Types of Socializing between Academics and Practitioners under the Context of Conferences

Wanxin Chen

Management School, Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Shenzhen 518172, China.

Corresponding Author: *Wanxin Chen, Management School, Shenzhen Institute of Information Technology, Shenzhen 518172, China.*

ABSTRACT

Measures to foster industry-university collaborations are essential to innovation agendas at state and national levels worldwide, as governments are eager to promote relationships between industry and academia. Academics and practitioners value conferences as a collaboration channel because conferences offer them a chance to interact in person. However, the interactions between academics and practitioners at conferences are less well understood. This study interviewed 35 conference participants from academics, industry and government, and three different types of social exchange were identified, including target socializing, random socializing, and referral socializing. Referral socializing was found to be the most trustworthy way of socializing between academics and practitioners. Target socializing was helpful for academic-practitioner interactions in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Random socializing was less efficient, but serendipity always happened through random socializing.

KEYWORDS: *Collaboration Channels, Academic-Practitioner Interactions, Socializing, Conferences*

INTRODUCTION

Industry-university collaborations have been acknowledged as a crucial mechanism for innovation in knowledge-based economies. However, ties between industry and the university sector is still relatively weak globally. Governments wish to encourage links between industry and academia, and measures to encourage these links are central to innovation agendas at state and national levels globally (OECD, 2019). Conferences are highly valued by both academics and practitioners for offering face-to-face communication opportunities (Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Cohen et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2010; Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch, 1998). It enables attendees to socialize with both potential and existing partners (Bathelt & Gibson, 2015; Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008; Borghini et al., 2006; Henn & Bathelt, 2015; Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015). At conferences, attendees typically pay a courtesy visit to current partners to keep the relationship going. Such environments promote social contact, which strengthens existing bonds and promotes trust (Borghini et al., 2006). It is also an excellent chance for prospective business partners to find and pick the right partners. Attendees can more easily locate a partner who complements their needs and initiate communication by routinely attending conferences (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015). Multiple social interactions will typically result in a reduction in social distance (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015; Sarmento, Simões, et al., 2015), and as one of the key engagement activities at conferences, socializing is crucial for the growth of relationships. However, previous research in the area of business events mainly focuses on the interactions between practitioners and practitioners. They focus on either exhibitor-to-exhibitor interactions or exhibitor-to-visitor interactions (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008; Cheng et al., 2014; Maskell et al., 2004; Zhong & Luo, 2018). Academic-practitioner interactions are under-researched in the conference setting. This study aims to characterize the social interactions between academics and practitioners at conferences. It will enrich the understanding of social interactions under the context of conferences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the context of collaboration channels, conferences were ranked as highly important by both academics and practitioners (Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Cohen et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2010; Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch,

1998). Within the context of collaboration channels, conferences were ranked as highly important by both academics and practitioners (Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Cohen et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2010; Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch, 1998). However, there lacks a detailed understanding of the characteristics of conferences as an informal collaboration channel. In most studies, conferences only appear as an option in the questionnaires (Arza & Vazquez, 2012; Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Cohen et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2010; Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch, 1998). Few studies explain why conferences are highly ranked by academics and practitioners as a collaboration channel in brief (Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch, 1998; Bekkers & Freitas, 2008). Therefore, less is known about how practitioners and academics interact at conferences.

Socializing refers to the "social dimension of meetings" (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2019, p691), is acknowledged as one of the main interactions among attendees in the conference settings (Bekkers & Freitas, 2008; Cohen et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2010; Meyer-Krahmer & Schmoch, 1998). Business events afford many opportunities for socializing (Borghini et al., 2006; Evers & Knight, 2008; Foley et al., 2014; Foley et al., 2013; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2019; Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015; Sarmento, Simões, et al., 2015). Generally, socializing acts as a starting point for two people to break the ice at business events. It is different from visits between companies, because people don't have to make an appointment in advance and seek permission to visit (Rinallo et al., 2010). Attendees get to know each other through low-risk interactions, such as small talk or a brief chat (Bathelt et al., 2004; Evers & Knight, 2008; Ravn & Elsborg, 2011). Socializing happens sometimes at formal session, and mostly at social events (Cheng et al., 2014; Foley et al., 2014; Rinallo et al., 2010; Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015). Attendees may congregate in a group around stand-up cocktail tables during lunchtime (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011), or bump into others randomly during a coffee break (Henn & Bathelt, 2015). These social events enable attendees to create social bonds through sharing common experiences (Foley et al., 2014). More private meetings may be held based on interests or needs when a better understanding of each other is established (Bathelt & Schuldt, 2008; Edwards et al.,

2017; Ravn & Elsborg, 2011). In general, social distance will decrease through multiple social interactions (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015; Sarmento, Simões, et al., 2015). Socializing plays a crucial role in trust development (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2019). Trust levels will increase along with the level of knowledge and understanding of partners (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015). As indicated by Lopez-Fresno and Savolainen (2019), trust may be built, sustained and even destroyed through socializing.

METHODS

Interviewing is the primary and common data collection technique in qualitative research (Cooper & Schindler, 2014; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Elliott & Timulak, 2005). This study employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. Purposeful sampling was used, which is widely applied in a qualitative approach to identify and select knowledgeable informants for gaining an insightful understanding of investigated phenomena (Coyne, 1997; Palinkas et al., 2015). Both academics and practitioners were targeted, who were required to have experience in attending conferences involving industry-university engagement. Such requirement ensured that participants were knowledgeable about the research topic. This study involved interviews with 35 people, and data collection ceased when "information saturation" was reached. Among 35 participants, 15 participants were academics, 11 participants were practitioners, 6 participants were partnership managers, and 3 participants were staff of government agencies. The gender balance of participants was almost equal, with 17 females and 18 males. Inductive thematic analysis was applied in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

Based on the interviews, three different types of social exchange were discovered, including target socializing, random socializing, and referral socializing. These three socializing styles are not exclusive of one another; target socializing could also be referral socializing, which would boost socializing's efficacy and efficiency. Many participants said they would use two to three socializing strategies simultaneously during conferences. The following section will show how these three socializing styles may help forge connections

between academics and practitioners after conferences.

Target Socializing

One of the frequently-mentioned ways of socializing with attendees at conferences was target socializing. In other words, attendees go to conferences with a list of targeted people who they want to meet. Comparatively speaking, practitioners are more likely to do preparation work before they go to conferences because networking seems to be more important to them than listening to presentations. Before attending, they are more likely to look through the delegate list and conference agenda, and make a rough plan about whom they are going to meet with and which sessions they will attend. Such plans are helpful for them to make the best use of the time when at conferences. For example, Practitioner-11 described his preparation before he went to a conference:

> There's a little bit of that preparation. I mean it doesn't always work. But it does give you some idea of who there might be, because you do not know who's actually showing up (laughs), so you do not want to waste your time necessarily finding those individuals. (Practitioner-11)

From his perspective, preparation does not always work but it is good to prepare as much as possible.

Some partnership managers indicated they had detailed plans for approaching their targeted attendees where they had a clear purpose. Partnership manager-3 described her preparations for meeting with her potential collaborators at conferences. She carried out thorough research on the people she was going to meet and also prepared what she would say when she had the chance to talk to them:

> So, we would be going there to meet our potential customers. So, you know, you try to plan, what am I going to listen to? Who am I trying to meet? If I meet them, what am I going to say? You know what I mean? So that, if you do it properly, like that's the kind of work. Like you do not just turn up. (Partnership manager-3)

This suggests that partnership managers and practitioners care about getting benefits from attending conferences through socializing. In other words, they are more result-oriented. They have relatively clear goals of making

contact with potential collaborators or reconnecting with their existing collaborators.

Academics are more casual in terms of socializing with other attendees compared to practitioners and partnership managers. They will review the conference agenda only if they have time. Academics will check with their colleagues or friends whether they will be going to the same conference. The main purpose of attending conferences for academics is to share their new research knowledge and to gain feedback from attendees in the same field of research. But in terms of connecting with industrial practitioners, relatively few academics mentioned any plans for interacting with them. For most academics, it seems like socializing with industrial practitioners is not on their list of reasons to attend conferences. For some PhD students or early-career academics, it is less likely for them to approach practitioners as they do not have much experience of communicating with them. It may be hard for them to initiate conversations as they may not be familiar with, or feel interested in, practitioners' work. Some senior academics indicated they were busy enough with their current work and they did not need to seek collaborations at conferences. Many industrial practitioners may contact them directly by checking their profiles and contact details online. Senior academics are more relaxed at conferences and reconnect with old friends. They also feel happy to talk with practitioners at conferences if they are approached. However, did not necessarily take the initiative to engage with practitioners, as indicated by Academics-15:

> I'm not trying to make new connections so much… I'll probably stand back and say, 'Well, if I happen to meet them, I'll meet them, but if not, then so be it.' I've got a busy enough schedule to not be worried about that. (Academics-15)

Those academics who are likely to interact with practitioners at conferences tend to be those who have been working in industry for years and already have connections with industrial practitioners. They may have known each other for years, and conferences are a great time for them to reconnect and share information with each other. For example, Academics-7 recalled her general experience

at conferences in terms of communicating with practitioners:

> *For me, yes, because I was a hotel manager before I was an academic. So, if I meet people who are from hotels, it is often that I know them, yeah. That I knew them in my previous life, or I have met with them on a number of occasions, and so we catch up.* (Academics-7)

The differences between academics and practitioners in targeted socializing may result from their different attitudes toward attending conferences. As several practitioners mentioned, the best use of their time is important for them. Unlike academics, who are expected to attend conferences as part of their work, practitioners incur opportunity costs for attending conferences: "We're [academics] expected to go to conferences as part of our job. But for a lot of people, that's not part of their day to day." (Partnership manager-3). Practitioners may need to go back to the office to finish their work after attending a whole day conference, or they may need to re-schedule a meeting with other potential customers if the time overlaps. Practitioners need to weigh up the opportunity costs when deciding to attend conferences compared to academics. Therefore, practitioners interact with other attendees at conferences with a stronger intent than academics. If they cannot gain value from attending conferences, they consider it a waste of time. This also partially explains why practitioners are not willing to attend academic conferences, as some practitioners indicated they could not see their value.

In terms of generating potential collaborations between academics and practitioners, target socializing is functional. Most participants agreed that target socializing makes their interactions more effective. Partnership manager-2 mentioned the chances of a collaboration increases by identifying the right people in advance: "just so you understand better who's doing what. So I can go and talk to them about opportunities that I'd like to explore for our students or for the faculty." (Partnership manager-3) Similarly, Governor-1 indicated that it was helpful to plan meetings in advance of the conference:

> *Like it can be quite helpful to have you know a series of match ups booked in before the event so you can look up a little bit about the person's company and the person before you have discussion with them, so you're a little bit better informed.*" (Governor-1)

This is also supported by Practitioner-1 who has collaborations with universities:

> *In advance of the conference I would look, because some conferences share who's attending, so you have a conference list. And I would look through it and kind of identify, for example if I saw someone that was there from a university that we had already been working with, or we were interested in working with, then I would definitely try to seek that person out and form a connection with them.* (Practitioner-1)

Thus, practitioners, more than academics, engage in targeted socializing practices with clear goals for meeting with potential and current collaborators. In general, targeted socializing is considered helpful for industry-university collaborations as it increases the chances of talking with the right person.

Random Socializing

As conferences are held for certain types of topics, a great many people who are interested in such topics gather together at the same place. Therefore, it is an opportunity for attendees to meet with like-minded people they may not meet otherwise (Edwards et al., 2017; Foley et al., 2014; Foley et al., 2013; Henn & Bathelt, 2015; Maskell et al., 2004, 2006). Random socializing occurs for everyone at conferences, as Practitioner-9 described his interesting experience at a conference of meeting with other attendees:

> *I was at a function and I went out to get a glass of water. And there was this massive guy standing out there and I'm just saying, 'oh, I just had to come out and get water.' he goes, 'oh yeah, me too.' And we just started talking. And I've said are you making a film, and he goes, 'Oh, yeah, my family is…' And his name was Chris Gibson. And, he said, 'Oh, my family is in filmmaking' and stuff like that. My wife's name is Gibson... Anyway, I said, oh, yeah, what's your family do? He goes, 'I'm Mel's brother, Mel Gibson's brother.' I went, 'Oh, right. Okay.' So, right? And then we started talking about the films and what he was doing and stuff like that. So, you do not know till you meet someone.* (Practitioner-9)

This seems to be an amazing aspect of conferences. Attendees do not know who they will meet until they start talking with others. Random socializing creates the opportunity for serendipity at conferences (Edwards et al., 2017). People may create a chemical reaction by meeting with people unexpectedly, such as sparking new ideas, generating new friendships, or even changing careers, as Practitioner-2 expressed:

> *I think that's what conferences do. You can't walk into any conference going, 'I expect to get this.' It's about who you meet and who you build that chemistry with. You create that serendipity by picking the right conferences, so are you going to have the right people there... I think that's what conferences bring; that idea of confluence with people you wouldn't necessarily otherwise meet or otherwise come across.* (Practitioner-2)

However, the efficiency of generating mutual interest via random socializing is relatively low. As a couple of participants mentioned, it is hard to predict who will be the one that you will resonate with. People only know whether someone is the right person to work with once they start communicating with each other. For example, Partnership manager-1 talked about her feelings about identifying potential collaborators at conferences:

> *You see ten people and you know that with some you may be able to talk, with others it will be really difficult but with some you can really make true friendships because you're kind of... What you talk about... It just resonates.* (Partnership manager-1)

Academics-4 also emphasized individual difference when she met with other attendees at conferences. It all depends on how conversations between people go, as she said: *"I have to say, it all depends... we just get along as people. So you end up going, 'Oh, let's have a drink in private.' Talk about something else or maybe talk about what we do, that's fine."* (Academics-4) This is also supported by practitioners. As one said: *"It's quite opportunistic, I guess and... sometimes you get lucky that you find a mutual topic of interest."* (Practitioner-11)

Thus, compared to target socializing, random socializing is considered relatively opportunistic. However, collaborations and

relationships are developed through random socializing at conferences. This is in line with previous literature (Edwards et al., 2017), that small talk and other encounters at conferences can generate unprecedented outcomes long after the conference is finished.

Referral Socializing

Referral socializing is considered the most trustworthy and reliable among the three types of socializing. Referral socializing refers to those who meet other attendees through referrals by their colleagues, friends, or through a third party. As PmFSC-2 described, she actively connected people whom she thought should meet each other: *"I probably would be the person who says you need to meet this person because you are both interested in the same thing."* (Partnership manager-2)

As mentioned before, conferences are a forum in which attendees can access potential collaborators. Referral socializing seems to be particularly conducive for expanding networks. For example, Academics-9 explained how he got to know people at conferences:

> *Yeah, I suppose, in terms of potential collaborators, usually when you've got three to five current ones. They know some people that they're meeting as well. So you might get to meet them. So it's more of a melting pot of potential meeting people and 'this person's really specialized in this area, you should talk to them'.* (Academics-9)

Referral socializing is considered trustworthy because people trust the recommendations of the connectors. Such connectors are supposed to have a fundamental understanding of these two people's general background, expertise and needs at the time. Connectors may identify that specific conference attendees share common ground, and introduce them to each other, which saves time. For example, Academics-1 recalled her experience of being introduced to practitioners by her colleagues because her colleagues had a rich experience of working with them:

> *It's probably more about who people introduce you to at those conferences because they already have a previous relationship with them. They trust them, they know them. It might just be a way to*

open that up… It's usually a recommendation of people that you know and you trust. (Academics-1)

More importantly, the connectors added more affinities to the newly-built relationship. As several participants mentioned, they feel more comfortable meeting new people if they have a common friend. It seems that trust transfers from old relationships to new ones, as Practitioner-10 mentioned: *"One of his research partners and now business partner is somebody I happen to have met two or three years ago, and he was also at the conference. So, there was an existing correlation there."* (Practitioner-10) Such existing relationships catalyse a new relationship. This is supported by Academics-15 when he was talking about the significance of a third-party introduction. The existing trust between old friends serves as a guarantee for a new relationship:

> *Not necessarily because of the research, but because of the social engagements or third parties introducing, or being in a group and meeting someone and chatting with them.* (Academics-15)

> *You know, an opportunity to meet somebody and see them in a certain setting and see who they interact with and see whether they already seem to be speaking to other people that you already have trust and connections with from your network.* (Governor-1)

Thus, compared to target socializing and random socializing, the possibility of generating potential collaborations seems to be higher through referral socializing. In addition to common interests, people feel more comfortable interacting and communicating with people they have been introduced to via a mutual acquaintance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study discusses three types of socializing at conferences, including target socializing, random socializing, and referral socializing. Such study enriches the understanding of the effect of social interactions on formal collaborations. Referral socializing was found to be the most trustworthy way of socializing between academics and practitioners. Target socializing was helpful for academic-practitioner interactions in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Random socializing was less efficient, but serendipity always happens through random socializing. In addition to multiple social interactions (Sarmento, Farhangmehr, et al., 2015; Sarmento, Simões, et al., 2015), trust levels will also increase based on referrals from existing relationships. Such existing relationships catalyse new relationships and it seems that trust transfers from old relationships to new ones (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2019).

This research is not without limitations. Interview-oriented research has limitations due to all data being self-reported. Human memories suffer from natural decay. When asked about experiences, participants may only remember something important to them and may overlook other details. Additionally, the targeted participants were individuals who had attended conferences with industry-university engagement. Future studies are suggested to focus on the dyadic relationship of participants to understand different perspectives on their interactions.

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