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Business Improvement Areas and Tourism in Urban Neighbourhoods

Tourism is a vast phenomenon, with substantial economic, social, and environmental impacts for travellers, residents, businesses, and communities (Mason, 2015). Much attention is given to urban destination marketing (e.g. Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2015), and tourism's potential for economic and social development in rural or developing world communities (e.g. Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). However, the existing and potential role of tourism in urban residential neighbourhoods has received limited attention. Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) are "association[s] of business people within a specified district, who join together, with official approval of the City… aimed at stimulating local business… [serving] as an economic and social anchor, helping to stabilize and revitalize the local community" (TABIA, 2018b). There are 82 BIAs across Toronto's diverse neighbourhoods, and many more across the province and country (OBIAA, 2018). However, despite their number, there is limited research on BIAs in general, and specifically on tourism (Ward, 2006). The purpose of this exploratory study, therefore, is to explore and understand BIAs' roles and actions relating to tourism such as product development, marketing, management, and socio-cultural and economic implications, drawing from interviews with 30 BIAs in Toronto.

Literature Review

BIAs were first established by Main Street business communities as a reaction to the development of malls, seeking to (re-)establish and protect a sense of community and heritage, placing the very local culture and community at the heart of their activities. BIAs in Ontario are formed after a period of consultation, and a majority vote from businesses in the dedicated area. Once established, all businesses are levied by the Municipality and funds directly returned to the BIA. BIAs are governed by a volunteer board. Toronto's BIAs have budgets ranging from $23,000 up to $5 million (City of Toronto, 2019), and depending on their size typically employ a coordinator and/or an Executive Director to carry out their mandate, with some larger BIAs also employing marketers, operations managers, planners, and others. BIAs are mandated with two main tasks: beautification of he neighbourhood and promotion of local businesses (Municipalities Act, 2001; TABIA, 2018a). The attracting of visitors from outside of the community, and conceptualizing tourism from the local context, is therefore intrinsically connected to the function and goals of BIAs. However, understanding current BIA practices and potential opportunities relating to tourism, from other Toronto communities and beyond, has received limited attention.

There are various academic and theoretical approaches that provide useful foundations for analysis and discussion. Literature on *Cultural Tourism* considers a community's culture expressed through food, festivals, and communal spaces etc., as both an attraction for visitors and an entity affected by tourism, bringing tourists interested in local culture directly to local producers (Hughes, 1996; McKercher & Du Cros, 2002; Silberberg; 1995). In discussions on *Visiting Friends and Relatives* (VFR) travel, residents are positioned as active agents in attracting and influencing tourism behaviour to their own (residential) communities, becoming brokers and consumers of local culture as they guide (Humbracht, 2015; McKercher, 1996; Shani & Ureily, 2012). *Place Making* is a topic within sociology and leisure studies, that considers the transformation of neutral spaces into meaningful places for participants, developing and fostering local culture through the provision of animations and inspiration for reflection and interaction positioned in and around the community (Gieryn, 2001; Silberberg, Lorah, Disbrow, Muessig, & Naparstek, 2013). The *Sustainable Livelihoods Approach* has typically been applied in rural and/or developing communities (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Shen, Hughey, & Simmons, 2008), and focuses on the

role of institutions and organizations to affect policy and culture to create an environment that enables community members to flourish (Scoones, 1998; Shen et al., 2008). *Community Based Tourism* projects should be community managed (Dodds, Ali, & Galaski, 2018) and encourage local participation in the development of culture (Aitchison, 2003). BIAs, as community institutions, therefore have some opportunity to influence the creation and use of community infrastructures, local policy, and culture, to positively affect the sustainable livelihoods of their community (Shen et al., 2008). Attracting and welcoming strategic tourism activity could be a part of meeting their goals. Positioning BIAs and their activities within these theoretical frameworks will help in analysis and identifying recommendations for practice.

Findings and Discussion

A brief summary of findings is provided here, and if accepted will be elaborated on. For many interviewees, the creation of a positive environment for their businesses to thrive, and the beautification and safety of the neighbourhood were naturally a primary concern. The main stakeholders for BIAs are their local businesses, and the primary goal is to improve their opportunities. However, there was strong appreciation that the quality and reputation of the community as a place to live, and by extension somewhere to visit, were vital and inseparable in seeking their ultimate goal, and for many, maintaining or (re-)establishing the local identity was a primary concern. The attraction and welcoming of visitors from outside of their neighbourhood was typically seen as positive, however a number expressed concern over the type and volume of visitors their communities would be comfortable with receiving. Some expressed skepticism over increasing tourism, and questioned the real enduring benefits, and the potentially negative impacts for local resident experiences of their own community. Further, there was limited empirical understanding of visitor numbers and impact due to restricted capacities.

BIAs reported receiving and engaging with varied types of visitors including, but not limited to: residents of neighbouring Toronto areas, international students, ethnic communities and those with shared cultural heritage of the community, visitors for niche experiences (e.g. a specific or iconic record or clothing store), residents' visiting friends and relatives, convention visitors, school groups, and to some extent employees of local businesses who live elsewhere. BIAs used varying approaches to attract and entertain visitors. The programming of festivals and events was a common effort, with many spending large proportions of their time and financial resources on an annual street event. All participants acknowledged both the benefits of revenue and reputation that large festivals can bring, but also acknowledged not all members or residents perceived them positively, and considered them a disruption with limited to negative impacts.

Other BIAs, however, sought to produce smaller, more regular events and animations more directed at created an ongoing atmosphere of entertainment and culture. External producers of events were commonly mentioned, whether through active partnerships, or on occasion where festivals organizers were able to gain permits directly from the Municipal government, with limited engagement of the BIA and their stakeholders. This caused some tension over the use and reputation of local space, profiting others at the perceived expense of local stakeholders. Some offered free guided tours to groups interested in local culture (e.g. school, church, and individuals (including residents)). Many BIAs had strategic plans for street-scaping and local development, but the implications of tourism were often assumed, or unconsidered. The visitor economy, is an part to varying extents of all BIAs' activities, and there is substantial potential to better consider and plan for tourism that is consistent line with local desires and best practices of community tourism development.

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