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**An Exploration into Toronto's Business Improvement Areas' Engagement
of the Visitor Economy**

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Institute for
Hospitality &
Tourism Research

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to explore and summarize how BIAs consider and engage visitors to their communities. Dr. Tom Griffin met with 39 representatives from 29 Toronto BIAs in the summer of 2019 who responded to email requests for interviews sent out by the Toronto Association of BIAs (TABIA) and follow ups from a research assistant. This report summarizes the findings, with the aim of providing BIAs a resource to learn from one and another, and to raise awareness of the potential advantages and dilemmas of the visitor economy.

In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the terrible impact it is having on many Main Street areas and small businesses, it is hoped that this report could provide some foundation for ideas to help strategically rebuild. It is acknowledged that the information in this report reflects a pre-pandemic world, and some of the discussions are inconsistent with current and near future possibilities, but as the restrictions on movement and motivations for travel evolve, engaging the visitor economy could provide some opportunities.

BIAs generally view attracting and welcoming visitors positively in helping them achieve their goals. A number of BIA activities directly and indirectly support attracting and welcoming visitors, even if they are aimed at local residents. Some examples of these BIA initiatives include beautification and streetscaping, production of events and festivals, hosting of guided tours, cultural initiatives such as art and music, and wayfinding.

Many BIAs actively promote their neighbourhood, specific businesses, and events, both to residents and those living elsewhere. Methods include paid advertising, engagement of media including blogs, local news, cultural media outlets, and hosting of press and familiarization tours. All BIAs have varying levels of activity on social media. A handful of BIAs partnered with Destination Toronto and other BIAs to cross promote each other. Other marketing efforts included event listing sites, using tourism visitor centres, and selling branded merchandise.

BIA neighbourhoods welcome a wide range of people visiting for non-routine reasons. Each could be engaged in different ways to affect their behaviour and experience. For example, residents of other areas of Toronto for day trips, friends and family of local residents, festival attendees, employees who stay for dinner or drinks, people who feel a cultural connection to the neighbourhood, organized groups from schools or social clubs, Airbnb visitors, convention visitors, vacationers, and groups such as international students.

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1 Introduction

This report has been prepared by Dr. Tom Griffin, Assistant Professor at Ryerson's Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management and Assistant Director at Ryerson's Institute for Hospitality and Tourism Research. Toronto is the home to a diverse range of neighbourhoods. There are more than 80 Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) across the city representing the interests of the business community¹. A BIA is “an association of commercial property owners and tenants within a defined [geographical] area who work in partnership with the City to create thriving, competitive, and safe business areas that attract shoppers, diners, tourists, and new businesses... [with the] capacity to be catalysts for civic improvement, enhancing the quality of life in their local neighbourhood and the City as a whole”².

Toronto's BIAs represent varied areas across the city, from districts that are iconic tourism attractions in their own right, to others that are predominantly residential neighbourhood commercial areas almost wholly serving the needs of local people. All BIAs share a purpose “to revitalize and maintain a dynamic local neighbourhood and to promote the area as a business or shopping destination... to encourage both local residents and others to spend their shopping dollars within the local commercial district” , or simply “beautification and promotion”³. However, how these goals are achieved depends upon the nature of the neighbourhood (residential, industrial, entertainment etc.), the capacity of the organization in terms of funding and skills, and the character of the volunteer board. Depending on the context of a BIA, attracting, welcoming, and managing visitors from outside of the community may be viewed as a potential strategy to achieve their goals.

This report summarises information collected through interviews with 39 representatives of 29 Toronto BIAs which were conducted in the summer of 2019. This report is not a definitive measure of BIA activity, but summarises the information collected through semi-structured interviews, where digressions in conversations were encouraged, and influenced by the individuals present. It is hoped that this report can provide organizations representing diverse communities with the foundation for strategies that will help them benefit from the visitor economy and proactively consider potential pitfalls and dilemmas.

¹ www.toronto.ca/business-economy/business-operation-growth/business-improvement-areas/bia-list/

² www.toronto-bia.com/whats-a-bia/

³ toronto-bia.com/images/stories/tabia/govon_bia_handbook.pdf

The 29 BIAs represent 35.8% of Toronto’s 81 BIAs. In 2019, the operating budgets of Toronto’s BIAs ranged from \$22,700 up to \$4.8m. When grouped into three budget categories, 41.% of BIAs interviewed were in the highest group (largest budgets), 37.9% in the middle group, and 20.7% in the lowest group (Table 1) showing the diversity that this study achieved.

Table 1: BIAs interviewed grouped by Operating Budget (2019)

Budget Group	BIAs interviewed (% of total)
High	12 (41.4%)
Medium	11 (37.9%)
Low	6 (20.7%)
Total	29 (100.0%)

1.1 COVID-19 in May 2020

At the time of writing (May 2020) the impacts of COVID-19 and implications of restricted activity are having a substantial impact on the ability of many businesses to survive, threatening livelihoods, employment, and the character and make-up of communities that has evolved over decades.

It is acknowledged that the information in this report reflects a pre-pandemic world, and some of the discussions are inconsistent with current and near future possibilities, for example festivals and international travel.

However, it is hoped that there is some value in helping to identify strategies for recovery through the attractions and management of visitors once that time arrives. As restrictions begin to be lifted, demand for local and regional experiences will increase, and the long-term implications for travel in general are sure to be changed as motivations and opportunities to travel will be limited to some extent.

1.2 Other challenges

BIAs and their members face a number of challenges mentioned by many interviewees as part of this study, which have likely been exacerbated by COVID-19, including:

- prioritising initiatives with limited budgets and capacities
- dealing with vacant store fronts and the churn of businesses
- increases and changes to property taxes
- the challenge of big box stores, malls and online shopping
- changes in availability of parking
- increasing condo-development that limits opportunities for levy-generation, increases demand on infrastructure, and impacts on local character, heritage, and culture

- balancing the advantages and disadvantages of gentrification
- regulations, bureaucracy and red-tape for businesses and BIAs
- managing expectations of multiple stakeholders
- engaging a membership base where some are unenthusiastic or unhappy with the levy or how it is being spent
- building relationships with absent landlords who are needed as partners to implement initiatives and changes
- lack of data on visitor behaviour

1.3 Defining ‘tourism’ and its implications for BIAs

Tourism is a popular tool for economic development by many governments and regions of all levels. Tourism is an export activity, a product that is produced and consumed at the place of production, that brings in foreign or outside income. Further, tourism brings social, cultural, and environmental implications for the local community, that must be managed to encourage positive impacts for a wide range of stakeholders.

Tourism, as a term, is both simple and complex. For example, in Ontario a tourist is technically someone who has travelled out-of-town on a non-routine trip for less than 12 months. Someone who travels on a same-day trip (i.e. returns home on the same day) is *counted* as a tourist if they travel 40kms or more on a non-routine trip⁴. Tourists travel for many reasons, often for *pleasure*, but also non-routine *business* and *shopping*, as well as *visiting friends and relatives*.

A *destination*, then, is “a physical space with or without administrative and/or analytical boundaries... [t]he cluster of products and services, and of activities and experiences”⁵, and the tourism *industry* refers to businesses of different sectors that to some extent attract tourists and serve them in their community⁶.

BIAs clearly represent their neighbourhoods as *destinations*. Many of the visitors a BIA might receive will travel short distances and are not, therefore, technically considered tourists, despite bringing benefits and impacts that tourists do. Therefore, this report is interested in discussing all *visitors* from outside of the BIA neighbourhood, whether they are technically *tourists* or not. Therefore, the term *visitors* will be used in this report to refer to all those who visit a BIA neighbourhood but reside elsewhere.

⁴ http://www.mtc.gov.on.ca/en/research/historicalstats/concepts_and_definitions_2014.pdf p. 2

⁵ www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420858 p. 14

⁶ [Smith, S. L. \(1994\). The tourism product. *Annals of tourism research*, 21\(3\), 582-595.](#)

1.4 How do BIAs view visitors?

The broad goals of BIAs shared by respondents were generally related to improving the quality of life and environment for residents, while making the community a more appealing place to live, work, and visit overall. Several respondents acknowledged that attracting visitors from outside of their community brought benefits including income, increased awareness, and enhancing local pride, but developing the visitor economy was never a main concern. Attracting and welcoming visitors was given varying priority by different BIAs. The primary concern was always to serve the needs of the local community, and when explaining why the visitor economy was not a major strategy, many noted a lack of capacity in terms of staffing and funding as these resources were being used for other concerns.

Further, some respondents suggested active consideration and engagement of visitors was too premature within their strategic plans. A few respondents also questioned the value and return-on-investment of targeting people who may only visit the neighbourhood one time, rather than locals who could be repeat customers.

For some respondents, there were dilemmas of promoting their neighbourhood as a destination in terms of the impact it may have on the local character of the community. The concern of becoming too *touristy* was raised by some, where local residents might be pushed out of neighbourhood restaurants and spaces, damaging the sense of community that many seek and take pride in.

2 Developing and Managing the Tourism Product

Visitors seek and consume products that serve physical needs like hunger and sleep, but that also meet emotional and experiential needs. A *tourism product* is “a combination of tangible and intangible elements, such as natural, cultural and man-made resources, attractions, facilities, services and activities around a specific center of interests”⁷. A *tourism product* can therefore be considered as the overall destination, made up of a variety of individual, distinct, yet complimentary smaller products and services, that combine to create the overall experience. BIAs create, manage, and influence many aspects of their communities that could be considered a product. It is important to note that not all tourism products are created for visitors; culture that is started by locals for locals often attracts visitors, and the positive and negative impacts on local culture and identity need to be considered.

2.1 Types of Tourism

There is much discussion and literature on different approaches to tourism development in a community. At the core of the discussion is considering what the community has to offer as a destination, which types of visitors would be most interested in this product, consideration for the amount of visitors at specific places, routes, and times, as well as opportunities for local people to inform how their community is presented, and to appreciate the benefits of the activities. Some of the most relevant approaches for BIAs are community-based tourism, and cultural tourism.

Community Based Tourism (CBT) is an approach with the primary aim of providing direct benefits to the local community⁸. For successful CBT, public and private sector organizations should encourage local participation in the development of culture, seek resident input into promotion, and help connect local businesses to appropriate visitors and tour operators. Adopting this approach BIAs should encourage members and residents to develop and participate in local cultural activities, and then communicate them to appropriate visitor groups. There are various toolkits available online for different types of destinations. Many suggest conducting an asset inventory of various businesses and cultural products to identify strengths and areas for improvement. It is vital to consider the carrying capacity of a community, defined by the UNWTO as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic and sociocultural environment and an unacceptable

⁷ www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420858 p. 17

⁸ [Dodds, R., Ali, A., & Galaski, K. \(2018\). Mobilizing knowledge: Determining key elements for success and pitfalls in developing community-based tourism. Current Issues in Tourism, 21\(13\), 1547-1568.](#)

decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction"⁹; however this is also very important for residential quality of life and local perceptions of tourism¹⁰. A CBT approach seeks to create memorable visitor experiences that are driven by locals, representing their culture, benefiting them directly, all in a manageable flow¹¹.

Another useful term is *cultural tourism*, a widely discussed topic referring to a community's culture expressed through food, festivals, and communal spaces etc., as both an attraction for visitors and an entity affected by tourism¹². Cultural Tourists are motivated to "learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination"¹³. Tourists who seek, engage, and consume local culture are more likely to bring positive economic and socio-cultural benefits to a community as they patronize local services and goods, with sincere interest from tourists refreshing resident pride¹⁴. The type of tourism a community attracts can therefore affect the quality of benefits received¹⁵.

One strategy consistent with these ideas is to encourage the collection and sharing of stories and culture from the local community. This helps locals connect with their own heritage and provides character and distinction. Sharing stories can be conducted in numerous ways, including plaques, info stands, blogs, imagery shared as installations or online, and through mobile technology applications. There are a number of existing projects in various places that collect and share the oral and visual stories of a place that could be replicated to some extent by different BIAs.

2.2 Beautification

All BIAs interviewed were involved in beautification and streetscaping projects to varying extents, to make their area a more interesting, safe, and animated place, with implications and connections to the visitor economy.

Efforts to show visual consistency throughout the neighbourhood, while creating distinctions from others, was common, for example, colours of flowers, flags, street furniture (e.g.

⁹ www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420070 p. 5

¹⁰ industry.colorado.com/community-based-tourism-toolkit

¹¹ [Jamieson, W. \(2012\). The urban design and tourism interface: The complementary role of urban design in tourism development.](#)

¹² [Silberberg, T. \(1995\). Cultural tourism and business opportunities for museums and heritage sites. *Tourism management*, 16\(5\), 361-365.](#)

¹³ www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420858 p. 30

¹⁴ [McKercher, R., & Du Cros, H. \(2002\). *Cultural tourism: The partnership between tourism and cultural heritage management*. Binghamton, NY: Routledge.](#)

¹⁵ heritagebc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/TBE-Guide-Cultural-and-Heritage-Tourism-Jan2014.pdf

benches), temporary colouring of street crossings, hiring of street cleaners, and landscaping, among others. Many respondents talked about programs where areas considered unsafe or unappealing were renovated with improvements such as lighting and murals, and animations such as music and events, to attract people to use the space in a constructive way.

Inserting infrastructure to attract and encourage certain behaviours was also common, for example, the creation and maintenance of mixed-use paths, green spaces and parks, stretch areas for runners, and seating were mentioned. These investments create focal points for people to engage, whether at lunch time, walking dogs, or on the weekend, and through interaction these spaces hold potential for culture and attachments to form.

2.3 Wayfinding and Directing Foot Traffic

Many BIAs had wayfinding initiatives to help visitors find different areas within the neighbourhood and encourage them to move around and explore. Some respondents talked about one part of their neighbourhood that might be a big draw for visitors, for example a park, or a specific strip of stores, and how signage, lighting, murals, and animations could persuade them to venture further.

2.4 Curating Business Community

In an effort to create the business makeup that best served their communities and strategic vision, some respondents talked about actively trying to curate the balance of businesses in their neighbourhood. For some this meant developing the culture and reputation of their neighbourhood so it would naturally attract certain types of businesses. Whereas for others there were active attempts to bring specific businesses to their communities, for example, some approached successful independent stores in other areas to open additional branches in their own neighbourhood.

Some participants mentioned how the retail make up was important in attracting companies and their office employees with an appealing and convenient neighbourhood to work.

Concerns were shared by some where the balance of businesses had been off. For example, some neighborhoods had seen a growth in restaurants and bars at various times over the last 10 to 20 years, which would attract a number of visitors from outside of the neighbourhood, but lead to issues concerning anti-social behaviour associated with late night alcohol consumption, and taking away space for other retail serving residents.

2.5 Festivals and Events

For many BIAs, festivals and events were a substantial investment and tool to stimulate activity in their neighbourhood. Festivals and events come in a variety of forms and sizes, but ultimately give a reason for people to come to a particular space to enjoy something temporary and out of the ordinary. Events and activities that encourage interaction and sharing of space between community members actively builds and evolves culture, which can be leveraged to change the meanings associated with specific spaces, and image of the area overall. Some BIAs actively created events in low season, mainly winter, to give vitality and reason for locals and visitors to spend time enjoying the neighbourhood.

Almost all BIAs engage in festivals and events, whether they directly own them, actively work with outside organizations, or have little control over external agencies who are permitted to use their neighbourhood as a space for events. Each brings opportunity and dilemmas, and respondents' views and experiences of each are summarized below.

2.5.1 BIA events

Many, but not all BIAs manage their own events. A clear distinction is between large, marquee festivals, and smaller niche events. For the purposes of this report, the distinction is subjectively made. *Major* events may include the closing of streets, substantial promotion, external vendors, and cause some level of disruption to the routine experience within the community. Smaller events are more focussed on local people, or specific niches, and generally have limited disruption to the ongoing experiences of those in the community not involved with the event.

2.5.1.1 BIA owned major events

Several BIAs host their own major events, seeking to develop a sense of community and awareness of their neighbourhoods. Some had recently launched festivals to establish awareness, tradition, and culture, and others managed legacy events that have happened for many years and are part of the neighbourhood tradition.

Major events bring many people to the community and are an opportunity for the BIA to bring together the different parts of the community, demonstrating and enhancing the culture of the place. Many BIAs with specific cultural or ethnic identities hold events that are consistent with their heritage, which attract both those who are familiar, as well as others less acquainted but curious. For businesses and residents in the community there are great benefits, including a sense of pride and opportunity for a greater number of customers.

However, there are also potential issues. For example, many BIA members are not consistent with a festival's theme or offer services and products (such as laundromats and hardware stores) that are not of interest to attendees. Some respondents described how some businesses, including restaurants, closed during major festivals as low spending visitors would take up space, or use facilities without making a purchase.

Another dilemma for the very large events is that external vendors are often sought by the BIA to raise revenues and provide services to high volumes of visitors. Some respondents therefore described a constant tension with some members who take the view that their BIA levies are spent on activities that arguably cause them a loss and benefit external competitors.

In response, BIAs described their efforts to communicate the greater value of these larger festivals to the ongoing reputation of the neighbourhood. As well, encouraging and educating these members to be creative in how they can take advantage of these events was mentioned. For example, one respondent described how a local hardware store takes advantage of the big festival organized by the BIA by offering barbecue demonstrations and lessons, where the store can build a relationship with locals that can lead to future business. A few respondents talked about educating their members on strategies to benefit from the unusually high volumes of people, for example selling old stock at discount prices, or creating a new product or service aimed at high volume.

2.5.1.2 BIA smaller events

Many BIAs ran smaller scale events and animations, including cultural celebrations, movie nights, live music, and markets. Several respondents suggested that major events and festivals were not strategically desirable to them, and were often described as laborious, with questionable return on investment given the required time and funding. Instead, some have chosen to focus on regular small-scale animations, targeted to locals and niche interests, that bring surprise and engagement in infrequently used spaces with the goals of repeat and regular visitation. The move from few large to more regular small events was mentioned by a few BIAs.

These activations give an area character and a reason for people to visit and spend time exploring different parts of a neighbourhood. They can also be shared within personal networks creating word-of-mouth awareness. Looking for somewhat unusual and distinct experiences to offer, including pop-up restaurants in laneways, or music concerts in unexpected venues, were all discussed as strategies to raise excitement about the neighbourhood.

Some respondents talked about efforts to encourage visitors of smaller events to also use

other shops and restaurants during their visit, for example, visitor information desks, or special daily promotions. Smaller events and animations were also used to change the meaning of a space. Attracting people to enjoy music or entertainment makes a place safer and more welcoming, and was a strategy employed by some BIAs to affect how a space is used within the community.

2.5.2 External Festivals

Many BIAs had relationships with external organizations who hosted their own festivals and events within the area. Some of these partnerships were actively sought and engaged in by the BIA, whereas others were not.

2.5.2.1 Active partnerships

BIAs who were in active partnerships with external event organizers were generally positive about their experiences and successes. The opportunity to bring activity and reputation to their community without the responsibility and management of logistics was appealing.

One BIA established a relationship with Sofar Sound¹⁶, who produce events in intimate venue spaces. Some BIA members could then be engaged as event spaces, while raising the awareness and image of the area with distinct and exciting experiences.

Hillcrest BIA partners with an external organizer to host Salsa on St Clair, one of the largest street festivals of the summer, a task that was far beyond the capacity of the BIA itself. The event brings thousands of people to the neighbourhood who would otherwise be very unlikely to visit. According to Beau Cappella, the BIA Chair, the festival raises awareness of the area, and “accelerates everything, pushing economic activity more quickly than without it”. Much like the large events hosted by BIAs themselves, there were challenges for some members, but also benefits in being introduced to local and regional visitors who become future customers, and opportunities to sell revised services and products at low prices and high volumes, and the BIA informally shared ideas and strategies with their members.

2.5.2.2 Events with limited BIA influence

BIAs do not control permits and are therefore obliged to accept events allowed by the City, and several other respondents described their relationships with events organized by external parties held within the boundaries of their BIA where they had limited influence and control.

¹⁶ www.sofarsounds.com/toronto

Although there were some benefits of these events associated with increased visitation, much tension was also described. The closing of roads, arrival of thousands of visitors uninterested in local services, and of street vendors selling competitive goods, are not welcome disruptions for many businesses.

Some respondents expressed feelings that their community was being used without the desires of their community and the impacts being truly considered by the event organizers or the City. The ownership of the space is contested, and some suggested that the BIA as representative for their business community could have more influence in the process for deciding how others use their community space.

2.6 Tours and Walks

Some BIAs managed tours of their communities. For example, The Village of Islington BIA has a pool of volunteer guides and offer free tours to different groups including schools, church groups, and other social groups¹⁷. They tour around 1,200 people a year, which raises awareness of their area and brings in business for local restaurants and shops.

Others also recruited local people to give tours, often to other locals, on different subjects, for example pub walks and architecture. The tours were used as a way to engage new businesses and encourage them to participate in the BIA and increase their exposure.

Taking advantage of events that encourage people to visit different parts of the city were very popular for some BIAs, for example, Jane's Walks¹⁸ and Doors Open¹⁹. These events attract motivated people keen to see and learn about very specific local experiences. There are also opportunities to partner with festivals like Nuit Blanche²⁰ to bring exhibits into the local area without the need for substantial infrastructure. Further, there are opportunities to partner with professional tour guiding companies. For example, tourist bus companies can bring the double decker through the neighbourhood on one of their routes²¹.

Leveraging the knowledge and excitement of locals to attract and guide visitors is an interesting opportunity for BIAs. Understanding the distinct and interesting aspects of a community and who might be curious to explore them is discussed in the next section. However,

¹⁷ www.villageofislington.com/events/

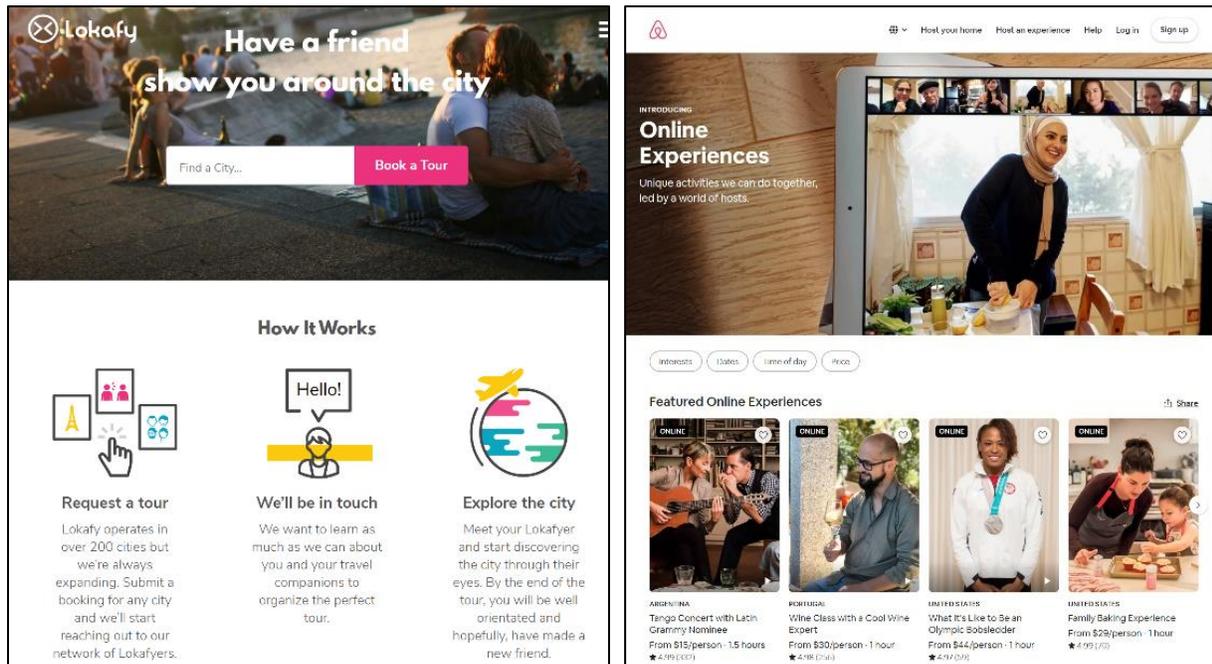
¹⁸ janeswalk.org/canada/toronto/

¹⁹ www.doorsopenontario.on.ca/en/toronto

²⁰ www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/festivals-events/nuitblanche/

²¹ citysightseeingtoronto.com/

Lokafy²² and Airbnb Experiences²³ are two online platforms where individuals can offer niche tours and experiences. BIAs could potentially leverage these tools by finding and encouraging local individuals to bring visitors to their areas and help them facilitate specific experiences. Airbnb is currently (in May 2020) offering ‘online experiences’ that can be enjoyed remotely, a potential strategy for some BIAs and their members to connect with existing and new customers.



2.7 Art

The installation of art, whether temporary or permanent, was also mentioned as a way to give meaning and character to a community. Murals are popular across the city, and some BIA neighbourhoods have grasped this medium to tell their area’s story and build a sense of character. For example, Islington Village has a large number of murals, and offer free tours to groups interested in learning about the area’s history through the stories told²⁴. The Little Portugal on Dundas BIA has recently partnered with a Portuguese artist to paint a new mural, connecting to the heritage of the area. Others, including Chinatown, and more discussed how murals were being used to elevate the visual presentation of their communities.

²² lokafy.com/

²³ www.airbnb.ca/s/experiences

²⁴ www.villageofislington.com/mural-map/

2.8 Food and Culture

Food and cuisine are a substantial marker of local culture, and was a common discussion point for many BIAs as defining aspects of their area. Some BIAs talked about leveraging these stories and events to encourage interest in their area overall. This was often connected to the area's heritage, but also specific restaurants or food events of members that were especially distinct and highly regarded. The use of cuisine as a driver of tourism and symbol of culture is worth considering for some BIAs, with plenty of resources available^{25, 26}. Unique and exciting food often inspires people to share their own images and experiences among their own networks.

2.9 Leveraging Members' Events and Activities

Many respondents talked of encouraging and working with local businesses and groups to hold their own small events, which help generate awareness and create culture and character. For example, local interpretations of larger celebrations or traditions, such as the making of culturally specific foods, or religious events, were activities that respondents excitedly talked about while defining what makes their neighbourhoods special.

²⁵ ontarioculinary.com/

²⁶ books.google.ca/books?id=db6voQEACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=qbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

3 Marketing Communications and Visitors

Marketing communications covers advertising, public relations, social media and more ways to make potential visitors and customers aware of the product or service on offer.

3.1 Product and Experience as Marketing

An important point raised by some BIAs, and backed up by research, is that the best form of promotion is the experiences of actual visitors or customers who share their stories. Visitors' experiences are co-created between themselves and the services and environments they interact with²⁷. A primary focus should therefore be on the tourism product and experience, with consideration of how a visitor might perceive their time and how this could be improved. Meeting and exceeding visitor expectations of what an experience will offer is vital for creating return customers and generation of positive word-of-mouth marketing. If a visitor has a poor experience that does not meet expectations promised through promotions, then the reputation of the destination would be damaged. Helping people to have the most positive experiences in the neighbourhood through ease and convenience, wayfinding, welcoming hospitality, animation and surprise, are all very important sources of marketing themselves.

3.2 Paid Advertising: Condos, Print, Radio

A number of BIAs bought advertising to promote their areas, either for specific events and festivals, or ongoing awareness. For example, the Lakeshore Village BIA was taking advantage of the large number of condo developments on the perimeter of its neighbourhood by placing a video within the elevator screens to encourage residents to visit.

Other examples included paid advertising in local and regional newspapers, cultural media channels (e.g. Chin Radio²⁸, and Ming Pao²⁹ and Sing Tao³⁰ for Chinese speakers), TTC, and on radio (including for some U.S. drive markets) for specific events.

3.3 Public Relations

Public relations (PR) refers to “the acquisition of media coverage that is not directly paid

²⁷ [Campos, A. C., Mendes, J., Valle, P. O. D., & Scott, N. \(2018\). Co-creation of tourist experiences: A literature review. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21\(4\), 369-400.](#)

²⁸ www.chinradio.com/

²⁹ <http://www.mingpaocanada.com/tor/>

³⁰ www.singtao.ca/toronto/?variant=zh-hk

for³¹, and is often interpreted with greater credibility than paid for advertising. Many BIAs talked about engaging local media to provide them with story ideas, for example BlogTO, CP24, and the Metro.

Some BIAs actively engaged with familiarization tours for media groups, where content producers relating to specific niche interests (e.g. music, food, fashion etc.) are invited on a tour of the area in the hope that they will write positive experiences in their own outlets. Both Destination Toronto (the new name of Tourism Toronto)³² and Destination Ontario³³ also run several media tours each year, typically themed, and could be a useful link for some BIAs and their members.

West Queen West BIA has been successful seeing their neighbourhood listed in ‘top cool area’ lists in Vogue, Huffington Post, and other [media outlets](#). Further, the BIA runs contests awarding trips and spending vouchers for local businesses³⁴, and these can be picked up by regional media who are keen to share the story in their communities.

Interviewees talked about the many partnerships they can leverage to promote their neighbourhoods further afield. For example, the Little Portugal on Dundas BIA partners with the Portuguese Consulate in Toronto. This relationship has included working with Portuguese artists to paint murals and attracting Portuguese businesses to move to the area. Likewise, the Village of Islington BIA established a friendship with the Borough of Islington, an area of London, UK, with the intention to share stories and increase awareness of each area.

3.3.1 Finding Travel Writers

A possible strategy to engage public relations is to contact local travel writers in the Toronto region to encourage them to share stories about their own home communities to their followers, potentially a useful strategy given the likely restrictions on their own activity due to COVID-19. Travel Massive is a “community for travel industry founders, leaders, and creators”³⁵ with close to 60,000 members worldwide, and almost 2,000 in their Toronto chapter³⁶. Members include travel bloggers, who typically create content to share with their own followers.

TBEX is “the largest conference and networking event for travel bloggers, online travel

³¹ [Inkson & Minnaert, 2018, p. 295](#)

³² <http://partners.seetorontonow.com/>

³³ www.tourismpartners.com/en/home

³⁴ westqueenwest.ca/win-a-vip-holiday-shopping-experience/

³⁵ travelmassive.com/

³⁶ travelmassive.com/chapters/toronto

journalists, new media content creators, travel brands and industry professionals”³⁷. Their focus is on creating conferences and events for the travel blogger community, but they also provide lists of past participants and sponsors. A group of BIAs with experiences that could be packaged together could possibly consider approaching a targeted travel blogger with relevant interests to visit their communities.

3.4 Social media

Using social media was mentioned by most interviewees as a way to share information and communicate. Interviewees predominantly mentioned Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WeChat (primarily for the Chinese community).

3.4.1 Paid Social Media

Several BIAs also used paid advertising on social media to send communications to targeted groups, for example, depending on geography, demographics, and related interests. This was particularly useful for promotion of events that could appeal to particular groups.

One participant, Anna Sebert, Executive Director with the Beach Village BIA, had recently hired a PR consultant to help raise awareness of events and the neighbourhood in general on social media. For example, they arranged “influencer crawls” where those with large follower bases in specific niche interests or demographics are invited to come and enjoy the neighbourhood.

3.4.2 Unpaid Social Media

Many BIAs used social media to post and communicate with followers on a regular basis. Several BIAs talked about interviewing members about their stories or events and creating videos and blog posts to share online (e.g. Bloor-Yorkville BIA ³⁸). Promotion of specific businesses provides an opportunity to share with niche interest groups. Encouraging resident followers to share and engage with posts about their favourite businesses was a tactic by some to help disseminate the posts organically in further networks.

Other types of information shared on social media beyond local business stories included events, online articles of interest from other sources, and images of scenery, pets, and historic

³⁷ tbexcon.com/about/#past

³⁸ www.bloor-yorkville.com/blog/

periods (e.g. the Waterfront BIA^{39, 40}), that generate public interest and local pride in the area overall.

3.4.3 Finding local influencers

Some BIAs talked about engaging local influencers to help increase the exposure of their posts. For example, leveraging relationships with local councillors, or well-known personalities with a connection to the area or topic of interest was mentioned.

Engaging local businesses with their own online followings can also help raise awareness through their own network. For example, local music venues with their own followers and networks could share posts to help promote BIA events.

3.5 Organizational Partners

3.5.1 Destination Toronto

Some BIAs had engaged with Destination Toronto, the new name of Tourism Toronto, the designated Regional Tourism Organization (RTO) for the Toronto area whose mandate is to promote and sell the “Toronto region as a remarkable destination for tourists, convention delegates and business travellers”⁴¹. Destination Toronto is a membership-based organization, meaning that they work primarily with their 1,000 plus paid members. As part of their promotional efforts, Destination Toronto tells the stories of different neighbourhoods and regions on their website⁴² and visitor magazine and guides⁴³. Destination Toronto also produces marketing campaigns to attract both leisure and business travel markets, and hosts many press trips and familiarization tours for a variety of travel and lifestyle writers, meeting and convention planners, and travel trade representatives (e.g. travel agents) from all around the world.

Some of the larger BIAs talked about how, as members, they rely upon Destination Toronto to promote the city to visitors from further away and then partner with them to attract visitors to their neighbourhood once the decision to visit Toronto has already been made. For example, some participants shared how they provide information with convention visitors about their local restaurants and activities. This also helps member businesses establish their own relationships with Destination Toronto and take advantage of the opportunities that may be

³⁹ www.facebook.com/waterfrontbia/photos/a.105069342920394/3047973718629927/?type=3&theater

⁴⁰ www.facebook.com/waterfrontbia/photos/a.105069342920394/2208424772584830/?type=3&theater

⁴¹ <http://partners.seetorontonow.com/about/#our-mandate>

⁴² www.seetorontonow.com/explore-toronto/neighbourhoods/

⁴³ www.seetorontonow.com/maps-and-guides/

available in terms of hosting events and press trips themselves. There were also some experiences of partnering with Destination Toronto on press trips to bring niche interest writers and social media influencers to the area.

However, it is important to note that some BIAs, notably smaller organizations, reported that their experiences with Destination Toronto had failed to deliver a return on investment, and they felt their resources were more efficiently used elsewhere.

3.5.2 Other BIAs as Partners

Many BIAs talked about informal relationships with other organizations, especially at the TABIA member meetings, and a private Facebook group where BIA staff could share recommendations and advice. One group of BIAs reported meeting on a more regular basis to share data and strategies.

Some respondents reported sharing posts and links from other BIAs on their own social media, but generally this was not a common practice. A few respondents viewed other BIAs in a competitive light and were not keen on the idea of sharing strategies and collaboration.

A possible strategy for BIAs is to cross-market, as actual and potential visitors are very likely to be curious about several neighbourhoods, not just one. Depending on the target market, tourism organizations are often at once both competitors and collaborators. Regional visitors are often repeat visitors to Toronto and may prefer to visit multiple neighbourhoods on the same visit, or return to a different area of Toronto for a future trip. BIAs could work together to share resources, data and insights to jointly promote their communities to some markets, whether as a single visit or with messaging that suggests “if you enjoyed visiting there this time, why not try here next time?”.

3.6 Listing Sites

A number of BIAs mentioned their use of listing sites for events including, but not limited to Now Magazine⁴⁴, the City of Toronto events calendar⁴⁵, and different niche groups including websites for parents and families.

3.7 Visitor Centres

The St Lawrence Market BIA shared that they had engaged Ontario Travel Information Centres to

⁴⁴ nowtoronto.com/search/event/all/#page=1

⁴⁵ www.toronto.ca/explore-enjoy/festivals-events/

distribute information in literature racks and at digital visitor information kiosks at highway stops around Ontario. In addition, there is a physical visitor information centre within Union Station that distributes information⁴⁶.

3.8 Merchandise

Some BIAs were active in selling and giving away branded merchandise. One BIA for example had a ‘swag shop’ where they sell neighbourhood t-shirts, flags, mugs and more which are branded with their distinctive logo.

The sale of branded food is intriguing, as it can be sold outside of the geographical area of the BIA, raising awareness and interest. One example from outside of Toronto is the Business Improvements District (BID) in Little Italy in the Bronx BID in New York City who sell their own branded tomato sauces⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ www.tourismpartners.com/en/partnership-opportunities/ontario-travel-information-centres

⁴⁷ www.bronxlittleitaly.com/little-italy-in-the-bronx-sauce/

4 Types of visitors

Throughout conversations with BIA representatives, many different types of visitors on non-routine trips were mentioned. Understanding visitors' motivations and expectations, how they evaluate their experiences and what stories they share will be valuable to inform strategic direction to effectively manage the impacts. The following provides a short summary on these visitor types. Some of the categories overlap, and are not always mutually exclusive, and not all groups will be relevant to all BIAs.

4.1 Other Torontonians

Other Torontonians who live outside of the direct neighbourhood are a strong market for many BIAs. They are large in volume and have influence over their own networks within Toronto as they share their stories and experiences of restaurants, events, and local businesses. Understanding these visitors can help BIAs better engage how their area's image is being constructed and shared among their networks. With local markets, messaging that inspires urgency is common, giving a strong reason to visit a specific place at certain time, rather than 'some-day'. For example, working with members to offer and promote special events and reasons to visit, extend or increase their routine visits, or bring new people with them, could be worthy of consideration.

4.2 Festival visitors

Festivals attract many people at specific times. A strategy some BIAs employed was to encourage festival visitors to consider the neighbourhood as a place for activity beyond the festival itself. For example, encouraging visitors to patronize other local businesses during the festival, or promoting the area as a place to visit at a later date.

Giving festival visitors a reason to share their experiences with their own personal networks, whether in person or online, is also a useful idea which can cultivate a meaningful and positive image of the area.

A useful approach is to consider how to encourage visitors of existing events to further their connection with the community, create interest in future trips, and give them reason to share information. Creating 'instagrammable' opportunities, with art installations, animations, unusual food etc. that is consistent with the overall desired image of the area can help generate word-of-mouth marketing and awareness.

4.3 Visiting friends and relatives

Residents influence visitor activity in their own communities, as they invite, host, and guide their friends and relatives visiting from other places. Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel is a very intriguing opportunity for some BIAs to bring visitors to their communities and engage residents at the same time. Although several BIA respondents had considered this type of visitor group, none had actively engaged them.

For a resident, hosting a visitor positions them as a guide and expert, and for the visitor the feeling of being shown around by a local adds authenticity to the experience. Leveraging this context has potential, where the host can provide a special experience or value that the visitor would otherwise be unable to access.

Residents are ambassadors for their neighbourhoods. They want to show the best of their area as a reflection of themselves. Personal relationships are also a powerful motivator for visitors choosing a destination for a day trip or longer vacation. Residents bring visitors to areas that they would otherwise not consider. Residents know their areas, understand their guests' interests, and can give authentic experiences of their favourite local businesses, events, and places. Being a host gives reason for the resident to refresh their own awareness of the community as a place to enjoy. Because VFR visitors are guided by locals, they are less likely to overwhelm a community, or cause demand that will substantially alter the cultural character of the area.

Giving residents reason and encouragement to invite and host friends and relatives from other parts of Toronto or beyond could be very beneficial for some BIAs. Communications with residents that offer some emotional messaging, incentive, or added value if they attend an event or business with a visitor could leverage relationships within the community to bring visitors, encourage resident activity and attachment to their community, and increase cultural and economic activity^{48, 49}.

There is potential for some BIAs to promote their area to residents of other Toronto areas as a place to visit with their out of town visitors. Communicating the alternative activities beyond the traditional 'tourism' attractions to residents who have the same friends and family visit multiple times is a potential opportunity.

Finding local ambassadors who are organically influencing perceptions of the area, and

⁴⁸ www.researchgate.net/publication/279515754_Handout_for_Hosts_and_Guests_Event_May_1st_2015_2_page_summary_of_research

⁴⁹ www.researchgate.net/publication/271758937_Visiting_friends_and_relatives_tourism_and_implications_for_community_capital

fostering a culture where they are supported, informed, and potentially even incentivised by the BIA to invite people to the neighbourhood is a potentially intriguing strategy.

Some initial ideas include passport schemes, where residents register as a host, and then show up at stores or events with a visitor and receive a discount, or special treatment that adds value to the experience. It emphasises the value of the relationship between host and guest, makes it more memorable and share-worthy, and helps the resident feel pride and connection to their local business community.

An excellent example of a VFR marketing campaign is from Victoria, Australia. A partnership between regional towns around Melbourne and the transit provider resulted in the ‘Guilt Trip’⁵⁰ campaign, where parents of young adults living in the city could send their grown children pre-paid train tickets. By identifying the relationships that residents have with people from outside of the area, innovative messaging could be used to strike a chord with locals to invite their friends and relatives. For example, residents who are university students, young families in their first home, grandparents, or immigrants etc. all have identifiable relationships with specific friend and family groups that could be engaged by BIAs.

New residents to an area, whether from another part of Toronto, elsewhere in Canada, or overseas, are a potential group to focus on for two main reasons. First, because they are unfamiliar with the community and what is on offer, and communications and offers addressed to them specifically could help instil a sense of attachment and welcome^{51, 52}. Secondly, they are also more likely to have visitors keen to see their new home and neighbourhood, which could be an opportunity for BIAs.

4.3.1 Toronto Residents and their Hosting Behaviour: Some Data

A 2016 survey of more than 2,000 residents of the GTA⁵³ provides some insight into the hosting behaviour of Toronto residents. In total, 63% reported they had ‘hosted a friend or relative from out-of-town in the last 12 months’ and 80% in the last three years. It is important to note that this data does include hosting friends or relatives ‘visiting from out of town’, and not other parts of Toronto for day visits.

⁵⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chiy7I7D1rk&t=5s

⁵¹ [Griffin, T., & Guttentag, D. \(2017\). The VFR Hosting Activity of Immigrant and Canadian-Born Residents.](#)

⁵² [Griffin, T., & Guttentag, D. \(2020\). Identifying active resident hosts of VFR visitors. *International Journal of Tourism Research*.](#)

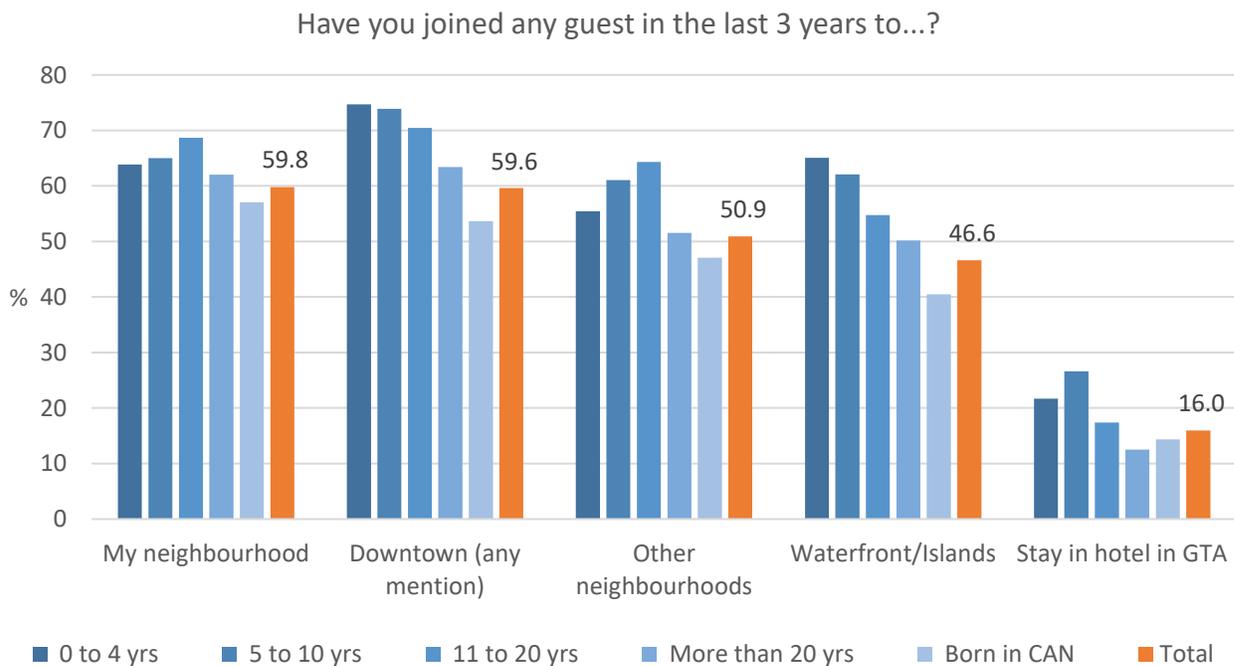
⁵³ drive.google.com/file/d/0BwpwAzNo159DeXluNUZNUWIQZUU/view?usp=sharing

Close to 80% of hosts took at least one paid vacation day to host a visitor in the last 12 months, demonstrating a level of investment in their role.

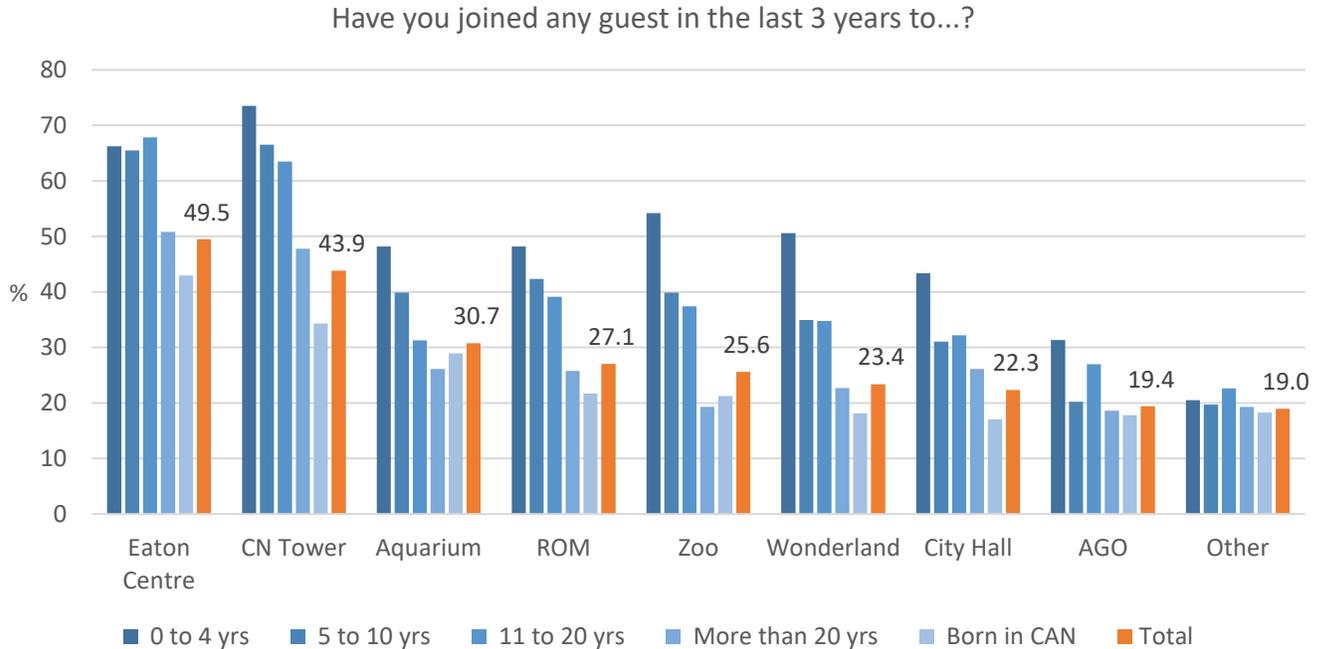
The charts below show all respondents who had hosted in the last three years. Respondents were split into immigrants and those born in Canada. Immigrants are further categorised by how long they have lived in Canada; either 0 to 4 years, 5 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, or more than 20 years.

The results broadly found that people who have lived in the country for the shortest period of time hosted more frequently and participated in more activities with their guests.

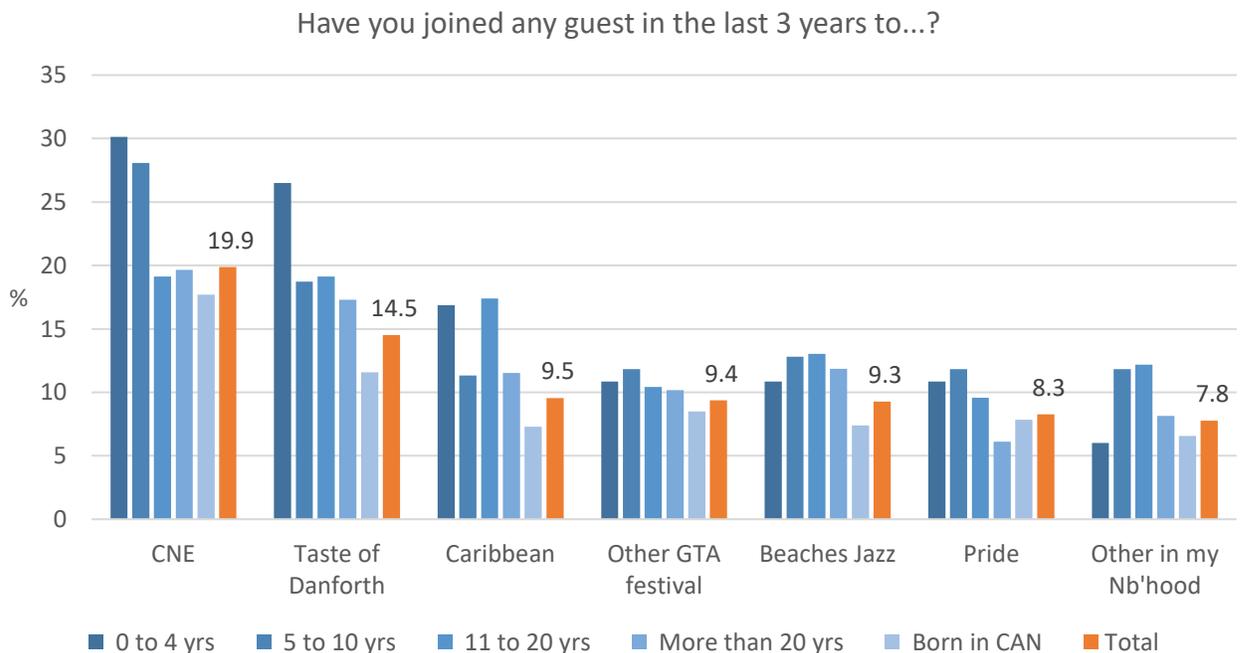
Within the last three years 59.8% said they explored their own neighbourhood while hosting their guests, 59.6% visited at least one Downtown area, 50.9% had also explored ‘other’ neighbourhoods in Toronto, and 46.6% went to the Waterfront and/or Islands. For the more traditional tourist areas, Downtown and Waterfront/Islands, more recent immigrants reported higher visitation numbers, whereas for immigrants who had stayed in Canada for a longer time gave the highest numbers for their own and other neighbourhoods. This demonstrates that in the first years immigrants as hosts are having a more typical vacation in their own city, visiting the iconic tourism attractions, whereas after some time people are more likely to want to explore their city.



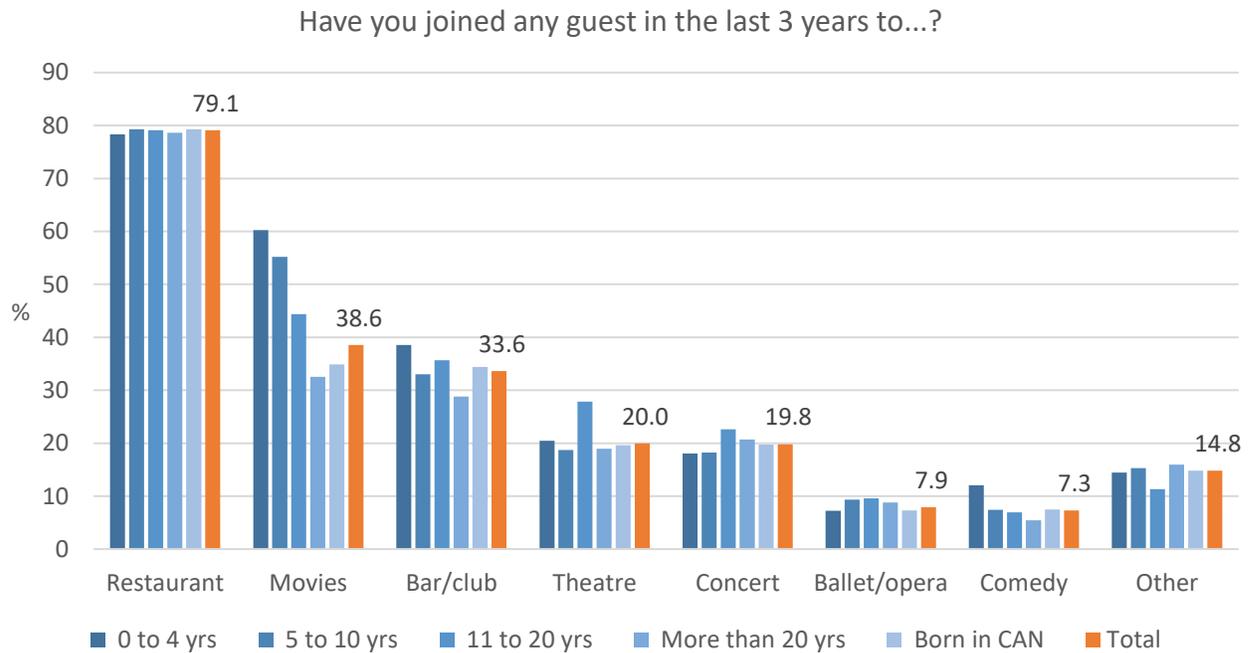
Many hosts reported visiting some of the city’s major attractions with a guest within the last three years. Notably, the numbers for more recently arrived immigrants are generally much higher.



Around 1-in-5 hosts had joined a guest to the CNE within the last three years, 1-in-7 to the Taste of the Danforth, and many others attended other festivals throughout the city.



Many Toronto hosts took their visitors to restaurants (79%), and large numbers have also been to the movies (39%), a bar or club (34%), theatre (20%) or concert (20%).



4.4 Cultural connections/Ancestry

Many respondents discussed visitors to their neighbourhood who have a personal, ancestral, or cultural connection to the neighbourhood. For example, Lucia Huang, Operations Manager with the Chinatown BIA described how a man who lived in the Toronto region, originally from China, called as he wanted to bring his Canadian born grandchildren to a festival; “they never had a chance to know his culture, his background, so he’s thanking me for this festival... he said ‘I wanted to bring them to participate in this event so they know how we celebrate Chinese New Year’”.

Gwen Bang, Chair of the Kensington Market BIA, talked about the many people who live in the GTA “that used to come to the market or lived in the market before, now they’re no longer students and they have their own career, but they come and visit the market all the time”.

Understanding which groups have an emotional connection to the area, what that connection is, how to communicate with them, and how to provide experiences that interest them, is a potential opportunity for some BIAs.

4.5 Groups from Schools, Churches, and Associations

The Village of Islington BIA actively engaged groups from churches, senior social clubs, retired teacher groups and more, who would travel from other parts of Toronto and beyond to tour their murals. The BIA worked with networks such as Probus⁵⁴, who share their experiences amongst themselves, leveraging the word-of-mouth marketing of the group.

Finding organizations and groups who have niche interests in the specific offerings of a neighbourhood and have their own culture of travelling and visiting is a possible strategy for some BIAs.

4.6 Airbnb

Airbnb is the largest online platform for short-term rentals, and there are varying implications for different neighbourhoods. The City of Toronto recently implemented new policies, which mean that only primary residences can be rented on Airbnb and similar platforms, for a maximum of 180 days per year, or up to three bedrooms in their primary residence for a maximum of 28 consecutive nights⁵⁵. Advocates of the regulations suggest this will improve the housing supply for local people by removing ‘ghost hotels’⁵⁶. In some places, short term rentals have been blamed in part for incidents of ‘overtourism’, where the number of visitors in one place at one time brings many negative impacts for local residents. This can lead to neighbourhoods changing drastically, as landlords seek the higher profits from visitors, pricing out locals, and then changing the demand and types of services offered in the community from residential to tourism⁵⁷. In Downtown Toronto, the rise of Airbnb has coincided with a decline in mid-range hotel rooms that have often been converted into apartments, coupled with a rise in the number of high-end smaller hotels⁵⁸.

However, for areas with few hotels there are opportunities to host overnight visitors who might otherwise not stay in the area. Visitors of friends and family may choose to stay in an Airbnb, perhaps staying longer in the neighbourhood rather than elsewhere. As well, visitors attracted to other areas of the city may decide to stay in an Airbnb in any neighbourhood, perhaps for cost reasons, or because they prefer to stay in a house or apartment rather than a hotel room.

⁵⁴ www.probus.org/

⁵⁵ www.toronto.ca/community-people/housing-shelter/rental-housing-standards/short-term-rentals/

⁵⁶ fairbnb.ca/

⁵⁷ skift.com/2017/08/03/barcelona-overtourism-airbnb-and-short-term-rentals/

⁵⁸ www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-hotel-to-condo-developments-are-threatening-torontos-convention/

Some BIAs reported some efforts to engage with Airbnb directly, as well as local hosts, to provide information and familiarization tours of the neighbourhood to encourage their own guests to explore the area. However, most BIAs did not have specific strategies or experiences with visitors staying in short term rentals.

Being aware of Airbnb in a neighbourhood could help with forecasting potential changes in demand for residential accommodation, change in community character, but also opportunities for engaging visitors. Inside Airbnb⁵⁹ is an open data site that provides an overview of Airbnb activity by neighbourhood, and could provide useful insight for a BIA in learning about the potential issues and opportunities that Airbnb may bring, including identifying active hosts to connect with. Further, there are many online communities for hosts that could be engaged.

4.7 Convention Visitors

For BIAs in areas where large conferences are held there is an opportunity to engage event planners and attendees. For example, Janice Solomon, Executive Director at the Toronto Entertainment District BIA described how they help their members understand and take advantage of events held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre⁶⁰. The BIA provides a conference calendar to members, and also partners with Destination Toronto⁶¹ as a member to distribute information on BIA businesses and events to conference attendees. For many conference attendees, the opportunity to explore beyond the immediate area they are in, and see another side of Toronto, is well received.

4.8 Employees and commuters

A specific group of local residents who visit BIA areas are employees of local businesses and commuters. Although not typically considered visitors, some BIAs acknowledged the opportunity to engage these groups.

Although travelling for work is not considered out-of-the-ordinary, there is opportunity to encourage this group to stay longer after work for a meal or event, bringing new economic activity with limited impact in terms of additional traffic or congestion. Employees can be ambassadors for the community and, if well-informed, can share knowledge and stories within their own networks.

⁵⁹ <http://insideairbnb.com/toronto/?neighbourhood=&filterEntireHomes=false&filterHighlyAvailable=false&filterRecentReviews=true&filterMultiListings=false>

⁶⁰ www.mtccc.com/events/

⁶¹ <http://partners.seetorontonow.com/>

4.9 Vacationers to Toronto

Another group worth considering are people on vacation to Toronto who may be looking for different and authentic experiences. Toronto has been welcoming around 15 million visitors who stay overnight in the city each year. Connecting with these visitors through the channels they look for information from, for example TripAdvisor, Airbnb, Google Maps, visitor information centres, social media, hotels, and their friends and family in Toronto, for ideas on different and distinct activities and experiences could be useful.

4.10 (International) students

A few BIAs mentioned that they were considering international university and college students as a potential market. For BIAs close to higher education institutions, or who have experiences that may be of interest, this group may have potential. In many ways they behave as tourists, looking for new and authentic experiences, but have the potential to be repeat visitors, albeit on a temporary basis, and bring their visiting friends and relatives with them as hosts.

5 Partnerships with Ryerson's Institute for Hospitality and Tourism Research

There are several potential ways for BIAs to partner with the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University. If you would like to discuss them please connect with Tom Griffin to discuss (tom.griffin@ryerson.ca).

- The Institute for Hospitality and Tourism Research⁶² aims to conduct research that is relevant to the industry. There are opportunities to partner on grant applications to fund research projects. Please contact Tom if you would like to learn more.
- Our school runs a co-op program, where students work for four or eight months at a placement. Some details are available on the website⁶³ or contact Tom to discuss ideas and ask questions.
- We have many students who are keen to find part-time and summer employment. If you have positions you want to share, we would be happy to distribute them directly to our students and through our Business Career Hub⁶⁴.
- We teach classes on marketing, market research, service design, and more⁶⁵. We are always looking for class project ideas, and guest speakers. Please contact Tom if you'd like to discuss this further.

⁶² www.ryerson.ca/htmresearch/

⁶³ www.ryerson.ca/trsm-co-op/

⁶⁴ www.ryerson.ca/trsm-careers/

⁶⁵ www.ryerson.ca/tedrogersschool/hospitality-tourism-management/programs-and-admissions/curriculum-overview/