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Volunteer Preparedness for Emergency Management at Festivals

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Volunteer Preparedness for Emergency Management at Festivals.

Introduction

The tourism industry is highly susceptible to disasters, including weather events, terrorism, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Novelli et al., 2018). Extensive research has examined the impact of disasters on various tourism sectors, highlighting the need for effective disaster emergency management (Gibson & Connell, 2015; Zenker & Kock, 2020). Recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic and emergencies like the Astroworld crowd crush tragedy emphasize the importance of emergency preparedness and recovery (Public Safety Canada, 2012). The study focuses on the crucial role of volunteers in event management and the need to understand their involvement in emergency preparedness and management (Baum & Lockstone, 2007; Slaughter & Home, 2004). By adopting the service ecosystem perspective, the research aims to explore how volunteers collaborate, utilize resources, and contribute to value co-creation in emergency management (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Literature Review

Emergency management (EM) is crucial in addressing natural and artificial hazards to safeguard lives, the environment, and the economy (Public Safety Canada, 2019). Disasters are escalating in frequency and severity globally (Public Safety Canada, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, research highlighted the short and long-term effects of disasters on tourists, stakeholders, and communities (Faulkner, 2001; Hystad & Keller, 2003; Miller & Ritchie, 2003). Hystad & Keller (2003) demonstrated the significant impact of a forest fire in Kelowna on tourism. Despite these consequences, the tourism industry lacks proactive planning to address the increasing negative impacts of disasters (Faulkner, 2001; Hystad & Keller, 2006; Ritchie, 2004). Festivals, as a component of the tourism sector, have been extensively studied from various perspectives, including economic impact, community and culture, and emergency management (Ragsdell & Jepson, 2014; Clayton, 2016; Earl, 2006). Festivals can be impacted by a wide range of emergencies, such as infrastructure disruption, extreme weather events, public health threats, and chemical-biological-radiological-nuclear incidents (Cole & Buckle, 2004).

Disasters at festivals can be managed by integrating emergency management in the event planning process and providing appropriate services and infrastructure (Earl, 2003). Earl (2005) asserted that volunteers are responsible for providing many of the essential services at festivals, including crowd management and provision of medical supplies. Given their essential role in the production and operation of festivals, it is necessary to better understand festival volunteers in general. This study aims to enhance event planning and management and advance our understanding of the role of volunteers within the festival service ecosystem.

The following research questions guided the study:

What resources (knowledge and skills) do volunteers need and bring to emergency management? (How do volunteers obtain and contribute those resources)

How are resources integrated to create value in an emergency management context?

Methodology

The study used a survey design incorporating both open ended and scale item questions. An online questionnaire using the Survey Monkey web-based platform was used to garner responses from festival volunteers. This research was conducted with volunteers at four Canadian performing arts festivals, selected based on convenience. A week after each festival, the online questionnaire was sent out to volunteers through the festival organization. Following the completion of these festivals in 2022, 154 responses were collected, with a total sample of $n = 124$ retained after surveys with a high percent of missing responses were deleted. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics were used to present the quantitative data and content analysis, as outlined by Gratton et al. (2009), was employed to code open-ended responses which were then used in statistical analysis.

Results

The sample was predominantly female (58.3%), between the ages of 21 and 60 (78.2%) with volunteer experience (68.2). Regarding the participant's familiarity with the festival emergency plan, 45.2% of participants were familiar with the EM plan, 33.3% of participants acknowledged the existence of a plan but were unfamiliar with its details, 20.4% of participants indicated they were unsure if one existed. Interestingly, a mere 1.1% of participants stated that there is no EM plan at the festival. The study also highlights the importance of festival-provided emergency management training in enhancing volunteers' confidence and preparedness. One-fourth of the study participants (26.7%; $n=24$) revealed that they did not receive any training from the festival, while most participants (60%; $n=54$) indicated moderate training received. However, only a few participants (13.4%; $n=13$) received a significant amount of training. Regarding the emergencies they were trained for, participants identified a range of emergencies into categories, including human-caused incidents, technological emergencies, and natural processes. The hypothesis testing revealed a significant association between the more training the volunteers had and the more skills they feel they can contribute to emergency management ($p=0.002$).

Conclusion and Discussion

The study provides valuable insights into the preparedness of volunteers for emergency management at festivals. The roles of volunteers in emergency management at festivals include safety and security, first aid and medical assistance, communication, and collaboration. Volunteers actively contribute to enhancing emergency response, playing a crucial role in its efficiency. Findings align with the concept of value co-creation, emphasizing the collaborative efforts of volunteers, organizers, and stakeholders in generating value. The study emphasizes the importance of communication skills, training, and relevant knowledge in equipping volunteers for emergency management. The study emphasizes the importance of communication skills, training, and relevant knowledge in equipping volunteers for emergency management. Volunteers who possess these attributes are better prepared to handle emergencies and contribute to the overall safety and well-being of festival attendees. Continuous training is crucial for volunteers to enhance their preparedness and ability to handle emergency situations effectively. By providing ongoing training opportunities, volunteers can stay up to date with best practices, develop new skills, and reinforce their existing knowledge.

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