‘Punching above our weight’: industry visibility and community engagement in rural and regional film festivals

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ABSTRACT
In Australia, the most visible film festivals are clustered around urban centres, yet there is a flourishing network of film festivals outside of major cities. In the state of Queensland, the festivals in regional and rural areas provide crucial visibility for the industry, local community and emerging filmmakers. Following the growth in film festival scholarship, and research on global digital distribution, the impetus for this research was to examine why so many film festivals continue to operate in Queensland. Using a broader mapping project as context, this article examines how the specificity of place shapes the identity of two case study festivals, their audience, and connection to community. The research identifies three key concerns: the distinctions between regional and metropolitan festivals; the duality of these festivals as both inward and outward facing events; and the challenges of viability that face the future of Queensland’s festival sector. In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused further disruption to the national and international screen industries. While this upheaval continues to affect the screen industry, it is important to understand the role that film festivals already play in cultivating and sustaining local audiences and communities, and consider strategies to support their ongoing viability.

KEYWORDS Regional cinema; film festival; screen culture; screen distribution; audience

Ongoing changes in the global distribution landscape have disrupted the international film festival network. The growth of streaming services, shortening of distribution windows and increased demand for niche content have changed the way screen content is developed, distributed and consumed. Despite this, film festivals, in which people physically gather to collectively share viewing experiences, continue to adapt and endure. They remain a significant part of global distribution and exhibition and provide a valued environment in which to screen a film. In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused further disruption to the national and international screen industries. In Australia, government
restrictions shutdown film production, forcing the closure of cinemas and the delay or cancellation of many film festivals. The experience of lockdown and the sense of isolation felt by many have arguably also heightened the importance of community and collective experience. In Australia, there has also been a rise in popularity of previously sidelined screen experiences such as drive-in and outdoor cinemas (PwC Australia 2019). While at the time of publication, restrictions in Queensland have eased and some film festivals are proceeding, the future viability of many film festivals remains unknown. As such, this research into the film festival landscape in Queensland, Australia feels even more timely. Following the growth in both film festival scholarship and research on global digital distribution, the impetus for this study was to examine why so many film festivals continue to operate in the state of Queensland when audiences increasingly have access to content on digital platforms, streaming services and social media.

**The Australian film festival landscape**

In Australia, the most visible and recognised film festivals are those based in cities. While both the Melbourne International Film Festival and Sydney Film Festival are considered internationally relevant, the situation in Queensland is less clear. Queensland is a geographically large state which includes pockets of coastal cities and smaller communities as well as vast regions with minimal population density. Queensland’s film sector has experienced ongoing uncertainty in the wake of major funding changes since the start of the decade. The flagship festival of the capital city, the Brisbane International Film Festival (BIFF), has had a particularly tumultuous history (Van Hemert 2016). Despite this, Queensland has built its capacity as an attractive and competitive film location for international productions, and as a hub of independent screen production (Ryan et al. 2020; Goldsmith, Ward, and O’Regan 2010).

The Brisbane International Film Festival and the Gold Coast Film Festival are the two largest festivals in Queensland. While other festivals exist and receive government funding, much of Queensland’s festival activity is focused on the South East corner, particularly the metropolitan hubs of Brisbane and the Gold Coast. For the rest of the state, many festivals are both region-specific and specialised, and often have varying levels of engagement with the community in which they are situated. As an example of a particular region’s specialised festivals, the Sunshine Coast, located just north of Brisbane, currently features three surf festivals: Noosa, Caloundra, and the Sunshine Coast Surf Film Festivals. Australia is not alone in its clustering of film festivals around urban and metropolitan centres. However, the geographic size of Queensland and its significant regional hubs have also established a flourishing network of film festivals outside of the major cities.
These areas, often subject to drought and rural decline, establish arts and community festivals as a means to ‘reinvigorate community and stimulate economic development’ (Gibson and Connell 2011, xv). Film festivals in regional and rural areas arguably also provide much-needed visibility for the film industry, local community and emerging filmmakers. In this context, questions of audience engagement and the sustainability of film festivals take on a particular significance that is different to festivals operating in urban areas. In Queensland, the strengthening of local film hubs, such as in Winton and Cairns, and the popularity of the Gold Coast for international film production, continue to challenge Brisbane as the locus for film activity.

This article examines how the specificity of place shapes the identity of a film festival, its particular audience, and connection to community. Two festivals are examined in more detail: the Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival in the regional town of Gympie, and The Vision Splendid Outback Film Festival, in the rural town of Winton. Both festivals are inextricably linked to their local communities, and yet have also built reputations within the wider screen and film festival industry. This dual focus raises interesting questions in terms of what can be learned from studying the ongoing importance of film festivals in regional and rural spaces. By conducting a desktop scan of the festival landscape, and undertaking two specific festival case studies, this research has identified three key concerns: the distinctions between regional and metropolitan festivals; the duality of these festivals as both inward and outward facing events; and the challenges that face the future of Queensland’s festival sector.

**Metropolitan, regional and rural film festivals**

The relationship between a film festival and its location is both reciprocal and dynamic. Towns and cities can benefit from the presence of a successful film festival through an influx of tourism (usually in off-peak season), the potential to strengthen a sense of community and culture, and the building of reputation and visibility. Much has been written about the relationship between cinema and the city (Stringer 2001; Shiel 2011; Srinivas 2010) and early film festival scholarship also tended toward examining high-profile film festivals located in metropolitan centres as these festivals typically have higher visibility on both a national and global scale (de Valck 2007; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009; Iordanova and Cheung 2010; Porton 2009). Festivals in urban cities face particular challenges, such as vying for audience attention amongst a wealth of other festivals and events, negotiating the distribution rights to films, competing for screening spaces, and accessing funding. Film festivals outside of metropolitan areas are also required to manage these challenges, and additionally to manage the tyranny of distance (Treveri Gennari, Hipkins, and O’Rawe 2018, 3). Treveri Gennari, Hipkins
and O’Rawe argue that recent research on rural cinema exhibition is now ‘challenging the long-held view that cinema and the city are inextricably linked’ (Treveri Gennari, Hipkins, and O’Rawe 2018, 3). Additionally, they posit that studying rural cinema spaces can also shift and add significant value to our understanding of audiences and screen culture (Treveri Gennari, Hipkins, and O’Rawe 2018, 3).

Small, local film festivals have also become the focus of international festival scholarship, such as Paz Peirano’s work on Chilean film festivals (Paz Peirano 2020). She argues that while less attention is often paid to smaller festivals, they can have a considerable impact on local and national cinema, which in Chile is characterised by ‘an irregular level of production, a small domestic market and a strong dependence on support from the nation state’ (Paz Peirano 2020, 171). The Australian screen industry has a similarly small domestic market, and relies on government support to boost local production and attract international productions to film at hubs such as the Gold Coast. National and local government funding is also used to support film festivals, but the evaluation methods used to determine successful funding applications tend to favour larger festivals that can demonstrate their impact and engagement more clearly through audience metrics. Within an international context, it is also worth noting that Australia is distinct because of the geographical remoteness of parts of the country. As de la Fuente and Van Luyn (2020, 14) suggest, ‘regions cannot be understood as homogenous but rather as having strikingly different capacities to nurture innovation and economic growth through knowledge economies’. As such, there is value in considering specific examples of regional film festivals in Queensland, Australia, and identifying the broader implications of the findings.

The significance of festivals for Australian regional communities and their economies more broadly has been investigated by scholars such as Gibson and Connell (2011). They find that regional and rural festivals are typically under-researched, and that ‘surprisingly little is known about their numbers and geographic distribution, their significance in cultural and economic terms; and whether or not they are absorbed into formal regional development and planning strategies outside major cities’ (Gibson and Connell 2011, xvii). Their research reveals that while many festivals are small and locally specific, they play an important role in engaging the community and stimulating economic development, particularly in times of drought and rural decline. Festivals that actively engage the local residents can also allow for a meaningful re-articulation of community and cultural identities. While the focus of their research is on Australia, they argue that the impact of ‘economic restructuring and geographically uneven distribution of investment and government funding’ are not unique to Australian festivals, but debated in developed countries around the world (Gibson and Connell 2011, xvi).
In rural and regional Australia, cinemas have always played an important role in the social and cultural identity of the community. Like the local pub, the cinema is usually located in the centre of town, and acts as a gathering point for locals and an important source of entertainment. It is also worth noting that regional centres often have only one cinema venue (Wallin, Collins, and Hull 2012), unlike their urban counterparts who may have a number of options including privately-owned infrastructure. The importance of cinema-going in rural Australia has been examined by Aveyard (2011), who identifies three key concerns: *locality*, in which the specific characteristics of a town, its cinema, and residents contribute to shaping the context and meanings of the cinematic experience; *sociality*, the development of a sense of belonging and personal connection to a particular location; and *identity*, in which this strong connection to place can help foster a positive articulation of local identity. Aveyard’s research suggests that local cinemas often become a ‘highly visible component of small-town infrastructures’, and that the ‘ability to retain a cinema venue is seen by some local residents as a potent symbol of their local town’s resilience and success’ (Aveyard 2011, 14–15). As such, it is important to consider the physical infrastructure of rural and regional festivals in which the cinema itself often plays a key part in the success of the event.

Given that cinemas play a central role in community life, providing access to a variety of films and visibility to the film industry also helps strengthen engagement to the national and (potentially) global screen landscape. However, Carroll Harris notes that as the numbers of independent cinemas across Australia has declined, ‘film festivals have become crucial … to the point that they have almost replaced the art-house circuit and come to provide a highly specialised distribution channel for small to medium budget film’ (Carroll Harris 2017, 47). Carroll Harris argues that despite the increase in digital streaming services and video-on-demand, audiences and filmmakers still prefer to see a film in a collective viewing environment (Carroll Harris 2017, 47). Her assertion supports Aveyard’s (2011) research on the importance of place to the audience experience. Carroll Harris suggests:

> the *eventness* of a film festival, this awareness of context and viewing experience, and the fact that film texts and cinema-going experiences are textured by their distribution and exhibition locations is crucial to understanding the orientation of Australian films to the festival circuit.

*(Carroll Harris 2017, 55, emphasis added)*

This research contributes to the work of Aveyard (2011), Carroll Harris (2017) and Gibson and Connell (2011) through investigating in more detail the importance of film festivals to rural and regional communities with a specific focus on Queensland, Australia.
**Setting the scene**

Having established the distinction between metropolitan, regional, and rural festival experiences, it is important to identify two contemporary factors that inform this research. Film festivals across Queensland do not happen in isolation, rather they form part of an interconnected web of festival activity that is responsive to and informed by the cultural landscape of the state. As such, this section will briefly outline contemporary research into audiences and their festival experience and digital engagement.

**Audiences and the film festival experience**

In addition to playing an important role in the local community, the distinct characteristics of a cinema also shape the cinematic experience of a film festival. Festival scholars have established that the environment of festivity and cinephilia in which films are screened differentiate the film festival experience from a regular commercial screening. In a regional and rural space, this significance is potentially heightened, as the cinema is already of central importance to the community (Aveyard 2011). This idea of community is often used as justification for funding festivals even though measuring the impact on communities is often difficult to evaluate. There is, though, a sense of the identity of the festival being inextricably linked to the location, which in turn shapes the cinematic experience.

In regional and rural towns, the physical space of the cinema can be unconventional. Alternative venues may be converted to a temporary screening space, such as town halls, churches or open-air cinemas (Treveri Gennari, Hipkins, and O’Rawe 2018). These spaces often feature characteristics that are unique to that location, and over time can become an integral part of that film festival’s identity. Coate, Verhoeven, and Davidson (2017) have investigated the impact of a city on local cinema culture in their Cinema Cities Index. They analysed factors including the physical infrastructure of the cinema, film programming, cost of admission, and presence of film festivals in order to determine the ‘cinemability’ of a particular city. In doing so, they argued that ‘cities themselves provide situated spaces that have a unique character and appeal that also play an important role in cultivating cultural practices around cinema-going’ (Coate, Verhoeven, and Davidson 2017, 164). This can be extended to examining the cultural practices of cinema-going in regional and rural areas. In these locations, ‘cinema is shaped by established urban practices but appropriated and adapted to local conditions’ (Aveyard 2018, 8).

What does this mean, then, for the engagement of the audience? In attending a film festival, watching a film is just one part of the experience. Festivals are also distinguished by opening and closing night parties, the
presence of industry guests, access to filmmakers and celebrities through question and answer sessions, and the building of festival ‘buzz’ that accumulates through extended attendance over the course of several days to a week. Iordanova states that it is this ‘idiosyncratic combination of all these elements that gives a festival its unique profile’ (Iordanova 2016, xiii). In the following examination of the case study festivals, it is evident that the festival directors have strategically shaped the programming of their festivals in order to offer a distinct festival experience. For instance, in Winton, the festival operates in an open-air cinema that is over one hundred years old. The film festival provides the opportunity to bring local residents and visitors together in this space for a sustained amount of time, strengthening both community ties and local cinema culture. Aveyard’s research on teenagers and cinema identified that “while movies are now readily accessible across a range of different formats and devices, going to the cinema in rural locations offers young people ‘something to do’ in places where there are typically very few social alternatives” (Aveyard 2018, 172). As such, a film festival experience can become even more important in areas that may be more isolated, have restricted opportunities for social engagement, or are affected by hardships such as drought.

**Digital engagement**

Another significant factor changing the nature of the film festival experience is the integration of social media and other forms of digital engagement. In 2012, de Valck wrote about convergence, digitisation and the future of film festivals. She stated then that it was her ‘expectation that current digital developments will have their biggest impact on the way festivals engage with their audience’ (de Valck 2012, 126). Digital engagement has become an important tool and resource for film festivals, with the integration of social media, websites, and ticketing apps distinct to each festival’s requirements.

In her research on film festival liveness, Stevens (2018) notes that the act of attending a festival is increasingly mediated through engaging with the digital. Audiences are able to use websites and social media to plan for and share their festival experience. She finds that “The internet works to both preserve and expand the world of the festival, adding new layers of access, engagement and awareness of events, while also infinitely expanding their geography and duration” (Stevens 2018, 12). Outside of urban centres, promoting and making a film festival visible through social media platforms becomes essential to attracting and sustaining an audience. However, this does not negate the use of more traditional methods of communication being used in parallel. Community newsletters, noticeboards and word of mouth are also essential means of communication, particularly in the more remote
areas where factors such as internet service may not always be reliable. While building a festival’s digital profile is a strategic means of increasing visibility beyond the local area, it also places greater pressure on the resources required to run the festival, which can already be precarious and reliant on volunteer labour. Considering the vital role that festivals play in regional and rural communities, it is crucial to examine how they address sustainability.

**Researching Queensland’s film festivals**

The notion of a festival circuit or network has been theorised in detail by film festival scholars (de Valck 2006; Stringer 2003; Elsaesser 2005; Iordanova 2009). As the complexity of these connections and power dynamics between festivals has become increasingly apparent, the notion of a hierarchy in a constant state of flux is more appropriate. de Valck describes this as the ‘constant positioning (competitive, antagonistic, or complementary) of festival organisations in an ever-changing institutional and cultural landscape’ (de Valck 2016, 7). Queensland has seen many changes in its cultural landscape in the last decade, with recent cuts to arts funding (Eltham 2013) leading to the demise of a number of key opportunities (the Queensland New Filmmaker Awards, for example) and organisations (for instance, the closure of Artslink Queensland). We are interested in investigating how this change had impacted the festival landscape.

In 2018, we started a project to map Queensland’s film festivals. The first step was to conduct a desktop scan of film festival activity across Queensland to build the foundations of a database. Festivals were identified using publicly available information and as much information as possible was collected against a number of headings, including: location, dates, focus or theme, the number of years that the festival had been running, and the duration of the festival programming. In 2018, we identified 78 active film festivals across Queensland, although this dropped to 68 in 2020. It is important to note the potential limitations of this finding. For instance, it has not always been possible to track whether planned festivals occurred; there may also be the existence of underground film festivals with little online presence or funding that are not represented in this figure. However, while analysing this data, it was clear that there was a significant comparison to be made between the metropolitan and regional areas of Queensland. Nearly half of the festivals identified occurred in Brisbane, and there were parts of the state – particularly rural areas – that are often experiencing very minimal or no festival activity at all.

The database is an important foundation that requires further input and analysis. However, two film festivals emerged as immediately warranting further investigation. While current film festival scholarship has moved beyond its earlier focus on individual case studies (Loist 2016), it is still
useful to consider an in-depth examination of significant festivals within the context of our broader mixed-methods investigation. At this stage of the project, these two film festivals provide important groundwork on emergent themes within the research. Although not intended to be representative of the sector overall, the case studies discussed in this article certainly establish the need to continue with the investigation, and have flagged a number of considerations for further research around economic sustainability and audience behaviour.

The two festivals investigated in this article are Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival (Gympie) and The Vision Splendid Outback Film Festival (Winton). Both of these film festivals are located outside of Queensland’s urban areas: Gympie is a small regional town north of Brisbane, and Winton is a rural town in Western Queensland. Although different in scale, both festivals are unequivocally successful in terms of recognition, audience numbers, and successful sponsorship and funding. Importantly, both festivals also feature strong links to their local community. They therefore can be considered appropriate festivals to ground the project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key festival creatives to examine their intentions for the festivals, the importance of place and if or how they are planning for sustainability.

**Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival, Gympie**

The Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival was established in Gympie in 2007. Heart of Gold is held over four days in October, and showcases ‘feel good’ short films from around the world to the local community. The festival provides support to local filmmakers, film students and Australian content through masterclasses, a young filmmaker competition and question and answer sessions after film screenings. Heart of Gold draws a wide audience, both from rural and regional areas surrounding Gympie, as well as patrons from Brisbane, the closest metropolitan city. A particular approach is taken to the programming of the festival that is distinct from many of the larger festivals in the country. Submissions are first reviewed by the Artistic Director, and then viewed in batches by screener groups comprised of local volunteers. This creates an inextricable link to the local community, and arguably this sense of ownership and contribution to the program helps shape a strong festival identity. The local community is also involved in managing venues and events, and volunteer in a range of roles throughout the festival.

Gympie is a regional centre just over 170 kilometres north of Brisbane. It is close to the urban centre, but regional enough to have its own festival culture. This was apparent to the Artistic Director from 2016 to 2018, Emily Avila. Coming from Brisbane, she identified the particular audience in
Gympie as both proud of their festival and their community, and perhaps not a traditional festival audience: ‘You had an audience that wasn’t really your city film festival audience of cinephiles or university students. It was a really different audience. There were a lot of school teachers. There were a lot of farmers, and community leaders.’ However, while the audience for Heart of Gold is different from that of festivals in the more metropolitan centres, they were enthusiastic and generous with their time. Avila shared the story of an audience member who attends every year: ‘He’s been to every Heart of Gold, and he’ll come to almost every session. He’ll try and see every film on the list and come tell you his top picks’. This commitment from the community is a key part that allows for its continued success.

Contemporary arts funding in Australia often prioritises growth. Recent data identifies that grant funding for the 2019 Heart of Gold festival came from state-wide bodies Screen Queensland and Arts Queensland, and the federally-funded Regional Arts Fund, as well as private sponsorship. The financial support received is crucial considering the expectation that revenue will account for perhaps 10% of the total cost (Avila 2019). Yet there are often limitations to these funding streams. When running Heart of Gold, Avila had to work within a particular tier of funding:

There’s a difficulty with the regional festivals that are growing to access that larger amount of money from Screen Queensland. Because there was a caveat to get that extra tier you have to present in various locations, and that’s not really viable … for a festival that’s run locally by volunteers to expand into different cities (Avila 2019).

This would hamstring many of the regional festivals in Queensland, as there are only a handful that are in a position to do this – such as major festivals Brisbane International Film Festival and the Gold Coast International Film Festival. Grant funding also inevitably comes with reporting and evaluation requirements, which present their own challenges for understanding how best to capture and report on value or success (Gattenhof 2017).

Heart of Gold is presented as a cherished institution that draws the community together. Avila recounts her experience with the festival in an incredibly positive light, and media coverage appears to support this interpretation. Avila identified this through the community’s generosity both as sponsors and volunteers. Nearly all the shops in the main street of Gympie were sponsors who promoted the festival with posters in their windows. Similarly, the festival was supported by a significant group of volunteers, including the dedicated screening groups. There was a small team of paid staff, often part-time and not always based in Gympie. As such, this means at times there was some tension at play between passion (of volunteers) and expertise (of paid staff), and most importantly, due to the pressures of time for delivery. Balancing the recommendations of the screening groups with
Avila’s industry and programming knowledge was one such challenge. Other challenges included the time spent sourcing funding and resources on an annual basis. As Avila identified from her previous experience working with more metropolitan festivals, ‘it’s actually a lot more work to try and do something on a low budget, because you need more time because you don’t have money. So you need enough time to ask twenty people for a favour instead of just paying one person.’ The potential for burnout is high and yet, for Avila, these volunteers are critical to the success and longevity of the festival.

Although the local community is often considered the lifeblood of the festival as audience goers, supporters and volunteers, the films themselves also play a key role in contributing to the intention and position of the festival. This exchange between community and organiser can be critical to a festival’s success, and may lead to opportunities to ‘co-create aspects of the festival which can increase pride, a sense of community identity and how the event is thought of and valued locally’ (Jepson and Clarke 2016, 232). For Avila and Heart of Gold, this meant remaining very aware of the curatorial component of the festival. Not only can Heart of Gold be a stepping stone for short film creatives, it also plays a role in the wider network of film festival activity in Australia. Its proximity to Brisbane, while still being located in a regional area, makes it an interesting case study. This tension between balancing the international perspective and the local community needs was something Avila was grappling with:

I’m coming at it from a different perspective because I’m looking at all the international film festivals. How are we going to stand out as a festival that’s punching above our weight on an industry level, and therefore making it appealing for filmmakers to travel and spend the time and money to be there?

Smaller festivals like Heart of Gold can assume a lot of responsibility for a local film community in servicing an audience, whilst also providing opportunities for filmmakers and the broader film industry. This is not dissimilar to other international regional film festivals which foster ‘social encounters between different agents in the field of film production’ (Paz Peirano 2020, 171). This can be attractive for filmmakers, as they have the potential to provide a different experience:

It wasn’t the reception that they were used to at film festivals … in that regional setting, you’re also stuck in one venue, you’re having a party afterwards. It was great for filmmakers, because they would be in these lengthy discussions with people who had watched their film and responded to it, [who otherwise] might never have had the chance to see it (Avila 2019).

Importantly, Avila’s comments note that the environment of a regional film festival may offer filmmakers the opportunity for deeper engagement with
audiences, over multiple encounters, than they would normally receive in a larger, urban festival.

Heart of Gold plays a role in the industry as a short film festival with a particular thematic focus. Yet the challenge of the funding realities and the expectations around growth can be difficult. Being honest about the scope of the festival is important, as Avila suggests: ‘I think there is a pull between this inevitable conditioned desire to grow, and also to recognise what is already really lovely and good about it and just to maintain that’. Heart of Gold is recognised as playing an important role within the festival circuit in Australia and many of the films programmed have gone onto larger, international showings. However, the reliance on local volunteers – although a common approach in arts festivals across the world – is a risk for the sustainability and longevity of the festival. While the success of Heart of Gold and its impact on the local community is largely reported in positive terms, the long-term impact of the festival should be considered critically. Other highly successful Australian events, such as the Eumundi markets in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, and the Splendour in the Grass music festival in Byron Bay, grew to be so popular with tourists that the influx of tourists on the infrastructure of the town became unsustainable. As Gibson and Connell observe, successful festivals do not just showcase the positive attributes of their location, but ‘capture many of the broader contradictions and tensions that emerge when local culture becomes more fully entwined with the economic and tourist promotion’ (Gibson and Connell 2011, xvi).

**The Vision Splendid Outback Film Festival, Winton**

The Vision Splendid Outback Film Festival, based in Winton, has become iconic within Australia for its outdoor cinema and remote outback location. Winton has developed a reputation as the ‘Hollywood of the Outback’ due to the success of several feature films that have been shot there such as *The Proposition* (2005) and *Mystery Road* (2013) (Goldsmith, Ward and O’Regan 2010). Craven (2020, 74) notes Winton has become a hub of production that has ‘stimulated a secondary industry of cultural festivals, initiated with the [film festival] that commenced in 2013’. In 2013, Winton hosted the premiere of *Mystery Road* at The Royal Theatre, an open-air cinema established in 1918. Over four hundred patrons attended the screening, and the success of the event generated the idea to start the annual film festival.

Vision Splendid was established to capitalise on the success of these feature films, and to build Winton’s profile as a regional filmmaking hub. The festival attracts up to three and a half thousand patrons each year, tripling the town’s population of just under one thousand people. Considering the rural location of Winton, over 1300 kilometres from Brisbane with limited airport accessibility, this is an impressive patronage
and speaks to the ever-growing popularity of the event. Part of the festival’s success has been achieved through increasing its visibility outside of the local area and its ability to attract notable festival guests from the wider Australian film industry. The festival offers professional development opportunities for local filmmakers and has developed the Vision Splendid Institute, a program that attracts sixty students from urban centres to make a short film in Winton, which screens on closing night. The timing of the festival is also strategically positioned to take advantage of tourists, and grey nomads\(^1\) in particular.

Vision Splendid provides what appears to be a vital function for the local community. First and foremost, the festival offers the community the opportunity to see films that would otherwise not be distributed to Winton. While this is a common mandate for film festivals, Greg Dolgopolov, the festival’s creative director, explains that ‘Because of the remoteness of Winton, and the majority of regional Australia, the opportunity for audiences to see films at the cinema is much lower than it would be for urban viewers’. In fact, outside of the film festival, many audiences ‘do not see another film at the cinema’. While The Royal Theatre does run a weekly screening night, this consists largely of nostalgic programming, such as newsreels and old commercials to appeal to tourists. Given the town’s small population, it is not economically feasible to sustain a commercial cinema operation year-round. This supports Carroll Harris (2017) argument that the decline of independent cinemas has led to film festivals filling the vital role of film distribution.

Despite Winton’s geographic isolation and the lack of commercial cinemas, the festival must still compete on a national level for the distribution rights to screen new Australian films. For example, on the Australian festival circuit, the Sydney Film Festival holds a significant position of power, and other festivals including Vision Splendid are forced to wait for Sydney’s program release before confirming their own program selection. Dolgopolov explains that this can be problematic for Vision Splendid because audiences often will not commit to buying tickets before the program is released, but the remote location, cost and limited availability of flights and accommodation requires that patrons plan their trip to the festival six to twelve months in advance. This also poses a challenge for the festival organisers, as inviting and confirming industry guests is also reliant on early confirmation of the festival program.

Notwithstanding these geographical challenges, the festival provides significant visibility for the national screen industry. The program is focused on showcasing recent Australian cinema, as well as supporting emerging filmmakers and curating retrospectives. The open-air cinema is a particular drawcard for visitors, and offers an experience specific to the remote location. Mark Melrose, Festival Director, explained that the cinema is ‘probably our biggest selling point . . . If you want to see stars and see films under the
stars, then you have to come to Winton. Because you don’t get that anywhere in the city’. While open-air cinemas have grown in popularity across Australia, including popular beach cinema and moonlight cinema events, the rural location of Winton does provide quite a spectacular, natural environment. The particular screening environment of the Royal Theatre demonstrates Aveyard’s (2011) argument that the locality of a cinema and its distinct characteristics shape the meaning and cinematic experience of the audience. The organisers strategically use the characteristics of the town and community to further add to the festival experience. For example, Dolgopolov personally introduces each film screening to provide context for the audience. Question and answer sessions are held at breakfast each morning to discuss the film screened the night before, and industry guests flown in for the event attend the festival events alongside volunteers, students and locals. Melrose explains that this creates what he considers a ‘unique experience because it is so relaxed. You can literally walk up to any of our guests in the street, or have a beer with him [or her] in the bar. They’re very accommodating, very open’. This approach differs quite significantly from an urban festival experience, where often the lines between the audience and industry sectors of the festival are more distinct and audience access to industry professionals may be carefully managed.

The festival also makes an important economic and cultural contribution to sustaining the tourism industry. Prior to the festival, the filming of The Proposition injected $11 million dollars into Winton’s local economy (Melrose 2019). While the town continues to attract feature film and television productions to the area, the annual festival provides a more regular influx of tourists and economic support. However, funding the festival is an ongoing challenge, with Melrose describing the process as a ‘constant task to chase the money’. According to Melrose, the festival costs about $450,000 to run each year, which includes a combination of government funding, private sponsorship, ticket and merchandise sales. Of the six festivals so far, three have been profitable. The labour involved in annual grant writing occupies a significant portion of Melrose’s time as Festival Director. The largest amount of government funding is contributed by Tourism and Events Queensland. Other funding for the 2019 festival was granted by the Regional Arts Development Fund (administered by local governments and Arts Queensland) and Year of the Outback Tourism funding.

Both Melrose and Dolgopolov voiced frustrations over the disparity in support for urban film festivals over those in regional and rural areas. The festival does receive some funding from Screen Queensland, but this is considerably less than the support from the tourism sector. Vision Splendid also has to apply annually for funding from Screen Queensland, while festivals in Brisbane and the Gold Coast are granted funding for three years at a time. Despite Screen Queensland using images of Vision Splendid
as a benchmark of their work fostering screen culture in regional areas, the film festival’s financial support predominantly comes from other funding sources. Vision Splendid’s strategic plan includes improving filmmaking facilities within the town to bolster both the festival’s development of emerging screen talent, and to continue attracting commercial productions. Melrose (2019) states that ‘Long-term, what we’re trying to do is make Winton a film hub, where it is a central location of original film throughout Queensland’. Vision Splendid was consulted as part of the State Government’s screen industry 10-year action plan:

We were one of the festivals that got involved in the ten-year plan that they did. But I think that translated into one paragraph in the document, highlighting the fact that Winton is a really friendly town for film. They love utilising the imagery we can produce. But we don’t get the overall support that we’re looking for (Melrose 2019).

However, the festival is yet to see an increase in support or resources. Vision Splendid has achieved impressive growth and visibility in the six years since its inception. The festival also seems to be of cultural and political importance to government funding bodies, given the references to its success as an example of regional screen development. However, Melrose and Dolgopolov both recognise the ongoing challenges for sustainability. The emergence of video-on-demand platforms such as Netflix and Stan were initially of some concern, particularly if there was overlap between content available online and content programmed in the festival line-up. However, Dolgopolov has observed that the festival continues to attract an audience, because they value being able to ‘watch it communally with other people, and to have that opportunity to discuss it’. Digital engagement with the audience via Facebook and Instagram also plays an important role in increasing the festival’s visibility. Dolgopolov suspects that while many of their four thousand Facebook followers are yet to attend in person, they are engaged in following the progress of the festival and plan on visiting in the future. During the festival itself, the main form of communication to visitors is through chalk boards set up outside the main theatre and festival office. This is to keep the festival ‘as social as possible’, and reinforces the live experience of ‘sociality’ fostered by the organisers (Aveyard 2011). Ultimately, Dolgopolov (2019) sees community engagement as the key to ongoing sustainability.

In a precarious cultural environment where funding is scarce and attention for audiences is highly competitive, he suggests that further consideration needs to be given to determining what festival success is, and how that should be measured. He states, ‘Obviously you look at box office, you look at numbers. That’s the really basic math. But I think it’s the non-quantifiable things. Audience experience, and ongoing social impact … How do you
ensure longevity? And is that important?’ Interestingly, a new film studio is in development for Winton, with support from the state government (Craven 2020). The implication of this suggests Winton’s film industry, and by extension the film festival, have strong potential for longevity. This was evident in 2020, in which Vision Splendid was one of the few festivals to successfully run in the wake of the global pandemic. Although the dates had to be shifted from June to September, the geographical remoteness and lack of virus cases in Queensland allowed the festival events to occur in person.

**Discussion**

Examining the Queensland film festival landscape has revealed some interesting tensions and power dynamics. In particular, three key concerns emerged: the difference between regional and metropolitan festivals; the dual roles of these festivals as both an inward and outward facing event; and the challenges of sustainability that loom over the future of these festivals in terms of funding, labour, resources and audience.

Firstly, in the initial data collection, it was evident that a substantial number of festivals compete for content, audiences and resources in the same regional towns and communities, often targeting the same pool of money from state organisations Screen Queensland and/or Arts Queensland. Screen Queensland funds a significant proportion of festivals across the state in annual funding rounds, with a remit to support festivals in regional and rural areas and increase access to diverse screen content. However, the festivals funded by Screen Queensland are arguably privileged through their support. This means the long-term viability of many other festivals is uncertain and often contingent on precarious funding structures and working conditions (Loist 2011). Funding arguably becomes a way of regulating festival significance, visibility and longevity. The markers of success or value for these festivals are often set by the funding bodies through their application processes. On a global scale, the marker of success of a film festival is growth – in order to be significant, a festival must continue to strive for national and international relevance. While the growth of a film festival can ‘foster increased organisational sustainability’, some of the largest festivals have now also been criticised as being ‘too unwieldy to navigate’ (de Valck 2016, 2). What this suggests is that successful growth is contingent upon maintaining a strong connection with the audience, both in terms of the local community and visiting industry professionals.

Given the additional pressures festivals now face with the popularity of streaming services and changing audience tastes, developing new strategies for engaging and sustaining an audience is more important than ever. Of the festivals mapped in the initial research, all 68 active film festivals had a website or online presence of some kind. Many of these also used social
media (predominantly Facebook) to promote their programming choices, special events and festival locations. Some festivals used multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). The digital presence of festivals such as Heart of Gold and Vision Splendid have certainly helped extend what otherwise may be a geographically isolated festival experience to a wider audience. For example, The Gold Coast International Film Festival (2020) has 10,000 followers on Facebook, and recorded attendance figures of just under 20,000 people in 2019. Heart of Gold has approximately 9000 followers on Facebook, and recorded attendance figures also around 9000 people. This suggests Heart of Gold has cultivated strong online engagement in relation to its actual audience size and comparably isolated geographical location. This finding supports recent research by Cunningham et al. (2019) into Australian cultural and creative activity in Central West Queensland, which finds that social media platforms perform a crucial role in mobilising the community. The two case studies examined here also revealed that the integration of digital tools is complemented with traditional modes of communication such as community newsletters, chalkboards and word-of-mouth recommendations. This would suggest that while access to digital information is important, the physical space of the festival remains central to cultivating community engagement. Of an initial scan of the database of festivals, it was the larger festivals with greater resources that were experimenting with other forms of digital engagement. This included streaming panel discussions or Q&A sessions, and (in the case of The Gold Coast Film Festival) introducing festival apps for ticketing.

Investigating the impact of digital participation on festivals in regional areas does raise some interesting questions. It is important to consider how integrating digital platforms into a film festival environment might extend audience engagement, and whether this is more significant for festivals in regional communities, given the value afforded to a live, communal experience. However, this also has implications for resources and labour. Do regional and rural film festivals currently have the resources to implement and sustain websites, apps and social media? Or does the need to integrate digital tools place an even greater burden on the already stretched resources of the festival workforce?

Notably, the two festivals discussed in this article are straddling dual roles. On one hand, they are responding specifically to the established, generous and supportive local community. For example, Emily Avila, former Artistic Director of Heart of Gold, involved dedicated screening groups in the curatorial process. However, they are also simultaneously functioning as part of the screen culture and industry both on a local level but also nationally and even internationally. Both Heart of Gold and Vision Splendid program films to appeal to a wide audience and consider themselves as part of a broader network – sometimes this can be challenging when
sourcing premieres, key guests and personnel. As such, these festivals navigate a careful line that both anchors them within a specific local identity while also striving for national relevance. This need to ‘punch above their weight’ (Avila 2019) also speaks to a funding agenda that champions growth rather than maintaining the scale of the event.

The proliferation of film festivals across the globe has driven debate amongst scholars over the ramifications of unchecked festival growth (Stevens 2011, de Valck 2012). While festivals bring many benefits, such as cultural tourism and prestige, the long-term sustainability of film festivals has also become a cause for concern. Given the increasing density of film festivals, particularly in metropolitan areas, competition for the same sources of funding, audiences, content, festival dates and screening spaces has also intensified. Film festivals operating in regional and rural areas are usually more sparsely populated, and so face different spatial, temporal and audience challenges. Both Heart of Gold and Vision Splendid must negotiate the ‘tyranny of distance’ when organising their programming schedules, inviting industry guests and managing the logistics of the festival itself. Vision Splendid’s temporal position in relation to other Australian film festivals such as the Sydney Film Festival makes it challenging to secure films and industry guests, and announce the programme to audiences in a timely manner. Despite this, the festival’s ability to attract visitors from outside of the local area is evidence of its established reputation and strong festival identity. Heart of Gold is located closer to metropolitan areas such as Brisbane, but uses particular strategies to attract a broader audience. As part of its remit to support emerging filmmakers, the festival has previously sold tickets to film students that included a return bus fare to Brisbane, in order to appeal to those outside of the local area. While these can be effective strategies, the resources required to implement such solutions are an additional logistical burden for regional and rural festivals to bear.

Avila, Melrose and Dolgopolov all spoke of the challenges of funding, particularly the labour associated with applying for grants, maintaining sponsors and sourcing new avenues of funding. While there was some support from state screen agencies, much of the funding was supplied by tourism or other arts grants and sponsorships by local businesses. In some instances, this support came from unlikely places. For instance, Heart of Gold’s major sponsor is the local abattoir. Vision Splendid’s platinum sponsors include the Brisbane Airport, the Longreach Regional Council and the North Gregory Hotel, among others. While it is not unusual for a film festival, or any festival, to exist on a range of funding sources, geographical isolation can further restrict opportunities for growth. Strong support and investment from the local community and businesses are crucial, but as Avila suggested, there could be a greater understanding of the geographical limitations of regional and rural festivals built into the requirements of grant
applications. Demonstrating continual growth in order to qualify for higher levels of funding, particularly beyond the local area, is in most cases not feasible. The initial findings of these case studies would suggest that there are other more meaningful ways to measure the success of these festivals, such as their engagement with local community, development of screen culture in that region and contribution to the national festival landscape. While measuring the development of screen culture in a town or city is not a straightforward undertaking, Coate, Verhoeven, and Davidson (2017, 164) argue that it ‘remains important, and should not be ignored for the fact of its complexity’.

Despite the complex and constantly changing nature of the festival circuit, and the challenge of ongoing sustainability, we would argue that film festivals in general have proven to be resilient. When a shift occurs in the festival ecosystem, such as the loss of major funding, the festival and wider circuit tends to reconfigure itself to meet the needs of the existing audience. There may be changes to the funding, space and content available, but there continues to be films and audiences and people willing to put in the work. The Brisbane International Film Festival is a good example of this. Over a decade of changes in funding structures, government mandates and festival organisation caused the festival to undergo significant transformations, but support by the established audience and local film community remained steadfast. Even when the festival was cancelled entirely, a new festival was established to serve the existing audience. This arguably demonstrates that once a film festival community has been established, it has power and resilience.

**Conclusion**

The current focus for Queensland’s state government appears to be the strategic development of the screen sector. This includes attracting more international co-productions, developing regional filmmaking hubs such as Winton and Far North Queensland, and increasing support for local screen practitioners. The Queensland Government recently released its Advance Queensland Screen Industry 10-year roadmap and action plan (2018), which outlines key economic strategies for future development. The priorities for the action plan are to continue strengthening the global reach of Queensland’s screen industry, as well as developing the skills, opportunities and local facilities for Australian film practitioners. The Advance Queensland Screen Industry roadmap (2018) also highlights the importance of film festivals and lists regional development as a key priority.

The unforeseen circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic have forced the Australian government, national screen agencies and film festivals to rethink their strategic plans and consider new ways to sustain the screen
industry amidst social distancing measures, funding restrictions and changing audience habits. The restrictions on global travel have caused the screen industry to look inward and consider the opportunities that exist within Australia to build the screen industry through production, skills development, regional film hubs and tourism. Investigating the significance of local and regional festivals and their engagement with audiences provides an opportunity to evaluate their function and assess their long-term sustainability. Given the current focus on long-term growth in the Queensland film sector, the project also has the potential to contribute to broader priorities such as developing regional hubs for film production, and supporting film practitioners outside of the major cities. Importantly, as Cunningham et al. (2019) suggest, the creative industries continue to be a sector of growth while others such as agriculture struggle during long periods of drought. However, film festivals clearly rely on non-sustainable funding, labour and resourcing models. Examining more festivals in depth may provide clearer examples of successful events and learnings from the rich tapestry of experiences happening across the state more broadly.

Regional and rural film festivals in Australia are often disproportionately affected by geographical distance. This can pose challenges in attracting staff, guests and content as well as potentially smaller audiences in smaller population centres; and facing difficulty in attracting high levels of state and national funding despite needing more resources to cover the geographical distance. Both Heart of Gold International Short Film Festival and The Vision Splendid Outback Film Festival are two examples of well-established events that have captured the hearts of their local communities while also playing important roles within the broader film festival network. The ongoing challenge for film festival organisers lies in finding a balance between fostering the live, communal experience unique to a film festival environment, and continuing to build the profile of their festival as significant to the national screen industry. While the upheaval caused by the global pandemic continues to affect the screen industry, it is important to understand the role that film festivals already play in cultivating and sustaining local audiences and communities. Despite their precarity and the ongoing challenges of viability, regional and rural film festivals are vital to the long-term development of the national screen industry.

**Note**

1. ‘Grey nomads’ is a term popularly used in Australia to refer to domestic travelers, often of retirement age, who undertake driving or camping holidays across the country. These travelers often visit locations that may be of less interest to international travelers, or that are less accessible without vehicular transport.
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