

## “EXPLORING ‘WELCOMENESS’ IN POST-PANDEMIC CANADA.”

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### **Abstract:**

While COVID has impacted the tourism industry, people appear eager to reopen in a post-pandemic world (Destination Canada, 2021e). This study analyses to what extent living with COVID has impacted the ‘hospitality’ Canadian residents have towards tourism. Canadians have a reputation for being friendly towards others (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013; Maclean’s, 2017), but some evidence suggests that COVID has affected their level of “welcomeness” (Destination Canada, 2021a). This study will help paint a general picture of domestic travel, focusing on rural and urban British Columbia and whether precautions such as increased vaccination rates across Canada (Government of Canada, 2021a; 2021b) will improve levels of “welcomeness.”

However, this study also unpacks the terminology ‘welcomeness’ and acknowledges the need for further research into ‘hospitality as welcome’ outside of the COVID context to understand the impact. These findings provide insights for Destination Marketing Organizations [DMOs] and suggest that many British Columbians feel it is too soon to re-welcome national and international visitors. Local communities still display hesitation or discomfort toward “outsiders,” which implies they currently prefer local and domestic tourism initiatives.

### **Introduction:**

Travelling, in essence, involves a host and guest dynamic where one party is welcoming another party into their home, community or country, but what happens when that dynamic is

turned on its head? When comfort levels are brought into question, do visitors become strangers and considered unwelcome outsiders? Do vulnerability and uncertainty affect even the stereotypical friendly destinations? To what extent is the line drawn between resident and visitor? Is there a regional, domestic or even a nationwide divide? With the world thrown into turmoil, this study will help paint a general picture of the host-guest relationship (Tucker, 2016), focusing on the resident sentiments of British Columbia and their level of ‘welcomeness’ in post-pandemic Canada.

There is data surrounding all of Canada; with time limitations, my analysis will focus on British Columbia as a case study. I seek to answer, as Canadian’s navigate life with COVID, what impact does it have on their level of ‘welcomeness’ towards visitors?

I utilize the sense of community theory to unpack the concept of ‘welcome’ (Lynch, 2017) to investigate how residents are navigating the pandemic’s effect on their level of “welcomeness” in a post-pandemic Canada (Nepal, 2020). Based on longitudinal data from Destination Canada, residents appear most comfortable with localized and domestic tourism (Destination Canada, 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). I will be pulling my data from Destination Canada’s weekly COVID-19 resident sentiment reports; it is also worth noting their definition of resident sentiment is “the level of ‘welcome’ that residents from each province/region are feeling towards accepting visitors into their communities. In addition, sentiment towards receptivity of seeing advertising promoting their communities” (2020a, pg. 1).

This clarification also brings to light the demand for definitions; I needed to unpack the terms welcomeness, post-pandemic, living with COVID, localized tourism and domestic tourism. For my study, I define welcomeness in proximity to that of Destination Canada (2020a) as being from the resident’s perspective on how open and comfortable they are with hosting tourists and

their safety concerns in being a tourist. As the number of vaccinated residents rises, there appears to be an end in sight for the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2021a; 2021b), suggesting we are transitioning into a state of post-pandemic. Living with COVID is an ongoing issue that Canadian's will need to continue navigating and adjusting their daily activities to accommodate as they learn to live with COVID. Finally, localized tourism is travel and tourism experiences focused within your local region or community as opposed to domestic tourism consisting of experiences focused within your province or from other areas across Canada. As I explain in further detail later in this paper, my initial understanding of welcomeness was much too simplistic. As I further investigated the term, it led to more questions than clarity.

In conclusion, using British Columbia as a case study, their resident sentiment reports show less receptiveness towards 'outsiders,' suggesting it may be time to alter the marketing approach towards a more localized and domestic tourism market. In turn, promoting a local support mentality and opening an investigation into what type of tourism is desirable in residents' current level of welcomeness. A limitation of my study, despite using six samples approximately three months apart, it takes time after each new policy is implemented or a new variant creates chaos to see the full impact in the data. Therefore, I would suggest a continued research analysis over the following year(s). In addition, more questions than answers arose from my study, including there is little to no data surrounding resident sentiments as a baseline prior to COVID-19. Without a baseline, it is hard to compare the current views. I advise implementing further research into 'welcomeness' regardless of COVID-19 as my secondary research has supported the knowledge gap (Lynch, 2017). As such, I will start my discussion by debunking and unpacking the idea of welcomeness as we know it today in the tourism industry.

## Debunking and Unpacking Welcomeness

### *Hospitality as Welcome:*

In order to fully understand the level of welcomeness in Destination Canada's Weekly COVID Resident Sentiment Reports (Destination Canada, 2020b; 2020b; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d), there needs to be a thorough understanding of what 'welcomeness' truly means. Looking at the dictionary, 'welcome' as a noun can be defined as 1) a warm and friendly greeting or reception usually upon arrival or 2) the state of being welcome (Merriam-Webster, 2021b), both I feel are strong indicators of welcomeness. Under further investigation, Puddifoot suggests community identity plays a role in understanding how belongingness, inclusion, and exclusion are determined (1996).

While themes did prove apparent in other literature, it was most clearly presented and identified through the ethnographic study by Lynch, where key themes emerged, including a sense of welcome; welcome habitus; ontological search for trust and security; welcome anchorages; the welcome assemblage; welcome as social oil and non-welcome (2017). Given the continual research into the behaviour of consumers and understanding the motivations of tourists, there is curious neglect of welcome in the tourism industry even though the idea of welcome is central to the tourist experience (Lynch, 2017). Furthermore, implying welcome as an area of research has been overlooked, and yet, inclusion and exclusion are embedded in the foundation stones of welcome (Lynch, 2017), for example, through passport controls and, more recently, vaccine passports.

Notably, Lynch (2017) addresses the tendency for tourism to live within the idea that tourism is in contrast to everyday life rather than a continuous and ongoing experience. The

reality of living and co-existing with strangers every day gives way to the simple but powerful metaphor of hospitality as welcome (Lynch, 2017). At the same time, hospitality suggests welcoming the stranger (Lynch, 2017). Hospitality is defined as hospitable treatment, reception, or disposition and the activity or business of providing services to guests in hotels, restaurants, bars and the like (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Despite studies employing the metaphor of hospitality as welcome, the elaboration of a welcome theory is restricted (Lynch, 2017), creating a limitation for my research. As I have been unpacking what it means to be welcome or unwelcome, it is worth noting there is also a threshold of hospitality, the difference between hospitable and inhospitable.

In general, my findings address the overarching welcomeness of national identities, but that undermines the importance of the mundane and often overlooked micro-hospitality (Lynch, 2017). Micro-hospitality or moments found in mundane hospitality illustrate day-to-day experiences, for example, holding or opening a door for a stranger; in turn, you are temporarily transformed into the host-guest relationship (Lynch, 2017). Thinking of ‘hospitality as welcome’ creates a multi-faceted phenomenon infusing everyday life, so there could be many different senses beyond the traditional five, suggesting that ‘sense of welcome’ could be included as an additional sense (Lynch, 2017). Furthermore, Lynch conducted a study surrounding sense/feeling of welcome and non-welcome; unsurprisingly, the participants did not require definitions as they all instinctively knew what they meant (2017).

Thinking of hospitality as welcome brought up another interesting idea where welcome essentially provides a gift of trust and security to the recipient, which on the opposite side instills a lack of trust and security, all fundamental aspects of living or visiting in a place that is not your own (Lynch, 2017). In tourism, it can be understood that some people travel to find something

they can't get at home, much like welcome can act as a contrast to the absence of welcome in an individual or create an anchorage in the world providing a sense of security (Lynch. 2017).

Interestingly enough, Lynch (2017) address the concept that most welcome is ordinary, hardly noticed, in what you might call moments of welcome that make up your day, where welcomeness provides an affirmation of the self and conversely, the experience of unwelcome challenges the individual's sense of identity.

### *Unwelcome:*

While the host-guest relationship is typically about making the guests feel welcome in a new environment. Tucker speaks to the necessity of giving the right balance of hospitality to tourists in rural areas; if they do not seek out this balance, they may quickly experience unwanted feelings of restriction and obligation towards their guests (2016). The importance of the balanced relationship between hosts and guests or giver and receiver, proving without it, there can be significant negative implications for future tourism opportunities (Tucker, 2016). Further supported by Kour et al., suggesting that negative experiences due to the imbalance of welcome and un-welcome between hosts and guests could lead to long-term negative impacts on the destination (Kour et al., 2020).

Seeing both local residents and tourists as significant stakeholders in the tourism industry might suggest their opinions are equally influenced by positive and negative impacts from their interactions (Kour et al., 2020). However, especially since our current climate of navigating COVID in post-pandemic Canada, visitors' perspective is far more noteworthy and critical. Consequently, COVID abruptly unsettled the host-guest relationship during the pandemic, and Kour et al. caution it may lead to a drastic transformation in consumer trends and behaviours (2020). According to data analysis by Kour et al., there are three significant impacts identified

as a sense of mistrust among the host community toward tourists, generation of negative emotions in the mind of visitors toward the destination and the lack of willingness to interact with the host community (2020). While I do acknowledge these three major impacts are located in India and not specifically in Canada, I do feel it is relevant as Kour et al., goes on to address the host perceptions and consequent behaviour appears to alter significantly during an emergency, such as a pandemic compared to their routine or baseline situation (2020). However, that does bring up the question of national identities and whether this same visitor situation would arise in Canada, where we are stereotyped as nice and friendly to our guests.

### ***Outsiders, Others and Guests:***

In the host and guest relationship, two groups are involved; Cohen & Cohen refer to the binary host-guest as the cornerstone social relationship involved in any tourist system (2012). Further, they suggest that hosts are typically portrayed as themselves while guests often engage with tourist businesses (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). Therefore, looking at the idea of ‘welcomeness,’ I also need to address both groups involved.

Throughout my secondary research, this entity is referred to as the stranger (Isaac & Platenkamp, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Tucker, 2016), the guest (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Tucker, 2016), the visitor (Destination Canada, 2021a; Gössling et al., 2020; Tucker, 2016), the receiver (Tucker, 2016), the newcomer (Isaac & Platenkamp, 2016), the other (Lynch, 2017), the outsider (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Kour et al., 2020), and the friend (Tucker 2016). Though the latter, the visitor is referenced as a friend, particularly to the transformation from a stranger into a friend (Tucker, 2016). Despite the various names, all literature sources essentially refer to the same entity of tourists leaving their homes and exploring a new space (Isaac & Platenkamp, 2016). As mentioned above, Kour et al. speak to the hostility tourists receive, which may correlate to their

references as tourists being seen as the outsiders, which suggest potential threats or carriers of disease, resulting in mistrust among the residents (2020).

### *Stereotypes:*

My research takes place around the Canadian context, with a lens focused on British Columbia, that brings in the general stereotype of Canadian's being perceived as friendly; however, finding hard evidence of a sort is proves to be more of a challenge. While cliché means stereotype in French, their original meanings were essentially the same, referring to printing blocks for making copies; in modern reference, they have a rather negative connotation (Merriam-Webster, 2021a). By definition, a stereotype is often an unfair or untrue belief surrounding all people or things with a particular characteristic (Merriam-Webster, 2021a).

With that in mind, McCrae et al. suggest that national character stereotypes are assumed to contain a grain of truth (2012). However, most social scientists emphasize their inaccuracy, considering the term stereotype refers to people's beliefs about social groups, and those beliefs tend to exaggerate the differences between countries regardless of their similarities (McCrae et al., 2013). With that said, a survey conducted as part of The Canada Project found 66 percent of Canadian respondents appear to embrace the stereotype as seen below in Figure 1 and feel we're as nice as the world thinks we are (McIntyre, 2017).



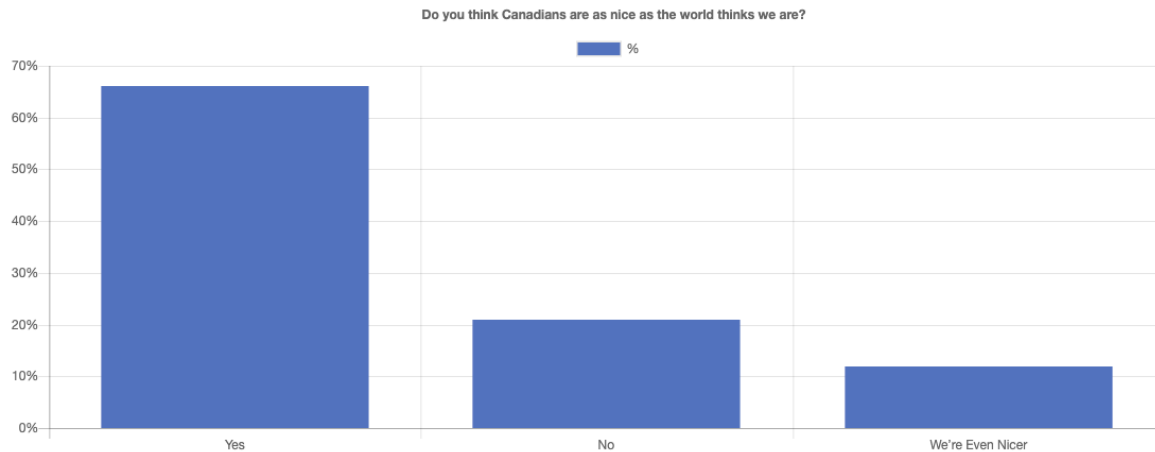


Figure 1: Survey results of Canadian friendliness pulled from *The Canada Project*. (Maclean's, 2017).

Furthermore, it appears our most notable traits of being friendly and nice are seen as cliché and closely tied with our national identity. They are going so far as to the company Roots reflecting on Canada's history of niceness in their ad campaign called 'Be Nice' (McIntyre, 2017). Defining 'welcomeness' for my study led to more questions. Such as, can a community as a whole truly be welcoming? According to Puddifoot (1996), there is uncertainty if a community's identity can be clarified in any overall objective way, much less if that should even be the goal. While McIntyre's search, presumably understanding stereotypes, led to questioning how Canadian's earned this niceness reputation and, more importantly, whether they deserve it (2017). Snefjella et al. suggest that stereotypes surrounding a nation's identity may stem from systematic and distinct behaviours one group shows in comparison to another (2018).

Considering most stereotypes have more to do with contrast (McCrae et al., 2013; McIntyre, 2017), it stands to reason that the perceived niceness of Canadians can be attributed to their comparison with Americans. McIntyre goes as far as to say that Canadian's are much nicer than Americans, specifically on social media platforms (2017). This theory is further supported by observational research conducted by Snefjella et al., studying the use of language in creating stereotypes through Canadian and American tweets (2018). To aid the understanding of language

as a form of national identity, a visual representation of the top 250 most utilized words and emojis used by Canadian and Americans while tweeting can be seen below in figure 2 (Sneffjella et al., 2018).

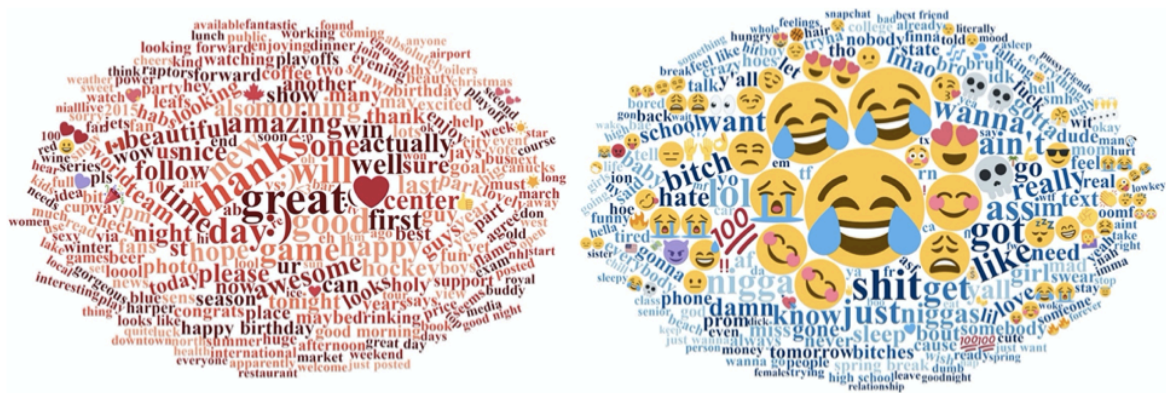


Figure 2: 250 most Canadian and American words found in tweets. Colour is for readability only. Source: (Sneffjella et al., 2018)

Analyzing the relationship between how analytical the use of language is in one country relative to another and to what extent perceived optimism is present plays a substantial factor in the stereotypical persona of a nation compared to the actuality of the nation's personality (Sneffjella et al., 2018). As seen above in Figure 2, Canadian words on the left generally appear more positive. The use of emojis is consistently more favourable than those noted on the right from American tweets (Sneffjella et al., 2018). To further understand the Canadian stereotype, outside of the hearsay of being friendly, ongoing political events appear to validate national character identities. Sneffjella et al. note a case in 2013 surrounding Former Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, becoming an international target because of his "un-Canadian" behaviour, to the extent of Former President Bill Clinton remarking Ford destroying every Canadian stereotype (2018).

## Methods

This research follows a sense of community theory, which proposes a feeling of belonging, that individuals matter to one another, and there is a shared belief that each other's

needs with being met through group cohesiveness (Lynch, 2017). This qualitative research focuses on a case study of British Columbia and the resident sentiments around the unseen but oh so present sense of welcome created in tourism. I will be utilizing secondary research to debunk the feeling of welcomeness and unwelcomeness found in tourism. Furthermore, I will pull a sample section from the longitudinal data created by Destination Canada's weekly COVID-19 resident sentiments reports to conduct data analysis. My secondary research and data analysis will then have the possibility to paint a general picture of what impacts COVID-19 has on the level of comfort, safety, and hospitality of residents in British Columbia, as well as what travel-related measures (Destination Canada, 2020a; 2021e) can be implemented to improve those levels.

## **Findings**

This section is divided into three parts. The first part will examine British Columbia as a case study and the methodology of data collected through resident sentiment reports. The second will expand on the quarterly sample reports, and the final section will address the discovery of more questions than answers.

### ***Case Study: British Columbia:***

Looking into the weekly resident sentiment reports, it became abundantly clear I would have to select my sample data carefully. Not only did the reports become more elaborate after the original issues, but as of late September 2020, the reports were alternating which results were available from weekly to bi-weekly (Destination Canada, 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). With that said, regardless of the questions being asked, Destination Canada is still seeking the same objective to understand how safe each province/region residents are feeling towards travelling to different places (Destination Canada, 2020a). Therefore, the respondents

were requested to rate their level of agreement with the following five statements (Destination Canada, 2020a):

- *I feel safe to travel to communities near me*
- *I feel safe to travel to communities in my province*
- *I feel safe to travel to other provinces or territories in Canada*
- *I feel safe to travel to the United States*
- *I feel safe to travel internationally*

Destination Canada accounts for approximately ~1,800 respondents to the resident sentiment questions asked by Leger, a market research provider, weekly through an online methodology (2020a). At the same time, the study is weighted to represent the Canadian population according to the census data, excluding the northern territories due to sampling feasibility (Destination Canada, 2020a). Destination Canada has also implemented a minimum of n=200 respondents every week from each province; as seen below in Table 1 and Table 2, British Columbia typically sits between 200 and 204 respondents weekly (2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d).

### ***Sample Reports:***

The six weekly COVID resident sentiment reports I chose for my sample study are approximately three months of separation between them; however, the exact date had to be altered to select the report with the corresponding questions. Every week the respondents are asked a set of five statements surrounding two separate questions. For example, weekly, 'I feel

safe to travel...’ is always asked, while they alternated the second question between ‘level of welcome’ and ‘seeing advertising ‘(Destination Canada, 2020b).

Destination Canada also broke down their results into rural (~60) and urban (~130); on average rural residents prefer to travel within their region and province and feel more welcoming towards localized and domestic visitors (2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). Urban residents also prefer local and domestic, although their attitudes towards travelling to and welcoming from national and international are much higher than the rural sentiments (Destination Canada, 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). A warning attached to the reports saying that any results from locations less than n=100 should be interpreted with caution (Destination Canada, 2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). Considering the warning and due to the time constraints to expanding my study, I have decided rural and urban connections to be outside the scope of this research.

<i>I feel safe to travel</i>						
Dates Selected from Resident Sentiment	29-Sep-20	08-Dec-20	23-Mar-21	15-Jun-21	07-Sep-21	16-Nov-21
<i>(number of people)</i>	200	204	200	200	201	201
I feel safe to travel to communities near me	78%	61%	80%	85%	83%	86%
I feel safe to travel to communities in my province	62%	46%	65%	76%	70%	78%
I feel safe to travel to other provinces/territories in Canada	37%	20%	36%	47%	49%	63%
I feel safe to travel to the United States	8%	11%	11%	32%	20%	30%
I feel safe to travel internationally	6%	10%	15%	25%	19%	33%

Table 1: Data from BC resident sentiments around safety, created from Destination Canada Reports

<i>Level of Welcome Towards Visitors</i>						
Dates Selected from Resident Sentiment	29-Sep-20	08-Dec-20	23-Mar-21	15-Jun-21	07-Sep-21	16-Nov-21
<i>(number of people)</i>	200	204	200	200	201	201
From other communities near me	66%	52%	62%	74%	74%	75%
From other parts of my province	51%	34%	43%	66%	60%	67%
From other parts of Canada	35%	19%	25%	43%	46%	59%
From the United States	8%	8%	10%	25%	22%	34%
From other countries	8%	9%	13%	22%	19%	34%

Table 2: Data from BC resident sentiments towards visitors, created from Destination Canada Reports

As seen above in Table 1 and Table 2, there appears to be more interest in travelling rather than welcoming visitors, though both are steadily increasing. However, there is a drop

between June 2021 to November 2021, suggesting the impact of external factors such as new policies, changes in restrictions or increasing COVID cases. A limitation of this analysis is the time allotment for changes to be present in the data collected, there is no definitive scale for understanding when events will show the impact in the data collected. While the variation in the last three reports and the timeframe, it could be assumed there were corresponding changes made public. Such as available content in the news regarding travel restrictions being implemented on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2021(MacGregor, 2021), or updated availability to get dose 3 for immunocompromised individuals (Province of British Columbia, 2021b), or starting September 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, requiring proof of vaccination in B.C. for people attending certain social and recreational settings or events (Province of British Columbia, 2021a).

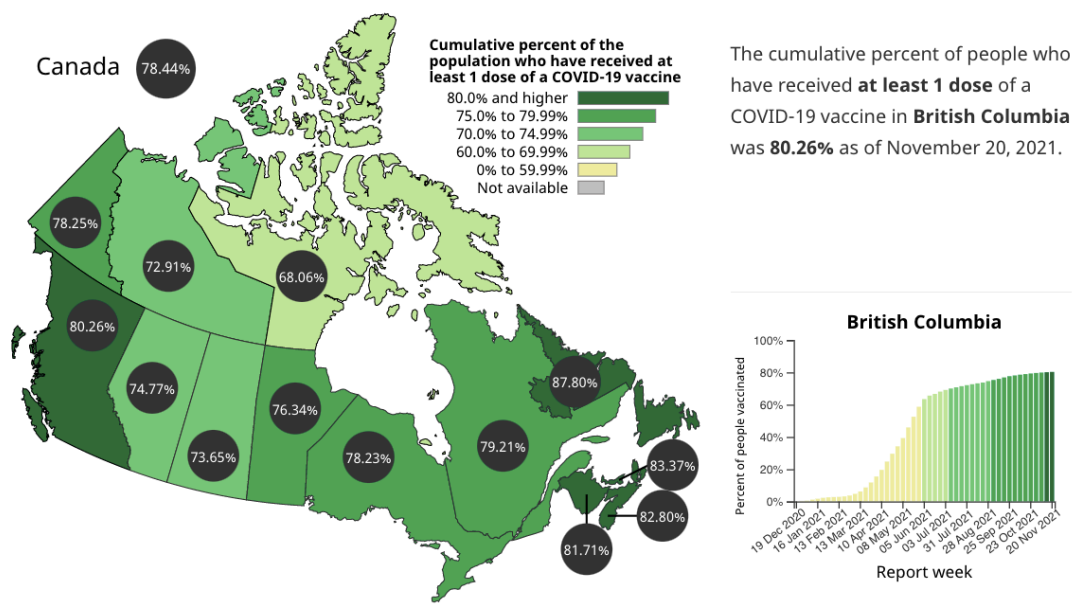


Figure 3: Map of Canada's Partially Vaccinated Population as of November 30, 2021. (Government of Canada, 2021b)

In Figure 3 it shows that 80.26% of British Columbia is reporting as partially vaccinated (Government of Canada, 2021b) which has increased since the beginning of my study where British Columbia was at 78.07% (Government of Canada, 2021a). However, that doesn't account for the different types of acceptable vaccine options or the vaccines that are not currently

available in Canada (Global Affairs Canada, 2021), but may cause an issue in the trustworthiness surrounding international vaccines of visitors.

### *Discovering More Questions:*

Despite the data currently being collected from Destination Canada (2020b; 2020c; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d) supporting the level of welcomeness of Canadian residents, that does not account for a baseline of their typical level of welcome. Who is to say that typically Canadian's feel hospitable towards welcoming visitors, without having data to support their 'normal' level of welcomeness how can we fully utilize their current levels being reported?

## **Recommendations**

Originally, I had planned to investigate the welcomeness in post-pandemic Canada as an incentive towards outdoor activities but due to the time constraints and further questions arising from the debunking and unpacking of welcomeness, that was outside the scope of this project. While Gössling et al., touch on observed impacts from COVID-19, including airlines, MICE and sporting events, accommodations, restaurants, and cruises, they report there is little data available regarding the residents' perspective surrounding tourism and the impact COVID-19 has had towards their desire to host visitors (2020). That said, they do go on to document a consumer sentiment survey in China that implies consumers were regaining confidence and a greater interest in environmentally friendly products in result of COVID-19 (Gössling et al., 2020), further supported by Stankov et al., suggesting the pandemic is the external change needed to create a more mindful tourism experience (2020).

Therefore, I recommend future research into discovering if there are specific fields within the tourism industry that are experiencing a growth because of COVID restrictions. Particularly,

if there are increased interest in outdoor adventure activities, and understanding tourists' motivations, perceived constraints and negotiation strategies to participating in those recreation trips within the context of COVID (Humagain & Singleton, 2021). It would appear that using British Columbia as a case study, their resident sentiment reports show less receptiveness towards 'outsiders' suggesting it is the opportune moment to promote localized and domestic experience, in turn creating economic growth. As mentioned, a limitation of my study is the time it takes after each new event to see the full impact, therefore, I would suggest a continued analysis of the research over the following year(s). In addition, without a baseline, it is hard to compare the current welcomeness to anything concrete, leading to my suggestion of implementing further research into hospitality as welcome (Lynch, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, my findings contribute to the literature of 'welcomeness' by making a step towards identifying the need for better understanding of the host-guest relationship in a post-pandemic Canada while living with COVID. These findings provide insights for Destination Marketing Organizations [DMOs] and suggest that many British Columbians feel it is too soon to re-welcome national and international visitors, though the trend does suggest that Canadian's in general show a continually positive and steadily increasing growth in welcomeness levels. Local communities still display hesitation or discomfort toward visitors, implying they currently prefer localized and domestic tourism initiatives, opening up the opportunity to research niche tourism prospects such as local outdoor adventures or agritourism initiatives. However, the biggest takeaway is the discovery of 'hospitality as welcome' and the importance that holds for the future of tourism, especially while navigating life with COVID-19.



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