

Leaving a Legacy Through Conferences and Exhibitions: The Enduring Value of Repeat and Globally- Rotating Events in Vancouver, British Columbia

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Conference, Exhibition, Meeting, Event, Legacy, Outcome, Impacts, Post-pandemic

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Conferences and exhibitions are important events that are associated with a range of positive impacts for attendees and other stakeholders on different scales. However, recent external disruptions such as COVID-19 and other global environmental and economic uncertainties have led to an increase in virtual and hybrid meetings. As virtual and hybrid events have increased, the ongoing value of in-person conferences and exhibitions has become less clear. This study explores the short-term outcomes and long-term legacies of five national and international conferences held in person at the Vancouver Convention Center, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in 2022. The study also compares the outcomes of conferences that return to the destination annually and those that rotate globally. The analytical framework is informed by the outcome and legacy approach developed by the BestCities Global Alliance, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The study identifies 47 short-term outcomes and 17 long-term legacies; affirming the value of in-person conferences and conventions. Key outcomes for returning and globally rotating conferences are also identified, as well as suggestions to guide the management and study of conference outcomes and legacies in other contexts.

KEYWORDS

Conference, Exhibition, Meeting, Event, Legacy, Outcome, Impacts, Post-pandemic

Introduction

In-person conferences and exhibitions are impactful events that have long been associated with a range of positive outcomes. In addition to sector-specific benefits, such as networking and knowledge exchange (Dwyer et al., 2000), conferences and exhibitions are also associated with broader economic, social, and environmental benefits from the local to global scale (Kim et al., 2010; Mistilis and Dwyer, 1999; Park and Boo, 2010). The benefits that flow from conferences and exhibitions also resonate in the long term after an event ends; thereby leaving a positive legacy (Best-Cities, 2020; Tham et al., 2023). With benefits abound, hosting conferences and exhibitions has become a globally competitive industry, in which destinations vie to attract events (Crouch et al., 2019; Schabbing, 2022). However, recent global developments have disrupted traditional conference and exhibition activity and raised questions regarding the enduring viability of traditional in-person events.

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic massively disrupted the global conferences and exhibitions industry. Many such events had to be cancelled or moved to a virtual format (Kulikova et al., 2023; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021). In the wake of the pandemic, some conferences and exhibitions have returned to traditional in-person formats, while others have continued to embrace virtual or hybrid models. These changes have led to questions regarding the ongoing value of in-person events (Kulikova et al., 2023; Schabbing, 2022). The need to understand the value of these events is exacerbated by external threats facing the industry, such as climate change and economic uncertainty. Key questions remain unanswered amid these challenges. In a world that increasingly relies on virtual communication and strives towards sustainability, what is the value of in-person events? And what is the value of returning to a host destination annually compared to a more nomadic, globally rotating approach?

This study addresses these questions by: (i) exploring the short-term outcomes and long-term legacies of five in-person conferences and exhibitions held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; and (ii) comparing the impacts of returning and globally rotating events. The study was guided by the conference outcome and legacy framework developed by the BestCities Global Alliance, a network of global destinations that encourage positive impacts through conference and exhibition events across five categories: economic, environmental, political, social, and sectoral (BestCities, 2020). The framework was refined to identify long-term event legacies using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Data was collected from five conferences held in person at the Vancouver Convention Center from March to September 2022.

Literature Review

Conferences and exhibitions are associated with a range of outcomes. A large body of research has focused on the economic impacts of these events—particularly the contributions of conferences and exhibitions to economic growth on different scales. On the local scale, conferences and exhibitions generate revenue for host destinations through the direct expenditures made by event organizers, exhibitors, and attendees (Mistilis and Dwyer, 1999). There are also indirect economic benefits for host destinations including local job creation (Jones and Li, 2015), increased property values, increased local trade/business development (Dwyer et al., 2000), and the development of new facilities and infrastructure (Rogerson, 2005). But the economic benefits of conferences and exhibitions are not confined to the host destination. These events have complex value chains that consist of diverse stakeholders with varying levels of involvement at the destination and beyond (Bueno et al., 2020). Thus, depending on where money flows, the economic impacts of these events can multiply throughout the region, nation, and world (Morgan and Condliffe, 2006; Mistilis and Dwyer, 1999).

From an economic perspective, conferences and exhibitions are also important drivers of tourism activity. Conference attendees are a unique segment who spend comparatively more money than other types of tourists (Kim et al., 2003), who may extend their stay beyond the end of the event, and may bring additional visitors along with them (Davidson, 2002). Further tourism spending can also be induced post-conference should attendees decide to revisit the host destination (Weru, 2021). Therefore, investing in conventions and exhibitions is also an investment in economic development through tourism activity.

The social impacts of conferences and exhibitions have also received attention in the literature. At the destination level, conferences and exhibitions are associated with benefits including increased community development, civic pride, and quality of life through product adoption (Dwyer et al., 2000). Research has also focused on how event organizers and venues can give back directly to host communities through corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Orthodoxou et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2008). Conference and exhibition-related CSR activities include various philanthropic activities that benefit host communities and build emotional attachments for attendees. Some examples of these activities include visiting nursing homes, orphanages, or marginalized communities (Chubchuwong, 2019). However, social impacts are broad categorization, and further research is needed to explore the breadth of cultural and political outcomes of conferences and exhibitions.

The environmental impacts and sustainability of conferences and exhibitions have also become an increasingly important topic. While the industry has been recognized for its potential to generate positive environmental outcomes (Park and Boo, 2010), recent literature has cast a more critical gaze on conference and exhibition events. In-person events have a high cost of carbon emissions that accumulate through activities such as attendee transportation, accommodations, food preparation, and host venue operations (i.e., use of single-use plastics). Other negative environmental impacts include environmental transformation and development, increased marine ecotoxicity, and water depletion (Tao et al., 2021; Whitfield et al., 2022).

In response to the negative environmental impacts of events, the conference and exhibition industry has been challenged to improve operations. Various strategies have been advanced to encourage sustainable practices at in-person events through the adoption of more 'green' practices and responsible management (Chubchuwong, 2019; Ong et al., 2022). Event organizers and managers have been encouraged to implement eco-friendly initiatives, such as reconsidering meeting frequency, reducing the use of single-use products (e.g., paper handouts, bottled water), increasing recycling, responsible food sourcing, and providing alternative transportation options for attendees (Bunlueng and Butcher, 2023). While these suggestions seek to improve industry practices on an operations-level, others have suggested altering the format of events themselves from in-person to virtual or hybrid meetings.

Calls to change the nature of the conference and exhibition industry are not new. In an era characterized by increased reliance on electronic communications, studies have long questioned the value of travelling to meet face-to-face when events can be held virtually (Høyer and Næss, 2001). Virtual or hybrid meetings allow individuals to attend a conference online, thereby reducing or eliminating the need to host attendees at, or travel to a destination, and lowering environmental impacts (Tao et al., 2021). However, virtual events also have unique costs such as financial investment in technology and expertise (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2022). In light of these developments, further research is needed to clarify and compare the impacts of these different types of events in environmental and other dimensions.

Researchers have long sought to measure the various impacts of conferences and exhibitions (Dwyer and Forsyth, 1997; Var et al., 1985). But despite the global importance of these events and the litany of economic, social, and environmental impacts associated with them, no comprehensive framework exists to identify and measure the range of possible outcomes. The conference outcome and legacy approach developed by the BestCities Global Alliance (BestCities, 2020) provide one framework to begin to explore these impacts.

The BestCities Global Alliance is a network of global destinations that encourages conferences and exhibitions to leave legacies that benefit different stakeholders from the host to the global scale. Legacies are the long-term impacts that are induced by conference and meeting activities. These long-term conference legacies are driven by short-term meeting outcomes: the actions that conference attendees take in the weeks to months following an event (BestCities, 2020). Meeting outcomes are categorized based on the primary area of impact in one of five categories: economic, environmental, political, sectoral, and social. However, while different conference legacy resources have been developed (BestCities, 2020; Copenhagen Legacy Lab, 2020; Madrid Convention Bureau, 2020; MeetDenmark, 2020), the framework has not been applied in a comprehensive study, and further development is needed.

Methodology

This study utilized a pragmatic paradigm and a mixed-method approach. The pragmatic mixed method approach focuses on using the most appropriate data collection methods to answer the research questions (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The pragmatic, mixed methods approach was selected for two reasons. First, it allowed the researchers to use the most appropriate methods to collect data for each conference studied. This was important because the five participating conferences and exhibitions had different policies regarding data collection (e.g., permitting on-site or remote data collection) and varying levels of commitment to the research (e.g., staff involvement, attendee access, time, and data sharing). Therefore, data collection had to be developed uniquely for each of the five events. The second benefit is that by using both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data, numeric and narrative data could be used to identify, describe, and measure, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the outcomes and legacies than a single approach would have produced.

The study was informed conceptually by the conference outcome and legacy framework developed by the BestCities Global Alliance (2020), the Copenhagen Legacy Lab (2020), the Madrid Convention Bureau (2020), and MeetDenmark (2020). The approach was chosen by Destination Vancouver, which initiated and co-sponsored the research. Destination Vancouver is the destination management organization of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and a member of the BestCities Global Alliance. Before hosting the BestCities Global Alliance conference in December 2022, Destination Vancouver sought to better understand local conferences and exhibitions and engaged the Center for Tourism Research at Capilano University to conduct the study using the outcome and legacy approach.

One benefit of the conference outcome and legacy framework is that it provides a basis to categorize the various impacts that flow from multiple stakeholders, on different scales, over time (e.g., economic, environmental, sectoral, etc.). However, while outcome and legacy resources include some preliminary examples of outcomes and legacies (BestCities, 2020; Madrid Convention Bureau, 2020; MeetDenmark, 2020) a key limitation of the approach is that no comprehensive database of possible outcomes and legacies exists to guide a deductive analysis. To this end, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) were adapted to inform the outcomes and legacies framework.

The UNSDGs are a comprehensive framework created to guide global development through the achievement of 17 long-term goals, enacted through 169 target indicators (United Nations, 2022). In adapting the UNSDGs to the BestCities framework, long-term conference legacies are represented through the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). The legacies (or SDGs) flow directly from related conference outcomes (or the different short-term indicators that exist for each SDG).

Data was collected from five conferences that were hosted in-person at the Vancouver Convention Centre from March to October 2022. The five participating conferences were purposefully selected and recruited by Destination Vancouver. The five conferences represent several of Vancouver's key local industries (e.g., health care, green industry, resource extraction) (see: InvestVancouver, 2022). All five of the conferences were national or international in scope. Two of the conferences were returning events that are held annually or bi-annually in Vancouver, and three of the conferences were globally rotating events that move between different host cities each year.

The study was completed using a sequential four-step multi-level triangulation mixed methods process. Data collection and analysis progressed through a series of iterative steps that inform one another toward the final interpretation (Creswell and Clark, 2006). The four steps of the process were adapted from the Meeting Legacy Strategic Pathway, which uses an eight-step process to identify and measure conference outcomes and legacies (BestCities; 2020; MeetDenmark, 2020). The four steps of the process are outlined below, including the goals, timeline, data collection and sampling methods, and analysis used in each.

Step 1: Pre-Conference

The goal of step 1 is to identify relevant outcomes and legacies for each conference. The outcomes and legacies identified during Step 1 were the basis for the measurements made during the subsequent steps. Step 1 occurred two weeks to one month before each event—subject to participant availability. During this step, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three to four conference organizers and previous event attendees. The interview participants were purposively selected by Destination Vancouver. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional interview participants from those initially identified. Desk research was also undertaken to identify possible outcomes using public secondary data (e.g., organizational reports, press releases, news articles, and social media). The combined data was then analyzed deductively using the goals and indicators within the UNSDGs framework to identify relevant outcomes and legacies for each event.

Step 2: During-Conference

The goal of Step 2 is to describe and measure the outcomes identified during Step 1, and to identify any additional emergent outcomes and legacies that need to be measured. Step 2 took place during each conference. A 10-question electronic survey was distributed to conference attendees. The survey identified the outcomes that attendees intended to create because of attending the event. The survey used at each conference featured a similar bank of questions. However, the survey content varied depending on the nature of the event (e.g., healthcare vs. mining). The survey distribution also varied for each event because the five participating conferences had different levels of commitment to the project and rules regarding survey distribution. In two instances, the conference organizers took the lead in distributing the electronic survey to the entire population of attendees via email. At two other conferences, the organizers did not participate directly in data collection. In these two cases, the researchers distributed a QR code to access the survey on-site through convenience sampling. The fifth conference did not permit any surveys to be distributed during the event. During each conference, desk research was also undertaken to identify relevant emergent outcomes. Event-focused news articles, press releases, or other public statements were collected. Two research assistants also spent 10-20 cumulative hours in-person at each conference to engage attendees in informal conversations to gain additional insights.

The survey data gathered during Step 2 was analyzed using descriptive statistics to further identify and begin to measure the outcomes of conference attendance. The secondary data and conversational insights were analyzed deductively to identify any additional outcomes and legacies that did not emerge during Step 1, i.e. that needed to be measured moving forward.

Step 3: Post-Conference

Step 3 focused on measuring and describing the event outcomes identified during Steps 1 and 2 that had been taken by attendees since the conference ended. Step 3 took place two to eight weeks following each event, depending on the availability and involvement of the participating conferences and exhibitions. The outcomes were measured using a 10-question electronic survey. Two events were involved in email distributing survey links to all attendees post-event. Two other conferences were not involved in post-event data collection. In these two cases, the researchers took the lead to self-recruit attendees for the online survey by sharing a link via social media platforms. The fifth conference only permitted 19 total surveys to be e-mailed directly to purposively chosen participants.

During Step 3, follow-up interviews were also conducted with the interview participants from Step 1. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to identify any additional event outcomes or relevant examples. Additional desk research was also undertaken.

The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the outcomes. The desk research and interview data were analyzed deductively concerning the outcomes identified to provide relevant descriptions.

Step 4: Legacy Measurement

The goal of Step 4 is to measure the long-term legacies that occur six months to two+ years following each event. The legacies measured at step 4 flow directly from the outcomes identified and measured during Steps 1-3. Step 4 was not completed in this project, as the legacy measurement did not fall within the temporal scope of the project.

Ethics and Funding

This study was adapted from a project originally commissioned by Destination Vancouver with the Center for Tourism Research at Capilano University. The project was completed from March to December 2022 (Wahl and Walker, 2023). The project was co-funded by Destination Vancouver and Mitacs, a Canadian not-for-profit research organization. The project was subject to review and approved by the Capilano University Review Ethics Board (REB) on March 21, 2022. In addition to the two primary investigators, the project was supported by two undergraduate student research assistants.

Results

A total of 219 surveys were collected from respondents across the five conferences, and 47 pages of descriptive notes were gathered during interviews with 15 participants and desk research. Table 1 (below) presents the geographic “home” region of the survey respondents.

	Metro Vancouver (local)	Another location in British Columbia (regional)	Another Canadian province (regional)	International
Returning Conferences (n=110)	35	16	50	9
Globally Rotating Conferences (n=109)	20	12	12	65
Total: 219	55	28	62	74

Table 1: Survey Respondents “Home” Location

A total of 47 different short-term conference outcomes were identified among the five conferences and exhibitions studied. Categorizing these using the BestCities framework, led to the identification of 5 environmental, 3 political, 9 sectoral, 10 social, and 20 economic outcomes. Economic outcomes represented the largest outcome segment (20 total). However, most outcomes (27 total) were non-economic in focus. The 47 outcomes contribute to the enactment of 17 long-term legacies. All 17 of the UN SDGs categories were represented in the legacies. Table 2 (below) summarizes the aggregate legacy goals, relevant outcomes, measurements, and key results.

Legacy Goal (UNSDGs)	Conference Outcomes and Categorization	Outcome Measurement	Result
GOAL 1 No Poverty	New local jobs created (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who created new local jobs	6 - 20%
	New jobs created (all scales) (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who created new jobs on all scales	6 - 16%
GOAL 2 Zero Hunger	Growth of agricultural industries (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing the agriculture sector	12%*
GOAL 3 Good Health and Wellbeing	Offering new health treatments (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are offering new health treatments	42.2 - 64.7%
	Developing new health treatments (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are developing new health treatments	35.6 - 41.2%
	Providing new or increased access to public services (Political Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are providing new or increased access to public services	17.8 - 59%
	New healthcare professionals (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are recruiting or accrediting new healthcare professionals	17.8 - 23.5%
	Number of healthcare specialists increased (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are recruiting or accrediting new healthcare specialists	13.3 - 29.4%

GOAL 4 Quality Education	Education and training increased (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are pursuing new accreditation, training, or skills	17.8 - 23.5%
	Education and research development (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of all attendees who represent the education or research sectors	47.1%*
GOAL 5 Gender Equality	Providing new opportunities for female professionals (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are creating new opportunities for female professionals	24.4 - 33.3%
GOAL 6 Clean Water and Sanitation	Growth of the water and waste-water sector (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing water and waste-water sectors	5%*
GOAL 7 Affordable and Clean Energy	Growth of the energy sector (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing the energy sector	4 - 8%*
GOAL 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth	Local information sharing (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of local speakers at an event	37.8 - 62%
	Local business partnerships (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of non-local attendees who added local businesses to their networks	24.5 - 38%
	Intra-sector business partnerships (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of non-local attendees who expanded their network within their own sector	47.5 - 94.1%
	Inter-sector business partnerships (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of non-local attendees who expanded their network with another sector	42.6 - 85.2%

Key local sectors represented (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing key local sectors	52 - 94%
Increased local business opportunities (Economic Outcome)	The number of contacts that local attendees added to their networks	Most attendees added 6-10
Increased business opportunities (all scales) (Economic Outcome)	The number of contacts that non-local attendees added to their networks	Most attendees added 6-10
Local economic growth (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees investing in local businesses	4 - 15%
New technologies, products or practices developed (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees developing new technologies, products or practices	21.3 - 26.7%
Increase opportunities for minority professionals (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are creating new opportunities for minority professionals	20 - 52.9%
Local businesses visited (Economic Outcome)	The number of local businesses visited by non-local attendees	Most attendees visited 1-5
Extended stay as tourists (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of non-local attendees that extended their stay post-conference	20 - 54.8%
Destination promotion (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of public communications about the conference that highlight the host community	16 - 58%

	Intention to revisit as tourist (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who intend to revisit post-conference	82.6 - 92%
	Travelled with a companion/guest (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who travelled with a companion who was not part of the conference	14.3 - 40%
GOAL 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Research undertaken (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are undertaking research	10 - 76.5%
GOAL 10 Reduced Inequalities	Domestic information sharing (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of domestic speakers at an event	30.3%*
	International information sharing (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of international speakers at an event	69.7%*
	Increased international business opportunities (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who expanded their contacts internationally	32 - 77.8%
	Creating connections between the industry and the local community (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who created new connections with the local community	17.6 - 48.9%
GOAL 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities	Creating community-based solutions to net-zero (Environmental Outcome)	The proportion of attendees creating community-based solutions towards net-zero	8 - 23.3%
	Developing new green technologies or innovations (Environmental Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are developing new green technologies or innovations	16.7 - 24%

GOAL 12 Responsible Consumption and Production	Participating in green projects, challenges, initiatives (Environmental Outcome)	The proportion of attendees participating in green projects, challenges, or initiatives	18 - 33.3%
	Implementing new green products or services (Environmental Outcome)	The proportion of attendees implementing new green products and services	33.3 - 36.2%
	Developing new sustainable action plans or strategies (Environmental Outcome)	The proportion of attendees developing new sustainable actions plans or strategies	Most attendees added 6-10
	Improved local operating standards (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of local attendees who are improving operating standards	30 - 57.1%
	Improved operating standards (all scales) (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are improving operating standards	30 - 53.2%
	Best practices shared (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees sharing best practices globally	33.3 - 76.5%
GOAL 13 Climate Action	Developing new climate regulations (Political Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are developing new public legislation, regulations, or governing strategies	19.1 - 30%
GOAL 14 Life Below Water	Growing the oceans and fisheries sector (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing the oceans and fisheries sectors	5 - 48%
GOAL 15 Life on Land	Growing the mining and forestry sectors (Sectoral Outcome)	The proportion of attendees representing the mining and forestry sectors	3%*

GOAL 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Connecting with public representatives (Political Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who made connections with public sector representatives	11.8 - 29.5%
	Working with Indigenous populations (Social Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are working with Indigenous populations	4.4 - 26%
GOAL 17 Partnerships for the Goals	Encouraging new investments (Economic Outcome)	The proportion of attendees who are investing money in new projects	5.9 - 34%

* Indicates that the value could only be calculated at one event.

Table 2: Legacy Goals, Conference Outcomes, Measurements and Key Results

Comparing Returning and Globally Rotating Conferences

After identifying the range of conference outcomes and legacies, the results were compared between the two returning conferences and the three globally rotating conferences. Attendees of the returning conferences completed 110 surveys, and attendees of the globally rotating conferences completed 109 surveys. The similar number of surveys completed between the two groups allowed for a straightforward comparison of the results. Data analysis was completed using a T-test to compare the mean values of the two independent groups, and Pearson’s Chi-Square was used to compare the proportions. All T-tests and Chi-Square were calculated to a 0.05 (95% confidence interval).

Attendees of both returning and globally rotating conferences felt that in-person conferences were valuable to their overall operations. The average value of returning conferences to attendees was 4.39/5. The average value of globally rotating conferences to attendees was 4.44/5. There was no statistical difference between the mean values of these groups. Therefore, while both types of conferences are valuable to participants, one type of conference is not seen as more valuable than the other.

Both returning and globally rotating conferences are impactful. Among both types of conferences, there were 36 shared outcomes. However, there were also some key differences between the two event types. The returning conferences resulted in 44 outcomes representing 16 legacies. The globally rotating conferences resulted in 45 outcomes representing 11 legacies. While repeat conferences represented more legacies overall, in most cases globally rotating conference outcomes were undertaken by a higher proportion of attendees. However, there were few significant differences

between the outcome values between the returning and globally rotating conferences. The key comparative results are summarized below.

Returning conference outcomes were significant in three regards. First, returning conference attendees were more likely to work with Indigenous populations than globally rotating conferences (24.5% to 11.9%) ($p=0.0159$). Second, returning conference attendees are more likely to invest money in new projects (31.8% to 15.6%) ($p=0.0048$). Third, returning conference attendees are more likely to mention the destination when discussing a conference on social media (54% to 15.3%) ($p<0.0001$).

Globally rotating conference outcomes were also significant in three regards. First, globally rotating conference attendees visit more local businesses than returning conference attendees ($p=0.0252$). Most globally rotating conference attendees visit between 6-10 businesses during their stays in Vancouver, while most returning conference attendees visit between 1-5 businesses during their stays. Second, globally rotating conference attendees are more likely to extend their stay in Vancouver post-conference (46.5% to 23%) ($p=0.002$). Third, globally rotating conference attendees are more likely to undertake research after attending a conference (35.8% to 14.5%) ($p=0.0003$).

One other interesting comparative finding emerged regarding tourism activity. Conference attendees intended to re-visit Vancouver in the future as tourists (4.47/5 intention for returning conferences and 4.43/5 intention for globally rotating conferences). One key difference between the two types of events is that returning conference attendees from British Columbia were less likely to intend to revisit Vancouver as a tourist than any other group overall ($p<0.0001$). Returning conference attendees from British Columbia were 20.6% less likely to intend to revisit Vancouver than international attendees and were 23% less likely to intend to revisit than attendees from other Canadian provinces. This could be because these individuals have previously visited Vancouver more than the other groups and therefore are more familiar with it as a tourism destination. However, further research is needed to clarify the relationship.

Comparing Key Relationships Between Returning and Globally Rotating Conferences

Common correlations were also identified and explored among the returning and globally rotating conferences. In each instance, the relationships were stronger during the returning conferences. One possible explanation for this relationship is that the outcomes become stronger as these conferences recur in Vancouver over time. Table 3 (below) compares the five strongest correlations between the returning and globally rotating conferences.

Variable Proposition	Returning Conference Strength	Globally Rotating Conference Strength
The more local businesses that attendees visit during their stay, the more likely that they are to intend to revisit the host destination.	r = 0.4571 <i>Weak positive relationship</i>	r = 0.2838 <i>Very weak positive relationship</i>
The more contacts that attendees make during a conference, the more likely that they are to intend to revisit Vancouver as a tourist.	r = 0.4153 <i>Weak positive relationship</i>	r = 0.2486 <i>Very weak positive relationship</i>
The more local businesses that attendees visit during their stay, the higher they rank the overall value of the conference.	r = 0.3557 <i>Weak positive relationship</i>	r = 0.2518 <i>Very weak positive relationship</i>
The more local businesses that attendees visit during their stay, the more contacts that attendees make during a conference.	r = 0.3486 <i>Weak positive relationship</i>	r = 0.2766 <i>Very weak positive relationship</i>
The more contacts that attendees make during a conference, the higher they rank the overall value of the conference.	r = 0.2285 <i>Weak positive relationship</i>	r = 0.2120 <i>Very weak positive relationship</i>

Table 3. A Comparison of the Five Strongest Correlations Among Returning and Globally Rotating Conferences.

Conclusion and Discussion

In recent years the convention and exhibition industry has been disrupted by external threats linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and economic uncertainty. Amid these threats, the enduring value of in-person events has been unclear. The 47 short-term outcomes identified at the five conferences and exhibitions held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, affirm the enduring benefits of in-person conferences and exhibitions in both the short and long term.

In the short term, in-person events are impactful and wide-reaching. In-person conferences and exhibitions consistently lead to outcomes that positively affect economic, environmental, political, social, and sectoral spectra. That half of the outcomes identified were non-economic in nature, demonstrates the importance of recognizing the range of different outcomes that can flow from in-person conference and exhibition events. The outcomes also resonate from the local to global scale, thereby contributing to positive effects beyond the host city, organization, and attendees themselves.

The results also demonstrate the enduring and transformative potential of conferences and exhibitions to leave a lasting legacy over time. In-person events can contribute to the enactment of each of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, thereby contributing to global benefits that extend far beyond the immediate temporal and spatial boundaries of conferences and exhibition events. The sustained benefits of conferences and exhibitions over time reinforce the claim that in-person events are not merely transient occurrences but catalysts for enduring positive change (BestCities, 2020; Tham et al., 2023). Thus, in conclusion to the pivotal question of the enduring value of in-person conferences and exhibitions in a landscape marked by unprecedented disruptions, the diverse and wide-ranging short-term and long-term benefits of in-person conferences and exhibitions support the case for the continued relevance of these events.

Moreover, the comparison between events that return to a host destination and rotate globally sheds light on the value of hosting conferences in specific locations versus adopting a more nomadic, rotating approach. Conferences that return to a host destination annually lead to more legacies and stronger correlative outcomes. This suggests that the strength of the relationships between key variables may strengthen over time as events repeat in a destination; thus, adding value to returning events. However, further research is needed to explore these relationships. Conversely, conferences and exhibitions that rotate between different global host cities are uniquely important events towards creating short-term outcomes, such as knowledge-sharing among attendees. Globally rotating events also generate more tourism activity among attendees and their guests, who visit more local businesses and are more likely extend their stays post-event. Thus, both returning and rotating conferences are impactful and valuable to attendees, though to different ends.

These findings have key practical implications for conference and exhibition organizers and host destination management. First, while the increase in online and hybrid conferences has led to debate regarding the future value of in-person events (Kulikova et al., 2023; Schabbing, 2022), the results affirm that in-person conferences, both returning and globally rotating, are highly valuable to attendees, the destinations that host them, and to other stakeholders at varying scales.

Second, the study highlights the value of facilitating visitation to local businesses. While event organizers may desire to keep attendees engaged at a conference, there are benefits to providing opportunities for attendees to visit local businesses. Attendees who visit more local businesses rate the overall value of conferences higher, and they also make more connections with other attendees.

Finally, a third emergent benefit of in-person conferences is that these events drive tourism-related economic development. In addition to traveling with guests and visiting local businesses, non-regional attendees are also likely to re-visit host destinations in the future. The more local businesses that attendees visit, the higher their intention to revisit a destination as a tourist. Therefore, to facilitate tourism activity, planners should encourage conference attendees to visit local businesses. Similarly, destinations should work with associations and conference organizers to provide networking opportunities. The more contacts that attendees make, the higher their intention to revisit as a tourist.

Finally, due to the stronger variable correlations associated with repeat conferences, destinations should encourage globally rotating conferences to return to strengthen the conference outcomes (and legacies) over time.

The BestCities (2020) conference outcome and legacy approach aligned with the UNSDGs are a useful framework to explore the multifaceted impacts of conferences and exhibitions that are transferable to other contexts. Future applications of this approach will be useful towards refining, refuting, and further identifying relevant outcomes and legacies for conferences and events—both in-person and virtual. Future research should continue to identify the short-term outcomes and long-term legacies of conferences and exhibitions to better understand and contrast the enduring value of in-person, virtual, and hybrid events.

This study had several limitations. Regarding the reliability of the framework, this was an initial application of the BestCities and UNSDGs approach. The outcome identification and measurement were inductive and sought to build knowledge rather than to systematically refine knowledge. Further applications are necessary to refine and confirm the BestCities approach. Another limitation is that each possible outcome was not measured at each possible scale. Future research should strive to measure different outcomes consistently at different scales (local → global), which would result in more outcomes being identified overall. The temporal scope of this study also prevented the measurement of long-term legacies. Future studies would benefit by measuring the event legacies to better understand the lasting impacts of these events. The reliability of the results was also limited by the inconsistent sampling strategies authorized by different participating associations. Future studies should strive to engage host associations in data collection. Conferences where the associations were more involved in data collection had higher survey response rates than conferences where associations were not involved. Associations are more familiar with their attendees than external researchers and therefore can engage attendees more effectively. Finally, this study only sought to identify the positive impacts of conferences. Future studies should adopt a more critical approach toward identifying both positive and negative outcomes. Identifying positive and negative impacts would help towards building a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and costs of in-person conferences and exhibitions.

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