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Understanding the Impacts of Festivals on Resident Attendees Before and During COVID-19: A First Look at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival

Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, festivals and events had been one of the fastest growing segments in tourism (Yolal et al., 2015). Globally, festivals provide unique benefits related to the economic, cultural, and social aspects of society and communities (Richards, 2007). With developing technology and connectiveness around the world, there has been an increasing interest in shared media, including film. As such, film festivals are growing in size and popularity; however, research in this area is in its infancy (Yolal et al., 2015).

Within the film festival industry, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Two-Spirit, Queer, and Additional Identities (LGBT2Q+, broadly referred to as queer in some spaces) are experiencing exceptional growth (Amnesty International, 2019). Within Canada, three queer film festivals have been operating for over thirty years: Toronto's Inside Out, Montreal's Image+Nation, and the Vancouver Queer Film Festival (VQFF). Festivals such as these help LGBT2Q+ community members fight against discrimination, gain freedom, and access films that most closely reflect who they are (Knecht, 2016). However, understanding benefits and outcomes for attendees has not been studied in a queer film festival context.

In Vancouver, VQFF is an annual queer film festival established in 1989. It is the largest queer film festival in Canada west of Toronto (Out On Screen, 2021). VQFF provides opportunities for people of different gender identities and sexual orientations to come together and see themselves reflected in the storytelling on screen. Using event and tourism literature in conjunction with film festival literature, this research examines VQFF attendees through a sociocultural lens (Yolal et al., 2016) to obtain a better understanding of the people and impacts (i.e. community benefits, cultural-educational benefits, well-being) of VQFF both before (in-person in 2019) and during (virtually in 2020) the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

According to Getz (2008), one popular tourism activity in many destinations globally is attending festivals and events. For locals, festivals bring both financial and cultural benefits (Frey & Busenhardt, 1996). As a result of these benefits, residents often support festivals in their communities (Aref & Redzuan, 2009). This support is critical in the long-term sustainability of festivals, and their perceptions must be understood and incorporated into festival management.

Although festival outcomes have been studied in a variety of contexts, relatively few studies have focused on these resident perceptions (i.e. Jani, 2017; Ismail & Swart, 2015; Chen, 2011; Zhou, 2010). Contextually, these relatively few studies have focused on outcomes of large-scale events at the expense of examining smaller, cultural festivals (Jani, 2017). Although there is some literature in queer film festivals, most previous literature has focused on the content of queer film festivals and not the attendees or operation of the festival (i.e. Binnie & Klesse, 2018; Damiens, 2018; Dawson & Loist, 2018; Ford, 2017).

As a result of these gaps, the broad objective of this research was to gain an understanding of attendees to the VQFF. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery mode and

operations of festivals and events, understanding the impacts of this transformation is important both as a comparison to pre-pandemic operations and as a source of information from which to determine future delivery modes and operation strategies of festivals and events post-pandemic.

Methodology

Survey administration was conducted by festival staff in coordination with the principal investigators in both 2019 and 2020 using Qualtrics software. Survey invitations were sent to all ticket-holder email addresses the day following the end of the 11-day festival in 2019 and 2020. Second and third reminder survey invitations were sent within three weeks of the end of the festival in both years (Babbie, 2016).

In 2019, 96.8% of completed surveys were from resident attendees. In 2020, the virtual edition was geolocked to only British Columbia (BC) residents due to copyright restrictions. As such, the study used only BC resident responses from 2019 to provide a comparable respondent pool. The survey both years included questions related to attendance history, satisfaction, loyalty, and residency (Báez-Montenegro & Devesa-Fernandez, 2017; Lee et al., 2016), cultural-educational, community, and subjective well-being benefits of the festival (Yolal et al., 2016), festival programming, and demographics. These questions were asked identically in 2019 and 2020. A total of 362 BC resident responses were received from the VQFF in 2019, and 209 were received from BC residents from the VQFF in 2020.

Results

For demographics, the virtual edition of VQFF in 2020 found a significantly higher diversity of respondents based on gender identity. However, no significant differences were found in sexual orientation, age, or household income. For behavioural variables, no significant differences were found in number of years attending VQFF or number of film screenings attended between the in-person version of VQFF in 2019 and the virtual version in 2020.

For benefits and outcomes, no significant differences were found between the in-person and virtual versions of VQFF regarding any of the three benefit types tested. A multiple regression analysis from each year's survey also found similar results regarding which benefit types were most associated with loyalty to VQFF. In addition to these findings, satisfaction and loyalty were significantly different, albeit inversely. Respondents were less satisfied, but more loyal in the virtual edition of VQFF in 2020. Mixed results were also found with sponsorship impression and likelihood to patronize sponsors.

Conclusion and Discussion

Focusing on obtaining an understanding of VQFF resident attendees in both 2019 and 2020 begins to address gaps in the literature regarding queer film festivals and the similarities and differences in characteristics of festivals conducted virtually compared to in-person (i.e. Jani, 2017; Yolal et al., 2016). These results provide academic contribution through their examination of demographics, benefits, and outcomes of a festival uniquely within the COVID-19 pandemic context. Practical implications were also found for festival practitioners, as the unexpected shift to a largely virtual world during COVID-19 provided an opportunity to explore alternate forms of festival delivery. A comparative analysis of VQFF in 2019 in-person and 2020 virtually

provides guidance for LGBT2Q+ tourism providers and festival and event organizers post-pandemic.

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