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A Model to Identify the Success Factors for Academic Conferences

André P. CALITZ
Department of Computing Sciences, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, Email, Andre.Calitz@Mandela.ac.za
Corresponding Author

Margaret CULLEN
Business School, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, Email, Margaret.Cullen@Mandela.ac.za

Abstract

Academic tourism refers to local and international travel by academics, researchers and students who visit different locations for research and educational purposes. Academic tourism includes academic conferences and seminars that provide opportunities for academics to present research papers, network, develop professionally and expand their academic and research horizons. Various factors influence an academic to attend a conference, such as funding, academic value, location and travel arrangements. The objective of this study was to determine the factors that delegates deemed important to attend national and international academic conferences. The study used mixed methods and statistically analysed quantitative data, including Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The qualitative responses were thematically analysed, including an analysis by Claude.ai. The Theory of Events was used to develop a model for academic conference events. The findings indicate that most respondents preferred the international locations where the conferences were held and the networking opportunities. The respondents indicated that the conferences were well organised, provided an opportunity to travel and provided a platform for younger researchers to present their research. The findings identified the factors conference organisers must consider when planning and organising an academic conference. A proposed model for academic conference events was evaluated and questionnaire items are presented after the EFA. The findings contribute to the latest knowledge on the still under-researched field of academic tourism.

Keywords Academic tourism; academic conference; delegates' perceptions; success factors

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Introduction

Academic tourism, which includes conferences, forms part of educational travel and is a global phenomenon (Hauss, 2020). Academic tourism is an important component of the tourism industry and for the growth of academic knowledge. Academics, researchers and students travel to local and international locations primarily for research-related activities and educational purposes. Academic tourism also includes student mobility and has primarily been studied in terms of the motivations of international students (Amaro et al., 2024). Conference tourism is a specific form of event tourism, which differs from leisure tourism in terms of its operation, clientele and key stakeholders (Christofle & Kallmuenzer, 2023). Academic conferences are found in all academic disciplines, trades and professions, societies and associations (Rowe, 2018). This type of tourism is described as planned in advance and designed for large groups of people for specific purposes (Alananzeh et al., 2019). It further forms part of MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions) and contributes substantially to the travel industry (Çakmak et al., 2024). A division of MICE is academic tourism, which includes academic conferencing. MICE tourism is also known as business tourism (Sharma & Arora, 2022) and includes all travel and stays related to business and associative events, such as business, training, educational, research, reward or team-building activities (Martin-Rojo, 2022). Academic conferences form a sub-sector of the MICE industry and can collectively be termed the Academic, Scientific and Professional (ASP) community (Rowe, 2018).

Simsek et al. (2023) indicate that academic conferences are more than just presenting and listening to papers. They propose that academic conferences are excellent opportunities to present work, learn about the latest developments, catch up with colleagues and past mentors, connect with future mentors and explore a location. Attending conferences is also about learning to be and function as an academic, which is accompanied and driven by networking and participant interaction (Seidenberg et al., 2024). They support the global drive for the internationalisation of education, as they offer platforms for exchange and collaboration (Serpa et al., 2020). Academic conferences are extraordinary events because they provide the opportunity to be within arm's length of so many members of the academic community (Regehr & Varpio, 2022). Understanding attendees' experiences, expectations and perspectives regarding conference offerings is crucial for the success and sustainability of conferences (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2023). The value of a conference for a delegate derives from personal perceptions and expectations. It is, therefore, important to discover what delegates expect and value in a conference. Limited work has been done on the factors that influence academics to attend national and international conferences. This study highlights the factors that conference delegates rate as important so that conference organisers can plan accordingly. Seidenberg et al. (2024) call for a sophisticated conference design and ask two questions: firstly, what drives academics to attend a conference? and secondly, what creates value for delegates?

The challenge for conference organisers is to create an exciting and meaningful experience that will attract attendees year after year and to understand what compels people to participate in one academic conference over others (Godovykh & Hahm, 2020). Organisers can learn from conference delegates to refine and improve the event (Seidenberg et al., 2024). This study examined the academic conference delegates' perceptions of the factors that influence them to attend an academic

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conference. Ubani et al. (2024) refer to the equity model theory of satisfaction in their research in Nigeria. They and the theory propose that the perceived quality of any facility, in this case conferences, is measured by the level at which the conference is able to meet the expectations of the conference delegate (Obi et al., 2023). The study forms part of the research field of academic tourism. This study contributes to a theoretical understanding of factors academic conference organisers should consider when organising an academic conference and the Theory of Events (Roberts et al., 2022). The layout of the paper is as follows, a literature review of the factors that influence academic tourism is presented in the following section of the paper, including the Theory of Events. The research methodology is discussed and the results of 171 respondents who attended academic conferences are presented thereafter. A discussion of managerial implications is provided, and conclusions of the study, academic theoretical contribution and future work are discussed at the end of the paper.

Literature review

The theory of events

Delegates attending face-to-face events, such as conferences and seminars, have increased after the COVID-19 pandemic. Conference organisers have tried to better understand what influences delegates to attend events, such as academic conferences. The theory of events is grounded in the delegate's perspective of an event (Roberts et al., 2022). Roberts et al. (2022) developed a model of the Event Experience (Figure 1) comprising five elements. The theory identifies five key aspects of the attendees' experience of an event, namely:

- *Shared purpose* – which consists of two key aspects, namely, clarity in understanding why an individual wants to attend the event, and there is a known host or organiser who is sponsoring the purpose of the event.
- *Group setting* - consisting of four aspects:
  - Individuals coming together at a fixed time;
  - An identifiable membership;
  - The size of the group; and
  - Participants can be known to one another or be complete strangers.
- *Logistics* - the accommodating facility and services to support the event and include:
  - A suitable venue for the purpose, both in terms of size and scale;
  - Accessibility: including transportation, directions, parking, stairs, elevators, restrooms and disability access;
  - Participant basic comforts, which include lighting, heating, cooling, drinking water, etc.; and
  - Infrastructure, including seating, tables, catering, podium, Internet access, etc.
- *Safety and security* - both the physical and the cyber needs of participants; and
- The *behaviours of participants* - how participants engage with others during the event. This includes social values, a sense of belonging, sociability, networking and participation in planned activities.

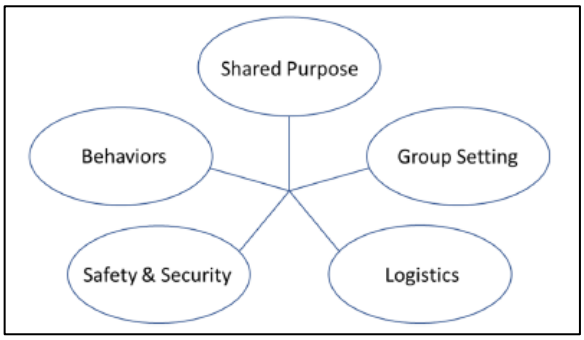

Figure 1: Model of the Event Experience
Source: Roberts et al. (2022)

Factors influencing academic conference attendance

Academic conferences are important for an academic's career progression, serving as valued occasions for conference attendees to network, gain new knowledge and establish or maintain collaborations (Walters et al., 2025). The traditional in-person academic conference remains the preferred format; however, Walters et al. (2025) call for academics across all disciplines to push for more ecological and socially sustainable academic conferences. Rana (2025) highlights the importance of the collaboration between academics and businesses, specifically, new start-ups, to participate in academic conferences as a strategic tool to enhance their reputation, establish industry leadership and drive sustainable growth. A reputable academic conference is characterised by proficient conference organisers, a rigorous paper review process, quality publications, including conference proceedings and journal publications, qualified reviewers, a suitable conference venue and location, and networking opportunities (Aguilar, 2023). All these factors influence the delegates' overall conference satisfaction. Their degree of satisfaction is primarily determined by how satisfied they are with the facilities, arrangements and services offered (Oloso et al. 2024). The literature identified the following factors as important regarding academic conference attendance.

Academic value

Conference attendance is generally considered beneficial for an individual's career (Roos et al., 2020). This has resulted in a global increase in predatory conferences that prey on researchers desperate to find a platform to present their research for career advancement (Aguilar, 2023). Academic conferences are relevant learning spaces for academics as they allow researchers to stay connected with their peers and keep abreast of cutting-edge research (Seidenberg et al., 2024; Godovykh & Hahm, 2020). A reputable research conference is characterised by its organisation, the paper review process, an appropriate paper acceptance rate, well-structured proceedings, qualified reviewers, distinguished keynote speakers and networking opportunities (Aguilar, 2023). Academic conferences are an indispensable component of contemporary science as researchers are allowed to share their research, become familiar with other scholars' work and build a network for future collaboration (Oruc, 2021). It is further an excellent source of scientific exchange, learning and networking opportunities, combined with social aspects, including cultural exchange (Roos et al., 2020). The academic value of a conference for a participant derives from personal perceptions based on previous knowledge, experience and expectations (Seidenberg et al., 2024), whilst being one of the best platforms to foster networking and receive feedback on research (Förster, 2023).

Quality assurance

The rapid growth in the number of conferences and papers appearing in conference proceedings publications has increased the need to examine the issue of conference paper quality (Laplante et al., 2009). Plagiarism is rising (Meadows, 2021) and clear guidelines for best practices in research publications must be provided to build trust and quality assurance. Plagiarism, which is using someone else's intellectual product, distorts scientific credibility (Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015). Academic integrity is about honesty, truthful reporting and not fabricating data or findings. It is about recognising authorship and not plagiarism (Davis, 2023). Plagiarism, as reported by Mulenga & Shilongo (2024), erodes the quality and credibility of education and underpins a culture of intellectual dishonesty. Laplante et al. (2009) propose some factors, which include the accepted-paper-to-attendee ratio, paper acceptance rates and reputation of programme committee members, reviewers, presenters (based on the number of papers published) and attendees, but comment that without measurable conference standards, inferior conferences will continue to emerge and exist. Peer reviews serve as a quality-control process that helps maintain the credibility of published academic research (George, 2023). Quality assurance is part of academic life, be it through peer review for research funding applications, manuscript submissions, tenure and promotion (Leyton- Brown, 2004).

Networking

Conferences are the ideal networking opportunity (Mallette et al., 2009). They play an important role in networking by providing opportunities to collaborate on projects and identify mentors, share knowledge and learn and network with colleagues (Simsek et al., 2023; Carr, 2023). Conferences must provide ample opportunities for networking and collaboration among participants. It should go beyond being a mere platform for academics and researchers to present their findings. It should foster an environment of knowledge sharing and collaboration, encouraging active engagement and constructive discussions among all participants (Aguilar, 2023). Networking at an academic conference allows researchers to exchange scientific knowledge in their field and interact with peers worldwide (George, 2022). The social gatherings associated with academic conferences are an important facet of academic life as they provide opportunities for collaboration, career advancement and developing new research and social friendships (Donlon, 2021). Fisher & Trautner (2022) indicate that networking at an academic conference is essential to building a researcher's academic career and frequently provides attendees with energising inspiration, whilst allowing academics to create an academic identity (Seidenberg et al., 2024).

Location

Choosing the correct location for a conference can make a difference to the success of the event (Rittichainuwat et al., 2020). A location is considered a geographical place that possesses specific qualities that make it appealing to tourists, and it should have the essential infrastructure to cater for travellers, appealing attractions and landmarks (Agyeman-Duah et al., 2024). The natural environment, which includes weather, scenic surroundings and diverse ecosystems, is an important factor regarding the location (Katsitadze & Natsvlishvili, 2017). Location is highlighted in many studies as a significant element of conference attractiveness (Bik et al., 2020). The attributes of the destination are considered pull factors that attract delegates and event planners to the destination (Alananzeh et al., 2019). Crespi-Vallbona et al. (2022) propose that emotional bonds with a conference destination are important and more positive when the visitors come from a culturally similar society. Location and face-to-face conferences allow for social connections, community development, personal engagement, networking opportunities and energy (Moloni & Metaxas, 2023). An important dimension of conferences is whether the location is rich in cultural and other tourist attractions (Falk & Hagsten, 2022).

Conference format

The advent of COVID-19 brought about a new perspective on conference formats. Discussions include considering in-person, purely digital or a hybrid offering (Moss et al., 2021). Conferences are important to academia, but large in-person meetings have several disadvantages. The COVID-19 experience has shown that online is a viable alternative (Sarabipour et al., 2021). Since COVID-19, some conferences have returned to the on-site format, whereas others have chosen the hybrid format. Förster (2023) advocates that there are many reasons for this, including not travelling to remote conferences, which is more environmentally friendly and cheaper. Visa requirements and costs need to be considered, but the most cited reason is saving

time and being more family-friendly. The AMEX 2024 report, however, emphasises that people want to meet in person. Their research indicates that three-quarters of meetings and events in 2024 will be either entirely in-person (59%) or hybrid (20%), with the remaining 21% virtual (AMEX, 2024).

Conference venue

The conference venue facilities, for example, a hotel, have become an essential factor in building its competitive advantage (Bik et al., 2021). Bik et al. (2021) indicate the importance of quality conference facilities, such as conference rooms, a good location, restaurants, exhibition spaces, sports and recreation facilities, technical equipment and accompanying services. The conference venue, such as suitable accommodation, venue class ratings (e.g., *** STAR venue), breakaway rooms, food and beverages provided during the conference and venue size, is important. The conference venue includes facilities, accommodation ratings (e.g., 3***), Booking.com or Trip Advisor ratings, location and transportation.

Conference arrangements

It is important to understand how conference structures support or hinder the integration of varied opportunities that promote engagement with critically informed ways of learning and co-constructing knowledge (Aldrich et al., 2022). The conference arrangements included items relating to the submission requirements, the review process, the use of a conference management system (e.g., EasyChair and Microsoft's Conference Management Toolkit), conference format, gifts, publications and workshops. The conference format, such as length, number of tracks, number of delegates and face-to-face vs online, is an important consideration for delegates. Submission management tools allow different roles to be assigned, such as editor, reviewer, author, corresponding author, committee member, or administration staff, making management of the conference easier (Oruc, 2021). A conference's formal programme is an important component of the conference experience and must be available for attendees to review to identify the sessions and people they want to hear (Regehr & Varpio, 2022).

Conference costs

Conference costs pose a substantial challenge (Oruc, 2021). Attending and participating in conferences can be costly and challenging despite the fact that they provide an excellent opportunity for academics to engage with their peers, learn from experts, collaborate and share their knowledge and experiences (Page & Mosen, 2024; Donlon, 2021). The costs associated with attending conferences include meeting registration fees, airfares, accommodations, ground transportation, food and event tickets (Sarabipour et al., 2021). Parncutt & Seither-Preisler (2019) also highlight the travel and accommodation costs. Additional costs include the often-prohibitive registration fees, which often restrict attendees, particularly when the cost is in Dollars, Euros or British pounds (Niner et al., 2020). The currency exchange rates can make the cost exorbitant, specifically for delegates attending from developing countries. Page & Mosen (2024) posit that attendance and participation in conferences can be costly and challenging, particularly for people from remote locations. In addition, emerging researchers, such as doctoral students, represent future academic conference attendees and should be considered by conference organisers because of their limited access to funding (Van der Schee & DeLong, 2023). In addition, Goebel et al. (2020) highlight the environmental impact of global conferencing and the overhead factors of venue hire and catering, which impact the financial cost of a conference.

Funding

The cost of attending a conference for academics has become a major consideration. University government funding, such as in South Africa, has been cut, and academics are finding it more difficult to obtain funds to attend conferences and pay journal page fees. Conference costs include visa costs, conference fees, travel and accommodation costs, gala event costs and food and beverages. Academics and researchers can fund a conference by applying for institutional, faculty and departmental funding, as well as institutional or personal research funding. Young academics could apply for emerging researcher funding. Hauss (2020) reports that governments, policymakers and funding organisations are increasingly asking for impact assessments to justify financial investment in research. Rowe (2018) questions the need for in-person conferences due to the high costs and the negative impact on the environment associated with air travel.

Visas and travel arrangements

Visa policies are among the most important administrative formalities influencing international tourism (Rossello & Santana-Gallego, 2024). Conference travel and other short-term academic mobility are under-researched (Henderson, 2019). Travel arrangements, travel time, distance and mode of transport are important considerations for delegates, as well as the effort to obtain a visa. Visa costs are an important consideration when attending an international conference. Visa costs include the application fee, service fee and courier costs. The conference delegate must also appear in person at the appropriate embassy or visa issuing authority, which may require travelling costs to major city centres. Obtaining short-term visas to travel to scientific meetings is a major hurdle for many researchers, particularly those from developing countries (Sarabipour et al., 2021). Travel arrangements include tickets for domestic or foreign travel by air, road or other transportation to the conference. Conference organisers generally avoid getting involved with delegates' travel arrangements. General practice is that delegates must organise their own travel arrangements or use the services provided by travel agents.

Accommodation

Conference organisers generally do not manage accommodation arrangements and reservations. However, they suggest hotels and other accommodations, such as Airbnb, near the conference venue, normally at a discounted conference rate. Travel and accommodation costs are important for a delegate who plans to submit a paper and attend a conference. The attendees' satisfaction with the accommodation is part of the 'conference package' and leads to preserving the reputation and convincing the attendees to attend the same conference again (Hussein & Rashwan, 2022).

Additional activities

The term 'Bleisure' has been coined to describe the mix of business and leisure. Bleisure is also known as blended travel, where delegates explore the location or stay longer after the conference (Tala et al., 2011). The practice of 'conferencing' also includes activities that go far beyond the exchange of information, as they include social spaces where researchers encounter other researchers, make new contacts, maintain old contacts, hold exploratory talks and initiate collaborations (Hauss, 2020). They offer the opportunity for cultural immersion and lived experiences if the destination is appropriate. Fisher & Trautner (2022:146) propose that some of the most important networking occurs at social events and that 'Bonding over a shared extracurricular interest may facilitate more congenial, productive and even lifelong collaborations and friendships'. Conference organisers have emphasised the conference experience, including opportunities for networking and social interaction (Carr, 2023). Science is a social enterprise and a conference is a social activity (Regehr & Varpio, 2022).

Proposed academic conference model

The factors discussed above that influence academic conference attendance are presented as an Academic Conference Model in Figure 2.

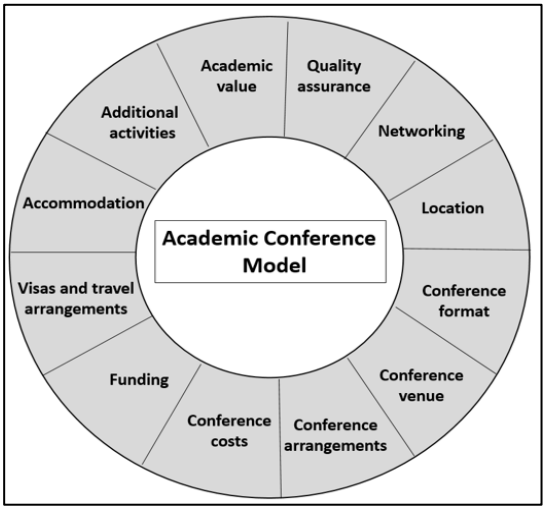

Figure 2: Academic Conference Model

Methods

This study followed a mixed-methods approach and a purposive sampling technique was used to identify respondents who have attended academic conferences. The conference organisers from various national and international conferences were identified and approached, including the International Business Conference (IBC), the Southern African Computing Lecturers Association (SACLA), the South African Institute of Computer Scientists and Information Technologists (SAICSIT), The Southern African Institute for Management Scientists (SAIMS) and the DigiTal international annual conference. Academic staff at four South African universities who attended academic conferences were also requested to complete the survey. Conference organisers from the four conferences were requested to forward an email requesting delegates to participate in the study. A total of 171 fully completed responses were received and statistically analysed. The data collected were as follows:

- Quantitative data relating to the items for the factors identified in the literature study for academic conferences, using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=Not important, 2=Slightly important, 3=Important and 4=Very important (Table 1);
- A qualitative component where the respondents were requested to identify a conference they enjoyed most and indicate why they chose the conference. They then had to complete a section, using a four-point Likert scale, indicating how satisfied they were with each factor relating to the identified conference. These factors included Location, Travel arrangements, Accommodation, Conference arrangements, Conference paper review process, Costs, Academic value, Funding, Conference venue, Non-academic activities provided by the conference organisers (excursions); Conference format; The return on investment (ROI) from the academic conference; The inclusion of full and Work-in-Progress papers and Conference workshops; and
- Finally, respondents had to indicate how satisfied they were overall with the conference they identified.

Table 1 indicates the factors included in the questionnaire and examples of the items rated by respondents on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Not important to 4 = Very important).

Table 1: Factors and related items

Factors	Items
Location	Attractiveness, historical value, tourist attractions and safety
Visa & Travel arrangements	Visa requirements, travelling time, mode of transport
Accommodation	Facilities, location to the conference venue, ratings, safety
Conference costs	Visa and travel costs, conference fees, accommodation costs
Academic value	DHET accreditation, the prestige and ranking of the conference, conference workshops and paper reviews
Networking	Networking opportunities, social activities
Funding	University, faculty, departmental research funding, personal funds
Conference venue	Venue star rating, facilities and infrastructure, accommodation
ROI for conferences	Return-on-Investment, DHET funding
Additional activities	Sightseeing, cultural and sport activities, companion activities
Conference arrangements	Call for papers, review process, use of conference management system (EasyChair), conference gifts
➢ **Conference format**	Face-to-face, online, hybrid, number of delegates, duration, tracks
➢ **Conference review process**	Review process, international reviewers, publications
➢ **Conference papers**	Full papers, Work-in-Progress papers, posters
➢ **Conference workshops**	Inclusion and type of workshops

The quantitative data were statistically analysed using descriptive statistics, including ANOVA and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The qualitative questions were thematically analysed and the results visually presented using a Theme Frequency and Association Diagram (TFAD). The TFAD shows the themes identified, the number of respondents who mentioned the theme and the associated themes. The association highlights the fact that respondents mentioned more than one theme in their responses. The qualitative responses were further thematically analysed using a large language model (LLM), namely Claude.ai, for triangulation purposes. Ethics approval was received from the Nelson Mandela University Human Ethics Committee.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were evaluated in this study:

H_1: Academic value (Quality Assurance, Networking, Academic Value) has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_2: Location has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_3: Conference format has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_4: Conference venue has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_5: Conference arrangements have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_6: Costs have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_7: Funding has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_8: Visa and travel arrangements have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_9: Accommodation has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction
H_{10}: Additional activities have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction

The hypothesised Academic conference model is presented in Figure 3.

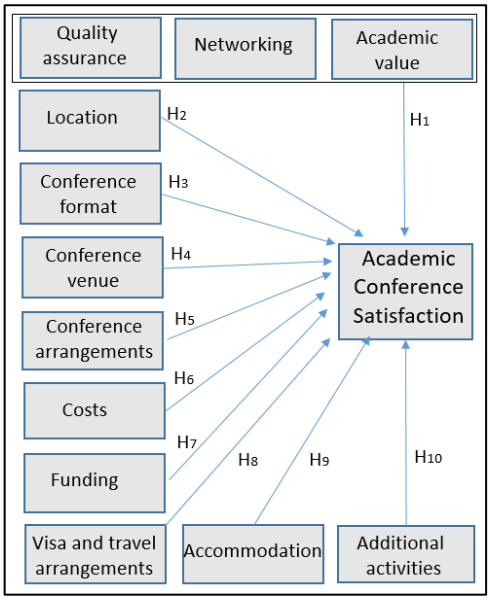

Figure 3: Hypothesised Academic conference model

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Results

The authors conducted an academic tourism research project in 2024 and obtained 171 responses. The survey was distributed to delegates of various national and international conferences, including academics at four universities in South Africa. A word cloud of the 171 responses to the question: *Which academic conference did you enjoy the most and why?* is presented in Figure 4. It is important to note that the words "networking", "location", "IBC" and "SACLA" are prominent in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Conferences and respondents' word cloud

The majority of the respondents, or delegates, were from South Africa (95%, n=162). The respondents' current position was 22% (n=39) at the Junior Lecturer/Lecturer level, 40% (n=68) at the Associate Professor/Professor level. Thirty-two percent (n=55) were less than 10 years in academia and 68% (n=116) were 10 years or longer in academia (Table 3). Fifty-three percent attend one national conference per year and 35% two or more national conferences per year. Sixty-two percent indicated they attend one international conference per year and seven respondents (4%) attend two or more international conferences per year.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents (n=171)

Current position	**Jr Lecturer/ Lecturer**	**Senior Lecturer**	**Assoc. Prof. / Prof.**	**Research. Associate / Other**
	39 (22%)	32 (19%)	68 (40%)	32 (19%)
How long in academia?	**<5 years**	**5 - 9 years**	**10–19 years**	**20+ years**
	17 (10%)	38 (22%)	59 (35%)	57 (33%)
Number of National Conferences attended on average per year	**None**	**1**	**2**	**3-7+**
	21 (12%)	90 (53%)	49 (29%)	11 (6%)
Number of International Conferences attended on average per year	**None**	**1**	**2**	**3-7+**
	43 (25%)	106 (62%)	15 (9%)	7 (4%)
Number of National Conferences attended in total	**0-4**	**5-9**	**10-19**	**20+**
	52 (30%)	49 (29%)	38 (22%)	32 (19%)
Number of International Conferences attended in total	**0-4**	**5-9**	**10-19**	**20+**
	77 (46%)	36 (21%)	33 (19%)	25 (15%)

The delegates were requested to rate the importance of the different factors identified in the literature for any conference they attended (Table 3). The factor Conference format was split into four sub-factors, namely Conference Presentation, Number of delegates, Conference length and Number of tracks. Most of the respondents (n=98, 47%) indicated that the conference location is (very) important, 70% (n=119) travel arrangements and 89% (n=153) indicated that accommodation is (very) important. Regarding conference arrangements, 91% indicated that the conference arrangements are (very) important. Eighty-two percent (n=141) indicated that the conference costs are important with most respondents indicating that academic value and networking are very important (93%, n=160). The majority (94%, n=126) indicated the importance of the conference venue, however, the provision of additional activities (25%, n=42) was not rated as important. Most delegates preferred a conference with two or more tracks and over several days.

Table 3: Frequency distributions of important factors for all conferences (n=171)

Factors	**Not important**	**Slightly important**	**Important**	**Very important**
IF1: Location	25 (15%)	48 (28%)	70 (41%)	28 (16%)
IF2: Travel arrangements	17 (10%)	35 (20%)	89 (52%)	30 (18%)
IF3: Accommodation	2 (1%)	16 (9%)	65 (38%)	88 (51%)
IF4: Conference arrangements	2 (1%)	13 (8%)	70 (41%)	86 (50%)
IF5: Conference costs	6 (4%)	24 (14%)	67 (39%)	74 (43%)
IF6: Academic Value & Networking	3 (2%)	8 (5%)	69 (40%)	91 (53%)
IF 7: Funding	13 (8%)	30 (18%)	61 (36%)	67 (39%)
IF8: Conference venue	7 (4%)	38 (2%)	99 (58%)	27 (16%)
IF9: Additional activities	42 (25%)	67 (39%)	44 (26%)	18 (11%)
IF10: Conference Presentation	4 (2%)	3 (2%)	92 (54%)	72 (42%)
IF10: Number of delegates	2 (1%)	13 (8%)	111 (65%)	45 (26%)
IF10: Conference length	11 (6%)	11 (6%)	92 (54%)	57 (33%)
IF10: Number of tracks	7 (4%)	11 (6%)	102 (60%)	51 (30%)

The delegates had to recall an academic conference they attended and enjoyed, and rate how satisfied they were with the conference. Table 4 shows the frequency distributions for the factors, in order of importance and the delegates' satisfaction ratings for the identified conference factors. The factor *Location* was ranked as most important, followed by Academic value

and networking. Almost all of the delegates (n=170) were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference location, its academic value and the networking opportunities it provided. The delegates were satisfied with the Return on Investment (ROI) they made from the conference and with the conference venue, format and arrangements. The respondents preferred face-to-face presentations, with a large number of delegates attending a conference. Ninety-six percent (n=165) of the respondents indicated they prefer a two-day or more conference rather than a one-day conference, with two to four tracks.
The younger academics highlighted that conference costs and funding could be problematic and that one conference did not include Work-in-Progress papers. The inclusion of workshops at a conference was also highlighted as an important factor. All of the delegates, except one, were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the conference they identified and attended.

Table 4: Frequency distributions for satisfaction with a chosen academic conference (n=171)

Factors	Not satisfied	Slightly satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Location	0 (0%)	2 (1%)	66 (39%)	103 (60%)
Academic Value & Networking	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	74 (43%)	96 (56%)
ROI for conferences	0 (0%)	10 (6%)	68 (40%)	93 (54%)
Conference Venue	1 (1%)	5 (3%)	76 (44%)	89 (52%)
Conference format	0 (0%)	5 (3%)	77 (45%)	89 (52%)
Conference arrangements	0 (0%)	5 (3%)	79 (46%)	87 (51%)
Peer-reviewed full paper	7 (4%)	17 (10%)	61 (36%)	86 (50%)
Conference paper review process	1 (1%)	11 (6%)	78 (46%)	81 (47%)
Accommodation	0 (0%)	6 (3%)	92 (54%)	73 (43%)
Conference Presentations	4 (2%)	3 (2%)	92 (54%)	72 (42%)
Travel Arrangements	3 (2%)	6 (4%)	95 (56%)	67 (39%)
Additional Activities	8 (5%)	29 (17%)	74 (43%)	60 (35%)
Conference length	11 (6%)	11 (6%)	92 (54%)	57 (33%)
Number of tracks	7 (4%)	11 (6%)	102 (60%)	51 (30%)
Funding	11 (6%)	43 (25%)	68 (40%)	49 (29%)
Conference workshops	24 (14%)	37 (22%)	64 (37%)	46 (27%)
Number of delegates	2 (1%)	13 (8%)	111 (56%)	45 (26%)
Conference costs	6 (4%)	34 (20%)	88 (51%)	43 (25%)
Work-in-Progress papers	28 (16%)	43 (25%)	62 (36%)	38 (22%)
Presentation	**On-line**		**Face-to-Face**	
	0 (0%)		171 (100%)	
Number of delegates	**Small**		**Large**	
	25 (15%)		146 (85%)	
Conference length	**1 day**		**2+ days**	
	6 (4%)		165 (96%)	
Number of tracks	**Few tracks**		**Many tracks**	
	4 (2%)		167 (98%)	
Overall conference satisfaction	**Not satisfied**	**Slightly satisfied**	**Satisfied**	**Extremely satisfied**
	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	93 (54%)	77 (45%)

Reliability, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Pearson's correlations

Table 5 indicates the reliability of the measuring instrument, which was measured using the Cronbach alpha coefficient and the EFA findings. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is one of the most popular techniques for evaluating a measuring device's internal reliability. Multiple-item scales' internal reliability was examined using the Cronbach alpha coefficient (Collis & Hussey, 2021). The EFA was not conducted for the factor *Conference Format*, because of the nature of the items that relate to four specific aspects of a conference format, namely Conference Presentation, Number of delegates, Conference length and Number of tracks, as shown in Table 4. Items for each factor after the EFA were anaylsed and the reliability of all factors was above 0,70, indicating Good or Excellent reliability.

Table 5: Factors ranked in order of importance for all conferences

All conferences	Cronbach's Alpha	Explanation	Eigenvalues	Variance explained
Location	0,82	Excellent	2.918	58.4%
Travel Arrangements	0,79	Good	2.986	49.8%
Accommodation	0,82	Excellent	3.450	49.3%
Conference Arrangements	0,84	Excellent	4.083	45.4%
Conference costs	0,90	Excellent	5.785	52.6%
Academic Value & Networking	0,89	Excellent	6.013	43.0%
Funding	0,87	Excellent	4.252	52.2%
Conference venue	0,90	Excellent	6.561	41.0%
Additional Activities	0,86	Excellent	3.289	65.8%
Conference Satisfaction	0,77	Good	4.505	30.0%

The correlation between the factors was evaluated using Pearson's correlations (Table 6).

Table 6: Correlations

	Location	Travel Arrangements	Accommodation	Conference Arrangements	Conference Costs	Academic Value	Funding	Conference Venue	Additional Activities	CF: Presentation	CF: No. of delegates	CF: Length	CF: No. of tracks	Conference Satisfaction
Location	-	**,227**	**,309**	**,260**	,025	**,171**	,063	,266	**,513**	,099	,235	,118	,081	,147
Travel Arrangements	**,227**	-	**,542**	**,440**	**,598**	**,327**	**,293**	**,403**	,265	-,130	-,120	-,004	-,145	,046
Accommodation	**,309**	**,542**	-	**,517**	**,427**	**,467**	**,330**	**,667**	**,388**	-,045	,032	-,105	,012	,159
Conference Arrangemen	**,260**	**,440**	**,517**	-	**,434**	**,657**	**,409**	**,623**	**,397**	-,062	,114	,020	,016	**,353**
Conference Costs	,025	**,598**	**,427**	**,434**	-	-	**,527**	**,557**	**,548**	**,303**	-,175	-,015	-,182	-,118	,155
Academic Value	**,171**	**,327**	**,467**	**,657**	**,527**	-	-	**,584**	**,644**	**,366**	-,087	,155	-,057	,008	**,339**
Funding	,063	**,293**	**,330**	**,409**	**,557**	**,584**	-	**,507**	**,363**	-,161	,105	-,033	-,009	,290
Conference Venue	**,266**	**,403**	**,667**	**,623**	**,548**	**,644**	**,507**	-	**,548**	-,188	,172	-,102	,046	**,324**
Additional Activities	**,513**	**,265**	**,388**	**,397**	**,303**	**,366**	**,363**	**,548**	-	,002	,155	-,041	-,024	,244
CF: Presentation	,099	-,130	-,045	-,062	**-,175**	-,087	**-,161**	-,188	,002	-	,203	,215	,163	-,087
CF: No. of delegates	**,235**	-,120	,032	,114	-,015	**,155**	,105	,172	,155	,203	-	,192	**,335**	,139
CF: Length	,118	-,004	-,105	,020	**-,182**	-,057	-,033	-,102	-,041	,215	,192	-	,283	-,063
CF: No. of tracks	,081	-,145	,012	,016	-,118	,008	-,009	,046	-,024	,163	**,335**	,283	-	,044
Conference Satisfaction	,147	,046	**,159**	**,353**	**,155**	**,339**	**,290**	**,324**	,244	-,087	,139	-,063	,044	-

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Correlations are statistically significant at 0.05 level for n = 171 if |r| >= .191 and practically significant if |r| >= .300, thus significant (both statistically and practically) if |r| >= .300. The factor Conference arrangements was significantly correlated to Conference satisfaction (|r| >= 0.353), as well as Academic value (|r| >= 0.339) and Conference venue (|r| >=0.324). No significant correlations were recorded for conference presentations, number of delegates and the length of a conference. One-sample t-tests were conducted to classify the factors based on their sample mean values, taking into account sampling error. Three factors correlated with the dependent factor, conference satisfaction are indicated in red (Table 7). However, the only hypothesis that was accepted was H_3, regarding the conference venue ($p<0.0005$).

Table 7: Hypotheses

Hypothesis Description	t-value	Pearson Correlation	p-value	Hypothesis
H_1: Academic value has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	0.13	**r = 0.339**	p<0.894	**Rejected**
H_2: Location has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	2.21	r = 0.147	p<0.029	**Rejected**
H_3: Conference format has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	n/a	n/a		**Rejected**
H_4: Conference venue has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	5.99	**r = 0.324**	p<0.0005	**Accepted**
H_5: Conference arrangements have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	-0.41	**r = 0.353**	p<0.685	**Rejected**
H_6: Costs have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	-3.37	r = 0.155	p<0.001	**Rejected**
H_7: Funding has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	-4.71	r = 0.290	p<0.0005	**Rejected**
H_8: Visa and travel arrangements have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	4.34	r = 0.046	p<0.0005	**Rejected**
H_9: Accommodation has a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	-2.05	r = 0.159	p<0.042	**Rejected**
H_{10}: Additional activities have a significant positive influence on Academic Conference Satisfaction	-3.25	r = 0.244	p<0.001	**Rejected**

Conference costs (ANOVA results)

The post-hoc results (Table 8) further confirm the differences between junior and senior respondents regarding conference costs. Junior respondents ($\mu_1 = 3.34$) rated conference costs higher in importance than Senior lecturers ($\mu_2 = 2.81$) and Associate Professors and Professors ($\mu_2 = 2.99$). The difference was statistically significant and a large practical significance, as indicated by Cohen's d.

Table 8: Post-hoc Results – Conference costs

Effect	Level 1	Level 2	μ_1	μ_2	t-test p	Cohen's d
Current Position	Jr Lecturer / Lecturer	Senior Lecturer	3.34	2.81	0.002	0.80
Current Position	Jr Lecturer / Lecturer	Assoc. Prof. / Professor	3.34	2.99	0.017	0.55

Thematic analysis

Figure 5 illustrates the content and thematic analysis of the responses regarding the question: *Which academic conference did you enjoy the most and why?*

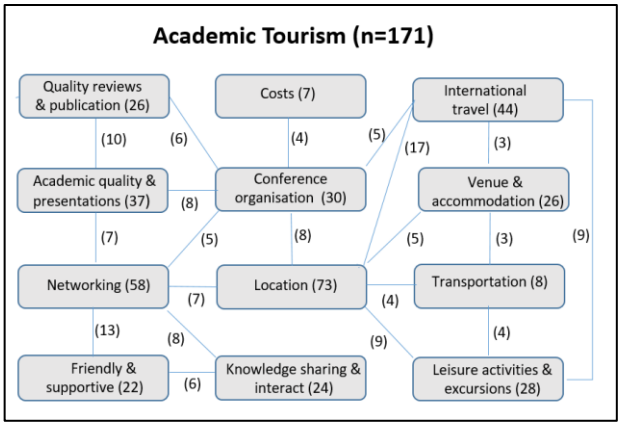

Figure 5: Content and thematic analysis

The location (43%, n=73) was the most important theme, as shown in Figure 5, followed by networking opportunities (34%, n=58) and international travel opportunities (26%, n=44). Seventeen delegates mentioned the importance of location and international travel. Respondent P5 indicated "Conference in Portugal in 2019. Well organised conference, good networking and excellent papers. Good sightseeing, reasonable public transportation, costs were reasonable all round at the time". P67 said "Conference in Budapest, Hungary. The location was great; the conference is highly ranked and attended by prominent researchers in the field of supply chain management. I received valuable feedback on my work. It was very well organised, had a PhD track, and other valuable workshops that enhanced my knowledge, experience and my CV. Food was great, cultural and industry tours were included". The academic quality of the conference (n=37) and the quality of the presentations were highlighted by 22% of the delegates. The delegates highlighted the importance of academic quality, with the quality of presentations and journal publications. The quality of presentations and the publication of a journal (22%, n=37) was also linked to the conference organisation (18%, n=30) and academic quality". P35 said, "A conference in 2008, on Christmas Island. An exotic location and one I had long wanted to visit. The conference was highly relevant to my research and provided an opportunity to meet other researchers working in similar areas. The conference proceedings were published in a credible peer-reviewed journal". Twenty-eight respondents mentioned the importance of leisure activities and excursions and nine respondents linked the theme to international travel and the location of the conference. P25 indicated "Those offering a full

package with special flight and accommodation rates at the conference venue. Conference offering special tours" and P28 said "a global congress, we had excursions we could participate in and the speakers were renowned authors with whom we could network".

Networking was associated with a friendly and supportive conference environment and opportunities for knowledge sharing and interaction (n=24). P8 indicated, "The conferences I have enjoyed the most have been the international face-to-face. Face-to-face interaction to meet people and interact. The international aspect is fun in the sense that you see a country you have not seen before and experience the people of that new place, but really, it's about spending time with colleagues from around the globe discussing research". P85 indicated "InSite Conference in Slovenia. Well organised, networking was easy and the venue was excellent". The conference venue and accommodation at or close to the conference were mentioned by 26 delegates; however, only 7 respondents mentioned the cost of the conference (Figure 5). P39 indicated, "On a junior lecturer salary, conferences these days are mostly out of my reach". P66 indicated, "The IBC conferences are good. They have good networking, good content, and the venues and locations are always interesting and of value. The feedback on presentations is done in a positive manner to add value to the presenter". Respondent P9 said "The conference that offered easy access (travel), rigorous academic quality (review) and an interesting venue and leisure activities". P53 said "meeting interesting people, joint presentation with colleagues, an opportunity to travel with my wife, interesting destinations, an opportunity for a holiday after the conference, good subsequent publication opportunities". The thematic analysis was repeated using the large language model (LLM), Claude.ai. The following are the analyses using Claude.ai: "I've identified several key themes that emerge from the responses about enjoyable academic conferences. Here's a thematic analysis:

1. Networking Opportunities: Many respondents emphasised the importance of networking at conferences. They valued opportunities to meet colleagues, form collaborations and engage in discussions with peers in their field.
2. Location and Venue: The location and venue of the conference played a significant role in enjoyment. Respondents frequently mentioned beautiful or interesting locations, often coupling conference attendance with tourism opportunities.
3. Conference Organisation and Quality: Well-organised conferences with high-quality papers and presentations were highly valued. Respondents appreciated conferences with rigorous academic standards and good management.
4. Size and Intimacy: There was a preference for smaller, more intimate conferences that allow for deeper discussions and better networking opportunities. Some respondents found large conferences overwhelming.
5. Interdisciplinary Nature: Several respondents enjoyed conferences that brought together academics from various disciplines, allowing for cross-pollination of ideas.
6. Cultural Experiences: Many appreciated conferences that included cultural activities or excursions, allowing them to experience the local culture of the host country or city.
7. Professional Development: Conferences were seen as valuable for professional growth, especially for early career researchers. Opportunities to present work and receive feedback were highlighted.
8. Specific Conference Series: Certain conference series were mentioned repeatedly (e.g., IBC, SAIMS, SACLA), suggesting loyalty to particular conference brands.
9. Balance of Academic and Social Activities: Respondents valued conferences that struck a good balance between academic sessions and social or networking events.
10. Affordability and Accessibility: Some respondents mentioned the importance of conferences being affordable and easily accessible, particularly for those with limited budgets.
11. Publication Opportunities: Conferences that offered opportunities for publication in reputable journals were viewed positively.
12. Industry Connections: Some respondents appreciated conferences that included industry tours or connections with professionals outside academia.

This analysis reveals that while academic quality is crucial, many other factors contribute to a positive conference experience, including networking opportunities, location and the overall balance of activities". Claude.ai highlighted the networking opportunities, the venue and location, the balance between academic and social activities and support for early career researchers.

Conclusions and future research

Conferences are important events in an academic's career and publishing a paper in a conference's proceedings increases the likelihood of a paper being cited (Leon & McQuillan, 2018). Academic conferences present valuable opportunities to learn about cutting-edge research, meet and network with delegates and build strong professional relationships (Walters, et al., 2025). A reputable academic conference is characterised by its organisation, qualified reviewers and paper review process, well-structured proceedings, distinguished academics and keynote speakers (Aguilar, 2023). Academic conference organisers must demonstrate their commitment to excellence, integrity and the advancement of knowledge within specific fields of study (Aguilar, 2023). The research findings in this study indicate that all the respondents indicated that they rated the conference location and networking as the most important factors in deciding to attend an academic conference. This highlights the appeal of well-organised conferences, which focus on a rigorous review process, maintaining high academic standards and research publications, including a journal publications. The content analysis and thematic analysis done by the authors and the LLM Claude.ai, highlighted similar themes and validated the content analysis done by the authors. This study contributed to the

Theory of Events, which is based on the conference participants' perspective of an event and in the case of this study, the delegates' perceptions of academic conferences. The Theory of Events identified five key elements of the event experience of the attendees (Roberts et al., 2022). This study identified four additional elements for academic conference events, namely Quality assurance, Academic value, Costs and funding and most importantly, Location (Figure 6). The results indicated that Networking is an important new component of the element Behaviours. Venue and accommodation are linked to Location, with the Conference format influencing the element Group setting. Transportation, Travel arrangements and Visas influence the element Logistics.

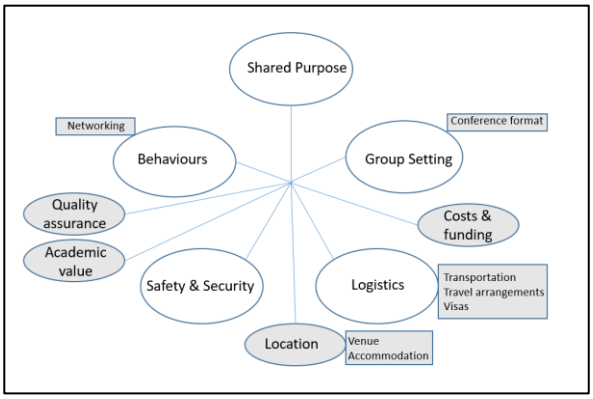

Figure 6: Updated model for academic conference event experiences
Source: Updated from Roberts et al. (2022)

The theoretical contribution of this study is that the Roberts et al. (2022) model of the event experience (Figure 1) has been extended to form an updated model for Academic Conference Event Experience (Figure 6) and the basis for a proposed Academic Conference Theory. The research findings contribute to the latest knowledge on the still under-researched field of academic tourism. The practical contribution of this study is that conference organisers should note the importance of the location and networking opportunities and maintain high academic standards. Academics, researchers and conference organisers must consider the factors identified in this study when selecting conferences to attend or endorse, ensuring that they participate in events that uphold reputable academic standards. The motives for attending a conference comprise personal and behavioural factors all anchored on the satisfaction of academic conference satisfaction (Ubani et al., 2024). In most instances, Academic conferences are run by academics who are not schooled in conference or event management. The findings of this study provide clear guidelines regarding what they should consider when planning an academic conference. The limitation of the study is that it has a South African bias. Future research should focus on obtaining a bigger sample and target academics and researchers who have attended international conferences in the past years. Future research should include measurement of the effectiveness of conferences in promoting the impact of academic work (Leon & McQuillin, 2018). 'Conferences are the invisible college made incarnate, the tangible manifestation of the spirit of the academic community' (Etzion et al., 2022, p. 360).

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