

APPLYING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR THEORY AND GRAND MODELS TO ATTENDEES BEHAVIOUR IN CONFERENCE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to provide a rational suggestion for creating a useful theory of decision making via a qualitative review of the “grand models” of consumer behavior and then applying this theory to conference decision-making context. During past three decades many consumer behavior theories and models have been developed and become prominent research topics in various fields of consumer science. These models, labeled the “grand models” of consumer decision-making which tend to describe the process of proceeding throughout a major buying decision as a rational problem solving approach. However, objections against use of grand models have been expressed since their introduction. The main objective of this research is to challenge these criticisms and prove that grand models are properly applicable in the context of conference decision-making based on logical discussions. Considering the fact that international convention market is growing rapidly and is attracting huge number of attendees every year, therefore the development of a reliable theory for understanding conference attendees’ behavior is not only a matter of purely academic interest but also a possible contribution to convention tourism marketing practice.

KEYWORDS

Grand Models, Decision-Making, Conference, Participation, Attendees.

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumer behavior has been a long-term question in scholarly literature. It involves the use and disposal of products and questioning how they are purchased. The product or services a consumer often use is of great interest to the marketer, because this can help them to find out how a product is best positioned in order to encourage consumers to increase their consumption (Belch, 1998). Consumer decision-making models are widely used in consumer behavior research and study areas to structure theory and research. Pioneer models of consumer behavior had one simple primary objective that was a systematic and in-depth understanding of buying processes (Howard, 1994).

However, as Kolb (2006) clarifies based on consumer’s level of involvement, decision-making can be a quick and easy or a lengthy and complicated process. The fact is that consumer buying and consumer decision-making are so complicated as a result of external influences that have to be handled within an internal frame of preference (Siwach and Dahiy, 2009). Consumer behavior within the discipline of consumer science focuses on consumption behavior where the humane aspect of decision-making and

purchasing is of major importance as opposed to buyer behavior - the domain of the marketing and business professionals who wish to understand buyer behavior (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000, P:5).

For better understanding of what happens in a real situation until a consumer decides to buy a product or service scientists suggested developing models. Walters (1978) states that consumer decision-making models specify exact cause and effect that relate to consumer behavior (P: 43). Engel et al. (1995) go further and explain that consumer decision-making models offer many advantages including: (1) the possibility to grasp visually what happens as variables and circumstances change; (2) providing conceptual frames of reference that logically indicate the interrelationship of variables for research purposes; (3) offering the possibility to understand different consumer decision processes and marketing strategies; (4) and finally playing an important part in the establishment of theory.

In tourism literature, a considerable number of researchers have studied individual tourists' travel decisions. Many of them applied traditional consumer behavior theories such as grand models. While grand models of consumer behavior never designed to explain service purchase decisions, they were greatly used by these scholars for explaining the process used to purchase tourism services (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Grand models in tourism decision-making studies offered substantial conceptual and empirical supports for understanding tourists' destination choice behavior (Yoo and Chon, 2008).

On the other hand, there has been a distinct lack of studies on business tourist behavior while it considers as a major sector of tourism market and of economic significance to many countries worldwide. Though several researchers have voiced the research need (Lee and Back 2005; Mair and Thompson, 2009; Yoo and Chon, 2008) neither business tourism nor the convention industry has been particularly well researched or documented in recent years (Mair and Thompson, 2009). Convention tourism literature face a real problem in terms of a reasonable and reliable theoretical framework of decision-making and important influential factors which warrant further study (Lee and Back, 2005; Yoo and Weber, 2005).

Since there are certain objections on applying grand models of consumer behavior to buyer behavior in service industry, this study is taking the first step to challenge these criticisms and to show that grand models are significantly applicable on conference decision-making context. The underlying idea is to raise a consistent discussion to verify that decision-making process of conference attendees (for participation in a particular international conference) is mostly the same funnel-like process of narrowing down choices among alternatives involving five stages which traditional consumer behavior theory, "grand models" suggested.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GRAND MODELS

In the 1960.s and 1970.s a considerable number of researchers introduce the earliest and the most influential theories of decision-making, the "grand models," of consumer behavior. Consumer behavior research thus did not grow from a pure theoretical basis (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). From the time when only a limited theory on consumer behavior exists and researchers used to apply theories from other disciplines to explain consumer behavior until today with existence of numerous theories grand models still consider as the best-known consumer decision-making models (Erasmus, et al., 2001) and widely use by authors to explain the process of purchasing products and services.

Grand models are based on a theory which illustrates consumer decision-making as a multi-staged and complex process involves five main stages: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3)

alternative evaluation and selection, (4) outlet selection and purchase, and (5) post-purchase processes. This theory discusses decision-making process as a funnel-like one, in that travelers narrow down choices among alternatives. The choices influenced by socio-psychological factors like attitudes, motives, values, personal characteristics and also non-psychological factors like product design, price and advertising (Sirakayaa and Woodsideb, 2005). Gilbert (1991) explains that grand models have 6 common points: (1) it perceives consumer behavior to be a constant decision making process; (2) the behavior of individual consumer is emphasized; (3) behavior is treated as a functional (or utilitarian) concept that can be explained; (4) a buyer is viewed as an individual who searches, evaluates and stores information; (5) buyers narrow down the range of information in time, and choose from the alternatives they developed during the decision process; (6) and feedback from the final purchase is included in the models to emphasize the effect of the decision on future purchases.

In tourism context grand models of consumer decision-making contributed to the development of many destination choice models and are among most influential consumer decision-making models in tourism literature (Yoo and Chon, 2008). The central theme of grand models in travel context discuss stages an individual will take after recognizing that there is a need to travel and to get away from home. Traveler then search for information about destination alternatives and in evaluation stage, it is the time to evaluate selected destinations and choose the suitable one based on his/her own beliefs. Consumer behavior theory in destination choice models claim that tourists collect and analyse information from gradually reduced range of alternatives and eventually select the best possible choice. Tourists' final choice is based on evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of each possible outcome. Smallman and Moore (2010) discuss that leisure tourism is characterized by heightened risks associated with uncertainties of outcomes and therefore are include higher levels of information search and evaluation of alternatives. This concept has been adopted and tested across several tourists' destination choice context.

2.2. APPLYING GRAND MODELS TO ATTENDEES' BEHAVIOR

Among all the grand models which have been developed to explain leisure trip decision-making, there are five common stages namely; motivation, information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision and post-decision behavior. Mair and Thompson (2009) in their study of "UK association conference attendance decision-making process" stated that consumer behaviour displayed by delegates attending an association conference has significant similarities with that of leisure tourists (P: 401). The following explanations will be the result our systematic review of literature and the above mentioned study to conclude a general agreement:

Stage 1- Motivation: First stage of grand models in travel context explains that people may intend to take a trip to fulfill their physiological and psychological needs (Kozak, 2002). This feeling can come from a destination marketing message or simply a friend advice. The same case goes to people who travel oversea to attend a conference with a slight difference in starting point. Attendance motivation in conference context starts with the receipt of an association mailing or a call for papers for the forthcoming event, or perhaps word of mouth by friends or colleagues (Mair and Thompson, 2009). Conference attendees therefore may feel an internal desire to escape from the office or a need to build professional relationships, feel in a global community, networking and so on. Participation decision in fact comes from an internal emotional desire from attendees' inner feeling.

Stage 2- Information Search: The consumer behavior literature has explored various concepts related to information search and its implications for marketers since the kind of search consumers undertake has significant implications for the kind of purchases they eventually make (Money & Crotts,

2003). Consumer behavior research has identified two types of search that buyers engage in as they make purchase decisions. A personal information search acquired from previous experience and word-of-mouth or advice from friends and relatives. And a second type of search which is non-personal or external in nature for example, advertisements in print and electronic media and travel agents.

Stage 3- Evaluation of Alternatives: Alternative evaluation is a very crucial stage in which tourist makes the final decision by deciding which destination will be selected from many alternative destinations. In this stage a potential tourist analyzes all the information on different destinations, evaluate each destination against their travel preferences and determine the best travel destination that provides the benefits desired (Kolb, 2006). After that they will decide where to travel. Mair and Thompson (2009) claim that evaluation of alternatives in conference attendees context is slightly different compare to leisure trip evaluation. Conference evaluation of alternative is about deciding whether or not to attend a conference based on a variety of factors including the pull factors of a conference such as an attractive location, or an interesting conference topic, and also push factors such as gaining a new experience or visiting a new destination (P: 401). There are also other important constrains such as having the time and money to attend the conference or being healthy enough to travel oversea. At the end potential attendees will evaluate whether price of the conference and the conference quality meet their need and at the same time is the destination within the preferred travel distance or attractive enough.

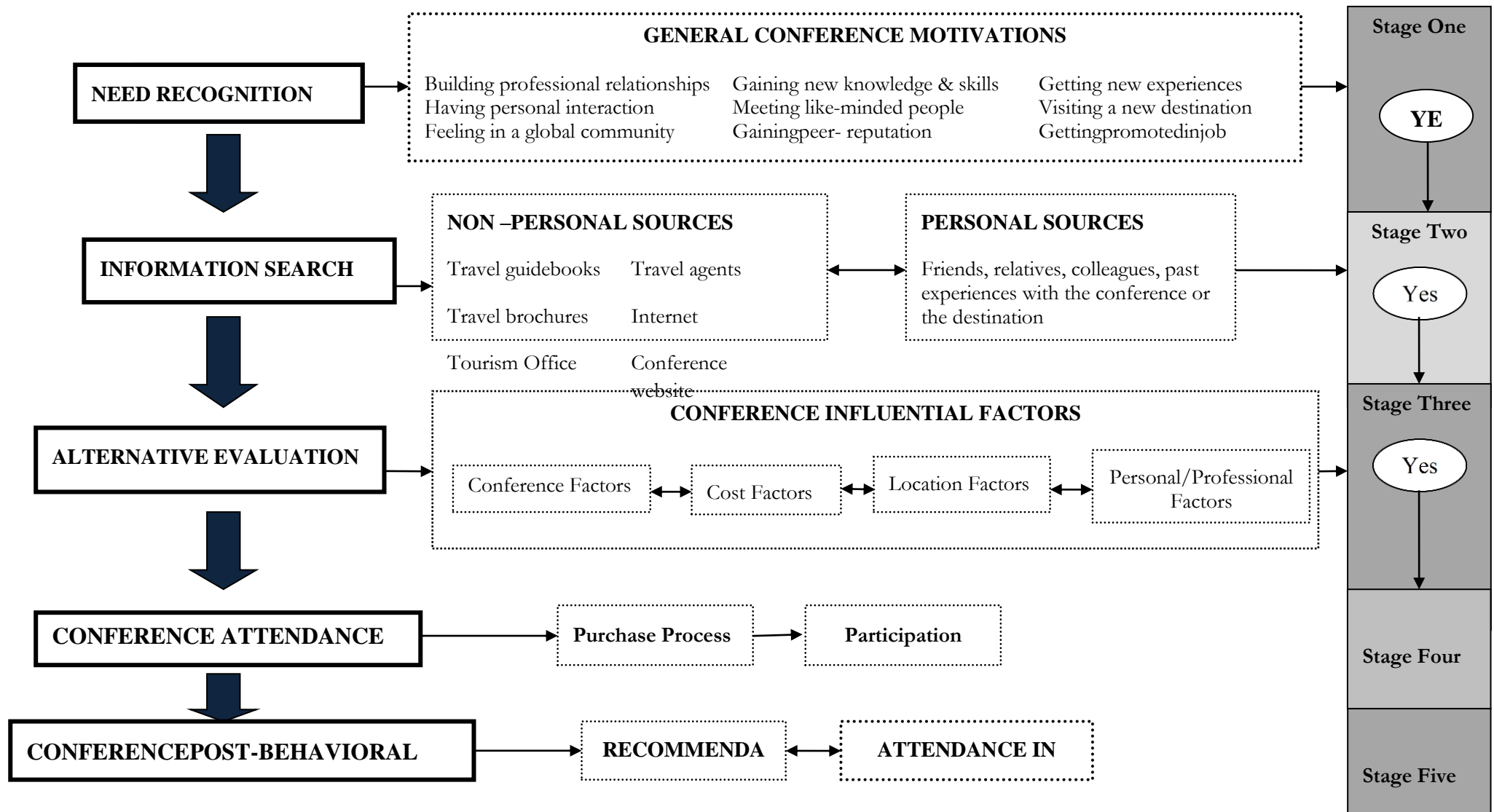
Stage 4- Purchase: Purchase process of a potential tourist after evaluation stage can be very simple however, if the destination is far or expensive and the consumer is unfamiliar with its features, the purchase process will take a longer time. The conference purchase decision also will be made according to the result of the evaluation process to attend a conference or not. It can be either simple or lengthy and extensive based on the price and distance of the selected conference.

Stage 5- Post Purchase: Scholars have a general agreement on the significant effect of tourist satisfaction and their post behavioral intentions. In fact satisfied tourist will have intentions to recommend the specific destination to others and to return to the place as well. In conference context also a satisfied attendee will have intentions to participate in the same conference again or in conferences which take place in the same destinations and he/she will also recommend the conference to his/her colleagues and friends.

With regard to the above discussions this research conclude that there are significant similarities between conference and leisure trip decision-making and in fact a potential conference delegate is nonetheless considered to move through the same stages as the leisure traveler in deciding whether or not to attend an international conference. Therefore, grand models of consumer behavior are properly applicable in conference attendees' decision-making context.

Figure 1 is the proposed conference decision-making framework. As shown in the figure conference attendees' decision making process involves 5 stages that occur in a sequential fashion.

Figure 1: Grand Models of consumer behavior in conference decision-making context



3. OBJECTION AGAINST GRAND MODELS

Scholars and theorists started to criticize traditional consumer decision-making theory in 1980s, 20 years after their introduction. According to Erasmus et al. (2001) objections against the indiscriminate use of grand models can broadly be categorized in four general terms: (1) considering a rational approach to consumer decision-making; (2) generalizing the decision-making process; (3) concerns on details included in consumer decision-making process; (4) and limitations as a result of a positivistic approach.

The first and the most extensive criticism against use of grand models refer to the fact that this theory considers consumers as rational people who spend a considerable amount of time to search information, evaluate available alternatives and then choose the greatest product that best satisfy their need. While scholar discuss that for many products consumers may just spend a little time and effort and never get engage in some of the sequential activities suggested to be very important in decision-making process (Bozinoff, 1982).

Grand models have been also criticized for generalizing the decision-making process for any consumer product. This view implies a biased approach to the consumer decision-making process and discuss that the more important a product, the more complex the decision-making process; therefore not all consumers go through extensive five stages of decision-making; they may simply skip some stages and decide based on their perception if the product is not of great importance to them (Burns and Gentry, 1990).

Another opinion criticizes grand models is regarding the details included in consumer decision-making models. This opinion discusses that consumers probably proceed through the decision-making process much quicker than is suggested by traditional consumer decision-making models. In fact scholars discuss that in many cases grand models complicate a situation that is quite straightforward (Erasmus et al., 2001).

Traditional theory of consumer behavior has a positivistic approach toward decision-making while scholars emphasize that consumers are not always in ideal situations where they have all the required information for the evaluation stage. In many cases missing information and ill-defined possibilities force consumers to choose an alternative approach (Burke, 1990). Erasmus et al., (2001) believe that consumers use different decision-making strategies in different situations and this is not reflected in traditional consumer decision-making models.

4. CHALLENGING ADAPTABILITY OF GRAND MODELS IN CONFERENCE CONTEXT

Despite the fact that grand models have been always criticized by scholars for not being applicable in many product or service decision-making contexts, this study claims that stages suggested by grand models in consumers decision-making process are almost the same stages in which an attendee usually take to participate in an international conference. We believe that the four common criticisms against grand models are not valid in conference decision-making context. The subsequent justification will disclose our outlook:

4.1. RATIONAL APPROACH IN CONFERENCE ATTENDEES DECISION-MAKING

Conference participation and involvement is very important for researchers and academicians, who are interested to get new information on their field, receive feedback on their research and network. Recently many universities/organizations encourage and facilitate conference participation with providing financial support for their researchers. That means academicians have to attend an international conference at least once a year as a rule. A potential conference attendee therefore, has to find the right conference in the right time and right place. A conference which fit within the researcher's area of study, provide networking opportunities and at the same time goes in line with the required principles of their organization in order to receive a fund from them.

Based on above discussion, this study assert that attending an international conference consider as a complex, high-risk situation in which a potential attendee (in most cases an educated academic person) who is engage with his/her busy lifestyle will embark upon an extensive, cognitive laden and realistic decision-making process. Attendees consider being aware of all the other alternative conferences they can attend and that they are able to correctly rank conferences in terms of their benefits and disadvantages. Hence, they are rational decision makers indeed. Therefore, conference participation decision-making is regarded as a rational and systematic behavior. High investment costs for attending a convention and uncertainty about the consequences of the participation can determine that convention participation decision-making fits the cognitive decision-making process, evolving in rational and sequential steps (Yoo & Chon, 2008).

4.2. GRAND MODELS AS A CONTEXT SPECIFIC MODEL IN CONFERENCE CONTEXT

To provide new insight and to contribute to the domain of decision-making theory for conference attendees this study is trying to suggest grand models as a context specific model for attendees' decision-making process. Our statement goes in line with Sirgy (1983) who suggested on the categorization of consumer decisions to three levels for discussion and research purposes; (1) micro level (purely on sensation, perception); (2) micro-macro level (five steps of decision-making); (3) and macro level (repeat purchase behavior). Since critics suggested that a study of consumer decision-making behavior should be context specific and product specific to provide new insights and to contribute to theory building in the domain of consumer science (Erasmus et al., 2001), the current study considers conference attendees behavior to process at micro-macro-level which is include the five stages offered by grand models and fit within its context.

4.3. CONFERENCE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: COMPLEX OR SIMPLE

In today's global business environment with the increasing number of organizers offering variety of opportunities and activities, all competing to maximize the number of their attendees; choosing the right conference is not simple. An attendee's wrong decision will lead to a sizable outlay of money and time lose and at the same time wasting a research paper on a low quality conference or leaving a conference without any feedback. Traditional decision-making models although imply complex and lengthily decision process, it is quite the case in conference context since making decision of which conference to attend is a very important issue for academicians.

4.4. POSITIVISM APPROACH IN CONFERENCE ATTENDEES DECISION-MAKING

An extensive decision-making process requires a wide range of information on available alternatives. While scholars discuss that in many cases missing information may lead an individual to choose an alternative or rely on others to choose for them. In real world a potential attendee has access to all the required information with only approaching the specific conference website. Conference websites provide all the conference related information (fees, speakers, publication opportunities, venue) and also destination information (accommodation, flight, sightseeing opportunities). This makes the conference decision-making an ideal situation compared to other products or services.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, meetings and conferences have become globally recognized for their valuable economic contribution to tourism destinations and their significant growth potential (Dwyer, 2002). Understanding conference attendees' decision-making process considers a very important topic in market research because of the growing intensity of competition for attracting international attendees among associations and host destinations (Lee & Back, 2008). The objective of this research was to suggest a useful theory of decision-making for conference attendees' behaviour and to challenge applicability of grand models in conference decision-making context. These have been done by raising the common criticisms against the grand models and providing a logical discussion to prove that the theory is applicable as a context specific model in conference decision-making process.

Despite the fact that many scholars question traditional consumer behaviour theory of being a complex phenomenon and therefore not reliable in many decision-making context, this study assert that in many situations of purchase decisions still people go through extensive information search and evaluation of alternatives in order to choose the best possible option for their high-risk, important purchases. Traditional consumer decision models and theories developed in the 1960s and 1970s are still being used to structure research in the field of consumer behavior and provide variety of opportunities for future research.

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