I didn’t have the time of my life: Qualitative data collection challenges at the 2017 Dirty Dancing Festival

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Introduction

In August 2017 two brave researchers embarked on a journey to try a novel approach to collect data at the Dirty Dancing Festival at Lake Lure, North Carolina, United States. Our hope was to utilize qualitative data collection methods to empower the attendees at the festival to share their lived experiences of the festival through their lens. We asked them to upload their photos using social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, several unforeseen circumstances, including lack of wireless internet, impaired the data collection. Even with a backup of ipads for data collection, our efforts were challenged. In this paper, we will share our challenges with novel approaches to data collection and offer suggestions for future data collection.

In 1987, the Chimney Rock camp for Boys in Lake Lure was transformed for the filming of Dirty Dancing. However, it wasn’t until 2010, after the death of the film’s co-star, Patrick Swayze from pancreatic cancer, that the Dirty Dancing Festival began. Currently, the festival is held every September (Swayze’s birthday month) drawing thousands of Dirty Dancing fans to the two-day celebration where a portion of the funding is donated to the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network (PANCAN). With this fairly new buzz around the Dirty Dancing Festival, we wanted to explore how attendees were experiencing the festival, their motivations for attending, and their level of fandom. Hopefully, someone was having the time of their life.

Literature Review

Film-induced tourism is increasingly popular in the United States and globally. Scholars tend to emphasize the effect of movies and television in forming the image of tourist destinations and thus influencing traveler motivation and experience (Beeton, 2005). Now touted around the world as an economic development tool, film-induced tourism is “an attractive marketing vehicle that increases awareness [of film-related places], enhances destination image, and results in significant increases in tourism numbers” (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006, p. 395). However, the study of film tourism is complex, incorporating aspects of disciplines such as sociology and psychology, in addition to stakeholders within the film industry and strategic marketing and branding of a destination. Consequently, this is an untapped and little-understood field of tourism research (Beeton, 2005). Thus, using visual research methodologies, such as participant produced images, can potentially assist scholars to explore this phenomenon through an intimate perspective.

Volunteer Employed Photography (VEP), a qualitative approach, which elicits participants’ interpretations of lived experiences (Merriam, 2009), was selected to explore attendees’ experiences as festival participants. VEP, also known as participant produced images, is widely used as a means of understanding how people view their environment, their sense of place, and what is important to them (Author, 2017). VEP is a data collection technique that allows participants to use their smartphones or cameras to take a number of photographs of a particular subject or theme that can then be analyzed using a variety of quantitative or qualitative methods (Garrod, 2007).
Interdisciplinary in nature, VEP, uses visual data collected by participants that enables their viewpoints, biases, and experiences to be considered (Loeffler, 2004). Within the tourism discipline, VEP is fairly new but has been used to explore community participation in tourism development, planning, and management (Balomenou & Garrod, 2010; Brickell, 2012; Garrod, 2007; Garrod, 2008). Additionally, several studies content analysis to explore how tourists are sharing their experiences through social media posts including their intention to return and lived experiences (Kang & Schuett, 2013; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). However, there is a dearth of literature inviting tourists or festival attendees, to share their experiences through photographs using real time social media posts. Thus, we wanted to fuse the two methodologies of content analysis and VEP to create a novel approach of collecting data of lived experiences at festivals.

Due to the lack of prior studies, we looked to popular culture for inspiration. In 2015 Netflix, global provider for streaming movies and television shows, executed a marketing campaign hiring “Grammasters” to take photographs of famous film locations using the hashtag #filmedhere (Crum, 2015). The grammasters were encouraged to create an interesting marketing campaign using social media to promote locations inspired/shot by television/films. For this study, festival participants participated in a similar project where they used their personal smartphones to capture images of their experiences at the festival. They uploaded their images to Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram (social media sites) and used the hashtag, #2017DDFNC so that we could track their photos. This way, participants had the freedom to take their own photos expressing their feelings and impressions of the festival.

Methodology

When initiating this study, we sought to develop a relationship with the festival organizers, in order to identify their data needs for making decisions about the festival. Through conversations with staff members at the public relations firm that organizes the festival, they shared that they needed to understand more about what attendees liked or disliked about the festival. This need coincided well with our interest in learning about the lived experiences of film festival attendees. We determined that VEP was a method that could help serve both of these data collection needs as it would provide the opportunity for capturing data on what the participants liked or didn’t like about the festival through their own visual interpretations of their DDF experience. Because the festival organizers had already established a robust community through Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter it was possible to utilize social media as a platform for collecting this visual data. However, in order to ensure that we could capture the data for this study we need to create a hashtag that would collect the publically posted images from the festival. We developed #2017DDFNC for this purpose. The use of social media as a platform for collecting the data also required there to be internet access during the festival. In order to share the purpose of the study, recruit participants, and encourage use of the hashtag it was necessary for the research team to attend the DDF. To accomplish these objectives, the festival organizers allowed the research team to set up an informational tent on the grounds of the festival. This also provided the opportunity for members of the research team to engage in participant observation, as they were included in the activities of the festival, and to collect data through informal interviews with festival attendees. During the festival, the research team promoted the study using signage, announcements by the festival organizers, and direct engagement with attendees who approached the tent. In recruiting participants, they explained that they were working with the festival
organizers to determine what festival attendees liked or did not like about the festival. They then asked the attendees to tag photos with #2017DDFNC in social media postings and provide a brief statement explaining what they liked or did not like about the festival in the post. The research team brought iPads to the tent to allow those who did not have a camera phone or access to a social media account or did not want to post publically about their DDF experiences to participate in the study as well.

After the conclusion of the DDF images were downloaded from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Once duplicate images were removed from the dataset the research team used open and axial coding to identify themes in the imagery related to the festival. This resulted in the data that helped explain the lived experience of festival attendees and information that can help festival organizers make better decisions about the festival in the future.

Methodological Findings and Recommendations

While these methods did result in the collection of data that were helpful to both the research team and festival organizers they were not without their challenges. The following outlines these challenges and offers recommendations for addressing them in future studies that utilize VEP data collected through social media platforms.

Challenge #1 – Obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval

As with any study conducted by university researchers this one required IRB approval. However, the nature of this study presented challenges in obtaining IRB approval, namely because of the use of participant generated images which could potentially include festival attendees who had not consented to participation in the study. It was important for the research team to clearly state that study participants would be identified so all festival attendees could recognize who was participating. This ultimately led to the solution of the research team providing consenting participants with large (3-inch diameter) stickers that read “I’m trending on #2017DDFNC. Are you?” This indicated that they were participating in the study’s use of the hashtag while also serving as a reminder for other consenting participants to use the hashtag and for advertising the opportunity to participate in the study to all festival attendees.

Challenge #2 – Reliable Internet Access

While the festival organizers had indicated that internet access was available during the festival the network was not strong enough to support the activity of 3000+ users. It was slow and difficult for festival attendees to connect to, which limited their ability to upload images and use the hashtag during the festival. This challenge is one that may be particularly difficult to address in rural areas (like the one that hosts the DDF) where internet speeds may be slower. The research team enacted a solution of encouraging participants post with the hashtag after the festival concluded once they had returned home or to hotel rooms with internet access. However, a future solution may be to attempt to provide an alternative means of sharing images outside of social media, perhaps with incentives being shared with participants who share a certain number of images on-site at the festival.

Challenge #3 – Participants Use of Hashtags
Despite efforts to promote the use of #2017DDFNC there was limited engagement with the hashtag. Based on an ad-hoc analysis using public posts related to the DDF there seemed to much greater engagement with hashtags related to lines/scenes from the film such as #toy1 (abbreviation of Time of Your Life), #icarriedawatermelon, and #sheslikethewind as well as more generic hashtags such as #dirtydancing and those related to the festival #dirtydancingfestival2017. This made it challenging to find images from study participants. A solution would be to do deeper analysis prior to an event where social media based VEP will be used to determine preexisting hashtags related to that event. This may help identify other sources of data for the study which could be integrated into the study protocol.

**Challenge #4 – Emphasis on Positive Experiences**

While this method was very effective at eliciting festival attendees’ lived experience at the DDF, the data focused almost entirely on the positive impacts of the festival. While this provided very valuable data for research questions related to lived experiences it had less value for festival organizers seeking to improve the festival. We were able to offer recommendations to them on what to continue offering, but changes for the future were more difficult to suggest. This may be due in part to social media users’ efforts to maintain a certain (positive) image on their accounts or because it was simply easier to remember to take pictures of what they were enjoying, rather than what they did not like about the festival. Based on the methodological experiences gained in this study it was found that informal interviews are more likely to yield festival attendees’ recommendations for future changes at the festival.

While the use of social media based VEP yielded many challenges when applied in the setting of the DDF there were several opportunities generated as well. The following outlines these opportunities for the use of social media based VEP in future studies.

**Opportunity #1 – Triangulation of Methods**

The necessity of the research team being on-site at the DDF presented them with the opportunity to collect more data than just the images shared through social media. The use of participant observation, through the research team participating in elements of the festival such as fundraising efforts, and informal interviews created multiple sources of data that helped build a richer understanding of attendees’ lived experience at the festival. It is recommended that future studies utilizing social media based VEP take advantage of these opportunities, rather than just collecting data from social media platforms. Researchers who do so will be rewarded with a much greater understanding of the context of their study area and their study participants.

**Opportunity #2 – Improving Trustworthiness through Prolonged Engagement**

In addition to improving the credibility of this study’s findings through method triangulation, the research team ensured the trustworthiness of this study’s findings by increasing dependability through prolonged engagement with the DDF. Prolonged engagement was achieved by connecting with the festival’s organizers months prior to the event, participating in the event itself, and conducting a follow up review of initial findings with the organizers. VEP facilitated this prolonged engagement as it required the research team to work closely with the organizers to work out the necessary logistics that support the method and for them to be on site during the festival.

**Opportunity #3 – Discovery within Data**
While there were many challenges in collecting the data, once it was obtained it did generate many opportunities for discovery of valuable themes related to the lived experience of festival attendees. The images provided the research team with the ability to see the festival through the eyes of the attendee, which revealed elements of value and connection to the festival that would have been difficult to capture with a survey or through interviews. For example, because the images provided evidence of the location where a photo was taken, we could see the exact spot that attendees were attempting to recreate scenes from the film. Images proved to be a valuable medium for understanding the complex relationships that attendees have with the place and spaces they (re)create during film festivals.

**Opportunity #4 – Alignment with Appreciative Inquiry**

The use of VEP resulted in a focus on the positive aspects of the festival which made it challenging to point to specific improvements for future festivals. However, we felt that there was great value in identifying what was working well for the DDF. This unintended outcome of using VEP as a method suggests that it may be a powerful complement to studies utilizing Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry, which focuses on what is working well in a specific organization or context, can be used to guide research efforts where stakeholder engagement is required. As an approach to research it helps empower stakeholders to identify and utilize the resources they have available to them, rather than what they are lacking (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011). Because VEP tends to generate images focusing on positive situations this method would appear to be a useful tool in helping stakeholders to recognize what resources they have available to them.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Challenges and opportunities always emerge when collecting data and being out in the field. We feel it is valuable to address these challenges and identify opportunities for future improvement. Therefore, within this study we wanted to illuminate some of our roadblocks and solutions to collecting data using VEP. Ideally, with being fully transparent, we were able to elucidate that conducting research can be complex and data collection plans do not always come to fruition in the way they were intended.

However, if we, as scholars, can be honest and share our trials and tribulations, we could potentially help ease anxiety with data collection – prior, during, and after. Furthermore, communicating issues with stakeholders, in our case the DDF organizers, was beneficial in helping us find solutions. Working as a team allowed for us to be co-creators and illuminate the need for collaboration. Lastly, we would like encourage more scholars, faculty, and students to share their trials and tribulations with conducting research, not specific to VEP or social media. Opening a dialogue around fears, failures, and challenges can help create an environment conducive to learning and being open to sharing lived experiences.
References


