioned within conferences, a significant business segment of planned events that presents substantial market growth, this framework offers both qualitative and quantitative accounts of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs, thus indirectly advancing the knowledgebase of event tourism.

Based upon the findings presented in the framework discussed above, this dissertation makes four significant theoretical contributions to event management and consumer experience literature that are illustrated in a consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism (see Figure 6.1). As shown in Figure 6.1, this dissertation (1) introduces an experiential perspective into CCE experiences; (2) proposes a multidimensional conceptualization of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs; (3) conceptualizes and classifies typical CCEs; and (4) develops a mediating model for the impacts of attendees' experiences during CCEs on their self-view and conference experience.
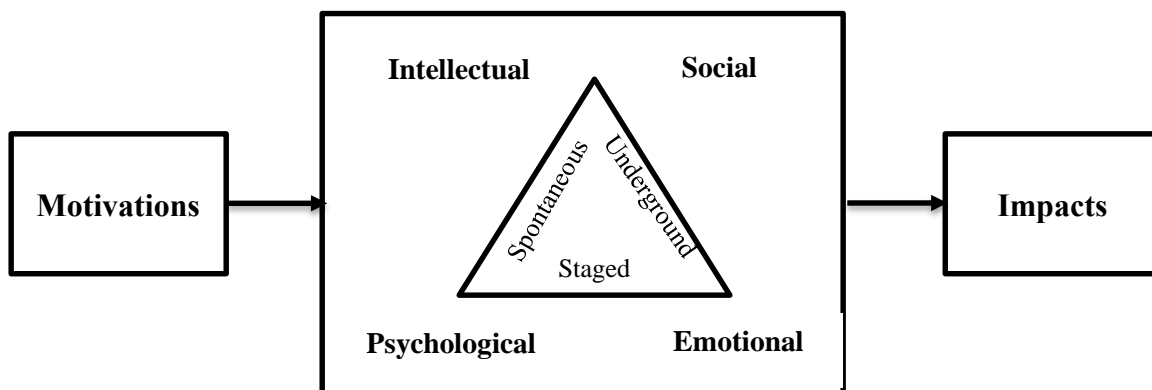
Figure 6.1 A Consumptive Model of Experiential CCEs in Event Tourism

This consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism is unique from existing consumption models in general service settings in several respects. First, it signifies the key role of interactions in one's consumption experience. For example, the three-stage model of service consumption by Bryson and Daniels (2014) utilizes a service-dominant logic (S-D) that describes one's consumption of service during the pre-purchase, the encounter and the post-encounter stages. In comparison, the model from this current study proposes an interaction-dominant logic (I-D) that highlights one's consumption of interactions with other attendees at high-contact encounters and thus signifies the importance of interpersonal interactions to one's consumption experience. In addition, the three-stage model of service consumption is behavior-oriented. It illustrates what consumers do or will do at various stages of the service consumption process. On the contrary, the consumptive model in this study is experience-oriented. It presents what attendees experience at CCEs and how they feel as a result of their CCE experiences. The focus on attendees' subjective interaction experience asserts an experiential perspective into consumption experience in an interaction-driven industry.

The unique value of the consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism is further reflected by the extent to which it reveals the "black box" between motivations and outcomes associated with interaction experience. Studies in consumer behavior examined how people choose, purchase, consume, and dispose of goods, services, or experiences to meet their needs and desires (Kotler, 2000). In consumer behavior models, however, there is a notable "black box" in the behavioral process between motivations and outcomes (Kotler, 2000). Prior research approached the black box in varied ways in order to better understand consumption behavior. For instance, Kotler (2000)'s model of consumer buyer behavior illustrates how and why individuals make purchase decisions. A stream of research particularly investigated the impacts of interactions among consumers on one's satisfaction (e.g., Martin, 1996) or service experiences (e.g., Harris & Baron, 2004). Understanding the specific aspects of an interaction experience and how those aspects lead to certain outcomes, nevertheless, is relatively lacking. Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991a, 1991b) developed the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV), which was adopted by subsequent research to offer a comprehensive understanding of consumption behavior and experience (e.g., Bodker et al., 2009). TCV is illustrated in a conceptual model that presents five consumption values, including *functional*, *social*, *emotional*, *epistemic*, and *conditional* value. These five values jointly influence consumer choice behaviors. Although the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of one's consumption experience acknowledged in TCV are consistent with the dual-motivation structure and the multidimensionality of interaction experience recognized in the consumptive model from this study, TCV only addresses a particular fragment of consumption experience: how consumption experience influences consumer choice behavior. In the context of

interaction-intense industries specifically, a number of empirical studies merely focused on the conceptualization and classification of interaction experience (e.g., Baron et al., 1996; McGrath & Otnes, 1995; Rowley, 1995). The consumptive model presented in this study uniquely unveils the black box and fills such gaps in two ways. First, it uncovers the multidimensionality of interaction experience during three identified types of CCEs. Second, it puts forth a mediating model to describe and explain how attendees' CCE experience impacts their self-view and conference experience. When considered together, the consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism presents why and how attendees experience CCEs during their conference participation, flowing from motivational factors, to interaction experiences to outcomes of interaction experiences.

The consumptive model from the current study advocates for and advances an integration of the experiential focus in consumer behavior studies. In 1982, Holbrook and Hirschman called for researchers to move in a broader direction when considering consumer behavior. They suggested that an experiential perspective that included experiential data was beneficial as it would "include some consideration of consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun" (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 139) rather than focusing primarily on the "information-processing model" (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132) used in the past. In 2000, Forlizzi and Ford explored "The Building Blocks of Experience" and sought to provide a "framework for interaction designers." Their model emphasized the relationship between the user, product, and interaction designer and the ways in which the characteristics of the user and the products influenced one's experience. Whereas Forlizzi and Ford's (2000) model demonstrated a cyclical interconnectedness between the user, product, and interaction designer, the consumptive model from this

study reflects a more linear approach, emphasizing the user (or attendees) motivations for engaging in CCEs, the four dimensions of CCE experiences, and the resulting impacts.

Specifically, the consumptive model from the current study reflects a focus on experience by revealing attendees' subjective experiences at CCEs, which elevates the understanding of consumer experience in extant research. Pine and Gilmore (1998) established the vision for a new economic era: the "experience economy." In this era, consumer experience is highlighted as an emerging economic offering. An increasing number of businesses are expected to capitalize on consumer experience (Xu & Chan, 2010), by deliberately designing engaging experiences and creating memorable events that could generate economic value (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). To uncover the characteristics of experiences, Pine and Gilmore (1998) identified four "realms" of consumer experiences: educational experience, entertainment experience, esthetic experience and escapist experience. Relevant theoretical variables were added to measure the four conceptual realms of experience (OH, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Specifically in a hospitality setting, lodging brand management has been suggested to be more closely affiliated with consumer experience than price-based commodities (Cai & Hobson, 2004). To better understand consumer experience, Ritchie and Hudson (2009) developed a graphic representation of "the evolution of the extraordinary/memorable travel/tourism experience" from 1975 to 2006. They concluded that "managing the delivery of consumer experience" was most likely to lead to both an "extraordinary" and "memorable" consumer experience (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009, p. 121). By uncovering the critical role that CCEs play in one's experience in an interaction-driven industry, the

consumptive model from this study builds on past research and extends this graphic to include the facilitation of CCEs as a key element in achieving a memorable experience.

In the following section, the major theoretical contributions generated from the findings of this dissertation are delineated in detail.

6.1.2   The Introduction of an Experiential Perspective

Several major findings in this dissertation empirically support an integration of both instrumental and experiential perspectives into the investigation of CCE experiences, with the experiential perspective playing a more salient role in the conference setting. First, findings from in-depth interviews supported a dual-motivation structure that drove attendees into CCEs, consisting of long-term instrumental needs and transient hedonic desires. Batra and Ahtola (1990) emphasized that consumption activities take place for two reasons: (1) instrumental and utilitarian reasons and (2) hedonic gratification. Gursoy et al. (2006) also found that individuals attend festivals for both hedonic and utilitarian purposes, while the hedonic aspects of festivals are significantly more important to attendees. Particularly, in the conference setting, this dissertation discovered the salience of hedonic values in attendees' expectation for CCEs during in-depth interviews, supporting the call made in earlier studies for an experiential perspective on consumption experience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). The theoretical significance of the experiential perspective lies in its recognition of the experiential nature of CCEs. The last decade has witnessed an increasing interest in the intangible experiential qualities of the consumption experience in general hospitality and tourism settings (Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). Such rising attention to the experiential nature

determines a need for an experiential perspective into conferences, an indispensable sector of event tourism. Whereas the CCE is claimed to be a key component of conference experience (Baber & Waymon, 1996), relatively little research has empirically and systematically examined its experiential nature. It is critical to capture the holistic experience at CCEs by integrating instrumental and experiential perspectives.

Second, while prior research acknowledged the social nature of CCEs (McCallum & Harrison, 1985; Miao, 2008), this dissertation identified four functions served by CCEs in a conference setting that uncovers the complexity of the construct of CCEs (see Figure 6.2). The four functions that CCEs are expected by attendees to perform reflect both instrumental and experiential domains of interaction experiences. The major function of CCEs as a sounding board indicates the necessity of including an instrumental perspective to reflect attendees' basic expectation for tangible outcomes from conference participation (i.e., intellectual outcomes such as information, knowledge, and expertise). The other three major functions of CCEs as a magnet, a pep rally, and a support group call for an experiential perspective to tap into the experiential nature of attendees' experiences at CCEs by acknowledging attendees' appreciation for relationship building, mutual affirmation, and empathetic resonance.

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┌────────────────────────────────┬────────────────────────────────┐
│     Sounding board              │          Magnet                 │
│     (intellectual)              │          (social)               │
│               ┌────────────────────────────────┐                 │
├───────────────│      Functions of CCEs         │─────────────────┤
│               └────────────────────────────────┘                 │
│     Support group               │        Pep rally                │
│     (emotional)                 │        (psychological)          │
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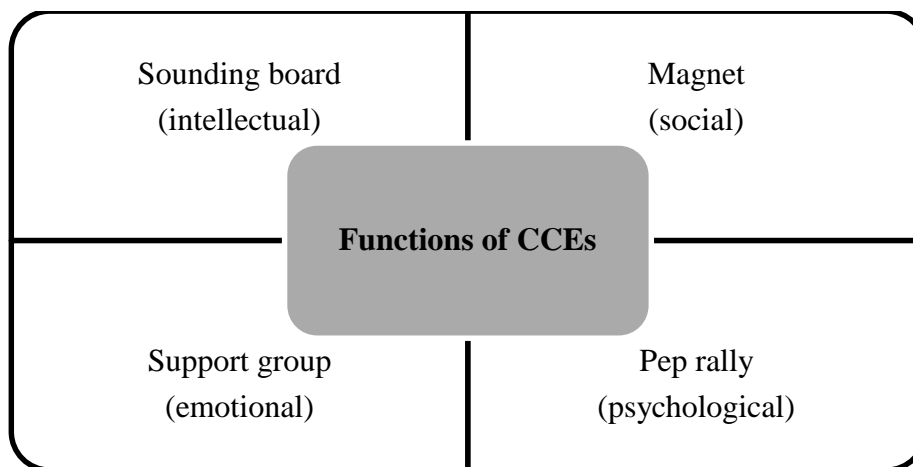
Figure 6.2 Functions of CCEs

This dissertation further suggests that in the long run, the experiential aspects of one's CCEs could carry more weight in leading to their encounter and transcendent conference experience than the instrumental aspects. The findings of in-depth interviews demonstrated that, among the four major functions served by CCEs as expected by attendees, three of them centered on the experiential aspect of attendees' interaction experiences. The salience of the experiential nature of CCEs that emerged from in-depth interviews is further quantified by the survey results. The survey results revealed that whereas both the know-how exchange (i.e., the instrumental aspect) and the social-emotional support (i.e., the experiential aspect) attendees experience at CCEs significantly impacts their transcendent conference experience, it is influenced to an even greater extent by the social-emotional support they receive from other attendees. Previous studies suggested that products prevailed on hedonic dimension are considered experiential consumptions while products that are predominantly utilitarian are regarded as functional consumptions (Mano & Oliver, 1993; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986).

Taking interpersonal interactions as a key product offered by conferences, such findings assert that CCE experiences at conferences represent a combination of both instrumental and experiential consumption experiences, yet are expected by attendees to deliver more hedonic or experiential values than functional or utilitarian ones.

Fourth, emotional implications of other attendees during customer-customer encounters were highlighted in this dissertation as with the finding that to the extent informants acknowledged the emotional resonance they established with other attendees, they obtained help in alleviating their negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration. Attendees' intensified emotions are also recognized by this dissertation to be an important element that characterizes a meaningful and memorable CCE. The identified salience of attendees' emotional memory in their transcendent conference experience supports the notion that "feelings-in-common, collective feelings are brought about by impressions left by bodily others" (Ahmed, 2004b). Such findings provide empirical evidence for the increasing recognition of an important experiential element in consumption experience, the emotions. Hedonically-driven consumption is usually an emotionally-laden event (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mano & Oliver, 1993). Emotions, feelings, and affects are complex, slippery concepts (Probyn, 2003). Geographers argue that they are intangible and indescribable yet a virtual force that will cause bodily responses (Dewsbury, 2009; Thien, 2005) and thus cannot be divorced from consumption experiences. Given a scarce investment in the interconnectedness of emotions, affects, feelings, and senses in tourism studies, studies are called for to advance emotional geographies of tourism by addressing question like what embodied emotions, feelings, and affects do in tourism (Ahmed, 2004a). In event settings, attendees' in-

person experiences extend as to how the achievement of these extrinsic values makes one feel intrinsically (i.e., emotion, affect, feelings). A shift is seen in event studies from adopting an instrumental approach by focusing on events' extrinsic values to acknowledging the emotional aspect of experiences. For instance, a recent study on festivals proposed that food experiences at festivals invoke emotions and contribute to the affective component (Silkes, Cai, & Lehto, 2012). This dissertation, therefore, contributes to event tourism literature by uncovering the significance of emotions and affects embodied in attendees' encounter experience as well as transcendent conference experience.

Lastly, this dissertation contributes to consumption experience research by using experiential-dominant non-behavior metrics to better capture the experiential nature of CCEs. To assess the impacts of experiences during CCEs, previous literature has predominantly focused on overall satisfaction, purchase intention (e.g., Anderson & Mossberg, 2004; Grove et al., 1998; Harris, Davies, & Baron, 1997; Johnson & Grier, 2013; Moore, Moore, & Capella, 2005), revisit intention and word-of-mouth intention (Gruen et al., 2007; Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004). In this dissertation, however, experiences at CCEs were perceived by attendees to signify experiential consumption experience to a larger extent than instrumental consumption experience. The impacts of subjective experiences at CCEs, therefore, should not be evaluated predominantly or solely by behavior-based metrics; a broader assessment is needed to reflect the hedonic or experiential values of attendees' interaction experiences. Consistent with studies that have incorporated consumers' enjoyment (Harris et al., 1995) and social involvement (Parker & Ward, 2000) into the discussion, the quantitative component of this dissertation

assessed the impact of experiences at CCEs by using two experiential-dominant non-behavior metrics: group-based self-esteem and transcendent conference experience. The two experiential-dominant metrics used in this dissertation demonstrate a need to assess impacts of other attendees beyond the widely used behavior-based metrics in recognition of the experiential or hedonic nature of events experiences, thus contributing to hospitality and events research, especially research on the influence of other consumers.

6.1.3   Multidimensionality of CCE Experiences

The empirical findings from in-depth interviews and surveys jointly suggest that the impacts of other attendees on focal attendees in a conference setting take place on multiple dimensions. The qualitative analysis of interview data revealed that at all three types of typical CCEs, attendees went through four major processes. These four distinct processes demonstrated that other attendees present had intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional implications for the focal attendees through reciprocal self-disclosure during CCEs. This dissertation thus proposes a multidimensional conceptualization of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs, which offers a phenomenological account of how CCEs at conferences are subjectively experienced by attendees.

The identified multidimensionality of attendees' CCE experiences contributes to consumer experience literature. In the last decade, the "experience economy" has attracted an increasing amount of attention to consumer experiences. Tourism experiences, such as experiences in convention tourism and rural tourism, are increasingly recognized to be centered on experiences, fulfillment, and rejuvenation rather than on things and places (King, 2002). Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) suggested

that consumption experience embodies a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun, which is encompassed by the experiential perspective of consumption or consumers' subjective and emotional reactions to product consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mcintosh & Siggs, 2005). The social, psychological, and emotional dimensions derived from the findings in this dissertation assert that one's affective memories, sensations and symbolism add value to his or her experience and jointly create a holistic and long-lasting personal experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Such multidimensional CCE experiences further addressed Pine and Gilmore's (1999) call for a shift in traditional marketing approaches that focus on functional product attributes and quality.

The four dimensions of CCE experiences, in particular, echo the four realms of experience in general in Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) conceptual model for "experience economy" (see Figure 6.3). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), consumer experience across a wide range of industries including tourism and hospitality, encompasses four realms: education, entertainment, esthetics, and escapism. Educational experience occurs when tourists actively engage their minds and bodies to increase knowledge and skills (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999). The intellectual dimension of attendees' CCE experiences, which reflects attendees' active engagement in collaborative learning at CCEs, resembles the educational realm of customer experiences. Entertainment experience happens when tourists observe the activities and performances of others (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999). The social dimension of attendees' CCE experiences that signifies relationship-building shares similarities with entertainment experience to the degree that the individual creates experiences by directly or indirectly interacting with others. The former, however, involves more direct and active

participation. Esthetic experience becomes salient when tourists enjoy the nature of the environment (Oh et al., 2007). The psychological dimension of attendees' CCE experiences is akin to the esthetic realm of customer experiences, in that they both involve a positive psychological reaction in one's experience. The uniqueness of the former lies in its emphasis on attendees' inward reflection, which encompasses the self-affirmation attendees receive during CCEs. On the contrary, the latter focuses on one's response to the environment, which captures his or her appreciation of the nature of the environment. Escapist experience occurs when tourists take a break from their routine. The emotional dimension of attendees' CCE experiences echoes the escapist realm of customer experiences, given that they both emphasize one's emotional disengagement. While the former refers to attendees' emotional disengagement from their negative feelings by gaining empathetic resonance through interactions with others, the latter describes one's emotional disengagement from his or her daily life. Drawing upon the comparison between the four dimensions in an interaction-driven industry and the four realms of experiences in general settings, the four dimensions derived from this dissertation represent the manifestations of the four realms in event tourism. This dissertation not only mirrors and validates the discovery in Pine and Gilmore's conceptualization of experiences (1998, 1999), but also generates practical value for the industry.
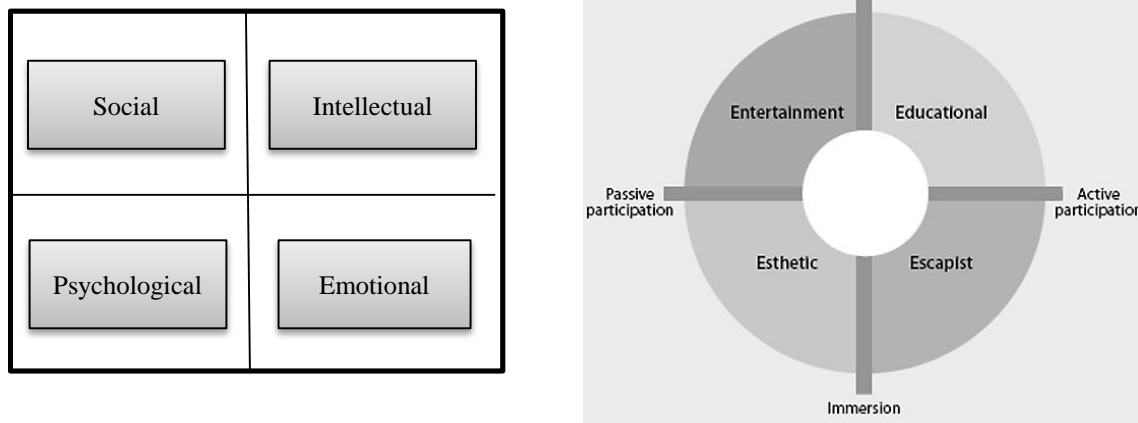
Figure 6.3 A Parallel Comparison between the Four Dimensions of CCE Experiences (left) and the Four Realms of General Experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999) (right)

The multidimensional implications generated by CCEs are, however, only realized when the interactions among attendees flow from *self-reported disclosure*, to *turn-taking disclosures*, and to *deeper level interactions*. This phenomenon can be explained by theories related to "Reciprocal Self-Disclosure" and "Social Penetration" from social psychology. Self-disclosure describes an important process in social relationships, during which people reveal personal information to others (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). According to Altman and Taylor (1987), self-disclosure is the gradual sharing of information about oneself and the gradual learning about others. When one's self-disclosure elicits another's self-disclosure and when such disclosures are equivalent in breadth or depth, self-disclosure reciprocity occurs (Hill & Stull, 1982; Jourard, 1971). The process of self-disclosure is further termed as social penetration. Based on social penetration theory, self-disclosure and the

growth of interpersonal relationships follows a linear path, during which relationships develop and grow as interaction partners become more willing to disclose information to one another (Taylor, Altman, & Sorrentino, 1969). In that case, relationships proceed from less intimate to more intimate levels of exchange as interaction or disclosure proceeds, which offers empirical support for the application of Social Penetration Theory in a conference setting.

The multidimensionality of attendees' subjective experiences during CCEs was further strengthened by the negative valence of CCEs as acknowledged by informants during in-depth interviews. This dissertation found that negative interpersonal encounters in a conference setting are present at multiple levels: when attendees feel emotionally discouraged by inauthentic interaction partners, psychologically uncomfortable by exhausting interpersonal encounters and disputes caused by controversial topics, socially excluded from other attendees' activities, and physically disturbed by fellow attendees displaying socially inappropriate behavior. Prior literature recognized the existence of negative experiences during CCEs in diverse service settings (Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Nicholls, 2005; Parker & Ward, 2000; Thakor et al., 2008). Such negative interactions among customers account for the largest number of dissatisfying incidents (Grove et al., 1998) and could be much more significant as a dissatisfying factor than as a satisfying one (Nicholls, 2010). A review of previous literature identified that negative encounters in service settings or retailing contexts often result from customer density (Hui & Bateson, 1991), stereotype (Thakor et al., 2008), and customer misbehavior (Harris & Reynold, 2004). The negative encounters with other attendees acknowledged in this

dissertation further reinforce the multidimensional impacts that other attendees could exert on focal attendees.

Together, this dissertation makes one of the first attempts to conceptualize the multidimensionality of attendees' interaction experiences in a conference setting. By drawing attention to the multidimensional pattern of experiences during CCEs, this dissertation encourages future influence of other consumers (IOC) research (Miao, 2008) to integrate the understanding of the multidimensionality of attendees' interaction experiences. Such conceptualization of interaction experiences also calls for the development of assessment to reflect the multidimensionality of attendees' experiences at CCEs in future event tourism studies.

6.1.4   Conceptualization of CCEs in a Conference Setting

This dissertation adds to a growing body of research on CCEs by conceptualizing the construct CCEs in a conference setting and classifying typical CCEs as acknowledged by attendees. The findings suggested that CCEs in a conference setting can be depicted as *a period of time when staged, spontaneous, or underground interactions between or among attendees take place"*. Although the importance of experiences at CCEs is recognized in academia (e.g., Baber & Waymon, 1996; Jones, 1995), few studies have provided a conceptual classification that systematically defines the typical CCEs in a conference setting. The findings of in-depth interviews enrich the proposed definition in this dissertation by providing a classification of typical CCEs that emerged from attendees' descriptions. This finding provides clarifying insight into the range of formats that encounters can take at conferences, thus advancing the conceptualization of CCEs

and offering a platform for future events studies. For instance, whereas spontaneous interactions that take place in random situations are largely left outside the attention of event researchers, conference organizers and service providers, this dissertation identified that they are recognized by attendees as one typical type of CCE that is more enjoyable than staged interactions and that could contribute to one's transcendent conference experience as well.

Conference Experience

Intrapersonal Spontaneous Underground Interpersonal

CCEs

Staged

Structural
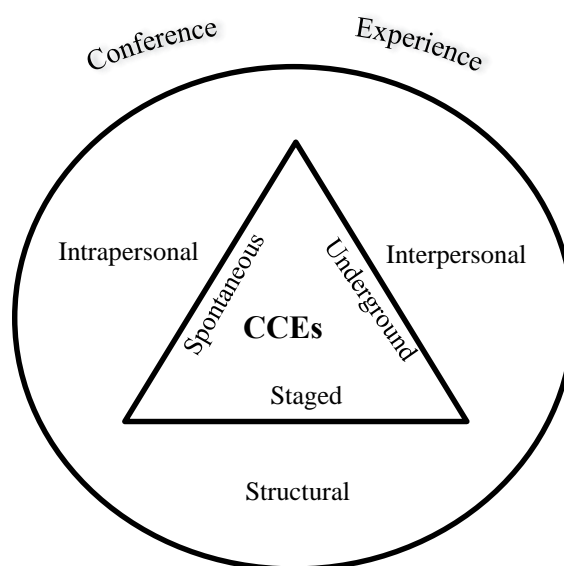
Figure 6.4 Customer-Customer Encounters (CCEs) in a Conference Setting

The central role of attendees' interaction experiences at three types of CCEs in their conference experience and the three situational factors identified in this dissertation as influential to interaction experiences (as illustrated in Figure 6.4) reflect the development of the conceptualization of a servicescape in service literature well. The concept servicescape was initially developed by Booms and Bitner (1981) to emphasize the impacts of the physical environment in which a service takes place. Then, social factors (i.e., service providers) were incorporated into the scope of servicescape (e.g.,

Ryu & Jang, 2008), which is increasingly perceived as involving the interface where consumers interact with physical facilities and other tangible elements as well as the interface where human interactions take place (Miao, 2008; Wu & Liang, 2009). In addition to consumer-provider two-way interactions (e.g., Gremler & Gwinner, 2000), researchers started to place more emphasis on the interactions between consumers in service encounters (e.g., Miao et al., 2009). In contrast to general service settings (e.g., a restaurant, a hotel, or a library) where tangible factors (e.g., products, physical environment) and service providers play a critical role, findings of this dissertation stressed that the "servicescape" in a conference setting is perceived by attendees to be dominated by human interactions among attendees at the identified three types of CCEs. Findings of this dissertation further offer empirical evidence that as the core of servicescape in a conference setting, attendees' interpersonal experience is influenced by three situational factors: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors. These three situational factors contain both tangible elements (i.e., atmosphere, physical environment) and intangible elements (i.e., time, interpersonal attraction, and personality) present in the servicescape. Given that this dissertation recognized salient interplay between the individual and the environment during one's experience in customer-customer encounters, future research on the influence of other consumers (IOC) is suggested to position a conference as a servicescape by placing interpersonal encounters between customers as the center of attendees' conference experience and acknowledging the impacts of multi-level factors identified in this dissertation, thus generating a more thorough understanding of attendees' situated interaction experiences.

It is also worth noting that human interactions in a conference setting are found to be affected by interpersonal factors that could override one's preconditioned individual traits. The finding specific to the level of similarity between an interaction pair supports two relevant views in social psychology: the homophily heterophily principle (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970) and the "affinity" or "like-me" principle (Laumann, 1966). The homophily heterophily principle argues that a homophilous interaction pair not only interacts more frequently but also interacts more effectively due to the common attitudes or beliefs they share. Similarly, the "affinity" view indicates that individuals are more likely to interact with people whom they perceived to be similar to themselves (Thakor et al., 2008). These effects were found to take place between pairs whose relationships are minimal, such as appearing with others in a public place (Mayhew, McPherson, Rotolo, & Smith-Lovin, 1995) or talking about hobbies at work (Feld, 1982). Previous service literature suggested positive impacts of customer compatibility or similarity on one's service experience. Examples include positive impacts of tourists' marital homogeneity on their evaluation of fellow tourists in a travel setting and travel satisfaction (Wu, 2007) and positive impacts of customers' overall similarity to other customers on their attitudes towards the service experience, other customers who were present, and the service provider (Brack & Benkenstein, 2012). Consideration of customer compatibility was suggested to be of particular importance in service settings that signify close physical proximity and frequent verbal interaction and activities among customers, as well as the existence of a heterogeneous customer mix (Martin & Pranter, 1989). The finding of this dissertation that highlights the significance of likeness between an interaction pair,

therefore, offers empirical evidence for the relevance of customer compatibility literature to a conference setting.

6.1.5 A Mediating Model of CCE Experiences

This dissertation developed a mediating model of the impacts of CCE experiences based on the quantitative analysis of survey data. This mediating model suggests that the impacts of experiences at customer-customer encounters are, to a great extent, realized through the cultivated sense of group identification, which advances the theoretical understanding of how attendees' experiences at CCEs could make an impact on both attendees' self-view and conference experience (see Figure 6.5).
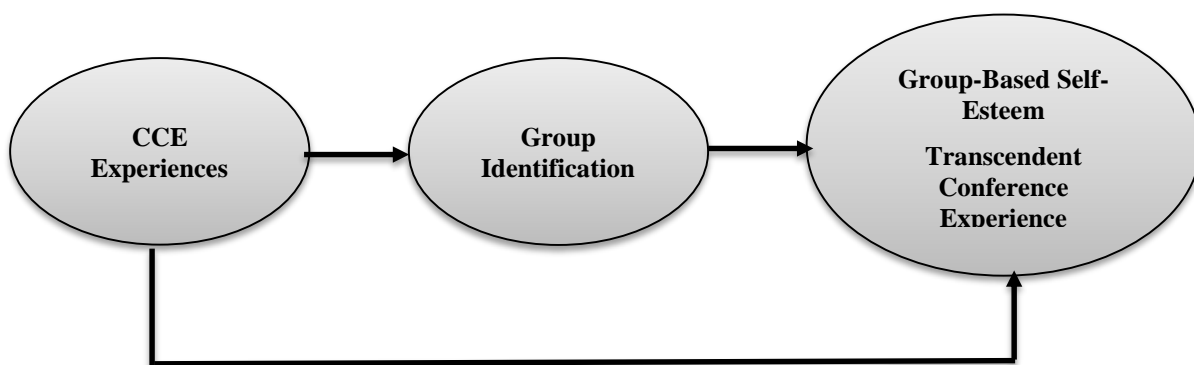
Figure 6.5 The Mediating Model for the Impacts of CCE Experiences in a Conference Setting

By offering empirical evidence for the salience and significance of group identity in a conference setting, findings of this dissertation provide insights into the connections between interpersonal-level experiences and group-level evaluations. Previous conference studies have recognized the improvement in one's self-esteem through their participation in a conference (i.e., Severt et al., 2007). Findings of this dissertation further

reveal that it is the interpersonal interactions that lead to one's increased level of group-based self-esteem and the impact of interpersonal interactions is, to a great extent, realized through their facilitating role in constructing one's sense of belonging to a conference group.

The findings offered by this mediating model thus provide empirical evidence for the application of Social Identity Theory to interpersonal experiences in meeting/conference settings. Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that group membership creates self-categorization such that one tends to favor the in-group at the expense of the out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Prior SIT literature found that group identification increases one's positive evaluations of the group with which he or she identified (Turner, 1984) as well as one's commitment to and satisfaction with companies (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), religious groups (Stryker & Serpe, 1982), and alumni associations (Mael, 1988). Consistent with prior research conducted in various settings, findings of this dissertation demonstrated that in a conference setting, the act of attendees categorizing themselves as group members makes attendees feel more connected with other attendees and contributes to attendees' transcendent conference experience. Such results concerning a positive relationship between the group identification and transcendent conference experience suggest that attendees' sense of belonging and connectedness as a result of their participation in customer-customer encounters has great power in creating a memorable moment, which brings to attendees novel experience, emotional memory, or peak enjoyment.

The identified significance of attendees' felt identification with a conference group yields unique implications from the perspective of the conference brand

community. The findings demonstrate that attendees' positive interaction experiences during CCEs significantly helped them identify with the conference group, which fostered a sense of belonging and commitment to the conference group. Such findings are akin to the establishment of a brand community in general service settings. The maintenance and success of a brand community is argued to be dependent upon the relationships between both the consumers, the brand, and fellow consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In a conference setting where a high level of interpersonal interactions is present, such relationships can be enhanced by attendees' positive interaction experience with each other. Taking conferences as a brand, attendees' interaction experiences during CCEs has essential implications for the development of a conference brand community that is built upon both the relationship between attendees and the conference but more importantly, the relationships among attendee themselves.

In summary, based on social psychology, marketing/branding, consumer behavior, and events studies, this mediating model of the impacts of CCEs advocates for a multidisciplinary approach in future studies on event experiences.

6.2   Managerial Implications

6.2.1   Overview

Association conferences are recognized as a major segment of demand in the conference industry (Davidson & Rogers, 2012, p. 6) due to their larger size and longer duration as compared to corporate conferences (Davidson & Rogers, 2012, p. 6; Getz, 2012). Association conferences have also become an emerging market for business

tourism destinations (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Malekmohammadi et al., 2011). However, this segment is increasingly challenged with issues caused by economy, decreased values as perceived by attendees, and declining attendance (Davidson, 2012). This dissertation focuses on the interaction-driven service setting and offers a better understanding of attendees' experiences during CCEs.

The consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism from this dissertation uniquely reveals the "black box" between motivations and outcomes associated with attendees' event experiences. By uncovering attendees' multidimensional interaction experiences at three major types of CCEs and unearthing how attendees' CCE experiences lead to their event experiences, this consumptive model generates valuable implications for industry practices. The findings of this dissertation equip hospitality and events practitioners with potential strategies for improving attendees' conference experience and sustaining the development and success of the industry by enhancing attendees' encounter experiences during CCEs. The findings further shed light on events marketing with a focus on experiential CCEs. The following section presents a discussion of the managerial implications offered by this dissertation in detail.

6.2.2   Recognize the Significance of Experiential CCEs in Events as a Value Source

Technology has created a potential threat to face-to-face events due to its high-quality video communication capabilities (IAEE, 2013). Event practitioners are challenged to produce high-value events that meet and even exceed attendees' expectations in ways that cannot be done in a digital world, so that the unique values of a face-to-face event as opposed to a digital one are clearly displayed. The experiential

CCEs presented in the consumptive model of this dissertation demonstrate an experiential perspective into attendees' event experiences. This dissertation, therefore, raises hospitality and events practitioners' awareness of the significance of experiential CCEs as a means of improving attendees' perceived value of their event participation. Additionally, the specific findings in this dissertation offer practitioners guidance in enhancing attendees' interpersonal experiences during CCEs.

The consumptive model of experiential CCEs from this dissertation calls for practitioners to give greater attention to attendees' subjective interaction experiences. Attendees engage in CCEs not only in order to gain instrumental benefits such as information and insight, but also for hedonic gratification. As compared to the information and insights, attendees' CCE experiences on the social and emotional level are found in this dissertation to play a more significant role in leading to their transcendent conference experience. Informants of this dissertation shared that in the long run, encounters characterized by intensified emotions, sparks, and felt surprises became the highlights of one's conference experience and served as an extremely influential source of the impression that one has of the conference overall (see Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2). For example, findings of this dissertation point out potential benefits for practitioners to "design surprises" at CCEs. As put forth by informants during in-depth interviews, when attendees experience surprises at a CCE, a "positive disconfirmation" moment usually makes this encounter extraordinary and memorable. The reported surprises highlighted unexpected socializing and networking opportunities that were unique to the attendees and transcended their routine conference experiences. Event organizers are recommended to plan out "surprises" by leaving certain items in the event

program unknown to perspective attendees prior to the event, and offering attractive "cues" that could arouse attendees' interest and curiosity and increase the potential for hedonic enjoyment. One such potential item could be a mystery guest with whom attendees would be delighted to identify.

Survey results further quantified that attendees' interaction experience on the social and emotional level would more significantly influence their transcendent conference experience (see Figure 6.5). In addition to gaining knowledge of attendees' perception of the instrumental aspects of an event such as price, location, and program, event practitioners are suggested to also include attendees' evaluation of the experiential aspects of CCEs as one of the measurements for assessing the performance of an event. Event design and format should also be driven by such assessments of attendees' engagement and interaction experience together. Hospitality and events practitioners are encouraged to invest in service design and management of the significant social domain of an event setting: customer-customer encounters.

6.2.3 Balance Staged CCEs and Spontaneous CCEs in Service Design

A key implication of the consumptive model of experiential CCEs in this dissertation lies in its call for greater attention to be given to how a typical experiential CCE is defined by attendees. CCEs are conceptualized in this dissertation as a period of time when staged, spontaneous, or underground interactions between or among attendees take place. According to the personal descriptions informants gave during in-depth interviews, in addition to staged interaction encounters that have been most commonly discussed by practitioners, spontaneous and underground encounters also are regarded by

attendees as essential CCEs (see Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.4) that have spillover effects on attendees' conference experience. Understanding of the three typical types of CCEs is necessary from the managerial perspective, in that it is not adequate to enhance attendees' CCE experiences by only staging structured CCEs inside an event venue. Facilitating attendees' interaction experiences during less structured CCEs also has great potential for creating transcendent conference experiences.

While it is relatively easier for conference and venue organizers to design and manage staged CCEs through managerial planning, such as preparing a space and designing themes for encouraging structured interactions in formal sessions, they seem to have no direct or total control over interactions that take place spontaneously or underground. This dissertation identified several leading situational factors that influence attendees' experiences at CCEs (see Figure 6.4). For instance, event and venue professionals should arrange more comfortable face-to-face seating options at various areas within the conference venue such as the hallway or restroom to facilitate spontaneous interactions. To acknowledge the areas where attendees may interact spontaneously, the conference venue is responsible for clearly labeling designated space for interactions, posting signs for directions, and making accurate session titles that unambiguously indicate the themes of sessions or activities. As another consideration, informants of this dissertation shared that frequently at a conference, while intentional meal times and coffee breaks between sessions were planned, there was not enough seating space and/or time arranged for attendees to interact with others who were present and to take the interaction to a deeper level, which at times created the difficult choice of either skipping the next activity or cutting off the interaction. As a result, attendees may

have only been able to engage in the initial stage of an interaction, which was frequently

considered negative due to its perceived "superficial" nature, thus the staged encounters

by conference organizers intended for facilitating networking opportunities were forfeited.

The identified three types of CCEs in this dissertation offer support for more

active and intimate collaborations among the event, venue, and the host destination.

Findings of this dissertation indicate that typical and influential CCEs not only occur at

the event as planned by event professionals, but also take place in a less formal manner

within and around the event venue, before and after the event. The venue and the host

destination both play an important role in attendees' evaluation of their interaction

experiences. Event professionals need to select a host location and venue capable of

facilitating attendees' quality interactions with each other. For instance, informants

acknowledged that tours facilitated by the conference, as one example of less structured

CCEs, gave them opportunities for relaxation and engagement in informal interactions

with other attendees. As people travel to a destination for the purpose of attending events

and conducting tours outside the event, events have been recognized to assist in

destination development and management. The finding concerning less structured CCEs

suggests that rather than driving attendees away from a conference and diluting attendees'

felt connection with other attendees, events should work actively and closely with venues

and destinations to design group activities both for facilitating spontaneous interactions

among attendees of a conference and for enhancing destination development.

For example, Lu and Cai (2009) pointed out the significance of host destinations

investing in the enhancement of facilities and in attendance service programs in order to

improve attendee loyalty to exhibitions. The discovery of the importance of spontaneous

and underground CCEs in this dissertation provides support for such recommended collaborations among event professionals and destination marketing organizers. The host destination is not developed at the expense of distracting attendees from participation in CCEs at conferences, but instead serves as another channel for engaging attendees in interpersonal interactions and increasing the likelihood of a transcendent event experience. For another example, in January of 2015, The Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (LBCVB) in the southern California called for more collaboration between the host destination and those visiting for the purpose of attending events and meetings, in order to meet the current requirement of interactions for a conference (Ting, 2015). As a result of this initiative, one proposal in progress is the construction of a pedestrian bridge that will make it easier for attendees of meetings, conferences, and other types of events to walk among hotels, restaurants, and venues. Practices like the aforementioned that promote dialogue among the destination, the venue, and attendees have potential for enriching attendees' event experience, in that they provide more opportunities for attendees to readily and actively engage in interactions not only with the destination, but also with each other.

6.2.4   Design the Multidimensional CCE Experiences

Findings of this dissertation provide insights into the aspects of attendees' encounter experiences that are expected by attendees to be facilitated and assessed by event practitioners. By uncovering the four dimensions of interpersonal interactions that attendees expect and appreciate, this dissertation helps practitioners develop an understanding of the multidimensional nature of attendees' subjective experiences at

CCEs in order that they may more effectively design such encounters (see Figure 6.1, Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3). Results concerning the four functions and processes related to CCEs indicate that CCE experiences should encompass four dimensions including intellectual, social, psychological and emotional dimensions. These four dimensions are akin to the four realms of general experiences in Pine and Gilmore's (1998, 1999) experience economy concept, thus representing the manifestations of the four realms in event tourism. As the experience economy unfolds, such findings generate unique practical values for the event industry.

The link between the identified multidimensionality of event experience and the four realms of general experiences as advocated in experience economy proposes that, the competitive battleground in event industry should lie in staging experiences. As goods and services, experiences need to be designed to meet certain customer needs and engage customers in order to create a memorable event. Specifically, the four dimensions derived in this dissertation (see Figure 6.1, Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3) offer conference organizers practical guidance for strategically designing rich and unique CCE experiences by engaging attendees on an intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional level..

The first identified link between the educational realm of general experience and the intellectual dimension of event experience suggests that one key element of event tourism is the interactive experience of the generation and exchange of information and ideas. The findings specifically revealed that CCEs should be utilized by organizers as a sounding board for facilitating collaborative learning between or among employees, further enhancing attendees' intellectual experience. For instance, event organizers are

encouraged to differentiate the complimentary event paraphernalia (e.g., pins, shirts, hats) they would offer attendees with varying levels or types of experience, such that newcomers and veterans can easily identify each other, thus facilitating the collaborative learning process between attendees. A space can also be designated at receptions or other gatherings for inviting newcomers and veterans to network with each other. In that case, attendees are actively included as "partial service providers" in a conference setting, adding value to their conference experience.

The link between the entertainment realm of general experience and the social dimension of event experience sheds light on the value of staging entertaining social experiences to captivate event attendees. Organizers can position a CCE as a magnet and draw attendees by offering fun and engaging activities that provide attendees with ample opportunities to engage with other attendees. The ability to offer innovative and flexible space for staging these interpersonal activities and transcendent experience is thus a key advantage for an event venue to attract business. For instance, Long Beach in the southern California continues to innovate as a transformative destination for hosting meetings and events (Ting, 2015). According to Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (LBCVB), the Pacific Ballroom at the Long Beach Arena is a revolution in the event planning industry because of its customizable and creative space. The ballroom's greatest advantage lies in its intimate space for as many as 5,000 guests and its ability to be configured into a variety of settings for receptions, meetings, dinners, concerts, theatrical presentations, fashion shows, and sporting events (Ting, 2015).

Findings of this dissertation further offer empirical support for the urgency of an issue related to CCEs in the current environment: socializing and networking does not seem to be a salient activity at conferences as attendees tend to socialize only with people they already know (Hovav & Mandviwalla, 1998). Analysis of informants' descriptions and field observations revealed that during all three types of CCEs, attendees tended to stay with their acquaintances when attending conferences, despite the fact that interacting with new contacts brings them increased pleasure and benefits. Such a paradox is reportedly caused by attendees' tendency to stay in their comfort zone, which encourages event organizers to strategize best practices to help attendees branch out, build new networks, and get more involved in the conference rather than only enhance their existing relationships. The situational factors identified in this dissertation provide practical guidance for event organizers and the event venue to strategically promote engagement in interpersonal interactions with non-acquaintances through managerial interventions, such as programming, services, or physical environment. For instance, designing the setting, style, and atmosphere can spur attendees' social mood during staged networking time. Conference organizers and the conference venue can cooperate and arrange relaxing music and lighting in areas where spontaneous social interactions are most likely to take place, in order to cultivate a conducive physical environment that could ease attendees' interaction anxiety. Event venues and event professionals should designate available rooms and spaces where attendees are free to gather throughout the conference. In addition, by empowering attendees to customize their nametags, serving snacks and drinks, and placing starters/prompts on the tables in the form of notecards, conference organizers and venue could help attendees signal a preferred identity to others and break

the silence in an enjoyable way, thus building a foundation for spontaneous social interactions to take place.

As general consumer experiences, event experiences are not exclusively about intellectual learning and social networking; events provide an experience on any occasion where they can engage attendees in a personal and memorable way. The links between the esthetic/escapist realms of general experiences and the psychological/emotional dimensions of event experience call for strategic design of event experiences on the psychological and emotional levels of attendees. Event practitioners are encouraged to use CCEs as a stage for creating an aspiring en route experience. Such an aspiring en route experience should have the potential to transform attendees' ordinary event experiences into a distinctive ones that facilitates attendees' self-discovery and/or disengages attendees emotionally from the frustrations of their routine lives. Specific findings from this dissertation provide practical suggestions for organizers to effectively stage psychological and emotional experiences for meeting attendees' needs. The interview results indicate that mutual emotional support becomes more salient when attendees share greater similarities and past experiences with their interaction partners. One potential approach for promoting psychological and emotional experiences is compatibility management that attracts homogeneous customers to the service environment (Pranter & Martin, 1991). Event practitioners may want to do necessary planning to effectively facilitate CCEs among attendees that are more compatible. For instance, event practitioners can stage an increased number of special interest group activities that will bring together attendees who share greater affinity.

The mediating model of CCE experiences developed in this dissertation further support the idea that CCE experiences that meet attendees' needs for social-emotional support are more likely to develop a sense of community, and as a result attendees identify with others and are more satisfied with their conference experiences (see Figure 6.5). While conferences are generally large affairs, smaller group activities or networking gatherings, such as underground CCEs, should be encouraged along with larger events to target specific attendees, to actively engage attendees in more intimate interactions, to enhance the group coherency and commitment, and eventually, to improve the conference productivity and effectiveness. Such a practice is termed as *industry segment targeted networking* by Reveron (2013). Strategic suggestions are therefore stressed for event professionals during their selection of event venues. Event organizers are encouraged to take into careful consideration the availability and characteristics of space and function rooms for event professionals and attendees to plan a variety of sub-group meetings and activities within and around the event venue. According to an annual list of the top 100 hotels for meetings in the United States released by Cvent, a cloud-based enterprise event managing platform, hotels must have more than 50.000 sq. ft. of total meeting space and 10 or more meeting rooms to be qualified for inclusion (Cvent, 2015). This inclusion criteria used by Cvent for selecting top meeting hotels implies the necessity for event venues, or hotels in this case, to have the ability to offer sufficient event space and a variety of functional/meeting rooms. Sufficient event space and functional/meeting rooms are perceived as essential for designing both large events with staged structured interactions and enabling smaller-scale sub-group activities that facilitate more intimate interactions. The versatility that event venues can offer through

their space and rooms equips event practitioners with greater power to effectively engage attendees in diverse interaction opportunities as a way for attendees to create their customized interpersonal experiences.

In general, attendees participate in events because they desire to gain fresh insights, social networking and entertainment, self-discovery, and emotional comfort from engaging interactions. The richest experiences depend on the degree to which an event can encompass all four dimensions. To create a memorable and rich event experience, CCEs should be used as a stage with services and products as the props.

6.2.5 Cope with Negative CCEs

Informants of this dissertation also shared that they had to deal with negative-valence encounters now and then, which were present at multiple levels. In addition to facilitating positive experiences at CCEs, service management of CCEs also involves coping with negative CCEs. Informants reported several causes for their negative interaction experiences at CCEs. To the extent that informants implicitly conveyed their expectation for appropriate intervention of service providers in the event of negative interactions with other attendees, effective managerial regulations and solutions are called for to minimize the negative impacts of such encounters.

First, hospitality and events practitioners should take a proactive approach to avoid undesirable encounters. For instance, negative encounters caused by dissatisfying speakers/presenters in a conference setting can be avoided by careful selection of speakers and explicitly sharing the expectation for format, length, and quality. Some academic conferences even have designated personnel review the presentation materials

beforehand to ensure quality and consistency. Negative impacts such as energy drain caused by exhausting encounters could be minimized by appropriate planning of the activities to ensure a good balance between scheduled events and independent activities. To minimize the occurrence of social exclusion, conference organizers can actively manage the physical environment of CCEs to mitigate the effect of incompatibility or can increase activities such as new-comer receptions to make inexperienced attendees feel recognized and welcomed. One example of such practices in the association conference segment is seen in the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) Annual Meeting. At ASAE Annual Meeting, a smiling "newbie/bee" bumble bee sticker was placed on first-time attendees' name badges and a paragraph was prepared in their conference program book to encourage attendees to spot people with bees on their badges and welcome them (Reveron, 2013). Such a practice creatively helps newcomers connect with others in a fun way.

Second, on-site service providers should be responsible for intervening in negative CCEs. Ekpo et al. (2014, p. 5) pointed out that hotel staff and management are "best positioned to manage interactions between conference attendees as they are the producer of an 'enclavic' environment, which is a space that maintains formalized regulatory regimes and supports an enhanced system for policing the performativity of guest" (Jordan, 2008). Similarly, Lovelock (2006) argued that service practitioners must occasionally act as police officers in managing customer-to-customer relationships. Given that attendees expect obligations to other attendees through the actions of service providers, the absence of such facilitation by service providers may tarnish attendees' implicit perception of the conference. Conferences and hotels are thus suggested to

increase the salience of their staff and provide training to improve their ability to identify

and handle negative encounters. For instance, necessary interpersonal skills can help

conference and hotel staff to identify "excluded" attendees and initiate "small talk" with

them in order to alleviate their negative feeling of being socially excluded. Strategic

interventions should be taken in the event of attendees displaying inappropriate social

behaviors.

Attendees can also play a role as part-time service providers to reduce the

occurrence of negative interaction experiences. For example, informants shared that when

confronting a monopolistic attendee during a CCE such as a group discussion, the

moderator/facilitator should do a better job facilitating the discussion to avoid monopoly.

Therefore, a necessary workshop is recommended for attendees who are selected as

moderators/facilitators in order to prevent or minimize the negative impacts of

monopolistic attendees. Such onsite regulations can assist in fostering a common culture

and shared values to regulate interactions among attendees and motivate attendees to

interact with each other in a more positive way.

Third, given the long-lasting effect of a negative CCE on one's memory of his or

her conference experience, hospitality and events practitioners are encouraged to make

multiple channels available for attendees to offer feedback, such as post-event surveys

and focus group discussions. Similar to service recovery philosophy prevalent in service

literature, such practices enable attendees to express rather than suppress their negative

emotions. Attendees' feedback further offers practitioners opportunities to improve in the

future, thus minimizing the detrimental effects of negative interaction experiences on

encounter satisfaction and further transcendent conference experience in the long run.

While it is not uncommon to see that post-event questionnaires are administered by hotel convention/event service team to gather convention/event planners' suggestions for service provision on the part of the hotel, the end users' or attendees' feedback specific to their interaction experiences at a conference should be more actively sought and used for future improvement by event organizers.

6.2.6 Leverage the Power of CCEs in Events Marketing

Given the declining attendance in association conferences coupled with decreased values of conference participation, the unique values offered by participation in in-person events are a favorable competitive advantage and are thus of great significance in events marketing to influence attendees' decision-making process. The mediating model of CCE experiences developed in this dissertation suggests that attendees' experiences at a CCE, especially the know-how exchange and the social and emotional support they receive from other attendees, helps construct their sense of community at the conference and leads to a memorable and transcendent conference experience (see Figure 6.5). This model provides rich implications for the marketing of the event industry with a focus on CCEs.

First, hospitality and events practitioners' interest in managing seemingly incapable relationships between attendees and staging memorable and personable event experiences needs to be communicated to current and potential attendees. In the current environment, digital events are becoming increasingly available and popular due to their economic benefits and convenience. The consumptive model of experiential CCEs in event tourism developed in this dissertation advocates for an integration of the

experiential focus in service and product design. Qualitative findings of this dissertation support that face-to-face events offer a range of experiential values through interpersonal interactions that cannot be replicated by digital events, including the social benefits from relationships building, the psychological benefits from mutual affirmation, and the emotional benefits from empathetic resonance (see Figure 6.1, Figure 6. 2 and Figure 6.3). Specific findings indicate that events gain a competitive advantage by strategizing their marketing messages and practices. Specifically, interaction opportunities as a unique experiential component of event experiences should be highlighted in an event's promotional offers, such that in-person events can be differentiated from standardized event provisions and digital event offerings. Event professionals were advised that organizing and promoting a fine event is insufficient, as destinations and venues are important to event success as well (Lu & Cai, 2011). By collaborating with the event venue and the host destination, event professionals can incorporate unique venue and destination appeal to influence attendees,' especially newcomers,' perceived values associated with an event. For instance, event practitioners have widely invested in promoting the price, convenience, products, educational opportunities, networking and other instrumental aspects of an event. This dissertation recommends that events design and incorporate various hedonically-driven interaction activities that can take place both within and beyond the event venue into their promotional offers, such as activities that involve teamwork/communication and activities where attendees will be incentivized for their engagement in interactions with others. A variety of interaction opportunities that occur at the event, at the venue, or at the destination all have a potential of arousing

attendees' psychological and emotional connection with each other, thus improving the perceived experiential values of an event.

Second, this dissertation calls for event practitioners to improve their strategic marketing capabilities by paying greater attention to the relationship marketing of interpersonal relationships between attendees. Reveron (2013) acknowledged that a truly productive association conference should drive membership by motivating attendees to come back year after year and to renew connections with valued acquaintances. Despite some indications that relationships between customers are important, marketing practices have predominantly focused upon the relationships between the firm and customers, between the firm and employees, and between the employees and the customers. Findings of this dissertation reveal that interactions between attendees, especially those that can help attendees to identify with each other at the conference, should be a matter of real concern for marketing practitioners in event industry. Relationship marketing in the event business is, therefore, encouraged to invest in fostering and maintaining attendees' sense of community with a conference at the group level through building at the interpersonal level.

To achieve the purpose of cultivating attendees' sense of community within a conference, the rapid development of technology has offered potential opportunities by complementing in-person event experiences in various ways. Event organizers can use social media tools to facilitate attendees' engagement in interactions with others before, during, and after their event experience. Prior to an event, event organizers can design online forums for "warm-up" opportunities, where attendees would be able to see who else is attending and would be offered readily available channels to connect with other

attendees ahead of time via social media platforms. Such pre-event networking helps set the stage for forging connections during the entire event period. During an event, wireless devices and mobile computing are potential tools for organizers to utilize in order to help attendees get connected and engaged. For example, digital engagement tools or sponsored apps can be offered free of charge to attendees enabling them to create their agenda and indicate their intention of attending activities, which can be seen by other attendees upon their permission. Using such tools and apps, attendees can also readily connect and set appointments wirelessly with other attendees with whom they are unacquainted. Such practices offer attendees, especially those who are introverted in social settings, an "icebreaker" or a comfort level from which to branch out to unfamiliar attendees and to pave the way for face-face interactions. The utilization of these tools on site, therefore, has the potential of increasing attendee engagement in interactions with others and influencing their transcendent conference experience. After a conference, technology can also help maintain the connections among the group via social network platforms. Event practitioners can in turn apply social media marketing towards engaging target social media market communities based on their respective commonalities.

Based on the discussion above, while technology has placed certain threats to in-person events, the relationship between technology and in-person events is suggested to be complementary, rather than exclusive. The current structure of the events industry is regarded as "episodic" in the sense that the event usually takes place at one short period in the year (IAEE, 2013). Provided that in-person event participation is time and cost-dependent, social network platforms can be actively designed and sustained to offer a year-round virtual community for attendees of an event. Such a social media community

enables the event planners to engage in and manage social media interactions even before and after an event experience for enhancing attendees' sense of belonging. Technology, therefore, plays a supportive role for in-person events by facilitating the establishment and maintenance of a conference brand community among attendees through enabling more frequent interpersonal interactions in various situations. Such utilization of technology to actively facilitate attendees' interactions throughout one's event participation fosters attendees' sense of community or identification with other attendees and offers event organizers implications for developing loyalty programs in the events industry. Together, this dissertation raises an important consideration for the future development and marketing of the hospitality and event industry.

6.3   Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this dissertation are suggested to be considered with caution due to the following limitations associated with this dissertation, which provide important suggestions for future research.

First, the representativeness of the sample is not apparent. The sample for in-depth interviews was recruited through a university-wide e-newsletter, as a result of which the sample was directly or indirectly associated with one university and did not represent all attendees who attended association conferences or events. Given that the culture of the university may have an impact on how this sample perceived and experienced interactions with others in a conference setting, a sample that can represent a consumption public in event industry can help to make the results more generalizable. In addition, data collection for both qualitative and quantitative studies took place in the

United States, due to a consideration that the United States hosted the largest number of association meetings (ICCA rankings, 1999-2001) which generated a significant number of trips (Opperman & Chon, 1997). As a result, Caucasians are over represented in the sample of both qualitative study (77%) and quantitative study (81%) in this dissertation. The findings, thus, could be dominated by values and beliefs held by the overrepresented ethnicity group. A more representative sample needs to be considered in future studies. For instance, future studies along this research stream can follow a global approach suggested by Nicholls (2010) to examine an area outside European and North American regions, such as Asia, which dominate the world's demographic balance.

Second, while a few informants brought up the cultural impacts in customer-customer encounters subtly during in-depth interviews (e.g., shared home culture facilitates interactions in a host culture background), culture is not adopted as the central theme of this dissertation. Literature in cross-cultural customer-customer encounters is in its infancy (Nicholls, 2011). Nicholls introduced a cross-cultural perspective into studies on customer-to-customer encounters (2010). The hospitality, travel and tourism industries increasingly cater to a cross-cultural customer mix and the level of cross-cultural customer-to-customer encounters in service encounters is perceived to continue to grow (Nicholls, 2011). As an emerging segment in the hospitality and tourism business, conferences are no exception. Provided the increasing number of international conferences, conference organizers are challenged with managing an increasingly diverse customer base. Customer-customer encounters, however, have been underappreciated in a cross-cultural context with a few exceptions (e.g., Levy, 2010; Nicholls, 2011). Prior research in the hospitality and tourism context has offered insight into the role of cultures

on customer-customer encounters, such as friction caused by different cultural norms and values or the rewarding cultural and learning experiences (e.g., Grove & Fisk, 1997; Nicholls, 2005; Strauss & Mang, 1999). Future events studies are suggested to explore how cultures play a role in attendees' subjective experience at customer-customer encounters and how hospitality and events practitioners can effectively engage in cross-cultural customer-customer encounters and harness the power of cross-cultural customer-customer encounters to create added-values for attendees. For instance, a recent study on the events setting examined interaction phenomenon between attendees under heterophily, who are from two very different ethno-racial groups (Ekpo et al., 2014). This study pointed out that as marketplace becomes increasingly multi-cultural, there is a growing recognition of the urgency for marketing managers to understand how customers' indirect and direct interactions may affect satisfaction across customer base.

The third limitation is regarding the application of the findings related to association conferences to a broader discussion in events tourism. It was recommended that for studies at the theory building stage, internal validity should be more important than the external validity (Chan & Wan, 2008). Therefore, in its exploration of interaction phenomenon in events tourism, this dissertation paid greater attention to internal validity rather than external validity by focusing on one type of events: association conferences. Association conferences were chosen as the focus of this dissertation due to their significant impact on the conference industry coupled with their current challenges caused by the economy and attendees' perception of decreased values. Whereas the findings capture the commonalities in attendees' interaction experiences across different sub-segments of association conferences (i.e., professional or trade association

conferences, education conferences, religious conferences military conferences, charity

conference, fraternal conference, and political conferences), applications of the findings

to other types of events need to be considered more carefully. According to Getz (2012)'s

events typology, planned events comprise cultural celebrations, business and trade, arts

and entertainment, sports and recreation events and other private functions. The themes

and factors identified in this dissertation need to be further investigated in other types of

events for testing the stability of their patterns. It is possible that diverse themes or factors

carry different weights in contributing to one's events experience at various types of

events. For instance, while intellectual values offered by customer-customer encounters

are of the primary concern for academic conference attendees, hedonic values of

customer-customer encounters may play a dominant role in leading to attendees'

transcendent event experience in cultural celebrations or arts events. This dissertation

thus offers interesting and meaningful avenues for future research in events experiences.

The size of conferences should be another concern for future studies. In this

dissertation, the conferences recalled by participants in both interviews and surveys are

dominated by larger conferences. The results may thus be potentially biased towards the

interaction phenomenon common at the larger conferences over-represented in this

sample. Given today's tighter corporate budgets, companies started to reduce the size and

duration of individual meetings in order to cut back the total expenses on accommodation

and food and beverage (Seli, 2009). According to a recent survey across the top five

convention destinations in the United States, the number of meetings of 0-50 people has

increased dramatically, while the number of larger group meetings has fallen (Active

Network, 2013). In 2012, nearly 50% of all meetings were groups of 0-50 attendees

(Active Network, 2013). Event planners are expecting more small meetings in the years

to come (PCMA, 2012). However, an interesting observation from the post-hoc analysis

of survey data in this dissertation indicates that attendees at smaller-scale conferences

(i.e., hosting 0-50 attendees) reported their know-how exchange, social-emotional

support, sense of group identification, group-based self-esteem, and transcendent

conference experience lower than those reported by participants attending larger-scale

conferences (i.e., hosting more than 50 attendees). Particularly, attendees' sense of group

identification, group-based self-esteem, and transcendent conference experience was

reportedly significantly lower at smaller conferences than at larger ones. While current

discussion and efforts have been predominantly focused on attendees' engagement and

networking at large-scale events (Alderton, 2012), the design of customer-customer

encounters at smaller meetings indicates great potential for future studies. Future studies

are encouraged to examine the effects of conference/meeting size on attendee behavior

manifested in interpersonal domains. For instance, comparison studies of attendees'

interaction experiences at larger events versus smaller events are suggested to contribute

to the events industry by improving their services and identifying areas for service

innovation.

Attendees' accumulated experience with a conference offers another meaningful

and interesting avenue for future studies. A post-hoc analysis of survey data demonstrates

that attendees' accumulated experience with a conference has a significant effect on

attendees' encounter experience, group identity, and transcendent conference experience.

In detail, attendees who perceived themselves more as a veteran at their recalled

association conference, reported a significantly higher level of know-how exchange,

social-emotional support, sense of group identification, group-based self-esteem, and transcendent conference experience than others who perceive themselves more as a newcomer at the recalled association conference. Such a finding indicates that seasoned attendees at a conference seem to gain greater enjoyment from customer-customer encounters as well as the conference itself, and feel more connected with others at the conference. Although attendees' accumulated experience with a conference has not been the focus of interest in this dissertation, it proposes potential topics for future events studies.

Lastly, while this dissertation explores customer-customer encounters, the encounters between attendees and service providers are not incorporated in the framework. In service settings, through direct or indirect interactions with focal attendees, service providers and others present can simultaneously contribute to the service encounters, resulting in an interaction triad consisting of focal customers, service providers, and others present. For instance, Adelman et al. (1994) suggested that the behavior of service employees acts as stimulus or deterrent for oral participations between strangers. Future studies, therefore, are suggested to focus on both service provider-to-customer encounters and customer-to-customer encounters to provide a phenomenological account of how these two encounters influence each other and affect attendees' encounter and events experience in an interactive manner. Particularly, future studies are recommended to provide a deeper understanding of the expected service provider's role in managing interactions among attendees, especially in a cross-cultural event setting. For example, while customer-customer encounters are traditionally thought to be spontaneous and uncontrollable, work by Johnson and Grier (2013) suggests that

customers implicitly expect marketing managerial involvement in conflict management,

such as increasing marketplace diversity and managing interactions between culturally

dissimilar customers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A   Interviews

…………….………………………… (For Interviewer Use Only)…….... ………………………

Interview Date: _____ (mm) _____ (dd) _____(yyyy)

Interview Time: Start _____ (00:00)

Interview Time: End _____ (00:00)

Location of the Interview: _____

……………………………………………………………………………………………………..

Thank you very much for coming. Today, we are here to talk about your interaction experiences at association conferences. There will be no right or wrong answer. It is all about your personal experience. What you did and how you felt.

Interview: Your interaction experiences at association conferences

So, approximately how many association conferences did you attend in the past five years, or, since 2008? _____Times

Part 1

Based on your past experience, you know that when you go to a conference, you met a lot of people there: you go to a presentation session where there are other attendees, you met another attendee at the elevator, in the hallway, or, you talk to people during lunch who are sitting at the same table with you

1.   Do you like interacting with people when you go to conference?
2.   Now, according to your past association conference experiences, please recall those common settings where you encountered other attendees. Please describe to me as many such encounters as you can.

Probe questions:
   ■   Where did you usually encounter other attendees? What did you usually talk about?
   ■   Who do you find yourself usually interacting with, people who you knew already versus who you just met at the conference?"
   ■   Did you find the focus of your interactions with people who you already knew different from others who you just met at the conference?

Part 2

Section I.

1.   Among those common encounters you have just recalled when answering my earlier question, if I ask you to recall one encounter with other attendees, which one comes to your mind immediately, or let's say, the one that you are able to recall more easily than others? Please describe this encounter to me, just like telling a story.

Probe questions:
   ■   How did that encounter take place? Can you elaborate on what happened specifically at that encounter?"
   ■   Who is that person you were interacting with?

2.	What do you think makes you participate/stay in that encounter? Were there any reasons for you to participate in that encounter?

Section II.
1.	Overall, how would you describe your experience at this encounter?
2.	If I give you a scale from 1as awful to 10 as wonderful, what number are you willing to assign to your experience at this encounter? What made it an x (x is replaced by the number provided by the interviewee)?
3.	How did you feel during the encounter? Were you happy? Tense? Pleased? Why?
4.	So, you recalled this encounter more easily than others. Why was your experience at this encounter more vivid to you? What does that encounter mean to you?
5.	Can this face-to-face interaction experience at customer-customer encounters be replaced by online communication?

Section III.
1.	Did any factors influence the encounter experience you have just described?
2.	Do you think your experience at that encounter you have just described can be improved? How?
3.	Have you had any negative experience at encounters with other attendees?

Part 3

Conference info
- What is the name of that association conference you just recalled?
- In which city, year, and month did that association conference take place?
- Was that association conference regional, state, national, or international?
- Can you recall approximately how many attendees were at that association conference?
- Why did you attend that association conference?

Basic demographic information
Last, I would like to ask some basic information for debriefing purpose. Your response will be kept confidential.

- Gender: ❑ Male ❑ Female (observed by the interviewer)
- In what year were you born? (Please fill in 4-digit year): __ __ __ __ Year
- Your highest level of education:
    - ❑ High School Graduate or Less
    - ❑ Some College but no Degree
    - ❑Four Year College Degree
    - ❑ Master Degree
    - ❑ Doctoral Degree
    - ❑ Others. Please specify. _____
- What is your ethnic background? _____
- What is your occupation? _____

Appendix B   Codebooks

I. Codebook for Motivations of CCEs

Coding Category	Example
Transient Hedonic Desires	*...it was just in general kind of an interesting and engaging conversation...it is about we spent all day being very professional...I don't remember exactly what topics [we have talked about], but it was non-professional topics.*
Long-Term Instrumental Needs	*And so I really just was doing the, "Get your business cards, talk to people and everything." And honestly that was the first session, those were the only two people I proactively went to and everything is like, ok checking that off my to-do list cause I wasn't entirely comfortable doing that right then.*

II. Codebook for Types of CCEs

Coding Category	Example
Staged CCEs	*And then the other connection we made was over lunch. It was structured in that we were all supposed to eat lunch together but it wasn't structured in that we were going to talk about anything in particular.*
Spontaneous CCEs	*I really like meeting in the hallways because you're like, "oh, you're going to the same place. I've seen you a couple of times. Let's sit together."*
Underground CCEs	*I think probably at one of my major conferences that I go to every April, one of the sub-divisions that I have been very active in, we have social during the conference every year. It is not publicized, it's kind of like underground.*

III. Codebook for Processes

Coding Category	Example
Collaborative Learning	*I was able to, kind of like a sounding board, to bounce ideas to each other because we have different demographics. Sometimes I meet people that have the same [ideas] or are new in the field who came from different fields and have different perspectives. So it was very productive.*
Relationships building	*We kept seeing each other everywhere the whole rest of the conference, since then we become good friends, and so it was almost like a magnet, something put us there, so we can talk.*
Mutual Affirmation	*It was nice to know I was not the only one. I felt like, my thoughts were validated, because other people felt that way.*
	So I felt really good that I could provide a resource to him that he never would have had if he didn't stop at my poster. That felt really great and I thought, "Look, I have a purpose. I'm going to do my research."
Empathetic Resonance	*It felt, it felt good, yeah, I just felt like, I wasn't alone...It really, it is just kind of you know at conference you see someone, you talk to them about that, and it just helped you feel you kind of belong a little bit more to the overall conference, you were not just there on the outside looking at it. So [that feeling] made this conference kind of seem smaller.*

IV. Codebook for Situational Factors at CCEs

Coding Category	Example
Intrapersonal	*I am very outgoing, so I think that helps. I can talk to anybody.*
Interpersonal	*She was just very open and congenial and just friendly person and so it was easy to carry on a longer conversation.* *And we both obviously have passions for hiring and working with students, we shared a lot of stories back and forth about the students we have interacted with…so, it was just really good to get to know that other people are sharing the same passions.*
Structural	*It made it easier to talk once we were out in the hallway. There were lots of people around. In one respect that made it easier because everybody else was doing exactly what we were doing. And so that was, that made it more comfortable.(atmosphere)* *I think it is easier when the room feels inviting, or when there is music playing, just so it is not silent, you are not the person who breaks the silence. I think that is always being helpful.(physical environment)* *It [The conference] is so big. It's hard to meet people because there's just so much going on and anything you attend is so big. So you try to meet people but it's more challenging. It's more detached.(time)* *Certainly, everywhere we go, we have name tags, and titles, so we know if we are going to something in common.(services)*

V. Codebook for Sticky CCEs

Coding Category	Sub-Categories	Example
Extraordinary CCEs	Intensified Emotions	*I think because I was so nervous heading into it, I had a lot of emotional memory with it as well. I remember being nervous. I remembered feeling not lonely, but a little bit isolated because I was going into a situation where I didn't already know anyone.*
	Sparks	*I met a woman at a conference, very sweet, and we hit off right away…our actual interaction that we did talk was very positive and actually good.*
	Surprises	*You know, it was almost like, wow, you do that I do that; you know that, I know that; you know her, I know her too, you know, that kind of … wow, I can't believe this, I mean, magic sounds silly, but it was definitely synergistic where we are just like unexpected, and exciting, and almost surprising.*
Negative CCEs	Attendee B	*A lot of them have to do with presenters, in terms of judging the values of their presentations, and interacting with them based on the questions. (dissatisfying presenters/speakers)*
		And then, people that may just seem fake in general. For me, it is about quality. If I only meet 5 people, but I feel like these 5 people, if I have questions, I can contact, then to me that is a harvest, versus people, some of them were even like colleagues, sometimes it is almost like a number game, like how many hands I shook, I got 15 business cards today, to me it is not reaching out to people actually. So for me, it is always a negative. I almost feel disinterested or disengaged, you just kind of ask a fair amount of questions and move on.(superficial interaction partner)
		It is not even necessarily that I am having a conversation with them. A lot of times in conference settings it is in the hotel, and the

			lobby, the conference area, it is usually inconsiderate behavior. (inappropriate social behavior) *Well I guess there have been instances where you'd be in a small group or even a large group, when it comes to people asking questions that sometimes they would monopolize the session and just want to ask one question after another and be very aggressive. So if they're not sharing the floor, I find that irritating. (monopoly)*
		Social Exclusion	*I don't know if there was a negative experience but one of them, I was the only undergraduate there. It was an academic conference so it was like professors reading their papers out loud and I didn't really talk with too many people there I just sat and listened but I didn't really interact because people there seemed already knew each other. It was not really about networking at all. I wasn't really looking for interactions but it still feels very cold. You feel like people are just interested in learning and maybe talking to people that they already know but not really meeting new people.*
		Energy Drain	*At some point you kind of become overwhelmed by all your options and all the people and all the things that are going on around and you're just kind of like, "I'm done. I need some alone time." So that's the only negative thing I can think about a conference. It's an intense experience and at some point you have to determine where your breaking point is.*
		Controversial Topics	*Generally negative things would be when people, there's sort of an unsettled issue and people are on different sides of it and then when they are going to try and interact with each other, depending on how strongly their convictions are, there can be some conflict there.*

Appendix C   Questionnaire for Quantitative Study

<div align="center">

SCREENING QUESTION

</div>

Are you 18 years or older?
□ Yes   Continue the survey
□ No   End of the survey

Have you participated in any <u>association conferences</u>* in the past **five** years (since **2008**)?
□ Yes   Continue the survey
□ No   End of the survey

*<u>Association conferences</u> refer to events organized by a wide range of associations to meet and exchange views, convey a message, open a debate or give publicity to some area of opinion on a specific issue. These associations include professional or trade associations, social organizations, military organizations, educational organizations, religious organizations, political organizations, fraternal organizations, charity, voluntary associations, and others.

PART I. ASSOCIATION CONFERENCES

Among all types of association conferences you have attended in the past five years (since 2008), which one appears the most vivid to you? If you have participated in this association conference more than once, please refer to your accumulated experiences at that conference and answer the following questions:

1. What is the name of that association conference? _____

2. That association conference was organized by _____

    ☐ Social organizations
    ☐ Military organizations
    ☐ Educational organizations
    ☐ Religious organizations
    ☐ Fraternal organizations
    ☐ Political organizations
    ☐ Professional or trade associations
    ☐ Charity
    ☐ Voluntary organizations
    ☐ Others. Please specify. _____

3. Approximately how many times in total have you attended that association conference in the past five years (since 2008)? _____Time(s)

4. On average, approximately how many attendees attended that association conference?
    a. 0-50
    b. 51-100
    c. 101-250
    d. 251-500
    e. 501-1000
    f. 1000+

5. What is the scale of that association conference?
    a. Regional
    b. National
    c. International
    d. Others, please specify _____

6. In the space below, please specify the major reason(s) for you to attend that association conference.
    _____

PART II. YOUR PAST EXPERIENCES AT ASSOCIATION'S CONFERENCES

The following statements are about your overall interaction experience based on your accumulated experiences at the association conference you have recalled above in the past five years. Please click a number that best describes your level of agreement/disagreement with each of the statements.
1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree

	Strongly Disagree			Neutral			Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. At this conference, I made many new valuable contacts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. At this conference, I had little attachment to other attendees.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. At this conference, I had valuable formal/informal partnerships with some of the conference attendees.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I continue to exchange valuable information, ask/answer questions, etc. with other attendees that I met at this association conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. More than the number of contacts I made at this conference, the most important value of networking was provided through one or two critical contacts.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Overall, the value I received and expected to receive from networking was alone worth the costs of this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The following statements are about the things that you experienced with other attendees at the association conference you have recalled above. Based on your accumulated experiences at that association conference, please click a number that best describes your level of agreement/disagreement with each of the statements.
1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree

	Strongly Disagree			Neutral			Strongly Agree
1. I was reassured about things by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I was told by not to lose courage by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I was perked up or cheered up by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I was given advice in the right direction by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I was lent a friendly ear by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I was shown understanding by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Other attendees at this conference sympathized with me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I was given information or advice by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I felt at ease by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I was treated friendly by other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I felt I can rely on other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

<u>**PART III. YOUR SELF-VIEW AT THIS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE**</u>

This section refers to the association conference you have recalled above.

Imagine that one of the circles at the left in each row represents your own self-definition or identity and the other circle at the right represents the identity of the conference group. Please indicate which case (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, or H) best describes the levels of overlap between your own identity and the identity of the conference group: _____

Me   The conference group

A	○ ○	Far Apart
B	○○	Close Together but Separate
C	⊙⊙	Very Small Overlap
D	⊙⊙	Small Overlap
E	⊙⊙	Moderate Overlap
F	◉	Large Overlap
G	◉	Very Large Overlap
H	○	Complete Overlap

The following statements are about how you felt about yourself based on your overall interactions with other attendees at the association conference you have recalled above. Please click a number that best describes your level of agreement/disagreement with each of the statements.
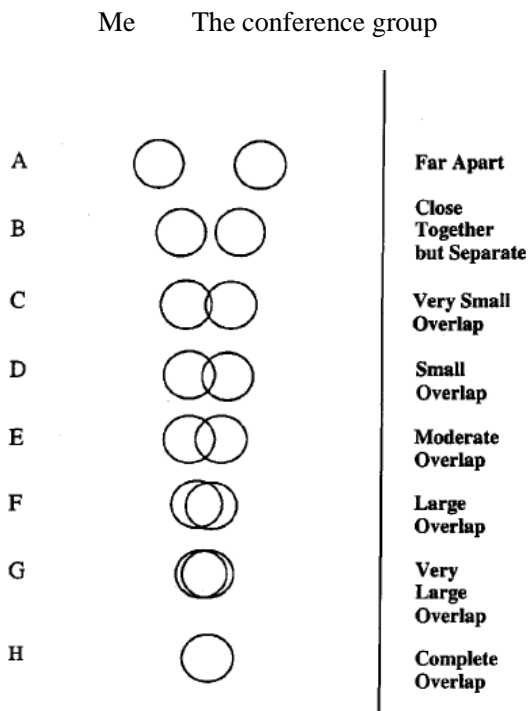*1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree*

	Strongly Disagree		Neutral			Strongly Agree	
1. I believe I am similar to other attendees at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I perceive an overlap between my self-identity and the attendees of this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Strongly Disagree		Neutral			Strongly Agree	
1. I was emotionally attached to the attendees of this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

2. I felt a sense of belongingness to the attendees of this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I was happy to spend time with the attendees of this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I enjoyed discussing the attendees of this conference with people outside it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. The attendees of this conference have a great deal of personal meaning for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Strongly Disagree			Neutral			Strongly Agree
1. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt confident about my abilities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt that other attendees respected and admired me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt as smart as others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt good about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt confident that I understood things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Based on my interactions with other attendees at this conference, I felt aware of myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

PART IV. YOUR OVERALL CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

The following statements are about your accumulated experience at the association conference you have recalled above and your future behavior. Please click a number that best describes your level of agreement/disagreement with each of the statements.
1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree

	Strongly Disagree		Neutral				Strongly Agree
1. Attending this conference made me feel differently about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Attending this conference made me feel more positive about myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. My experience at this conference was new.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I truly enjoyed the experience at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. The experience at this conference tested my limits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. The experience at this conference was beyond words.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I feel like I was having the ideal conference experience.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I learned new things as a result of my experience at this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. This conference felt like part of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I would like to have similar conference experience again.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. The experience at this conference was emotionally intense.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I still remember the feelings I had during this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. My total attention was on the conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Because of the experience at this conference, I have confidence in myself that I didn't have before I attended this conference.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

PART V. YOUR BASIC INFORMATION

1. Gender: ❑ Male ❑ Female

2. In what year were you born? (Please fill in 4-digit year): __ __ __ __Year

3. Your highest level of education:
❑ High School Graduate or Less
❑ Some College but no Degree
❑ Four Year College
❑ Master Degree
❑ Doctoral Degree
❑ Others, please specify_____.

4. Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?
❑ Caucasian
❑ African American
❑ Hispanic
❑ Asian or Pacific Islander
❑ Native American
❑ Others. Please specify_____.

5. What is your occupation?

6. Compared to other attendees, you perceive yourself more as a _____ at the associate conference you have recalled above:
❑ Newcomer
❑ Veteran

Thank you!

VITA

VITA

Wei Wei
School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
Purdue University

EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy, Hospitality and Tourism Management   Expected May 2015
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA
Dissertation: *"Modeling the Experiences of Customer-Customer Encounters in Event Tourism"*
GPA: 3.95/4.00

Master of Science, Hospitality and Tourism Management   May 2010
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA
Thesis: *"The Influence of Self-Construal and Co-Consumption Others on Consumer Complaining Behavior"*
GPA: 4.00/4.00

Bachelor of Arts, Tourism Management   June 2008
Northwest University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China
Thesis: *"Incentive Management of International Hotel Companies in China: A Case Study of Accor"*

AWARDS, RECOGNITIONS, AND CERTIFICATES

Outstanding HTM Ph.D. Student Award   2013
School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University

Coca Cola Special Interest Topic Best Paper Award   2013
18th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Seattle, Washington, USA

Title: *Consumers' pro-environmental behavior and its determinants in the lodging segment*

Beulah Gillaspie Outstanding Master's Student Award Nomination   2010
College of Consumer and Family Sciences, Purdue University

Certificate of Recognition of Excellent Service   2009
Purdue Graduate Student Government, Purdue University

Recognition of Excellent Service 2009
Purdue University Chinese Student & Scholars Association (PUCSSA),
Purdue University

RESEARCH

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Primary Research Interests:

- Consumer behavior and psychology in hospitality service encounters
- Meeting and events management

Secondary Research Interests:

- Cross-cultural studies in hospitality service encounters
- Consumers' sustainability behavior when travelling

REFEREED JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS

1. Cai, L.A., **Wei, W.,** Lu, Y., & Day, J. (2015). College students' decision-making for study abroad – Anecdotes from a U.S. hospitality and tourism internship program in China. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism,* doi:10.1080/15313220.2014.999735.

2. **Wei, W.,** Miao, L., & Huang, Z.W. (2013). Customer engagement behaviors and hotel responses. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 33,* 316-330.

3. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2013). Effects of calorie information disclosure on consumers' food choices at restaurants. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 33,* 106-117.

4. Miao, L., & **Wei, W.** (2013). Consumers' pro-environmental behavior and the underlying motivations: A comparison between household and hotel settings. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 32*, 102-112.

5. Miao, L., & **Wei, W.** (2013). Consumers' pro-environmental behavior and its determinants in the lodging segment. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research,* doi:10.1177/1096348013495699.

6. Miao, L., Lehto, X.Y., & **Wei, W.** (2014). The hedonic experience of travel-related consumption. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 23*(2), 99-121.

7. **Wei, W.,** Miao, L., Cai, L.A., & Adler, H. (2012). The influence of self-construal and co-consumption others on consumer complaining behavior. *International Journal of Hospitality Managem*ent, *31*(3), 764-771.

RESEARCH-IN-PROGRESS

1. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L., Cai, L.A., & Adler, H. Modeling the experiences of customer-customer encounters in event tourism. *Target for International*

Journal of Hospitality Management.

2. **Wei, W.,** Lu, Y., & Cai, L.A. Conventions going paperless: the power of social media technology – Anecdotes from convention attendees. *Target for Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research.*

3. Lu, Y., **Wei, W.,** & Swanson, J., Getz, D. Attendee behavioral differences and perceived ROI at small-scale versus large-scale meetings: A comparison and implications for the hospitality industry. *Target for International Journal of Hospitality Management.*

REFEREED CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Stand-Up Presentations:

1. **Wei, W.,** Lu, Y., & Swanson, J., Getz, D. (2014). Attendee behavioral differences and perceived ROI at small-scale versus large-scale meetings: A comparison and implications for the hospitality industry. Proceedings of the 19th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Houston, Texas USA, Jan. 3-5.

2. **Wei, W.,** Lu, Y., & Cai, L.A. (2013). Conventions going paperless: the power of social media technology – Anecdotes from convention attendees. Proceedings of 11th Asia-Pacific Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, Macau, China, May 21-24.

3. Miao, L., & **Wei, W.** (2013). Consumers' pro-environmental behavior and its determinants in the lodging segment. Proceedings of the 18th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Seattle, Washington USA, Jan. 3-5. **Best Paper Award. $250.**

4. **Wei, W.,** Miao, L., & Huang, Z.W. (2012). Customer engagement behaviors and hotel responses. Proceedings of International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, Providence, Rhode Island USA, August 1-4.

5. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2011). The effects of calorie information disclosure on consumers' food choices. Proceedings of 9th Asia-Pacific Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, Hong Kong, China, June 2-5.

6. Cai, L.A., **Wei, W.,** Lu, Y., & Day, J. (2011). How do U.S. college students decide to study abroad? A decision-making framework. Proceedings of 9th Asia-Pacific Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, Hong Kong, China, June 2-5.

7. Miao, L., Lehto, X.Y., & **Wei, W.** (2011). The hedonic experience of travel-related consumption. Proceedings of International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, Denver, Colorado USA, July 27-30.

8. **Wei, W.,** Huang, Z.W., & Miao, L. (2011). Motivation and attitude – An exploration of customer online complaining behavior. Proceedings of the 16th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Houston, Texas USA, Jan. 6-8.

9. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2010). Consumer's pro-environmental behavior and the underlying motivations: A comparison between household and hotel settings.

Proceedings of International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, San Juan, Puerto Rico USA, July 28-31.

10. **Wei, W.,** Miao, L., Cai, L.A., & Adler, H. (2010). The influence of self-construal and co-consumption others on consumer complaining behavior. Proceedings of the 15th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Washington, D.C., USA, Jan. 7-9.

Poster Presentations:

1. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2014). Why do people meet? Uncover the experiences of customer-customer encounters (CCEs) at conferences. Proceedings of the 19th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Houston, Texas USA, Jan. 3-5.

2. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2013). The impacts of customer-to-customer interactions (CCIs) on convention experiences and behavioral intention: A social identity perspective. Proceedings of International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, St. Louis, Missouri USA, July 24-27.

3. Quinteros, D.A., **Wei, W.,** & Lu, Y. (2013). Loyalty towards online travel agents: Antecedents of e-loyalty. Proceedings of International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, St. Louis, Missouri USA, July 24-27.

4. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2013). The impact of customer-to-customer interactions (CCIs) on hospitality experiences. Proceedings of the 18th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Seattle, Washington USA, Jan. 3-5.

5. **Wei, W.,** & Miao, L. (2012). An exploration of the experiential nature of convention experience. Proceedings of the 17th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Auburn, Atlanta USA, Jan. 5-7.

6. **Wei, W.,** Miao, L., & Adler, H. (2010). An investigation of consumers' pro-environmental behaviors and underlying motivations in a hospitality setting. Proceedings of the 15th Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Washington, D.C., USA, Jan. 7-9.

CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

Co-presented with Professor Liping A. Cai on "Are We Ready for the Red Dragon?" at the Conference of International Society of Travel and Tourism Educators, Cruise on the Carnival Paradise from Los Angeles, Oct. 18-22, 2010.

RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP

Graduate Research Assistant   January 2012 – May 2012
                                        January 2009 – December 2011
Dr. Li Miao, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University
Assisted in idea generation, literature review, design of online and paper-and-pencil questionnaires, data collection and analysis, preparation of paper submission to

academic refereed journals.

Completed Projects:
- Consumers' Pro-Environmental Behaviors and Underlying Motivations
- The Hedonic Experience of Travel-Related Consumption
- Nutrition Labeling and Food Choices
- Customer Engagement Behavior

TEACHING

TEACHING INTERESTS

- Service management
- Lodging management
- Human resources management
- Meeting and events management
- Tourism management

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Instructor   Spring 2014
Purdue University
Introduction to Tourism HTM 17300, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
Class size: 59 students

Graduate Instructor   Spring 2013
Purdue University
Introduction to Tourism HTM 17300, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
Class size: 37 students

EMBA Course Instructor Team Member and Translator
                                         Fall 2011/Fall 2012/Fall 2013

Purdue University
Knowledge Management: *facilitate a four-day course for 30-40 Executive MBA students from South China University of Technology*

Class Coordinator and Academic Advisor   2011 - present
Purdue University
Sponsored Internship and Study Abroad in China Program
International Special Topics HTM39800: *supervise interns to complete a hotel consulting project upon their completion of a hotel internship*

Guest Lecturer
- On-campus lectures
University of Kentucky, KY   Apr. 4, 2013

Service Management HMT 395, Retailing and Tourism Management
Topic: Consumer complaining behavior and management responses

Purdue University, IN   Dec. 4, 2012
Lodging Management HTM 181, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
Topic: Special resorts: cruise ships and casinos

University of Kentucky, KY   Oct. 11, 2011
Advanced Seminar in Lodging and Tourism HMT 460, Retailing and Tourism
Management
Topic: Consumer complaining behavior

- Distance Education using **Adobe Connect software**
University of Kentucky, KY   Nov. 19, 2013
Service Management HMT 359, Retailing and Tourism Management
Topic: Why do customers complain and how?

University of Kentucky, KY   Nov. 15, 2011
Advanced Seminar in Lodging and Tourism HMT 460, Retailing and Tourism
Management
*Topic: Meeting and events management: Customer-to-customer interactions at
conventions*

Graduate Teaching Assistant   August 2009 – December 2010
Dr. Li Miao, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University
Courses: HTM 181 – Lodging Management
         HTM 381 – Lodging Management II
         HTM 382 – Lodging Service Management
Responsibilities:
- Evaluated students' progress
- Provided feedback via various channels, such as Blackboard, emails, and one-to-one meetings
- Assisted in class administration

Grader   August 2009 – May 2010
Dr. Tiantian Qin, Department of Statistics, Purdue University
Course: STAT 503 – Statistical Methods for Biology
Responsibilities:
- Graded assignments and quizzes
- Enhanced students' understanding of subject matter by answering students' questions via emails

Proctor   September 2008 – January 2009
Center for Instructional Excellence, Purdue University

Responsibilities:
- Prepared and collected exam papers and answer sheets
- Monitored student behavior during exams

SERVICES

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Professional Membership
- Hotel Human Resources Association of Central Florida (HHRA) 2014-present
- International Council on Hotel, Restaurant & Institutional Education   2013
- International Council on Hotel, Restaurant & Institutional Education   2012
- International Society of Travel & Tourism Educators   2010

Reviewer
- International Journal of Hospitality Management
- Cornell Hospitality Quarterly
- International Journal of Hospitality and Event Management
- Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management
- Journal of China Tourism Research
- Journal of Sustainable Tourism
- International Council on Hotel, Restaurant & Institutional Education (I-CHRIE)
- Annual Graduate Student Conference in Hospitality and Tourism Conference
- TOSOK International Tourism Conference

Conference Moderator
- International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education, St. Louis, Missouri USA   July 27, 2013

SCHOOL SERVICES

Student Organization Services
- **Vice President**, HTM Graduate Student Association, Purdue University
- **HTM Senator**, Purdue Graduate Students Government, Purdue University
- **Treasurer**, HTM Graduate Student Association, Purdue University
- **Member,** HTM Graduate Student Association, Purdue University

UNIVERSITY SERVICES

Student Services
- **Leader of Catering Service**, Career Fair Committee, Purdue Graduate Student Government, Purdue University
- **Coordinator and Performer,** Spring Festival Gala, Purdue University Chinese Student & Scholars Association (PUCSSA), Purdue University

- **Facilitator**, Grad Expo, Purdue University

International Affairs and Services
- **Translation Assistant**, International Program, Purdue University
- **Moderator**, International Students Orientation, Purdue University
- **Volunteer**, International Center, Purdue University

COMMUNITY SERVICES

- Crosswalk Project, West Lafayette, Indiana
- Furniture Give-away Event, Lafayette, Indiana
- Amazing Race for International Adoption, West Lafayette, Indiana
- "Dancing in the Street" Festival, Great Lafayette Community, Indiana
- Feast of the Hunter's Moon Festival, Lafayette, Indiana
- Hilton Garden-Inn Hotel Soft Opening, Chicago, Illinois

INDUSTRY OUTREACH

Program coordinator, College of Health and Human Sciences, Purdue University

August 2012 – present

January 2011 – May 2011

- ***Coordinated a Six-Month Sponsored Internship and Study Abroad in China Program,*** including liaising with hotel executives, promoting the program by co-organizing campus-wide and college-wide study abroad fairs and career fairs, recruiting interns, conducting interviews, planning orientations, escorting interns to China, facilitating interns' initial life and work experience in China, advising interns' hotel consulting projects, and providing counsel for cultural and work-related concerns.

- ***Co-organized 2011, 2012, and 2013 Executive Development Program for an EMBA delegation from South China University of Technology (SCUT),*** including preparing the bilingual program packet, co-interpreting the four-day Knowledge Management class, giving formal presentation on Purdue University, facilitating the interactions between the delegation and government officials, leaders and local entrepreneurs, coordinating activities including campus tours, field trips to the local community, meetings and banquets, and providing other assistance during the delegation's stay.

- ***Assisted with a hotel consulting project of SCHOTEL Hotel Company*** "hotel employees' satisfaction and generation Y's characteristics in the workplace", including assistance with the literature review and the Chinese–English translation.

- ***Co-hosted visiting scholars and hotel executives,*** including assisting in their interactions with professors, students, government officials and local

entrepreneurs by organizing seminars, coordinating events and tours, translating, and providing assistance with housing, daily needs and adjustment to American cultures during their stay.

Foreign Affairs office, Shaanxi Province Government, Xi'an, China   2010
- Interpreted correspondences between the Embassy of Belgium and the Shaanxi Province Governor
- Coordinated and facilitated negotiation between the Foreign Affair Office and Foreign Government Delegates

Accor, Sofitel Hotel, Xi'an, China   2008
- Surpassed sales goals through wine up-selling and gained extensive wine knowledge
- Demonstrated commitment to meeting customers' needs and practiced suggestive selling techniques
- Provided quality services at an upscale bar that attracted a diverse international clientele
- Learned strategy and advanced customer service techniques at weekly trainin meetings

B&Q Furniture Supermarket, Customer Service Department, Xi'an, China   2006
- Improved understanding of customers by conducting surveys regarding products and services
- Performed communication skills through dealing with customers' feedback and complaints
- Collaborated with on-site technicians to effectively serve customers

Oriental Hotel, Xi'an, China   2005
- Developed interpersonal skills by providing individualized customer service in both a western restaurant and a convention center