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The Role of Tourism and the Visitor Economy in Main Street Recovery and Revitalization

Introduction

Main streets are areas of concentrated commercial activity and serve as gathering places within communities with public spaces, cultural institutions, and amenities, where people go to work, shop, eat, and gather (Canadian Urban Institute, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, main streets had already been facing challenges, which have now been exacerbated with new problems arising. Issues such as business vacancies, increasing taxes, competition with online retail, restrictions on gatherings and events, changing purchasing and travel behavior, and social issues are threatening the future of main streets (Canadian Urban Institute, 2020; Griffin, 2020). Given these challenges, it is useful to focus research on Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) which are organizations that often represent and manage main streets. They are associations of property owners and tenants within a defined geographic boundary that work to improve the business environment and attract visitors to it (Briffault, 1999; Mitchell, 1999; TABIA, 2022). In short, a main street is the *place*, and a BIA is the *organization* that manages the place. BIAs are involved in activities at the main street level that often overlap with those undertaken by tourism organizations at the larger destination level such as place management, customer satisfaction, hospitality management, and competitiveness (Ratcliffe & Flanagan, 2004). Although current literature acknowledges a connection between BIAs and tourism (Ha & Grunwell, 2014; Hackworth & Rekers, 2005; Houstoun & Levy, 2003; Ratcliffe & Flanagan, 2004; Schmiz, 2019) there have been very few studies to date looking exclusively at this relationship to understand the economic and social implications of visitor engagement at the main street level. Further, there has been increasing interest in local and regional travel that will to some extent affect demand in the near future (Griffin, 2020). This further justifies the importance of main streets as local destinations, and positions BIAs as valuable actors in local visitor economy development as a recovery and revitalization strategy. This exploratory study therefore aims to answer the following questions: To what extent and in what ways:

- 1) do BIAs engage the visitor economy?
- 2) do BIAs see the visitor economy as a strategic approach for main street recovery from the impacts of COVID-19?
- 3) can BIAs be part of the planning and development of the visitor economy within broader destinations?

To address these questions, qualitative interviews with 36 representatives of Canadian BIAs and equivalent organizations were conducted, resulting in important implications for organizations interested in main street vitality.

Literature Review

Main streets are found in towns and cities of all sizes, acting as hubs of economic and cultural activity (Canadian Urban Institute, 2022b; Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, 2020). Main streets provide diverse employment opportunities and are home to independent and small businesses which help keep profits within local communities (Canadian Urban Institute, 2022a). Main streets are socially important, providing public spaces, cultural facilities, and amenities, allowing people to gather and connect (Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, 2020). From an environmental perspective, some main streets focus on the pedestrian experience and cycling over other forms of transportation (Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, 2020). Given the benefits

of main streets, and the numerous challenges they face, it is critical to investigate ways to develop and revitalize them.

The BIA concept originated in Toronto, Canada (Charenko, 2015), and is now an organizational structure used around the world (Peyroux et al., 2012). BIAs are collective organizations funded through a mandatory levy paid by all businesses and property owners within a defined geographic boundary (Ratcliffe & Flanagan, 2004). The fundamental function of a BIA is to improve and promote the business environment (Hernandez & Jones, 2005), which is typically done through beautification, revitalization and maintenance, marketing, events, business recruitment, and communication (Government of Ontario, 2001). BIAs fill gaps in the service delivery between public and private sectors and use their collective voice to advocate for the needs of the business community (Mitchell, 2008), affecting the renewal of downtowns around the world (Briffault, 1999; Ewoh & Zimmermann, 2010; Houstoun & Levy, 2003; Hoyt, 2006; Mitchell, 2001). BIAs encourage more people to shop at local businesses (Hernandez & Jones, 2005), improve property values (Ellen et al., 2007), expand the tax base, lower vacancies (Hernandez & Jones, 2005), and reduce crime rates (Brooks, 2008; Cook & MacDonald, 2011; Hoyt, 2005). There is general recognition that BIAs are effective, coalescing local stakeholders and leveraging influence and connections to other institutions.

A *tourist* is often defined by distance travelled, motivation, or time spent away from home (Hunt & Layne, 1991; Masberg, 1998). In contrast, the *visitor economy* is a much broader concept. It considers the impacts of all visitors to a place, including those who may not meet the criteria to be defined as a tourist (Reddy, 2006). Tourists are therefore one group of visitors, however there are others such as commuters, students, some day-trippers, and more. A focus on the visitor economy helps to capture and understand the broader impacts of all visitors to a main street so that valuable segments are not excluded from planning and discourse.

Much visitation that main streets experience is from people traveling short distances who are not technically tourists but bring many of the same impacts (Griffin, 2020). Additionally, there is much variation amongst BIAs in terms of their access to traditional tourists and their capacity to successfully engage tourists. Finally, there has been renewed interest in local experiences due to changing travel behaviours resulting from the pandemic, providing opportunities for BIAs to engage new groups (Griffin, 2020). As mobility and motivations shift, it may be an opportune time for BIAs to consider how visitors can bring economic and cultural benefits to main streets (Brida & Risso, 2009; Hall & Lew, 2009), but to also limit and mitigate problems like pollution, crime, noise, crowding, and development that may be inconsistent with resident needs (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Although the BIA concept combines functions of urban management and tourism destination management, there is limited research exploring the potential of the visitor economy for main streets (Ha & Grunwell, 2014).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was beneficial since this study's topic and population is relatively under-researched (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies was used. Initially a list of potential interviewees was developed through reviewing individual BIA websites and social media to determine if they were actively involved in visitor engagement through events, marketing, beautification, and more. BIAs were then contacted with an interview request, and as data collection progressed efforts were made to include a mix of BIAs based on size, urban and rural, and region of Canada. Interviews were held over

Zoom and were audio recorded. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to circulate the interviewer's contact information to other relevant BIAs in their networks. The population for this study included representatives of Canadian BIAs and equivalent organizations. Interviews were held in the fall of 2020 and a total of 32 interviews were completed and 36 representatives were spoken to. A thematic analysis was then completed because of the flexibility to adapt the analysis process to best fit the research to produce comprehensive and rich representations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Esfehiani & Walters, 2018).

Results

Impacts of COVID-19 and BIA Response

The pandemic created numerous and varied impacts for businesses and main streets. Challenges included reduced visitation, canceling of events and festivals, business closures, increased competition with online retailers, and social issues. However, there were some unexpected positive impacts for BIAs like increased member engagement, more frequent and meaningful collaboration with stakeholders, a push to support local businesses, and advocacy successes. Some BIAs also reported increased visitation from local and regional segments. BIAs undertook a variety of initiatives, often situating themselves in new positions within the community. For example, many started to summarize, disseminate, and advise members of new information relating to lockdowns and how to navigate public health measures and government subsidies. BIAs often developed their own online presence and helped their members, as well as pivoting their own events and activations, public realm initiatives, and establishing and strengthening partnerships with other local groups to advocate for the needs of their members.

BIAs' Views of the Visitor Economy

The visitor economy was believed to be important by most, however, to varying degrees, with some main streets depending on it to a large extent, and others viewing it as beneficial but secondary to the resident population. However, all BIA representatives acknowledged and communicated the significant benefits visitors bring to their district regardless of the volume of visitation they experience, particularly through the support visitors provide local businesses and their contribution to word-of-mouth marketing. However, the visitor economy was not always strategically integrated into BIA planning and initiatives. BIA representatives were aware of visitor activity within the district, however at times this understanding was anecdotal and in reference to traditional forms of tourism, but less often included the broader visitor economy. Many BIAs had clear visitor segments they were aware of, (i.e., cruise travellers, event and entertainment travellers), but strategic consideration of varied segments in terms of differentiated communications and product offerings was limited, often due to capacity, and at times limited understanding of visitor engagement strategies and techniques. However, a minority of BIAs practiced this concept by producing promotional material and pursuing initiatives to reach specific visitor groups that were identified to have a natural interest in the main street's offering, be easily reached through promotions, or bring desirable impacts. It was expressed that this strategic and targeted approach to visitor engagement has been successful in further capitalizing on the benefits of the visitor economy (i.e., new income sources for businesses and word-of-mouth marketing), exemplifying the applicability and potential of strategic visitor economy engagement for main streets.

BIAs' Role in the Visitor Economy

The functions and activities BIAs fulfil is well understood, however their applications to the context of the visitor economy have not been widely explored. BIAs both directly and indirectly contribute to visitor economy development. Many BIAs market to non-residents through social media albeit sometimes in a relatively non-segmented approach, but also through radio, billboards, and more. BIAs host events, festivals, and activations, and these are primary methods of attracting visitors to the district. BIAs also do work that may not be seen as a direct attempt to engage visitors but improves the quality, attractiveness, and experience of the area as a destination through streetscaping and beautification, cleanliness, and safety and security initiatives, which aids the appeal of the broader destination. Therefore, the work that BIAs do is significantly tied to the marketing and management of the main street as a destination and they are involved in visitor economy development, regardless of if this is intentional or unintentional.

Partnerships in Developing the Visitor Economy

Many BIAs commented that they communicated with their city and sometimes Provincial Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), but formal collaborations were less common. However, this relationship had typically been strengthened through the pandemic, as DMOs shifted their focus to local markets which further aligned their interests with BIAs'. Some interviewees hoped this relationship would continue in the future. It is important to note, however, that a number of BIA representatives felt that their DMO prioritized some neighbourhoods over others and failed to see a meaningful outcome from collaboration with BIAs. A handful of BIAs collaborated with neighbouring main streets to develop and promote the wider area as a visitor destination, which anecdotally led to greater visitation and experiences. This was mainly done through implementing coordinated marketing campaigns and activations that spanned multiple main street communities.

Challenges and Future Opportunities for BIAs and the Visitor Economy

There are many challenges BIAs face with visitor economy engagement including budgets, staffing and time, seasonality, destination development, and competition. Another challenge often discussed was the difficulty BIAs face in collecting data in general, and specifically in relation to the visitor economy. BIAs do not always have the resources or skillset to collect data to understand the visitor economy and inform planning and decision making.

When looking to the future, BIA representatives expressed that the resident population will always be a priority, but that the visitor economy will be important in recovery and revitalization efforts to help renew the vibrancy of main streets. It was typically expressed that local visitors will be the most important segment for main streets for the foreseeable future, even for main streets that previously received significant levels of traditional tourists.

Conclusion and Discussion

This initial exploratory study demonstrates that the visitor economy is and can be a big part of the work and function of BIAs, but that its benefits could be more significantly capitalized on through further attention at the main street level. This research has revealed implications for BIAs and academics based on potential opportunities and current challenges in relation to the visitor economy and main streets.

Implications for BIAs and Main Streets

Given that BIAs' goals, responsibilities, and mandates involve improving local business districts and attracting people to them, it seems that future strategic engagement of the visitor economy is a useful approach that BIAs could consider, especially in light of the perceived benefits visitors bring. Although most BIAs appreciated the value and opportunity of developing the visitor economy, there was limited strategic planning for developing and harnessing this potential. However, there were examples that revealed the visitor economy can be beneficial and successfully engaged by BIAs; for example, partnering with local DMOs to align communications and promote a main street within wider promotional materials, shifting products and activations to meet the needs and motivations of regional visitors and other identified target markets, and collaborating with neighbouring main streets on activations designed to encourage the movement of local visitors. This suggests that there are opportunities for many BIAs to strategically consider the visitor economy and integrate destination management practices into their work. In particular, a segmented approach that identifies varied visitor groups with different motivations, behaviour, and impacts holds potential for BIAs to engage specific groups, tailoring their offerings and communications. For example, a main street with a strong food culture may benefit from a marketing approach that targets culinary visitors, and perhaps running events or promotions around this theme. BIAs should consider a more targeted approach to the management and marketing of their main street to visitors, and could also potentially adopt ideas from DMOs relating to this.

A focus on local tourism can bring many benefits to main streets, and as more widespread travel slowly returns, coordinating broader destination development can help BIAs to attract other visitor types or tourists as well. BIAs found success in communicating and collaborating with DMOs and other main streets and stakeholders on visitor economy focused initiatives. Doing so helped in immediate pandemic survival by pooling resources, aligning messaging, and strengthening the impact of their efforts. The relationships that were built through the pandemic should be maintained and strengthened because they also have applications for longer-term planning and development of the visitor economy of the larger destination. A coordinated approach helps to align development and raise the image of the broader destination, which in turn benefits individual main streets. Additionally, collaboration may be a beneficial approach to improving data collection capacity at the main street level. Data collection can help BIAs to expand their understandings of visitor activity and use this improved understanding to make informed decisions. Since data collection is a challenge for many BIAs, working with DMOs who have significant data collection capacity, and other stakeholders, may help BIAs contribute to and gain access to relevant data.

This research is not meant to suggest that BIAs should prioritize visitors above residents. Some BIA representatives reinforced this by suggesting that the visitor economy is a vital, yet secondary focus. However, the needs of residents and visitors can often be complementary. For example, an attractive main street, interesting retail and food and beverage establishments, events and activations, and a safe environment, all improve the district for the resident community and are also central to the district's ability to attract visitors and provide positive experiences. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that considers residents in the direction of visitor economy development should always be a priority.

Implications for Academics

This research provides an improved understanding of the role of main streets in the visitor economy and justifies their importance, since local travel may likely see increasing demand. Therefore, it is important and relevant for academics to focus research on tourism and the visitor economy at the main street level, with the idea that main streets are both local destinations themselves, and pieces that make up larger destinations.

This research helped to confirm that BIAs face numerous complex challenges with visitor economy engagement. Due to the importance of main streets for tourism and the visitor economy, academics should be curious about undergoing research to identify potential solutions and opportunities to improve these issues. Some topics of interest include: identifying target markets and targeted marketing opportunities, BIA strategic partnerships, main street destination development, data collection for BIAs, amongst others. This type of research is essential, as it was found that BIAs experience and value the benefits visitors bring, but at times lack the understanding of effective approaches to capture key visitor segments, and the capacity to do so. Therefore, undergoing research to investigate these topics and disseminate findings that highlight opportunities for BIAs to effectively engage visitors in a realistic and sustainable manner could assist BIAs in further capitalizing on the benefits of the visitor economy. The beginnings of this type of work is currently underway by the authors through a project called Main Street Reimagined, which provides written material and webinars informed by academic research that can be implemented by main street practitioners.

Main streets as destinations provide an interesting topic for interdisciplinary research that has the potential to integrate ideas, frameworks, and concepts, from the fields of urban planning, local economic development, marketing, leisure and recreation, and tourism.

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