Voices from the “Heart”: Understanding a Community-Engaged Festival in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside

The study’s objective

Researchers chose to study the Heart of the City Festival in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) due to the deficiency of research on this topic.

Previous studies show that urban festivals have a large impact on community identity and provide an opportunity for communities to engage with and develop their own culture.

Their study focused on the role the Festival plays in resisting stereotypes and, specifically, how it creates a sense of community and a new, positive identity.

What is the heart of the city festival?

The annual Festival was first launched in 2004 and takes place in the DTES of Vancouver, British Columbia.

The DTES boasts rich artistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. Unfortunately, it is often targeted and labelled negatively by the media due to the high rate of poverty. The Festival helps to resist stereotypes, creating a sense of community and shared identity.

Effect on the community

The Festival allows DTES residents and artists to showcase the diversity and culture of the area and, in the process, construct dignity, hope and a common community identity.

Various art and cultural event projects, performances, and works are displayed at the Festival. They demonstrate the true essence of the DTES that is often overlooked by the media.

Research methodology

The researchers worked with community residents in a reciprocal and collaborative manner for ethical research practices, including: co-creating with participants a plain-language consent form, keeping participants’ real names as they wished, and returning the report to participants for feedback.

Findings

1. The Festival fights the negative stereotypes of the DTES to create an inclusive civic culture.
2. The Festival unites the community by creating shared memories of resilience.
3. The various art forms foster a sense of community and local culture through shared experiences between community members.
4. The researchers indicate the various art and cultural event projects, performances, and photographic works displayed at the Festival to reconstruct local narratives which help build a group culture and community identity.

Conversations

The researchers had casual conversations with Festival participants.

Observation & Interviews

Data was collected (2013 to 2015) from interviews with participants, as well as recorded observation field notes of the event in its entirety.

Media Recordings

The media texts of events/performances that were recorded and uploaded online by the Festival contributed to the study.

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This undergraduate student work is a product of collaboration between the Making Research Visible (MRV) research, Dr. Kirk Miyaki and the students of ASTU 100 at UBC. This student work has been reviewed by the lead author of the original item. Remaining credit provided by the lead author have been incorporated into this student work with support from the UBC Learning Exchange members of the MRV. The reader should bear in mind that this is a student research project and not an official document of UBC.