

WHAT BRINGS PEOPLE TO AN UNCONVENTIONAL FESTIVAL ON A COLD NIGHT?: AN UNDERSTANDING OF AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT AT THE BELTANE FIRE FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

The key aim of this project is to evaluate the 2011 audience consumption of the Beltane Fire Festival (BFF) in order to inform the future development of the festival. The objectives are to: first, investigate the demographics, attitudes and profile of the 2011 audience; second, investigate customer needs which they may be seeking to satisfy at the 2011 festival; and, finally, to develop a typology of audience groupings. Such work has precedents in various studies (Chang, 2006; Lee, Lee & Wicks, 2004). Investigation of the typology will be based on demographics; attendees' motives and needs; their perceptions of BFF as a ritual and/or performance; and attitudes to change and spirituality. A substantially quantitative research methodology will be adopted, comprising two distinct phases. First, prior to the audience survey, a pilot study will be undertaken involving the current performers/volunteers. Second, informed by this pilot, a survey of the 2011 audience will be conducted on a face-to-face basis. Data analysis will be facilitated by SPSS. Analysis will be undertaken with the application of quantitative methods often used in marketing and higher education and triangulated with findings of a qualitative study pertaining to the BFF development. This study has been informed by an earlier qualitative study by the authors. Indicative findings will centre upon the following key areas: a typology of audience groupings based on demographics, profile, motives and spiritual attitudes. In conclusion, this paper will contribute to existing work on festival audiences and will provide an insight into the contribution of relevance of spiritual beliefs to audience groupings.

KEYWORDS

Festivals, Motivation, Consumption.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In recent years, greater focus has been accorded to festival motivations as a result of the changing nature of the festival marketplace. Festivals have often been utilised as a means to generate economic revenues, develop tourist audiences, place market cities in terms of repositioning and rebranding

destination image, and provide cultural benefits to the local community (García, 2004; Quinn, 2005). Further, there has been a substantial increase in the number of UK festivals (British Arts Festival Association, 2008), which has, in part, been fuelled by changing economic and social agendas. In light of the changing nature of the marketplace and increased competition, there are increasing pressures upon festivals to understand audience characteristics and consumer motivations in a bid to ensure their sustainability. As Crompton and McKay (1997) argue, an understanding of festival motivations can contribute to the event design process, monitor satisfaction and provide an avenue to comprehend festival attendees' decision making processes.

Common factors in festival motivation include family togetherness, novelty, escape, socialisation (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Dewar, Meyer & Wen, 2001; Lee, Lee & Wicks, 2004; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001) cultural exploration, event attractions (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Lee, Lee & Wicks, 2004), excitement (Dewar, Meyer & Wen, 2001) and entertainment (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). While Li and Petrick (2006) suggest that this provides a research framework for surveying festival and event motivations there is not, to date, a universal motivation scale. Certainly, the diversity of festival types necessitates that these motivation scales are adapted somewhat according to the given festival. This paper is focused on audience consumption within the context of a relatively unconventional festival, the Beltane Fire Festival.

The BFF takes place on an annual basis on the 30 April and is primarily run by a volunteer group. It marks the passage of the seasons and is a modern interpretation of an ancient ritual, which is rooted in the Celtic calendar. Approximately three hundred performers take part in an outdoor procession and performance. As such, there is a strong carnivalesque spirit (Bakhtin, 1967) to the performance given the uninhibited nature of aspects of the performance. There are features of the Beltane Fire Festival that set it apart from many other activities organised in Scotland and in Edinburgh in particular. This does not mean there are no festivals with comparable features. For example, there is the Burning Man Festival (Kozinets, 2002). Like Beltane, these arose from the interests of a small group of citizens other than organisations interested in fostering events tourism and developing conventional events that conformed to social norms. Further, with these other festivals, Beltane continues a form of ritual, shares an appeal to inevitable change (in the case of Beltane, the change of season) and closer linkage to often-suppressed, non-commercial features of life and spirituality. These aspects are enveloped in an ethos that is celebratory or carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1967). Furthermore, there is a spiritual element to BFF, which is a key component to it. Spirituality underpins aspects of the festival structure and performance. Consequently, due to the nature of the festival, this paper will draw upon festival motivations and spirituality. There is a plethora of work around spirituality (Gallarza et al., 2009; Piedmont, 1999; Piedmont et al., 2009) but specific attention will be accorded to spirituality measures (Astin et al, 2005; Bryan & Astin, 2008) in order to acquire an insight into audience attitudes.

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