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Conference Paper

Attracting Attentive Academics. Paper, Person or Place?

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Attracting Attentive Academics:

Paper, Person or Place?

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Abstract:

We examine the determinants of the number of attendees and questions and comments in parallel sessions at a large economics conference. We use the annual meeting of the German economics association in 2012 in Göttingen as an empirical case study. We find that the place (close to the coffee and before lunch) of the presentation is most important for attendance, whereas the person and the paper presented has a minor effect on other academics attending the presentation. However, papers with long titles as well as those by junior researchers attract significantly fewer attendees. There are also interesting and sizable gender effects. Sessions by female presenters are frequented more, but mainly because more women attend sessions in general, and sessions with female presenters in particular. There are also interesting gender effects related to topic choice. When it comes to asking questions, location becomes less important, but smaller rooms lead to more questions asked. Younger researchers attract more questions. Women ask fewer questions, but a large share of women increases the likelihood of a woman to ask a question. Our findings suggest that scheduling sessions should be taken more seriously to ensure better participation at conferences, and to take into account differences in preferences between men and female researchers.

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1. Introduction

“Happy is the one who speaks to attentive listeners” - Sirach 25:9

Apart from publications in journals, presenting at academic conferences are the key mechanisms for dissemination of research results for academics in all stages of their careers. This is true for economists as much (or possibly more) than for researchers in the natural sciences or humanities. In addition, they play a central role for getting to know other researchers’ ongoing work and to network with researchers working on similar topics.

Lastly, they play a very important role for the career development of young researchers for whom conference presentations can yield at least three benefits. First, just getting accepted at a well-known and highly selective conference is already a recognition of the quality and relevance of one’s research, thereby constituting a signal of potentially considerable value in a market where asymmetric information problems are pervasive. Second, for young researchers conferences are one of the most important (and sometimes only) opportunities to present their research to a wider audience outside one’s own institution, and to receive feedback on it from specialists.¹ Third, a conference presentation can also be one of the most promising ways to get known to potential employers for post-doctoral or professorial employments. Since more senior professors are decisive for such appointments, presenting in front of them can be one of the best ways to ensure an academic job. Moreover, asking questions in sessions where others present can be a way to demonstrate research interest and research skills which might increase one’s standing in the profession.

Of course, all of these positive effects of presenting at conferences, and especially for young researchers, only become effective if one has a sufficiently large and attentive audience. In a world where most general economics conferences now have dozens of parallel sessions, it is far from clear that there will be many listeners in one’s session. Nor will it be clear that anyone actually asks a question or comments on the research. While it is well known among economists that many parallel sessions at large general conferences attract very few listeners and frequently there is no discussion at all after the presentation of a paper. To our knowledge there exists no prior study that empirically investigates the drivers of attendance and discussion at conferences.

Knowing about the drivers of participation and discussion at a conference is, however, of great importance for both the presenters who want to disseminate their results and get feed-

¹ In contrast, more established researchers have many more ways to disseminate their research, including invited seminars, invited workshops, keynote speeches, organized sessions at conferences, newspapers, blogs, etc.

back as well as the organizers who have to think about how to schedule sessions in order to ensure that academic exchange is maximized. Most conference organizers do not mix topics of papers within one session and make sure that no parallel sessions with the same topic are organized to enable like-minded researchers to exchange ideas. However, at least to our knowledge, little attention is paid to other factors that might limit discussion during parallel sessions.

The question is also of interest to behavioral and gender economics by investigating whether there are clear gender differences in behavior at such conferences, with important repercussions for the standing and career progression of women. Given the importance of conferences for young researchers' career and the determination of universities to increase the share of female senior academics, such gender differentials in attending and commenting can shed light on how conferences can affect these efforts.

Gender differences in science still play an important role. Female full professors are still underrepresented, even though the share of female PhD students is increasing and the share of graduate students is already above 50% (see Ferber and Brün (2011) and *The Economist* (2013)). Furthermore, they are also underrepresented at conferences, in publications, and in citations, and they are less successful in getting positions, funding, tenure, and promotion (e.g. Mailiniak et al. 2013 and McLaughlin et al. for the field of international relations, Ferber and Brün 2011 for economics, Symonds et al. 2006 for life sciences). Recent findings suggest that one important factor is “promotion and self-promotion”. All papers on gender gaps in citations find that people tend to cite papers of authors of the same gender and that papers authored by women are systematically cited less. Furthermore, women do not tend to self-cite because they do not seem to “like” such a self-promotion. When it comes to preferences of women, Rhoten and Pfirman (2007), for the example of interdisciplinary research, highlight that (i) women are more likely to use techniques of other fields or disciplines and see the larger context (cross-fertilization), women are more interested in group work and networking (team-collaboration), women tend to look questions at the edges of the discipline (in niche fields) or connection to different fields where competition and exposure is less severe (field-creation), and women tend to favor working with “people” rather (problem-orientation).

The two studies that come closest to our investigation are papers by Hauffler and Rincke (2009) and Borghans et al. (2010). Applying a choice experiment, Borghans et al. (2010) investigate conference preferences among European labor economists. They find that the keynote speaker and the location are the two most important drivers of conference attendance. Hauffler and Rincke (2009) also analyze which submitted papers between 2005 and 2008 have passed the competitive selection procedure of Annual Congress of the German Economic Association to be accepted for presentation. They find that acceptance is mainly driven by the

previous publication record of the author and whether the author has already a full professorship. Both factors could be highly correlated with the quality of the paper or might act as a signaling effect for the selection committee.

Our paper differs from both papers by focusing on the behavior of participants *at* a conference, i.e. after the general attendance decision has been made by the author and the selection committee, in particular the researchers' participation in research sessions and the discussion there.

The aim of this paper is therefore to empirically analyze which factors attract attentive academics at sessions at a general conference. We analyze both the general *presence* as well as the *participation* (by asking questions) of researchers in parallel sessions. Using the annual meeting of the German Economics Association (called 'Verein für Socialpolitik') in Göttingen in September 2012 as a case study of a large general economics conference with many parallel sessions, we particularly investigate the role of

- the *paper* (topic, length of title),
- the *person* (seniority, position, visibility of the researcher in terms of high-level publications or the department he or she comes from, gender of the presenter),
- and *place* (time of day, day of the conference, location and size of the room).

We study the entire sample as well as male and female researchers separately to identify gender differences.

We find that place has the largest impact on number of researchers listening to a research talk. The highest numbers of attendees are observed on the second day (out of three) of the conference, in sessions in the late morning, in the most convenient location. Moreover, papers with long titles as well as those by junior researchers attract significantly fewer attendees. There are interesting and sizable gender effects. Sessions by female presenters are frequented more, but mainly because more women attend sessions in general, and sessions with female presenters in particular. There are also interesting gender effects related to topic choice. When it comes to asking questions, younger researchers attract more questions. Women ask fewer questions, but a large share of women increases the likelihood of a woman to ask a question.

Our findings suggest that scheduling sessions should be taken more seriously – apart from avoiding parallel sessions with similar topics - to ensure better participation at conferences. For example, one might want to schedule more parallel sessions at convenient times (and fewer at the margins). The gender differences merit particular attention as they might relate more generally to gender differences of career progress for males and females in the academic profession. For example, if women ask fewer questions and this is an important way to

impress more senior colleagues, pre-assigning discussants in a gender-balanced way might be one way to address this problem. Furthermore, shaping the overall conference in a more gender-balanced way could help to decrease the exposure of females and to generate more role models for female researchers. Looking at all past VfS conferences reveals that not a single senior woman was honored with the “Thünen-Vorlesung”, the “Gossen-Preis”, or the “Stolper-Preis”, all awarded by the VfS. Only some women were successful in gaining the “Selten-Preis” which is the VfS young author best paper award. This might give the impression of an “old boys network” (McLaughlin Mitchell et al 2013).

2. Conference Set-Up and Data Collection

The VfS (Verein für Socialpolitik) is – after the European Economic Association – the largest association of economists with more than 3.000 members, 2.000 young researchers and 1.200 senior fellows. Most members are from Germany, Austria, and German-speaking Switzerland. The VfS organizes one large (annual) conference per year. Recently, more and more presentations and discussions are also held in English, so some European (non-German speaking) economists attend the conference. However, the share of German-speaking economists is still very high.

The VfS) annual conference of 2012 took place in Göttingen from 9.-12. September (Sunday to Wednesday). Located in the middle of Germany, Göttingen has excellent train connections, i.e. all major German cities (including Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Munich) are very easily and quickly reached. Göttingen itself is a town very much dominated by the University: out of the roughly 120.000 inhabitants, 25.000 are students, and the central campus is located very close to the city center and the train station. Even though it is a pleasant place, there are very few overwhelming sights that would attract many tourists. Thus, it would be fair to assume that the people who come to the conference are very likely to actually be at the conference (thus they would not visit any museum or theatre or alike). On the other hand, because of the excellent train connections, there is the possibility to just come for a short period and then get away quickly.

In total, 436 researchers were accepted and registered for presentation and 637 participants registered in total (including press and panel presenters). The weather was nice and warm until Tuesday afternoon with a sudden change to extreme rainfall on Tuesday evening (after the last parallel sessions), but it turned better again on Wednesday.

After a social welcome reception on Sunday, the scientific program started on Monday morning with the first block of parallel sessions (Block A) and ended on Wednesday in the early afternoon with a plenary discussion. Overall, the scientific program took place on 3 days on which parallel sessions and plenary meetings alternated. In total, 7 blocks (A – G) with time slots of 90 minutes each - with 20 or 21 parallel research sessions (e.g. A1-A20) were organized. In each research session 3 papers were presented (only one session had 4 papers). In total, 436 papers were presented, or better said: listed in the program. Out of these 436 presentations, 27 presenters (6.21%) did not show up to give a presentation. During 3 out of the 7 blocks of parallel sessions so-called “panels” with experts discussing on specific issues took place. These “panels” were organized by research institutions and added another parallel option (the 21st or 22nd) to choose from (see Appendix A2 for an outline of the time table).

The conference was located in two buildings of the University Campus: First, in a “central lecture building” (ZHG) with larger rooms which are normally used for lectures and, second, in a “seminar room building” (VG) with smaller rooms where smaller lectures or tutorials take place. Walking from one to the other building takes about 3 minutes (open air). See Appendix A1 for a map of the conference set-up. The lecture rooms in ZHG could host 85-230 people sitting in rows and having no opportunity to look out of the windows due to the absence of windows, whereas the VG rooms could host 25-48 people sitting at tables in u-shape (and offering daylight). In ZHG, all plenary sessions, the three panels, and 10 parallel sessions took place. In VG, the other 11 parallel sessions took place. The ZHG was also the location for coffee breaks and for a book show of around 20 research institutions and publishing houses.

According to the research committee of the conference (interview with Armin Schmutzler, 11. October 2013, University of Zurich, chair of the research committee) two rules applied when assigning 3 research papers to certain sessions and blocks. First papers with a topical fit were group into sessions. Then sessions were assigned to blocks the same topic not appearing twice with one block, e.g. in parallel sessions. Apart from those two rules sessions were randomly assigned to the various blocks (A-G) and to a session number (1-20). Next, according to the local organizer (Melanie Grosse) the sessions were mechanically assigned to the time slots and rooms, only following the rule that the same session number would always be in the same room (e.g. A1, B1, ..., G1 all took place in room ZHG.001).

The data set used for the analysis has been compiled from three different sources. First, the conference booklet provided the following information: presentation title, presentation ordering, building and room where the presentation took place, presentation day and time, presenter’s name, gender, and affiliation, and number of co-authors. The conference booklet did not contain the abstracts nor was there a book of abstracts or a homepage of abstracts. The papers could only be downloaded from the conference homepage, which, however only included 100 papers (less than one-quarter), and, in addition, was very time consuming. Thus, we assume that further information about the content of the presentations (besides the titles) was hardly available to the audience.

Second, primary data collection took place during the conference with a small survey filled out by research assistants who participated in each session. They recorded whether the presentation took place as planned, and collected the number of participants (males and females) as well as the number of questions asked (by males and females). Participants did not know whether a presentation listed in the program was cancelled due to no-show of the presenter before the session took place. Out of 436 listed presentations, 27 presenters (6.21%) did not show up.

Third, information on presenters was retrieved from various websites. The information retrieved from websites included the “Handelsblatt Ranking”, a German economics newspaper which ranks “German” economists (defined as researchers working in German-speaking universities in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland) according to their publication record. We used the three individual categories for year the 2011 (i) best economists with regard to their lifetime achievement (“Lebenswerk”), (ii) best economists in the last 4 years, and (iii) best economists below age 40. Furthermore, we included if the presenter is affiliated to one of the top 10 economic faculties according to the Handelsblatt Ranking in 2011 (Handelsblatt 2011). In addition the RePEc (Research Papers in Economics) homepage was consulted regarding the number of peer reviewed publications for each presenter as well as whether the paper presented at the conference was already listed at RePEc (<http://repec.org>). Last, the personal web-site of each presenter was consulted for his/her academic position (ongoing PhD, completed PhD, Assistant Professor, Full Professor).

3. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics on aggregate presence and participation. A total of 637 persons registered, of which 75% were men, about 25% women. Many of the registered persons were also presenters (407), and there the gender-split is slightly less skewed in favor of men. Note that 435 presentations were scheduled to take place, but only 407 took place due to last-minute cancellations and no-shows (6.3% cancellation rate). If everyone attended diligently at all sessions, one should expect 20-30 persons per session (given 20 sessions) depending on whether we include all registered persons (that also included media and politics) or only the researchers that also presented a paper. In reality, the average attendance is much lower, at 11 persons per presentation (not counting the presenter). There is a clear gender difference in attendance with women having a 10 percentage point higher attendance rate than men. This attendance difference would be in line with Rhoten and Pfirman (2007) who assume that women are more interested in the broader picture and in getting insights from different fields.

When it comes to “active” participation, the average presentation attracts 4 comments or questions, and here the gender differentials are reversed. Women are less likely to ask questions or make comments: of the women listening to a presentation only 27 percent ask a question, whereas of the men listening to a presentation 39 percent ask a question. Two reasons might be behind: Either women do not ask questions because they do not like to self-promote and to “show off” (as assumed in The Economist 2013) or because they are fear the exposure (Rhoten and Pfirman 2007) especially in a male-dominated audience. This gender effect might however be partly be explained by an age effect, whereas 37% of registered male presenters are (assistant) professors, only 24% of registered female conference participants are (assistant) professor. Unfortunately, we can only distinguish by gender and not by age.

Table 1: Aggregate Presence and Participation

		Total	Men	Women
Total Registered Economists	a1	637	486	151
Total Economists with Presentations	a2	407	308	99
Theoretical Number per Talk 1***	$b1=(a1-20)/20$	30.85	23.55	7.3
Theoretical Number per Talk 2***	$b2=(a2-20)/20$	19.35	14.65	4.7
Actual Presence of Economists	c	11.19	8.16	3.02
Actual Participation of Economists	d	3.99	3.16	0.82
% of persons present	$e=c/b2$	0.5782	0.5569	0.6425
% of persons participating	$f=d/c$	0.3565	0.3872	0.2715

Notes: ***20 presenters and 20 parallel sessions.

As shown in Table 2, within a session there is considerable fluctuation in presence and participation. Session hopping (or late arrival and early departure) are rather common but fluctuations within sessions are much smaller than differences in presence between sessions. However, note that this variation might be underestimated as we only observe the net change in number of people listening to different talks within a session, i.e. if 2 people leave and 2 people arrive before the second talk, we would not measure any variation. In contrast, the number of questions asked varies almost as much within sessions than between sessions.

Table2: Between and Within Variation of Presence and Participation

	Total	Men	Women
StD between sessions: Presence	7.066	5.023	2.712
StD within sessions: Presence	1.505	1.202	0.559
Within/between Std			
StD between sessions: Participation (Questions)	2.064	1.760	0.959
StD within sessions: Participation (Questions)	1.570	1.399	0.880
Within/between Std			

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of the variables included in the empirical analysis. In 40% of session there was an organized panel discussion set at the same time (usually with well-known senior economists, thus potentially diverting audience from the parallel contributed sessions). Half the sessions took place in the main building (where also the coffee breaks took place and where there was an exhibition of academic publishers and research institutes), the other half in a second building about 200 m away (walking distance around 3 minutes). Room capacity was very large (on average 95 seats) suggesting that most sessions looked rather empty given the average number of 11 listeners (see Table 1).

Regarding presenter characteristics, about a quarter are female, and have an average of 6 listed refereed publications in REPEC. However, note that 58% of presenters have 0 refereed publications on REPEC, whereas 2% of presenters have more than 50 publications. More than 30% of presenters come from the top 10 economics departments according to the Handelsblatt Ranking (in total researchers from 103 universities are participating) and about 43% are Ph.D. students.

Regarding the papers, most papers are co-authored and more than a third of the papers were already available in REPEC. About half of the papers come from three JEL Codes, Methods (including econometrics and experimental methods), micro (where again experimental papers also play a role) and labor economics. The other papers distribute themselves across the other fields. History of thought, law and economics, and economic history are seriously underrepresented; but these fields are also not widely represented among economics researchers at universities in Germany.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
Place					
Parallel Plenum	407	.4313		0	1
Main Building (ZHG)*	407	.4888			
Second Building (VG)*	407	.5122		0	1
08.30-10.00 am	407	.4289		0	1
10.30-12.00 am	407	.2892		0	1
15.30-17.00 pm	407	.2819		0	1
10. September	407	.2270			
11. September	407	.4289			
12. September	407	.2941			
Room Size	407	94.7911	71.6426	25	230
Person/Presenter					
Presenter is a women	407	.2426		0	1
Presenter's refereed publications in Repec	407	6.434	13.5663	0	114
Presenter is listed in Handelsblatt ranking**	407	.0980		0	1
Presenter from Top 10 Universities in Handelsblatt ranking	407	.3415		0	1
ongoing PhD	407	.4289		0	1
PhD completed	407	.2157		0	1
Ass. Prof.	407	.1103		0	1
Prof	407	.2328		0	1
Paper					
Single Authored Paper	407	.2524		0	1
Paper Listed in Repec	407	.3627		0	1
Others (A/B/K/N)***	407	3.19		0	1
C: Methods	407	15.23		0	1
D: Microeconomics	407	15.97		0	1
E: Macroeconomics	407	9.34		0	1
F: International Economics	407	10.32		0	1
G: Financial Economics	407	6.88		0	1
H: Public Economics	407	9.34		0	1
I: Health, Education Welfare	407	4.67		0	1
J: Labour and Demography	407	13.02		0	1
L: Industrial Organization	407	4.42		0	1
O: Development Economics	407	2.70		0	1
Q: Agricultural and Resource Economics	407	2.46		0	1
R: Urban and Regional Economics	407	2.46		0	1

Notes: Number of Observations = 407. * see Annex 1; ** listed in either (i) best economists' lifetime achievement ("Lebenswerk"), (ii) best economists in the last 4 years, and (iii) best economists below age 40; *** JEL Codes A/B/K/N: General Economics (A), History of Economic Thought (B), Law and Economics (K), Economic History (N).

Our estimation strategy is two-fold. We first estimate the drivers of the "attractiveness" of the talk (Table 4), and second the "attentiveness" of the audience (Table 5, see below). Thus, we first estimate the effect on number of people listening to the presentations (i.e., the size of the audience). When we look at the attractiveness of talks, three main groups of explanatory variables emerge: First, "Is the *place* or timing comfortable to reach?", second, "Is the *person* presenting attractive?", third "Does the *paper* sound interesting?"

Our regressions are clustered at the session level because it is not so clear if persons focus on one specific talk within one session or if they target one session in general. Also, we observe

that people do not move that much within sessions (see Table 2): the within-session variance of presence is much smaller than between-session variance.

The overall results suggest that unknown male people writing single-authored papers with boring titles in unpopular subjects presented in early morning sessions and remote rooms have a very low chance to attract listeners.

In particular we find that place is very much more important than paper or person. The sessions that were located in the VG attract much fewer people than the ones in ZHG, and the early morning sessions are also very unpopular. Furthermore, there seems to be a problem of late arrival to sessions, so that the first talk of each session has a smaller audience. Tenured presenters (holding the title “Prof.”, an information that the audience cannot see from the program but might know nevertheless) seem to attract more people, also female presenters tend to attract more people. The Handelsblatt ranking (neither university ranking nor individual rankings) seems to play a role.

In terms of the paper, we see that long titles decrease attractiveness. If we, for example, compare a short title like “Rewarding Idleness” (18 characters) with a long title like “Do people have a preference for increasing or decreasing pain? An experimental comparison of psychological and economic measures in health related decision making” (162 characters) or “The Interest Rate Trap” (22 characters) with “How can banks effectively stabilize their retail customers’ saving behavior? The impact of contractual rewards on saving persistence and cash flow volatility” (157 characters), we seem to observe a kind of boredom effect. In fact, having 140 more characters decreases the size of the audience by 2.8 persons. Writing a single-authored paper also significantly decreases the chances of participation. In the sample, 25% of papers are single authored and 75% of papers are co-authored. In 30% of cases one (or more) of the co-authors is also present at the conference (and presents another paper). So probably we observe two effects. Either, more co-authors mean that one of the co-authors is also (well) known (and that name attracts more people to attend), or that the co-author also attends the session. The average effect (+1.9) is too large to be explained solely by attending co-authors.

In terms of topic, the single most attractive JEL code is “J”, for “Labour and Demography”, which might also be driven by the overall topic of the keynote presentations (“Kerntagung”) which was on “labour markets”. We have also checked for the impact of number of researchers presenting within the same JEL code at the conference as the presenter instead of JEL code dummies of presentations but that does not have any influence. This means that higher presence within certain JEL topics is not driven by more people from that JEL code being strongly present at the conference.

When we separate the results by gender we find that women go to other women's talks. Furthermore, women seem to like plenary (anonymous) sessions more than men, maybe because of being less exposed. Men only seem to attend sessions on Tuesdays and (in contrast to women) do not like health, education, welfare and development topics. This would also be expected from Rhoten and Pfirman, because these topics are more problem-oriented and applied in terms of working with "people". Men are also more attracted by tenured presenters than women. This could be explained by self-promotion patterns, trying to network with potential employers or co-authors.

Table 4: Attracting Academics – Drivers of Presence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent Variable	Number of people present	Number of males present	Number of females present	Number of people present	Number of males present	Number of females present
	Place					
Plenum at the same time	-2.639	-0.409	-1.574*			
ZHG	Reference					
VG	-2.755**	-1.122	-1.787***			
Monday	Reference					
Tuesday	3.013**	2.484**	0.601			
Wednesday	-0.0779	-0.983	0.460			
8.30-10.00	Reference					
10.30-12.00	3.833*	1.741	1.771**			
15.30-17.00	2.761	0.246	1.642			
1st Presenter	Reference					
2nd Presenter	0.426*	0.292	0.136			
3rd Presenter	0.621**	0.415*	0.174*			
	Person/Presenter					
Female presenter				1.922**	0.825	0.991***
Publications in Repec				0.007	-0.005	0.011
Handelsblatt ranked				-0.417	-0.387	0.120
Top 10 Uni				-0.130	-0.0697	-0.0563
Ongoing PhD	Reference					
PhD				-0.156	0.0161	-0.154
Ass. Prof.				0.729	0.409	0.175
Prof.				2.886**	2.117**	0.347
	Paper					
title_length				-0.0202*	-0.017**	-0.005
single_author paper				-1.896**	-1.566**	-0.527*
paper_listed in repec				0.907	0.363	0.206
C: Methods	Reference					
D: Microeconomics				-1.546	-1.038	-0.272
E: Macroeconomics				2.137	2.257	-0.641
F: International Economics				1.005	1.167	0.148
G: Financial Economics				-2.615	-1.217	-0.881
H: Public Economics				-2.028	-0.942	-0.472
I: Health, Edu, Welfare				-2.295	-2.360**	-0.219
J: Labour and Demography				4.876**	2.496	2.396**
L: Industrial Organization				-0.228	-0.00109	0.264
O: Dev. Economics				-2.831*	-3.205***	-0.799
Q: Agri & Resources				1.142	1.432	-0.482
R: Urban & Regional				-1.202	-1.564	0.368
Others (A/B/K/N)				6.768	4.589**	2.893
Constant	10.73***	7.593***	3.253***	10.96***	8.590***	2.713***
Observations	404	404	404	398	398	398
R-squared	0.133	0.117	0.167	0.187	0.168	86

Notes: grey are general effects, blue: typical effect for men, pink: typical effect for women

After having estimated the drivers of the “attractiveness” of the talk (passive presence), we turn to the “attentiveness” of the audience (active participation). In Table 5 we estimate the effect of various correlates on the number of questions asked by the audience, controlled for the number of people being present. We again look at the same three main groups of

explanatory variables emerge: First, “Is the *place* or timing comfortable to ask questions?”, second, “Is the *person* presenting doing a good job?”, or third, “Is the *paper* stimulating?”

The overall results suggest that PhD students (or researchers having no Handelsblatt ranking) presenting in a small seminar room and in the second presentation slot get most questions. In particular, in contrast to our results for the drivers of presence, we find that place is much less important for the number of questions asked. Moreover, even though the sessions that were located in the VG attract much less people than the ones in ZHG, but once the audience is there, the tendency to ask questions increases. This seems to be due to nicer seminar atmosphere of the VG rooms. If we control for seat numbers per room, we find that 1 more seat leads to 0.006 fewer questions asked (see Table 5), or 100 more seats lead to 0.6 fewer questions. Given an average of 4 questions per session, a large room reduces the number of questions by 15%. Interestingly, presence and participation seem to be not very strongly related, because the number of participants has only small impact on number of questions: you would need 10 more participants to get one additional question (remember that the average number of people present in each session is only 11). There are no more effects of early morning sessions or specific days, thus once the audience is there, the number of questions is independent. However, the second presenter in each session gets more questions than the others. Given that we control for the number of researchers present at each talk, this result cannot be explained by late arrival and early leaving within sessions. The explanation might hence be that the audience needs to “warm up” and get in touch with the group, so that for the first presenter the “mood” is not yet favorable. For the last presenter, the problem might be that the session time is over², limiting the available time for questions.

Untenured presenters attract more questions. An attentive audience might have two reasons: Either the presentation was perceived as “good”, so this stimulates a nice discussion (thus asks interested questions). Or the presentation was “bad”, so the audience gives rather critical comments to the presenter (thus asks critical questions). One might expect PhD students to give less convincing or experienced presentations. In addition, a PhD student might receive more questions both because s/he did more errors or because it might seem easier to ask questions to a less experienced researcher compared to a well-known tenured economist. Or it may be the case that senior researchers feel more obliged to give comments to Ph.D. students who might require them more.

In terms of the paper, the negative effects of long titles as well as the effect of single-authored papers vanishes. In terms of topic, also the JEL code “J”, for “Labour and Demography”, has no longer an effect.

² However, the last presenter is the session chair, so s/he theoretically would have full control over the time allocation.

When we separate the results by gender we find that there is no average difference between women and men presenters to get questions. Also the drivers of active participation does not largely differ between men and women – apart from the fact that women ask fewer questions in general.

Table 5: Attentive Academics – Drivers of Participation (controlled for Presence)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent Variable	Number of questions asked	Number of questions asked by men	Number of questions asked by women	Number of questions asked	Number of questions asked by men	Number of questions asked by women
Number of people present	0.0776***	0.103***	0.153***	0.0749***	0.0965***	0.185***
Place						
Share of women	-0.00146	-0.008***	0.0063***			
plenum	0.337	0.717	-0.290			
ZHG	reference					
VG	0.750***	0.750***	0.0625			
Monday	reference					
Tuesday	0.0596	0.151	-0.209			
Wednesday	-0.194	0.0419	-0.216			
8.30-10.00	reference					
10.30-12.00	-0.290	-0.680*	0.225			
15.30-17.00	-0.0271	-0.533	0.429			
1st presenter	Reference					
2nd presenter	0.628**	0.455*	0.169			
3rd presenter	0.388	0.205	0.180			
Room Size**	-.0058***	-.0049***	-.0022***			
Person/Presenter						
Female presenter				-0.114	-0.155	-0.0598
Number Repec publications				0.00950	0.0136	-0.00497
Handelsblatt ranked				-0.917*	-0.664*	-0.267
top_uni				0.327	0.236	0.0970
Ongoing PhD	reference					
PhD				-0.746**	-0.403	-0.330**
Ass. Prof.				-0.677*	-0.215	-0.476**
Prof.				-0.565	-0.492	-0.121
Paper						
title_length				0.00349	0.00336	0.00123
single_author paper				0.111	0.297	-0.0890
paper_listed in repec				0.303	0.471*	-0.170
C: Methods	reference					
D: Microeconomics				-0.0828	-0.152	0.0998
E: Macroeconomics				1.193*	0.969*	0.270
F: Int. Economics				-0.145	-0.180	-0.0273
G: Financial Economics				0.626	0.465	0.230
H: Public Economics				1.038	0.600	0.456*
I: Health, Edu, Welfare				1.438*	1.043	0.489*
J: Labour and Demo.				0.0316	-0.309	0.0662
L: Industrial Organization				1.675*	0.892	0.723
O: Dev. Economics				0.526	0.311	0.444
Q: Agri & Resources				-0.256	-0.328	0.0981
R: Urban & Regional				-0.827	-1.066**	0.240
Others (A/B/K/N)**				0.997	0.328	0.253
Constant	2.728***	1.858***	0.407**	3.221***	2.357***	0.437**
Observations	404	404	404	386	386	386
R-squared	0.065	0.095	0.115	0.119	0.113	0.194

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is was to empirically analyze which factors attract attentive academics at sessions at a general conference. We analyze both the general *presence* as well as the *participation* (by asking questions) of researchers in parallel sessions. Using the annual meeting of the German Economics Association (called ‘Verein für Socialpolitik’) in Göttingen in September 2012 as a case study of a large general economics conference with many parallel sessions, we particularly investigate the role of paper, person and place.

We find that place has the largest impact on number of researchers listening to a research talk. The highest numbers of attendees are observed on the second day (out of three) of the conference, in sessions in the late morning, in the most convenient location. Moreover, papers with long titles as well as those by junior researchers attract significantly fewer attendees. There are interesting and sizable gender effects. Sessions by female presenters are frequented more, but mainly because more women attend sessions in general, and sessions with female presenters in particular. There are also interesting gender effects related to topic choice. When it comes to asking questions, younger researchers attract more questions. Women ask fewer questions, but a large share of women increases the likelihood of a woman to ask a question.

Our findings suggest that scheduling sessions should be taken more seriously – apart from avoiding parallel sessions with similar topics - to ensure better participation at conferences. For example, one might want to schedule more parallel sessions at convenient times (and fewer at the margins). The gender differences merit particular attention as they might relate more generally to gender differences of career progress for males and females in the academic profession. For example, if women ask fewer questions and this is an important way to impress more senior colleagues, pre-assigning discussants in a gender-balanced way might be one way to address this problem. Furthermore, shaping the overall conference in a more gender-balanced way could help to decrease the exposure of females and to generate more role models for female researchers. Looking at all past VfS conferences reveals that not a single senior woman was honored with the “Thünen-Vorlesung”, the “Gossen-Preis”, or the “Stolper-Preis”, all awarded by the VfS. Only some women were successful in gaining the “Selten-Preis” which is the VfS young author best paper award. This might give the impression of an “old boys network” (McLaughlin Mitchell et al 2013).

5. Bibliography

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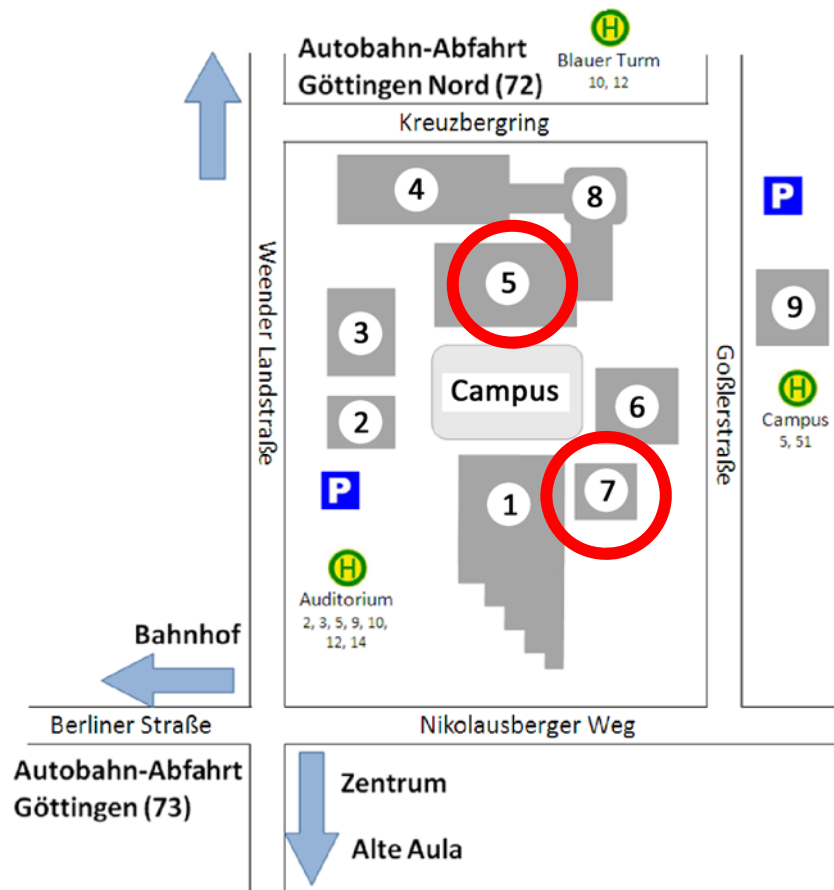
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6. Appendix

A1 Conference: Geographic Set-Up



- 1 Bibliothek (SUB)
- 2 Theologicum
- 3 Oeconomicum (Oec)
- 4 Zentralmensa
- 5 **Zentrales Hörsaalgebäude (ZHG)**
- 6 Juridicum
- 7 **Verfügungsgebäude (VG)**
- 8 Mehrzweckgebäude (MZG)
- 9 Mensa am Turm

A2 Conference Time Plan

	Alte Aula	ZHG 011	ZHG 101	ZHG 001
MONTAG				
08.30 – 10.00				A 1 Local Labor Markets & Migration
10.30 – 10.50	Begrüßung			
10.50 – 12.00	Plenum: R. Freeman			
14.00 – 15.15		Plenum: Alan Manning		
15.30 – 17.00			Panel 1 Euro-Krise, zweite Runde	B 1 Measurement of Poverty & Malnutrition
17.30 – 19.30		Gossen-Preis, Thünenlecture		
DIENSTAG				
08.30 – 10.00				C 1 International Trade I
10.30 – 12.00				D 1 Gender Diff., Children, Labor Markets
13.15 – 14.30		Plenum: Pierre Cahuc		
14.30 – 15.15		Plenum: F.-J. Weise		
15.30 – 17.00			Panel 2 Tablets, Breitband, Web 2.0	E 1 International Trade II
17.15 – 18.30		Plenum: Jennifer Hunt		
18.30 – 19.15		Mitgliedervers		
MITTWOCH				
08.45 – 10.15				F 1 Public Finance
10.45 – 12.15			Panel 3 Der Weg zu soliden Staatsfinanzen	G 1 Consumer Behaviour
12.20 – 12.35		Reinhard- Selten-Preis		
12.35 – 14.15		Plenar-Panel: Zunünftige Formen der Beschäftigung		