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Professional Conferences, Social Capital and Tourism: Is The Alliance in Jeopardy?

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Abstract

This editorial uses stakeholder and conference tourism theory to discuss how open access has influenced the increasing growth of virtual conferences and meetings and the implications for social capital traditionally valued by face-to-face events. Online or virtual conferences, meetings and events have emerged as a growing sector of the professional, education, research and development market worldwide. Educational and tourism leadership and stakeholders must form partnerships to determine the economic impact of global online conferences vs. face-to-face meetings on host communities around the world and the social capital that is valued by such conferences and meetings in both the education and tourism communities. The purpose of this editorial, therefore, is to call attention to how face-to-face professional conferences and meetings support or add value to the relationship between social capital and educational tourism. This editorial recommends a research agenda to develop theories about how to sustain the social capital of professional conference while not compromising the benefits of FTF conference tourism. Such an agenda would first examine relevant literature on the key characteristics of online and face-to-face conferences and their comparative social, educational, economical and political impact; and second, explore the contemporary issue of "social capital" within academic debates in a variety of conference contexts from an interdisciplinary stance.

Introduction

After years of economic recession in most developed countries, professionals, institutions and organizations, trapped between rising travel and professional development expenses and pressures from stakeholders to shrink overhead, are slowly yet steadily looking to virtual conferencing solutions to meet professional development needs for their members, share developments and improve the practice of their respective fields. While meeting "in the cloud" may be better than laboring in isolation, is this emerging trend yet another example of "penny wise and pound foolish"?

The hidden costs of virtual meetings, whether one seeks to put a price tag on missed opportunities and reduction of social capital within professional groups, or measure the economic, social and political consequences declines in educational tourism have on convention host communities, are currently well understood in their respective discrete spaces, even if only anecdotally. Additional research is needed, however, to understand how these declines interact with each other and drive declines in professions, their institutions and the communities they serve. "Travel broadens the mind" is a truism in many circles and studies exist to quantify the gains of travel and exposure to different cultures. One such concise example is illustrated in a study of gap year students in Commonwealth countries [1]. It is a different case entirely to quantify how reduced face-to-face social interaction, both through physical contact and destination educational travel, lead to quantifiable declines in professional environments, or to determine whether a balance of virtual and face-to-face meeting can be struck or could be a potentially viable alternative.

The Problem

As online research and technology conferences continue to emerge as a growing sector of the professional, education, research and development market worldwide, they pose a threat (however unintentionally) by interrupting the process of social capital gains usually experienced in traditional face-to-face professional conferences. While this new mode of conferencing is a bid that many individual scholars and professional groups undertake to increase attendance and participation, attract new audiences and address diminishing travel budgets, the virtual nature of these meetings themselves stand in stark contrast to the traditional role conferences have played, namely, their alliance to building social capital, developing educational tourism and leisure markets in the host areas. These efforts have long been seen to have significant educational, research, economic, socio-cultural and political effects on the destination areas and the participants themselves.

Methodology

This editorial is a reflective and theoretical conversation, integrating literature only to place emphasis and evidence to support ideas relevant, timely and of scholarly interest to a critical analysis to this journal's audience and other stakeholders. The contemporary research utilized open access resources to survey studies conducted from 2004 to 2011, with emphasis on the latter half of the period[1]. Research included was peer-reviewed and cited in recognized scholarly research journals, authoritative books or online open access sources. However, this editorial does not claim to be an exhaustive review of this rapidly-emerging field of study.

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Arguments for Research

Research shows that events are an important motivator of tourism and figure prominently in the development and marketing plans of most destinations [2]. Virtual conferencing, especially in regards to professional association meetings, has emerged to pose a strong challenge to the conventional model. Researchers, including Anderson, have cited a U.S. Travel Association study, where 31 percent of business travelers reported using video- or tele conferencing to replace at least one business trip in 2008. Another anecdotal pivot point was noted in 2010, when Tammy Blosil, vice president of online learning for ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership reported having 40 vendors to choose from in the planning phase of the center's 2010 virtual conference [3]. However, comparisons between online and professional conferences are difficult because as one researcher put it, "we don't know enough" about this new way of doing conferences [4]. This is especially true outside the business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C) spheres. Within the B2B sphere, researchers have long stressed the limitations of virtual technology in terms of initiating relationships and fostering cohesiveness within groups, the cornerstones of social capital. One early study comparing the effectiveness of virtual teams using asynchronous conference software to face-to-face teams found that the virtual teams were less cohesive and reported lower levels of satisfaction. Confirming similar results from contemporary studies of synchronously-meeting virtual teams versus face-to-face teams, the authors suggested virtual teams should schedule face-to-face meetings to compensate [5]. Over time, studies continue to note the lack of ability to perceive fine interpersonal cues as a potential obstacle for virtual event participants. Despite technological advances affording near-broadcast video quality in many applications, even experienced participants continue to cite problems picking up subtle cues, especially in the initial phase of B2B and B2C relationships. A survey of 760 business executives showed 84 percent preferred person-to-person meetings: over three-quarters of the survey group cited "the ability to read body language" and "more social interaction/ability to bond" as advantages for person-to-person meetings over virtual ones [6]. Another argument for research is to quantify the benefits of educational tourism is recognition of travel's role in the development of social capital in destinations where conferees travel. Most developed countries outside the United States have national policies on fostering social capital and sustainable economic activities, including travel[2]. Public and private institutions are by and large obligated to further these goals in the course of their operational planning. Macbeth et al. [7] have illustrated such a holistic model of connections between travel and social, political and cultural capital in Australasia. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence does exist, especially in the library science and technical communications fields of the benefits of virtual conferencing. For these ultra-lean organizations, virtual conferencing is the sole means of professional development and communication. Employees lose no travel time and may multi-task or be available for recall from conference participation to meet staffing or operational requirements [8]. With embedded chat features, attendees can share their reactions about salient ideas from a speaker's presentation in real time without

[1]One historical study was included, however, was included to illustrate a long-standing, still-unaddressed concern.
[2]Within the United States, studies have explored the role of "Voluntourism" in fostering social capital in tourists and the regions where they volunteer. It is not clear at this time, however, whether the models emerging from these studies can be applied to professional communities reviewed here.

disturbing other listeners; the speaker retains control over when and how to answer questions [9]. Conferencing environments featuring both face-to-face and virtual characteristics are still in their infancy but portend developments that could lead to true hybrid environments featuring the best of both worlds.

Limitations on Data

Studies comparing social cohesiveness among virtual and face-to-face groups have only been conducted in number in the B2B and B2C communities, where these factors are mission-critical to their daily operations. However, one recent study evaluating productivity gains from private and public sector conference travel demonstrated that public sector travelers as a group (of which educational travelers are arguably members) benefit from face-to-face contact with peers and supplies and improve their relationships in much the same way as their private sector counterparts [10].

Conclusion and Afterthoughts

On the basis of this limited discussion, the authors conclude that online conferencing will not replace face-to-face conferences entirely [11]. This editorial can only call attention to the role of face to face conference and meeting attendance supports and adds value to the relationship between social capital and educational tourism. One must draw upon literature from various disciplines to develop a concept about the synergy between educational conferences, social capital and other evolving factors that could significantly influence educational tourism. As a starting point, the authors recommend a research agenda based on examining relevant literature on key characteristics of online and face-to-face conferences and their comparative social, educational, economic and political impact. The contemporary issue of social capital within academic debates in a variety of conference frameworks should also be examined within an interdisciplinary stance. Useful measures of values that can be applied to evaluating the appropriateness of online versus face-to-face events are captured in the figure 1. Such initial research can lay down the basis for more comprehensive studies of educational tourism and its essential role in building global collaboration, economic partnerships and social capital to sustain and grow vital international relationships in the digital age. Institutional
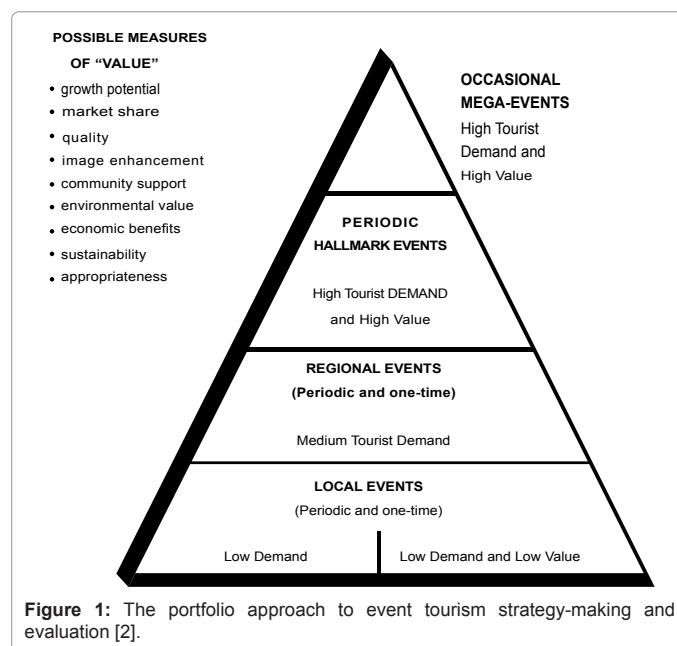

Figure 1: The portfolio approach to event tourism strategy-making and evaluation [2].

leaders and stakeholders, under metastasizing pressures, require a theoretical framework in which to view and evaluate the worth of face-to-face contacts and prioritize them as part of their ongoing operations. Innovative partnerships between professional, scholarly and business entities can help provide the sound theoretical basis our developing accountability society demands.

Closing Words

While tourism is an economic activity, it directly and indirectly affects the economic development of a country and its infrastructure. Research suggests that the best indicator of the effects on online conferences on tourism would be conducting analyses of studies of how tourism from professional conferences affects the social, economic or educational development of regions and districts of a country where the physical conferences take place. Developing and sustaining global partnerships on all level through professional meetings and tourism is more important than simply increasing the number of individuals who submit papers online and present in vacuums without the advantage of face-to-face meetings and socialization where new partnerships and understandings often happen. We must work together politically and socially to get top priority for widespread support from the business, industry, governments and education (BIG-E) sectors to continue their financial support to institutions, organizations and individuals who value the travel to different regions for real-time professional meetings and conferences to build global collaborations, economic partnerships and social and cultural capital that can help sustain international relationships, professional conference groups and partner tourism entities in a digital age.

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