

# **Examining attendance and non-attendance at association conferences: a grounded theory approach**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

under the supervision of A/Prof. Carmel Foley, A/Prof. Deborah Edwards and A/Prof. Katie Schlenker

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## **Certificate of Original Authorship**

I, *Rui Wang* declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of *Doctor of Philosophy*, in the *Business School* at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## **Conference Proceedings/Presentations airing from the Doctoral Research**

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## Abstract

For academics, attending association conferences is a crucial activity in the course of their career trajectory. Researchers have noted increasing concerns over delegate's absences and question whether the merits of conferences, mentioned above, are effectively reduced as a result. Previous literature has not provided a robust analysis regarding delegate attendance and non-attendance at conferences and there is little evidence of connections between empirical studies and the theories behind the phenomenon.

Following the guidelines of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, unstructured interviews were conducted with 15 PhD students and 22 academic staff across STM (Science, Technology, and Medical), ESS (Education and Social Sciences), and BUS (Economics and Management) disciplines from four Australian universities. It was found that delegates are motivated by external factors (including support from the institution, conference reputation) and inherent needs (including learning and networking opportunities, visibility improvement, career advancement, and conference destination exploration) to attend the association conference. Their reasons for not fully participating in the conference program were varied, and included: lack of interest in the topics, competing priorities, conference fatigue, feelings of exclusion, and the influence of others including accompanying partners and peers.

It is clear from the results that the ultimate purpose of those attending conferences is to obtain resources, which is clearly proven by social capital theory. Research data revealed there were circumstances under which interviewees fully attended a conference, others where they selectively participated in some sessions, and some which saw them not participate in any sessions or social events at all. These anomalies in patterns of attendance were influenced by their unique needs and circumstances. They had different degrees of freedom of choice (or passive choice) of social capital brought by the attendance, which naturally causes them to show varying degrees of involvement during the conference. In this sense, the emergent theories (social capital and involvement theory) provide theoretical lens to examine delegates' attendance and non-attendance during the conference.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the event management literature by establishing a new conceptual model to capture event attendee's conference experience. From a practical perspective, this study provides guidance for multiple conference stakeholders. Participants will benefit from better conference design. Greater understanding of participant

needs will also enable meeting planners, conference organisers, convention bureau managers and others create and market conference programs more likely to attract participants and maximise attendance at their events.