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Visitors' Perceptions of their Own Impacts at a Special Event

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ABSTRACT

Within the special events literature limited research exists exploring the impacts that result from special event visitation. No studies exist that examine special event attendees' perception of their contribution to impacts. This needed perspective is valuable because management may want to develop communication material to minimize the negative outcomes of the festival and maximize the benefits. Attribution theory was used as the theoretical framework to better understand festival visitors' perceptions of their own contribution to impacts (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Tetlock, 1981). During a two-week period in July 2005, self-administered surveys were distributed to Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival visitors in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Two questions were designed to better understand visitors' perceptions of their own impacts. In total 307 visitors returned a completed survey resulting in a 53% response rate. Simple regression was used to examine the relationship between the direction of the impact (positive or negative) and visitors' perceptions of their contribution to the impact item. The results indicated a positive significant relationship between direction of the impact and perception of contribution to impact item for each of the 8 impact items included in this study. Specifically, the more positively visitors rated an item the more they felt they contributed to an impact item. The results of this study provide support for the existence of self-serving biases in visitors' attributions.

INTRODUCTION

Every July the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival floods the historic Winnipeg Exchange District with thousands of theatre-goers. During this 2 week theatre festival attendance at theatre performances in this district reaches over 69,000 and attendance at the outdoor site tops 90,000. With such large visitation to the site over a two week period, festival management is interested in understanding various aspects of the impacts the festival has on the Historic neighbourhood in which it is located. The purpose of the paper is to examine visitors' perceptions of their own impacts while attending this special event.

Within the tourism literature, social, environmental and economic impacts have been examined from both residents' and visitors' perspectives. Examining the special events literature reveals limited research exploring the impacts that result from special event visitation. Specifically, the majority of research regarding impacts at special events has explored the economic outcomes of the events (Barker, Page & Meyer, 2001). No studies exist that examine special event attendees' perception of their contribution to impacts. This needed perspective is valuable because management may want to develop communication material to minimize the perceived negative outcomes of the festival and maximize the benefits. Developing appropriate communication material requires that management understand visitors' existing perceptions regarding their contribution to impacts at the event and the outcomes of those impacts.

Attribution theory will be used as the theoretical framework to better understand festival visitors' perceptions of their own contributions to impacts. Attribution theory addresses how people arrive at an explanation for their own behaviour and the behaviour of others (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Tetlock, 1981). Various factors that affect causal attributions have been identified, including biases in attribution. For the purpose of this study, the self-serving bias of attributions provides a framework to explore how people perceive their own impacts while attending a festival in a historic district. Self-serving bias research suggests that people tend to accept recognition for praiseworthy behaviour and attribute those successes to internal causes, but deny responsibility for blameworthy behaviour and attribute those failures to external forces (Arkin, Appelman & Burger, 1980; Bradley, 1978, Myers, 1990; Tetlock, 1981). As a result, this study sets out to test the following hypothesis: The more positively visitors perceive an impact outcome the more likely they are to feel they contribute to that outcome.

RESEARCH METHODS

During a two-week period in July 2005, self-administered surveys were distributed to Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival visitors in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Survey distributors were stationed in high traffic areas throughout the outdoor site and asked individuals who passed within a few feet to complete the survey. Also, every 10th visitor in line at the 22 venues was also asked to complete a survey. Once surveys were completed they could be returned to the survey distributor, dropped off at a latter time or returned by mail. A target of 30 returned surveys, on each of the 11 days of the festival, was sought.

Since the purpose of this paper is to discuss visitors' perceptions of their impacts on the event, only the impact questions contained in the questionnaire will be described in detail here. The literature, festival staff and festival patrons were consulted to determine the impact items to be included in the study. In total 8 impact items were selected, these were; changes to the local economy, the amount of litter/waste in the area, the quality of life in the area, traffic conditions, employment opportunities, amount of vandalism, amount of theft, and changes in the amount of crowding. Two questions were designed to better understand visitors' perceptions of their own impacts. Specifically, visitors were asked to complete two 7 point Likert-type scales. The first scale asked visitors to indicate whether their visit to the Winnipeg Fringe contributed to changes in each of the 8 impact items and response items ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The second scale asked visitors to specify whether changes in the 8 impact items listed were positive or negative. Visitors responded on a 7 point Likert-type scale ranging from extremely negative to extremely positive.

FINDINGS

In total 307 visitors returned a completed survey resulting in a 53% response rate. Most respondents were between 25 and 54 years old (65%), female (63%), and had graduated from university (66%). While the majority of respondents were from Winnipeg (77%), 11% were from other places in Manitoba, 8% were from other Canadian provinces and 3% were from outside of Canada.

Visitors' responses to the question about whether their visit contributed to each of the 8 impact items reveals that visitors feel they contribute to most of the impact items. On average, visitors agree that their visit to the festival contributed to changes in the economy, quality of life, traffic, employment, and crowding. The mean response to whether visitors' felt they contributed to litter/waste, vandalism and theft was neither agree nor disagree (Table 1).

Table 1
Visitors' perception of their contribution to impact items

Impact Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Impact Economy	280	5.06	1.27
Impact Waste	282	4.22	1.63
Impact Quality of Life	281	4.83	1.38
Impact Traffic	282	4.62	1.43
Impact Employment	281	4.66	1.28
Impact Vandalism	280	4.16	1.36
Impact Theft	280	4.12	1.34
Impact Crowding	281	4.68	1.38
Valid N (listwise)	273		

Note. Based on scale 1= Strongly disagree; 7= Strongly agree.

When asked about whether changes to the impact items were positive or negative the mean response was “neither positive nor negative” for most of the impact items. Specifically, visitors felt that changes to amount of litter/waste, traffic, vandalism, theft and crowding, was neither positive nor negative as a result of their visit. On average, visitors felt that their visit contributed to a positive change in the economy, quality of life and employment opportunities (Table 2).

Table 2
Visitors' perception of their contribution to impact items

Direction of Impact	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Economy	278	5.22	1.16
Waste	276	3.89	1.40
Crowding	271	3.93	1.29
Quality Life	277	5.05	1.26
Traffic	274	3.98	1.28
Employment	275	4.83	1.23
Vandalism	275	4.18	1.30
Theft	274	4.11	1.26
Valid N (listwise)	266		

Note. Based on scale 1= Extremely negative; 7= Extremely positive.

Simple regression was used to examine the relationship between the direction of the impact (positive or negative) and visitors' perceptions of their contribution to the impact item (Table 3). The results indicated a positive significant relationship between direction of the impact and perception of contribution to impact item for each of the 8 impact items. Specifically, the more positively visitors rated an item the more they felt they contributed to an impact item.

Table 3

Regression results examining the relationship between direction of impact and perception of contribution to impact

IV	DV	Unstandardized Coefficients		T	Sig	Rsquare
Contribute to...	Direction of impact (negative or positive)	B	Std. Error			
Changes in the local economy	Changes in the local economy	.605	.055	10.995	.000	.308
Amount of litter/waste	Amount of litter/waste	.119	.051	2.335	.02	.020
Changes to quality of life	Changes to quality of life	.478	.047	10.243	.000	.278
Amount of traffic	Amount of traffic	.206	.053	3.917	.000	.054
Changes to employment opportunities	Changes to employment opportunities	.551	.048	11.496	.000	.329
Amount of vandalism	Amount of vandalism	.391	.053	7.346	.000	.167
Amount of theft	Amount of theft	.336	.053	6.379	.000	.131
Amount of crowding	Amount of crowding	.296	.053	5.545	.000	.103

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

The results of this study provide support for the existence of self-serving biases in visitors' attributions. Specifically, the more positively visitors perceive an item, the more visitors feel they contribute to the impact item. Visitors appear to take more responsibility for outcomes when they are positive than when they are negative. It is possible that visitors want to believe they contribute less to negative outcomes and therefore claim less responsibility of negative impacts; however it is also possible that visitors actually perceive they contribute less to negative impacts than to positive ones. If visitors do not recognize their own contribution to negative impacts then festival management needs to ensure visitors understand how their actions contribute not only to the positive outcomes of the event but also to negative outcomes, in order to reduce the negative impact visitors have while visiting the site. Furthermore, if visitors are simply unwilling to accept responsibility for their contribution to negative impacts they may not attend to communication material intended to encourage visitors to minimize the negative affect of their visit on the neighbourhood.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provided preliminary insight into visitors' perceptions of their contribution to impacts in a festival setting. Examining the impacts of festivals is a needed perspective since many communities turn to events for their positive economic outcomes, however a range of impacts are possible. Examining visitors' perceptions is important because often their behaviour affects the type and amount of impacts that result. Prior to informing visitors about how they can minimize their negative impact on a neighbourhood, while attending an event, we must first understand their existing perceptions. While this research did not rule out the possibility that visitors do in fact contribute less to impact items perceive negatively, it seems unlikely that this is the case especially considering the positive relationship between direction of impact and perception of contribution to the impact existed for all 8 of the impact items.

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