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Accompanying Partners in Conference Travel: A Gendered Perspective

Hyekyung Yoo

University of Waikato, hyekyngyoo82@gmail.com

Erica Wilson

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Title: Accompanying Partners in Conference Travel: A Gendered Perspective

Author: Hyekyung Yoo¹ & Erica Wilson²

Affiliation: University of Waikato¹; Southern Cross University²

Contact: hyekyngyoo82@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The presence of accompanying partners (or those attending a conference with their partner or spouse) is a common phenomenon within the conference travel sector. Practitioners within the conference industry (Adams, 1994; Alonzo, 1993; Brooks, 2003; Crocker, 1999; Jensen, 1996; Sherman, 2007) have recognised that spousal attendance at conferences is closely tied to a mutual desire to maintain a balance between family and work. Yoo et al. (2016) have identified that accompanying partners enjoy conference travel as a form of alternative family leisure, especially between partners. However, the business nature of most conferences serves to reinforce stereotypical assumptions about the relative invisibility of accompanying partners. Further, when considering the disproportionate number of male to female conference attendees (Seekings, 1997), in a conventional sense, accompanying partners have been considered as a group of wives or women. Examination about the accompanying partners' phenomenon is therefore inextricably linked to a wider social discussion, and located firmly within the context of gender.

The present paper explores the nature of accompanying partners' subjective experiences of conference travel. In order to this, the researchers adopt interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Data were collected from in-depth interviews with 14 accompanying partners, 12 of whom were female and 2 male. Based on the IPA approach, the experience of conference travel for accompanying partners was located around three key contexts: the *individual time* that they spend on their own, a *relationship-focus* through sharing time with their partner together, and feelings of social *inclusion and exclusion* at the conference based on perceptions of their status as non-members in the conference 'society'. As accompanying partners remain outside of the conference society, it encourages full control over their travel experience as a partner.

The study adds value to the existing literature by demonstrating the travel experience of accompanying partners from a gendered perspective. It highlights the need for critical thought on the nexus of accompanying partners in conference travel and gender. More refined analysis will be needed as the discussion on this phenomenon moves forward.

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