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Hosting Friends and Relatives in the Yukon

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Hosting Friends and Relatives in the Yukon

Introduction

The Yukon Territory, in Canada's north-west, has a rich First Nations culture, breathtaking natural beauty, and a complex heritage in the Klondike Gold Rush (Carson, 2020; de la Barre, 2020, 2021; Travel Yukon, 2023). The Yukon is home to a diversifying and growing population of 44,500 (Yukon Bureau of Statistics (YBS), 2023), and received half a million visitors in 2018 (YBS, 2019c). Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel concerns experiences between visitors and residents with a pre-existing relationship (Munoz et al., 2017). A growing body of research has revealed VFR's implications for communities' economic and cultural development, individual well-being and integration (e.g., Backer, 2012; Griffin & Guttentag, 2023; Shani & Uriely, 2012). This study aims to explore Yukon residents' experiences of hosting friends and relatives, identify implications for destination marketing and management, and provide a foundation for engaging this group to enhance the economic and cultural development.

Literature

Tourism is vital for the Yukon, accounting for 5% of GDP and 9% of jobs in 2018 (YBS 2019a, 2019b). Visitors can interact with First Nations culture, enjoy a thriving arts and cultural scene, explore the Klondike Gold Rush, discover exceptional natural landscapes, and view the Aurora (Travel Yukon, 2023). The Government of Yukon's Department of Tourism and Culture (DTC) is responsible for destination development, research, marketing, and visitor services, among other functions relating to arts and culture more broadly (Government of Yukon (GY), 2023). The DTC's *Yukon Tourism Development Strategy* (GY, 2018) identified developing year-round visitor demand (78% of visitation occurs from June-Sept (YBS, 2019c)), resident travel within the territory, and enhancement of outstanding visitor experiences as tactics to improve resident support and sustainability of this important sector.

As a sub-topic of VFR, *Hosting Friends and Relatives* (HFR) concerns the behaviour, experiences and implications of residents who welcome guests (Griffin, 2013). Hosts generate comparatively resilient and stable tourism demand, bring export income to regional businesses, spend their own vacation time and funds locally, establish and refresh awareness of and attachment to local culture and experiences, yielding authentic word-of-mouth marketing (Backer, 2012; Backer & Ritchie, 2017; Greffe, 1994; Griffin, 2013; Griffin & Glover, 2020). VFR activity is arguably more aligned with residential values than other tourism (Griffin, 2013), decreasing the risk of touristic commodification and creating meaningful experiences for all locals and visitors alike (de la Barre, 2021). Hosting inspires, obliges, and provides justification for residents to engage their community while revitalizing personal relationships with enduring impacts on behaviour and perceptions (Shani & Uriely, 2012; Griffin, 2017; Zentveld et al., 2022).

VFR is important for the Yukon, with 19% of all tourist-nights spent in the home of a friend or relative (YBS, 2019c), with a further but unmeasured proportion of paid accommodation use attributable to VFR visitors and hosts themselves on side trips (Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016). Further, the Yukon has experienced a population increase of around 14% between 2017 and 2022 (YBS, 2023), and as new residents arrive it can be expected that their friends and relatives will follow (Dwyer et al., 2014).

Methodology

To understand the role of hosting in residents' lives, fifty-four residents of Whitehorse, Yukon's capital, were recruited through the researcher's attendance at a farmers' market, posters placed on community social media groups and public notice boards, advertisement in a local newspaper, and a radio interview. Participants were interviewed in May and June 2023, and asked about their hosting experiences in semi-structured interviews guided by Flick's (2009) *episodic knowledge* approach that centres on an actual event (e.g., hosting) the *semantic knowledge* surrounding it. Participants were 76% female, 28% immigrants, ranging from early 20s to mid 70s, and 56% having lived in the Yukon for 10 years or less. Thematic analysis is ongoing, with patterns across participants' experiences being identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Esfehiani & Walters, 2018).

Results

Initial findings show several overarching themes. All were very proud of their territory and keen to encourage visits to share the experience. Many posted on social media and used existing events including weddings, family holidays, and festivals to incite visits. Many felt a sense of responsibility to provide a positive experience to reciprocate visitors' investment in time and money, curating tailored itineraries that met guests' interests and abilities, appreciating that the Yukon may be daunting to some.

Hosting pushed many residents out of their usual routine, including trips to regional destinations, visiting paid attractions, and dining more frequently in restaurants. Some guests used paid accommodation, sometimes in combination with staying at their host's home, and several hosts reported using paid accommodation themselves on regional trips with their guests. Additionally, guests' varied abilities and interests meant altered interactions with familiar places which revealed new meanings. Hosting occurred in all seasons, including winter for Christmas, Aurora viewing, dogsledding, and personal availability. Participants generally agreed they spent more money while hosting on activities, but also groceries and preparatory home improvements. Some joined guests on expensive excursions such scenic flights.

Hosting often refreshed participants' appreciation for their own community; seeing their guests' positive reactions helped people see their routine through fresh eyes, instilling and boosting pride. For migrants, sharing their new homes helped explain and justify their move as guests could experience and appreciate their quality of life, which benefitted ongoing relationships with family members. Guests also provided help for hosts, ranging from childcare, shopping, home improvements, and emotional support at difficult periods. Finally, several participants revealed how they would encourage and welcome guests to consider migrating to the Yukon and support them in that decision.

Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, there are many existing implications of hosting for individuals, and the economic and cultural development of the Yukon consistent with the *Tourism Development Strategy* (GY, 2018), specifically, the seasonal nature of tourism, in-territory residential travel, ongoing development of cultural events and experiences (de la Barre, 2020, 2021), and recruitment and retention of skilled and seasonal workers (e.g., Amminson, 2022; CBC News, 2022). In considering the specific case of Yukon, there are implications for other northern and remote communities seeking to develop tourism.

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