SURFING THE FRINGE: AN EXAMINATION OF EVENT TOURISM STRATEGIES OF THE BLEACH FESTIVAL—COOLANGATTA QUEENSLAND

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Created as a celebration of art, music, and surf culture, the Bleach Festival was designed as a fringe-style event to be positioned in the week between two major surf events (Quiksilver/Roxy Pro and Burleigh Pro) held annually in Coolangatta, Queensland, Australia. Using visitor data collected at the event, in conjunction with an in-depth interview of the event’s manager, the study evaluates the success of the festival against its own objectives of tourism extension, destination brand development, and local artist engagement. Additionally, the study explores the utility of augmentation strategies in achieving these objectives. Resultant issues in measuring the value of arts and cultural development in conjunction with tourism are further discussed.

Key words: Fringe festival; Destination management; Branding; Local artist engagement; Subculture

Introduction

Festivals are rarely designed principally to attract tourists; rather, they are developed to create social experiences that celebrate special occasions or milestones in communities, or showcase artistic or sporting talent (Allen, O’Toole, McDonnell, & Harris, 2008; Getz, 2012; Goldblatt, 2011). In some instances, however, economic development agencies, either of a governmental or private sector nature, create deliberate event-making strategies to attract and/or keep visitors in a destination. These strategies can range from providing additional funding for existing events and aiding their marketing efforts to attracting, bidding for, or creating new events. This article focuses upon one of these strategies—new event development—and concerns the creation of the Bleach Festival in the Southern Gold Coast region of Queensland, Australia, and its linkage to the major surfing events in the destination. It aims to explore the rationale for developing a fringe-style arts event offering artists and performers opportunities to showcase their talents in a noncurated festival space. Furthermore, it examines the augmentation and social leverage strategies implemented to extend visitation around the event. Resultant issues in measuring the value of arts and cultural development in conjunction with event tourism are further
discussed, as are the implications for the utilization of fringe-style events.

**Literature Review**

This literature review examines the role of festivals in tourist destination branding and development, as well as the current and historical research into the role of fringe festivals in these areas.

**Events, Festivals, and Destination Brand Development**

Many festivals throughout the world are synonymous with the place in which they are developed. For example, the Montreux Jazz Festival, Cannes International Film Festival, and the Monaco Grand Prix all have a perceptual link in the minds of consumers between the city and the event. This perceptual link assists destination marketing agencies to create awareness of a destination, position it, and brand it (Dimanche, 2008). In this sense destinations have an opportunity to leverage both sporting and cultural events for brand development purposes (Chalip & Costa, 2005; Dimanche, 2008; Getz, 2007; Goldblatt, 2011). According to Woosnam, McElroy, and Van Winkle (2009) festivals in particular have been well understood to “contribute to a destination’s offerings through the creative use of culture in order to position the destination as well as enhance the tourist experience” (p. 501). However, the success of a destination’s efforts to leverage events for this intent is determined by the types of leveraging strategies used, as well as by the willingness of local businesses to be involved in the event (Chalip & Leyns, 2002; Mackellar, 2014). A review of the academic literature and current industry practice provides some examples of strategies used by destination marketing agencies to maximize brand development from festivals and sporting events in destinations, in particular: clustering strategies, augmentation strategies, social leverage strategies, and portfolio development.

**Clustering Strategy**

The city of Edinburgh uses a cluster of festivals to market itself as a creative and cultural hub. The portfolio of events that this city conducts allows marketers to proclaim it as “an all year round city,” thereby also addressing tourism seasonality (Visit Edinburgh, 2012). This strategy provides a focus for businesses to work together toward developing festivals in the city. The initiative is supported by government at all levels and by tourism business development groups such as Edinburgh Tourism Action Group (2012), who suggest “The festivals in Edinburgh play a key role in driving tourism growth which is critical to the future of Scotland. It is crucial that we all work together to maximize the opportunities and benefits.” Developing a strategic approach to the development of a portfolio of events can also help event and government planners understand the relationships between sports and cultural events and to market them more effectively (Ziakas & Costa, 2011).

**Augmentation Strategy**

In relation to sport events, researchers have posited that event organizers can use their understanding of the sport’s subculture to create augmentations to the event—and thereby enhance its attractiveness along with that of the destination in which it is held (Chalip, 2004; Garcia, 2001; Green, 2001; O’Brien, 2007). According to Green (2001), an augmentation strategy provides additional aspects to the event beyond the sport itself, and may include opportunities to socialize, learn, or achieve. Furthermore, Chalip and McGuiry (2004) suggest that, “appropriate event elements include activities that support the subculture of the sport, as well as complementary cultural events” (p. 268). The process of augmentation tends to be undertaken by the sport event organization itself utilizing existing events. It is less common for other agencies to create a new event to extend and leverage visitation. In the research cited above, Green (2001) suggests that events can broaden their appeal by including entertainment and activities under the same event brand. It is less common, however, to find examples where whole events are created as an augmentation to a major sport event.

**Social Leverage Strategies**

The idea that sport events can be leveraged to facilitate positive social outcomes has been posited...
proportion of international visitors, with 45% of “staying visitors” coming from outside Scotland. This event now claims to be the world’s largest arts festival spanning 25 days, and totaling over 2,500 international shows from 60 nations in 258 venues. In 2009 a total of 18,901 performers took to the stage and 1,859,235 tickets were sold to approximately 290,000 visitors (BOP Consulting, 2011; Edinburgh Tourism Action Group, 2012). The event thus provides important opportunities to leverage extended visitation into other parts of Scotland and to other events—an opportunity that has been suitably seized by the Edinburgh Tourism Action Group.

Management of Fringe Festivals

With the success of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and others like it, event managers have come under pressure from a diverse range of event stakeholders to commercialize these events, and so provide greater returns for those with a financial or business interest in them. This in turn has resulted in the criticism that such events have become overly commercial (Frew & Ali-Knight, 2010). In the case of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, one festival critic went as far as to argue that the event had “sold its soul to the two arch enemies of the arts: commercialism and capitalism” (Frew & Ali-Knight, 2010, p. 238).

Although Frew and Ali-Knight (2010) found that criticism has occurred because venues and promoters aggressively market the artists they support, they also noted that pressure on event managers to change existing practices to improve efficiency or deal with growing audience numbers were sometimes also seen in this same light. For example, pressures on ticketing systems from growing audience numbers have forced upgrades and changes (Carlsen, Andersson, Ali-Knight, Jaeger, & Taylor, 2010), while competition for venue space can necessitate, as it did in the context of the Edmonton Fringe, changes to the venue management process (Boulder Fringe Festival, 2012). Therefore, while some critics may see these changes to fringe festival management as commercialism, others may see them as innovative management practices required as a result of pressures from venues, funding agencies and commercial interests as these events move through their life.
cycle (Finkel, 2006). This debate over the commercialization of art, whether part of a festival or not, is age old and centers on freedom of expression verses the expectations of commercial practice.

The Event

The focus of this study, the 2011 Bleach Festival, was initiated by the economic development agency Connecting Southern Gold Coast, an entity created by local businesses and supported by the Gold Coast City Council. From its outset the event was to be a commercial project. The new event was primarily conceptualized as a way in which to extend visitation for the week between the two major international surf events (Quiksilver/Roxy Pro and Burleigh Pro) held annually in Coolangatta, Queensland. It was conceived as an arts festival that would capture the culture of the surf coast through a connection to the local arts community. Bleach Festival comprised 55 events including film, photography, visual arts, theater, fashion, food, as well as major music events, over 16 days. The Festival extended along 10 km of coastline fromCurrumbin to Coolangatta and included more than 500 pieces of art and surf photographs, as well as a number of other elements such as theatrical and music performances and debates. Collectively, the event involved some 168 visual and performing artists.

The research undertaken at this event aimed to examine the strategies undertaken by Connecting Southern Gold Coast in terms of destination brand development, local artist engagement, and tourism extension. The research approach used is detailed in the following section.

Research Method

The study used a mixed method design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) combining qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with the festival director and contributing artists, as well as data collected from festival attendees using on-site questionnaires. A review of other relevant documents such as newspaper articles and website forums also contributed to the researcher’s wider understanding of the event context.

The audience was surveyed using a convenience sampling technique, as used by other event researchers (Bayrak, 2011; Deng & Pierskalla, 2011; Grunwell, Ha, & Martin, 2008) in circumstances where the size of the population is unknown or difficult to estimate (Zikmund, 2010). As many events were in nonticketed, open-access venues it was not possible to undertake a systematic sampling technique.

Researchers were placed in each venue to conduct face-to-face questionnaires over the duration of the event. The questionnaire was designed to gather basic demographic data necessary to establish an audience profile, as well as to gather data on the perceptions of the event in terms of its destination image and artistic engagement. It was considered important, however, to keep the questionnaire short so as not to impose on the event experience of patrons. A total of 380 audience questionnaires were collected from an estimated crowd of 27,800. These were entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS software to generate frequencies and cross tabulations of the data. The analysis provided quantitative data from which to create a profile of the audience, and some qualitative data in the form of open-ended questions to gauge perceptions and satisfaction with the event.

Interviews with the festival director and contributing artists were undertaken to examine the objectives, design, and outcomes of the event. Data from the interview were recorded and transcribed. Using a coding sequence suggested by Tesch (1990) the data were then coded and assembled into themes to address the aims of the study—to explore the strategies of the event in destination brand development, local artist engagement, and tourism extension.

Results

Destination Brand Development

The Festival was given the tag line “Surfing the Fringe” to represent a fringe style of arts event, incorporating noncurated arts exhibitions where local artists were actively encouraged to be part of the event. However, as explained by the festival director, the fringe concept related to other aspects of the event design:

The style of the festival was fringe, but also the fringe of the surfing competitions, the fringe of the land meeting the ocean—that kind of philosophy.
The surfing was the natural connection to why it came about. When I was naming the festival—I didn’t want it to be the Gold Coast Festival—I wanted to separate it from the crowd. (Personal communication, April 3, 2012)

The design of the event strongly related to coastal culture, to enjoying and appreciating the beauty and connection to the ocean. Many local artists reflect surf culture in their works, including photographers, painters, and sculptor but also musicians and fashion designers. Over the past 50 years, lifestyles based around surfing have become a dominant subculture on the Gold Coast—reflecting the values and interests of the residential and business community. Although other fringe event programs feature theater and comedy, the program for Bleach was more focused on visual art and music, perhaps as a reflection of the emerging cultural dominance of surfing and its reflection in the local art community.

In terms of destination brand development, the event development strategy used the natural attributes of the physical coastal landscape, along with the strong subculture of the surfing community, to enhance the existing branding of the area. The development of an arts festival grounded in this coastal culture as an augmentation to the established surfing events provided the integrated fit between event and destination, described by Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, and Ali (2003) as necessary in destination branding.

Interestingly, the design of the event was also constrained and influenced by the governance and funding provided to stage the event, which came from the local economic development agency. This is again explained by the festival director:

Because we are funded by the Special Rates Levy of the traders, to not engage with them, and create a program that contributes directly back to them is one of the key things. . . . If I wanted to build a venue by the beach that would cause a major problem with some of the traders who would ask, “why would you directly compete with us?” (Personal communication, April 3, 2012)

The design of the program included both curated and noncurated elements, where the curated elements included featured music performances by Australian musicians. This represented the more commercial aspects of the event, where ticketed performances allowed the event to access income from visitors. Other programmed items included debates around controversial issues associated with surfing, art, and commercialization that were designed to stimulate participation and discussion.

Local Artist Engagement

The development of artists and the provision of opportunities for them to participate in the event was a key element in the event design. As described by the festival director:

Visual arts were an open access, no submission process. But there were specific artists we invited for specific reasons . . . including local photographers. Foremost the event is a unique arts festival. Its point of difference is that it’s connected to the place where it has been born from. (Personal communication, April 3, 2012)

The artists were able to create artist installations, many of which were inspired by the natural environment and connection to beach and ocean. The artists themselves had a connection to the established surfing culture of the destination and to the Australian beach culture. This provided the event with a sense of place as described by Derrett (2003). Local and invited musicians were also asked to participate in the program where they could emphasize a connection with surf culture, but also to the place.

Beyond the development of the event for tourism purposes, the professional development of artists was also an important objective, achieved through mentoring activities and collaboration with new artists from interstate. The public outcome of this objective was to develop new relationships between artists and to encourage innovative art.

Visitor Survey Results

Results from the audience survey identified the profile of the audience that attended the Bleach Festival, and their perceptions of the event. The profile suggests the event appealed mainly to a younger audience, with 52% aged between 18 and 39 years, coming from both local and neighboring regions, with an interest in entertainment, art, and community. Analysis of the postcodes of respondents to the survey suggests that attendees came from the local
Southern Gold Coast area (36%) as well as from neighboring regions such as the Northern Rivers (12%) and the Gold Coast (24%), with most visitors traveling less than 50 km to attend the festival. Further analysis of the purpose of visit revealed that only a small segment of the audience (8%) were “event specific tourists”—coming to the region specifically for the festival (from more than 50 km away) and staying overnight or longer. Other visitors to the event were in the event location because they lived in the area (83.5%), were on holidays (5.6%), or passing through (3.2%).

However, it was established that 70% of the sampled audience at the Bleach Festival also attended one or both of the professional surfing contests that were held the week before and the week after the event. This suggests the event designers succeeded in developing an event which was attractive to surfing event audiences. Key to this outcome was the degree to which the Festival engaged with the existing subculture of surfing, and providing relevant music and art experiences. This type of augmentation strategy, which engaged with the subcultural values of participants, had also previously been successful with other events in the region—specifically the Noosa Longboard Festival (O’Brien, 2007) and the Gold Coast Marathon (Green, 2001)—but in this case it had been applied to a new event.

When respondents were asked specifically what they enjoyed most about the event, music and entertainment featured strongly (36.2%), along with community atmosphere (15.7%) and art presentations/installations (12.4%). Interestingly, 6.4% mentioned the phrase surf culture in their response, while other responses primarily concerned food and venues (Table 1).

Survey respondents were asked to select a statement—or create one of their own—that best described the Southern Gold Coast. The results indicated that the audience perceived the destination to be related to “surf and surf culture” (36.2%), “art and culture” (16.1%), and to be “a dynamic and exciting destination” (32.3%). A further 15.4% created their own description of the Southern Gold Coast mostly relating to the “chilled” or “relaxed” atmosphere of the area.

**Artist Development**

The degree to which the event adhered to the principles of fringe festival design seemed insignificant to many artists, who were more concerned with the role of the event in bringing together and showcasing the artistic talent in the community. This result suggest that events like Bleach are important to developing artists—giving them an opportunity to interface with visitors, showcase their work, and to work collaboratively with other artists. The following testimonials from the participating artists convey this sentiment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Theme</th>
<th>Theme %</th>
<th>Sample Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/music</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>A great way to showcase music, art, and surf culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bringing acts/music together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Love good music</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Summer surf films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/atmosphere</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>Good community vibe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community feel, not too big</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>All the inspiring art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Artworks on display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting local artists’ work out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving local talent exposure on the Gold Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local surf culture</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>It is surf culture not surf contests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Really nice to take our visitors from abroad to show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>them surf culture</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total immersion of surf culture</td>
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</table>
Secondly, the deliberate use of the fringe festival concept encouraged local artists to deliver the cultural elements which related to the theme of the surfing events. In this sense it was a deliberate strategy to allow local artists noncurated access to the major event market, and to develop authentic links to the local community. However, as described by the festival director, the concept of the fringe also related well to other perceptual aspects of “being on the fringe of other events,” and being on the fringe of the sea. The extent to which the fringe festival was commercialized is subjective; however, as described by the festival director, a commercial outcome was definitely expected by the funding agency. Although some elements were noncurated, others were highly curated to achieve a financial return. The engagement of local artists as a feature of the fringe festival event provides an example of how the social leverage strategy, posited by Chalip (2006), can be operationalized. The research has explored the tactical bases through which social leverage can be achieved via the connections to the subculture of the community through visual and performance art.

In support of the findings by O’Brien (2007), the augmentation strategy provided opportunities for visitors to surfing events to connect to creative elements of their subculture and reinforce their values, identity, and interests in surfing and the ocean. Augmentation strategies typically offer opportunities for participants to socialize, learn, or achieve (Green, 2001), but also in this case to reflect on the artists’ interpretation of the same environment. Furthermore, visitors to the region can better understand the local artists’ response to the ocean and waves. This may create a stronger affective attachment to the destination, allowing visitors to feel an immersion in the sport through art.

Discussion

The study of this event has highlighted the critical elements in the design and governance of the event that have contributed to its development. Firstly, the design and operation of the event was undertaken by an economic development agency, whose purpose was to extend the economic benefits of the established major sport events by developing cultural activities and entertainment that would match the needs and identity of existing visitors. This has perhaps enhanced the success of the event, as the organizers of the sport event(s) can focus on staging their event, while the entertainment is organized by a separate organization with its own more localized objectives.

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Furthermore, the importance of the event to the artists in the Gold Coast art community was clearly evident as a way of stimulating future cultural development as shown in these testimonials:

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sport event organizer (Green, 2001; O’Brien, 2007) and within the existing event; however, this study shows that new cultural events can be developed to augment the sport event and enhance the sport visitor experience.

Achieving this strategy, however, did present issues in measuring the value of arts and cultural development in conjunction with tourism. The event manager was required to provide evidence that the event delivered results related to tourism, economic development, and arts development. Funding agencies such as Arts Queensland, Connecting Southern Gold Coast, Events Queensland, and other local sponsors all required different key indicators of success. This is a difficult task, and one that requires several research strategies for adequate data collection. Although survey data can show who is coming to the event and estimate their expenditure, it is much more difficult to generate data to demonstrate the social and cultural value of the event, especially as these indicators may stretch beyond the timeframe of the event. Developing an event which augments major sporting events also creates issues in determining how much of the visitation and expenditure is attributable to each event, or to the bundle of events and other activities in the destination.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Although the Bleach Festival was designed as a new fringe style arts event, it was also intended to augment the activities of the established international surfing contests held in the same destination. Deliberate augmentation strategies were undertaken to enhance the experience of visitors to the surf events, as well as to add cultural components to their destination experience. These strategies blended well with the existing branding of the surfing destination. In terms of tourism extension, Bleach was also designed to provide opportunities for visitors to spend money on entertainment and cultural industries, and to keep that expenditure within the economic region of the Southern Gold Coast.

The event, however, also achieved other social leverage goals in that it provided opportunities for local artists to showcase their talents to a large visiting audience and to connect with other artists. It also acted to tap into the existing coastal and surfing subculture to present authentic local art and entertainment. The comments provided by both the local and visiting audiences indicate that this was a successful augmentation strategy.

The implications of this apparent success are relevant to a wide array of event, arts, and tourism stakeholders including economic development agencies and tourism marketers. These organizations may see the rationale in developing cultural and artistic augmentations to sport events in situations where there is a relationship between the sport and the physical environment. For example, this may occur with regards to skiing and snow, mountain biking and mountains, sailing and lakes, fishing and rivers. Further, by incorporating locally sourced artistic content into the program through a fringe-style event, the organizations may also achieve greater social leverage and achieve greater community connection.

In terms of destination image, future research may also include media content analysis exploring the representation of the event(s) and the destination in both traditional and social media. Analysis of news coverage and images from the events could yield insights into the representation of the augmentations to the main sport event, and its contributions to destination image.

The ability to extend and enhance the visitor experience in the destination through the development of event augmentation strategies warrants further comparative research in other destinations. Future research can determine other cultural and artistic augmentations which compliment sporting events, and explore other “strategic and tactical bases for social leverage” (Chalip 2006, p. 109). In particular, qualitative research exploring the function of art and cultural entertainment in reinforcing sports subculture may yield greater insight into visitor motivations and expectations.

**References**


