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Brighter but not clearer: Entertainment-dependent destinations dealing with long COVID

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Abstract

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we explored a range of very different possible outcomes for destinations that rely heavily on their entertainment sector (Dubois & Dimanche, 2021). Several months later, this article seeks to revisit those outcomes, while also highlighting the ongoing recovery efforts and evolving strategies of entertainment-dependent destinations (EDDs). To do so, we reconnected with the panel of respondents from various destinations (i.e., Las Vegas, Nashville, New Orleans etc.) to take stock of both new challenges and opportunities, as well as emerging factors impacting their respective markets. Our results show that while EDDs are facing a brighter situation, the overall recovery trajectories, permanent effects, and future outlooks remain still very much uncertain.

Keywords: Entertainment; destination; tourism; events; crisis management; COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Months of border closures and social distancing measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus have deeply affected industries such as live entertainment and airlines, and to a lesser extent hotels and restaurants, which depend on people being able to move and congregate freely (Gunay & Kurtulmus, 2021). Even worse is the fact that it is the entire value chain of those sectors that has suffered. For instance, the tourism sector has been dealing with impacts on both travel supply and demand, with people either hesitant or unable to travel, and with destinations scrambling to propose new attractions or adapt existing ones to account for changing rules or sensitivities (Nicola et al., 2020).

Similarly, global entertainment companies such as Walt Disney or Cirque du Soleil, whose operations are often intricately connected to select destinations (i.e., in this case, Orlando and Las Vegas), have managed to stay afloat during the pandemic, but still lost millions of dollars and a significant number of workers along the way (Nhamo et al., 2020). Global attraction attendance has collapsed, down 50% to 90% from 2019 figures, largely because of capacity restrictions (TEA/AECOM, 2021). The compound effects of empty airports and hotel lobbies, mass layoffs, festival, concert, and business conference cancellations, both causes and manifestations of a sputtering entertainment industry, were certainly not lost to EDDs. In fact, Atlantic City and Las Vegas, both known for their thriving entertainment scenes, were expected to be the 3rd and 4th most impacted markets in the US economically speaking, with vibrant Louisiana and Orlando also coming in at 8th and 11th, respectively (Muro, Maxim, & Whiton, 2020).

Despite a steady vaccination roll out in 2021, with vaccines that did not even exist when we conducted our original study, the COVID-19 virus has continued to evolve and spread. This, in turn, has led to restrictions being relaxed

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and tightened many times over, generating both fleeting optimism and lasting confusion. While most entertainment sectors were eventually allowed to operate at varying levels of limited capacity, many companies chose to remain dormant because of business models unfit for a smaller scale. For instance, anything below 60% capacity is generally deemed too big of an admission revenue gap for most theme parks to survive in the long run (Gabe, 2021). Similarly, Cirque du Soleil productions must operate at around 50% capacity to turn a profit (Katsilometes, 2021). In the meantime, any reduced capacity also means reduced revenues for EDDs, which inevitably translates into direct and indirect negative consequences for local economies largely dependent on entertainment and tourism dollars.

In an attempt to better understand this trickle-down impact, and more importantly, how EDDs planned to recover from it after the pandemic, we first presented a panel of respondents with very contrasting images of the future – known as Dator’s (1998) four generic futures – and asked them to ponder not so much the likelihood of each of them coming to be, but more so the respondents’ overall capacity to recognize and face them when they came to be. What stood out then is that most had planned for COVID-19 to be short-lived, that they were generally unprepared for a worsening situation, had not begun to explore alternative growth models or could not absorb a catharsis-like surge in post-pandemic demand (Dubois & Dimanche, 2021). It was also evident that the COVID-19 crisis was unlike anything before, and that new solutions would need to be imagined for EDDs to come out of it. Indeed, while Las Vegas benefited from a boom in Asian and Oceanian visitors after the 2008 financial crisis (Lim & Won, 2020), U.S. borders are still not reopening to international visitors before the end of 2021. Likewise, New Orleans could count on the support of other communities in the country and around the world following Hurricane Katrina, as well as on a surge in “disaster tourism,” that is people flocking to the destination to witness the devastation first-hand (Gotham, 2017). However, this time around, there are very few communities that were unaffected by the pandemic, nor visible damages for people to see. Only, it seems, a shared depressed economy and a lasting social slumber.

2. Fifteen months later: Views from an uncertain future

The fact that we struggled to connect with our New Orleans respondents for an interview because they were dealing with a regional power outage following yet another hurricane, speaks volumes about the catastrophic situation that some EDDs find themselves in today, albeit for different reasons. As one of them eventually explained:

We were starting to get back with live music and we had another wave of cases. But it was nothing compared to hurricane Ida. Unfortunately, hurricane season doesn’t end until November so we’re hoping and praying that we don’t get another one, but even a bad storm could prove to be another big setback. (R1)

At the same time, the fact that getting in touch with the respondents in Las Vegas was equally, if not more challenging because they were too busy ramping up operations shows how wildly dissimilar the recovery is (or will be) proving to be: “the fear of missing out is very real right now, the first entertainment companies out of the gate who can put tickets on sale are going to win. Sold out crowds beget sold out crowds” (R3). Likewise, after operating at a limited capacity in 2020, Florida theme parks experienced a spectacular rebound in 2021 (Goldsmith, 2021).

Between these two extremes, respondents in destinations such as Toronto, who have been going back and forth between reopenings and lockdowns over the last few months, are also desperately grasping for clarity and direction to inform their next moves. This makes for very uneven recovery stories. According to a local tourism professional:

The hotels in the city are still running at 20ish % occupancy, mainly because nothing is happening right now. Why would you come here, you can walk the neighborhoods and things like that, but you can’t have the experience that you would normally come here for. (R2)

Many EDDs appear to be dealing with a chicken-and-the-egg situation where the lack of local entertainment attractions (concerts, theatre, parks) makes it unappealing for people to travel, which in turn makes it unappealing for companies to reboot their operations. Health authorities’ iterative policies in response to an evolving virus also created uncertainty, resulting at times in costly misfiring. As one of the respondents explains: “we’ve been burned with the second and third waves, so we’re all going to wait and see who wants to stick their necks out” (R4). However, entertainment companies are seeking refuge in clarity and stability, perhaps over safety, choosing to reopen where most of the restrictions have been lifted and are unlikely to be reinstated. The result is a very uneven recovery for EDDs, where some are rebounding nicely while others are falling behind the competition. According to

the Toronto respondent: “There’s a school of thought that says, because we’ve been so heavily restricted, we can offer a real sense of safety, but the reality of losing ground is a real concern, no doubt about it” (R3).

In the face of uncertainty, we are reminded of one of Dator’s (1998) “laws of the future,” which states that little of importance can be predicted. No one knows how long this virus will continue to be potent enough to warrant such measures, leaving EDDs having to sort through very diverging outlooks for the future, or actively work towards a range of plausible outcomes. Optimistic pundits point to a two- to three-year recovery window (e.g., Nhamo, Dube, & Chikodzi, 2020), or even suggest that 2022 “could be expected to be a full operating year” (TEA/AECOM, 2021). Others, more pessimistic, speak of a lost decade, at least for some parts of the world (World Bank, 2021). Whichever the case may be, the wording around the coming months remains quite broad and ambiguous, with talks of a “transition toward normalcy” providing little insights for EDDs (Charumilind et al., 2021). Thus, only change seems for certain, as a return to pre-pandemic “equilibrium” is neither possible nor desirable. As history goes, there is no such thing as a “status quo” in the face of a major crisis, only an impetus to innovate and restructure (Simmie & Martin, 2010).

Among the changes that respondents identify is the end of “casual travel,” be it for business or leisure, replaced instead by fewer yet longer, more intentional stays, as well as urban destinations lagging well behind non-urban, resort, campsite etc. destinations for the foreseeable future. They also point out that some pragmatic issues, such as permanently disrupted supply chains and labor shortages across many sectors, are likely to have a bigger than anticipated impact on their recovery, much like the younger, less risk-averse demographics such as the millennials and the Zs are bound to play a more significant role in the coming months. In addition, because some degree of travel restrictions or inconveniences are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future, entertainment companies are expected to go to their guests, at times with new smaller offerings, instead of waiting on them to travel to their installations again. Despite having experienced the limitations of teleconferencing and other virtual formats, respondents also expect some of the pre-pandemic entertainment offerings to remain online for good. Taken together, these perspectives give a measure of the challenge that lies ahead for established EDDs, whose success to date have in large part depended on people spontaneously hopping on a plane to partake in experiences that could not be “consumed” in one’s home location. As summed up by one of the respondents, EDDs have embarked on a long journey of both “growth and decline, as well as massive transformation, but also a period of sustained uncertainty and risk aversion” (R5). In other words, all of Dator’s four futures collapsed in one.

3. Conclusion

Many recovering COVID-19 patients speak of difficulties thinking or concentrating, dizziness, and mood swings (CDC, 2021). In a way, EDDs also appear to be suffering from a persistent fog of long COVID, going through ups and downs, recalibrating often, and praying for the symptoms to go away. In the meantime, Future Studies suggest that they should continue creating a guiding vision for the future of their destinations and working towards a preferred outcome. Only by actively tracking, questioning, and acting on emerging behaviors and weak signals can they ultimately hope to “surf the tsunamis of change” (Dator, 2019, p.2) brought about by this pandemic.

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