

FINAL DRAFT

AVAILABLE OPEN ACCESS:

Bertella, G. & Castriotta, M. (2023). Thinking and acting creatively for greater sustainability in academic conference tourism. *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism*.

DOI: [10.1080/15470148.2023.2284748](https://doi.org/10.1080/15470148.2023.2284748)

Thinking and acting creatively for greater sustainability in academic conference tourism

Abstract

Creative thinking is crucial to address the sustainability challenge of academic conferences. Adopting a creativity lens, we explored the low-carbon initiatives and actions associated with an organizational studies conference in Italy. We relied on an action research approach that involved implementing one of the initiatives included in the study, interviews with key informants, and secondary data. Considering the features and the creative thinking underlying the initiatives and actions, we identified six major themes: three relying on inside-the-box thinking and three on outside-the-box thinking. This study highlights the opportunity to integrate the debate about scientific conferences and sustainability with considerations about academic well-being and suggests that academic conferences can be used as arenas for experimenting with sustainability projects. The impact of the study relates to the introduction of new ideas in the context of an academic conference, the reduction of CO₂ emissions by some conference attendees and the prototype of an alternative way to hold conferences.

Key words: conference tourism; creative thinking; sustainability; academic well-being

Introduction

New approaches are needed to increase the sustainability of academic conferences. Numerous scholars have highlighted the need to decarbonize academia (e.g., Dey & Russell, 2022; Holden, 2017; Kreil, 2021; Reyes-García et al., 2022; Schüßler et al., 2021; Spinellis & Louridas 2013). Recently, it has been argued that changing academic mobility can be a first step of the “creative destruction” of academia, i.e., a process through which academics move from practices of acceleration and status quo maintenance to reorganization (Wassénus et al., 2023). Academic mobility has been discussed in relation to the debate about air travel and climate change, sometimes highlighting the hypocrisy of some academics who, while advocating for green behaviors, frequently travel by plane (e.g., Gössling & Dolnicar, 2023; Higham & Font, 2019; Scott & Gössling, 2022), and there is no agreement about the extent such travels and events are useful for the academics’ work and careers (e.g., Bousema et al., 2020; Chalvatzis & Ormosi, 2020; Edelheim et al., 2018; Glover et al., 2019; Hansen & Budtz Pedersen, 2018; Ponette-González & Byrnes, 2011; Wynes et al., 2019). All these discussions on scientific conferences and related travels have led to tension within academia (pro vs. con) and a sort of impasse that, we argue, can be overcome by exploring the sustainability of academic conferences creatively and actively seeking to make a positive impact.

Most solutions to the sustainability challenge regarding academic conferences are logical and feasible but limited in terms of creativity. Some examples are the promotion of low-carbon transportation alternatives to planes and virtual meetings (Leochico et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2020). Although potentially effective, such solutions deal exclusively with the issue of reducing CO₂, without exploring possibilities to create additional value. In line with the broader literature on creativity and sustainability (Mitchell & Walinga, 2017), our study explored the sustainability of academic conferences, considering more than just minimizing the negative impacts. We shifted our focus from the problem (CO₂ emissions)

toward the potential of not only reducing the environmental harm of conferences but also creating some new value. Our study was based on the following research question: How can creativity help progress toward more sustainable academic conferences?

To answer this question, we reviewed central scholarly contributions on creativity and sustainability and considered the solutions to conference sustainability presented in the literature. This review is presented in the next section, followed by a description of the methodology (action research, interviews, secondary data) adopted to investigate the low-carbon initiatives and actions associated with an academic conference. As presented in the section dedicated to the findings and discussion, we identified six themes that, overall, are indicative of creative thinking for greater sustainability. Of these themes, three rely on outside-the-box thinking and add new insights to the debate on the sustainability of academic conferences. This paper concludes by commenting on this study's contributions to the literature on academic conference tourism and its impacts.

Theory

This section presents our understanding of creativity and how creative thinking is relevant to sustainability. It reflects on how a creativity lens can support the study of sustainability in the context of academic conferences.

Creativity, creative thinking and sustainability

Creativity leads to new possibilities to address unsustainable practices. Over the years, creativity has been studied as an individual trait, an outcome, an ongoing social phenomenon and a problem-solving process (e.g., Amabile, 1988; Michell & Waling, 2017;

Weisberg, 2006; Woodman et al. 1993). With the latter as a starting point, we considered different types of creative thinking. Several scholars have explored creative thinking by distinguishing between inside-the-box thinking (i.e., approaching an issue in conventional, logic and linear ways based on existing perspectives and knowledge and aiming to find the most accurate solution) and outside-the-box thinking (i.e., approaching an issue in unconventional ways through new combinations and associations to find multiple or alternative answers) (e.g., Cropley, 2006; Zhu et al., 2019). Examples of the latter are thinking in terms of analogies and imagining utopian scenarios (Lerdahl, 2002). Several scholars and practitioners have highlighted the effectiveness of solutions based on outside-the-box thinking, but it is important to note that solutions based on such thinking can be difficult to implement due to resistance to radical changes that might be required (e.g., Weisberg, 2009). Hence, both types of thinking are to be considered relevant when addressing existing practices and developing solutions that, whether in increments or leaps, can help reshape the old and build a more sustainable future along complementary pathways of change (Mitchell & Walinga, 2017).

Creativity in improving sustainability is a relatively new field of research and is still scarcely represented in tourism studies. In the literature, scholars have investigated creative solutions to sustainability, including new technologies, behavioral change solutions and innovative practices at different levels (e.g., Brem et al., 2020; Mitchell & Walinga, 2017; Saleh & Brem, 2023). Some studies have proposed methods to stimulate and support creative thinking, such as design thinking, scenarios, metaphors and jam sessions (Buhl et al., 2019; Carlson et al., 2015; Mitchell & Saren, 2008; Montag-Smit et al., 2017). Lim (2016) noted that the issue of creative thinking about sustainability is an emerging topic in tourism. On the one hand, there is an extensive body of literature on creative tourism (e.g., Duxbury & Richards, 2019) and several contributions about employee creativity, entrepreneurship and

innovation (e.g., Bavik & Kuo, 2022; Bhaskara et al., 2023). On the other hand, few tourism studies have explored creative thinking and methods in relation to sustainability and none have focused on the case of events. More studies on the application of creative thinking to sustainability to find feasible context-specific solutions are needed.

Following Lim (2016), we focused on creativity in considering the sustainability of academic conferences. Specifically, we studied initiatives and actions aiming to increase the sustainability of such conferences by exploring the underlying types of creative thinking, that is, inside-the-box thinking, outside-the-box thinking and their integration, which Lim (2016) referred to as thinking in new boxes for greater sustainability.

Applying a creativity lens to the sustainability of academic conferences

Numerous scholars have discussed the sustainability of events and event tourism (e.g., Alananzeh et al., 2022; Getz & Page, 2016; Lawton, 2011; Mair & Smith, 2021; Pernecky & Lück, 2013; Raj & Musgrave, 2009; Zamzuri et al., 2023), while the scholarly discussions on the sustainability of academic conferences have been rather limited and not specifically focused on creativity.

Most studies about academic conferences and sustainability discuss and propose solutions, such as avoiding single-use items and high-carbon footprint food offers (Leochico et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2020). Some studies have considered the travel aspect and, in addition to arguing for replacing flights with greener means of travel and proposing carbon offsetting, emphasized the benefits of virtual and small gatherings (e.g., Jäckle, 2021; Williams & Love, 2022). For example, Fraser et al. (2017) and Bousema et al. (2020) discussed conference models structured around one or more hubs and some nodes, and Høyer and Næss (2001) argued that smaller gatherings with highly interested colleagues can be more

useful than big events. Aside from some considerations about virtual and hybrid conferences possibly being more inclusive than in-person ones (e.g., Banister, 2018; Higham & Font, 2019; Klöwer et al., 2020; Leochico et al., 2021), these discussions, also when presented as reimaginings (e.g., Klöwer et al., 2020), have dealt exclusively with reducing CO2 emissions and have not been particularly creative. An example of the lack of creativity is offered by Higham and Font (2019) who urged the scientific community to take responsibility and act accordingly, but did not offer any creative approach to do so, neither as academics nor as editors of one of the major tourism journals focused on sustainability.

Overall, the solutions to the sustainability challenge of academic conferences discussed in the literature correspond to thinking inside the box, namely, modifying existing practices developed through logical reasoning, and they aim at decreasing a disvalue (negative environmental impact). The problem with these proposed solutions is that they hardly touch on the possibility that CO2 emission reductions could be accompanied by other positive effects. While some attention has been paid to the issue of inclusiveness, these solutions neither adopt new perspectives nor aim at promoting additional value, which, ideally, could be relevant to central aspects of academic conferences, such as knowledge sharing, networking and identity building (e.g., Edelheim et al., 2018). This is a considerable limitation since, fundamentally, it is based on an understanding of sustainability as a problem and not an opportunity.

We wanted to explore how applying a creativity lens to the debate on academic conferences and sustainability could contribute to conceptualizing sustainability as an opportunity to adopt new perspectives and create new value. We found some compelling ideas in the study by management scholars Etzion et al. (2022), who, in addition to propose a hubs-and-nodes model, stretched the time of the conferences to include pre- and post-conference gatherings. These authors adopted an explicit values-based approach to reimagine

conferences in line with the principles of environmental stewardship and some of the principles marginally discussed by other scholars exploring academic conferences and sustainability, such as inclusion, diversity, and community building and development (Banister, 2018; Higham & Font, 2019; Klöwer et al., 2020; Leochico et al., 2021; Yamashita & Oshimi, 2023). Etzion et al. (2022) argued that in addition to technical solutions, it is important to address the values that conferences encourage and, importantly, those that we want to promote in academia. Unfortunately, their reasoning was only theoretical, and their study, presented as a provocation essay, did not include an empirical section. Hence, we decided to engage in the field and contribute to developing a creative solution for improving the sustainability of academic conference tourism.

Methodology

To explore how creativity can help to progress toward more sustainable academic conferences, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, including action research, and engaged in the field with the aim to achieve both research outcome and impact (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Hales et al., 2018; Bertella, 2023). We considered an organizational studies conference in Italy, the 2023 European Group for Organisational Studies (EGOS) conference (<https://egos2023.org/>) to be a relevant and accessible context for our investigation. Three key factors pointed to the conference's relevance to this study. Firstly, the conference was characterized by several academic mobility low-carbon initiatives and actions (table 1). Secondly, the conference venue — the University of Cagliari — is located on the island of Sardinia (Italy), and therefore the environmental impact of travelling was evident. Thirdly, the conference featured imagination, stating on its webpage that imagination represents the “capacity to build better futures” (https://www.egos.org/2023_Cagliari/General-Theme). Regarding our access to the empirical field, both authors are contributors to the conference,

and one is among the organizers of a section and is a key figure in a low-carbon initiative associated with the conference (The #SailingEGOS Experiment).

We relied on primary and secondary data. Some primary data were collected as fieldnotes taken during the planning of the initiative in which one of us was involved as one of the main organizers and which, as indicated by its name (The #Sailing EGOS Experiment) was designed as the first cycle of experimentation (i.e., the researchers test an action with the intention of learning from the experience and continuing experimenting) (Acosta et al., 2015). Other primary data were derived from interviews with the following key informants: the EGOS president and co-founder of a relevant grassroots movement (OS4Future, Delmestri et al., 2021), four participants to two of the identified relevant initiatives (table 1). The interviews were conducted in the form of conversations structured around the main topics of sustainability challenges associated with academic conferences and possible approaches and solutions. Notes were taken during and just after these interviews. Secondary data included: the EGOS' webpage, especially the parts regarding the movement's conferences and the specific 2023 conference; the University's webpage, with a particular focus on the part about the conference; and, when available, the webpages of the identified initiatives and their organizers. The data collection occurred in the months before the conference (December 2022–June 2023), as the aim was to capture the thinking behind the sustainability initiatives and actions, independently of their outcomes.

Table 1. The initiatives and actions investigated

Initiative/action; promoter	Short description	Data sources
EGOS by Train & Boat by OS4Future	First arranged in 2019, it promotes alternative means of travel to planes. In 2023, the train is an option for attendees living on the island and those who reach the closer harbors (Naples, Rome) on the mainland and continue their travel by sea.	Interview with the OS4Future co-founder OS4Future webpage (https://OS4Futureuture.org/)
The #SailingEGOS Experiment by OS4Future, including one of the authors (among the main organizers) with the patronage of the University of Cagliari	Planned to occur for the first time in 2023. It consists of two crossings — to and from Cagliari — on a sailing boat. Only conference attendees who do not reach the harbor of departure (Naples) by plane are admitted.	Interview with the OS4Future co-founder Participation in the initiative’s planning meetings OS4Future webpage (https://OS4Futureuture.org/initatives/sailingegos/)
By sea via Corsica with SailCoop, arranged privately	The participants use the service of SailCoop, which is a cooperative based on the vision of slow and green travel. They travel to Corsica and continue by sea.	Interviews with two participants Cooperative webpage (https://www.sailcoop.fr/)
By bike and by sea, arranged privately	The participants bike to the harbor of Civitavecchia and continue by sea.	Interviews with two participants

We analyzed the data to identify meaningful themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to allow us to understand the main features of and the type of thinking behind each initiative and action. We undertook this process collaboratively in monthly meetings, in which we discussed the ongoing data collection and how the data could help us interpret the emerging themes in terms of creativity and sustainability. At the end of the data collection process, we had a total of 45 themes describing the main features of the initiatives and actions, which we aggregated into six major themes. For example, the themes that we labelled “No phone/technology”, “No schedule/plan/structure” and “Improvisation” were among the themes that we aggregated into the major theme “Alternative work modalities”. In discussing the major themes, we adopted Lim’s (2016) classification of thinking inside the box, outside the box and within new boxes. To increase the study’s trustworthiness, the first draft of this paper was read and commented on by the EGOS president and OS4Future co-founder, who happily agreed about not anonymize the case in the future publication.

Due to one of the authors’ involvement in The #SailingEGOS Experiment initiative, reflexivity considerations were necessary (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Corlet & Mavin, 2018). We had an insider’s perspective about such initiative, which gave us a deeper understanding of the context and, obviously, the specific initiative, but it also implied some challenges in terms of objectivity. The collaborative aspect of our study saw one author being deeply engaged in the field and the other acting as a more detached discussion partner (Acosta et al., 2015; Chang et al., 2013). This arrangement helped us to gain some objectivity. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is not possible to exclude our emotions from the framing, implementation and analysis of the study. Indeed, it was the enthusiasm of the author organizing and implementing The #SailingEGOS Experiment and his contagious passion in sharing his

experience with the other author that motivated us to learn and do more about the sustainability of academic conferences.

After recognizing the impossibility of excluding our “selves” from the study and acknowledging our privilege in being able to participate to the physical conference, we used the reflexivity-guiding questions developed by Bertella (2023) on research activism to reflect on and be transparent about our position in relation to the two dimensions of interconnectedness and transformative agency. We were aware of a variety of stakeholders and the many possible ways to understand sustainability. Among the stakeholders, we had a clear focus on the attendees and their potential benefits from participating in the conference and a close relation with OS4Future. Other stakeholders that we considered in our study were nature, as we regard the ocean as a living entity that must be protected and conserved, and the conference organizers. About the latter, our action research approach aimed to provide a practical example of alternative ways to travel to and from conferences. Regarding the transformative agency dimension, our study was prompted by concerns about how sustainability was discussed in the literature on academic conferences and by a feeling of obligation to try to improve the situation by imagining and enacting an alternative creative solution. We critically acknowledged our initiative’s limitations in terms of CO2 emission reduction (few participants) and inclusiveness (high price related to the transport) and decided not to let such considerations hinder our plans. Instead, we consciously viewed the initiative as a small-scale experiment.

Findings and Discussion

This section describes and discusses the main findings about the six themes that emerged from our analysis: the objective need to reduce CO2 emissions through greener

choices; academics' coherence and example setting; socio-economic sustainability; "slow" academia promotion; alternative work modalities; and conferences as experiences inspiring a responsible lifestyle. The discussion is presented using Lim's (2016) terminology of thinking inside and outside the box and thinking in new boxes, considering the extent to which the themes are represented in the extant literature on academic conferences and other relevant studies. By leveraging these concepts, we explore these themes' implications for the study and practice of academic conference tourism. Drawing on insights gained from our case, the discussion concludes by proposing potential theoretical and practical avenues for further advancement in the field.

Thinking inside the box

Three themes related to thinking characterized by logic and linear reasoning and intended value creation within existing perspectives (Cropley, 2006; Lim, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). The first theme is the objective need to reduce CO₂ emissions through greener choices. The conference webpage presents various options to travel to Cagliari and travel when at the destination. Such information is given in detail, with figures, explanations and comparisons with previous EGOS conferences. Attendees are provided with practical solutions, including the possibility to participate online. This is shown in the following extract from the EGOS sustainability principles:

This year, given the island location of Cagliari, avoiding air travel by taking the train and a ferry has a comparatively lower effect on CO₂ emissions than in other locations. In other words, flying becomes a comparatively less negative option regarding CO₂ emissions. However, as in previous years, we have compiled some important rules of thumb regarding sustainable travel (...). Furthermore, we provide several scenarios

comparing the CO2 emissions of flying to Cagliari with alternative means of travel.

Finally, we have significantly expanded virtual participation options from 7 to 21 hybrid sub-themes.

(https://www.egos.org/egos/about_egos/egos_Sustainability_Principles)

CO2 emission reduction also encompasses the commitment to measure the carbon footprint of attendees, to help attendees identify impactful offsetting partners and to collaborate with local organizers to adopt practices supporting local environmentally friendly food offerings and reductions in food waste, plastics and paper use.

The webpages of OS4Future and SailCoop, which are the organizations behind three of the investigated initiatives and actions, report in detail and provide scientific references about the climate emergency. For example, the SailCoop webpage includes a section entitled “The ecological impact of tourism”, a picture showing the intense plane traffic over Europe and a comparison of the CO2 emissions resulting from different forms of travel. The OS4Future webpage reports central information and figures about the climate emergency based on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report and includes the Planetary Boundaries graphical illustration and links to relevant actions and groups, such as Fridays for Future and Scientists for Future. The theme about the objective need to reduce CO2 emissions through greener choices is relevant to all the investigated initiatives and actions. Indeed, this theme is at the core of the debate on academic conference sustainability and is well represented in the literature (e.g., Fraser et al., 2017; Higham & Font, 2019; Høyer & Næss, 2012; Jäckle, 2021; Leochico et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2020; Williams & Love, 2022).

The second theme relates to thinking inside the box and concerns the role of academics, namely, their coherence and example setting. In the literature, this theme can be seen in several studies about academia and sustainable travelling (e.g., Higham & Font, 2019; Bousema et al., 2020), and it is highlighted in the OS4Future initiatives. This movement, as

shown on its webpage, acknowledges the privilege and responsibility of scientists to offer knowledge and examples of behavioral changes at the individual and collective levels. The OS4Future mission and action statement read as follows:

We are a movement of organization and management scientists who wish to inspire fellow academics to take action on climate change (...). We do this on four dimensions: research, teaching, practice, leading by example.

(w)e need to stop “decoupling” our talk from our actions (...). We embrace our responsibility as social scientists to raise awareness, lead by example and help individuals, the organizations we study and collaborate with and the institutions to which we belong, to change their behavior and functionings.

The OS4Future webpage includes information about policies and proposals and recommendations for conferences and universities, with examples of practices from around the world. The example setting is further discussed in the section of the webpage dedicated to The #Sailing EGOS Experiment, where the initiative is described as a “symbolic initiative that seeks to minimize even (...) the carbon footprint of conference attendance”. It is worth noting that the OS4Future co-founder has authored an article titled “Are we all activists?” (Delmestri, 2023), which discusses activism in academia.

The third theme of thinking inside the box concerns socio-economic sustainability. As noted above in relation to the conference’s food offer, the organizers consider local businesses as both partners providing a service to the attendees and beneficiaries of the event. Regarding inclusiveness, the conference’s webpage details the EGOS inclusivity policy, whose “spirit (...) is to facilitate membership and attendance for those who cannot afford them”. EGOS also has a diversity and anti-harassment policy, which is reported in the conference’s webpage as well as on the OS4Future webpage in the section dedicated to The

#SailingEGOS Experiment. Further, this section highlights the aim to create a sense of inclusiveness among participants with different backgrounds and levels of academic experience. Such socio-economic considerations are represented in the literature on conferences (e.g., Banister, 2018; Higham & Font, 2019; Leochico et al., 2021) and are an expression of feasible sustainable solutions, but do not depart from rather traditional and linear types of thinking.

Thinking outside the box

Thinking outside the box, understood as unconventional thinking to find multiple or alternative solutions to create new value (Cropley, 2006; Lim, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019), related to three themes: the promotion of “slow” academia, the possibility for alternative work modalities and participation in a conference as an experience inspiring a responsible lifestyle. Although the crossing organized through SailCoop is rapid (ca. 13 hours), the cooperatives’ consideration of time is evident. The SailCoop webpage praises the idea of slowing down:

Our ways of life are destroying ecosystems and threatening (...) the survival of our civilization. It becomes urgent to slow down. To find other ways to get around, to consider travel.

The idea of slow travel is presented on the OS4Future webpage and is among the pillars of The #SailingEGOS Experiment, which extends the time of the conference, including academic activities during both crossings in order to increase the conference’s “mindprint”, as stated on the webpage:

... (The travel time) will allow academic sailors (from first-timers to experts) to engage in structured and unstructured conversations under the blue sky and night stars. What will this academic experiment bring about? With the desired combination of

earlier and more senior scholars, we anticipate that new research ideas will emerge and possibly new collaborations.

This extract also shows reflection about possible alternative work modalities, in terms of spaces (the boat, the open air, the ocean) and time (no working times, days and nights), and the sailing trips are depicted as valuable arenas for networking and working together. This theme was recurrent in our discussions when planning The #SailingEGOS Experiment. The author directly involved in the initiative was intrigued by the boat and the journey as work settings that, essentially, were designed based on a vision of academia, similarly to some types of out-of-the box thinking, such as imagining fantasy utopian scenarios (Lerdahl, 2002).

The last theme that we identified in relation to thinking outside the box is participating in a conference as an experience inspiring a responsible lifestyle. This theme was evident in the two sailing initiatives, where the boat serves as a metaphor of society as large. Sobriety, understood as the wise and controlled use of available resources, is mentioned on the SailCoop webpage as follows: “The way of life on board takes into account, at all times, the available resources. In water, in food, in fuel, in charge of the batteries, the passengers learn, as close as possible to nature, to practice and appreciate sobriety”. Similar reflections emerged during The #Sailing EGOS Experiment planning meetings and discussions, and the initiative’s webpage highlights other relevant aspects about living onboard, such as the importance of sharing the spaces and tasks, coordination, responsibilities and duties.

These three themes that we categorized as thinking outside the box play an extremely marginal role in the scholarly debate about academic conferences and sustainability. Etzion et al. (2021) touched on the theme of promoting “slow” academia when referring to scholars feeling of losing time while travelling to and from a conference and proposed reimagining

academic conferences. Regarding the theme of alternative work modalities, Høye & Næss (2001) advocated for smaller gatherings. The theme of conferences as experiences inspiring a responsible lifestyle points to a radical rethinking of the potential of academic conferences, as advocated in the commentaries by Dey and Russell (2022) and Wassénus et al. (2023), who argued for the need to transform scholarship and the wider knowledge production economy.

Thinking inside new boxes for greater sustainability in conference tourism and further reflections

Taken as a whole, the initiatives and actions associated with the conference rely on both types of thinking: inside- and outside-the-box thinking. This aligns with the creative thinking advocated by creativity scholars, including those exploring sustainability challenges (Brem et al., 2020; Cropley, 2006; Mitchell & Walinga, 2017; Saleh & Brem, 2023; Zhu et al., 2019), and corresponds to what Lim (2016) refers to as thinking inside new boxes for greater sustainability. We also note that the themes related to the practices presented on the conference's website rely on inside-the-box thinking, are critically and constructively described and are consistent with the extant literature on academic conferences and sustainability (Leochico et al., 2021; Neugebauer et al., 2020). Conversely, the themes referring to a combination of thinking inside and outside the box are observed in initiatives and actions arranged either privately or by OS4Future. The data do not allow us to determine the cause of this difference, but they have two important implications that may be relevant for the study and the practice of academic conference tourism.

The first reflection relates to the marginal role played by relevant aspects in the debate on the sustainability of academic conferences. Our findings suggest that three themes ("slow" academia, alternative work modalities, conferences as experiences inspiring a

responsible lifestyle) should be integrated into the debate, as they are relevant both to sustainability broadly and to knowledge sharing, networking and identity building, which are central aspects of academic conferences (Edelheim et al., 2018). Leveraging the idea of Etzion et al. (2020) to move away from the conceptualization of conferences as punctuated events and make explicit the values on which the conferences build, we propose that academic conferences can be reimagined and discussed in relation to scholarly literature on “slow” academia (e.g., Berg & Seeber, 2016; Lee & Benjamin, 2022), creative workplaces and mobile work (e.g., De Paoli et al., 2017; Schäfer et al., 2023) and transformative authentic experiences (e.g., Brown, 2013; Mezirow, 1997). This integration of concepts from the tourism (and other) literature would result in a renewed perspective on conferences, with a strong emphasis on academic well-being. The ongoing debate on academic conferences and sustainability might benefit from a perspective focused on the creation of value by adding a new dimension to the dominant perspective about reducing the disvalue disadvantage related to CO2 emissions.

The second reflection is a practical one. The findings suggest the opportunity to use the potential already present in the context of academic conferences. The #SailingEGOS Experiment, designed and supported by particularly engaged scholars, was especially creative in proposing a new conception of conferences as spaces to reinvent academic life in terms of sustainability and well-being. The initiative was considered an experiment, and the creativity literature (e.g., Buhl et al., 2019) emphasizes the importance of testing new ideas to improve and learn from them. Although the function of experimentation can be performed by individuals and activist groups, official support can be important, both practically and as an explicit sign of commitment to walk the talk of sustainability (Dey & Russell, 2022; Wassénus et al., 2023). Klöwer et al. (2020) argued that researchers and conference organisers are responsible for driving the change toward more sustainable conferences,

mainly by supporting virtual conferences. We go a step forward and, in line with Baas and Hjelm (2015), who discussed the design of scientific conferences to experiment with and enhance sustainable transitions, we argue that conference organizers and attendees should use their capacities and position to conceptualize and test new solutions. We believe that academic conferences, which involve curious and competent people (both organizers and attendees), could serve as arenas for small-scale experimental projects with sustainability potential.

Conclusion

In this study, we asked how creativity can help us progress toward more sustainable academic conferences and applied a mixed-methods approach including action research to explore the low-carbon initiatives and actions associated with a conference. We considered the main features and the creative thinking underlying such initiatives and actions and identified six themes relevant to the sustainability of the investigated conference. Among these themes, three related to inside-the-box thinking and were related to extant studies on academic conferences and sustainability, while three themes concerned outside-the-box thinking, which have not or have only marginally been discussed in the literature. Our findings suggest an opportunity to broaden and deepen the debate on academic conferences and sustainability by integrating ideas from studies on academic well-being, especially “slow academia”, creative workplaces and authentic, transformative experiences.

In line with the literature on the value of creativity for improving sustainability, we acknowledge the importance of both inside- and outside-the-box thinking and consider every initiative and action aiming to facilitate sustainability-related changes to be important. However, based on our experience, we argue that initiatives and actions relying on outside-

the-box thinking can be challenging to conceptualize and implement. While valuable ideas based on thinking inside the box have been presented in the literature on conferences and some articles have presented best practices, the emergence of new ideas is challenging. Academic conferences could be excellent arenas for experimenting with them. Therefore, we propose that academic conferences could serve as platforms where organizers and attendees can test small-scale projects that can lead to innovative ways to implement more sustainable conference tourism. It is worth noting that we investigated a conference targeting organizational studies scholars, and this focus is reflected in some of the themes that emerged from the related initiatives, especially the one about creative workplaces. It can be reasonably assumed that conferences focused on other disciplines, for instance, engineering and psychology, could be interesting arenas for experiments leading to different projects (e.g., about innovative technological solutions and behavioral change strategies).

Our study aimed to achieve research outcome and make an impact. Regarding the research outcome and our research question, we believe that applying a creativity lens in examining the sustainability challenge of academic conferences was extremely useful. It allowed us to change our perspective from the perception of sustainability as a major and even overwhelming challenge to the opportunity to reflect more deeply on conferences and on well-being as a crucial dimension of the sustainability of academic life. We built our study around the concept of creative thinking and consider this approach to be an important contribution to the literature on conference tourism and sustainability. This contribution aligns with the idea of scholars taking responsibility and taking action to address unsustainable practices (Dey & Russell, 2022; Higham & Font, 2019) and is in line with recent developments in sustainability science, which emphasize the need for “creative destruction” in academia (Wassénus et al., 2023).

Based on the initiative we planned and implemented, The #SailingEGOS Experiment, we argue that this study makes three important impacts. The first is about introducing new ideas to the discussion on the practical implementation of the investigated conference. Although it is difficult to measure this impact, we are sure that the initiative did not go unnoticed. Another impact relates to CO₂ emissions. According to our calculations based on best- and worst-case scenarios, the use of the boat engine (in the possible absence of wind) will result in emissions between 37 and 80 kg per person. This is lower than the emissions related to taking the ferry (150 kg) from the same harbor (Naples) as well as those related to the travel options from Rome, including the use of plane (160 kg) and the combination of a train and ferry through Civitavecchia and Olbia (87 kg). The third impact concerns the lessons we will learn from the initiative, which is an experiment and, as such, will point to improvements for similar initiatives in the future.

Finally, this study has some limitations that can be used to inform future studies. One limitation is that the study is based on a conference and focused on a small-scale project. On the one side, such limitation enabled us to adopt an action research approach, explore deeply the thinking behind the initiatives and create some impact. On the other side, a multi-case study including small-scale projects related to several conferences would be valuable for identifying critical success factors. Furthermore, a multi-case study would allow for the identification of factors and mechanisms related to different dimensions of sustainability, such as social legacy. Another limitation is that our attention was on one academic conference and therefore we excluded the possibility of extending the study, especially its empirical part, to other types of conferences and events. By extending our study, we could explore whether our findings can be applied to other disciplines, and, more importantly, whether the role of creative problem-solvers differs between academics and non-academics and how possible differences could be used to create synergies within shared projects.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank and dedicate this work to those people who, with enthusiasm and perseverance, dare to think and act creatively. Special thanks to all the "activists for sustainable academic mobility" who are working to change the world, such as the organizers and participants of #SailingEgos, #Egosbytrain, "Egosbybike," and #Sailcoop.

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