
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, A KEY FACTOR FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

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SUMMARY

Entertainment activities in an international academic conference, remains an important factor for its success. The question is if there is an optimal communication strategy for the organization of the conferences entertainment program in order to attract a large number of potential researchers. Can social event(s) ameliorate the participants' of an international academic conference experience? This is the research question of this paper.

The entertainment part of an academic conference can have an important impact on the overall event. An adequate communication strategy that takes into account its *interculturality* and so the difficulties of facing a *cultural confusion* is more than important for the overall success of the conference.

Key Words: Intercultural Communication, Academic conference, cultural confusion, cultural shock

INTRODUCTION

Attending conferences is one important element in the work of the academic community. Researchers, professors, PhD and master students need presentations in international conferences to acquire feedback on a paper, get informed about the work of others, communicate with colleagues from the same or from other disciplines and exchange ideas (Borghans L. et al., 2010). The participation in conferences can also help academics ameliorate their Curriculum Vitae, obtain the opportunity of new collaborations, and finally even have some nice time off, which can be combined, for example, with holiday vacations, immediately after the conference. Actually, the need of participants to combine their scientific activity with relaxation has been identified by researchers on the field. In this paper we focus on the need of academics for relaxation and communication.

We consider the entertainment activities that exist in an international academic conference an important factor for its success. The question is if there is an optimal communication strategy for the organization of the conferences entertainment program in order to attract a large number of potential researchers and which is the role of intercultural communication. Our research question is the following: Can social event(s) ameliorate the participants' of an international academic conference experience?

Our research is based on literature review, the observation of academic international conferences and the unofficial discussion with its participants. We focus on international, multicultural (more than 10 different nationalities per conference), academic conferences. The participants of these conferences had the opportunity to interact 4 days (duration of the conference¹). It is also important to notice that we are referring to non-rotated conferences that take place in Athens, Greece, with a minimum of 50 to a maximum of 150 participants.

¹ The international conferences we are referring to include 2 days of presentations and 2 days of possible participation in entertainment activities.

This paper is separated in 5 different parts, including the introduction. In the second part, we analyze some of the elements to take into account for a successful conference. We then examine the communication strategy steps needed for the organization of a successful event, as far as multicultural events are concerned, taking into account the effect of *cultural shock* or *cultural confusion*. We finally take a look at the infrastructure elements and more particularly the entertainment services that can ameliorate the participants' perception of academic conferences.

I. ELEMENTS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT ...

The interest and value of academic conferences is growing. According to the statistics of the International Congress & Convention Association (ICCA), Greece has the 21st position in meetings per country and the numbers of meetings is growing each year (see figure 2).

International academic conferences location is an important factor of attractiveness for the organization of scientific conferences (Terzi M. et al., 2013). The evaluation criteria regarding this factor include a) infrastructure, that must be able to meet the needs of both conference organizers and participants (accommodation, food quality, entertainment services, ability of a destination to offer sightseeing), b) historical and cultural heritage, c) appropriate weather conditions, d) adequate availability of travel services, e) variety of transportation modes, f) safe destination (free of high terrorism, theft and injuries), g) calm environment, as far as local community is concerned, h) adequate health conditions, j) the use of English as an international language that can help the participants communicate.

123 academics and students participated in a quantitative research, conducted by Terzi M. C. et al. (2013) that was completed to evaluate the role of the location for a conference success. This research concluded that evaluation criteria are able to influence the decision making process of potential delegates, regarding their participation since the more the factor of "Conference Location" is satisfied, the higher the levels of participation. The evaluation criterion of

Infrastructure was considered as very important, according to 74% of respondents. A percentage of 87.8% considered their transportation options (ease of access to and from the destination in which the conference is held) as one of the major criteria for the choice of a conference destination. The criterion of security with a rate of 77.2% was also approved as one of the elements that had also a great impact on participants' reaction. Concerning the evaluation criterion of hygiene (destinations free from bad hygiene, infectious diseases and poor cleanliness), 87% of the sample consider it very important for a successful conference. Finally, English was approved as the official language for academic conferences for 83.7% of the sample as academic conferences usually attract scientists from different countries. The use of a united code of communication among participants is therefore needed. Terzi M. C. et al. (2013) also noticed that the communication strategy based on the pillars of the factor "conference location" is able to increase the levels of participants' satisfaction and by extension the levels of their participation. Judging from the above, the organization of conferences should develop a communication strategy by highlighting the evaluation criteria of the factor conference location in order to attract more participants. As far as infrastructure and entertainment elements are concerned, before organizing our communication strategy we should take into account the *interculturality* of the event and so the effect of cultural shock.

II. THE EFFECT OF "CULTURAL SHOCK" - "CULTURAL CONFUSION" ...

Hottola (2004) proposes the theory framework of "dynamic model of culture confusion", to explain the theoretical understanding of short-term transitions. This is the term we also consider adequate for the intercultural adaptation needed for the participation in an international conference. Conference participants can be regarded as short term tourists, as the event takes place from 2 to 4 days and the stay can be extended (to meet new places, monuments and people, establish collaborations, etc).

The term '*cultural confusion*' (also known as '*culture shock*'), describes a variety of difficulties experienced while meeting other countries and people. Oberg (1960:177) has defined culture shock as a 'transitory concept precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all one's familiar signs and symbols of social

interaction'. For Guanipa (1998), the expression 'culture shock', introduced in 1958, describes the anxiety (lack of direction, feeling of not knowing what to do or how to react), produced when someone moves to a new environment. The feeling of culture shock generally sets in after the first few days of coming to a new place and can be described as the physical and emotional discomfort one suffers when coming to live in another country or a place different from the place of origin (different language, social rules, etc.) (Oberg, 1960). Some of the symptoms might be loneliness, melancholy, pains and allergies, health troubles (insomnia, desire to sleep too much, depression, feeling tired, anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others), identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country, loss of identity, feelings of being lost, overlooked, feeling exploited or abused. These symptoms of cultural shock can appear at different times. Nevertheless, we should also add that culture shock can also become an opportunity for redefining one's life objectives and acquiring new perspectives.

Culture shock can have different stages (Guanipa, 1998), that can be ongoing or might only appear at certain times. These different stages remind us the U-Curve of Culture Shock (Oberg, 1960) (see figure 1). At the first stage, the new arrival may feel euphoric and be pleased by all of the new things encountered. This time is called the "**honeymoon**" stage, as everything encountered is new and exciting. At this point we have to observe that conference participants usually stay on this first stage, due to their short time of stay.

In the second stage, the person may encounter some **difficult times and crises** in daily life. For example, communication difficulties may occur such as not being understood. In this stage, there may be feelings of discontent, impatience, anger, sadness, and feeling incompetence. This happens when a person is trying to adapt to a new culture that is very different from the culture of origin. Transition between the old methods and those of the new country is a difficult process and takes time to complete. During the transition, there can be strong feelings of dissatisfaction. The third stage is characterized by gaining some understanding of the new culture. A new feeling of pleasure and sense of humor may be experienced. One may start to feel a **certain psychological balance**. The new arrival may not feel as lost and starts to have a feeling of direction. The individual is **more familiar** with the environment and wants to belong. This initiates an evaluation of the old ways versus those of the new. In the fourth stage, the

person realizes that the new culture has good and bad things to offer. This stage can be one of double integration or triple integration depending on the number of cultures that the person has to process. This integration is accompanied by a more solid **feeling of belonging**. The person starts to define him/herself and establish goals for living. The fifth stage, called the "**re-entry shock**", occurs when a return to the country of origin is made. One may find that things are no longer the same. For example, some of the newly acquired customs are not in use in the old culture.

These stages are presented at different times for each person. Additionally, each person has its own way of reacting in the stages of culture shock (cultural confusion). As a consequence, some stages will be longer and more difficult than others. Many factors contribute to the duration and effects of culture shock. For example, the individual's state of mental health, the type of personality, previous experiences, socio-economic conditions, familiarity with the language, family and/or social support systems, and level of education can differentiate its duration and effects.

In our globalised society we experience the difference in mentalities and cultures every day, especially when people travel, this is why we can't speak of a culture shock, even if we might like to call their confusion a shock because that sounds more exciting (Hottola, 2004). 'Culture confusion', as we have already noticed, seems more accurate in the context of intercultural adaptation. Culture confusion focuses both on the problematic part of the adaptation process and on the presence of enjoyment, success, and learning. It acknowledges the reality of mixed emotions instead of clearly definable stages of emotional dominances (Hottola, 2004). In other words, culture confusion recognizes the complexity and diversity of people behavior and feelings while communication with a new, different culture.

Cultural confused people need special communication treatment. In our view, the organization of successful social events can very much help the ameliorations of possible *cultural confusions*. An adequate intercultural communication strategy could also help overcoming situations of cultural confusion.

III. WHAT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY?

Cultural communication influence the way people communicate across different cultures. Effective intercultural communication is very difficult and sometimes even impossible to achieve. In this research we focus on intercultural contact and adaptation in a multicultural environment of an international conference that takes place in Athens, Greece. Our field study involves the time people meet during the conference. In this case we can speak of a first cultural confusion. The steps for an adequate communication strategy are the following:

First of all we need a communication plan: what do we hope to achieve? What are our objectives and goals? A SWOT-analysis should follow, to see our project's communications strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Then, we need to know our target group and the message we should share with this group. Messages used necessitate being appropriate and interesting for our audience. In addition, each audience is reached by different tactics and different communication tools. The selection of communication tools, the responsibilities of each member of the team, the timeline to follow, the budget and the way that the plan will be evaluated, have also an important role for our communication strategy concerning the organization of a successful conference event. Our objective is to accomplish an event that will help academics coming from different parts of the world. The interculturality, which can easily provoke cultural confusion, should be also taken into account.

Varying characteristics of a conference can influence both its overall attractiveness, but also the type of researchers interested to participate. Selecting these characteristics is therefore a strategic instrument for the communication strategy scientific associations to reach their goals (Borghans L. et al., 2010). These basic characteristics are the following: First of all, the expenses for the scientific conferences participation (conferences fees and travel costs) are generally fully covered by the researchers' universities, when presenting a paper at the conference participation. This is why the price of the registration fee will not so much affect conference participation. Elements such as conference destination, the brand name of the university/association that organizes the conference (conference reputation), specialists participating in the academic committee, and possibilities for networking are important for the attraction of participants'

attention. More particularly, Borghans L. et al. (2010) consider conference characteristics like the quality of keynote speakers and the attractiveness of conference location as the most important characteristics as far as the European Association of Labour Economists (EALE) conferences are concerned. On the other side, the type of social events, the conference venue and the time of the year, are considered as less important for the successful organization of a conference.

Borghans L. et al., (2010) carried out a research among 1310 former participants in at least one of the EALE-meetings in between 2001 and 2008, who could still be contacted by their email-address. In total, 437 participants filled in the questions on conference participation. On a 5-point Likert scale, 89% of survey participants answered that getting international feedback on their research and networking is an important reason for conference participation. **33% are attending conferences for fun.** 61% prefer attractive conference locations and 80% easy-to-reach places. Then, 57% agree with the statement that travel costs should be low. At the same time, 78% explained that travel expenses are mostly fully covered by the institution a researcher works for if the participant is accepted for presenting a paper.

Researchers can value conference characteristics differently (Borghans L., et al., 2010). Their cultural background and country, their character, their emotional condition at the moment of the event, their age and discipline have certainly a role to play. This is also a fact for the entertainment part of a conference.

For Borghans L., et al. (2010), researchers prefer an informal garden barbecue instead of more formal events like formal dinners or a reception in the city hall. During our informal contact with participants of academic conferences, academics expressed their preference for 5 star hotels as conference locations. These kinds of hotels have organized conference sales and meeting places, not to forget restaurant, accommodation and entertainment facilities. In this way conference participants can refresh themselves or even take a small nap during the posses of the conference. Restaurant fully booked for conference participants with good, clean Greek food and Greek entertainment events is also something that is preferred by conference participants. This kind of event can help them communicate and get to know each other better in a more informal environment. Collaborations can also be privileged in such an environment. It is important to

notice that certain rules should always be taken seriously into account by the entertainment activity organizers. First of all, the start and finish time of the event should be announced and followed. We can't say that the event will start on 20.00 and the participants wait until 21.00, for example. Then, when food is included, we should always check and be sure of its good quality and sufficient quantity. It is also important to notice that the amount of alcohol consumed should also be controlled. More than one or two glasses of wine could cause troubles during the event. Finally, participants require good service and encouragement to participate. The animation part has an important role to play here.

Additionally, Newcomb (1961) model of artistic communication emphasizes the dynamic nature of the relationship between each audience member and the performance/ performer (In Hill L. et al., 2003). In case of artistic performance, it is the dialogue between the performers and the audience that will each time give a different performance (figure 3).

Generally speaking, mutual respect, good communication and understanding will help everybody have a good time, meet new people, taste local cuisine and participate in local entertainment activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

At what time academics who participate in a conference can combine their presence with a nice experience, the conference can attract new participants the years to come. In order to achieve such a mission, an adequate communication strategy, is a necessity! The intercultural academic character of the conference should be certainly taken into account, as far as the organization of intercultural events with multicultural participants is also concerned.

The entertainment part of an academic conference can have an important impact on the overall event of an academic conference. An adequate communication strategy that takes into account the *interculturality* of the event and so the difficulties of facing a *cultural shock* or a *cultural confusion* is more than important for the overall success of the conference. Certainly, as far as the event itself is concerned, the interaction between the participants and the animators/ artists is finally that makes the difference.

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V. Annexes

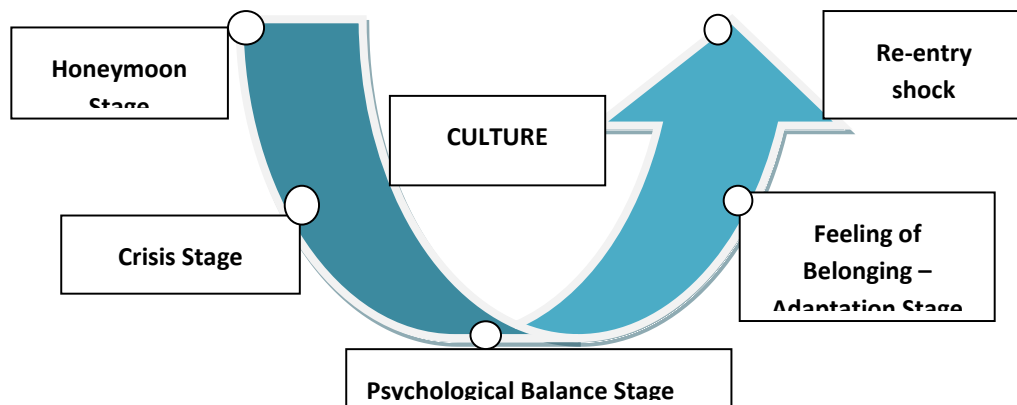


Figure 1: Stages of Culture Confusion

Rank	Count	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1	U.S.A.	538	468	571	587	620	648	645	651	637	595
2	Germa	325	299	314	339	409	415	449	525	450	458
3	Spain	212	221	304	302	387	352	316	365	385	360
4	Italy	243	278	293	317	329	324	323	350	350	350
5	United m	321	231	310	323	315	389	390	368	381	345
6	France	297	273	283	283	372	360	370	340	397	341
7	Brazil	124	105	107	128	161	186	231	223	255	293
8	Japan	176	213	211	197	205	232	243	265	281	257
9	China-	83	79	130	81	229	226	255	264	262	245
10	Austri	101	103	111	156	165	188	240	243	212	236

	Nethe	191	186	170	190	230	234	229	235	253	236
12	Switze	106	117	154	170	169	193	189	205	204	214
13	Canad	168	156	190	168	204	199	209	247	270	213
14	Swede	142	141	140	143	164	157	171	161	177	184
15	Repub orea	53	106	113	93	149	139	167	147	184	176
16	Austra	207	165	168	166	189	186	207	212	197	169
17	Portug	82	88	116	133	148	153	155	199	186	168
18	Denm	88	111	136	102	109	110	126	118	128	151
19	Argent	67	73	53	55	84	93	90	120	136	145
20	Belgiu	98	92	115	97	122	145	150	157	152	130
21	Greec	58	85	116	97	116	123	157	156	147	128
22											

Figure 2: Number of meetings per country. In the association of meeting markets 2000-2009. Available at: <http://www.iccaworld.com/dcps/doc.cfm?docid=1130> [Accessed on 21 Mai 2013].