

1 Introduction

Business tourism is a major segment of the international tourism market and of economic significance to many countries worldwide. Of total international arrivals in 2005, 16% (125 million trips) were attributable to business tourism (WTO, 2006). However, despite its economic importance, neither business tourism nor the meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) industry has been particularly well researched or documented in recent years. Moreover, existing research on the MICE sector has focused predominantly on the supply side, in particular on convention destination competitiveness, and in areas such as economic impacts. It appears that the conference market is being defined primarily from the supply-side, with little attention being paid to individual conference delegates and their needs and wants. Research within this latter area offers an opportunity to advance knowledge in the domain of conference and business tourism.

Association conferences are those based around organised and structured groups of people who have similar interests (McCabe, Poole, Weeks and Leiper, 2000) and are an increasingly important market for business tourism destinations. Within the context of this research, the defining facet of the association conference market is that, for the most part, attendance is largely discretionary from the attendee's perspective. The authors acknowledge that, in some instances, delegates may attend as a result of a business decision by their company to send them. However, it is argued that association conference delegates have a much higher degree of discretion in attendance than within

the corporate conference sector, where attendance is often encouraged, if not dictated, by the employer. This discretionary element, which Oppermann and Chon (1997:179) refer to as “freedom of choice”, arguably lends the association conference segment greater similarities with leisure travellers as regards the decision-making process undertaken by conference delegates in choosing to attend an association conference. It is precisely this process which the paper seeks to investigate, hypothesising and testing a model of the decision making process of UK association conference attendees. The paper aims to adapt existing models of leisure tourism decision-making to the conference context. A model of the UK association conference attendance decision-making process is subsequently proposed, identifying those components which appear to be most important in the decision-making process. The components of the model are further analyzed to ascertain the extent to which they are significant predictors of the likelihood of delegates attending the same conference again in the future.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Decision-Making in Tourism

A number of models have been developed and tested within the tourism literature in an attempt to explain the decision to make a leisure trip to a particular destination (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Moutinho, 1987; Schmoll, 1977; Van Raaij and Francken, 1984; Wahab et al., 1976). Examination of these models shows a common thread of five stages considered to constitute the decision-making process. Although they vary slightly from model to model, the stages can broadly be identified as motivation, information

search, evaluation of alternatives, decision and post-decision behaviour. Given the issues of discretionary attendance and freedom of choice, the research set out with the hypothesis that consumer behaviour displayed by delegates attending an association conference displays significant similarities with the behaviour of leisure tourists when deciding to take a holiday. However, further scrutiny of the stages of the leisure tourist decision making models suggests that, although these models have relevance to behaviour displayed within the association conference context, sufficient distinctions exist to justify the proposal of a separate model explaining the decision making behaviour of association conference delegates. For example, with regard to the initial motivation to travel, the stimulus or motivation to attend a conference is likely to be the receipt of an association mailing or a call for papers for the forthcoming event, or perhaps from word of mouth. This differs from the leisure tourism context, where there is a much wider range of potential stimuli, including marketing messages from destinations, a “felt need” to travel or escape (Mathieson & Wall 1982), or a recommendation from a reference group to travel to a particular location, amongst others.

Similarly, the information search stage of the decision-making process in a conference context, and particularly in an association conference context, is likely to differ, depending on how the potential attendee first learned about the conference. Where an association mailing has been received, it is likely that very little further information will be sought since the association mailing will normally contain all the information that the potential delegate might require, such as conference topic and programme, details of guest speakers, accommodation and travel information. However, where the stimulus to

attend an association conference has been the receipt of a call for papers or information received by word of mouth, a more detailed information search may be required. Even so, it is still likely that the information search will consist of little more than an examination of the association website, which is likely to contain all the supply side information that a potential delegate might need in order to decide whether or not to attend the conference.

The evaluation of alternatives stage in the leisure tourism context usually applies to deciding which of many alternative destinations or products will ultimately be selected for a vacation. When considering the conference attendance process, evaluating alternatives may be taken to refer not to deciding which of many conferences to attend, in a similar vein to the way the tourists decide which of many destinations to attend (although this may be the case on occasion), but rather to decide whether or not to attend the conference based on a variety of factors. These may include the “pull” factors of a conference such as an attractive location, or an interesting conference topic, but may also include “push” factors such as getting away from the office for a while. These are similar to the ideas of “pull” and “push” suggested by Dann (1977). In addition, the issue of situational constraints such as having the time and money to attend the conference come into play, and also the question of intervening issues such as a date clash with a family holiday have to be taken into account.

By contrast, the decision stage and the post-purchase or post-decision stage are arguably less likely to differ within the conference context than the other three stages. A decision will be taken as the outcome of the process regardless of whether it is a decision to attend

a conference or not, or a decision to travel on holiday or not. With reference to post-decision behaviour, it seems reasonable to consider that similar issues will affect post-decision behaviour in both the conference and the leisure context. For example, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the outcome of attendance is likely to influence future conference attendance, in the same way that satisfaction with a holiday is thought to influence future holiday making behaviour. Thus, although the individual components of some of the above stages may be different for the leisure and the association conference contexts, the potential conference delegate is nonetheless considered to move through the same stages as the leisure traveller in deciding whether or not to attend an association conference. Thus, a proposed model of the UK Association Conference Attendance Decision-Making Process is illustrated in Figure 1. INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

As part of this hypothesised behavioural model, the evaluation of alternatives stage represents a good opportunity to examine factors that play an important role in the UK association conference attendance decision-making process, as it is during this stage that the benefits or otherwise of attending a conference are assessed. The following section of the paper reviews the extent to which these factors have been identified and empirically tested within the existing literature. The paper subsequently reports on the results of empirical testing of the evaluation of alternatives stage of the hypothesised model.

2.2 Conference Attendance Motivation

A number of papers have examined the drivers of delegate attendance at association conferences, both international and domestic and both similarities and differences can be identified in their approach and findings. An analysis of the literature reveals several categories that are useful in determining a conceptual framework for research into conference delegate motivations. These are discussed below, but also summarised in Table 1. Notwithstanding the fact that the various studies have investigated different types of conference (some international and some regional for example), communalities can be identified within the areas of location, cost, networking, social aspects, intervening opportunities, conference/association activities and personal and professional development. Other factors appear in individual studies only and are thus not considered to be widely generalisable.

One of the underlying dimensions of association conference attendance that appears to be in little doubt is *location*. All studies into attendance motivation have uncovered a locational dimension. Early work by Var, Cesario and Mauser (1985) concluded that location was the key aspect, noting that “accessibility and attractiveness constitute by far the most important element in conference venue decisions” (Var et al. 1985, p 197). They conclude that the combined effects of emissiveness (individual differences in choice behaviour), attractiveness and accessibility give rise to a particular level of attendance at each conference.

Witt, Sykes and Dartus (1995) equally identify location as an important factor, although one of the prime conclusions reached is that “the intrinsic characteristics of a conference

city/country and a particular conference theme do not usually have a major impact on the proportion of association members attending the annual conference; it is only when the destination is particularly 'interesting' or 'exotic' that conference attendance is likely to be stimulated" (p 568). This suggests that destination attractiveness has a role to play in the decision to attend an association conference. A similar location factor was also identified by Jago and Deery (2005, p33), who propose that the location of the conference is often chosen by associations to be "interesting, exotic, safe, accessible and accepting of all types of delegates". Again, this highlights the dual nature of a location factor – it represents both attractiveness and accessibility. INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

A location factor was also identified by Oppermann and Chon (1997) as having a bearing in several ways on the decision whether or not to attend a conference. For example, a potential attendee may consider more favourably a conference that is taking place near his home – it will save on costs and travelling time. Conferences that take place in more accessible areas, such as city centres or near airports, are also likely to attract more people. The climate of the conference location may also be important, if it is an international event. Finally, according to Oppermann and Chon (1997), the image of the location chosen by the conference organisers may be vital in determining attendance levels (*cf* Witt et al. 1995 who state that only if a destination was perceived to be particularly exotic will this stimulate attendance at a conference). This again provides further support not just for a location factor but for that factor to be composed of both destination attractiveness and accessibility. Expanding on work by Oppermann and Chon (1997), Zhang, Leung and Qu (2007) propose amending the original location factor to include two dimensions – the attractiveness of the destination and the accessibility of the destination, however, as yet no empirical basis exists for this division.

Further work by Rittichainuwat, Beck and Lalopa (2001), investigates not only the factors considered to be motivators but also those factors which may inhibit attendance and those that facilitate attendance. They identify a motivational factor, labelled ‘sightseeing’ – this included attributes such as travelling to desirable places, outdoor recreation and a change of pace. This is clearly linked to destination attractiveness. However, they also identify a factor which they suggest facilitates conference attendance - distance and ease of access (short distance and easy access). This is conceptually linked to the idea of destination accessibility, but Rittichainuwat

et al. (2001) do not consider this to be a motivational item in itself, but rather a facilitator, something that will make it easier for a delegate to attend a conference. Their findings arose from a study of an international conference, and it may be assumed that for a different kind of conference (for example a domestic association conference) several of their factors or dimensions would be of much lesser relevance (for example, sightseeing, and distance and ease of access). Nonetheless, location is important in their findings.

Severt et al. (2007) also uncovered two factors that relate to the location of a conference, which they term 'activities and opportunities' and 'convenience of the conference'. The activities and opportunities factor includes travel opportunities and visiting friends and relatives, whilst the convenience of the conference factor has variables such as reasonable travel time to conference and distance to conference loading on it. Their findings do not split evenly into destination attractiveness and destination accessibility and thus throw into question the components of any location factor. In summary, location appears to be one of the key drivers of the decision to attend an association conference and may be composed of a combination of destination attractiveness and destination accessibility.

A further motivation dimension which has been widely confirmed is *networking*. The majority of papers on the subject consider networking opportunities to be an important aspect of any decision to attend an association conference. The conceptual framework outlined by Witt et al. (1995) suggests that networking is an important dimension, as does that of Oppermann and Chon (1997). They suggest that personal interaction with other like-minded people, keeping up with changes in their field and

learning new skills are all part of networking, although they term their factor 'Association/Conference Factors' (Oppermann and Chon 1997). Networking is also identified by Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) as a conference attendance motivator and is placed in a 'self-enhancement' factor that also includes career enhancement and leadership enhancement.

Networking and social events were found to be of particular importance by Jago and Deery (2005) perhaps due to the fact that, in their opinion, most delegates are now time-poor and thus profit from the opportunity to network and investigate the potential for new collaborations and business offered by such conferences. This provides further evidence for the importance of networking in the conference attendance decision.

Finally in their study, Severt et al. (2007) also uncovered a networking factor. However, the relevance of some of the attributes loading on this factor (networking, employer funded, job opportunities and escape from routine) may be questioned, since the relationship appears tenuous. Thus, this factor has arguably been misleadingly labelled. Certainly, the high loading of the networking attribute on this factor (0.67) suggests that networking is an aspect of this underlying dimension, but the other attributes appear to be related more to career and destination. Nonetheless, it is clear that networking plays an important role in the decision to attend an association conference and it may be argued that any framework intending to reflect the association conference attendance decision-making process should include reference to networking.

One further dimension that is likely to figure in the attendance decision is the *cost* factor. This is of particular relevance to the association market, as delegates are often required to contribute to their attendance, or even to entirely finance their attendance, where not required to attend by their employer. This is linked to the fact (mentioned above) that attendance at association conferences is often discretionary.

Cost is suggested to be an influencing factor by at least four previous studies. Witt et al. (1995) specifically mention budget constraints including travel costs and conference fees, but it seems clear that the costs incurred by a delegate may be greater than simply the cost of transport and the conference. For example, the cost of accommodation and other expenses must also be taken into account. Oppermann and Chon (1997) include cost as part of the personal/business dimension and relate this to the financial status of the delegate - funding is highlighted as an important part of the decision to attend.

Zhang et al. (2007) expand on the work of Oppermann and Chon (1997) but argue that financial cost and opportunity cost belong together, within a total cost factor. However, Zhang et al.'s (2007) theorised model has yet to be tested empirically. Meanwhile, Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) identify cost as a determinant of attendance, along with time and distance. They also suggested that 'affordability and availability of time' (conference costs, transport costs and funding from employers) is an underlying dimension that facilitates conference attendance. This is further confirmation of the importance of the cost and funding aspect of the attendance decision.

Severt et al. (2007) did not find a cost factor *per se*. However, items relating to the cost of the conference and funding for delegates loaded on three of the factors which emerged from their research. ‘Deals on the conference package’ loaded on their product and deals factor, ‘conference is reasonably priced’ loaded on their convenience of conference factor and ‘employer funded’ loaded on their networking factor (already suggested to be a misleading factor label). It can therefore be argued that attributes relating to the cost of the conference are likely to play a role in the conference attendance decision. In summary, it can be argued that any conceptual framework for the conference attendance decision-making process should include reference to the location of the conference, the networking opportunities available and the cost of the conference.

Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) suggested that there are three underlying dimensions that facilitate conference attendance. These are stated to be ‘affordability and availability of time’, already discussed in relation to cost, ‘distance and ease of access’ (mentioned under location) and ‘family’ / spouse (family permission, spouse and / or guest program). This last issue, of the *social aspects* of attending a conference, is one that has been afforded very little attention, but nonetheless may potentially form part of the attendance decision. Witt et al. (1995) consider that participating in recreational activities plays a role in the decision-making process of attending a conference, and Jago and Deery (2005) found that social events played an important role in delegate motivations. Severt et al. (2007) did not find a social aspects factor, but they did include spouse, family and guest programs under their Activities and Opportunities factor. Thus, the evidence for including a social aspects factor in a conceptual framework is perhaps more limited than for location, cost and networking, but the fact

that it has emerged from previous studies argues for its inclusion in a hypothesised model of the association conference attendance decision making process.

Another area where the literature is divided is that of *intervening opportunities*.

Intervening opportunities is identified as a separate issue by Oppermann and Chon (1997). This may refer to other conferences that are taking place, perhaps in a more attractive location, or with better speakers. The timing of a conference is also mentioned, as schedule overlaps and conflicts are the second most important reason for not attending a convention (Oppermann 1995). Var et al. (1985) also note that date clashes with other conferences may account for differences in attendance patterns at different conferences. Intervening opportunities may also be other ways of spending the time that are in competition with the conference, such as a family holiday, or spending time at home doing DIY. Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) also mention family as a facilitator of attendance, suggesting that getting permission from one's family to attend the conference does have a bearing on the attendance decision, with refusal resulting in non-attendance. Oppermann and Chon (1997) point out that, not only must conferences compete against each other for attendees, but they must also compete against other products such as leisure holidays. In summary, intervening opportunities are anything that might get in the way of the conference attendance. It seems pertinent to consider those alternatives to attending a conference, and therefore an intervening opportunities factor is proposed for this study.

There is some confusion as to the composition of the next two factors reported by several authors (see Table 1), i.e. 'conference/association activities' and 'self enhancement' or 'personal/ professional development'. Careful examination of the

items and attributes that load on these two factors suggest that in fact they are closely linked.

The association/conference factors identified by Oppermann and Chon (1997) relate to the involvement of the individual with the association concerned. Some people are members of several associations and organisations and, in the absence of an unlimited budget, must rank their preferences in order if they are to decide which if any conference to attend. Additionally, some conferences have more prestigious speakers than others and this will influence the decision of whether or not to attend. Other factors which may influence the potential attendee include personal interaction with other like-minded people, keeping up with changes in their field and learning new skills (Oppermann and Chon 1997). These factors seem to represent an area of the decision-making process which may be termed personal and/or professional development.

The framework put forward by Witt et al. (1995) includes obtaining information, hearing speakers and presenting papers as motivating attributes. This is more related to the personal and professional development idea than to the idea of being involved with the association holding the conference. Meanwhile, Rittichainuwat et al. (2001) include a factor which they name 'business and conference activities', with attributes such as an interesting conference program, business activities and association-related activities loading on it. They also identified a separate factor, 'self enhancement', which included career enhancement, leadership enhancement, networking, education and esteem enhancement. Some aspects of their 'business and conference factor' are similar to those identified by Witt et al. (1995) and Oppermann and Chon (1997),

such as association related activities and an interesting program. However, their ‘self enhancement’ factor is more closely related to the personal/professional development area.

The ‘activities and opportunities’ factor uncovered by Severt et al. (2007) bears similarities to the Oppermann and Chon (1997) ‘association/conference’ factor, including as it does association-related activities and business activities. Their ‘networking’ factor also includes job opportunities, arguably a reference to personal and/or professional development. The ‘education benefits’ factor mentioned by Severt et al. (2007) which includes interesting program, career enhancement and educational purposes also shares some similarities with the ‘association/conference’ factor of Oppermann and Chon (1997) which includes references to a desire to learn and professional advancement. The item statements used by Severt et al. (2007) are in many respects similar to those selected by other authors researching this field, but appear to load on to unrelated dimensions, possibly as a result of the particular conference that they surveyed, however limitations to the generalisability of their results are also suggested. In summary, however, the attributes and items that relate to the factors that have been identified as either conference and association activities or personal and professional development are very similar, and it appears to be a matter of interpretation as to how these items can be meaningfully structured. It is proposed, therefore, that there should be one factor, named *Personal and Professional Development* that will encompass both the association and conference related items as well as those that relate to personal and professional development.

In conclusion, a close examination of the available literature in this field has suggested that there are dimensions of attendance motivation which have been shown to be constant across different association conference contexts and which are hypothesised to underpin the conference attendance decision making process at the evaluation of alternatives stage. These are argued to be ‘location’, ‘cost’, ‘networking opportunities’, ‘social aspects’, ‘personal and professional development’ and ‘intervening opportunities’ and these will form the conceptual framework for the UK association conference attendance decision-making process . Thus the purpose of the paper is both to propose an adaptation of the existing models of leisure tourism decision making to the conference context, drawing on the literature available in the business events area and to refine and empirically test the evaluation of alternatives section of this proposed model. This paper seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the existing body of tourism consumer behaviour literature, by examining the relevance of the traditional models of tourist decision-making to the association conference context, and also seeks to contribute to the business events and association conference literature by clarifying the underlying factors of importance in the delegate attendance decision. The hypothesised model of the UK association conference attendance decision-making process is illustrated in Figure 1. Following clarification of the number and nature of factors exerting an influence at the evaluation of alternatives stage, the hypothesis that one or more of these factors predict future conference attendance will be tested.

3 Methodology

In order to fill in some of the gaps in the original conceptual framework, as well as to triangulate and validate the key concepts that had arisen from the literature review, a series of short, structured interviews were initially held with conference professionals in Scotland. The outcome of these interviews was a series of additional attributes that, together with those uncovered by the literature review, were hypothesised to influence the evaluation of alternatives in deciding to attend an association conference. The findings fed into a larger scale survey of conference attendees, discussed below, whose purpose was to confirm and further investigate the factors of significance in the decision to attend association conferences.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

A questionnaire was devised with two 7-point Likert-type scales, measuring the importance of attributes affecting the association conference attendance decision making process. The items in the scale consisted of the attributes hypothesised to contribute to the six dimensions that make up the evaluation of alternatives stage of the association conference decision making model. Two lists of attributes were included in the questionnaire. These items were drawn from the literature and from preliminary interviews. One set was hypothesised to represent the ‘determinant’ items or pull factors, and the other to correspond to the ‘goal driven’ or push factors. The scale ran from “extremely unimportant” to “extremely important” and included a non-response option.

3.2 Characteristics of Sample

After a pilot study, the questionnaire was distributed to 1400 delegates at six UK association conferences during the Spring and Summer of 2003. The conferences surveyed were held by the Law Society of Scotland, the Royal College of Radiologists, the Tourism Society, British & Irish Law Librarians Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association. The response rate was relatively poor at 15.6% with only 220 usable questionnaires being returned. However, response rates differed greatly between the six conferences, the lowest being 4% (the Law Society) and the highest 52% (Tourism Society). The sample suffered from a gender imbalance of 36.1% men and 63.9% women, due chiefly to the fact that one of the conferences surveyed was held by the association of a female dominated profession (Royal College of Nursing). Thus, the sample was representative of the population of attendees at the conferences surveyed. With regard to the age profile of the sample, 95.9% of respondents were aged between 25 and 44 years old. The vast majority of respondents were of an age where they were likely to be working, with only 3.2% of the sample being of retirement age and above. The majority of respondents had not attended the association conference in the past (61.6%), indicating a relatively low level of re-attendance. Indeed only 10.9% of respondents were attending for the second time, 5.7 % for the third time and 3.8% for the fourth occasion. Some other attendees, meanwhile, had been attending their association conference regularly for more than thirty years.

3.3 Delegate Characteristics

With regard to the membership characteristics of the delegates, 68% of those attending the conferences surveyed were members of the respective associations.

However, it is perhaps more interesting to note that over 31% (a sizeable minority) were not members of the association. It might be expected that members would have made up a larger percentage of delegates than non-members, since it is often the case the association conferences are more heavily marketed toward the members of the association, but this may give food for thought to those trying to encourage higher attendance at association conferences, as it seems that a good proportion of those who attended were willing to do so without being members. The mean length of time that delegates had been members was 13.5 years, with a std. error of 0.884 years. Range of length of membership of the association varied from 1 year to 48 years. The results also showed that delegates travelled various distances to attend. The mean distance travelled was 213.03 miles (with a std. error of 9.878). The range was 1 mile to 540 miles.

The source of information about the conference for most delegates was predominantly association mailings (65.6%), but 25% heard about the conference either through word of mouth or by advertising. Those who gave another source of information as to where they heard about the conference gave a selection of sources, but these sources can be broadly summarised as either their employers or other associations that they are members of. Therefore, if associations are interested in attracting non-members to their conferences, it might be a good starting point to target large employers in a field pertinent to the association in order to attract more non-members of the association to attend.

Analysis of the trip profile characteristics of delegates showed that 89.1% of delegates were not adding on any holidays to the conference, and although this cannot be taken

to be representative of every association conference in the UK, it seems possible that those who take a holiday before or after attending an association conference in the UK are in the minority. This may be helpful to destination marketing bodies that might be spending a disproportionate amount of time and money trying to market add-on holidays to delegates at UK association conferences. However, the fact that 10% of delegates do add on a holiday to their conference is indicative of the relative importance of this market segment. The majority of delegates (57.3%) were travelling alone - it may be reasonable to assume that those travelling alone are slightly less likely to want to extend their stay, as they may have left family and/or friends at home. Further, another 37.7% of delegates were travelling with colleagues, which suggests a business relationship, and less likelihood of those delegates wanting to add on a short holiday. In fact, only 4.5% of delegates were travelling with a partner/family. This may suggest that there is little need for any accompanying persons' events or facilities to be organised during UK association conferences, or conversely, that more partners would come if accompanying events and facilities were considered to be better.

3.4 Analysis

Analysis of the data was undertaken using SPSS version 14. Principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax orthogonal rotation was conducted in an attempt to test the factor structure proposed by the hypothesised model of association conference attendance decision making (Figure 1). All factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0 were considered significant and thus retained (Kaiser 1974). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (0.88) and Bartlett's test of

sphericity ($\chi^2(406) = 2762.98; p < .001$) both confirmed the factorability of the correlation matrix. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as a measure of the reliability of the scales. The alpha coefficient for the two scales together was 0.9201 and it was therefore decided to combine them for the purpose of the PCA. To test for a relationship between motivation and re-attendance, stepwise multiple regression analysis was carried out using Anderson-Rubin factor scores as the input variables, in order to establish the predictive ability of significant factors over the variable measuring likelihood of re-attending the same conference.

4 Findings

The PCA resulted in 6 components, (henceforth referred to as factors) with eigenvalues greater than one, and explaining 64.357% of the total variance (Table 2). The alpha values for each of the factors were high enough to be acceptable, the lowest being 0.69.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Factor 1 explains 19.78% of the total variance and loads on nine attributes, reflecting the networking dimension which influences attendance decision making, related to meeting friends and professional contacts. Factor 2 explains 10.93% of the variance; it loads on seven ‘push’ variables representing the personal and professional development aspects of conference attendance, which act as motivators in the decision making process, including those variables related to employment and careers, as well as learning about the subject matter. The cost dimension was clearly delineated as Factor 3, and is self-explanatory. Factor 4 (Location) represented 8.09% of the variance explained, and interestingly included not only the pull dimensions of an attractive location, but also the push dimension of wishing to get out of the office. Meanwhile Factor 5, explaining 7.89% of the variance, represented reasons why delegates may not be able to attend a given conference, i.e. if the date clashes with a family holiday or another conference, and was therefore labeled ‘Time and Convenience’. This factor may be considered to represent the non-compensatory aspect of the evaluation process, although arguably cost can also influence the decision towards a non-compensatory heuristic – if the cost is too high then attendance may be ruled out without further consideration of the benefits of attending. Finally, Factor 6 (Health and Security) relates to wellbeing and personal safety and represents 7.49% of the total variance explained.

Thus, the PCA found evidence of six components or factors underpinning the association conference attendance decision-making process. However, the factors display some slight differences to those hypothesized in the proposed model (see Figure 1).

Nonetheless, they provide evidence of the existence of a relevant six-factor solution.

Differences between the two models will be discussed below in the discussion section.

Regression

Having identified the six factor solution above, a multiple regression analysis was undertaken in order to establish the relative significance of these factors in predicting repeat attendance at association conferences, based on the following hypothesis:

H₀ = six factors **are not** significant predictors of likelihood to attend this conference in future.

H₁ = six factors **are** significant predictors of likelihood to attend this conference in future.

Assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were tested. Examination of the residuals did not show any non-linear pattern and indicated that the assumption of homoscedasticity had been met. The Durbin Watson statistic (2.01) confirmed the independence of errors. Some outliers were present, but only one case had a standardized residual greater than 3 (much less than the 1% of the sample that Field (2000) suggests is acceptable) and Mahalanobis and Cook's distance statistics did not provide any evidence of influential cases (Barnett and Lewis, 1978; Cook and Weisberg, 1982). The average VIF (1.00) and the tolerance statistics (1.00) indicated the absence of collinearity in the

data (Field 2000). In addition, the predictors were found to have most of their variance loading onto different dimensions (eigenvalues).

The results of the regression analysis are reported in Table 3. The adjusted R^2 value is 0.21, indicating that 21% of the variance in the dependent variable (likelihood of future attendance at this conference) is explained by the significant factors. In the absence of a second sample against which to compare the results, the validity and generalisability of the model can be assessed by examining the shrinkage between the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values. The difference of 0.02 signifies little loss of predictive power, indicating that if the model were derived from the population rather than the sample, it would account for approximately 2.0% less variance in the outcome (Field, 2005). The F-ratio, which has a value of 10.28 and is significant ($p < 0.01$), suggests that this regression model is unlikely to have arisen by chance and that the beta coefficients can be used to explain each of the factors' relative contribution to the variance in likelihood of re-attendance. However, only two factors make a significant contribution to the prediction of re-attendance (networking and cost). These were both significant at $p < 0.001$. These two variables accounted for almost all of the explained variance. For networking, the relationship was positive, meaning that as the importance of networking increased, so the likelihood of attending the conference again in the future increased. For cost, the relationship was negative, which suggests that as the importance of cost increases, so the likelihood of attending the conference again in future decreases.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

With reference to hypothesis one (H_1 = six factors are significant predictors of likelihood to attend this conference in future) the null hypothesis cannot be rejected since only two of the factors were statistically significant predictors of the likelihood of delegates to attend the conference again in the future. Therefore hypothesis one cannot be sustained.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The six factors that emerged from the PCA differed slightly in their composition from those which had been proposed (see Figure 1). Following interpretation of the PCA results, an amended model is now proposed as representing the decision to attend a professional association conference (Figure 2). This revised model retains four of the six components from the proposed model, but incorporates two new components, ‘time and convenience’ and ‘health and security’. Although the components of this amended model vary slightly from those originally proposed, the emergence of a stable six-component solution following the proposal of six components is evidence of factorial validity, and is confirmatory in the sense that what was discovered corresponds broadly with what was hypothesized.

In addition, following the discovery of not one intervening issue component, but rather two components (‘time and convenience’ and ‘health and security’), it was decided to consider all factors equally as conference factors, some representing “pull” factors (e.g. networking and personal/professional development) and others “constraints” (e.g. time and convenience). Cost may be considered to be both. This results in a slightly more

complex model, which better describes the process of making the decision to attend a UK association conference.

This model, which follows the five-stage process identified during the literature review and confirmed at least in part during the fieldwork, is illustrated in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

It is interesting to compare the findings of this study with other key works in this area discussed in the literature review (Var et al., 1985; Witt et al. 1995; Oppermann, 1995 and Oppermann & Chon, 1997). In their study, Var et al. (1985) stressed the importance of the conference location, both its attractiveness and its accessibility. Both were found by this study to be important attributes of the decision process. Var et al. also highlighted the utility of attending the meeting and interest in the programme on offer at the conference. 'Interesting Topic' was the highest rated of the importance variables and so the findings of this study are in line with the results of their research. Witt et al. (1995) accepted the accessibility and attractiveness of the destination as important in the decision to attend an association conference, but they also noted other conference-specific variables such as networking and learning about new subjects and developments in the field. This study also found these attributes to be important in the decision process. Finally, Witt et al. (1995) stressed the importance of the cost aspect of attending a conference, both the cost of the conference itself and the cost of transport to get to the destination. Findings from this study are in line with and expand upon the conclusions of Witt et al. (1995).

The most detailed work that had previously been carried out on the subject of the conference attendance decision was by Oppermann (1995) and Oppermann & Chon (1997). They proposed four factors as representing the decision to attend – personal and business factors, association and conference factors, location factors and intervening opportunities. The components of their four factors are in some ways similar to some of the factors in this study. For example, their association and conference factors included being involved in the association, creating a reputation amongst one's peers, meeting old friends and being part of the global community. This is very similar to the 'networking' factor in this study. Additionally, their 'intervening opportunities' factor is similar to the 'time and convenience' factor that emerged from this study. This study has produced results which tie in well with these two factors.

However, their personal and business factor, which included being healthy enough to travel, being funded to attend, getting time off work, and professional advancement, was not replicated by this study, which showed loadings on two different factors for the above attributes – personal and professional development and health and security. It can be argued that two factors better represent the differing constructs involved.

Finally, their 'location' factor included both attributes of the destination itself, such as the climate and destination image as well as the cost of accommodation and transport at the destination. The 'location' factor which emerged from the PCA had loadings for attributes such as 'visiting the surrounding area' and 'attractive location' which are in

essence linked to the destination image, but did not include any cost elements. Instead, a 'cost' factor emerged from this study which included the cost of accommodation and cost of transport and also the cost of the conference itself.

In terms of the attributes in the importance scale, many were influenced by the work of Var et al. (1985), Witt et al. (1995), Oppermann (1995) and Oppermann & Chon (1997) and therefore it was reasonable to expect that these attributes would figure large in the findings of the study. Neither Var et al. (1985) nor Witt et al. (1995) incorporated these attributes into any groupings, and so the results of the PCA carried out by this study cannot be compared in detail with their work. However, the work of Oppermann & Chon (1997) did present four factors that they consider make up the decision process of conference delegates. This study replicated two of their factors (association and conference factors and intervening opportunities), albeit with slightly different names – this study named them networking and time and convenience. Additionally, a similar location factor did emerge from this study, albeit with different attributes loading on it. This study did not however replicate the other factor identified by Oppermann & Chon (1997) as personal and business factors. Instead, this study proposed a further three factors – personal and professional development, health and security and cost.

This illustrates that the findings from this study, although not in complete agreement with the findings of previous research, do fit in with the broad themes and issues identified by previous authors in this field.

With regard to the regression analysis, although 21% of the variance in the variable 'likelihood of attending this conference again in the future' is explained by two of the factors (F1 networking and F3 cost), there are clearly other issues affecting this variable which require further elucidation. However, it can be stated that the importance of networking to conference delegates has a positive correlation with their likelihood of attending the conference again in the future, meaning that the more important networking is as a motivator for attendance, the more likely the delegate is to attend the conference again in the future. Cost on the other hand had a negative correlation with future attendance, and as cost becomes a more important issue for a delegate, so their likelihood of attending again in the future decreases. This is useful information for conference organisers and associations, as it gives some indication as to which key parts of the conference experience can influence repeat attendance. Association conferences generally need to maximize revenue by maximizing attendance at their annual conferences and therefore if they can stress the importance of networking to their delegates, this may encourage more delegates to attend again in future. The findings of the regression analysis are exploratory in nature and would benefit from further study and replication.

There is one aspect of the results of the regression analysis which requires further elucidation. The regression analysis indicated that only the networking and cost factors were significant predictors of future attendance, as discussed above. However, the other R^2 values, although not significant, are of interest and are worthy of some discussion. The findings show a negative relationship between likelihood of future re-attendance and the

four non-significant predictors: personal/professional development, location, time & convenience and health and security. At first glance this may seem counter-intuitive; however it may be the case that the factors which have emerged from the analysis could be divided into two types – generic and specific. Generic factors would be those which the potential delegate considers to be important, but not necessarily specific to one occurrence of a conference. For example, a conference delegate is likely to be able to engage in networking at most conferences, regardless of the location or educational content of the conference and therefore it may be argued that networking is a generic factor. Other factors differ from conference to conference depending on the date, time and location of the conference. These factors include cost, location, time and convenience and health and security. Opportunities for personal and professional development may also vary depending on the theme, topic or educational content of the conference and thus this factor may also be considered to be specific to a given conference.

The regression analysis results suggest that the greater the importance a delegate has placed on these specific factors for the case of the sampled conference (e.g. the particular location of this conference, or the educational content) the less likely they are to re-attend the same conference in the future at a different location, or with different educational content. This potential difference between generic and specific motivational factors has not been noted as yet in any other literature on this subject and provides a potentially important avenue for further research. It is still argued that each of these factors (generic or specific) belongs in the overall evaluation of alternatives stage of the decision-making process, as delegates still consider each factor when deciding whether or not to attend an

association conference. However, further research is required to ascertain the role played by generic as opposed to specific factors.

Additional suggestions for future research include identifying other elements which have a bearing on likelihood of delegates attending again in the future. Future studies should also test the model within the context of international association conferences. Finally considerable potential exists for future research on the other stages of the association conference attendance decision-making process – motivation, information search and post-decision behaviour.

Financial and temporal constraints and difficulties in obtaining permission for fieldwork led to a smaller than desired data sample and a greater number of cases may have provided a more reliable solution. The issue of transferability of the findings must also be raised. All data were collected in the UK, thus the results cannot be generalised beyond the UK association conference context. Further cross-cultural or international studies are therefore advocated.

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