

## **Assessing Chinese exhibitors' international trade show evaluations: the role of outbound exhibition organizers**

Wei Shi

Project Manager

Messe Frankfurt (HK) Ltd

26 Harbor Road

Wanchai, Hong Kong SAR, China

Email: [ben.shi@hongkong.messefrankfurt.com](mailto:ben.shi@hongkong.messefrankfurt.com)

Dr Karin Weber \*

Associate Professor

School of Hotel & Tourism Management

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

17 Science Museum Rd.

TST East, Hong Kong SAR, China

Email: [hmkweber@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:hmkweber@polyu.edu.hk)

Dr. Xin Jin

Senior Lecturer

Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sports Management

Griffith Business School

Gold Coast Campus, Griffith University,

Parklands Drive, Southport Qld 4215, Australia

Email: [x.jin@griffith.edu.au](mailto:x.jin@griffith.edu.au)

\* Corresponding Author

# **Assessing Chinese exhibitors' international trade show evaluations: the role of outbound exhibition organizers**

## **Abstract**

Despite the importance of the exhibition industry globally, and that of China in particular, there is a paucity of research on this topic. This study aims to address this research gap by examining Chinese exhibitors who participated in international tradeshows in the United States. In the process, it introduces and highlights the vital role of a key industry player within the Chinese context, in addition to the traditional triad of exhibition organizer, exhibitor and visitor, namely the Outbound Exhibition Organizer (OEO). A survey collected 458 responses from Chinese Mainland exhibitors participating in two international tradeshows in the United States. Study findings provide insights into the performance of OEOs, as perceived by Chinese exhibitors, in addition to the perceived organizer and tradeshow performance. The vital role of OEOs is highlighted by it being identified as a key predictor of satisfaction with international tradeshows. Study implications are discussed, and directions for future research provided.

***Keywords: Chinese Mainland Exhibitor, Outbound Exhibition Organizer, United States tradeshows***

## **Introduction**

China's exhibition industry has experienced rapid growth in the past decades (e.g., Kay, 2005, Zhou, 2020), reflected in both the increase in the number of exhibitions hosted and exhibition space available. In 2018, the number of UFI certified exhibitions/trade shows held in the country totaled 730, with estimated trade fair revenues of US\$ 2.4 billion (UFI, 2018). The total number of exhibitions held in China in 2018 amounted to 3,800 (CCPIT, 2019). In terms of the number of exhibition centers and exhibition space, China ranked second in the world in 2018, with 110 exhibition centers and total indoor exhibition space exceeding 5.75 million square meters (UFI, 2018). In 2019, those numbers rose to 161 and 8.43 million square meters respectively, accounting for 77% of venue capacity in Asia (UFI, 2019). Not surprisingly, the exhibition industry has evolved into a major driver of economic development in China over the past decades.

In line with these changes, numerous studies have investigated various aspects of the exhibition industry in China. Research has focused predominantly on the domestic context, mainly on the government-led exhibition industry reformation, perceived problems of the industry and its contribution to the local economy (Jin, Weber & Bauer, 2010; Lu, 2015; Tong, 2017; Sun, 2019; Zhao, 2019). Other studies explored the service provided by organizers and support service prior, during and post-show, in addition to exhibitors' objectives to attend (Lin & Lin, 2013; Han & Verma, 2014; Lee, Lee & Joo, 2015; Hu, 2011; Gottlieb, Brown, & Drennan, 2011; Reinhold, Reinhold & Schmitz, 2010; Lee & Kim, 2008; Yang & Gu, 2009). Several studies investigated satisfaction and loyalty of exhibitors (Qi, Smith, Yeoman & Goh, 2018; Zhang, Qu & Ma, 2010) the relationship between various industry stakeholders (Jin, Weber & Bauer, 2012a; Jin & Weber, 2013) and destination attractiveness (Jin, Bauer & Weber, 2010; Jin, Weber & Bauer, 2012b; 2013).

In contrast, there has been little research attention on the increasing number of Chinese visitors and exhibitors in exhibitions that are held outside of China, that is in overseas exhibitions (Wang, Lee & Chang, 2017), despite their high number and economic importance (Zhou, 2020). In 2019 about 60,000 Chinese exhibitors participated in 1,766 exhibitions overseas, with overseas exhibition space amounting to almost 1 million square meters (Zhou, 2020). Chinese exhibitors have become the largest source of international exhibitors for German exhibitions (Koetter & Spinger, 2015), while also accounting for a sizable portion of exhibitors at tradeshow held in the

United States (CCPIT, 2019) Not surprisingly then, attracting and serving the rapidly growing market of Chinese outbound exhibitors is of importance to international exhibition organizers (Wang, Lee & Huh, 2017). In line with this neglect, the role of an additional stakeholder to the relationship triad in the exhibition context (Bruhn & Hadwich, 2005), unique to the Chinese exhibition industry, has also not been explored. This stakeholder is the outbound exhibition organizer (OEO) who plays an important and unique role in the context of Chinese Mainland firms (exhibitors) attending international tradeshows. Chinese Mainland exhibitors (CME) predominantly attend the international trade show (ITS) with OEO assistance and government support, however, how OEO performance and government support influence exhibitors' evaluation of the show attended and impact ITS selection has so far not being investigated.

The current study aims to address this gap in the research by establishing CMEs' perception relating to the

- 1) performance of OEOs and government assistance;
- 2) performance of ITS and organizers, together with overall satisfaction ratings and repeat attendance intentions
- 3) key criteria and underlying factors influencing them to attend ITS, and verify whether recommendation from OEOs and government support represent key influences impacting CMEs' decision-making.

## Literature Review

### *Key Exhibition Industry Stakeholders*

Exhibition management is a complex process and encompasses efforts from a wide range of players. The process encompasses initiation, promotion, organization, sponsorship and support from related public and private sectors. An exhibition can be organized by one organization having its own exhibition hall or by cooperation and collaboration of several organizations from the initiation to completion. Figure 1 presents a holistic portrait of the various stakeholders involved in the exhibition sector, in which organizers, exhibitors, visitors, and venues are stressed as critical stakeholders for successful exhibition events (Liu, 2006; Jin 2011).

***INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE***

With regard to exhibitors, their key stakeholders are visitors, organizers, and other stakeholders (Liu, 2006). Visitors are strongly linked to exhibitors and exhibition companies (organizers), and have a weaker link to other stakeholders such as distributors and exhibition venues. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship triad among these three key players, the focal point of stakeholder relationships in the exhibition sector, with Bruhn and Hadwich (2005, p.790) elaborating on this triad notion as follows:

*Whatever dissatisfaction visitors articulate to exhibitors can influence the relationship between a trade fair company and exhibitors – assuming the trade fair company, rather than the exhibitor, is at fault. From the exhibitor’s standpoint, trade fair companies must provide conditions that promise to satisfy visitors’ expectations. Therefore, an exhibitor’s judgment of the quality of a trade fair company’s service also depends on the exhibitor-visitor relationship. Via this indirect relationship to performance, exhibitors’ expectations of a trade fair company also depend on visitors’ expectations regarding exhibitors.*

***INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE***

In their assessment of relationship quality between exhibitors and organizers, Jin, Weber and Bauer (2012, p. 1224) highlighted the fact that “exhibitors and visitors, as ‘buyers’ of the ‘exhibition product’ that the exhibition company ‘sells’, are themselves the main components of the ‘product’ constructs a complicated buying-selling relationship between the exhibition company, and the exhibitors and visitors respectively. The buying-selling relationship is influenced by the relationship between the two customer segments. The duty of organizers is to facilitate the relationship-building between the two segments at different stages of an event: pre-event, on-site and post-event.” In addition, although organizers are sales representatives of the exhibition event, they are not the exclusive supplier of the product. Other suppliers include venues and related local sectors. This phenomenon is unique to the exhibition industry. Thus far, the discussion has centered on key stakeholders identified in the literature that largely focuses on the exhibition industry in the West. Yet, in Mainland China an additional stakeholder facilitates the link between international tradeshow organizers and Chinese outbound exhibitors, namely the Outbound Exhibition Organizer.

### ***Outbound Exhibition Organizer (OEO)***

Outbound Exhibition Organizers (OEOs) play an important role for Chinese Mainland firms (exhibitors) attending international tradeshow. An OEO has a critical liaising role between the overseas exhibition organizer and Chinese outbound exhibitors, providing a series of services for the latter. The China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) served as the pioneer OEO when it organized Chinese enterprises to attend the Leipzig Trade Fair in former East Germany to showcase the country’s achievements and build the brand image of the new People’s Republic of China in the 1950s (Yang, 2004). In view of China’s economic development and increasing number of enterprises exhibiting in ITSs, the coverage of OEOs has expanded beyond CCPIT to industrial associations, units at different levels of foreign trade departments and bureaus, and professional conference organizers (PCOs), with an estimated number of around 100 (Zhou, 2020). Each of them is in charge of overseas exhibitors registered in their region or industrial sector.

OEOs are required by regulation to report their plans in terms of show name, venue, exhibiting space and other basic show information six months prior a show to CCPIT to apply for relevant documents. The approved plan will be certified by issuing an official document, which also functions as a prerequisite to obtain approvals from other relevant entities such as the Foreign Affairs Office, customs, foreign trade departments, Entry & Exit Inspection & Quarantine and foreign exchange. More importantly, the approved exhibit space will be granted with a governmental subsidy allocated by China's Ministry of Finance, namely the Small and Medium Enterprises International Market Development Fund (SMEIMDF). Different levels of regional and municipal departments and bureaus of foreign trade will also provide subsidies to outbound exhibitors in certain shows in order to reinforce the trade promotion (Li et al, 2009). Such government support has minimized exhibitors' investment risk in booth and traveling expenditure. At the same time, it facilitates building valuable relationships with overseas show organizers. Most of them have signed the general agency of world-renowned shows, some with sub-agency contracts (CCEES, 2006; Li & Li, 2014).

Over time, OEOs have cultivated a special role bridging communication between ITS organizers and CMEs. Several of their attributes have also made them trade shows experts in China. OEOs are acknowledged as having rich business experience in cooperating with ITS organizers, expertise in dealing with CME delegations and offering tradeshow services all over the world, as well as frequent contact and communication with exporters and manufacturers. The performance of OEOs generally enhances the negotiating power with international trade show organizers in terms of securing preferred booth locations, and space fees (Qiu 2011). OEO services cover visa applications, accommodation and travel arrangements, show updates and marketing information, booth applications, construction, sample shipments, onsite services, government assistance and consultancy. Their professional expertise in show participation and foreign language skills also facilitate efficient and effective communication between ITS organizers and exhibitors. Finally, OEOs also offer support to CMEs applying for governmental assistance to ensure that their application is successful so that they can avail of the various governmental support available.

OEO managers and coordinators have developed vast expertise relating to visa application processes. At times, they might leverage their relationship with the Foreign Affairs Department and visa application centers to speed up the application process and optimize visa results. Besides, on-site service staff sent by OEOs will monitor all trade show activities, including booth construction, and freight forwarding. Those services are not only cost-efficient but also shoulder much of the burden in show preparation while providing a feeling of stability and security for CMEs. Their role in putting in place smooth travel arrangements can also ensure a pleasant experience for first-time attendees. Potential troubles may be avoided with OEOs devising a feasible schedule. Table 1 provides an overview of the services provided by OEOs compared to an ITS organizer.

***INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE***

Despite the numerous advantages OEOs can offer, several problems relating to the role of OEOs have also been noted. As it acts as an intermediary, it may at times block direct communication between the ITS organizer and CMEs, to the detriment of the latter. Furthermore, with OEOs working as a mediator, it is difficult for CMEs to build a relationship directly with ITS organizers. The quality of service provided by OEO also varies and is difficult to guarantee. OEOs are mainly state-owned as most of them are derived from government-related departments or non-profit industry associations with staff working as civil servants. That presents a dilemma as on one hand, service should be enhanced by dedicated work, yet, on the other hand, the remuneration in governmental departments still lack suitable incentives (Li, 2009). There is also fierce competition between certified OEOs and private exhibition organizers (PEO), with the latter trying to use a low price strategy and targeting small scale or uncertified trade shows in emerging markets to get a share of the business (Qiu & Wang, 2011).

Only a few studies have explored Chinese outbound exhibition attendance. Outbound exhibition attendance was considered problematic for various reasons, such as problems with OEO's service operations, extensive bureaucracy, and the positioning of exhibitors (Yang, 2004). Yan (2003) pointed to inefficiencies and bureaucracy, with OEO being required to apply for approval documents one year in advance. Moreover, there is still a requirement that space applied



for is not allowed to differ from actual rental space, yet, additional exhibitors cannot take advantage of a subsidy. Finally, some OEOs act as governmental departments yet are outsourcing their services to a private company, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest. Yet, despite numerous shortcomings, OEO operations have resulted in significant achievements; between 1951 to 2002, the number of exhibitions attended by CMEs overseas has risen from two to 591 exhibitions. In 2019 it stood at almost 1,800 exhibitions (Zhou, 2020).

### ***Tradeshow Selection and Performance Evaluations***

Kijewski et. al. (1993) pointed out that motives, objectives and evaluations are three steps involved in exhibitors' decision process. Trade shows attract exhibitors primarily due to their pursuit of marketing advantages (Breden & Flanagan, 2019). Given their multi-functional nature and rich resources, exhibitors' motives to attend a tradeshow include sales-oriented, promotion-oriented, investigation-oriented and long-term oriented benefits (Kerin & Cron, 1987; Kozak, 2005). Researchers have reached a consensus that exhibitors are mainly aiming to fulfil selling needs, realized in both the short-term and long-term (O'Hara, 1993; Shoham, 1992). The primary consideration in trade show selection is the expected quantity and quality of attendees (Kijewski et al., 1993). That relies on the organizer's efforts to invite quality buyers; as confirmed by Berne et al. (2012), an organizer's reputation and prior behavior may partially guarantee the quality of attendees. Access to foreign markets and trade knowledge are also important selection criteria, especially for large-scale companies (Kang & Schrier, 2011), as are potential business interaction with other exhibitors (Motwani et al, 1992). Yet, other studies have also focused on the value of non-selling activities (Sharland & Balogh, 1996).

The performance of tradeshow is usually evaluated by assessing whether the trade show's selling and non-selling objectives are reached (Bonoma, 1983; Kerin & Cron, 1987). Performance indicators can be categorized into three dimensions, namely audience quality indicators, audience activity indicators, and exhibit effectiveness indicators. There is sporadic research that analyses the external influences, especially those of the intermediaries, which affect exhibitors' selection and evaluation of trade shows. Prior exhibition experience has been found to have a positive influence on future participation intentions (Kang & Schrier, 2011).

## **Methodology**

### ***Sample and Procedures***

Chinese exhibitors in ITSs were the sample for this research. Permission was sought from 10 organizers of international tradeshows frequented by CMEs (at least 200 in each show) to administer the survey. Tradeshow locations included North and South America, Europe, and Southeast Asia, that is, traditional Chinese export destinations (China Statistical Yearbook, 2018). Six tradeshow organizers did not grant permission as these organizers already conducted their own survey and/or non-trade related activities were not allowed in the venue. Of the four shows that granted permission, two shows in the United States were selected for data collection, namely MAGIC International Trade Fair in Las Vegas and the International Home + Housewares Show in Chicago. The former is one of the world's largest tradeshows for the fashion industry, held biannually, attracting more than 85,000 visitors and 5,000 exhibitors (Millward, 2017). The latter is among the world's largest trade shows for the home goods industry, held annually, with more than 60,000 buyers and 2,200 exhibitors (IHA, 2019).

In approaching respondents, a systematic sampling approach was adopted (Veal, 2017) to ensure that data is collected from different delegation organizers organized by various OEOs. Since both outbound exhibition organizer and tradeshow performance were the focus of this study, it was essential to employ independent survey assistants to avoid any bias to the survey results. Survey assistants were recruited from local universities respectively via the Chinese student union of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and a Chinese travel agency in Chicago. Survey assistants were briefed extensively prior data collection and supervised on-site. Based on the floor plan, each survey assistant was assigned several blocks of the Chinese Mainland Pavilion, and assigned to visit every other booth, ensuring an appropriate coverage of different sub-sections for corresponding industry, company size, booth size, and company's province of origin. Key booth staff were approached to seek their assistance to complete the questionnaire. Survey assistants were present during the survey completion that took an average of 12 minutes. The survey was administered on the last two days of each show. Exhibitors were willing to participate in the study since a summary of the report was shared with the show organizer to further improve and optimize the show. No other incentives were employed.

## ***Instrument***

Based on the literature review, a questionnaire was developed and refined through pretesting, and employed to collect data. The questionnaire was comprised of several sections, ascertaining CMEs' perceptions of the 1) performance of OEOs (12 variables), 2) evaluation of government assistance (7 variables), 3) selection criterion for ITSs in general (32 variables), and 4) performance of the show and organizer (19 variables). A 7-point Likert-scale was utilized for all measurements to solicit respondents' level of agreement or perceived importance (1 equaled strongly disagree/unimportant, 7 equaled strongly agree/very important). Finally, characteristics of exhibitors and the companies they represent were established for cross-referencing purposes. The survey instrument was initially designed in English, then translated into Chinese, and back into English. Two independent, native Chinese speakers conducted this back-to-back translation (Brislin, 1970). The Chinese questionnaire version was administered to the CMEs while the English version was utilized for seeking permission for data collection from the international tradeshow organizers. Questionnaire design, length and layout were considered especially in view of respondents engaging in business activities on-site a tradeshow.

## **Results**

### ***Sample Profile***

The vast majority of CME at both tradeshows were respondents representing small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), accounting for 72%. In contrast, respondents from companies with more than 300 employees accounted for only about a quarter of respondents for both shows, and at an aggregate level. In terms of company type, the highest number of respondents (39%) represented companies that engaged in both manufacturing and trading, followed by manufacturing only companies (32%). The majority of companies were privately-owned, accounting for 52%. Almost all respondents were from the Marketing & Sales department (88%), with about half being at managerial level, followed by another third being at GM level or above. Almost two-thirds of respondents were involved in the decision-making to attend the show. About half of the respondents at both shows attended 2-3 ITS each year, with another quarter attending 4-6 ITS annually. Finally, the vast majority of companies had registered via an overseas exhibition organizer (91%), indicative of OEOs being vital players in connecting CME with ITS. Despite their attendance at shows that represented two different industry sectors (clothing and houseware),

no significant differences were observed in the profile of respondents for MAGIC and IHA; consequently, data from both shows were combined for subsequent analysis.

### ***Performance of Outbound Exhibition Organizers***

All variables assessing OEOs' performance had a mean value higher than the neutral value of 4, suggesting favorable perceptions of OEO services in general (Table 1). The three highest rated items related to OEOs' ability to "smoothen the visa application," "provide a satisfactory overall experience," and "smoothen the government assistance application process," with mean values of 5.57, 5.52 and 5.48 respectively. This was followed by three items relating to OEO services provided on-site: "arranges convenient transportation," "solves on-site problems efficiently," and "assists with sample shipment and delivery," with respective mean values of 5.44, 5.40 and 5.33. In contrast, the lowest rated items were relating to accommodation and catering services provided by OEOs, indicative of CME expecting a higher standard of service for these aspects while exhibiting in unfamiliar overseas countries. Some scope for improvement is also highlighted by ratings in relation to OEOs' expertise to "provide valuable advice on booth construction," "securing a good booth location," and "providing reliable marketing information," with mean values of 4.90, 5.10, and 5.11 respectively.

Significant differences in ratings were found based on the frequency of annual ITS attendance. It was respondents representing companies that infrequently attend ITS (one per annum) that rated 'Solves on-site problems efficiently' significantly lower than both respondents representing companies that frequently attend ITS (2-3 per annum) and those representing companies that very frequently attend ITS (4 times and more per annum) ( $F(2, 424) = 4.187$ ;  $p < .01$ ,  $M_{IE} = 4.89$ ;  $M_E = 5.48$ ;  $M_{VE} = 5.54$ ). First-time attendees rated OEOs 'Offering tailor-made recommendations on suitable shows' and ( $F(1, 429) = 6.413$ ;  $p < .025$ ,  $M_{FTA} = 4.94$  vs.  $M_{RA} = 5.33$ ) 'securing a good booth location' ( $F(1, 428) = 5.602$ ;  $p < .025$ ,  $M_{FTA} = 4.80$  vs.  $M_{RA} = 5.25$ ) significantly lower than repeat attendees to the particular show. No significant differences in OEO performance were observed based on company size.

***INSERT TABLE 2 HERE***

### *Evaluation of Government Assistance*

Government support from the Small & Medium Enterprise International Market Development Fund (SMEIMDF) was perceived as very important by CMEs ( $M=5.78$ ), indeed, there was a high level of agreement that ‘regional government-funded shows match our company’s strategy’ ( $M=5.57$ ), in addition to it being ‘worthwhile to attend shows funded by the regional government given their effectiveness’ ( $M=5.31$ ). Conversely, findings indicated that there are several areas in which CMEs thought improvements were possible/necessary, namely in terms of the speed with which exhibitor costs are refunded ( $M=5.53$ ), the complexity of the application material and process ( $M=5.38$ ) and the frequency with which regulations for the SMEIMDF application are updated ( $M=5.15$ ).

Looking at differences in perceptions of government assistance, again, there were no differences relating to the size of respondents’ company, nor in terms of company ownership. However, significant differences were found based on the type of company and frequency of annual ITS attendance. In regard to the former, respondents representing trading companies considered it worthwhile to attend shows funded by regional government based on their effectiveness significantly more so than respondents representing manufacturing companies ( $F(2, 416) = 2.992$ ;  $p < .05$ ,  $M_T = 5.58$   $M_M = 5.09$ ). Regarding the latter, it was respondents representing companies that infrequently attend ITS (one per annum) that rated support from the SMEIMDF being of great importance to their company significantly lower than both respondents representing companies that frequently attend ITS (2-3 per annum) and those representing companies that very frequently attend ITS (4 times and more per annum) ( $F(2, 421) = 4.161$ ;  $p < .01$ ,  $M_{IE} = 5.28$ ;  $M_E = 5.88$ ;  $M_{VE} = 5.85$ ).

To facilitate the subsequent regression analysis, EFA was employed to establish the underlying factors of OEO Performance and government assistance from the 12 and 7 items respectively. A varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization was utilized. For OEO performance, it revealed cross loadings on 4 items that were consequently deleted (1) ‘smoothens the visa application process’; 2) ‘provides accommodation at a low price’; 3) ‘provides accommodation of high quality standards’; 4) ‘smoothens the government assistance application process’ and 5) ‘duration of the show is too long’). From the remaining 8 items, the EFA delineated 2 factors that

accounted for 60% of the total variance; they were labelled 1) On-site Services and 2) Pre-Show Services. For government assistance, the EFA identified 2 factors that accounted for 68% of the total variance; they were labelled 1) Benefits of GA and 2) Barriers to GA. Cronbach Alpha tests for reliability indicated high to acceptable reliabilities for all factors (Nunnally, 1978). Results from the EFA and reliability tests are displayed in Table 2.

***INSERT TABLE 3 HERE***

***Key Factors for CME in Evaluating Show and Organizer Performance and its Link to Overall Satisfaction***

EFA was also employed to establish the underlying factors of Show and Organizer Performance Evaluation from the 18 performance items. A varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization revealed cross loadings on 5 items that were consequently deleted (1) ‘This show attracts high quality buyers’ (M= 3.89); 2) ‘This show attracts a large number of buyers’ (M= 3.57); 3) ‘The social program is well designed’ (M= 3.97) ; 4) ‘The booth cost is too high’ (M=4.87); and 5) ‘The duration of the show is too long’ (M=3.04)). From the remaining 13 items, the EFA delineated 3 factors that accounted for 54% of the total variance; they were labelled 1) Supportive Services 2) Market Coverage and 3) Selling Facilitators. Cronbach Alpha tests for reliability indicated high reliability for first two factors with values above 0.8, while the third factor had an acceptable value of 0.650. Results from the EFA and reliability tests, together with the mean for each factor item, are displayed in Table 3.

***INSERT TABLE 4 HERE***

***Predictors of CME Show Satisfaction***

A multiple regression was run to predict CME satisfaction with the tradeshow from show and organizer evaluation, OEO performance and GA factors. Four factors predicted CME show satisfaction statistically significant  $F(7, 412) = 65.324, p < .0001, R^2 = .599$ , explaining 59.9% of CME’s show satisfaction. All show evaluation factors, together with OEO’s on-site services added statistically significant to the prediction,  $p < .05$ , with ‘selling facilitators’ being the most

important factor (Beta =.343), followed by market coverage (Beta =.311), supportive services (Beta = .221), and finally OEO on-site services. (Beta =.146).

#### *Differences in Show & Organizer Evaluations based on Exhibitor Characteristics*

Significant differences in show and organizer performance evaluation were found by the type of company for two factors. ‘Supportive Services’ and ‘Selling Facilitators’ received a significantly more positive evaluation from respondents representing trading companies compared to those representing manufacturing companies (SS:  $F(2, 422) = 7.588, p < .001, M_T = 4.83$  vs.  $M_M = 4.29$ ); SF:  $F(2, 419) = 4.635, p < .01, M_T = 4.15$  vs.  $M_M = 3.72$ ). Selling Facilitators were also evaluated significantly higher by respondents representing small companies compared to medium-sized ones (SF:  $F(2, 427) = 6.07, p < .001, M_S = 4.18$  vs.  $M_M = 3.74$ ). Market coverage was evaluated higher by respondents representing companies that more frequently attended ITS compared to those that did so only infrequently (MC:  $F(2, 431) = 3.277, p < .05, M_{IE} = 3.92$  vs.  $M_E = 4.46$ ), the same was the case for repeat attendees to the respective shows as compared to first-time attendees (MC:  $F(1, 436) = 5.8, p < .025, M_{FTA} = 4.11$  vs.  $M_{RA} = 4.46$ ).

#### *ITS Selection Criteria*

Table 4 offers insights into the importance CMEs attached to various factors when deciding to attend an ITS. As is apparent, ‘Expected quality of buyers’, and ‘Expected number of buyers’ were considered most important with a mean rating of 6.43 and 6.38 respectively. These items were followed by criteria relating to product range and market coverage: ‘level of specialization of the show’ (6.30), ‘product compatibility with the show’ (6.27), ‘Competitive position of the show’ (6.21) and ‘Geographic scope of the show’ (6.21). In contrast, the lowest ratings were associated with ‘Duration of the show’ (4.94) and ‘Availability of booth personnel’ (4.23), though both criteria were still rated well above the mid-point. Finally, it is interesting to note that even though almost all CMEs registered in the ITS via an OEO, the ‘recommendation from the OEO’ was among the lower rated selection criteria for an ITS. Examining significant differences in importance ratings for ITS selection criteria, based on firm size there were significant differences in ratings for ‘Timing of the show’ ( $F(2, 434) = 3.087, p < .05, M_L = 5.72$  vs.  $M_M = 5.24$ ), ‘Presence of competitors’ ( $F(2, 430) = 3.409, p < .05, M_L = 5.71$  vs.  $M_S = 5.07$ ) and ‘Timing of the company’s new product launch’ ( $F(2, 430) = 3.113, p < .05, M_L = 5.67$  vs.  $M_M = 5.27$ ). Significant differences

were observed on the basis of company type for three selection criteria, namely ‘Level of specialization of the show’ (F (2, 425) = 7.323,  $p < .001$ ,  $M_{MT} = 6.54$  vs  $M_M = 6.11$ ); ‘Cost of booth space’ (F (2, 422) = 3.926,  $p < .025$ ,  $M_{MT} = 5.57$  vs  $M_M = 5.11$ ) and ‘Extent of government support’ (F (2, 421) = 5.501,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_M = 5.45$  vs  $M_T = 6.00$ ). ‘Show security’ (F (3, 433) = 5.087,  $p < .001$ ,  $M_{JV} = 6.76$  vs  $M_S = 5.08$ ;  $M_{JV} = 6.76$  vs  $M_P = 5.87$ ) ‘Timing of the company’s new product launch’ (F (3, 433) = 4.132,  $p < .01$ ,  $M_{JV} = 6.00$  vs  $M_P = 5.24$ ) and ‘Presence of competitors’ (F (3, 433) = 3.578,  $p < .05$ ,  $M_{JV} = 6.24$  vs  $M_P = 5.20$ ) were rated significantly different on the basis of company ownership. Finally, five ITS selection criteria were rated significantly different on the basis of frequency of ITS attendance: ‘Timing of the show’ (F (2, 430) = 6.46,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{IE} = 4.69$  vs  $M_E = 5.55$ ;  $M_{IE} = 4.69$  vs  $M_{ve} = 5.46$ ), ‘Location of the show’ (F (2, 425) = 5.136,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{IE} = 4.96$  vs  $M_E = 5.64$ ), ‘Cost of booth space’ (F (2, 427) = 4.983,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{IE} = 4.91$  vs  $M_E = 5.53$ ), ‘Product compatibility with the show’ (F (2, 426) = 7.071,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{IE} = 5.79$  vs  $M_E = 6.37$ ;  $M_{IE} = 5.79$  vs  $M_{ve} = 6.27$ ) and ‘Prestige of the show’ (F (2, 426) = 4.233,  $p < .025$ ;  $M_{IE} = 5.89$  vs  $M_E = 6.30$ ).

### ***INSERT TABLE 5 HERE***

## **Discussion**

This study addressed three research issues, namely, 1) CMEs’ evaluation of the performance of OEOs and government assistance; 2) CMEs’ evaluation of show and organizer performance, and 3) CMEs’ selection criteria for ITS.

First, in terms of CMEs’ evaluation of OEO performance, results indicate that OEOs play a critical role in offering assistance to solve obstacles for CMEs prior to participating in ITS (visa application) and also after the show (government assistance application), in addition to vital on-site services. Compared to visa for the Schengen area, visa for CMEs to attend tradeshow in the United States have traditionally been more difficult to obtain (Donati & Chen, 2018; Li, 2017; Nixon & Lee, 2017; Wu, 2014). The introduction of a 10 year, multiple entry visa for visits to the United States by Chinese citizens in 2014 offered CMEs greater flexibility which shows to attend and which OEO to contract; furthermore, it allowed CMEs to switch to another OEO offering a more competitive price and/or better service without any concerns about obtaining the required



visa. However, given the increasingly hostile business relations between the United States and China in recent years, and greater restrictions on visa, OEO's assistance with visa matters continues to be of importance for CMEs. Furthermore, prior the show CMEs will also seek from the OEO show review reports, and detailed insights on visitor profiles to adjust their products and samples for the show for maximum impact. While in the past OEOs had a more active role in gathering requisite paperwork to facilitate government assistance applications for entitled CMEs, they continue to offer important consulting services to successfully navigate complicated application procedures.

It is also suggested that the identified on-site services require preparation prior the show that then need to be effected on-site – giving the OEO a competitive advantage, as such specialized services are difficult for the ITS organizers to monitor. Being a comprehensive service provider, OEOs do stay alert throughout a show and provide service staff who accompany the exhibiting delegation on-site. Recognizing the increasing importance of CMEs in their shows, some ITS have been offering more targeted services for select CMEs. However, in general OEOs are still in a strong position to offer tailored services to the CMEs.

It also became apparent that CMEs expected a higher standard of service from OEOs in relation to accommodation and catering while exhibiting in unfamiliar overseas countries. Yet, given the increase in overseas travel among Chinese in general (China Tourism Academy, 2019), together with increased international business travel (GBTA, 2018), and participation in ITS (Zhou, 2020), CMEs are increasingly opting to source and secure favorable travel arrangements independently via online booking portals (Lei He, personal communication, 2020). They may continue to do so even more in the future, in an attempt to reduce costs associated with contracting OEO services (Zhang, 2020), typically consisting of booth costs and associated costs (Sha, 2015).

The importance of government assistance was acknowledged by the vast majority of CMEs, as were benefits from attending regional government-funded shows due to their perceived effectiveness. Consequently, the availability of government assistance and support for particular ITS becomes a major selection criteria that has not been previously identified in the literature, given its traditional focus on Western settings (Jin, 2011). For ITS to attract quality CMEs,

effective promotion is vital. Again, the OEO has a key role in the marketing of these show, reaching out to potential CMEs via WeChat promotions, especially for very prestigious ITS. In contrast, for less prominent ITS, the Asian branch office of that ITS may engage in promotional activities to attract CMEs.

At the same time findings also highlighted several areas for potential/necessary improvements. The complexity of the government assistance application materials/processes were a critical area of concern. Naturally, if CMEs have participated in ITS numerous times, they may be familiar with the type of paperwork required and the online submission process. Yet, regulations and procedures change, and familiarity with procedures is unlikely for CMEs exhibiting less frequently. Consequently, the OEOs' role is still pivotal for many CMEs. Not surprisingly, the speed with which exhibitor costs are refunded was an area of concern, given that it can still take up to one year for refunds (unless CMEs exhibit at an exhibition overseas organized by a mainland Chinese government entity where the government subsidy may be deducted immediately from any cost).

It is also of interest to note that trading companies considered it worthwhile to attend shows funded by regional government based on their effectiveness significantly more so than manufacturing companies. Given that such shows are typically held in new markets, trading companies may be more cognizant than manufacturing ones of the value of market development and destination exploration, while also being more flexible to explore potential business opportunities. Having more connections to various manufacturers, they are also likely to provide a wider range of appropriate products to meet potential buyer demand. In contrast, manufacturing company may attach more weight in their decision-making to attend ITS to secure specific business.

Second, with respect to CMEs' evaluation of show and organizer performance, this study found that responsible and professional show staff, a show's comprehensive coverage of the industry and the show timing being in line with the industry's ordering cycle were rated highest by CMEs. In terms of underlying dimensions, three factors were identified, namely 1) Supportive Services; 2) Market Coverage, and 3) Selling Facilitators. These findings are largely in line with

those of prior studies (e.g., Bonoma, 1983; Hansen, 2004; Kerin & Cron, 1987). However, since our study extended the focus beyond the traditional exhibition relationship triad to include another key stakeholder facilitating CMEs' attendance at ITS, predictors of CMEs' satisfaction with an ITS extended beyond the three show and organizer performance factors, typically identified in prior research (e.g., Alberca-Oliver, Rodríguez-Oromendía, & Parte-Esteban, 2015; Dekimpe, François, Gopalakrishna, Lilien, & van den Bulte, 1997; Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 1995; Kerin & Cron, 1987). Specifically, satisfaction with an ITS was also dependent on OEO on-site services. Therefore, ITS aiming to attract quality CMEs have to consider not only their own services offered directly to CMEs but need to also carefully liaise with OEOs, and offer any necessary support to ensure that OEOs' on-site services are consistent with and/or exceed CMEs' expectations leading to CME satisfaction and repeat attendance.

Finally, the importance ratings of ITS selection criteria in this study were largely consistent with findings of prior research on tradeshow selection in general (Kerin & Cron, 1987; Kozak, 2005), highlighting the importance of factors relating to the show's market coverage, supportive services and selling facilitators.

## **Conclusions**

This study represents one of the first studies to investigate Chinese outbound exhibitors, and in doing so, sheds light on the role of a critical exhibition stakeholder unique to the Mainland China context that has not received any research attention thus far, the Outbound Exhibition Organizer. Findings highlighted the critical role OEOs still play in facilitating CMEs' participation in ITS, and the importance of government assistance schemes. This may be even more important in view of the escalating tension between China and the United States, and a potential shift in exploring new alternative markets for CMEs.

Several avenues for future research regarding CMEs' overseas exhibition participation exist, especially in the current fast-changing technological, social, political and economic environment. First, as a sub-contractor of ITS, OEOs have been assisting ITS in organizing CMEs' overseas exhibition activities. Studies may investigate whether OEOs' role would be strengthened or weakened given the advances in technology (such as internet access, show virtual platforms,

online training, online accommodation booking, event APP, and translation tools) which enable a smooth show participation at potentially reduced cost. Second, government assistance and support have been a key reason for overseas ITS selection of CMEs. It is timely and of interest to the industry to probe whether the trade disputes between China and the US /or other trade partners will impact Chinese government support and eventually, influence overseas ITS participation of CMEs. The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic coincides with the trade war between China and the US further complicates matters. In this context, it would be beneficial to assess whether the Chinese governments at both central and provincial levels will continue to support overseas exhibitions, conducive to exports, and if so, whether such support would be directed to certain geographical areas based on political interests rather than existing market demand. Of course, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on exhibitions in general presents a fruitful area for extensive future research. Among all potential impacts, it is particularly worthwhile to investigate the evolving roles and functions of sub-contractors in the exhibition industry, for example, the evolving role of OEOs in the transition and post-pandemic industry dynamic in China.

**Table 1 – Services OEO versus ITS organizer**

<b>Service</b>	<b>OEO</b>	<b>ITS organizer</b>
Booth application	Via application form/booth confirmation/ payment via bank transfer in RMB	Via application form/booth confirmation/ payment via bank transfer in local currency
Booth construction	Uniform booth/ to outsource booth construction according to exhibitor's requirements	Exhibition's own construction/ shell booth
Visa	Comprehensive service to facilitate visa application; can usually propose flexible solution in case of visa refusal	Provide invitation letter, booth and payment confirmation; mostly no booth fee refund in case of visa refusal
Accommodation and Traveling	Provide hotel and round-trip air ticket service, and fulfill other fringe traveling requests around the show period	Provide recommendation and basic information relative to the location of the venue
Sample Shipment	Outsource logistic service; provide sample preparation supervision; assist backhaul shipment	Provide custom regulation notice and contracted shipment company contacts.
Show updates and Marketing information	Pass information from ITS organizers, other suggestions by managers of OEO and other general marketing information	Trade show program, buyers information, industry trends, etc.
On-site Service	Overall service, catering, hiring interpreter, transportation	Mainly via OEO to deliver the service
Government Assistance	Provide official documents, consultancy on application process, assist to submit as a group	N/A
Consultancy	Provide information from shows organized all over the world	Only limited in the show they organize

Source: Compiled by authors.

**Table 2. Overseas Exhibition Organizers' Performance and Government Assistance**

<b>OVERSEAS EXHIBITION ORGANIZERS' PERFORMANCE</b>	Mean	Std. Deviation
Smoothens the visa application process	5.57	1.42
Provides satisfactory overall experience	5.52	1.40
Smoothens the government assistance application process	5.48	1.45
Arranges convenient transportation	5.44	1.48
Solves on-site problems efficiently	5.40	1.48
Assists with sample shipment and delivery	5.33	1.57
Offers tailor-made recommendations on suitable shows	5.19	1.50
Provides accommodation of high quality standards	5.17	1.50
Provides reliable marketing information before the show	5.11	1.68
Secures good booth location	5.10	1.85
Provides valuable advice on booth construction	4.90	1.66
Ensures good catering arrangements	4.68	1.65
Provides accommodation at a low price	4.47	1.61
<b>GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE EVALUATION</b>		
Support from the Small & Medium Enterprise International Market Development Fund (SMEIMDF) is of great importance to my company.	5.78	1.48
My company tends to attend shows that attract government assistance that is larger than the basic SMEIMDF.	5.69	1.37
The regional government funded shows match our company's strategy.	5.57	1.47
The SMEIMDF that subsidizes exhibitors' booth costs is slow to refund costs to exhibitors.	5.53	1.49
The application material and process for the SMEIMDF is complicated.	5.38	1.51
It is worthwhile to attend shows funded by the regional government based on their effectiveness.	5.31	1.58
Regulations for the SMEIMDF applications are updated too frequently.	5.15	1.47

**Table 3. EFA for OEO Performance and Government Assistance**

<b>OEO PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>Factor Loadings</b>	<b>EV</b>	<b>% of Variance Explained</b>	<b>Cronbach Alpha</b>
<b>D1 On-site Service</b>		6.556	31.076	0.816
Solves on-site problems efficiently	0.783			
Assists with the sample shipment and delivery	0.763			
Arranges convenient transportation	0.741			
Ensures good catering arrangements	0.735			
<b>D2 Pre-show Service</b>		1.281	29.206	0.879
Offers tailor-made recommendation on suitable shows	0.862			
Provides reliable marketing information before the show	0.851			
Secures good booth location	0.824			
Provides valuable advice on booth construction	0.700			
<b>Total</b>			<b>60.282</b>	
<b>GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE</b>				
<b>D1 - Benefits</b>		<b>3.459</b>	<b>38.110</b>	<b>.838</b>
The regional government funded shows match our company's strategy.	0.879			
My company tends to attend shows that attract government assistance that is larger than the basic SMEIMDF.	0.801			
It is worthwhile to attend shows funded by the regional government based on their effectiveness.	0.790			
Support from the Small & Medium Enterprise International Market Development Fund (SMEIMDF) is of great importance to my company.	0.726			
<b>D2 - Barriers</b>		<b>1.335</b>	<b>30.379</b>	<b>.774</b>
The application material and process for the SMEIMDF is complicated.	0.859			
The SMEIMDF that subsidizes exhibitors' booth costs is slow to refund costs to exhibitors.	0.840			
Regulations for the SMEIMDF applications are updated too frequently.	.721			
<b>Total</b>			<b>68.489</b>	

OEO - Chi-Square 3066.385 df=78 P<0.001, KMO = .924; GA - Chi-Square =1209.182 df=21 P<0.001; KMO = .792

**Table 4. PCA - Show and Organizer Performance Evaluation**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Factor Loadings</b>	<b>EV</b>	<b>Percentage of Variance Explained</b>	<b>Reliability Alpha</b>
<b>D1 Supportive Services</b>			6.644	20.354	0.884
15. The show staff are professional.	4.80	0.873			
14. The support service of the show organizer is efficient.	4.42	0.847			
13. The service provided by the venue is good.	4.47	0.842			
16. The show staff are responsible.	4.88	0.840			
12. The contracted suppliers (e.g., F&B, printing) provide excellent service.	4.18	0.639			
<b>D2 Market Coverage</b>			2.434	18.183	0.819
2. This show attracts the leading enterprises from our industry sector.	4.24	0.845			
3. This show addresses the latest trends in our industry.	4.39	0.795			
1. This show attracts reliable exhibitors from our industry sector.	4.40	0.784			
4. This show provides a comprehensive coverage of our industry.	4.67	0.614			
<b>D3 Selling Facilitators</b>			1.196	15.538	0.650
17. The booth allocation is fair.	3.73	0.645			
18. The shell booth design is effective in attracting buyers.	3.62	0.606			
8. The business program (e.g., match-making meetings) is well designed.	3.73	0.542			
10. The timing of the show facilitates our industry's ordering cycle.	4.60	0.516			
<b>Total</b>				<b>54.075</b>	

Chi-Square =3833.044 df=171 P<0.001; KMO = .881



**Table 5. Importance of ITS Selection Criteria and Differences in Perceptions**

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev</b>	<b>Firm Size</b>	<b>Firm Type</b>	<b>Firm Ownership</b>	<b>Frequency of ITS Attendance</b>
Expected quality of buyers	6.43	1.00	NS	NS	NS	NS
Expected number of buyers	6.38	1.01	NS	NS	NS	NS
Level of specialization of the show	6.30	1.09	NS	<b>S</b>	NS	NS
Product compatibility with the show	6.27	1.07	NS	NS	NS	<b>S</b>
Competitive position of the show	6.21	1.14	NS	NS	NS	NS
Geographic scope of the show	6.21	1.12	NS	NS	NS	NS
Prestige of the show	6.18	1.11	NS	NS	NS	<b>S</b>
Promotional activities	6.15	1.19	NS	NS	NS	NS
Estimated sales at the show	6.10	1.22	NS	NS	NS	NS
Reputation of the show organizer	6.08	1.28	NS	NS	NS	NS
Estimated number of sales leads	5.98	1.24	NS	NS	NS	NS
Appropriate fit with the marketing strategy of our company	5.94	1.20	NS	NS	NS	NS
Show security	5.84	1.28	NS	NS	<b>S</b>	NS
Quality of support services	5.81	1.26	NS	NS	NS	NS
Extent of government support	5.76	1.42	NS	<b>S</b>	NS	NS
Provision of buyer profile/activity of prior shows	5.69	1.37	NS	NS	NS	NS
Expected types of exhibitors	5.66	1.38	NS	NS	NS	NS
Estimated publicity to be gained	5.60	1.38	NS	NS	NS	NS
Expected number of exhibitors	5.59	1.39	NS	NS	NS	NS
Location of the show	5.52	1.45	NS	NS	NS	<b>S</b>

Economic conditions in exhibition destination	5.43	1.52	NS	NS	NS	NS
Timing of the company's new product launch	5.41	1.36	NS	NS	S	NS
Cost of booth operation	5.39	1.38	NS	NS	NS	NS
Timing of the show	5.39	1.68	S	NS	NS	S
Budget for show attendance	5.38	1.27	NS	NS	NS	NS
Cost of booth space	5.36	1.47	NS	S	NS	S
Quality of booth personnel	5.22	1.45	NS	NS	NS	NS
Presence of competitors	5.22	1.47	S	NS	S	NS
Recommendation from the outbound exhibition organizer	5.03	1.42	NS	NS	NS	NS
Difficulty of visa acquisition	5.00	1.66	NS	NS	NS	NS
Duration of the show	4.94	1.27	NS	NS	NS	NS
Availability of booth personnel	4.23	1.68	NS	NS	NS	NS

Note. All variables were measured on a 7 point scale with 1 indicating no importance and 7 indicating high importance

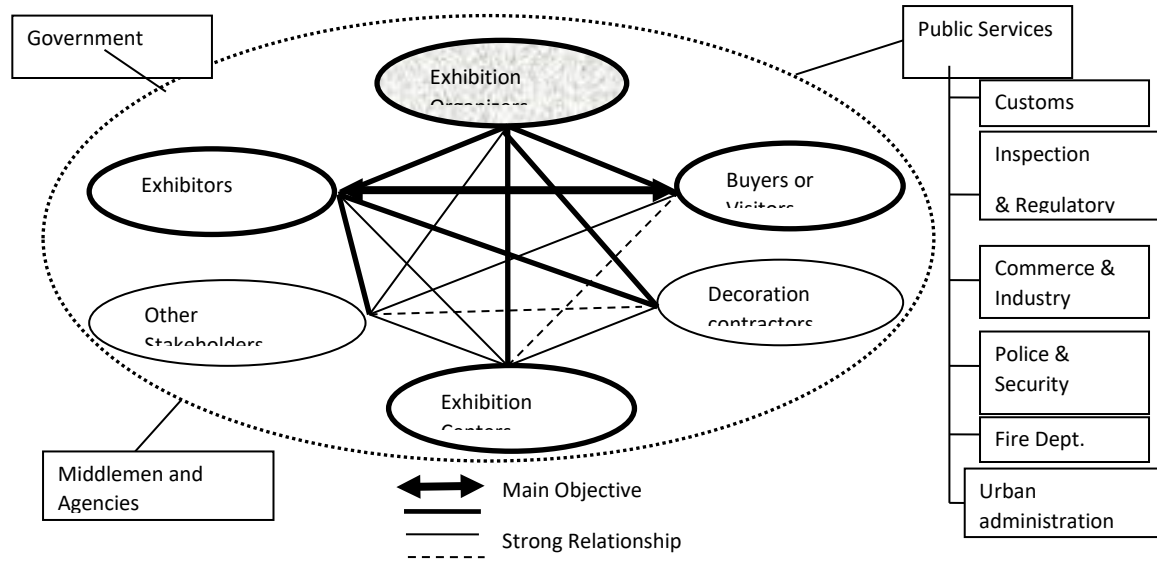


Figure 1- Stakeholders in the Exhibition Industry - Source: Liu, 2006

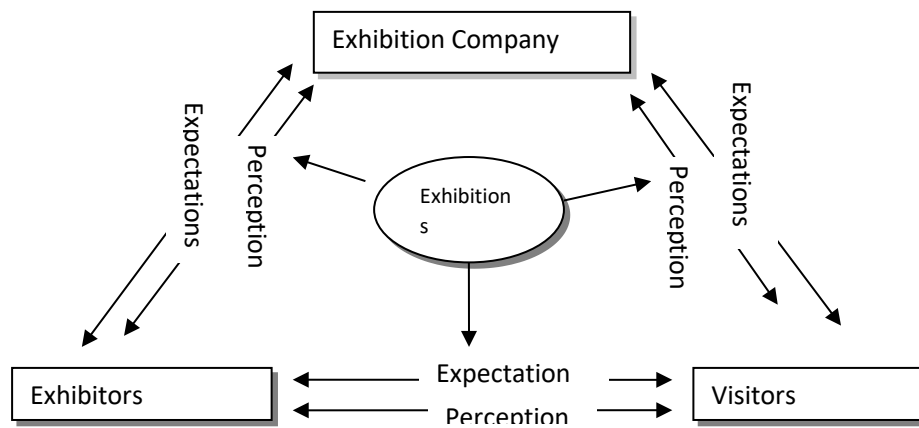


Figure 2 - Relationship Triad in the Exhibition Context Source: Bruhn & Hadwich, 2005

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