



Virtual vs. Live Conferences: Measuring the Participants Memorable Conference Experience

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Abstract: *Due to Croatian government measures to prevent the spread of COVID - 19, Croatian citizens have been in several lockdowns, which causally affected the normal function of society as a whole. One of the most common consequences of such restrictions was the reduction in social contacts and reliance on virtual contacts in the online environment. The scientific community and any other sphere of business had to change its processes, particularly in organizing conferences. Virtual conferences from “rescue solution” became “pleasant with the useful solution” for organizing committees but also for participants. The purpose of this study is to detect the differences in the memorable experiences of participants concerning different quality elements in virtual and online environments. Furthermore, the aim is to detect predictors of behavioural intentions for both virtual and live conferences. For the purpose of this research, the authors have created a questionnaire, which was distributed online and onsite. The T-test and regression analysis were conducted on a sample of 256 respondents. Results confirmed significant differences between virtual and live conferences in ten variables. Furthermore, regression results revealed that only “Memorable experience” is the common predictor for both virtual and live conferences.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Business tourism is one of the quickest growing segments of tourism (Rogers, 1998) for which the acronym M.I.C.E is used in the scientific literature because it includes the following forms: (a) *meetings*, (b) *incentives*, (c) *Congress/conference* and (d) *exhibitions* (Gračan & Rudančić Lugarić, 2011). This type of tourism, due to high tourist consumption (Štetić, 2007) generates multi-economic advantages for the host’s place and at the same time represents one of the most profitable types of tourism (Oppermann & Chon, 1997). Therefore, its participants are of crucial necessity for tourist destinations (Zhang et al., 2007). For that reason, the tourist offer of a destination has adapted to this segment of tourism, with emphasis on specialising activities according to the type of business tourism which participants most frequently visit. The most important element of M.I.C.E tourism is definitely conferences; representing one of the most important sectors of the tourism industry (Šušić & Mojić, 2014). In support of this view is the fact that in the last twenty years, the highest rate of investment was present in the construction/building and reconstruction of congress and conference facilities (Šušić & Mojić, 2014). Due to their importance in the tourism sector, conferences have been chosen as the topic of this research. Conference implies counsel, agreement, meeting to reach an agreement, discussing an issue or a public lecture which usually includes a discussion (Anić et al., 2002). Also, it can be said that it represents an event which sometimes lasts for a few days, and where a certain topic is discussed (Cambridge Dictionary, online).

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According to Marušić et al. (2019), business is the secondary motif of tourists coming to a destination (4%), and only 18% of business tourists decide to go on a journey to participate in a conference. But, with the occurrence of COVID – 19 and after introducing several lockdowns, there has been a decrease in the number of journeys with the purpose of attending conferences. Due to this, conference organizers have been forced to secure alternative means of this type of event, allowing participants passive and active participation in online surroundings (Pacchioni, 2020). Despite this new practice, the objective of each conference organising board is to continue the contentment of the wishes and needs of participants through the insured high-quality memorable experience. This experience can, in the long term, contribute to a feeling of excitement and satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lian Chan & Baum, 2007) which is remembered forever (Larsen, 2007). The memory will in this context represent a single and the most important source for the individual during the return journey and while spreading positive word of mouth (Oh et al., 2007). So, a memorable conference experience is possible to define as the experience of positive intention which forever stays in the participant's memory, and which has mostly been influenced by the affordable conference cost, dealing with broader and more specific topics during the conference, easy access to information about the conference and the opportunities for professional growth and development (Rašan & Laškarin Ažić, 2021).

By researching databases and scientific literature, it has been established that there is only one existing research which dealt with measuring the quality of memorable conference experience (Rašan & Laškarin Ažić, 2021), but so far there are no studies aimed at examining participants on their accomplished conference experience in virtual environments. Therefore, this empirical research is of crucial importance and can later serve as the basis for future research. However, the literature contains scientific articles focused on the research of participants' satisfaction with the quality of a held conference (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2017; Halim & Mokhtar, 2016; Price, 1993; Riper et al., 2013; Severt et al., 2007), which helped the authors to get a better understanding of the researched field. Rašan & Laškarin Ažić (2021) created a four-dimensional MCE model which measures memorable conference experience, determining in their study the following factors: comprehensive characteristics, outdoor activities, conference organisers and networking. They also came to the result that there is a connection between the main construct and behavioural intentions, or to be more exact, they confirm that affectively loyal participants show stronger behavioural intentions in relation to affectively disloyal participants. On the other hand, Severt et al. (2007) state that major motivators to take part in a conference are activities and possibilities, networking, the benefit of the conference, educational benefits, products and offers, while according to Price (1993) those are education, networking, career improvement and travelling to desirable places. Chatzigeorgiou et al. (2017), by analysing gathered primary data, came to know that the conference quality performance has a positive effect on the experience quality of the participants and that the perceived experience quality, together with individual aspects, has a significant influence on the overall examinee's experience. Also, this research has demonstrated the predictive relationship between the overall service quality and satisfaction with future behavioural intentions of the participants.

As mentioned so far, it is essential for conference organisers to pay more attention to the way participants perceive their experience (Halim & Mokhtar, 2016), as this is the only approach that will allow them to influence the future intentions of participants' attendance. Therefore, the main goal of this research is to examine the overall quality of memorable conference experience and behavioural intentions of participants in virtual and live environments. Starting from the purpose of the research, hereafter are the formulated research aims: (1) to examine and analyse the

socio-demographic characteristics of participants in virtual and live conferences; (2) to examine and analyse the key stakeholders of conference environments, memorable conference experience and behavioural intentions of participants; (3) to examine and analyse the differences in the perception of the memorable conference experience for participants who have taken part in live and of those who have taken part in a virtual conference; (4) to examine whether there are significant predictors of behavioural intentions with regard to MCE attributes and type of conferences. Based on the participants' attitudes, the conference organisers will through this research get a more detailed insight into the difference in the quality of virtual and live conferences. In accordance with this, the conference organisers will be able to determine the differences between the wishes and desires of virtual and live participants and will, according to the form of the conference (virtual or live), be able to adapt and enhance their current quality when organising future conferences. This scientific paper is structured in four parts: introduction, methodology, results and conclusion.

2. METHODOLOGY

Measuring the memorable conference experience is based on the MCE model (Rašan & Laškarić Ažić, 2021) which has been modified for the purpose of conducting this research. The following is the presentation of the modified MCE model, or more accurately, its study framework (figure 1).



Figure 1. Study framework: modified MCE model

Source: Authors' research

Figure 1 shows that the study's framework contains three constructs, the conference environment, memorable conference experience and behavioural intentions of the participants. In this research, the instrument for gathering primary data was an autonomous survey questionnaire which was distributed in online and onsite form. Accepting the above-mentioned constructs, the designed questionnaire included the examinees' sociodemographic characteristics. The first part of the measuring instrument was the main construct- conference environments, which included three dimensions: (1) comprehensive characteristics, (2) conference organizers and (3) networking. In this part of the questionnaire, all particles were in the form of structured questions where a Likert scale of importance was used for measuring and one (1) presents „not important“, and five (5) were „very important“. Furthermore, in the second and third parts of the questionnaire, the examinees were asked to, using the Likert scale of agreement from one (1 = I completely agree) to five (5 = I completely disagree) determine the achieved memorable conference experience and their behavioural intentions. The final part of the measuring instrument included statements referring to the examinees' sociodemographic profile, including their age, sex, marital status, level of education and the frequency of participating in conferences.

Moreover, the target group were participants of virtual and live conferences, and participation in research was voluntary without any compensation. It was not possible to apply a random sample in this research, due to the fact that there is no list of passive conference participants, while for active ones, we only have access to the Conference Agenda. Because of this, the research

will apply a convenience sample which is based exclusively on the availability of units. Since the appropriate sample size is possible to determine only for random samples, the decision on the size of the sample will depend on the researchers' subjective judgment. In distributing and collecting samples, the researchers used their private contacts, academic experts and students from various scientific fields who frequently attend conferences. An online survey questionnaire has been distributed via email and various social media with the goal of collecting a representative sample. Both ways of collecting, online and onsite, were conducted in the period between the first of December, 2021 and the thirtieth of January, 2022. A descriptive statistical analysis was used to examine the sociodemographic characteristics of the examinees and to determine the average value of all the particles within questioned constructs, while bivariate statistical analysis (independent t-test) was used to estimate the differences in the relevance of the particles' average values. After bivariate statistical analysis, regression analysis was performed for both models, virtual and live conferences. The aim of the regression analysis was to examine the influence of the independent variables - conference environment and memorable conference experience on the dependent variable - the behavioural intention of the conference participants.

3. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The obtained results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics		LIVE CONFERENCE (N=131)		VIRTUAL CONFERENCE (N=125)	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	42	32.06	57	45.6
	Female	89	67.94	68	54.4
Age	Less than 20	2	1.53	6	4.58
	21-30	39	29.77	34	25.95
	31-40	45	34.35	30	22.90
	41-50	22	16.79	26	19.85
	More then 51	23	17.56	29	22.14
Marital status	Married	68	51.91	48	36.64
	Single	25	19.08	36	27.48
	In a relationship	38	29.01	41	31.30
Education	High school diploma	34	25.96	28	21.37
	Bachelor's degree	13	9.92	19	14.50
	Magister degree	66	50.38	49	37.40
	PhD	18	13.74	29	22.14
Working status	Employed	113	86.26	91	69.47
	Unemployed	3	2.29	5	3.82
	Student	15	11.45	26	19.85
	Retired	1	0.76	3	2.29
Frequency of participation in conferences	1 per year	103	78.63	77	61.60
	2 -3 per year	26	19.85	41	32.80
	3 and more	2	1.53	7	5.60

Source: Authors' research

As shown in Table 1, in both samples the representation of women was higher compared to men. Specifically, 67.94% of women participated in live conferences and 54.4% in virtual conferences. In terms of age, in the observed samples the largest number of respondents was between the ages of 21 and 30 (29.77% at live conferences and 25.95% at virtual conferences). In contrast, the lowest number of

respondents at live (1.53%) and virtual (4.58%) conferences were under 20 years of age. More than half of the participants in the live conference stated that they were married (51.91%) with a master's degree (50.38%). Also, the largest number of participants in virtual conferences are married (36.64%) with a master's degree (37.40%) and a doctoral degree (22.14%). In both cases, the majority of respondents are employed (79.69%) and attend conferences most often once a year (61.60%).

Descriptive statistics were applied to compute means (M) and standard deviations of conference attributes for virtual and live conferences. To compare the mean scores of conference attributes (conference environment, overall quality of memorable experience, behavioural intentions) between two independent groups (virtual vs. live) independent samples t-test was applied. Although the t-test assumes a normal distribution of data, the normality test has shown asymmetry among analysed data. However, statisticians have proven that the t-test is a robust method, and it can be used even when data does not show normal distribution (Raspor, 2012). Moreover, since in social sciences, the normal distribution is hard to realize, some authors (Opić, 2011) justify the use of parametric statistics with the "Central limit theorem" even if the normal distribution isn't achieved. According to Opić (2011), this is allowed since the standard error decreases as the sample size rises. Thus, the authors decided to proceed with a t-test to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference among mean scores for observed variables.

The results of descriptive and bivariate statistical analysis are presented below. Table 2 presents the significance of the difference in mean scores between live participants (N = 131) and online conferences (N = 125).

Both participants of live and virtual conferences graded "*Comprehensive characteristics*" with the highest average scores. Results also indicate that the dimension "Networking" had the lowest average score (3.65) among participants of virtual conferences. Moreover, it is noticeable that participants of live conferences better graded the majority of statements (15 out of 19), while participants of virtual conferences graded only the following four attributes higher: high expertise of keynote speakers (4.50), the relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge (4.63), easy availability of conference information (4.68), affordable conference price (4.64). Among participants of live conference values of standard deviation (SD) are higher than 1 in statements: "I plan to recommend this conference to my colleagues" (1.056) and "I plan to participate in this conference again" (1.021), and in three statements among participants of virtual conferences: "conference networking opportunities" (1.087), "opportunities to make new contacts" (1.139), "opportunities to talk to other conference participants" (1.114), indicating that the data are here more spread out in relation to the mean.

According to T-test results, there are some significant discrepancies between live and virtual conferences in their attributes. In the first dimension "*Comprehensive characteristics*" within the construct conference environment, all variables except one showed insignificant differences. Respondents' opinions only significantly differ in the variable "relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge, insights and current events to the participants" ($p=0.000$). Results show that participants of virtual conferences gave significantly higher scores for this attribute of the conference. For the second dimension "*Conference organization*", independent samples t-test results have shown significant differences in two variables "easy availability of conference information" ($p=0.020$) and "interactive workshops" ($p=0.000$). Namely, participants of a virtual conference gave higher scores for easy availability of conference information than those who participated in a live conference. In contrast, interactive workshop as an attribute was significantly better graded among participants of live conferences. In addition, the t-test

indicated differences for all networking variables (the third dimension of conference environment construct), where participants of live conferences significantly better-graded networking opportunities during the conference. Interesting results of the t-test are noticeable for the construct “*Memorable conference experience*”. For this construct, participants of the live conference had significantly better evaluated the quality of memorable conference experience compared to those who participated online. For the construct “*Behavioural intentions*”, participants of the live conference better graded all three variables, however, the t-test indicated a significant difference in only one variable – positive WOM (word of mouth) ($p=0.000$).

Table 2. The results comparison of MCE model attributes between virtual and live conferences participants

Attributes	Participants of live conference		Participants of virtual conference		t - tes	Sig. (2 tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
CONFERENCE ENVIRONMENT	4.32	-	4.10	-		
<i>Comprehensive characteristics</i>	4.42	-	4.43	-		
Timely topics.	4.53	0.599	4.42	0.732	1.316	0.189
High expertise of keynote speakers.	4.41	0.743	4.50	0.667	-1.038	0.300
Elaboration of specific and broader topics.	4.42	0.754	4.23	0.863	1.857	0.064
Combination of lecturers: scientists and practitioners.	4.37	0.748	4.36	0.797	0.145	0.884
Relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge, insights and current events to the participants.	4.36	0.657	4.63	0.532	-3.664	0.000*
<i>Conference organization</i>	4.29	-	4.22	-		
Easy availability of conference information.	4.50	0.661	4.68	0.590	-2.350	0.020*
Affordable conference price.	4.48	0.798	4.64	0.559	-1.854	0.065
Defined conference topic.	4.31	0.812	4.22	0.819	0.876	0.382
High quality introductory and closing sessions.	4.22	0.797	4.11	0.961	0.989	0.324
Interactive workshops.	3.97	0.992	3.45	0.954	4.283	0.000*
<i>Networking</i>	4.25	-	3.65	-		
Conference networking opportunities.	4.15	0.707	3.45	1.087	4.382	0.000*
Opportunities to make new contacts.	4.41	0.606	3.65	1.139	6.727	0.000*
Opportunities to talk to other conference participants.	4.19	0.860	3.66	1.114	4.221	0.000*
MEMORABLE CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE	4.24	-	3.91	-		
I have wonderful memories of this conference.	4.23	0.891	3.97	0.813	0.092	0.015*
I will not forget my experience from the conference.	4.22	0.862	3.89	0.854	0.867	0.002*
I will remember many positive things from the conference.	4.27	0.823	3.89	0.854	0.487	0.000*
BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS	4.17	-	3.98	-		
I plan to participate in this conference again.	3.98	1.056	3.94	0.910	0.268	0.789
I plan to recommend this conference to my colleagues.	4.16	1.021	4.06	0.821	0.833	0.405
I will say positive things about this conference.	4.37	0.896	3.92	0.829	4.132	0.000*

* $p<0.05$

Source: Authors’ research

To test internal consistency and the reliability of each construct/dimension, the authors conducted a reliability analysis (Cronbach’s alpha). The α coefficient ranged from 0.714 to 0.925. The highest value of α coefficient was for the “Networking” 0.925, following “Memorable experience” 0.922, “Behavioural intentions” 0.822, “Comprehensive characteristics” 0.763, and “Conference organization” 0.714. All values were greater than the cut-off value of 0.70 (Baggio & Klobas, 2011), hence, all factors and their variables were kept for further analysis.

Regression analysis is conducted on a sample of 131 respondents of live conferences, and 125 respondents of virtual conferences, which satisfies recommended criteria of 100 respondents in a sample, and the smallest proposed ratio of the number of elements in a sample and the number of independent variables (5:1) (Raspor, 2012). In particular for *Model 1*, the ratio is 9:1 (134 respondents and 15 independent variables), and for *Model 2* ratio is 8:1 (125 respondents and 15 independent variables).

In the first model (*Live conference*), the OLS results showed that only one variable is a significant predictor of the participants' behaviour intentions to live conferences. Results imply that respondents who remember many positive things from the conference are most likely to come again and recommend their memorable conference experience to friends and colleagues ($p=0.000$). In other words, it is a variable that is part of the construct of a "*Memorable conference experience*" (abbreviation MCE) for the participants. The obtained results show that in this virtual model, the VIF coefficients range from 1.2706 to 3.701. Therefore, the VIF coefficients for all regressors are less than 10 and very close to 1, which means that there is no serious problem of multicollinearity among regressors.

When it comes to regression results of the second model (Virtual conferences), results showed that 5 out of 15 variables turn out to be significant predictors of the behavioural intentions of virtual conferences. The results confirm that participants of virtual conferences who are most likely to have behavioural intentions are those who believe that interactive workshops and the relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge, insights and current events ($p=0.024$) are important in creating memorable conference experience. Hence, of the five possible variables within the "*Conference characteristic*" (CC) dimension, only the aforementioned variable showed a predictor relationship with the behavioural intentions of conference participants. Also, within the "*Conference organizers*" (CO) dimension, only one variable, more precisely the "affordable conference price" ($p = 0.043$), showed a significant correlation with the behavioural intentions of the participants. Furthermore, within the conference environment construct, none of the "Networking" (N) variables proved to be a statistically significant predictor of the virtual participants' behavioural intentions. Additionally, the results also imply that participants who had wonderful memories ($p=0.000$) and will not forget ($p=0.002$) the recalled conference are the ones who will come again and recommend their memorable conference experience to friends and colleagues. Thus, two of the three variables within the construct "*Memorable conference experience*" showed a significant predictor of the participant's behavioural intentions. In this virtual model, all values of the VIF coefficient are also within the given frames, which means that the regressors do not have multicollinearity issues.

Although, this is the first study that tests the relationships between MCE and behavioural intentions, there are some previous results on memorable experiences and behavioural intentions comparable with current ones. Namely, our results agree with results reported by Coudoumaris & Sthapit (2017) who noted that hedonism (enjoying the trip, being thrilled with experience, exciting experience) had a positive effect on tourist behavioural intention toward the destination. Similarly, Yu et al. (2019) reported that memorable experience such as hedonism (thrilled about having new experiences, excitement, enjoyment in tourism experience etc.) positively influence revisit intentions. Moreover, current study results align with Sthapit et al. (2019) findings who reported that memorability is a significant predictor of tourists' behavioural intentions.

Table 3. Behavioural intentions predictors: Virtual vs. Live

Model 1: Live (n=131)

Independent variable	B	S.E.	sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	0.468	0.638	0.464		
CC1: Timely topics.	0.102	0.095	0.285	0.737	1.357
CC2: High expertise of keynote speakers.	0.016	0.084	0.852	0.620	1.614
CC3: Elaboration of specific and broader topics.	-0.108	0.088	0.224	0.543	1.843
CC4: Combination of lecturers: scientists and practitioners.	0.055	0.074	0.456	0.784	1.276
CC5: Relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge, insights and current events to the participants.	0.065	0.087	0.459	0.733	1.365
CO1: Easy availability of conference information.	-0.046	0.101	0.647	0.540	1.851
CO2: Affordable conference price.	0.102	0.091	0.266	0.450	2.220
CO3: Defined conference topic.	0.008	0.085	0.927	0.499	2.003
CO4: High quality introductory and closing sessions.	-0.019	0.082	0.819	0.557	1.794
CO5: Interactive workshops.	0.005	0.064	0.933	0.594	1.684
N1: Conference networking opportunities.	0.020	0.104	0.850	0.440	2.270
N2: Opportunities to make new contacts.	-0.046	0.129	0.723	0.389	2.568
N3: Opportunities to talk to other conference participants.	-0.082	0.088	0.350	0.421	2.375
MCE1: I have wonderful memories of this conference.	0.064	0.091	0.482	0.366	2.730
MCE2: I will not forget my experience from the conference.	0.023	0.105	0.825	0.291	3.441
MCE3: I will remember many positive things from the conference.	0.699	0.114	0.000	0.270	3.701

$R^2=0.604$; (F=10.849), $p<0.05$

Model 2: Virtual (n=125)

Independent variable	B	S.E.	sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	0.498	0.473	0.294		
CC1: Timely topics.	-0.112	0.101	0.272	0.305	3.278
CC2: High expertise of keynote speakers.	-0.074	0.101	0.465	0.373	2.679
CC3: Elaboration of specific and broader topics.	-0.055	0.092	0.547	0.269	3.714
CC4: Combination of lecturers: scientists and practitioners.	-0.123	0.091	0.179	0.322	3.108
CC5: Relevance of topics for the transfer of new knowledge, insights and current events to the participants.	0.236	0.103	0.024	0.557	1.796
CO1: Easy availability of conference information.	0.001	0.102	0.996	0.461	2.169
CO2: Affordable conference price.	0.218	0.106	0.043	0.477	2.098
CO3: Defined conference topic.	-0.109	0.084	0.196	0.359	2.788
CO4: High quality introductory and closing sessions.	0.024	0.076	0.753	0.315	3.178
CO5: Interactive workshops.	0.285	0.091	0.002	0.223	4.493
N1: Conference networking opportunities.	0.172	0.109	0.116	0.121	8.284
N2: Opportunities to make new contacts.	-0.082	0.113	0.469	0.102	9.829
N3: Opportunities to talk to other conference participants.	-0.056	0.115	0.630	0.102	9.809
MCE1: I have wonderful memories of this conference.	0.455	0.116	0.000	0.189	5.301
MCE2: I will not forget my experience from the conference.	0.361	0.115	0.002	0.175	5.729
MCE3: I will remember many positive things from the conference.	-0.254	0.137	0.066	0.123	8.109

$R^2=0.690$; (F=15.025), $p<0.05$

Source: Authors' research

4. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis has affected the changes in the functioning of society as a whole. This can be seen in the suspension of a large number of events, and this decision made by the National board has affected the need to create new ways of conducting events. For that reason, conference organisers had to ensure alternative ways of conducting conferences for its participants, introducing the possibility of online participation. Regardless of this fact, the conference's organising board still aims to ensure a high-quality memorable experience for its participants. Therefore, the

contribution of this research is of exceptional importance because it represents the first research in literature dealing with the comparison of the virtual and live memorable conference experience. At the same time, it offers mite from the managerial aspect, to be precise for the conference organisers who can based on the analysed data, determine the differences in wants and needs of participants who take part in the virtual and live conference with the goal of determining the strengths and weaknesses in the existing elements of the offer. The obtained findings indicate that there are statistically significant differences between live and virtual conferences in 10 of the 19 possible variables. Comparing both models, virtual and live, there are also differences in the prediction of participants' behavioural intentions. In live conferences, only one variable shows a predictor relationship with the behavioural intentions of conference participants, while in the case of virtual conferences, there were five variables. On the basis of the above findings, they will be able to adapt organisational elements regarding the way the conference is held (virtual or live).

Despite the fact that this paper provides insight into the current state of memorable conference experiences in virtual and live environments, it also has some drawbacks. The overall number of examinees in this research is 256, but if we look at the samples based on the groups of virtual (N=125) and live (N=131) participants, it is possible to see that we have small representative samples. Subsequently, future research should include a higher number of participants in order to get a more representative sample, where research should be conducted before, during and after the conference. Since most of the examinees are the authors' private contacts, future research should include other conference participants. In addition, this research was conducted in a small geographical area, in the Republic of Croatia to be precise, so the suggestion is to conduct the research in other countries around the world. With the goal of achieving as much detailed insight into the wishes and wants of participants, it would be desirable to apply the MCE model in the future to examine the memorable conference experience from the professional aspect.

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