

Is the Sea to Sky Gondola Squamish's Gondola?

by

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Abstract

The Sea to Sky Gondola plays a vital role in Squamish, B.C.'s tourism ecosystem, and the residents of Squamish are essential stakeholders as customers for the operation. This research applies a stakeholder engagement theory to understand better the perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola to the residents. Semi-structured interviews and a self-administered survey, collecting market research, were applied to gather data related to the community perception of the gondola as well as the relevance of the gondola to the community. The research shows a positive perception that the gondola remains relevant to the residents; however, it also shares suggestions to ensure the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team does not lose sight of what is essential to the community, especially as it grows and evolves.

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Introduction

Squamish, British Columbia is located half way between the city of Vancouver (60 km south) and the year-round resort community of Whistler (60 km north), which is where the Sea to Sky Gondola is found. The community perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola is imperative to the leadership team owning and operating this notable visitor attraction in Squamish, British Columbia. A positive perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola amongst the residents is important to the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team as they rely on the residents as both customers and ambassadors for the operation. The original vision for the gondola was to provide a community asset which would result in revenue generation and strong word-of-mouth promotion to drive visitation. The Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team wants to ensure they have a clear understanding of the community's current needs, including but not limited to the local reputation of the attraction. They, therefore, deemed the Squamish residents a critical stakeholder, and this research was specifically requested as part of overall community engagement initiatives to measure local perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola.

The purpose of this research is to answer the question, 'Is the Sea to Sky Gondola truly there for the Squamish community or is it for the visitors to Squamish?' The research addresses both whether the gondola remains relevant to the existing community and how the Sea to Sky Gondola could better meet the needs of the community. Conceptually, the reason for the research is to ensure the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team has not lost sight of the importance of the gondola to the community, against skewing its importance towards the visitor. Theoretically, the research positions the community members as critical stakeholders applying a consultative approach to the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership teams' decision-making.

Eight years ago, when the Sea to Sky Gondola attraction was introduced to the community, the developers and owners claimed that the gondola would always belong to the Squamish residents. The founders determined that if the locals like it, the visitors will too (personal communication, C. Allan, January 26, 2021).

The timing of the research is relevant as the community and visitor economy in Squamish has evolved tremendously since 2014 when the gondola first opened. In the number of residents alone, an estimated population growth of 9% from 2014 – 2020 was experienced (Government of British Columbia, n.d.) and projected growth of 3% annually has Squamish poised as one of Canada’s fastest-growing communities (District of Squamish, n.d.). This growth has been fuelled by a new dynamic of active, adventurous segment, younger than the average median age in the British Columbia population (District of Squamish, n.d.).

With increased attention on tourism, in 2020, the District of Squamish shared an economic impact study related to the visitor economy. This report shares that visitation to Squamish has increased 290% since 2008 (District of Squamish, 2020). The report states that the main contributing factors are: “healthy economy, increased global awareness and new tourism infrastructure (highway/hotel accommodation) afforded from the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, the 2014 opening of the Sea to Sky Gondola, better funded marketing efforts of Tourism Squamish through increasing Municipal and Regional District Tax (MRDT) revenues, and increased accommodation supply due to growth in vacation rental accommodation” (District of Squamish, 2020, pg. 3) This increase in tourism to the area also lends to the need to ensure the leadership team at the gondola has not lost sight of the residents needs and attachment to the attraction.

Specific to the timing of the research, is the overall trend to support and stay local, and spend time in wide open, outdoor spaces, both spurred on due to Public Health Orders and protocols related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which increases the relevance of the attraction to locals. As a result of these trends, studies have shown that residents will continue to enjoy the outdoors in and around their communities long after pandemic protocols are removed (University of Cumbria, 2020; Wood, 2021; AARP, n.d.), making outdoor attractions more critical to communities and destinations. During a presentation, Greg Klassen (2021) of Twenty31 suggested that traditionally tourist attractions were designed for tourists only; the residents' satisfaction did not matter. Considering pandemic travel restrictions, being perceived as an important attraction to the local community is crucial to the long-term business' success (Klassen, 2021; Swarbrooke, 2001; Hede & Hall, 2006).

The final analysis of this research will be presented to the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team. The members include the General Manager (K. Brown), Director of Finance (C. Webster), Director of Sales and Marketing (C. Allen), Director of Operations (R. Walter) and Director of Human Resources (C. Halley), each of them works closely with and report directly to the ownership group. Using stakeholder engagement theory, the data collected and analyzed from Squamish residents will attempt to determine the overall contribution of the gondola to the community; whether the gondola is meeting the locals' needs; and how to best grow and develop the attraction in a positive and social, environmental, and economical way. By conducting the research and responding to the findings, the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team may be better positioned to adapt and strategize their operations based upon their relevance to residents.

Purpose

The Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team is interested in taking a proactive approach to best understand how the residents of Squamish feel about the Sea to Sky Gondola and its place in the community. The research took place in Squamish, B.C. There are no known or assumed issues or disconnection. The problem identified is that since the opening of the gondola in 2014, when initial stakeholder and community engagement studies occurred, the community has changed significantly in growth and demography (CBC News, 2018, February 16) and community engagement research has not been revisited since this shift. The Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team was eager to take a consultative approach with the residents by inviting them to share their thoughts as critical stakeholders to determine the relevance and sentiment of the attraction.

The research incorporated a stakeholder engagement theory (Freeman et al., 2017) to best explain and understand the residents' perceptions. The purpose of the stakeholder engagement theory is to bring together employees, suppliers, investors and the community to determine the best products and services needed and overall perception of the attraction; it is a way a business can create value for its stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2017). Based on the objective of building a gondola for the residents of Squamish, the residents, in this case, are the stakeholders who were consulted for feedback.

Attractions and Residents

There are attractions all over the globe that are world-renowned; however, the residents often loathe them. Examples include Disney World in Orlando, The Blue Lagoon in Reykjavik, and The Vegas Strip (Lakritz, 2019). In British Columbia, examples include: North Vancouver residents' challenges related to the traffic and congestion created from visitors of the Capilano Suspension Bridge (CBC News, 2017; Shepherd, 2017); and in 2020, residents of Whistler started a petition to reduce the perceived erosion of the high-quality experience offered by Whistler Blackcomb, the residents were once proud of (CBC News, 2020). Unlike their neighbours in North Vancouver and Whistler, the Sea to Sky Gondola team would like to stay ahead of any challenges or negative sentiment in the community related to the company. Stakeholder engagement theory includes the need to pay attention to the usually voiceless, distant, stakeholder relationships; in this case, the community (Freeman et al., 2017).

As one of the largest employers, purchaser of supplies, and drivers of tourism, the Sea to Sky Gondola plays a significant role in the community. In 2018, Squamish was touted as Canada's fourth fastest-growing census metropolitan area; with this increase, the community is in a state of flux as to its identity (CBC News, 2018, February 16). With uncertainty around this community identity, it was important to the gondola team to reach out to the residents and ask specifically about their perception. In speaking with Kirby Brown, General Manager of the Sea to Sky Gondola, he said, "something that has always been important to me is that we ensure we are part of the community, not attempting to create our own community." He also stressed that "we never want to be another roadside attraction; we want to be a proud crucial part of Squamish's DNA" (K. Brown, personal communication, January 28, 2021). The research will help to explore the overall impact of the Sea to Sky Gondola on the local community.

The use of memberships within tourism is viewed as a standard marketing tool as members generate reliable revenue year-round (Olsson, 2010). For the Sea to Sky Gondola, membership is through their pass holder program, which in 2019 attracted 14,000 members; of these 14,000 members, approximately 9,000 are residents of Squamish (C. Allan, personal communication, January 5, 2021). The population of Squamish is 23,819 (Chief Staff, February 9, 2022), these 9,000 passholder represents over

37% of the population. Considering more than 50% of this vital revenue stream are Squamish residents engagement and determining strategic direction with the results has the potential to best ensure stability in pass holder numbers.

Using a consultative style, the Squamish community, one of the most critical stakeholders to the Sea to Sky Gondola, has the potential to help guide the strategic direction related to the gondola's investment in the community and match general operations for the community's needs. The Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team will consider this anonymous feedback.

Background

The Sea to Sky Gondola opened in the spring of 2014 in Squamish, British Columbia. A group of local Vancouver and Whistler developers envisioned creating a gondola that provided "access to the inaccessible" (Sea to Sky Gondola, n.d.). Located adjacent to the famous Stawamus Chief (the Chief) monolith, the gondola takes visitors 850 meters to the summit above Howe Sound, accessing both front and backcountry trails, restaurants, a suspension bridge and viewing platforms (Sea to Sky Gondola, n.d.). The developers' vision was to make connecting with nature easy and accessible for everyone (personal communication, C. Allan, January 21, 2021).

2014 was also the year the community of Squamish celebrated its hundred years of existence (District of Squamish, n.d.). Rich in Indigenous culture and history, the town of Squamish has evolved from an industry culture of railroad logging to truck logging in the early 1900s, to the discovery of world-class rock climbing in the 1950s, to an evolving tourism economy as currently evident (McLane, 2016). Industrial forestry was the heart of life in Squamish until 2006 when the pulp mill left town. At the same time, opportunities from the rise of international tourism were a reality for the town, in addition to the demand for relocation for Canadians attempting to find a place to settle (McLane, 2016). As the Squamish History Society shares:

For over a century, the Squamish landscape was valued and exploited for farming, timber, and mineral resources to benefit community life. Now, as Squamish attempts to scale back resource extraction to a long-term sustainable level, we are witnessing a different kind of demand for the

land, from a worldwide interest in its natural state: the stunning mountains, the ocean proximity, the climbing, the trail network, the Chief, and Squamish as a centre and a home where a well-balanced lifestyle can be achieved (McLane, 2014).

The timing for the opening of the gondola mirrored the opportunity for the developers to invest in tourism opportunities ripe for the economy and add a community asset to this growing destination. In fact, in 2015 Squamish was named by the New York Times as one of the top 52 places to visit in the world (Tourism Squamish, n.d.). A big coup for this small town, placing Squamish alongside world renowned destinations.

Soon after opening, with a growing number of annual pass holders and international and domestic visitors, the Sea to Sky Gondola was far surpassing expectations and on a trajectory for growth in both product and market development (personal communication, C. Allan, January 21, 2021). In August 2019, when Canada's visitor economy was amid what became the country's third record-breaking year, an increase of 6% from 2018 (Destination Canada, n.d.), the gondola was faced with an act of vandalism. The gondola cable was purposely cut, and the operation was forced to close. After a six-month closure, the gondola reopened in February 2020 and experienced the busiest day on record with over 5,000 visitors (personal communication, C. Allan, January 21, 2021). The people came back.

One month later however, the operation was forced to close again, this time due to health orders related to the COVID-19 global pandemic. On May 19, 2020, they reopened, one of the first attractions in the area to do so. In the summer of 2020, despite the U.S. and international borders remaining closed to enter Canada, the regional market and local pass holders allowed the gondola to perform at 70% of their 'normal' summer business, significantly higher than others in their competitive set (personal communication C. Allan, December 11, 2020).

On September 14, 2020 yet again the gondola structure was vandalized and forced to close. It is believed that this third closure within 18 months, in conjunction with the fact that the person(s) responsible for the crime is unknown, has reduced the community's consumer confidence to commit again to purchasing memberships. Additionally, it is speculated that people are nervous about riding the

gondola. It is not only the most recent act of vandalism that has the leadership team curious about the sentiment and commitment, it is also the changed population of Squamish since opening that requires a refreshed consultation as to the attraction's relevance in the community.

Literature review

The following section reviews literature based on attractions' roles in the tourism sector, resident sentiment related to tourism, and stakeholder engagement theory and its importance in tourism.

Attractions' roles in the tourism sector

Literature related to attractions themselves is limited but growing. Research into management issues and specific types of attractions is prevalent; however, recognition of the importance of the attraction's sector within the visitor economy is more uncommon (Garrod et al., 2012). The definition of an attraction is essential to shed light on the role of attractions in the overall tourism ecosystem. Leask (2008) in Garrod, et al. research, refers to an attraction as a visitor attraction and defines them as a permanently established tour destination, with a primary purpose to access entertainment, personal interest or education. She says an attraction must be open to the public and should attract day visitors or tourists, as well as the residents (Garrod et al., 2012). Olsson (2010), on the other hand, refers to a tourist attraction as an integrated system and defines a tourist attraction to include three elements: "a tourist or human element, a nucleus or central element, and a marker or informative element. A tourist attraction comes into existence when the three elements are connected" (Olsson, 2010, pg. 415). Swarbrooke's (2001) research introduces the term visitor attraction replacing the term tourist attraction as visitors to attractions are not always tourists but can include day-trippers and residents (Swarbrooke, 2001). The Sea to Sky Gondola aligns with this definition of attraction as visitation from the residents and those travelling in between Whistler and Vancouver is identified as an important segment for driving revenue. There is also alignment with both Olsson's (2010) three element connection and Garrod et al. (2012) suggestion of resident use of attractions.

It is widely known that attractions play a pivotal role in the tourism industry and play a primary role in the overall visitor economy (Garrod, 2008; Nowacki, 2013; Swarbrooke, 2001). Hotels,

transportation and restaurants are secondary motivators, while the attractions themselves are the primary reason for visiting a destination (Swarbrooke, 2001). Research has shown that significant attractions are tools for economic development, increase the overall appeal of a destination to visitors, and increase the quality of life for residents (Weidenfeld, 2010; Garrod et al., 2012; Weiermair et al., 2012). Purpose-built visitor attractions, like theme parks, aquariums, and sports venues are significant in drawing visitation to a particular destination (Garrod, 2008). The Sea to Sky Gondola is a purpose-built attraction that connects visitors to a natural environment.

Weidenfeld (2010) shares an interesting perspective related to attractions by further defining whether or not they are iconic or flagship attractions in a destination (Weidenfeld, 2010). To be considered flagship it must have "distinct qualities, which include uniqueness, location, international reputation, and outstanding media attention, making it a 'must-see' attraction and relatively large in size and economic impact" (Weidenfeld, 2010, p. 852). Weidenfeld explains that a flagship attraction refers to the ability of the attraction to drive visitors to its location (Weidenfeld, 2010). On the other hand, an iconic attraction may not drive the most significant number of visitors but could draw visitors based on image (Weidenfeld, 2010). Attractions can work together with their community and tourism stakeholders to determine whether an attraction is iconic or a flagship. Examples of flagship attractions are: Disneyland or The Butchart Gardens; examples of iconic attractions are: The Great Wall of China or the Taj Mahal (Weidenfeld, 2010). This distinction may affect promotional or marketing materials for the overall destination and how attractions are positioned.

Weidenfeld (2010) also suggests that his research acknowledges there is not always separation between flagship and iconic. An attraction could have both high and low levels of either and can grow and reduce over time (Weidenfeld, 2010). An example of this, is the London Eye, although a flagship attraction generating more than three million visits annually its stature has changed the city skyline of London, which could result in the London Eye to be considered iconic (Weidenfeld, 2010). If the Sea to Sky Gondola grows in popularity and is positioned alongside the Stawamus Chief, it too could move into

the category of iconic over time. Meaning the identity of Squamish could be defined through discussion and visuals of the Sea to Sky Gondola.

As both flagship and iconic attractions draw attention and demand to a destination, Garrod (2008) in his research shares the potential for negative impacts for residents and communities (Garrod, 2008). He summarizes five main influences of negativity: overcrowding, physical wear and tear, excess traffic, overall impacts on the local community, and impacts of visitor management on authenticity (Garrod, 2008). Garrod (2008) shares the negative perceptions of residents on visitors to the attraction: thoughtless and antisocial behaviour, poorly parked cars and coaches, trespassing, rudeness, congestion of local facilities, and disrespect of local people (Garrod, 2008). These impacts will be cross-referenced with the primary research findings of the Squamish community related to the Sea to Sky Gondola.

Resident sentiment related to tourism

Research related to resident perceptions of tourism has been conducted over the past thirty-five years applying various frameworks and research methodologies (Sharpley, 2014). Positive resident sentiment and support for tourism, in this case, an attraction, is essential for sustainability – whether social, cultural, environmental or economic (Sharpley, 2014; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Residents can play a critical role in developing the management process and the overall evolution of tourism products and attractions (Garrod et al., 2012).

Alongside the importance of sustainability, a trend towards people to want to work to live, versus the traditional, live to work, makes community attractions important (Uysal et al., 2012). As a result of this mindset, people expect a better quality of life and amenities close to home. Residents want this increased quality of life through tourism in their community (Uysal et al., 2012). Uysal (2012) states, "A community which is enriched and satisfied attracts tourists who in turn are satisfied with their visits, catered by satisfied people serving them, for improved quality-of-life for all stakeholders." (Uysal, p. vii). Considering the business aspect, Hede and Hall (2006) suggest that the patronage of residents to attractions is of equal importance to the sustainability of most attractions and the cultural validity of a destination.

Most visitor-resident research to date is related to the tourism sector within a community, yet, research is limited specifically to attractions' impacts on residents (Lawton, 2005; Garrod et al., 2012). However, the attraction sector is increasingly recognized as the main driver for a destination's success and visitor economy growth, so it is important to consider an attraction's impacts on residents (Garrod et al., 2012). Like the information the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team hopes to gain, Garrod et al. (2012) research examines a range of measures attraction leaders can apply to bring residents' interests into decision making. Examples of measures in their work to encourage positive sentiment include a discounted entry for residents, open days and special events for locals, friends, membership and ambassador advocate programs, encouraging residents to use attraction facilities, working with residents, and communication efforts with residents (Garrod et al., 2012).

Lawton's (2005) work was one of the first of its kind, evaluating residents' perceptions towards tourist attractions on the Gold Coast in Australia (Lawton, 2005). Lawton (2005) found that residents who used and enjoyed tourist attractions, by definition for their pleasure, did not consider them amenities for visitors, but recreation opportunities for themselves, and were overall positive about how the attractions impacted their lives (Lawton, 2005). Similarly, the Sea to Sky Gondola team hypothesizes that pass holders and residents who regularly visit the gondola are generally optimistic about their experience. Lawton (2005) also found that how long a resident lived on the Gold Coast impacted their overall satisfaction of the attractions, those that were residents the longest skewed negatively towards built attractions (Lawton, 2005). The longer length residents however, were the most positively skewed towards nature-based activities and attractions on the Gold Coast (Lawton, 2005). This fact was considered when determining the data sample as it is essential to include a wide range of resident life cycles within Squamish. It is hypothesized that the longer a resident has lived in Squamish, the greater likelihood of negative sentiment towards the gondola.

Around the same time as Lawton's (2005) research, Hede and Hall (2006) conducted research of what motivated visits to tourist attractions by residents of Melbourne, Australia. Their research focussed on residents using attractions for their personal leisure use and stressed the importance of the residents'

positive perception, as it can lead to increased visitation from residents (Hede & Hall, 2006). Residents who enjoy and are positive about an attraction can play an ambassador role by providing helpful word-of-mouth feedback to support growing the business and reputation of the attraction or destination (Hede & Hall, 2006).

Residents are also important to attractions as they help balance seasonal aspects of tourism, helping mitigate the highs and lows of visitation (Hede & Hall, 2006). Hede and Hall (2006) research linked a sense of freedom or flexibility to visit as an essential driver of visitation, particularly for nature-based attractions (Hede & Hall, 2006). It is suggested that their research can help the marketers of attractions use and consider research to develop strategies to meet the community needs (Hede & Hall, 2006).

Most visitor-resident studies have applied a quantitative methodology (Sharpley, 2014). However, Zhang et al. (2016) conducted qualitative research on resident use and contentment with a local tourist attraction in China (Zhang et al., 2016). They applied semi-structured interviews and informal discussions to secure data related to resident sentiment. Interestingly, they also applied photography analysis methodology to their research as a visual language representing reality (Zhang et al., 2016). This method is something to consider for future gondola research as a collection of social media photographs may help identify drivers and areas of interest. Their research found that residents are essential stakeholders and that locals' presence at the attraction made it more appealing to tourists (Zhang et al., 2016). This discovery is interesting to consider as a positive visitor experience increases an attraction's net promoter scores. Net promoters are described as those that rate the likelihood to recommend the attraction to friends and family as a 9 or 10 out of 10 minus the detractors who would rate 0 to 6 out of 10 (Qualtrics, n.d.).

Zhang et al. (2016) also found that what the residents consider essential at the attraction, like service and facility improvements and cleanliness, differs from what visitors deem necessary (Zhang et al., 2016). Another suggestion for further research for the Sea to Sky Gondola is to layer the feedback and

sentiment from their guest satisfaction surveys alongside resident sentiment in attempts to weigh important attributes.

Stakeholder engagement theory and tourism

Stakeholder engagement theory has been considered best practice for businesses as it can increase companies' social relevance and reputation (Iazzi et al., 2020). Stakeholder engagement theory, arguably pioneered by Freeman (1984), was initially developed as a theory of organizational management (Garrod et al., 2012). The theory has rapidly become typical of management thinking in business ethics (Freeman et al., 2017; Iazzi et al., 2020). The theory suggests that an organization considers all relationships with various groups and individuals, and how they interact with each other. Stakeholder groups can include employees, customers, suppliers, governments and members of the community (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Garrod et al., 2012). Sautter and Leisen (1999) summarize that there must be a legitimate interest in aspects of the business' function to be considered a stakeholder. The success of a business relies on its ability to address and manage the requirements and goals of a wider audience rather than their particular interests or stake in the business; residents are often considered one such group (Garrod et al., 2012; Chase et al., 2012). Delivering tourism products will typically involve stakeholders like residents, businesses that cater to visitors, Chambers of Commerce, local government officials, environmental groups and landowners (Garrod et al., 2012; Chase et al., 2012).

In order for an organization to effectively manage stakeholders, they must adopt three key concepts: identification of the stakeholder and what their perceived stake is; a process necessary to manage the stakeholder relationship with the business; and management of the transactions or agreements among the business and stakeholders (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). The literature argues that tourism plans will likely never come to fruition without having all stakeholders involved from the beginning and throughout the business life cycle (Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Garrod et al., 2012; Chase et al., 2012). However, as identified earlier in the paper, as a tourism attraction, the Sea to Sky Gondola has not completed specific stakeholder engagement sessions with residents since the beginning of its lifecycle.

Garrod et al. (2012) includes Arnstein (1969) theory, the *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, as well as, Green and Hunton-Clarke's simplified typology (2003) in their research, which both align naturally with stakeholder engagement theory. Arnstein's (1969) eight-rung ladder is the visual tool used to identify eight rungs, emphasizing the ascending degree to which citizens are able to engage (Arnstein, 1969), while Green and Hunton-Clark (2003), as found in Garrod et al. (2012) research, simplify the eight levels into three more concise layers. Both frameworks begin with no citizen participation or simply information giving, and climbs to the top rung of complete citizen control and resident decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Garrod et al, 2012). The middle rungs, which are more widely applied within organizations (Garrod et al., 2012), is where this research engages. The middle rungs stretch from consultation to placation to partnership with citizens (Arnstein, 1969).

The literature review provides insight as to the importance of attractions' role in the overall tourism infrastructure. They are often the main drivers of demand to a destination and can be a critical community asset. The literature explains that the resident and visitor satisfaction go hand-in-hand for an attraction to be successful. The literature also supports that there is a drive among leaders of attractions to place significant value on their residents as they not only drive revenue but can flatten demand curves and become critical to help spread positive word-of-mouth promotion.

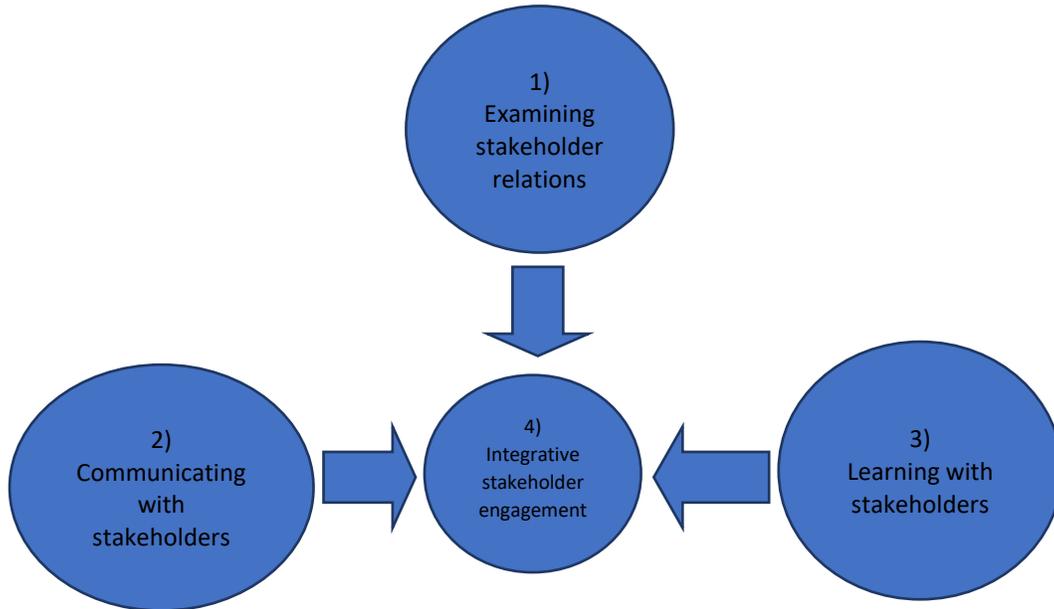
The literature related to the stakeholder engagement theory provides a greater foundation towards the importance of residents' perceptions and opinions of the Sea to Sky Gondola. The past research, theories and concept applications helped determine the level to which the residents would be engaged for this research as consultants to their community asset.

Framework

The stakeholder engagement theory framework was applied in this research to capture the desired data. Freeman et al. (2017) theory identifies four dimensions of stakeholder engagement (Fig. 1). They are: 1) examining stakeholder relations, 2) communicating with stakeholders, 3) learning with and from stakeholders, and 4) integrative stakeholder engagement (Freeman et al., 2017).

Figure 1:

Framework for stakeholder engagement (Freeman et al., 2017)



Note: This figure demonstrates Freeman et al. (2017) dimensions of stakeholder engagement

The Sea to Sky Gondola team has applied three of the four dimensions by investing in this research. At this stage, the primary research with the residents as stakeholders is learning with them. The findings and analysis will allow the team to evolve to the fourth dimension by potentially integrating and continuing their ongoing engagement.

The research applies Garrod et al. 2012 suggestion of Arnstein's (1969) ladder to determine to what level this stakeholder group is engaged. As previously mentioned, Arnstein's ladder formulation consists of eight rungs or levels of citizen participation in stakeholder engagement (Garrod et al., 2012). In addition, they apply Green and Hunton-Clarke's (2003) typology, which is a simplification of Arnstein's ladder. Green and Hunton-Clarke (2003) narrow down Arnstein's formula to three distinct levels of engagement: 1) informative participation, 2) consultative engagement, 3) decisional participation. Figure 2 demonstrates citizen participation with both typology formulae.

Figure 2:

Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) and Green and Hunton-Clarke's Typology

Arnstein's Ladder	Green and Hunton-Clarke's Typology
Citizen Control	Decisional participation
Delegated Power	
Partnership	Consultative participation
Placation	
Consultation	
Informing	Informative participation
Therapy	
Manipulation	

Note: This figure demonstrates the eight rungs of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) alongside Green and Hunton-Clarke's simplified typology (2003), and the arrows demonstrate the application of the primary research for the Sea to Sky Gondola.

To engage the residents of Squamish to garner their perceptions of the Sea to Sky Gondola, Green and Hunton-Clarke's (2003) second level of involvement, consultive participation (Garrod et al., 2012) and Arnstein's middle three rungs from the typology was applied. Arnstein's (1969) middle rungs of consultation, placation and partnership, relate to reducing efforts seeking to reconcile, consult with, and inform residents to keep them happy and encourage them to continue interacting with the organization (Garrod et al., 2012). It is understood that the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team is interested in all stages of engagement. This research is the consultation; identifying and recognizing needs and shifts in the needs is placation; and applying recommendations and ongoing engagement identifies their willingness to partner. At this level, stakeholders are asked for their views at a far deeper level and can evolve from consultation to partnership and can include proposal submissions for an organization to consider (Garrod et al., 2012).

Garrod et al. (2012) suggest that to apply this framework, management can consider using customer interviews, surveys, and focus groups impacting on product development or decision-making related to planning (Garrod et al., 2012). A consultative approach will allow the organization to use the results of the discussions. However, gathering feedback and information is critical to gaining insights (Garrod et al., 2012). Based on this model, this approach will permit the Sea to Sky Gondola team to consider this feedback and interest to shape the operational focus and strategic direction to manage the attraction further. Information gathered among Squamish residents included various special interest groups.

Research question

The following outlines research questions attempting to achieve the study's main research question, 'Is the Sea to Sky Gondola truly there for the Squamish community or is it for the visitors to Squamish?'. The question can be expanded to two themes of research. Firstly, what is the role and relevance of the Sea to Sky Gondola in the community, and secondly, what can the Sea to Sky Gondola do better to meet the community's needs?

Theme 1: Is the Sea to Sky Gondola still relevant to the community? What is the community's perception?

Questions:

- What role and relevance does the Sea to Sky Gondola play in Squamish?
- What are resident perceptions of the Sea to Sky Gondola?
- What do residents like to do at the gondola? Specifically, what do they use the gondola for?
- What do residents tell others about the gondola?
- What feelings do residents have when they think of the Sea to Sky Gondola?
- How has the gondola impacted the lives of residents? If they were in Squamish before the gondola, what changed when the gondola entered the scene?

Theme 2: What can the Sea to Sky Gondola do better? How can they better meet local needs?

Questions:

- What could the Sea to Sky Gondola do to meet community needs better?
- Was Squamish better before the gondola was here?
- If we could start over again, starting from scratch, what would you do differently?
- Does the Sea to Sky Gondola meet resident expectations? Why or why not?

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was taken for the research, applying qualitative and quantitative techniques to answer the research question. Mixed-method is applied when more than one method is conducted to answer the research question (Morse, 2016). Mixed-method is the “process of research in which researchers integrate quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to understand best a research purpose” (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016, p. 2). What sets this method apart from others is it involves the application of one core method or component, which is the backbone to the research and enhanced with a secondary method which provides supplemental data, often not rigorous enough to stand on its own (Morse, 2016). This approach provides a more robust representation of the research problem and capitalizes on qualitative and quantitative results and often takes longer to conduct and analyze (Lieber & Weisner, 2010; Morse, 2016). Mixed-method is based on the principle that methods should be integrated and built on strengths and weaknesses (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Morse (2016) suggests that mixed method is often used when research is relevant to business management and organizations (Morse, 2016). For this research, as the research question was broad and important to ensure timing of collection was consistent, a simultaneous mixed method was applied, which had the core and supplementary components being conducted at the same time (Morse, 2016).

Morse (2016) summarizes both the advantages and disadvantages. Advantages to mixed-method design are that it enables the completion of a research project in a more timely and efficient manner than conducting multiple methods over time, as well as, offering more in-depth data within the same paradigm. A challenge with applying a mixed method is related to the fact the process may take longer to conduct

(Morse, 2016). Specifically, the researcher is left with more data to analyze, therefore consuming greater time than other methods with less data (Morse, 2016).

Research Method

The research application for collecting information was by both a self-administered survey and semi-structured interviews (SSI) with the central goal of understanding data collected from each method (Robson & McCarten, 2016). As Warren (2001), in Gubrium and Holstein's (2001) book suggests, qualitative interviewing is appropriate when topics of interest are not centred on particular settings but when concern is with establishing common patterns or themes between particular types of respondents. In the case of this research, the perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola in the community (Warren, 2001). Although the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team have observations and their perceptions through seeing and hearing what is going on, as Robson and McCarten (2016) suggest, in addition to observation, interviewing allows the researcher to ask questions directly about what is going on, a shortcut to finding answers to problems (Robson & McCarten, 2016).

The research follows Given's (2008) suggestion to conduct interviews when a relationship is well understood (Given, 2008). Applying the interview method is used in this research based on the researcher's relationship with the Sea to Sky Gondola as a passholder and resident. In this case, positive community support is perceived; however, it is essential for the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team to verify the validity of that perception. Conducting SSI provided the ability to meet the objective to develop rich, relevant data; however, it demonstrated the researcher's ability to understand, interpret, and react to respondents' verbal and nonverbal information (Given, 2008).

Ten interviews were conducted virtually, via Zoom webinar or in-person. The interviewees were selected, through word-of-mouth from the researcher's social network, in addition to recommendations from the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team. The breadth of interviewees represented a variety of demographic profiles, including seniors, parents with small children, hikers, teachers, backcountry users and community members with older children. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with a thematic analysis approach. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to conduct.

A self-administered survey was also used as a method to gather data to answer the research question. As Durand (2016) suggests, self-administered surveys, specifically web-based surveys, reach a broader audience than interviewing and allow for a candid, flexible, non-intrusive way for participants to share their perceptions (Durand 2016). A link to the survey was included in one of the monthly newsletters to the Sea to Sky Gondola database and posted onto their social media channels (Facebook and Instagram). It is recognized that those who follow the Sea to Sky Gondola in the social space and their newsletter could be assumed to be optimistic supporters of the gondola. Therefore, to broaden the audience and reach more community diversity, the survey was shared through local social media groups: Squamish Moms, Sea to Sky Birders and Bike Squamish. All three channels attempted to reach a broader audience, those who may not already be loyal to the Sea to Sky Gondola. A link through social media was the distribution method and Survey Monkey for the survey data collection. The survey was open for two and a half weeks.

The overall findings from the data, completing the analysis and determining recommendations and next steps could help the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team better understand their existing relevance in their home community of Squamish, B.C. The research will help answer the question as to whether the gondola is perceived that it belongs to and meets the needs of the community. The results will help address what the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team may need to implement or apply to maintain or gain back the relevance to residents.

Survey sample size

The survey secured 1,254 responses. As previously mentioned, the survey was initially distributed through the Sea to Sky Gondola newsletter database and was posted on both the company's Facebook and Instagram accounts. The newsletter database is 47,672. The newsletter, which included the link to the survey, had an open rate of 42.4% (20,213); the Sea to Sky Gondola Facebook page has 26,827 followers and 26,600 followers on Instagram (personal communication, C. Allan, August 31, 2021). Individuals likely follow both social media channels and could be part of the newsletter database; therefore, individuals potentially received the link to the survey multiple times. The other user groups to

where the survey was distributed account for Squamish Moms 3,800 followers; Sea to Sky Birders, 275 followers; and Bike Squamish, 10,500 members.

The total number of individuals receiving the survey is unknown, considering individuals may have received the same survey multiple times through various channels; surveys could also have been shared from one individual to another. The survey is intended for residents of Squamish, with an estimated population of 21,273 which includes children (Government of B.C., n.d.). The response rate of 1,254 represents 7% of the eligible population.

Approach

The research takes a market research perspective. As Given (2008) explains, traditionally market research has been described as the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data related to a particular segment or market. In this research, the market being researched is the community. Market research will allow the leadership team to gather data and provide an opportunity to identify potential opportunities for future strategies and development; and overall, assist in a greater understanding of this critical target market (Given, 2008). Given states, "often organizations think, or assume, that they know what their customers need and want and how their products and services are perceived. Market research can deepen this understanding and can also raise questions about the assumptions that organizations make about their customers" (2008, pg. 2). A market research approach involves collecting, analyzing, and applying customer information and is used by organizations to make decisions about the delivery of their products and services (Sage Research Methods, 2021). In this case, the research objective may help the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team explore any assumptions and better understand the residents' needs. As Given (2008) suggests, other approaches, or future engagement to understand needs can be through brainstorming, creative thinking sessions, idea generation and evaluation.

Results

Semi-structured interviews (SSI)

Ten semi-structured interviews (SSI) took place. The ten SSI was less than the 15-20 initially anticipated to occur. At the completion of ten interviews, the principle of saturation was applied. This meant adequate data was collected, developing a dynamic understanding of the research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019) and new information learnings were limited. At the point of saturation, the research was not implying or providing any new information. The contributing information from the interviews resulted in standard codes and themes, sufficient to conceptualize.

The SSI provided qualitative data to answer the research questions. Appendix A includes the interview schedule, which was applied as a guideline for the conversations. As the interview was semi-structured, the order of conversation, prompts and follow-up questions varied by participant. As the essential requirement to participate in the interviews was to be a resident of Squamish, each interview began with a question about the length of time as a Squamish resident. The responses varied from less than two years to greater than 20 years. As a result of Lawton's (2008) discovery in her research that the engagement of attractions depended on how long someone had lived in the community, a variety of lengths of time living in Squamish was considered essential criteria for interviewee selection.

Of the ten interviewees, nine of them were pass holders. Although that one interviewee had previously been a pass holder, they identified that cost was an underlying factor in purchasing and committing to another pass. All nine pass holders also shared that their entire households were pass holders—the next section highlights responses to the interview questions and highlights of dialogue.

Interview data related to the perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola

The dialogue started with a question around the first thoughts that come to mind when thinking about the Sea to Sky Gondola. A summary of paraphrased responses follows.

"I think of trails and tourists."

"Nature, hike, beauty, community, accessibility to the backcountry. There is no better place to see Howe Sound. The Friday music. Just an amazing way for locals and other people to get together."

"Alpine Access"

"I think for me, what we have used it a lot for, is the hike up to the top and then the gondola ride down. So I think of it as a stepping stone for the backcountry or doing some interesting hikes up there. And then also have some enjoyable memories of going up for drinks with groups of friends and enjoying the afternoon scene. And it sounds like really fun things to do in the winter as well. So to summarize, it would be like a unique Squamish experience for something to do."

"Views and hiking"

"Joy would be a word. And then I think of the view going up the gondola, and it is a little bit of a broken time, of course, with everything, but I remember back to when it was open in the winter. We are not huge snowshoers; in the winter, I love hanging out, grabbing a coffee or hot chocolate. I loved the fire pits early on when they first opened outside was great."

"I think it is beautiful, to be honest, like, it is a great way to burn time, especially with the kids on a rainy day or even on a sunny day. I love the playgrounds and going up and just like the adventure of it. I love it because we enjoy the hikes underneath it and then not having to hike down. Then, of course, the beer at the top helps."

"Views, views, views."

The conversation typically flowed to ask about what the gondola means to the interviewee or what kind of role the gondola plays in their lives. One interviewee felt it is a nice place to visit; however, they have no attachment, suggesting it might mean more to them if they were not a Squamish resident, that it would be unique to them. Others expressed that the gondola meant a place of gathering for friends and family; a sense of pride; an essential place for athletic training; provides a place for a great workout that keeps them in shape and essential role in their mental health; it is a place to take grandchildren; it is a place to celebrate; it is a place to go and spend days off. Five interviewees also suggested that the Sea to Sky Gondola has helped bring increased awareness to Squamish. It gives people more of a reason to visit and stay longer and make a permanent move to the community.

When asked about a special memory from the interviewees, there was a variety of responses. One respondent remembered a fundraising event their employer had invited them to; they expressed how unique the location was for an event like that. Another interviewee remembers bringing a nervous friend up there and encouraging him to experience the suspension bridge. Four of the interviewees mentioned

the Friday night music series as a favourite memory, including two of them remembering how it felt like all of Squamish was up there. Wine dinner events were a favourite memory of another interviewee. A family photo shoot at the summit was another memory mentioned by an interviewee. Seven interviewees also added favourite memories of bringing friends and family up to visit for the first time. Finally, some were asked about celebrating a special occasion. None of the interviewees had celebrated a special occasion, like birthday or anniversary, at the Sea to Sky Gondola.

Bringing friends and family up to the gondola garnered a positive response from all interviewees when asked if they bring visitors to the gondola. When asked what they do with their visiting friends and family there, most of the responses suggested enjoying the walking trails, suspension bridge, viewing platforms, and taking pictures. Two respondents suggested that the best part of showing friends is having them in the gondola facing down and can point out all of Squamish's amenities from there. Some suggested that they might stop for a drink or a bite to eat; however, five respondents suggested they do not eat or drink at the gondola. High prices, lack of consistency, and being too busy were reasons not including dining up there with friends and family. In addition to the gondola, interviewees shared that they would take visitors through downtown, a walk through the estuary, dine at a restaurant in town, and tour Alice Lake as other essential aspects of Squamish to showcase.

When asked about their awareness of how others perceive the gondola, the feedback was generally positive based on what they heard other Squamish residents say. Two of the interviewees had neighbours who recently could not visit as they could not find parking. Five respondents mentioned several friends from Squamish who were upset when the gondola closed down due to vandalism and COVID-19 protocols. It was evident they missed it.

The interviewees were asked about physically feeling the gondola's presence throughout the community, not just when at the Sea to Sky Gondola. Although all interviewees answered no to this question, they had thoughts afterwards related to the question. One interviewee suggested that yes, they feel the gondola throughout the community as it comes up in conversation as somewhere to go, or the details and speculation around the vandalism, or someone they know works there. Another interviewee

suggested that they get a sense of the gondola when they see the local shuttle bus that drives around town with the big image of the gondola. Finally, one interviewee suggested partnering with local businesses for a themed coffee, chocolate or small retail store with gondola merchandise.

Along the same lines, some interviews included dialogue about feeling the sense of community at the Sea to Sky Gondola. One interviewee suggested that the further they got away from the facilities, into the backcountry, the more they felt community presence, and that is where they recognized familiar faces. One other interviewee suggested that the Friday night music nights are their community. There are not many places in town where they go and recognize people anymore, but those Friday nights created a strong community connection and they recognised familiar faces. One interviewee suggested that it is common for all families on their street to head up together to walk and play. Another mentioned that the couples in their building get together to head up to feel the Squamish community and recognize people when they visit. Three interviewees, all long-time residents, mentioned that Squamish had grown so much that they do not recognize people anymore and do not feel part of the community anywhere they go.

Questions and conversations were initiated around whether the gondola is truly Squamish's gondola or if they feel the gondola epitomizes Squamish, using the research to help define whether the gondola is a flagship or iconic. This question resulted in minimal feedback and dialogue; not one of the interviewees felt strongly about this discussion. This could be due to the lack of understanding as to what makes an attraction iconic or simply that they believe the gondola is just part of the community, not defined by it. Two of the respondents shared that they did not feel the gondola epitomizes Squamish, suggesting that it could be anywhere if it were not because there is a view of the town. Another interviewee suggested that a manufactured structure should not define a community; but that the Chief in Squamish is truly Squamish. Three interviewees felt that visitors to the gondola still need to go into town as there is not enough about Squamish up at the Sea to Sky Gondola. From this question, the interviewees added that the gondola had put Squamish on the map, resulting in increased tourism to the destination overall. People have now moved to the community, a reason for the town's growth.

Suggestions for Sea to Sky Gondola to better meet community needs

The interviewees were asked, if they could return to 2011 and start over, what they would do differently. Most of the responses were positive, suggesting they would not change anything. Other suggestions were to make access from the highway better or build it closer to town so residents could walk or shuttle there.

When asked about the best aspect of the Sea to Sky Gondola, for those that were asked that question, the views, walking trails, Friday night music and yoga, the beauty, and access to backcountry was mentioned. However, when asked what the team at the gondola could do better, five of the respondents mentioned the inconsistency of the food and beverage; eliminate the need to enter B.C. Parks for the Sea to Summit Trail; enhance the presence of the gondola throughout town; and add tables to the outside areas, suggesting that locals will stay outside and eat outside; locals do not necessarily need the view every time they go.

The hours of operation came up throughout the interviews by at least half of the respondents. Specifically related to hours of operation, it was mentioned that the weekends are too busy for residents to visit. Due to the visitor volume on the weekends, they avoided going altogether. They suggested that the operating hours target visitors, not working locals and suggested it stay open later midweek. Two of the respondents also suggested that backcountry skiing access start earlier in the morning and keep the summit open later which would increase their opportunity to support food and beverage, perhaps garnering a more positive sentiment towards the food and beverage. Increased hours could also result in a safer experience, less time pressure to return.

When asking the interviewees if they had any last thoughts or comments, the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team should hear. It became apparent that this group cares a lot about the gondola. The following was mentioned [paraphrased]:

"I am a huge fan. I am a big cheerleader for it. I think it is a great piece of Squamish. Moreover, I personally get a lot of joy out of it, too. So yeah, you naturally want to share that with friends, community or the people visiting. Hopefully, my family will come to visit, and I hope to take them

up there. I do want to spend a bit more time up there in the winter. Since I moved here, it has not been fully operational in the winter."

"No, honestly, everyone who does it loves it. I mean, there have been no issues when you go up there. The facilities are great. The staff is friendly. We have not had any problems."

"Keep doing what you are doing."

"I would like to praise the gondola on the resilience. They had to open up twice with somebody destroying the property and then with COVID on top of that, and still operating and still doing well. That is amazing. I was distraught when the second time it happened as well. Are they going to come back from this? I was going to be disappointed if that would be a thing. If COVID were not a thing and had the staffing, it would be nice to have just one day midweek for locals. We can go up and have a drink or, you know, a little bit different midweek. You know that the crowds are not going to be there."

"No, I do not think so. Well, Kirby is awesome. He is a man about town, as well, and does such a good job connecting with people when he is up there and saying hi, and always has time for you, no matter. I do not know, there could be some fire going on, but he will never let you know that. He is so good that way. He has been the face of the gondola through all of this, too. However, everyone, everyone there is super nice."

"The Chief is truly Squamish."

"The gondola is another thing you know that we are fortunate enough to have passes. Membership, the membership price is fine. Right, and that is their marketing tool."

"Once we are there, we could spend money there, but I do not buy trinkets."

"If they could keep doing community events and think outside the box, and they all already do, but they need to, you know, to keep going at it. Because Whistler Blackcomb stopped doing it, and it was noticeable."

The interviewees were asked about their vision of the future of the Sea to Sky Gondola. Two of the interviewees suggested that the development of the Sky Spiral (an attraction announced in 2019 as a product enhancement at the Sea to Sky Gondola) does not target locals. That particular investment is for the visitors. One interviewee mentioned that the community members might go and experience Sky Spiral once but never go again. One interviewee also commented that investment into trail development and the food and beverage operation is likely what the community members would want. One other interviewee also suggested not to lose sight of the importance of community support. They further suggested that Whistler Blackcomb, located in the neighbouring community of Whistler, reduced community engagement and programming, and the locals were not happy. This shift away from local needs made a

difference in the community's happiness and support. Other feedback shared was around future local programming, and special rates and events for the Squamish community members.

Survey

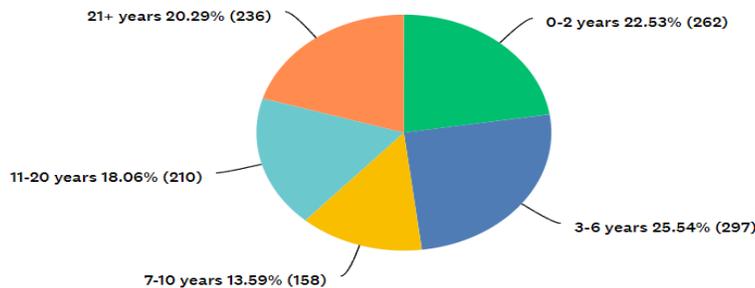
The survey, titled 'Better Together – Squamish Resident Survey,' secured 1,254 responses. The survey took 4 minutes and 37 seconds on average to complete and contained 20 questions. The questions were made up of demographic, multiple-choice, Likert scale, dropdown and open-ended questions. According to Survey Monkey, surveys with 20 questions have an average completion rate of 87% (SurveyMonkey, n.d.), the Sea to Sky Gondola resident survey had a completion rate of 88% right in line with the average.

The confidence level determines how closely the results are related to the true reflection of how the questions would have been answered (University of Connecticut, n.d.). The most basic of calculations is $1/\sqrt{\text{number of respondents}}$. For this survey, the confidence level is approximately $1/\sqrt{1254} = 2.9\%$, 19 times out of 20. The following section highlights the survey results.

Qualification question

The survey opened with a question asking the respondent if they were, in fact, a resident of Squamish. 1,166 (93%) responded yes; the remaining 7% were withdrawn from the survey as they did not qualify to continue.

Length of residency



Once qualified as a resident of Squamish, the respondents were asked how long they had lived in Squamish. Again, the results were relatively evenly spread among responses. The highest group was 26%

of respondents have lived in Squamish for 3-6 years; all other categories, 0-2 years (19%); 7-10 years (15%); 11-20 years (19%); 21 plus years (22%) ranged between 15%-22%; a fairly even spread of the length of life in Squamish.

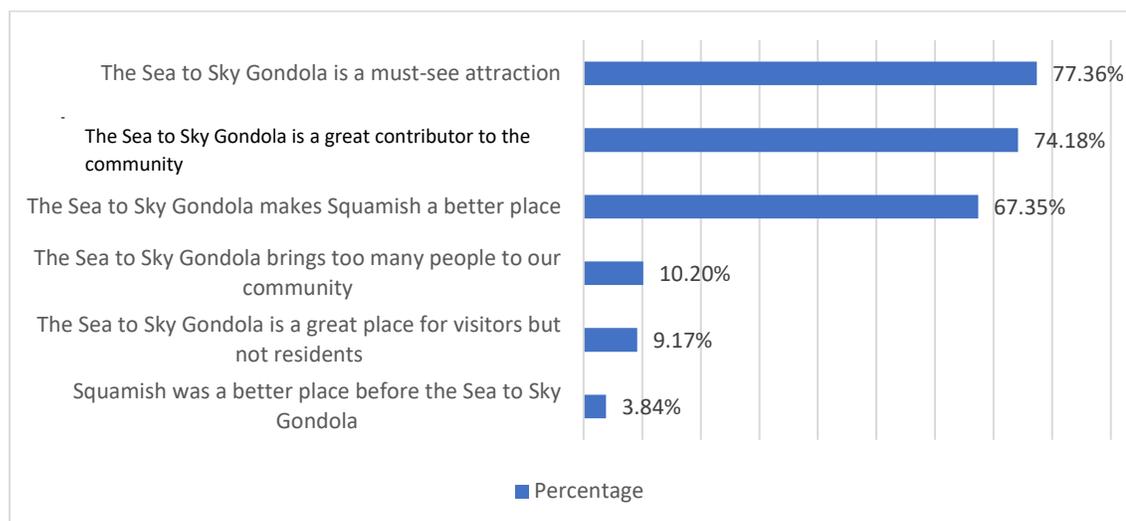
When asked about whether they are pass holders or not, 94% of the respondents had a positive response and were pass holders. As previously mentioned, nearly 40% of the Squamish community are pass holders.

Previous visits

Asking the respondents whether they had previously visited the gondola or not garnered a 96% positive response; 4% of respondents had not visited the gondola; 10 respondents skipped that question. Having this many of the respondents as previous visitors, with awareness of the operation, likely lends a richer depth of potential connection, either positive or negative.

Of those respondents having never visited the gondola, 46% selected 'It is too expensive to visit.' The secondary reason was that it is closed when they have wanted to visit (30%). 7% suggested they were too scared to visit, and 13% believe they enjoy doing nothing there. Comments related to this question as to reasons for not visiting were: too busy and cannot get there quickly.

Of the 4% of respondents who have not visited the gondola, 45% plan to visit, 33% might and 22% do not plan to visit in the future. For those that do not plan to visit, some comments were that they do not need to visit as they hike the Chief, they prefer natural beauty to infrastructure, and it is too touristy. Of the respondents who have not visited the gondola, only 38% know about the pass holder program.

Residents' perceptions

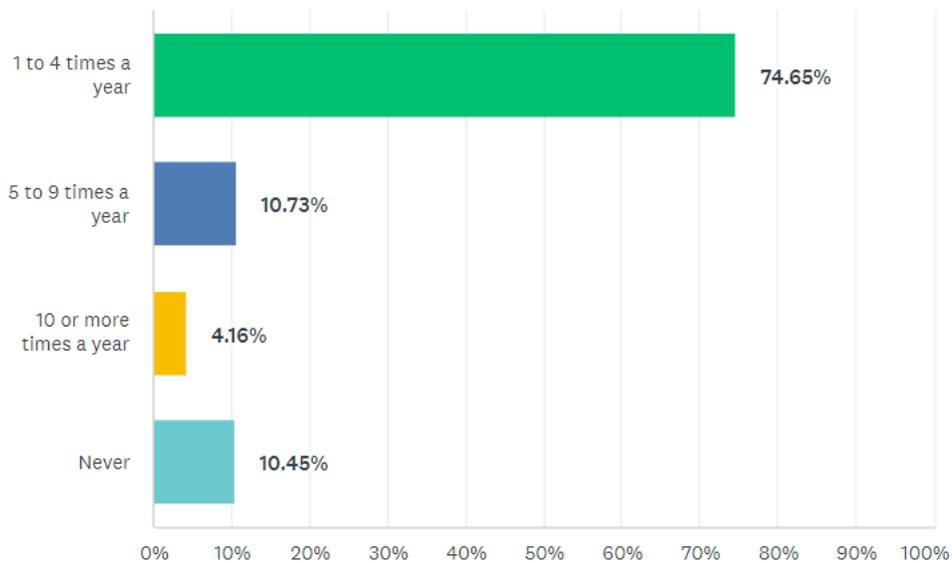
Likely the most important question on the survey, as this question asks specifically about the residents' perceptions of the Sea to Sky Gondola. Nearly all respondents (1,069) took time to respond to this question. They were asked which statements they supported the most. Respondents could select more than one statement. More than 90% of the responses were positive when thinking about their perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola. 78% agreed that 'The Sea to Sky Gondola is a must-see attraction'; 74% believe 'The Sea to Sky Gondola is a great contributor to the community and 67% felt 'The Sea to Sky Gondola makes Squamish a better place.' The remaining respondents skewed towards negative sentiment with 10% responding that 'The Sea to Sky Gondola brings too many people into our community, 9% believe that 'The Sea to Sky Gondola is a great place for visitors but not residents' and 4% chose the option that 'Squamish was better before the Sea to Sky Gondola'.

Along the same lines, related to perception, when asking respondents their thoughts on the statement 'I believe the Sea to Sky Gondola is an asset to the town of Squamish,' 89% strongly agreed and agreed; 7% were neutral, and 3% strongly disagreed, disagreed or commented. Highlights of the optional comments included: it does not help our community, increases our carbon footprint, and brings too many people to Squamish.

Special Occasions

When asked about celebrating a special occasion at the Sea to Sky Gondola, 78% have not celebrated anything special. Of those who responded that they had celebrated a special occasion, 50% were birthdays, 12% anniversaries, and 7% were there to celebrate a wedding.

Friends and family



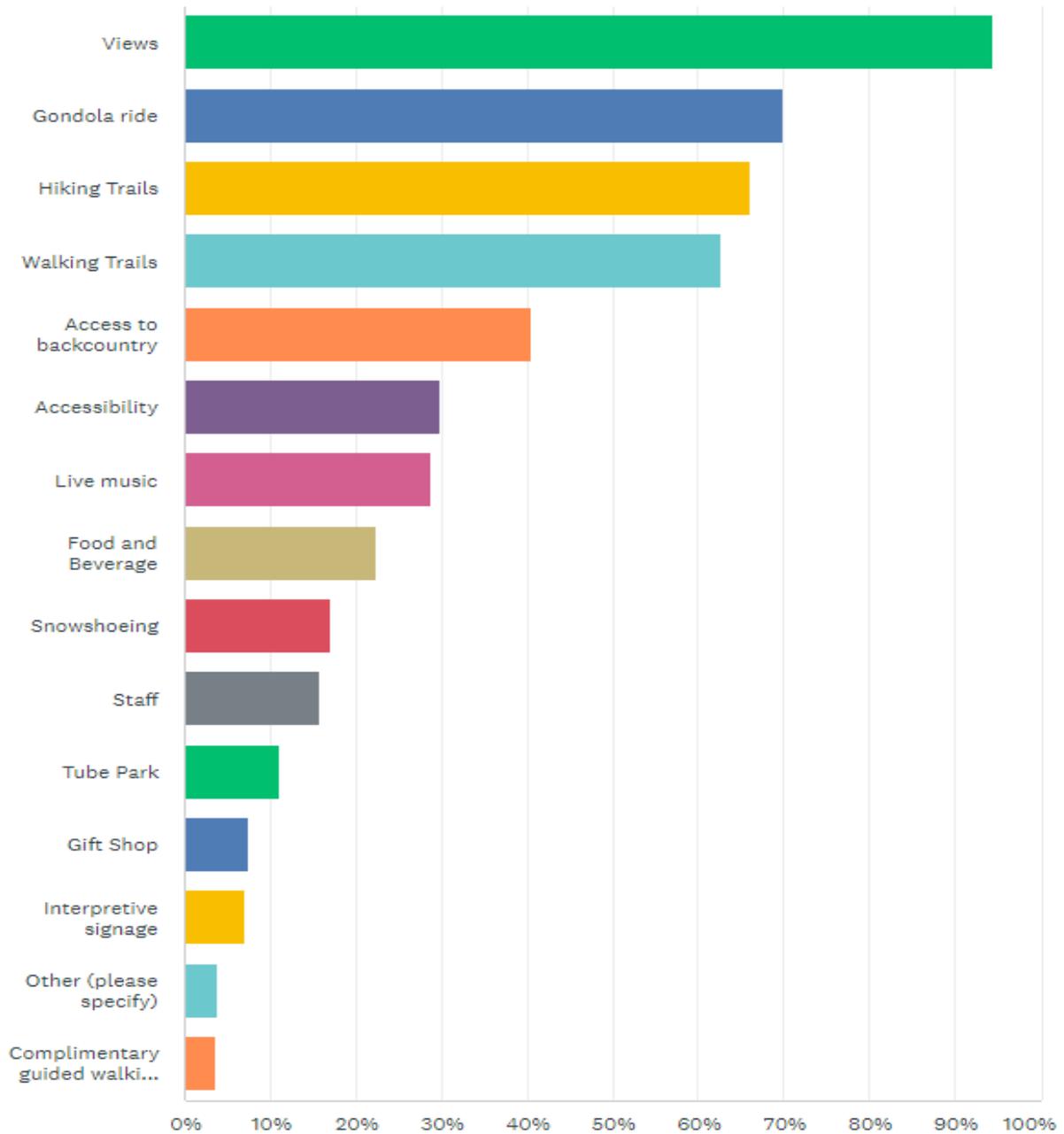
75% of respondents bring friends and family to the gondola one to four times per year. However, only 11% bring visitors five to nine times a year and 4% more than ten times per year. In addition, almost 11% never bring visiting friends and family to the gondola.

When asked about their sense of pride when bringing friends and family to the Sea to Sky Gondola, 79% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I feel proud when bringing friends and family to the Sea to Sky Gondola"; 14% were neutral and less than 7% strongly disagreed or disagreed with that statement.

In addition to visiting the gondola, respondents primarily showcase the following Squamish attributes to visiting friends and family: Hiking (79%), walking trails (76%), lakes (75%), rivers (69%), breweries, cideries and distilleries (58%), ocean (58%), biking (55%), dining (43%), rock climbing (23%), shopping (11%), rafting (5%), other (5%). Some of the other attributes included Squamish spit,

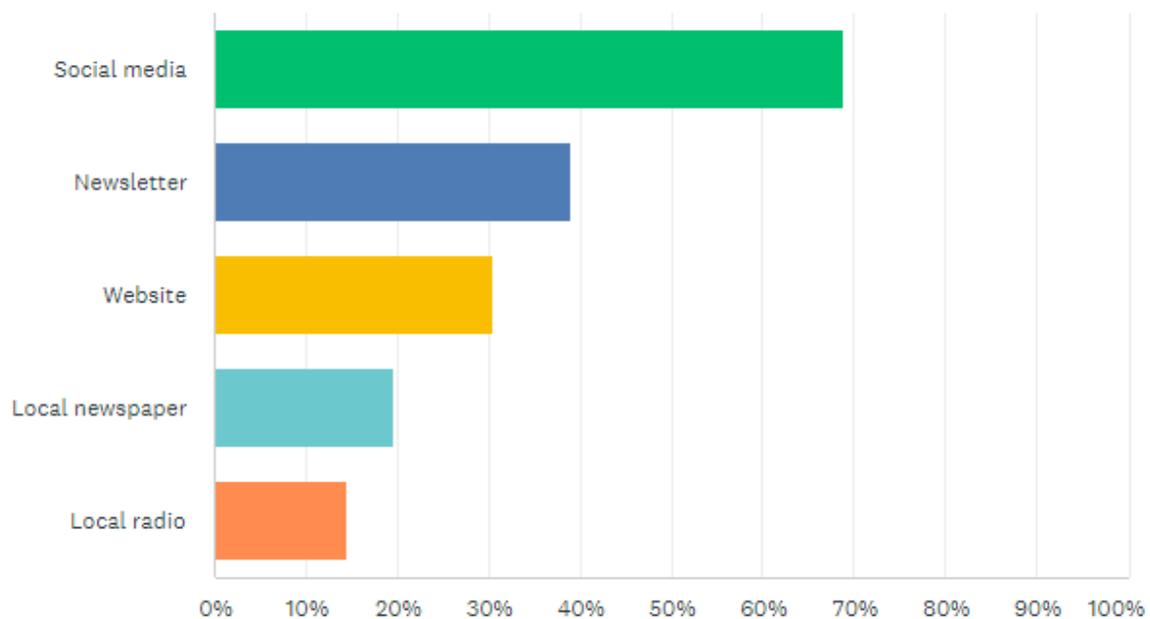
events, and skiing. Other responses included negative feedback on the inability to showcase anything in Squamish due to the volume of existing visitors.

Sea to Sky Gondola attributes



When asking respondents about the top five attributes of the Sea to Sky Gondola, 1,045 responses were collected. The top-ranking attributes were the views (95%), the gondola ride (70%), hiking trails (66%), walking trails (63%), and access to the backcountry (41%). The lowest ranking attributes were staff (16%), tube park (11%), gift shop (7%), interpretive signage (7%) and others (4%). Attributes suggested in the other category were primarily: the playgrounds and events (e.g., yoga, Halloween, Christmas).

Communication



When asking where the respondents learn about events and updates from the Sea to Sky Gondola, 69% of respondents rely on the Sea to Sky Gondola's social channels - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram - for the updates; 40% selected newsletter; 30% chose website; 20% chose local newspaper and 15% selected radio. Learning from local friends (13 responses) was another suggestion for information sources.

Gondola thoughts

Respondents were asked what three words come to mind when thinking about the Sea to Sky Gondola; Figure 3 includes a word cloud of the results. Eight hundred seventy-two responses were collected from respondents sharing 2,344 words.

Figure 3

Word cloud of gondola thoughts



Figure 3 demonstrates the most common words that came to the respondents' minds. The popular words were views (342), beauty/beautiful (154), hiking (135), access/accessibility (125), fun (115), expensive (40), tourists (36), community (39), spectacular (29), busy (33), backcountry (26) and walking (20). In addition, the word "Squamish" appeared 17 times, primarily with a positive sentiment.

Improvements

The respondents were provided with the opportunity to suggest what the gondola could do better; 864 responses were generated which represents 69% of respondents. Food and restaurant were the top mentions for improvements, with 243 comments (30%) in this category. Other top areas for suggested improvements were: improve hours of operation (101); improve the costs (77) and within that category, specifically, feedback related to special pricing for residents; additional hiking trails (38); improve safety and security, which includes communication-related to both (34); improve the event and live music offerings (33); incorporate more winter activities like cross-country skiing, ice rink and kids activities (29); improve parking, and the highway turn off (28); become more dog-friendly (27), and allow biking (23).

Additional feedback

When asked to share any other thoughts, feelings, or comments with the leadership team at the gondola, 589 respondents (47%) took the time to share. Of those comments, 273 (46%) left a positive message to the team, expressing support and a sense of pride attached to them and the Sea to Sky Gondola. On the other hand, 173 (30%) responses were neutral or a simple note with 'no' or nothing more they would like to say. Of the 143 remaining respondents (24%) added comments relating to their thoughts; the highest number of mentions were related to local discounts and exclusive events (16), extended hours (14), and safety and security concerns (20). Other mentions, although minimal, were related to food and beverage, dogs, bikes, the environment, and Indigenous representation.

Analysis methodology

This section shares the methodology applied to analyze the data collected from the semi-structured interviews (SSI) and surveys. The SSI aimed to obtain a more in-depth reflection from local stakeholders on their perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola. Within the interview context, the questions and dialogue direction were within the two main realms of research, namely perception in the community and what the gondola could do better to meet community needs.

A thematic analysis approach to the data was applied to SSI and the open-ended survey questions. As Sage (2020) suggests, an analytic approach in qualitative research is where an analyst identifies themes that emerge out of data, such as interview transcripts and field notes (Sage, 2020). Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive approach was applied to the data. In 2019, Braun and Clarke shared the following about their approach and summarize:

For us, qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated. Qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories,' about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there and findable from, or buried deep within the data. For us, the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness, and reflection, active and generative. We emphasized that themes do not passively emerge from data to capture this process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Upon completing the interviews, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process was applied to analyze the data. Table 1 summarizes the process applied.

Table 1

Braun and Clarke's phases of thematic approach

Phase	Description of process
1 – Familiarize with the data	Transcribing, re-reading, and reporting initial ideas
2 – Coding	Coding interesting features from the data, assigning a code to the relevant data.
3 – Searching initial themes	Collating the codes based on patterns of meaning into various potential themes
4 – Reviewing themes	Review if the themes work concerning the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5 – Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis and refining the specifics of the theme, determining the story the theme tells, defining each theme
6 – Producing the findings/report	The final opportunity for analysis provides the opportunity to weave together a narrative related to the research question and other literature.

Note: This table represents the six phases of Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis approach to data.

The following section further describes the details related to each phase and a description of how the phases were applied to the semi-structured interviews.

Phase 1 - The interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform and recorded. The recordings were listened to one more time and then transcribed using Otter.ai. The transcriptions were downloaded from the Otter.ai platform into a Word document and put into a table with the question and response.

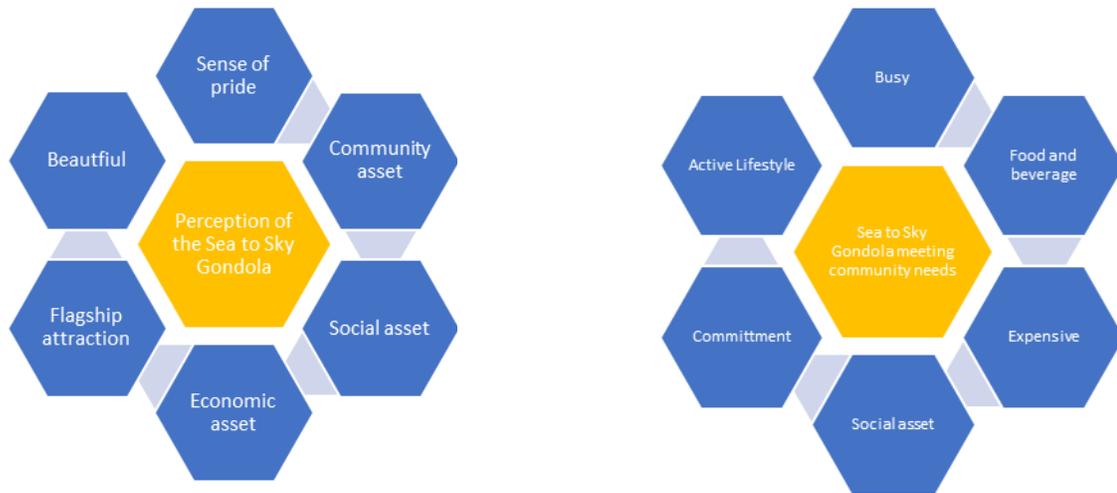
Phase 2 - Once all interviews were completed and transcribed, coding began. Some standard codes that became consistent were: enjoying views; connection to outdoors and nature; accessible for all; access to backcountry; taking visitors to the gondola; friends and family; tourists; increased Squamish awareness; hours of operation are geared towards tourists' visitation patterns; interviewees are grateful to have the Sea to Sky Gondola in their backyard; busyness; impacts when the gondola was not running due to vandalism; future investments are not community-centric.

Phase 3 – By consolidating the codes, some themes began to emerge (Appendix B includes an example of one transcription, coding and themes). Themes that became evident were: a sense of pride in being associated with the Sea to Sky Gondola; community asset; at times the gondola, and the town are too busy, and the locals avoid visiting; the Sea to Sky Gondola brings the community together; the Sea to Sky Gondola is a place of togetherness for friends and family; Squamish is an active community, and the gondola has become part of their active lifestyle; it feels that the hours of operation are for the visitors, not the locals; the Sea to Sky Gondola is Squamish's gondola, but does not define Squamish; there is a limited sense of the presence of the gondola throughout the town without actually being there; the future of the gondola does not feel community-focussed.

Phase 4 and phase 5– Figure 4 demonstrates further theme definition and mapping between the two realms of research.

Figure 4:

Emerging themes



Note: This figure helps demonstrate the themes that emerged from the data. The middle represents the realm and the blue shapes are the sub themes.

Figure 4 demonstrates how the initial themes fit into the two realms of the research. The relevance of the Sea to Sky Gondola in the community and the Sea to Sky Gondola's meeting of the community's needs. Some of the themes can fit within both realms, related to perception and meeting the community needs. For example, themes that connect the gondola to the community's day-to-day life substantiate findings related to the relevance of the Sea to Sky Gondola, and the themes around feedback and future create validity in the data related to whether or not the Sea to Sky Gondola meets the needs of the community now and in the future.

Phase 6 – The data from the interviews and the survey comes together at this stage as the research reveals an overall story of the perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola. The following section shares the narrative for each theme.

Findings and discussion

This section shares what the data tells us about how the community feels and how they perceive the Sea to Sky Gondola. The analysis relates to the academic literature attempting to answer the research question: Is the Sea to Sky Gondola truly Squamish's gondola? The analysis focuses on the perception of

the gondola to the residents and how best the gondola can maintain its role of relevance within the community. This section also considers the findings in the academic research related to resident engagement and perception of tourism and tourist attractions, stakeholder engagement.

Focussing on phase 6 of the thematic approach analysis, the story is derived from the data analysis from the semi-structured interviews (SSI) and layering in themes from the survey results. Analytic tools available on the Survey Monkey platform were also applied to analyze the survey data alongside the thematic approach.

In summarizing both the survey and SSI results, the community generally encompasses an overall positive perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola. Nine out of ten interviewees and 91% of the survey respondents are pass holders, which mirrors the approximate 90% expressing positive feelings about the gondola in Squamish. This data reflects Lawton's (2005) and Zhang et al. (2016) research that suggests when residents' frequently use attractions and commit to visiting regularly, this generally results in a more positive perception of the attraction, demonstrating a sense of pride. Similarly, Hede and Hall (2006) linked residents' use of attractions for leisure activities leading to a positive perception of the attraction.

For the respondents having not committed to passes; although had visited, their sentiment was overall positively reflected. Some feedback relating to the hours of operation, the busyness and ongoing closures had prevented them from committing to a pass, however, in general had positive feelings.

Of those who have not visited the gondola (from the survey results), residents who have lived in Squamish for less than two years had the highest number of responses that had not yet visited the gondola. The reason they have not been to visit is likely related to the fact the gondola was closed for a total of 18 months between August 2019 – June 2021; any residents moving to the community during that time had limited opportunity to visit. However, this is something for the Sea to Sky leadership team to pay attention to, to ensure they capture these residents' attention and support once they can rely on the gondola being open and available.

Although hypothesized, neither the survey nor the interview respondent's data correlate to the length of time living in Squamish related to overall satisfaction. There was a fairly even spread of responses when the question related to the length of time living in Squamish was cross-referenced with the resident perception question for both the interviews and survey. It was believed that there would be a more negative sentiment among residents who have lived here longer; however, the data did not present such a result. The data demonstrated that negative sentiment, although minimal, was spread among both long-term residents (21+ years) and those that were new to town and lived less than two years.

Ongoing stakeholder engagement requires an effective communication strategy. Freeman et al. (2017) suggest that it is important to consider communication *with* stakeholders not only *at* them; essentially two-way communication (Freeman et al., 2017). We know from the survey results that a significant number (69%) rely on social media for updates and information related to the gondola. Social media is a platform for two-way communication as followers can ask questions, leave comments, and interact 'live' with the Sea to Sky Gondola team. The other forms of communication, like the newsletter, website, newspaper and radio, do not allow for dialogue or conversation.

Emerging themes

Consistent themes evolved from both the SSI and survey results. Applying phase six of the thematic analysis approach, the themes that became evident were:

Commitment. The interview participants and 90% of the survey respondents were committed pass holders; the financial and time investment demonstrates a commitment to the attraction. As Olsson (2010) suggests, becoming a member of an attraction demonstrates individuals' wish to be visually recognized as having a relationship with the organization, satisfying social and psychological needs (Olsson, 2010). Asking the respondents their level of commitment reflects that the research found members can be anywhere from consumers to co-producers, based on their level of engagement (Olsson, 2010). To add economic benefit to their positive perception, these community members purchase and commit to annual passes.

Sense of pride. Interview respondents shared that they were proud to '*show off the gondola*'; '*hope my family can come to visit as they would love it*, and 79% of survey respondents suggest that they agree or strongly agree that they feel proud when bringing visiting friends and family to the Sea to Sky Gondola. Lawton's (2005) research found that residents who used attractions for their recreation and visited regularly felt positive about tourist attractions in their community. As Hede and Hall (2006) found, residents who feel proud of attractions then act as ambassadors, helping build the business locally and beyond. Garrod et al. (2012) explain that visitor attractions play a significant role in the overall tourism destination experience and provide a sense of identity and local pride. The response rate alone to this survey demonstrates a sense of pride, in that the community wants to be heard and express their feelings towards this important attraction.

Accessible. The term accessible and accessibility was found in the survey (more than 120 mentions) and within the interviews when asked about the words or thoughts that come to mind. For example, one respondent said simply, 'the gondola means access to me.' Looking back at the foundation to which the founders designed and the overall purpose of the gondola when it was first introduced was about providing access to the inaccessible, this positive feedback today continues to bring that vision to life.

Flagship attraction. The positive response to whether the gondola is a must-see attraction (78% of responses) positions the gondola in the category as a flagship attraction. Future research could include the extent to which the gondola is a 'must-see' attraction, whether only within Squamish, the province or the world. As Weidenfeld (2010) shares in her work related to icon versus flagship attractions, flagship attractions are defined as 'must-see' and relatively large and have an economic impact. Two interviewees suggested that the Sea to Sky Gondola is not an icon of Squamish but a flagship attraction. Something like the Stawamus Chief (world's second-largest monolith) or Howe Sound (the most southern fjord in the world) are iconic for Squamish as the community was built around them. Weidenfeld (2010) suggests that an iconic feature serves as a universally recognized symbol of the location. Alignment with the icons, for example positioning

the attraction alongside the Stawamus Chief, is essential for the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team to consider when thinking about their position in the destination. This alignment has the potential to provide a stronger sense of place.

Economic asset. Interview participants and survey respondents who discussed the gondola's role in the community as an economic driver understood the importance of the gondola to the overall visitor economy and found that the gondola plays an essential role in bringing visitors to the community short-term and long-term. This perceived role aligns with the research of Garrod (2008) and Weidenfeld (2010), as the attraction plays a pivotal role in the overall tourism ecosystem, driving visitation to the community and creating employment. Lawton's (2005) research in Australia showed that manufactured attractions were considered more touristy than nature-based attractions. Similarly, in the Sea to Sky Gondola interviews, three participants expressed that the gondola and infrastructure were touristy. As Swarbrooke (2001) suggests related to economy, attractions need to shift from focussing only on tourists and ensuring that the residents are part of the visit to an attraction, leading to further economic benefits.

Beautiful. Respondents used words like beautiful, spectacular and breathtaking among the descriptive terms as words and thoughts that came to mind when thinking about the gondola. These words reflect positive perceptions and a positive place to be associated with.

Social asset. All interview respondents mentioned that they visit the gondola with family or friends. Respondents shared memories of the Friday night music series, theme dinners, family photoshoots, and bringing visitors up the gondola, all examples of enjoying the experience and connecting with people. Zhang et al. (2016) found similar results in their research that those who enjoyed the attraction for leisure activity or performances considered the attraction a gathering place and would then bring family and friends to experience it. In addition, two of the interviewees mentioned that when they go up the gondola, they recognize familiar faces and get a sense of their Squamish community up there. Four of the respondents suggested that they never

recognize people in town; however, they do when they go to the gondola, creating social interaction.

Active lifestyle. Evidence from both the survey and SSI reveals that, in addition to committing to becoming a pass holder, the community visits the Sea to Sky Gondola regularly for recreation, leisure time and entertainment. All interview participants expressed that they have experienced outdoor activity at the Sea to Sky Gondola. One participant shared that they believe that most residents of Squamish are young and active and were first introduced to the idea of living in Squamish by visiting the gondola. The survey reveals that hiking, walking trails and access to the backcountry are among the top five attributes of the gondola, further lending to the fact that the residents appreciate the physical activity the Sea to Sky Gondola offers. As Zhang et al. (2016) found in their research, residents who spent their leisure time doing physical activity at the attraction had a positive perception. Similarly, in her research Lawton (2005) also suggested that residents are more enthusiastic about attractions if it improves the quality of life. The research also tells us that the residents showcase hiking, walking, and biking as some of the top other Squamish attributes they showcase to visitors, which demonstrates the community's active lifestyle.

Busy. The term 'busy' arose through the interviews, and discussions occurred around the interviewees' challenges to visit on weekends in the summer due to volume. The literature also shows that, at times, residents feel negatively impacted by visitors who can affect traffic, parking, and overall congestion (Garrod et al., 2012). Comments in the survey reflect this feeling, as some respondents referred to the lack of parking, their inability to visit in the summer, the trails being too crowded, and the limited space on weekends for food and beverage. It is risky not to pay attention to this; as Garrod et al. (2012) suggest, local people can increasingly feel inundated by visitors and feel a weakening sense of ownership of their community (Garrod et al., 2012). This is of particular attention as borders reopen and protocols related to COVID-19 are mitigated, increasing the volume of visitors and likely impacting the busyness.

Expensive: The word expensive appeared as a word that came to mind (40 mentions) when thinking about the gondola; it also appeared as a comment for improvement (77 mentions). In addition to the survey results, two of the interview responses, revealed the term expensive when thinking about the Sea to Sky Gondola. One interviewee mentioned specifically the cost of the pass was too high and survey respondents mentioned expensive in general. The term expensive could be related to either the overall ticketed experience, items for sale at the gondola, pass prices or a diminished feeling of value for money. Future research with residents could involve investigating further into what specifically is perceived as expensive – whether specifically the costs or the value received. In the same vein, related to expensive, the research shows that residents are looking for exclusive pricing and events, which could impact the sentiment related to costs.

Food and beverage: Feelings related to the food and beverage offerings at the Sea to Sky Gondola skewed negative from both the survey responses and the interviews. 30% of comments regarding what the gondola could be doing better were related to food and beverage. Additionally, food and beverage only ranked 8 out of 15 as top attribute of the Sea to Sky Gondola. The comments share that the dining options are better for the visitors than residents, as Zheng et al. (2016) found in their research, the needs of the residents and what they find satisfying may vary from what the visitors are satisfied with. This is important for the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team to consider as food and beverage not only provide a financial impact from a residents' visit, a positive experience can have both social and cultural benefits impacting the overall sense of pride.

Eleven sub-themes emerged from the research. The themes relate back to the research questions around the perceptions and relevance of the gondola, what it means to the community, as well as, how it can better meet the needs of its residents. The emerging themes were overall positive with the results lending to a community committed to the attraction's success; thoughts of sense of pride related to the

gondola; it's accessibility for all; it is seen as both an economic and social asset; it is beautiful; and helps contribute to an active lifestyle, all support positive sentiment.

A more neutral theme arose, of the gondola being considered a flagship attraction, relates to its importance in the community, not the definition of the community. Not surprisingly, based on the success of visitation, the theme of busyness emerged from the research, this is something the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team may want to consider addressing when involving the residents' needs in decision-making.

Recommendations

The following section considers results and analysis from the surveys and interviews, in addition to past research found in the literature. The research finds that, in general, the community is positive and passionate about enjoying the Sea to Sky Gondola. The high number of survey responses demonstrates the community is keen to share their opinions about the Sea to Sky Gondola. By applying stakeholder engagement theory, the analysis strives to provide feedback to the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team from Squamish residents. As stated earlier in the paper, the Sea to Sky Gondola was initially built for the locals, the developers believing that if the locals enjoy it and are engaged, so will the visitors. The collection of data applied a consultative approach using a stakeholder engagement theory to determine results. Therefore, the recommendations consider the Squamish resident's perspective and consultation.

Exclusive community events – Considering the gondola as a social asset, although the Sea to Sky Gondola offers visitor events throughout the year (Sea to Sky Gondola, n.d.), the survey and interview feedback was that the community would like exclusive access to the gondola. Resident-specific events could also mitigate some of the feedback related to the costs to enter and busyness. Vancouver Aquarium and Butchart Gardens for example, offer exclusive entry and events for their membership (Vancouver Aquarium, n.d.; Butchart Gardens, n.d.). Events like this could be during the week or in a quieter visitor season which would meet the needs of the locals who avoid visiting the gondola when it is too crowded. The local community appreciates and enjoys the views (as reported in the survey). However, other feedback in the interviews was that evening events could work for the locals as they do not need to enjoy the view the same way

visitors do. Having exclusive events could also provide a gathering place for the community and point of community connection.

Partnership opportunities – It was learned in the research that showcasing the gondola to friends and family is essential. In addition to the gondola, top responses to other Squamish attributes residents share with visitors were hiking, walking trails, lakes, rivers and breweries/cideries. Hede and Hall's (2006) research suggested that 'like' attractions work collaboratively and create a multi-venue pass allowing residents the flexibility and freedom to experience attractions as they please. This recommendation addresses the themes of social and economic assets, active lifestyle and sense of pride. In Squamish, partnering with suppliers and producers of these top experiences could generate additional exposure in the community, provide further engagement and support for other local businesses, and increase the overall likelihood of residents exposing their visitors to explore. Some examples of a partnership are a Squamish pass for multiple attractions or activities; offering pass holders of the Sea to Sky Gondola a discount with a local hiking or water sport company; or similarly, vice versa, offering patrons of a local restaurant or bar a discount from visiting the Sea to Sky Gondola. Another suggestion is to feature a local company at an event or in each newsletter, showing further connection and support for local businesses.

Introduce new hours of operation – Feedback within both the survey and interviews expressed interest in adapting the hours of operations to meet community members' needs better. For example, the hours of operation were significant to those interested in accessing the backcountry, particularly in winter for skiing. Opening earlier would allow them sufficient time for their journey, resulting in a safer, more meaningful experience; additionally, providing the opportunity for this group to access the backcountry earlier increases the chances that they will spend time in the facilities for a meal or beverage after their day, improving revenue potential. Addressing this feedback and recommendation aligns with the themes related to commitment and accessibility.

In addition to the backcountry enthusiasts, feedback from the research suggests keeping the operation open later than current hours. An extension would allow residents who work during the week and find the weekends too busy to visit to enjoy the operation. Respondents suggested adding dinner events and live music as areas to improve. Although views were the number one word that comes to mind when thinking about the gondola, and the evenings do not provide that attribute, it is essential to note that this group of residents do not need the views and time to hike as much as the visitors would. The recommendation is to offer access to the restaurant and bar.

Ongoing resident engagement – The total responses to the survey (1,254) and enthusiasm to be part of the interviews demonstrates the community's eagerness to share their support and feedback related to the Sea to Sky Gondola and its relevance to them. The literature suggests that residents as stakeholders encourage positive tourism development opportunities. Other suggestions for continued engagement could be public meetings with residents, additional surveys, focus groups, planning sessions or task forces. These suggestions could be conducted in isolation or combined. This recommendation addresses the theme of commitment and sense of pride.

Another recommendation, similar to models at other attractions like Whistler Blackcomb or Butchart Gardens, is to incorporate ambassadors that represent various interest groups. These ambassadors and stakeholder groups can play a pivotal role in determining investment and development for the future, ensuring decisions are made with a continued focus on what the community needs versus the visitors. Ambassadors help humanize a brand, spread positive word of mouth, and generally help grow business (The Tourism Academy, n.d.; Garrod et. al., 2012). Further learning on how to introduce and maintain an ambassador program can be taken through the Tourism Academy (The Tourism Academy, n.d.).

Based on the high percentage of residents relying on social media for information from the gondola and social media's ability to generate two-way communication, it is recommended to use the platform to engage with the residents for opinions or preferences. For example: using

Instagram Stories' This or That feature (easil.com., n.d.), followers could click brunch or dessert or pizza or pasta; or offer five images of a meal and followers can like their favourite dish or share different trail features and followers could click which ones they find inspiring. Examples such as these can lead to decisions around food and beverage offerings or trail development ensuring these kinds of decisions are relevant to the residents.

In-depth food and beverage consultation – The research shows a negative skew towards the food and beverage offerings at the Sea to Sky Gondola (more than 250 comments). Negative comments related to costs, quality and consistency, led to this result. The feedback included comments that the residents no longer support the food and beverage component, and dine elsewhere. However, in addition to the negative comments, positive feedback was related to the decision to pivot to a sit-down restaurant versus a cafeteria (a decision made to respond to protocols related to the COVID-19 pandemic). The recommendation is to conduct further research specifically related to the food and beverage attributes and consider hiring a consultant to dissect further and offer suggestions relevant to the residents.

Winter programming – Current winter programming includes snowshoeing, tubing, winter walking and ski touring all. There were comments and suggestions from both the interview and survey respondents related to winter programming, showing its relevance to them. Although the gondola was closed both winter 2019 and 2020 due to vandalism, enhancing winter programming is recommended as it addresses themes related to active lifestyle and commitment. Winter (October-May) is considered a non-peak tourism season in Squamish (Tourism Squamish, n.d.), resulting in a more significant pressure to encourage visitation from the residents. Specific suggestions and recommendations include increased cross-country skiing, reliable tube park hours and access, skating rink, and Christmas programming. As there is less volume of tourists in winter, the residents who are hesitant to visit on the weekends during the summer will likely lead to a more robust demand with reliable programming. This can also address the feedback related to busyness, as the winter is overall a less busy time.

Align with the icons. As suggested, the Sea to Sky Gondola is considered a flagship attraction, not necessarily an icon of Squamish at this point in the community life stage. In sales and marketing materials, it is recommended to include images and stories related to the icons, such as the Stawamus Chief, Howe Sound or the Sea to Sky Highway. This combination demonstrates the importance of the Sea to Sky Gondola to continue supporting and aligning with what has made Squamish recognizable and unique for generations. Putting both the icons and flagship attraction together, like an attraction cluster, lends a more significant opportunity for increased community spirit and a sense of pride for both the gondola and the destination.

Increase presence throughout the community – In response to the feedback related to whether respondents felt the presence of the gondola throughout the community, it is recommended to increase the gondola's presence, addressing the sense of pride and economic asset themes. Knowing it is vital for the gondola to be a part of the community (as exemplified by conducting this research), further immersion could increase the perception of support. Some suggestions are: partnering with a local food artisan for a Sea to Sky Gondola branded item (e.g. Sea to Sky Gondola donut, chocolate or tea); increasing local advertising, for example, at the community centre or events; offering pass holders a logo item of clothing (i.e. hat or buff) that they can wear around town, physically showing their support; offering education programs in the local classrooms or a mobile education program (i.e. similar to what the Vancouver Aquarium has had for in-community education sessions); introduce roving ambassadors or guides during community events and fundraisers; and lastly, sell branded merchandise at local retail shops. Understanding from the research that the community has a sense of pride when thinking about the gondola, this further extends the opportunities to facilitate this relevance.

Product development strategy. Feedback in the interviews and a few survey comments suggested that product development and investment announcements, connected explicitly to the Sky Spiral, target visitors, not residents, which has the risk of impacting commitment and sense of pride. Therefore, it is recommended to consider an overall product development plan or

strategy shared with the community or discussed as part of a future resident engagement consultation. Based on the interview discussions and the survey question related to improvements, areas to consider to ensure continued relevance to the residents are: transportation, parking, and highway access; trail development; food and beverage consistency; and programming that brings the community together.

The recommendations are meant to serve the purpose of addressing the themes emerged from the data. The recommendations are truly that, suggestions for the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team to consider when thinking about the residents needs.

Limitations and future research

The research presented includes limitations. Although the data came from residents in the community, over 90% of respondents are currently involved with the Sea to Sky Gondola either as a past visitor or passholder. As mentioned earlier, the pass holder data base includes 9,000 Squamish residents, which represents nearly 40% of the population. This significant number of respondents connected to the gondola may suggest that data does not reflect all of the local residents' opinions and perceptions. As ongoing stakeholder engagement is recommended, future research should address a broader audience, perhaps with less existing engagement with the attraction. Based on this sample, at this time, the findings can not be generalized to the overall community perception.

A bias that became evident throughout the research journey was the researcher's connection and positive outlook on the gondola and the Squamish community. As a resident and committed pass holder, optimism for positive results ensued.

Conclusion

The research sought to help the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team understand how the residents of Squamish feel about the Sea to Sky Gondola and its relevance in the community. The data tells a positive story about the perception of the gondola's significant relevance to those engaged in the interviews and survey. The results from both the interviews and surveys demonstrate that there is strong connection and has a sense of pride when thinking about the Sea to Sky Gondola. The position of the

gondola being both a significant economic and social asset to the residents was found throughout the research. For the Sea to Sky Gondola to prosper in the community, recognizing its positive perception is a pertinent discovery towards securing that positive sentiment and ongoing relevance.

The literature supports the primary research. The literature addresses the significance of attractions in the overall tourism ecosystem; it demonstrates the reliability and importance of residents as stakeholders in tourism; and explains and supports the stakeholder engagement theory as a framework to collecting data from residents.

The stakeholder engagement theory applied, considered the residents feedback and thoughts, through interviews and surveys. This approach was consultative in nature and proved a positive method for gathering this data. This approach considers these important stakeholders as partners for determining strategy and developments important to the residents.

Based on the substantial number of responses (1,254) it is evident the residents want to be heard. Although the results demonstrate an overall positive sentiment, those that engaged in the research also wanted to share their thoughts on how the attraction could be an even better asset to the community. The community warns the Sea to Sky Gondola leadership team not to lose sight of the importance of staying relevant to them. Future investments, product development, and ongoing engagement with Squamish residents garner a reliable foundation for this prosperous community asset.

The research positively answers the key research question, 'Is the Sea to Sky Gondola truly there for the Squamish community or is it for the visitors to Squamish?' The findings say "yes," the Sea to Sky Gondola is truly here for the Squamish community. Yes, there are a volume of visitors, which according to the research, the residents understand and support. Applying this research and recommendations while continuing engagement with the community can aid in strategies towards a relevant, balanced community asset to maintain the resident's ongoing sense of pride.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview schedule

Topic Time	Finish Time	Topic	Purpose
5 mins		Wait for logging in, mics, etc...	Give people a moment to get settled
2 mins		<u>Greeting</u> Welcome... recording... timeline... speak freely... no wrong answers	Establish guidelines for the discussion and time required expectation
5 mins		<u>Ice Breaker</u> Please briefly tell me about living in Squamish.	Get the person comfortable and talking; understand how long they have lived and about their life in Squamish
15 mins		<u>Perceptions of the Sea to Sky Gondola</u> Have you visited the gondola? Have you been a passholder? Why or why not What do you do at the gondola? What do you first think of when you think of the Sea to Sky Gondola? What does the Sea to Sky Gondola mean to you? What role does the Sea to Sky	Determine what positive or negative perceptions of the gondola. What is special about the gondola to this participant. If the participant has not visited previously, find out why.

		<p>Gondola play in your life?</p> <p>How has the gondola impacted your life in Squamish?</p> <p>What are your favorite memories at the Sea to Sky Gondola?</p> <p>Anything else you would like to share regarding your perception of the Sea to Sky Gondola</p>	
15 mins		<p><u>Suggestions for Sea to Sky Gondola</u></p> <p>In your opinion, what could the Sea to Sky Gondola do better?</p> <p>What do you feel is the best aspect of the Sea to Sky Gondola?</p> <p>What is your vision for the future of the Sea to Sky Gondola?</p> <p>What is the Sea to Sky Gondola missing?</p> <p>If we could start over again, what would you suggest?</p>	<p>Understand what the gondola team could do better, if anything. Discuss the future and new opportunities for the gondola team.</p>
5 mins		<p><u>Wrap up (open discussion)</u></p> <p>What else would you like the gondola leadership team to know?</p>	<p>Last thoughts from the participant; opportunity to finalize the discussion and allow for concluding remarks</p>

Appendix B

Example transcript

Transcript 2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gondola, squamish, people, community, friends, hiking, views, hike, perception, winter, lived, big, whistler, engaged, feel, piece, tourism, town, vandalism, restaurants

Question	Response	Code	Theme
How long have you lived in Squamish?	Three years	Under five years	
And are you a pass holder?	Yes. Okay. I am. Does it matter that I used to be happy tourism pass before but now I'm a full pass again. Yeah,	Yes passholder	Commitment
when you first think of the see this guy gondola, what kind of images or words come to your mind?	nature? hike beauty community. accessibility to the back country? How sound there's no better place to see house like the North. The end of how sound from up there. The Friday music, I guess a lot. Yeah, just an amazing way for vocals and other people to get together. That was just a big highlight, I think. And hiking is accessibility. I do use it to go up and I ground and access to that country	Nature Beauty Accessibility to backcountry Views of Howe Sound	Beautiful Accessbile
So do you feel when you're up there on a Friday night or thinking back to when you were up there on a Friday night that you felt that was the Squamish community up there?	Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, we would literally planned all meet up and just everybody had a pass go up. And it was great to see kids. I remember specifically a couple times, you know, you've got even grandparents within the Millay of the dance, sitting on chairs. Yeah. And it's always from a personal and a tourism standpoint, the tourists would still be up there and see the whole community coming together. And it was a really great way for tourists to see a little bit of our community as well and mixed in a little bit. And that's what, because people want to see all the time and yeah, be engaged or be exposed to that kind of connection and events and	Yes it feels like community Remembers older couples dancing Great way for tourists and community to come together Fridays were unexpected	Community

	stuff like that. And they probably weren't even expecting it when they get up there. Yeah, all of a sudden, Friday, and there's these great bands, and people all over and families been having a really good time. Yeah. Yeah,		
do you have one specific memory? Or have you celebrated a special occasion up there?	Um, I've had some great dinners and stuff with friends up there. And just the Fridays, everybody, you know, back, I think, also quite nostalgic right now, because we aren't in a place where we can mix and mingle with so many different people. And when you get to know a lot of the community, it was great for me to just moving down here, being with my good friends who have had for a long time, but then meeting their friends. So it was a great way for me to integrate a little bit more into that. Yeah. Being in person to town with memories. We've had a good friend's father in law's celebration of life. Which was great to have up there. It was a special place for that family and for him. And then I haven't been in any weddings, but you see what exam there and you just get a feel for what an amazing place to hold a wedding	Great dinners Friday night memories Celebration of life memory Great place for a wedding	memories
what kind of role does the gondola play in your life?	It's good for The outdoors because it's a fabulous hike up. I love that. I don't I don't even think I might have done the cheap a couple times since it's opened. Yeah, but I much prefer going up all the way because I don't like coming down and yeah. Give us a great it's such a great workout. So it's something that keeps me in shape. Good for my mental health. Social again, you know, like going up there with friends.	Gives me a chance to workout Keeps me in shape Good for my mental health	Lifestyle
Have you had an experience where you've planned to go up or you want to go up and it's just too busy?	Well, definitely the weekends I basically can't do the hike anymore. Because unfortunately with the past near the end of the park, and like everything in Squamish Whistler in I was eating in Pemberton this weekend, you kind of just have to learn not to go into theory. I	I don't go on weekends It's too busy in the corridor	busy

	<p>mean, we're in tourism to kind of get at it. Yeah. And hopefully your schedule allows you to enjoy things in the non peak times from a work perspective. Yes. It does get busy. Like, I would not think of going up middle of the weekend, or coming down when you know, it's like one or two busy with other tour groups or whatever. You kind of just have to learn to work around it. It's not ideal. Oh, yeah. And I mean, I've had text from people going, Oh, my God, the lineup to get down. Or I suggested to people don't go on the weekends in Yep. Season. Right. Yeah. So yeah,</p>	<p>I enjoy non-peak times but I'm working</p> <p>You have to learn to work around it</p>	
<p>do you feel there's a general positive perception of the gondola in the community?</p>	<p>Yeah. I don't know. Anybody that has a negative perception of it. Yeah. I do. Remember, I wasn't even living here when it went up, as you said, but I do remember the anx. I remember the Hanks when they were going to pick up. Yeah, there's always a lot of pushback. But for the most part, I think the whole community has embraced it, not only as an employer, with a place to go a meeting place. It's like one of those anchors. And I think people are proud of it, too. Yeah.</p>	<p>No one has a negative perception</p> <p>I remember protesters at the beginning</p>	
<p>Would you if you had friends visiting from out of town, would you take them up there?</p>	<p>Yes, for sure.</p>	<p>Yes bring visitors from out of town</p>	
<p>And what would you envision pointing out?</p>	<p>So even I mean it depending on who they are the gondola ride up the sound behind you. I'm always stuck to the glass on my way down looking for like, I don't know whether it's kiteboarders or any kind of animals. But yeah, to me, I just when I get up there the view of the debt. Yeah, is phenomenal. It's sort of take your breath away, whether it's sunny or cloudy. You know, it's some people are like, Oh, it's not a beautiful sunny day. It doesn't matter what yeah, I live in a rain forest. Part of my love of living in this place. When the clouds are all layered. The restaurants great to</p>	<p>I show them the view</p> <p>Weather doesn't matter</p> <p>The layered clouds are amazing</p>	<p>Views</p>

	<p>have a drink, whether inside or outside of my deck. lunches. Food has always been really good as well, but I haven't in the last couple of years. have lunch with you one? Yeah. Yeah. And then the hiking depending on who they are. I do appreciate whether you're just going over the suspension bridge itself with little kids or the small loop that will take you off to the back of the observer. Yeah. Whatever that is. I've done the shorter one. The Wonderland loop. Yeah. has a late john middle. Yeah, yeah. Longer hikes. So I feel it's accessible to anybody and everybody whether you're just going up to the views and a quick walk across the suspension bridge, or other friends that really want to go out and go for something.</p>	<p>Food has always been good</p> <p>I take them on hikes depending who it is</p> <p>But always the suspension bridge</p>	
<p>And when you go up there, do you feel it epitomizes Squamish? Like, do you feel or do you think if it was located somewhere else with the similar view? It would feel so would you still feel Squamish?</p>	<p>Um, if it was located elsewhere, I'm not really sure. But I mean, again, when you're going up the gondola you can see the log sorts you can like it's has such a great view of Squamish, you can really get a good feel for the whole town. You've got the map map, the blind channel, the estuary, which I personally love, and love spending a lot of time on, so it's amazing. seem to have a bird's eye view and even that can tell a lot of stories about the town, the history, the mix between the industry with all the love for it, and then you've got the painters and just the hiking and accessibility. So in one fell swoop, you do get a pretty good sense of Yeah, this town and community is all about</p>	<p>Such great views of Squamish</p> <p>Estuary, mix of industry</p> <p>In one visit you get the sense of Squamish, the town and community</p>	<p>Presence</p>
<p>, do you if you had visitors and they could you say just go to the gondola that you'll get as much of an experience as Squamish or do you think there's other things to showcase them in</p>	<p>Oh, I think there's lots of other things to show in Squamish. I mean that though, it's like anything, when you have a bird's eye view, you get the layout, you understand it a little bit more. You see the sound, you see everything, but I still think I mean, I've taken before it was close, but even the train Museum, yeah. into downtown. You know, it's getting there's more and more offering some great little restaurants and stuff. So I</p>	<p>Other things to show, but this gives the bird's eye view</p> <p>The gondola is only one piece</p>	

	think it's one big piece of the pie. It depends on how long you have to spend Squamish. If it was one day I'd say go up the gondola, do something up there and then maybe go through town. But there are other things for sure that are great to see.	of the pie for visitors. Have to go through town	
you mentioned the new restaurants and things like that is a bit of a reflection of a new population and a growth in the population? Based on what you know about new people to Squamish or anyone in your network that's maybe new to Squamish. What do you think their thoughts are on the gondola? And if you don't know, that's fine.	Yeah. Yeah. No, I mean, as far as I know, it's positive. I mean, people depending on what like whether they're super active, whether they want to use it for hiking, I have some friends that just going to pass in school in Vancouver because they want to use it for hiking and yeah, just to go up there. But newer people to Squamish. I don't really know, I'm probably one of the newest out of my group.	Positive thoughts from newer people as they're active	
What do you feel is the best aspect of the gondola?	The best aspects? I think the views really like just to get up. Yeah, for me, that is a huge plus. I mean, I love everything about nature and views and stuff. But also when we're when the bond will get back to, let's say normal or whatever, again, that can bring the community together. And I know what it's not just those Fridays, there are other events. I have some friends that do go up for the yoga. I actually haven't been up before. Yeah, but I know there are other events and community engagement pieces that are really important. So once we're able to from a COVID perspective, and just yeah, numbers and staffing and stuff. I think a lot of other things.	The views are the best Love everything about nature Look forward to bringing back the community	Nature
And what do you think the gondola is missing?	At this point, again, getting back to the food and beverage offering, but that's somewhat out of their hands. I do wish they would have an extra trail that is outside of the beginning of the Jeep.	Food and beverage consistency is missing	

	<p>Yeah, because I don't know what the percentage is. But so many of the people that want to do the height, you can't because the cheapest bull and you know, like the numbers once you will turn off to the right there. It's majority of the people are going to the gym, and it's unfortunate that we don't have access. Yeah. Because of that, yeah, no for the things that are really missing. I don't know, I can't think of anything really off the top of my head.</p>	<p>I wish the trail next the Chief was part of the gonodola</p>	
<p>And if you were one of the founders and you know standing there in 2011 with this vision and idea, would you do anything differently if you could start from scratch</p>	<p>Apparently I'm not that visionary person. Yeah, that's okay. And you can say you don't know. The choice for location was phenomenal. Just I think it really captures the views and everything. you know, there's a fear of getting too too big. I mean, I know the concept of growing and growing numbers of growing revenue or whatever is what business is all about. But I would caution it getting too big turning, like just expanding to a point where it's too busy or there's just too much out there. I like it. It's not a massive attraction. It's not a within that realm or whatever. Yeah, I would caution. Getting too big. Yeah, emanate. And why do you say it's not a Whistler Blackcomb? Just just the sheer scope and size of it. Yeah. With all the people. Yeah</p>	<p>Choice of location is perfect</p> <p>There is a fear of getting too big</p> <p>Caution becoming a massive attraction</p>	<p>Local</p>
<p>do you ever feel a sense of the gondola in the community without being physically at the gondola?</p>	<p>I think I personally do because I have some good friends that all work there. Yeah. And so I do see people that work there in the community. Yeah. I do remember talking to you and stuff. Yeah. During the shutdown. Yeah. I remember the Santa like, you know, just trying to keep that community engaged, whether I knew you were not I thought on some of my community Facebook pages, yeah, outside of my friends, that the bondholders doing this, and Santa was coming around. For sure, I am aware of various different ways that the gondola has tried to engage. Also, from a media standpoint, it will be unfortunate, you know, vandalism, or</p>	<p>I feel the gondola even when not there</p> <p>Social media, community events</p> <p>Kirby in the news</p>	<p>presence</p>

	<p>whatever you seeing Kirby. Seeing it in the news. Seeing from an observer a positive. You know, the positive message that we are going to rebuild are important in the community, seeing various provincial stakeholders coming and supporting at those press conferences and stuff like showing that. It is an important piece of not only Squamish, but British Columbia, too. Yeah. And then it's so close to Vancouver. So there's a lot of people from Vancouver that can come up. Yeah,</p>	<p>Good that it's close to Vancouver</p>	
<p>And do you feel the statement that the Sea to Sky gondola is truly Squamish gondola is true?</p>	<p>Yeah, yeah. Yeah</p>	<p>Yes, truly Squamish's gondola</p>	
<p>anything else you'd want to add about? perception or of the gondola?</p>	<p>you know, I'm a huge fan. I'm a big cheerleader for it. I just think it I think it really is a great piece of supplements. Yeah. And I personally get a lot of joy out of it, too. So yeah, you naturally want to share that with your friends, your community or the people visiting tonight? Yeah, like anytime my hopefully my family will be able to come visit. parts of my family will be able to come visit. Yeah. And I really hope that I could take them up there. Yeah, I think whether it's Oh, yeah, the boys would love anything I do want to do is spend a bit more time up there in the winter. Yeah, because sensitive moved. It hasn't really been fully operational in the winter. Yeah. I remember I went up three winters ago, actually, with a good friend who was visiting around Christmas time, and it just snowed. It was really amazing. So for me, that's one thing to do is go up and spin. I haven't been snowshoeing yet. So I want to do some Yeah, I know. I know where they too, but I haven't done a number of different things I would like Yeah. Yeah. In the winter. Yeah.</p>	<p>I can't wait to show my nephews</p> <p>Wants to visit in winter</p>	<p>Pride</p>