

Holistic transformational experience of a conference: an attendee perspective

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Holistic transformational experience of a conference: An attendee perspective

This paper presents an original framework depicting the holistic transformational conference journey – pre, during and post-conference. It departs from existing scholarship that has examined each stage in isolation, limiting understanding on how the attendees' beneficial outcomes are developed throughout the conference journey. The unique application of a transformational lens enables a critical interrogation of the conference creator's influence on designing meaningful experiences that deliver individual transformational outcomes at each stage. The framework is informed by 18 life-world interviews with conference attendees from varied professions and at different stages in their careers, offering diverse narratives. The findings show that deep motivations and internal needs are actualised through a transformational conference design, leading to greater conference engagement and post-conference outcomes. Conversely, a traditional basic conference design stimulates shallow motivation, driven by external needs, leading to superficial engagement and outcomes.

Keywords: conference; conference creator; transformational experiences; event design; convention

Introduction

This paper contends that contemporary conference experiences are more complex than previously considered, extending temporarily and spatially beyond the conference event for both the attendees and the conference creators. Consequently, the conference journey – pre, during and post - is conceptualised holistically through an original framework. This departs from previous approaches by scholars to examine each stage in isolation, limiting understanding on how the attendees' beneficial outcomes are developed throughout the conference journey, and how conference creators can design the conference to support outcome development. For example, the greatest attention, primarily in early conference literature, has been on the pre-conference stage, with an emphasis on the organisers' destination and venue choices (Rittichainuwat et al., 2001), evidenced in conference attendance decision making models by Oppermann and Chon (1997), Lee and Back (2007) and Mair and Thompson (2009). The during conference stage, specifically the attendees' experience, has also received some interest, viewing,

for example, the service experience (e.g., Breiter & Milman, 2006) and belonging to a community (e.g., Hahm et al., 2016); a direction which is replicated within the broader events literature (e.g., Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). The final post-conference stage has largely leaned towards its tourism origins and concentrated heavily on the economic impacts of conferences on the host destination (Mair, 2014), the attendees' satisfaction and intentions to return (Jung & Tanford, 2017), and evaluations of costs, logistics and hospitality (Mair, 2012).

The attendee's experience has widely been considered one of the most under-research areas (Ramirez et al., 2013). Recently, this has been given some scholarly attention, however, it has been limited in its focus primarily on the conference experiences of academics and on the 'during' stage of the conference journey (e.g., Cavusoglu et al., 2023). The inclusion of attendees from varied professions in this paper alongside its holistic approach and its focus on outcomes significantly broadens scholarly knowledge on the emergent research field of conference experiences.

Uniquely, this paper also considers conference experiences through a transformational lens, drawing from Pine and Gilmore's (2011) concept of the experience economy and more recently the emerging transformation economy (Pine II, 2026). Pine II (2026) argues that economic value can no longer only be determined by the services and experiences offered but also through the provision of meaningful and transformational experiences. Therefore, the framework depicts the attendees holistic conference journey within a transformational conference design, recognising the conference creator's influence on designing meaningful experiences that deliver individual transformational outcomes (Neuhofer et al., 2024). This includes outcomes such as the attendee's development from the conference experience and how it triggers behavioural change (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024b) and knowledge transfer (Henn &

Bathelt, 2015) in their day-to-day business following the conference. Therefore, this paper also responds to calls for further research (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024a) in the embryonic scholarly field of transformational conference experiences. Concurrently, this paper extends existing strategic event design approaches, as offered by authors such as Crowther et al. (2018), Orefice (2018) and Neuhofer et al. (2020), which conference creators can utilise to promote deeper transformational outcomes for the attendees.

Outside of the conference literature, a somewhat holistic approach has been adopted in the broader event literature to examine event experiences, such as de Geus et al.'s (2016) event experience model, Frissen et al.'s (2016) event canvas, Brown's (2023) experience value model, and Liu et al.'s (2017) model of customer experience creation. Whilst these models offer understanding of the feelings and emotions attendees experience during the event, and the environment that event designers should aim to create, they are not comprehensive and do not consider each stage in detail or how, interrelatedly, the stages support the continuous development of outcomes. The framework presented in this paper extends these models by considering the optimal event journey as a series of transformational steps that result in during- and post-event outcomes.

This paper, therefore, makes a two-fold revelatory (Doran et al., 2022) original contribution to academic scholarship: to conference research specifically and event studies generally. Firstly, a revelatory contribution is made by challenging existing assumptions regarding the conference experience, considering it holistically, rather than focusing on one stage of the conference journey, and through a transformational lens to understand attendees' beneficial outcomes, including positive changed behaviour. Simultaneously, it answers calls for further research in the neglected area of conference experiences and the emergent related field of transformational event experiences.

Secondly, a revelatory contribution lies in extending into broader event scholarship a generalisable framework for examining the attendees' event experiences holistically expanding, firstly on earlier conference models which focused on the attendance decision making stage and, secondly on earlier event experience models whose scope was more narrow in focus, excluding both a transformational lens and a focus on outcomes.

The conceptual framework is informed by 18 life-world interviews with people who have attended multiple conferences throughout their varied careers, offering diverse narratives of the holistic conference journey from pre-conference decision-making to the during conference experience and outcomes, and finally the post-conference outcomes.

Literature review

Pre-conference: Decision-making process and motivations

Networking and learning are widely reported as key motivations for attending conferences (Jung & Tanford, 2017). Learning refers to three different but very closely linked factors - education, professional development, and personal development – and viewed as one overall motivation (Mair, 2014). The foundations for learning as a motivation are grounded in the attendee's needs and desires to expand their knowledge, gain new skills, and improve professional practices (Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

Further motivations have been identified, especially when discussing decision-making process models for conference attendees and the factors which affect decision-making. For example, Oppermann and Chon's (1997) early model identified four factors which can influence someone's decision to attend a conference: (1) personal/business, such as funding, time availability and professional development, (2)

association/conference, including maintaining/broadening professional contacts and personal interactions with the host, (3) destination factors such as weather, attractions, and access, and (4) intervening opportunities such as attending another conference or going on vacation constraining the ability to attend. Zhang et al. (2007) refined this model by expanding the intervening opportunities to include time and financial costs as possible constraints and increased the importance of destination factors.

Models by other scholars have followed similar patterns with some additions. For example, Mair and Thompson (2009) added an awareness and information search stage preceding the motivation consideration; Lee and Back's (2007) model included expected outcomes, determining that past experience has the greatest influence on the decision to attend; and Kusumawardani et al.'s (2022) model focused on trust and confidence in conference organisers. None of the models explore the relationship between motivations to attend and outcomes.

With early event studies having a focus within a management-predominant paradigm (Orefice, 2018), many of the pre-conference decision-making process models focused on the facilitators, inhibitors or barriers to understand how to attract attendees. These are not mutually exclusive. The destination, for example, can function as both a facilitator and an inhibitor. For it to be a facilitator, conference creators evaluate the choice of destination by considering established factors such as cost (finance and time), accessibility, facilities, services and surroundings. More recently, sustainability (Welthagen et al., 2022), safety and easy access to Wi-Fi (Yamashita & Oshimi, 2023) are considered facilitators when perceived positively by the attendee. Gaining funding to attend is, however, a common barrier (Mair et al., 2018). Finally, studies have also considered the impact of experiences on future motivations in the form of intentions to

return (Hahm et al., 2016; Jung & Tanford, 2017) as an outcome from a conference experience.

Many of these studies are long-established and still relevant, however, they overlook the underpinning meanings of the motivations and what the attendees hope to achieve from their experience, including the transformation they envisage. This is perhaps due to the preference for employing quantitative methods (e.g. Cassar et al., 2020) which have not allowed for latent meanings to be explored. Further, by focusing on one stage of the conference journey, they overlook how motivations in one stage inform and influence motivations in other stages of a conference journey.

During: The conference experience

Conference design can be used to construct the relationship between individuals and their physical settings to create the conference experience and an emotional connection to the conference for the attendee (Nelson, 2009). To achieve this, conference creators must move beyond inputs, such as logistics, décor and entertainment (Berridge, 2007; Orefice, 2018) and a format which emphasises one-way communication (Ravn, 2007), to one that adopts an audience-centric approach to positively influence and modify the behaviour of the attendees (Frissen et al., 2016) post-conference. The emphasis should, therefore, be on the event design pre, during and post experience, not solely on managing the during stage of the event (Orefice, 2018), and focus on meeting the attendees' increased expectations and desires to have a unique and meaningful experience (Crowther, 2010) that creates outcomes, including changed behaviour.

This contemporary view of designing events has gained significant traction in academic literature recently, largely led by Neuhofer and colleagues with their work on transformative event experiences building on the wider experience economy concept

(Pine & Gilmore, 2011) which has now developed into a transformation economy (Pine II, 2026). This concept views the event as being temporary and away from everyday life and routines, which can support transformative experiences and lead to changed personal behaviour post-conference (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024a) through interpersonal connections, new knowledge, self-growth, and a sense of inclusivity and belonging (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024b). However, a transformational experience could begin pre-conference through an effective conference design, heightening the motivations of perspective attendees and positively influencing the decision-making process, whilst also managing expectations on what their experience will include (Berners & Martin, 2023). This may also initiate the development of perceived beneficial outcomes for attendees, something that has been overlooked in the literature.

Transformative event experiences and changed behaviour

Transformative event experience as defined by Neuhofer (2024, p. 524) is an “intentional, voluntary, and positive experience that an individual undergoes aimed at triggering a shift of one’s mindset, beliefs, values, and behaviours and long-term wellbeing” in a “one or multiple-day gathering [...] that aspire to elicit personal transformation” (Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024b, p. 4). In addition, it should offer a “vehicle for time well spent and invested in an ecosystem of positive emotions, memories, and personal growth” (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024a, p. 486). This applies to all types of events, including business events (also called MICE: Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, Events), such as conferences (Neuhofer et al., 2024). Integral to this, is an event design that enables attendees to be active participants, with a focus on building connections and having long-term impact (Steriopoulos & Wrathall, 2021) as this triggers the desired behavioural change as a consequence of attending the event

(Neuhofer et al., 2024).

The underpinnings of a transformative event experience are not new. Two decades ago, Ravn (2007, p. 216) discussed the importance of human co-flourishing during conferences focused on learning, for empowerment and success following attendance: “when human potentials unfold and blossom in interaction with each other; when people have so inspired each other for individual or joint reflection or action that they become more fully what they are”. He recommended an active and relevant programme for the attendees, for example, a contemporary overarching theme or main topic as proposed by Henn and Bathelt (2015). Additionally, it has been noted that the sooner the peak presentation which delivers on positive emotions, like keynote speakers, is in the programme, the higher levels of attendee satisfaction (Godovykh & Hahm, 2020). These studies, however, all focus on the during phase of the conference, omitting the other stages and how they interplay, including how the programme allows for post-conference transformational outcomes, which a holistic approach to the conference journey offers.

Event design centred on co-creation

A transformation does not happen in vacuum and as discussed above, active attendee participation in the event is integral to it becoming a transformative experience. Hence, an event design centred on co-creation is required, which Dieteren & Neuhofer (2024a) depicted as a dynamic conference format which creates a trusting environment, offers challenging experiences, and facilitates attendee interaction and learning. It enables the attendee to construct value from this business exchange through the transformational experience (Rihova et al., 2018). Indeed, attendees have been reported to find more value in co-creation experiences than the traditional value dimensions of emotional

(activated from gathering with like-minded people), social (enhanced self-image) and functional (value for money) values (Min Ho et al., 2022) on its own.

Co-creating value can be achieved through the inclusion of a social programme (Rihova et al., 2018) which enables attendees to take time out from the formal programme, encouraging small group interactions in non-work environments and fostering relationships with other attendees (Foley et al., 2014; Mair & Frew, 2016). Consequently, food and beverage sessions are not simply fuelling the attendees but offer relaxed settings to reflect upon their learning and not passively listening to speakers but gaining opportunities to discuss and debate with other attendees (Crowther & Donlan, 2011) facilitating their co-creation of the experience. Through co-creation, when the attendees are engaged and involved, they are more likely to leave with increased knowledge and skills which could positively change their behaviour (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), including, sharing their experience on social media (Sriwanna & Meeprom, 2026), and promote the sense of a transformational experience, thus enhancing the perceived value of the conference for attendees (Mitchell et al., 2016).

To support a more immersive event, frequently aided by co-creation (Sobitan & Vlachos, 2020), Jung et al. (2024) have suggested a design approach termed as festivalisation which injects leisure and social elements into the business events programme. Their study found that the festivalisation they offered during the conference, including wellness programs, interactive marketing booths and tech village, with enhanced quality and experiences of food and beverages, improved the attendees' perception of value and engagement with the conference. They conclude that this fostered greater satisfaction with the conference experience, increased behavioural intents of returning and encouraged positive word of mouth. It was not clear, however, if this festivalisation approach to co-creation also supported learning or led to positive

changed behaviour and other outcomes post-event. Therefore, this approach on its own may not be suitable to event creators designing outcomes-driven and/or transformational conferences. In addition, not all attendees are seeking a transformational experience at events as they may perceive there is no need for individual transformation or they participate with low energy, leading to limited engagement with co-creating the transformational experience (Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024a)

Post-conference: Continuous development of outcomes

The holistic conference journey approach enables conference creators to recognise and appreciate attendees' motivations and build them into the conference design to create a transformational experience that supports the development of outcomes from that experience. Thus, it moves away from the more traditional focus of evaluations supporting increased future attendance and measuring conference organisers' efforts of delivery (Jung & Tanford, 2017) or determining the conference's value for money (Min Ho et al., 2022) rather than its design benefits for attendees. Recently, Neuhofer et al. (2024) suggest that event creators should focus their design on facilitating outcomes related to changed behaviour, emotional experiences, personal engagement, responsible/sustainable objectives, and design measurements that can demonstrate these outcomes. Foley et al. (2026) also recognise that these need evaluating, however contend that further work is needed to develop and test measurement instruments which demonstrate the outcomes.

Conference outcomes, viewed from the attendee's benefit, are often referred to as value, and studies have identified different types of value beyond the functional value for money (Jung et al., 2024; Min Ho et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2016). For example,

1) professional value, including learning value, innovation value, and reputational value; 2) personal value, which develops social and relationship value, emotional value and hedonic value; and 3) novelty value (learning and experiencing something new). In addition, attendee outcomes have been referred to as social legacies, encompassing networking and collaboration, knowledge sharing and application, and new friendship (Tan et al., 2024). By comparison, Io (2022) refers to attendee outcomes of business events as experiential benefits including cognitive experiences, psychological experiences and leisure experiences which have a positive effect on attendees' satisfaction and achieved outcomes. Although, these categories of value are not detailed by Io (2022).

Following networking and learning during the conference, including receiving feedback during the conference through formal and informal conversations, reported outcomes include new knowledge of emerging trends, inspiration, problem solving and innovation (Henn & Bathelt, 2023), a promotion or further responsibility at work (Mair & Frew, 2016), increased confidence (Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024a), knowledge sharing (Henn & Bathelt, 2015), idea generation (Kitchen, 2017), formation of new collaborative relationships (Ihm & Castillo, 2017), fundraising and future research capacity, and raising awareness and profiling of their work (Foley et al., 2013). The tacit knowledge gained, originating from people's world experiences and understanding, therefore makes the conference of essential value as a knowledge platform (Jung & Lee, 2022).

Whilst the outcomes of a conference are well known, Dieteren and Neuhofer (2024a) contest that there is limited understanding of how value, and therefore outcomes, in events, including conferences, is being enabled and diminished. They suggest increased facilitators' involvement, strategically designed to drive value

(outcome) enablement. The adoption of a holistic approach offers this, as it enables the facilitator to consider value (outcome) attainment at each stage of the conference journey and how this positively influences behaviour post-conference.

To measure outcomes, Celuch et al. (2025) suggest a longitudinal evaluation cycle, starting with clear definitions of outcomes to measure. This is followed by multi method data collections before, during and after, including quantitative surveys, focus groups, and interviews, allowing for change measurements of emotions, learning outcomes, behaviour and transformations. The holistic transformational conference journey framework (see Figure 2) provided in this paper, would support a longitudinal evaluation cycle.

Methodology

To understand the holistic transformational conference journey(s) of conference participants over their career, how this relates to other experiences in their professional life, and the subsequent meaning of conferences to the participants, an interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology was adopted.

18 semi-structured life-world interviews were conducted with participants whose experience ranged from one conference journey to journeys over a period of 40 years. Initially, a purposive sample was generated through personal and professional contacts, then snowball sampling was used to recruit participants with a range of experiences from both association and corporate conferences, recognising that different types of conferences attract different attendees with differing motivations and outcomes, thus offering diverse voices and multiple realities. For example, association conferences are predominantly attended by people who have a choice in attending, and the expected benefits (e.g., networking and learning) and/or the destination need to be sufficiently

attractive for delegates to overcome barriers and be motivated to attend (Cassar et al., 2020; Mair et al., 2018). Creators of this type of conference are aiming to maximise attendance and encourage repeat attendance and word of mouth as the conference often generates most of their annual income (Davidson, 2026). Therefore, it is imperative that beneficial outcomes for attendees are considered and included in the conference design to stimulate need and motivation to attend and engagement. By comparison, attendance at corporate conferences is often expected and delegates do not have a choice (Cassar et al., 2020). This presents the conference creator with very different attendee motivations and barriers that must be considered and negotiated to activate engagement that generates beneficial outcomes for the attendee.

To enable different experiences and voices to be heard, the participants were not recruited from specific events or industry, as has been common practice in conference research (e.g. Io, 2022; Mair et al., 2018), but instead they are employed in a range of industries offering diverse conference experiences. To contribute to the existing academic literature explicitly, the participant voices have been split into two groups: academic and practitioner (outside academia). The voices from the two attendee groups – nine academics and nine practitioners – within this study have been delineated with narratives from academics indicated by A and practitioner by P.

The sampling approach also facilitated the inclusion of participants situated at different stages within their career to enable the identification of distinctions at different stages of the attendees' careers, and to capture the evolution of conference design over the years and how this shaped the experiences of and outcomes for attendees. Further, the inclusion of early career participants who have recently begun attending conferences mitigated the reliance on long-term memories. Within both the academic and practitioner groups, a similar number of early, mid and late career participants were

recruited. Diversity in demographics was not the purpose of the sampling and was not recorded. The focus, instead, was diversity in the participants' profession, career stage, and conference attendance. The sample size would also not allow for demographics to be meaningfully analysed. Table 1 provides a summary of the interview participants.

		Participant	Current Occupation	Area	Previous occupation
A C A D E M I C S	Early Career	A1	Lecturer	Business management	Business management
		A2	PhD Student	Medicine	
		A3	Lecturer undertaking a PhD	Business management	Sales
	Mid-Career	A5	Postdoctoral Researcher	Geoscience	
		A4	Lecturer undertaking a PhD	Business management	
		A6	Postdoctoral Researcher	Medicine	
		A7	Senior academic undertaking a PhD	Education	Teaching
	Late Career	A8	Professor	Education	School teacher
		A9	Professor	Engineering	
P R A C T I T I O N E R S	Early Career	P1	Consultant	Built environment	PhD researcher
		P2	IT	IT	
	Mid-Career	P3	Lawyer	Law	
		P4	Chartered Engineer	Energy Industry	
		P5	Finance Director	Wealth management	
		P6	Finance Manager	Third sector	
	Late Career	P7	Consultant	Compliance	IT and Pharmaceutical sector
		P8	IT Manager	Health sector	
		P9	Medical clinician and professor	Medicine	

Table 1. Summary of interview participants

Participants were encouraged to provide a personal experience story of attending conferences, from when they first began contemplating attending, what motivated them to attend, their experience during the conference, and the perceived long-term beneficial

outcomes they gained post-conference. The participants' stories were not told in this order, however the information gained in each interview was synthesised to provide a longitudinal account of the participant's overall journey. The purpose of the interview was not to 'understand the language and culture of the respondents' (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 654) but to learn about their conference experiences as they perceived them. Focus was on their words and choice of topics which was guided by the interview themes and questions; however as the interviewee chose the path of discussing their experiences, the questions asked and the order of them varied between interviews in accordance to the flow of the conversation (Saunders et al., 2009). Appendix 1 provides example questions used when discussing each stage of the conference journey with the participants.

Interviews were a mix of face-to-face and online and lasted 40-90 mins depending on the number of experiences participants had to discuss from their conference journey. The lack of memory on some points and vivid memory on others, regardless of when they attended the conference, only demonstrated what was of importance to the participants when explaining their conference experiences and subsequent outcomes.

To interpret the data, thematic data analysis was utilised, appropriate to the interpretivist stance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, data was coded using both the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) software NVivo as well as by hand, and, subsequently, initial themes within the codes were generated. The analysis was data-driven, in an attempt to avoid the conceptualisation of themes based on the preconceived three stages of a conference journey identified in the literature, allowing also for analysis of each participants' journey as well as a holistic journey. However, 'data is not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), and the

theoretical commitments created after the review of literature undoubtedly influenced the thematic analysis, resulting in the data being analysed using the pre-existing coding frame of the three conference stages. To ensure dependability and confirmability of the findings, intercoder reliability was adopted, and the research team independently coded the same interview data to check for consistency of coding.

The analytic process progressed from coding and the development of initial themes related to the three journey stages at a semantic or surface meaning level (see Figure 1), to a latent and interpretive level (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where themes were refined and interpreted.

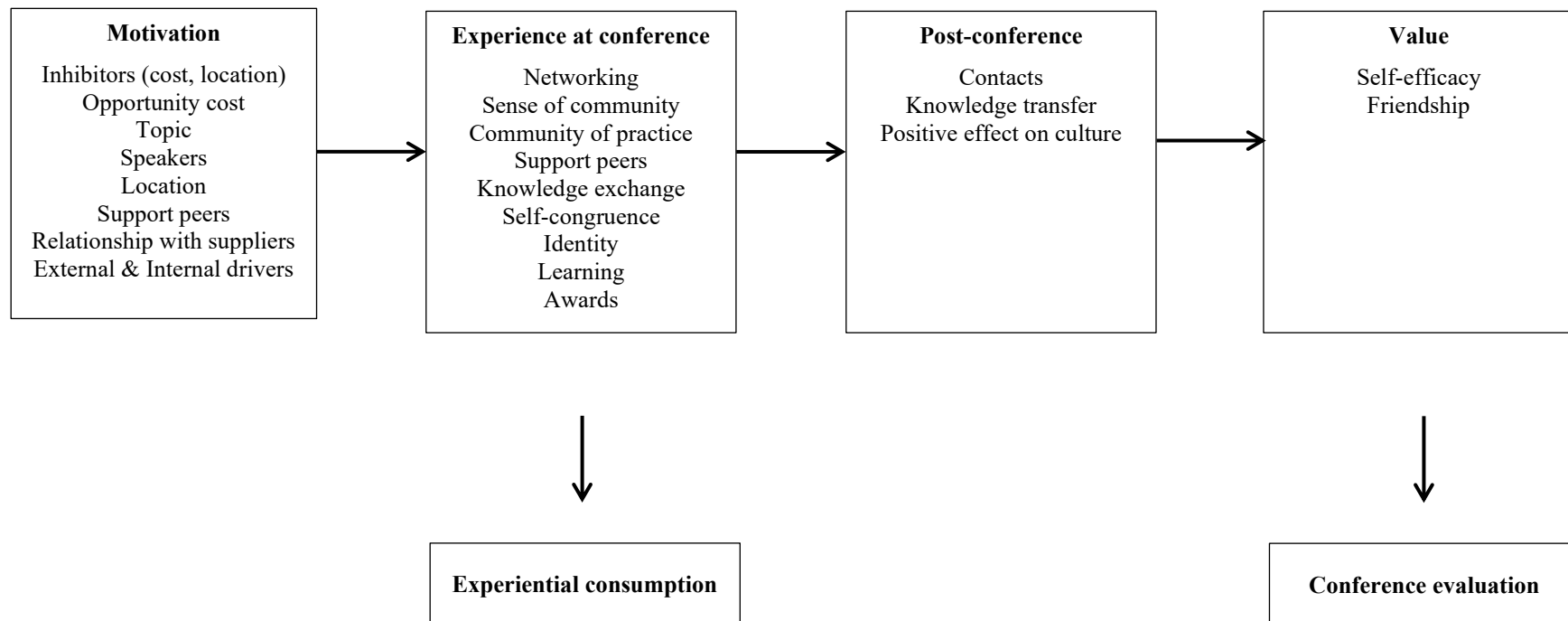


Figure 1. Initial themes from the data analysis

Specifically, this involved identifying explicit meaning within the stories the participants told, and the data organised to show patterns within the journeys to gain a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This underpinned the development of the original framework in Figure 2 as a means of creating one common journey, which then supported the remainder of the theming process. The inclusion of the key research questions (see Appendix) enables others to replicate the study and assess the theoretical transferability of the framework, further strengthening the research rigour of this study.

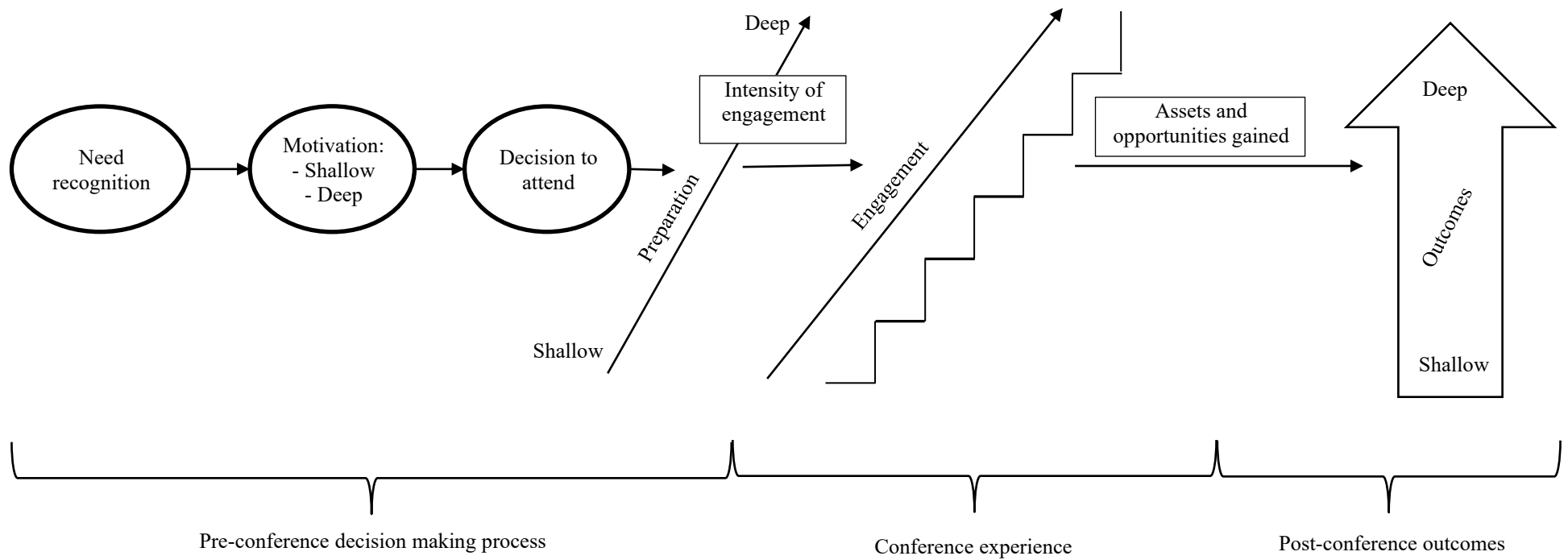


Figure 2. The single transformational conference journey framework

Findings and discussion

The single conference journey framework

The framework (Figure 2) synthesises existing critical approaches to examining the individual stages of a conference attendees' experience - pre, during and post - with the holistic qualitative data from this study, offering an original way of examining and theorising a conference journey whilst responding to calls to address knowledge gaps. The framework also advances earlier conference models by Zhang et al. (2007), Lee and Back (2007) and Mair and Thompson (2009), which focused on the period before attending, specifically the decision-making process, suggesting that short-term logistical factors were of higher importance than long-term outcomes, as discussed in the literature review. Although the framework focuses on the holistic experiences of conference attendees, it can be applied to other event settings, thus providing a useful point of reference for event scholars generally. Especially, as it advances other event experience models. For example, Brown (2023), de Geus et al.'s (2016), Frissen et al.'s (2016) and Liu et al.'s (2017) event experience models each illustrate a somewhat holistic journey, with the latter two also focusing to some extent on outcomes, such as 'entering behaviour' and 'exiting behaviour' (Frissen et al., 2016). By comparison, the framework presented in Figure 2 illustrates a more comprehensive journey, illustrating what components need to be in place and at what stage, to develop different levels of outcomes and a transformational experience. Accordingly, this offers event designers a framework depicting detailed stages of a transformational event experience.

The framework illustrates the behaviour of the individual attendee throughout the conference journey, beginning with the recognition of a need to attend a conference. This is followed by consideration of the motivations to attend, depicted as 'shallow' or 'deep' motivations, offering a novel approach to considering motivations in the

conference literature. After the decision to attend, the prospective attendee engages with preparations, some more intensely than others. The experience at the conference itself is a ladder which depicts that, as more design approaches are applied to the conference and with greater engagement from the attendee themselves, the more likely they are to reach a heightened experience whereby the attendee will integrate better into the conference community and have a transformational experience, leading to a range of assets and opportunities. The final stages of the attendee's single conference journey involve the development of experiential assets and opportunities gained during the conference, which may transform into more tangible positive outcomes post-conference.

Each stage of the single conference journey will now be discussed in turn and illustrated using data from the interviews. A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Conference stages		Key responses
Pre	Need recognition	• <i>External needs</i>: Required to attend • <i>Internal needs</i>: To gain new and relevant information
	Motivation (see Table 3)	• <i>Shallow motivation</i>: Linked to external needs. Aligned with conference management approach, e.g., good food and location, broad conference topic. • <i>Deep motivation</i>: Narrow and relevant conference topic offering learning and networking opportunities, visibility, and perceived outcomes.
	Decision to attend	• Positive word-of-mouth
	Preparation	• <i>Shallow motivation</i>: Make travel arrangements and prepare presentation. • <i>Deep motivation</i>: Read conference material, decide which sessions to attend, and arrange meetings with attendees.
During	Engagement (see Figure 2)	• <i>Superficial engagement</i>: External needs, shallow motivation and passive conference sessions. • <i>Deep engagement</i>: Internal needs, deep motivation, attendee contribute to sessions and co-create their experiences, networking opportunities, and community formation.

	Assets & Opportunities (see Figure 3)	• <i>Experiential assets</i>: New information, confidence, increased visibility, and larger network. • <i>Opportunities</i>: Future projects and sales, and future collaborations.
Post	Assets, Opportunities & Outcomes (see Figure 3)	• Reflecting, sharing and acting on new knowledge and contacts; improved professional image. • Stronger and wider network, increased sales, new clients, and new projects.

Table 2. Summary of findings

Pre-conference: Need recognition, motivations to attend and preparations

The conference journey begins with a need recognition, a stage that has been largely overlooked in the literature. These needs manifested either externally or internally, and once recognised, initiated the participants' motivations. External needs, which are outside of the attendees' control, were centred on them being required to attend. For example, '*the university needs to have a presence there*' (A6) or senior leaders having to be present to show support (A7, P3, P7, P8), reflecting Hansen and Budtz Pedersen's (2018) concept of 'Visible College'. The internal needs, however, are identified and controlled by the attendees themselves: '*you need to [attend] conferences, [for] updates and listening to people*' (A9) and experience '*a wider stance and a wider range of issues*' (P2).

Following recognition of the needs, motivations were established. Motivations in this research are uniquely identified as 'shallow' and 'deep' (see table 3), rather than adopting the conventional view of considering them solely within a management-paradigm as factors that inform the decision-making process and influenced by facilitators and barriers (see Oppermann & Chon, 1997; Lee & Back, 2007; Mair & Thompson, 2009). The findings indicate this earlier conventional view to be confined to 'shallow' motivations. The framework presented in this study advances these earlier

models by also considering ‘deep’ motivations and their influence on the other stages of a conference journey, including outcome development, offering a more critical and holistic analysis of the conference attendance journey.

‘Shallow’ motivations	‘Deep’ motivations
• Conference design factors (programme, other attendees, location) • Previous experience • Total cost (financial and time)	• Perceived opportunities for development within the programme leading to outcomes • Perceived opportunities for contributions and visibility at the conference, including networking, leading to outcomes • Conference topic supportive of developing outcomes

Table 3. Shallow and deep motivations to attend a conference

Whilst external needs initiate attendance, they provide limited and ‘shallow’ motivations to attend. ‘Shallow motivations’ are aligned with the conference management approach: *‘if you know it was going to be well-run, you are going to be well looked after with nice food and location then you are more amenable to go’* and consider *‘how easy is it to get there?’* (P5).

Whereas ‘deep motivations’ can be recognised through a transformational event design. Starting with the marketing messages to potential attendees when they are making their attendance decision, ensuring that they are attracting the most relevant attendees. A simple programme, indicating the conference design in terms of broad topic and key speakers (P1, P5, P7) and communicating the expectations of knowledge dissemination back to the attendee’s employer (Henn & Bathelt, 2023), supports ‘shallow’ motivations. A comprehensive programme, however, provides the prospective attendee with information on the conference’s ability to deliver upon the ‘deep’ motivations. For example, by mentioning the importance of opportunities for gaining further knowledge of the topic area (P5), a new topic where they could learn innovative things (P9) or knowing of outcomes such as paper publication opportunities (A3).

Information that there would be peers to whom they could network and discuss their subject matter with (P4) also provided contribution opportunities and visibility (P3): *'if you're not there you're not known, ... it is part of the job'* (A5). The marketed conference topic synthesises these points: *'must be in my area, so that I can contribute and learn'* (A9). Indeed, the programme is more influential on the attendee experience and the subsequent outcomes than previous studies have suggested (e.g., Kim & Malek, 2017).

When attendees perceived that the conference was not designed and delivered as advertised, their internal needs and 'deep' motivations were not met, creating negative experiences. For example, by discussing feeling out of place at the conference: *'I don't know how to relate to any of these people'* (P1). It is, therefore, important that conference creators narrow their target market to people who are like-minded and share the same characteristics (Min Ho et al., 2022) and motivations. Interestingly, it was established that the power of word-of-mouth was stronger than formal marketing material: *'this [conference] would be good for you'* (A6) and *'it was a key conference for the sector, [...] one of those that everybody came to'* (P6). Recently Celuch et al. (2025) acknowledged the importance of the marketing message. For example, they suggested communicating the transformative potential of the marketed events through storytelling and provide engaging value propositions. Which is highly relevant for prospective attendees with internal needs and 'deep' motivations.

'Shallow' and 'deep' motivations also influenced engagements with conference attendance preparations. Those with 'shallow' motivations were more likely to only make travel arrangements and prepare presentations/posters (A8, A9), whereas those with more 'deep' motivations engaged with deciding which sessions to attend (P7), reading conference published material (A4) and actively arranging meetings with other

attendees (P8). These deeper preparations were found to strengthen their level of engagement at the conference and positively impact developed outcomes and transformational experiences.

During the conference: Seven steps towards greater outcomes

The experience ladder within the conference journey is shown in Figure 3. The aim of its design is to support Orefice’s (2018) call for a more strategic conference design approach, offering touchpoints during the conference whereby adjustments can be made to the conference design to deepen attendee engagement, promote co-creation (Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024a), heighten the transformational experience and foster positive outcomes.

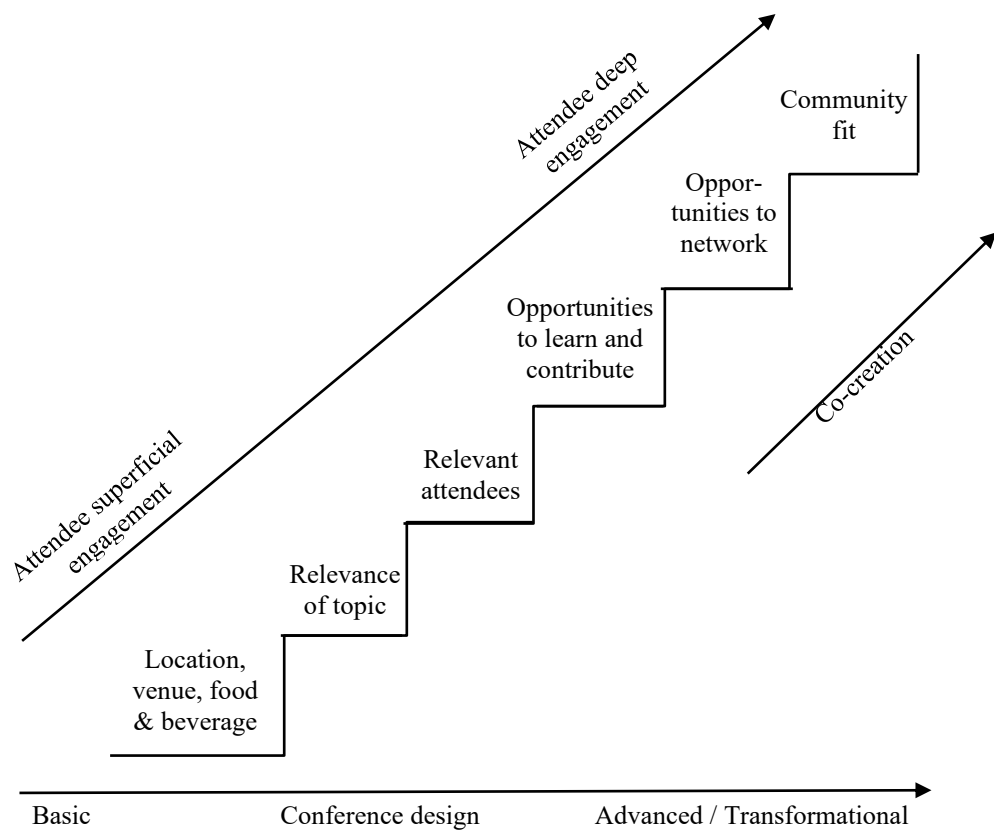


Figure 3. The experience ladder within the conference journey

The location did not have a significant impact on the experience, contradictory to previous findings (Kim & Malek, 2017). It influences as a 'shallow' motivation within the decision-making process and when positive it motivates attendance. Additionally, the venue, food and beverage, were mostly discussed when they caused issues, essentially they were a 'hygiene' factor (Jago & Deery, 2005). This finding underlines the literature saturation on the management approach. Organisers have great knowledge of the basic conference design, but on its own it only delivers superficial engagement.

Steps two, three and four of the conference design are inter-related and particularly important to the attendees' level of engagement during the conference. The conference topic needs to be of relevance to the attendees, therefore, if the conference creator targets relevant attendees based on the topic rather than unsystematically to boost numbers, a sense of community belonging will ensue, promoting deeper engagement with the conference. In turn, a topic-focused conference design will foster opportunities for learning and contributions. The attendee should not have *'to force myself to concentrate'* (P7) but rather experience presentations that are relevant to them, as relevance is more strongly linked to learning than satisfaction with the conference experience (Andersen & Wahlgren, 2015). At the same time, it is important that the conference creator designs opportunities for the attendee to contribute, for example with co-creative workshops, allowing them to have a transformational experience. To achieve this Henn and Bathelt's (2015, p. 109) recommendation of including "narrow focus on specific sub-fields to deliver opportunities for product-specific knowledge exchanges" is supported.

Therefore, a conference design which balances formal more passive sessions with informal interactive sessions will ensure progressive levels of attendee

engagement. Formal sessions, such as keynotes, provide organised learning opportunities. However, an overload of speakers in programmes limits opportunities for interaction and further learning, which can lead to missed opportunities for the realisation of meaningful outcomes and value creation (Crowther & Donlan, 2011). Whereas informal sessions offer richer opportunities for attendees to participate in the co-creation of their conference experience through interaction with other attendees (Rihova et al., 2018), thus reinforcing Jung et al.'s (2024) festivalisation design approach. The creation of experiential assets and opportunities during the conference, like gaining new information, confidence and networking about future projects (see table 2) are achieved both in formal and informal sessions. For example, P3 found organised speed networking exposed him *'to more people than you would be able to get around on your own [...] a quick touch point to see who you might want to engage with later on a deeper level.'*

All types of informal interactive sessions were found to support the key motivation of networking. Thus, contradicting previous work that reported networking only occurring randomly outside of the formal sessions (Henn & Bathelt, 2015). The conference as a combined space (formal and informal) should provide networking opportunities – they should not be random but strategically embedded in the conference design. Indeed, the findings of this study supports the notion that quality interactions among attendees, whereby a sense of belonging, social bonding and positive emotional connections could occur (Hahm et al., 2016; Wei & Miao, 2017), can lead to the formation of a conference community which can transcend the conference experience far more than superficial (random) networking (Wei, Lu, et al., 2017). In addition, this study found that learning and networking opportunities with relevant attendees, *'like-minded people with problems and issues that you have had'* (P2), also underpin the

community formation, increasing the likelihood of outcome creation, illustrated in the following section.

Post-conference: Outcomes for the individual attendee

Three types of outcomes were identified in this research: 1) experiential assets and 2) opportunities that manifested during the conference, and 3) tangible outcomes that formed post-conference as shown in Figure 4. Each of these positively changed behaviours, supporting a transformative experience by triggering shifts of mindsets, beliefs, values and long-term wellbeing. However, experiential assets and opportunities gained during the conference did not always convert into tangible outcomes post-conference. Further, confirming Henn and Bathelt's (2015) suggestion that each type of outcome may not trigger disruptive changes to the conference's entire subject area, nevertheless, the outcomes are likely to have long-lasting impact on the individual attendee.

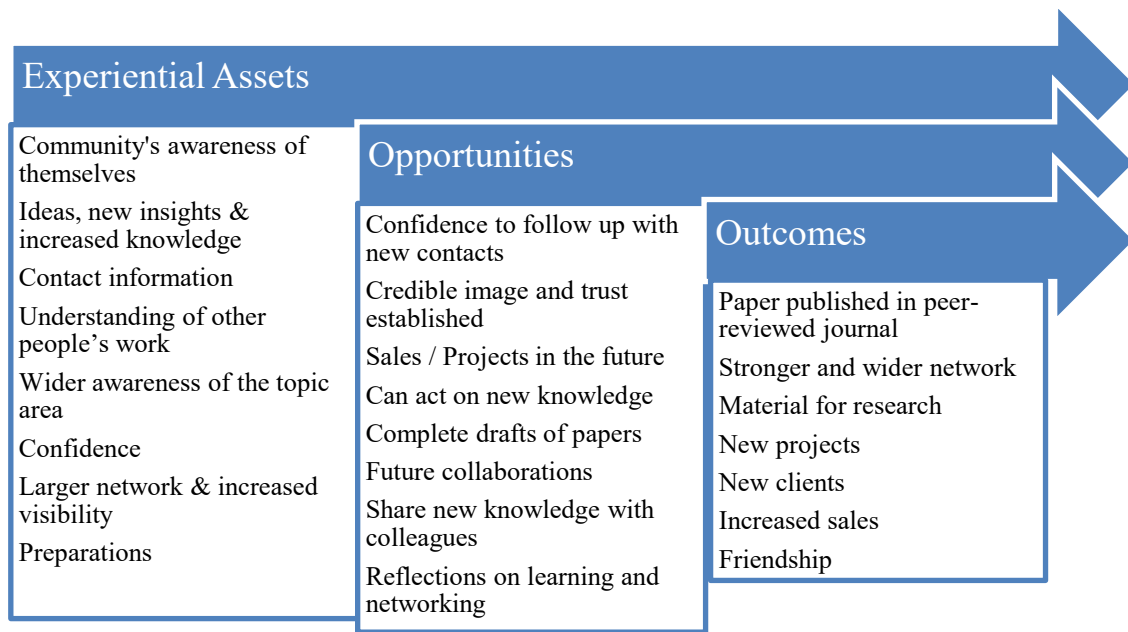


Figure 4. Three types of outcomes from the conference journey

The common thread of the experiential assets is the development of ideas. These were simple transformational moments where attendees gained knowledge, learnt new techniques or brought *'up to date stuff to the front of my mind and helped it to give me ideas [...] it helped bring things together'* (A6). Opportunities arise from the experiential assets, but, like experiential assets, have yet to realise more tangible outcomes. For example, networking (experiential asset), whilst an outcome during the conference, may not have an immediate effect following the conference, but could result in outcomes as the relationship develops over time (Kitchen, 2017). To illustrate this, participants discussed meeting the same people at multiple conferences developing friendships: *'I've met some really interesting people [...] some of whom have become friends'* (P7) - confirming Foley et al.'s (2014) findings on friendship formations at conferences. In addition, long-term professional contacts gained through business event networking can become collaborative relationships (Luo & Zhong, 2016). Essentially,

networking is about attendees creating value from each other (Mitchell et al., 2016), as A6 discussed: *'they gave us a protocol [...] saved us maybe 6 months of work'*. If the conference creator has been strategic with their design, there should be multiple opportunities for the attendees to engage with this type of co-creation of value.

Tangible outcomes included new projects or sales completed, collaborations and sharing of material which led to tangible projects, such as invitations to deliver presentations elsewhere (A4, A8), book contract (A9), and the ability to become an early technology adopter for a discounted price (P8). Outcomes like these are more easily measured and demonstrated as value from conferences, than, for example, stronger and wider networks. Many of these tangible outcomes can be further enhanced post-conference through community discussions on social media created and hosted by the attendees (Wei, Tracy Lu, et al., 2017). Although, an advanced design should facilitate community development online during the pre-conference early marketing to the post-conference stage.

Whilst these outcomes are aligned with the previously reported personal, professional (Mitchell et al., 2016), emotional, novelty (Jung et al., 2024) and social (Min Ho et al., 2022) values, this study also recognises when these were realised and how attendees are developing them differently. The findings suggest that these are not just simply values realised post-conference but are initially experiential assets and opportunities developed during the conference, that, with a strategic design focused on attendee engagement and transformation, can amplify long-lasting outcomes which have a positive influence on behaviour following the transformative experience. Exemplified by P8: *"[conferences] make me thinking of things in a different way, how people have approached things so I come away quite often invigorated and enthusiastic*

to carry on and do some more innovative things; not just to get bogged down in the day to day stuff”.

Conclusion

Theoretical implications

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in its framework, offering a revelatory contribution (Doran et al., 2022) in its approach to challenging existing assumptions on the conference experience, examining this holistically, not in separate stages, utilising a transformational lens to enhance the holistic journey and provide conference creators with a practical framework they can apply. Simultaneously, it answers calls for further research in the neglected area of conference experiences and the emergent related field of transformational event experiences.

The original framework (Figure 2) examines the holistic conference journey of an attendee, advancing previous models which emphasised the pre-conference stage (see Lee & Back, 2007; Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1997) creating an understanding of what conference designers need to be considering to attract attendees. This framework, however, recognises pre-, during- and post-conference as interconnected stages that collectively facilitate a meaningful experience where beneficial outcomes can be developed throughout.

The framework, therefore, departs from earlier studies which focused on each stage of the conference experience in isolation (e.g., Cassar et al., 2020; Hahm et al., 2016; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001), assigning outcome development solely post-conference (e.g., Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024b; Henn & Bathelt, 2015), thus overlooking the opportunities for beneficial outcomes to be developed at each stage of the conference journey and how a transformational approach can accelerate this. The

framework synthesises existing critical approaches to examining the individual stages of a conference experience with the holistic qualitative data from 18 life-world interviews.

Although the framework focuses on the holistic experience of conference attendees, it can be applied to other event settings, thus providing a useful point of reference for event scholars generally. The framework extends existing event experience models (e.g., Brown, 2023; de Geus et al., 2016; Frissen et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2017) by offering a deeper evaluation of an event journey, considering the interconnectedness of each step within the journey and how, collectively, they result in a range outcomes and a transformational experience.

Managerial implications

The framework depicts the attendee's journey within a transformational conference design, acknowledging the influence of the conference creator on designing a meaningful experience that aids outcome development. It therefore offers conference creators a framework to follow when designing their events.

It is recommended that conference creators begin by identifying the needs the prospective attendees must satisfy by attending the conference. The findings highlight the influence of internal and external need recognition on motivations to attend, with 'shallow' motivations influenced more by external needs and 'deep' motivations by internal needs. Those who are more motivated to attend are more likely to participate in preparation activities pre-conference, offering conference creators the opportunity to engage the attendee early through marketing activities promoting conference benefits. These benefits must be realised by the attendee during the conference, hence it is recommended that the marketing materials depicts a realistic picture of the conference design, including the programme.

The application of the experience ladder (Figure 3) facilitates this as it depicts the steps a conference creator can take in their design to increase attendee engagement, community building, outcome development and create a more transformational experience. When the location, venue, food and beverages are delivered in accordance with expectations, attendees are more likely to attend for the relevant topic, thus attracting relevant attendees. Attendee engagement in the conference design further increases if it includes opportunities to learn, contribute and network, resulting in a sense of fitting into the community, thus co-creation occurs, resulting in a transformational experience. Therefore, experience ladder (Figure 3) also answers calls for new strategic conference design approaches (Orefice, 2018).

The findings suggest that outcomes take three forms: 1) experiential assets, which largely relate to the generation of ideas, and 2) opportunities that arise from experiential assets. These manifest during the conference with an advanced design but may not always convert to 3) tangible outcomes that are formed post-conference (Figure 4). It is recommended that the framework is applied and evaluated longitudinally to assess the long-term outcomes from conference attendance.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

A limitation of this study is its UK focus and sample size. It is recommended that future research apply the framework in various contexts to assess its transferability and with a larger sample size, allowing for an analysis of how demographics intersect to provide new insights. Another limitation is the method, it is encouraged to employ different and multi methods for triangulation, including a longitudinal approach which follows attendees, relying less on their memories and subjective perceptions.

The findings also suggest further research is needed on the application of effective activities which create a conference community, therefore, the findings add to calls for research to focus on understanding the details needed in event design to trigger transformative events (Celuch & Neuhofer, 2024a). This includes the use of technology, such as apps for facilitating community conversations, or extensions to current RFID technologies, which measure movements at events, towards understanding purpose and outcomes of those movements.

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