

## **COLLECTION OF THESES**

**Kitti Boros**

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE DECISION-MAKING  
PROCESS AMONG PARTICIPANTS OF  
IN-PERSON ACADEMIC CONFERENCES:**

**The Role of Tourism Destinations in Consumer Choice  
for Academic Association Conferences**

for her PhD dissertation

**Supervisors:**

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Budapest, 2024

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# Table of Contents

1. Research Background and Justification of the Topic.....	1
1.1. Justification and Relevance of the Topic .....	2
1.2. Theoretical and Practical Relevance of the Research .....	5
1.3. Focus Points of the Theoretical Framework .....	6
2. Applied Methods.....	8
2.1. Research Process.....	8
2.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses .....	10
2.3. Methods of Data Analysis.....	11
3. Results and Conclusions of the Dissertation.....	13
3.1. Summary of Qualitative Research Findings .....	13
3.2. Summary of Quantitative Research Findings .....	16
3.3. Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Significance of the Research .....	19
3.4. Limitations of the Research and Future Research Opportunities .....	20
4. Main References .....	21
5. List of Publications .....	28

# **1. Research Background and Justification of the Topic**

This dissertation focuses on in-person academic association conferences, events that are organised by associations with the primary aim of fostering professional discourse and interaction, as well as supporting knowledge transfer across various academic disciplines (Davidson – Cope, 2003; McCartney, 2008; Hansen et al., 2020). According to Lee and Back (2007), there are three key stakeholders in association conferences: the associations themselves, the tourist destinations, and the conference participants. The present research centres on the persons belonging to the latter group, who are the actual consumers of academic association conferences. The COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects have significantly impacted the association market. Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify the factors influencing participation in in-person academic association conferences, with a particular focus on the role of the destination, from the perspective of participants in the post-COVID era. The guiding research question for this academic investigation is:

**How does the conference selection process of participants in in-person academic association conferences evolve in relation to the tourism destination hosting these events?**

## **1.1. Justification and Relevance of the Topic**

The favourable conditions created by demand and supply have made travel accessible to masses in the 21st century. Through the diversification of tourism, new tourism products have emerged; however, two classic forms have remained unchanged: leisure tourism and business tourism. Business tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping global tourism trends, as the trends emerging in this sector also influence leisure tourism. Consequently, this dissertation examines five key trends – family-friendliness, bleisure tourism, innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability – in the context of participant decision-making.

Even in the pre-COVID era, an increasing number of tourism professionals recognised the positive economic impacts inherent in business tourism and invested resources in product development (Lee – Back, 2007). This trend appears to be strengthening with the subsidence of the pandemic. The participants of business tourism events are key stakeholders, generating economic and social benefits for the host destination. Additionally, they contribute to reducing seasonality and enhancing the destination's positive image (Oppermann – Chon, 1997; González-Rodríguez et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to business tourism, particularly within the conference industry. The global examination of association conferences and congresses is conducted by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) and the Union of International Associations (UIA) (Békefi, 2023). According to ICCA estimates, approximately 24,000 association events were organised during the pre-COVID era (ICCA, 2024). ICCA researchers possess data on roughly 80% of these events (ICCA, 2024), which is why this dissertation relies on ICCA data.

The number of annual association events declined in 2023 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a total of 10,187 association events organised globally that year. Of these, approximately 9,000 events were held with in-person attendance, including both fully in-person and hybrid events (ICCA, 2024).

The 2023 figures represent an increase compared to the 2022 data, when a total of 9,042 association events were held worldwide. However, this overall performance still falls short of the record year of 2019, when 13,269 association events were registered (ICCA, 2024). The overall performance in 2023 is comparable to that of 2010, when a total of 10,070 association events were organised (ICCA, 2024).

Data is available for all association events up to 2022, revealing that since 1963, the year ICCA was founded, a total of 264,662 association events have been held worldwide, with nearly 57 million participants (ICCA, 2023). Association conferences can be organised by trade organisations, scientific associations, professional bodies, and social groupings (ICCA, 2024). Among these, academic conferences are typically associated with scientific associations (Nolan, 2020) and have a substantial impact on the entire association market. Between 2020 and 2022, academic association events accounted for 89.9% of all such events (ICCA, 2023).

The Hungarian domestic conference industry is analysed by the Budapest Convention Bureau (BUD CB). According to the bureau's annual business tourism statistical report, a total of 1,707 business tourism events were organised in Hungary in 2023, with the collaboration of 122 Hungarian service providers. Conferences accounted for 39.7% (678) of these events. A total of 165,850 participants attended the conferences, with an average of 246 participants per event. Within the conference industry, the proportion of association conferences was 39% (364) in the year under review (BUD CB, 2024).

## **1.2. Theoretical and Practical Relevance of the Research**

The primary value of conferences lies in knowledge sharing, networking opportunities, and the supporting infrastructure and suprastructure, which lead to long-term benefits and underscore the significance of the conference industry. This research had a dual aim: first, to contribute to the relatively limited academic literature on academic association conferences (Mair – Frew, 2016), and second, to offer practical insights for professionals in the field. The scientific contribution of this research lies in synthesising existing theories and incorporating recent changes to expand the theoretical framework of participant decision-making in conference selection, emphasising the pivotal role of the destination.

The research further holds theoretical significance because the collective examination of conference selection and the role of the destination in decision-making has been relatively under-researched (Lee – Yoon, 2022). Thus, this study fills a gap in the literature, providing a valuable contribution to the understanding of how destinations influence conference choices. Consequently, data from international organisations that measure association conferences, such as the ICCA and UIA, become more interpretable, particularly in the context of destination rankings. From a practical perspective, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential of conference destinations and offer strategic insights for strengthening this potential within Hungary.



### **1.3. Focus Points of the Theoretical Framework**

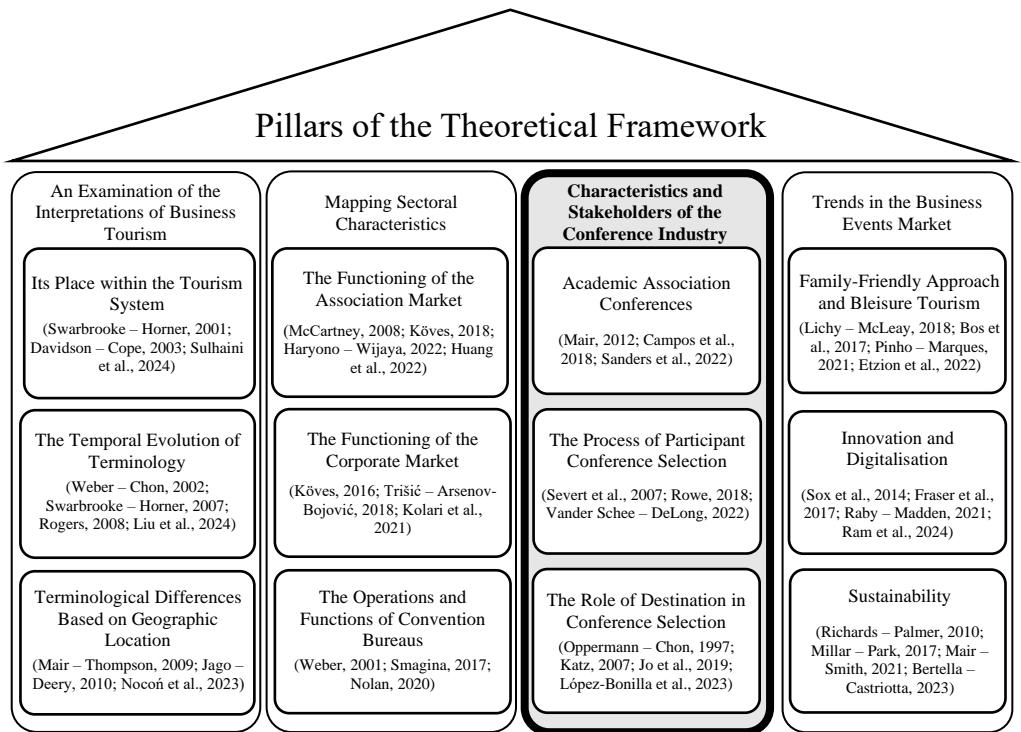
In the literature review, I examined the terminology related to business tourism, revealing a lack of consensus on the designation of the sector (Liu et al., 2024). While the term '*Meetings Industry*' is gaining popularity (Walas et al., 2021; Nocoń et al., 2023), the use of '*business tourism*' remains the most prevalent in academic research (Liu et al., 2024). Therefore, this term is used in both the dissertation and this collection of theses to refer to the sector.

Participants in the business tourism market are business travellers whose travel motivations, according to the definition provided by the World Tourism Organization (currently UN Tourism, formerly UNWTO until 2023) can be further categorised as "attendance at a business meeting, conference, or convention, trade fair, and exhibition" and "other business and professional purposes" (UNWTO, 2019). This definition distinguishes conferences from other events, providing a foundational point for the research.

Participation at conferences is significant at professional, institutional, and personal levels (Borg, 2014; Hall, 2015; Büyükyavuz, 2016; Sousa – Clark, 2017; Bhandari, 2018; Finnegan et al., 2019).

In the decision-making process of participants, motivational factors, multidimensional value (Rowe, 2018), satisfaction, and behavioural intentions are all present (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). As a consequence of the pandemic, the appeal of the destination and safety have become increasingly important in the conference selection process (Yamashita – Oshimi, 2023). These factors have been incorporated as new elements into the research model. The theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Structure and Pillars of the Theoretical Framework**



Source: own elaboration

## **2. Applied Methods**

### **2.1. Research Process**

In this dissertation, I conducted an exploratory, sequential, mixed-methods study. The primary research was divided into two phases: the first phase involved qualitative research, followed by quantitative research in the second phase. The use of both methods complemented each other (Busetto et al., 2020), as my aim was to achieve methodological triangulation and to broaden the scope of the investigation.

The qualitative research included conference participants who met the following criteria: (1) they have been residing in Hungary for at least six months, thus possessing complex interactions within the local space; (2) they have attended at least one conference in the past five years; and (3) they have participated in conferences in Budapest or other major Hungarian cities, as well as in foreign cities, making them experienced business travellers capable of forming opinions on the organisation of both domestic and international conferences. The conference participants involved in the study, who currently reside in Hungary, were of Hungarian nationality.

Interviewees were selected based on accessibility (Miles – Huberman, 1994). The process of qualitative data collection and analysis was carried out until theoretical saturation was achieved, following the recommendations of Sandelowski (2008).

I conducted a total of five pilot interviews, four in 2020 and one in 2021. The results of these pilot interviews confirmed the necessity of continuing the qualitative research, leading to the completion of an additional 36 in-depth interviews in 2023, bringing the total to 41 in-depth interviews. Following this, I performed a qualitative content analysis of the interviews.

In the second phase of the primary research, I conducted quantitative research, specifically a questionnaire survey, in 2023. The requirements for the conferences included in the sample were as follows: (1) they could not be held in the same country as the participant's residence; (2) they had to be commissioned by a scientific association; (3) they had to involve participants from at least three different nations; and (4) they had to have taken place between 2018 and 2023.

The statements used were based on validated scales and were related to conference attendees' motivations, derived from the literature (Crouch – Ritchie, 1997; Oppermann – Chon, 1997; Severt et al., 2007; Yoo – Chon, 2008; Kim et al., 2012). The statements were adapted to the context of this research, and I examined safety in relation to both the destination and the conference. For measuring multidimensional value, I followed the recommendations of Williams and Soutar (2009), while for assessing attendee satisfaction and behavioural intentions, I followed the guidelines of Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Oliver (1997, 2014).

## 2.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

In relation to the research question, I formulated the following research sub-questions and hypotheses:

Research Sub-questions and Hypotheses		Research Methodology and Method
<i><b>Q1 How do the factors of attendee motivation relate to the multidimensional value of the conference?</b></i>		Qualitative Research: In-depth interviews
H1/a	The safety of the conference is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	Quantitative Research: Questionnaire survey SEM
H1/b	The safety of the destination is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
H1/c	Extra-conference opportunities are positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
H1/d	The location/comfort of the conference is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
H1/e	The destination image is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
H1/f	The opportunity for social networking is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
H1/g	The opportunity for professional education is positively related to the multidimensional value of the conference.	
<i><b>Q2 How does the multidimensional value influence the individual dimensions of perceived value?</b></i>		Qualitative Research: In-depth interviews
H2/a	Multidimensional value has a positive impact on the quality dimension of functional value.	Quantitative Research: Questionnaire survey SEM
H2/b	Multidimensional value has a positive impact on the economic dimension of functional value.	
H2/c	Multidimensional value has a positive impact on social value.	
H2/d	Multidimensional value has a positive impact on emotional value.	
<i><b>Q3 What are the key material and non-material factors of multidimensional value that influence attendee satisfaction?</b></i>		Qualitative Research: In-depth interviews
H3	The multidimensional value of the conference increases attendee satisfaction.	Quantitative Research: Questionnaire survey SEM
<i><b>Q4 How does attendee satisfaction affect behavioural intentions related to academic association conferences?</b></i>		Qualitative Research: In-depth interviews
H4	Attendee satisfaction has a positive impact on behavioural intentions related to the conference.	Quantitative Research: Questionnaire survey SEM
H5	Attendee motivation related to travelling with an accompanying person increases the multidimensional value of the conference more than in cases of travelling without an accompanying person.	
H6	The participant's gender moderates the relationship between participant motivation and the multidimensional value of the conference.	

*Source:* own elaboration

### **2.3. Methods of Data Analysis**

For qualitative analysis, researchers have access to various software tools, such as ATLAS, MAXQDA, and NVivo (Busetto et al., 2020), which are well-suited for the complex analysis of multi-coded materials and the exploration of relationships within the data (Sántha, 2013), as well as for facilitating collaboration among researchers. Based on the findings of Sántha (2013), I decided to use NVivo software, which supports electronic coding. Given that my research employed both deductive and inductive approaches, I applied priori coding. This form of data coding involves the researcher establishing the coding categories before the analysis, grounded in theory (Sántha, 2013).

At the outset of the research, I established five broad coding categories that directly corresponded to the research sub-questions in a top-down manner. These categories are as follows:

1. Factors of Attendee Motivation, specifically related to sub-question Q1.
2. Dimensions of Multidimensional Value, specifically related to sub-question Q2.
3. Conference Attendee Satisfaction, specifically related to sub-question Q3.
4. Behavioural Intentions, specifically related to sub-question Q4.

5. Trends observed by interviewees during conference participation, which are related to association market development and are presented holistically within the research.

The coding process culminated in the description of the behavioural patterns of the interviewees, where the researcher supports the main findings with relevant quotes and situates them within the broader context (Busetto et al., 2020).

For the quantitative analysis, I employed descriptive statistical methods and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SEM is a well-established method for analysing multivariate relationships, widely used in the social, psychological, and behavioural sciences (Bentler – Yuan, 1999). Specifically, I opted for the variance-based approach known as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). During the SEM modelling process, I used Stata version 18 to test the research model and the hypothesised relationships, while additional analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.

### **3. Results and Conclusions of the Dissertation**

The results of the dissertation are presented according to the logical and chronological sequence of the primary research. I begin by outlining the findings of the qualitative research in relation to the research sub-questions, followed by a detailed discussion of the quantitative research outcomes through hypothesis testing.

#### **3.1. Summary of Qualitative Research Findings**

##### **Q1 How do the factors of attendee motivation relate to the multidimensional value of the conference?**

The results of the qualitative research indicated that both professional and leisure factors shaped attendee motivation, corroborating the findings of López-Bonilla et al. (2023). In terms of professional factors, social networking, professional education, and scientific performance were identified as the primary motivational factors for participation, which supports the conclusions drawn by Sanders et al. (2022).

**(1) Based on the sample, the leisure factors that determined attendee motivation included extra-conference opportunities, the destination image, the location and comfort, as well as, identified as a new finding, gastronomy.**



**(2) Additionally, a new finding emerged from the interviews: the destination image was identified as a key motivational factor in participants' conference selection process.** This result complements existing motivational research (including Oppermann – Chon, 1997; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001; Severt et al., 2009; Rowe, 2018; López-Bonilla et al., 2023).

**Q2 How does the multidimensional value influence the individual dimensions of perceived value?**

Multidimensional value was prominently featured in participants' conference selection preferences. The dimensions of multidimensional value, as defined by Sweeney and Soutar (2001) – namely functional quality value, functional economic value, social value, and emotional value – were all reflected in the interview findings. Based on the sample, it can be asserted that if one or more dimensions of perceived value elicited a negative impression from the participant, it significantly impacted the overall evaluation of the conference. Thus, the response to the second research sub-question in the qualitative study supplements existing tourism research (such as Park, 2004; Williams – Soutar, 2009; Carlson et al., 2015) concerning perceived value.

**Q3 What are the key material and non-material factors of multidimensional value that influence attendee satisfaction?**

Satisfaction plays a crucial role in the development of loyalty, a topic that has been extensively researched by several scholars (including Severt et al., 2007; Lee – Back, 2008). The satisfaction of interviewees was evident in both their satisfaction with the conference itself and with the destination.

**(3) As a new finding from the qualitative research, I identified that the dimensions of multidimensional value manifested in the conference selection process through both material and non-material aspects based on the sample.** This result reflects and extends previous research (Severt et al., 2007; Tanford et al., 2012) concerning attendee satisfaction.

**Q4 How does attendee satisfaction affect behavioural intentions related to academic association conferences?**

Based on the research, it can be concluded that positive experiences and professional relationships strengthened participants' commitment to the association and encouraged them to participate in similar events in the future. This finding is consistent with the existing literature (Loi et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2021).

**(4) Another new finding from the qualitative research, based on the sample, is the prominent role of the destination in the interpretation of satisfaction, which is also linked to behavioural intentions.**

As the concluding point of the qualitative research, it is important to note that trends shaping the conference industry emerged throughout the entire conference selection process.

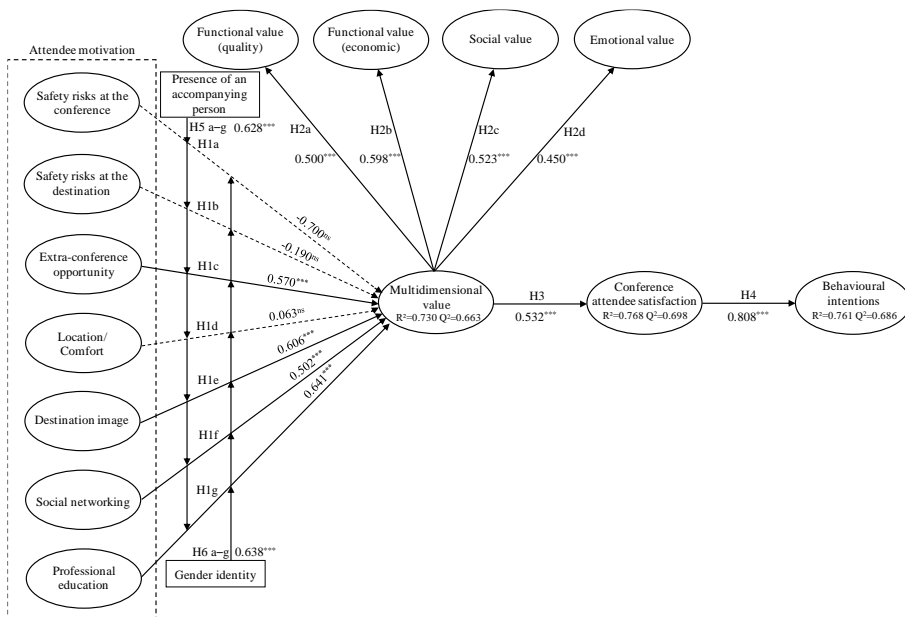
**(5) The final new finding from the qualitative research, based on the sample, is the complex influence of family-friendliness (reflecting on the research of Bos et al., 2017), bleisure tourism (reflecting on the research of Lichy – McLeay, 2018), innovation (reflecting on the research of Pinho – Marques, 2021), digitalisation (reflecting on the research of Ram et al., 2024), and sustainability (reflecting on the research of Bertella – Castriotta, 2023) on participants' decision-making processes.**

### **3.2. Summary of Quantitative Research Findings**

As a result of the questionnaire survey, a total of 310 valid responses were collected, each pertaining to an in-person academic association conference. Following the descriptive statistical analysis, I conducted SEM modelling based on the five-step recommendation by Dash and Paul (2021).

The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) indicated that the measurement model demonstrated adequate reliability, validity, and fit indices according to the criteria established in the literature (Fornell – Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2019; Dash – Paul, 2021). The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: The Structural Model Generated by Stata Software**



Note: Bootstrapping with a 95% confidence interval, \*\*\* $p < 0.05$ , ns = not significant

Source: own research

The acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses was determined based on the values of the standardised regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ).

The acceptance of the hypotheses was conducted at a 5% significance level.

**Table 1: Results of Hypothesis Testing**

Hypotheses	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	P-value – Sig. Level	t-value	5%	95%	Evaluation
<i>Direct Relationships</i>						
H1/a: Safety Risks at the Conference → Multidimensional Value	-0.700	0.529 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.630	0.577	0.878	Rejected
H1/b: Safety Risks at the Destination → Multidimensional Value	-0.190	0.341 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.950	0.281	0.301	Rejected
H1/c: Extra-Conference Opportunities → Multidimensional Value	0.570	***	2.640	0.515	0.600	Accepted
H1/d: Location/Comfort → Multidimensional Value	0.063	0.074 <sup>ns</sup>	1.790	0.006	0.132	Rejected
H1/e: Destination Image → Multidimensional Value	0.606	***	5.320	0.564	0.656	Accepted
H1/f: Social Networking → Multidimensional Value	0.502	***	5.010	0.423	0.581	Accepted
H1/g: Professional Education → Multidimensional Value	0.641	***	5.640	0.523	0.760	Accepted
H2/a: Multidimensional Value → Functional Value (Quality)	0.500	***	9.360	0.433	0.646	Accepted
H2/b: Multidimensional Value → Functional Value (Economic)	0.598	***	10.980	0.484	0.711	Accepted
H2/c: Multidimensional Value → Social Value	0.523	***	9.850	0.480	0.666	Accepted
H2/d: Multidimensional Value → Emotional Value	0.450	***	12.500	0.423	0.678	Accepted
H3: Multidimensional Value → Conference Attendee Satisfaction	0.532	***	12.610	0.449	0.698	Accepted
H4: Conference Attendee Satisfaction → Behavioural Intentions	0.808	***	14.560	0.773	0.844	Accepted
H5: Travelling with an Accompanying Person → Attendee Motivation/ Multidimensional Value	0.628	***	6.251	0.555	0.674	Accepted
H6: Gender Identity → Attendee Motivation/Multidimensional Value	0.638	***	6.588	0.579	0.685	Accepted

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.05$ , ns = not significant

Source: own research

In conclusion, 12 hypotheses were accepted, and 3 were rejected. After moderation, the multidimensional value improved, indicating that the moderation was beneficial in enhancing the model's performance.

### **3.3. Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Significance of the Research**

Based on the results of this research, a new relationship can be established: the destination selection of scientific associations plays a crucial role in the individual conference selection decisions of the association's members, i.e., the conference participants.

My research findings corroborate the results of Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023), who examined multidimensional value, tourist satisfaction, and behavioural intentions within a single model. Their research demonstrated that perceived value significantly influences satisfaction and behavioural intentions. This study contributes to the academic literature by addressing a gap with its comprehensive examination of the decision-making process of conference participants.

The complexity of the research model in this dissertation is highlighted by the inclusion of factors related to attendee motivation, as well as the elements examining the moderating effects of travelling with an accompanying person and gender identity. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the methodological novelty of this research lies in the application of the PLS-SEM method to analyse the factors of attendee motivation, multidimensional value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions.

The findings are particularly valuable for policy-making and strategic planning aimed at reducing the concentration of events in Budapest by promoting rural destinations as viable alternatives.

### **3.4. Limitations of the Research and Future Research Opportunities**

I deemed the primary research to be successful, as both the qualitative and quantitative components were effective, providing relevant answers to the research question. However, it was essential to consider the limitations inherent in the methodology and the research environment. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new dimensions to the study with the rise of virtual and hybrid conferences. For future research, I propose conducting a more in-depth comparative analysis of different conference formats.

Additionally, future research directions should include a comprehensive analysis of the sustainability aspects of in-person conferences, with an extension of the study to virtual and hybrid conferences. As an independent research topic, I recommend a detailed exploration of the family-friendly approach among stakeholders of academic association conferences. Another future research suggestion related to emerging trends is the investigation of bleisure tourism among conference participants.

My final recommendation for continuing this research is to include the supply side in the analysis. It would be valuable to conduct expert in-depth interviews with professional conference organisers to better understand the interconnectedness of supply-side stakeholders.

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## 5. List of Publications

### Academic Book, Book Chapters:

- Boros K. (2019): Konferenciaturizmus. In Irimiás A. – Jászberényi M. – Michalkó G. (eds.): *A turisztikai termékek innovatív fejlesztése*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, pp. 50–61. <https://doi.org/10.1556/9789634544081>
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- Boros K. (ed.) (2023): Az üzleti és a kulturális rendezvények értékkeremtő ereje. [Digital Edition.] Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. On-line: <https://mersz.hu/boros-az-uzleti-es-a-kulturalis-rendezvenyek-ertekteremto-ereje/> <https://doi.org/10.1556/9789634549321>
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### **Refereed Journal Articles:**

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- Boros K. (2018): Város és nagyvállalat pozitív szinergiája: A Mercedes-Benz Manufacturing Hungary Kft. turizmusélnkítő hatása Kecskemét városára és vonzáskörzetére. *A Magyar Regionális Tudományi Társaság XVI. Vándorgyűlése: Áramlások a térgazdaságban*. October 18-19, 2018, Kecskemét, Hungary: John von Neumann University Faculty of Economics and Business. Conference presentation.
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