

What Happens Here? Educating Las Vegas's Guests During COVID-19

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Even if almost half of a century has passed from the publication of Valene Smith's groundbreaking book, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (1977), social scientists still try to uncover the complex relationship between tourists and local communities worldwide. When, at the end of the spring 2020, a large number of destinations started to ease their travel restrictions after the COVID-19 lockdown, scholars expressed concerns regarding tourists' behaviors and their effects on host communities (Carr, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). Aware that host-guest encounters could represent a significant threat in terms of spreading the virus, tourism stakeholders worked hard to make sure that hospitality-related venues could assure high levels of safety (Bonfanti, Vigolo & Yfantidou, 2021; Ghaharian & Bernhard, 2020). Being a major destination, Las Vegas followed this trend. When on June 4, 2020, a number of integrated resorts in the Nevadan city opened their doors, they enhanced a rigid set of guidelines (Villano, 2020). After being closed for 78 days, those venues saw in the ability of increasing social distance and using advanced sanitizing tools a strategy to, at least partially, recover from the previous months' losses. For how equipped Las Vegas's resorts were, however, there was an aspect that not even the rigid directions by the Nevada Gaming Control Board and the Nevada Gaming Commission could predict: tourists' behaviors.

During the summer of 2020, several news outlets and social media posts highlighted a trend of unsafe attitudes. On June 9, CNN Travel published an article titled *Las Vegas reopened. People showed up*, describing that a large number of the newly welcomed tourists were not wearing masks or practicing social distancing (Villano, 2020). Less than a month later, the Las Vegas Review Journal wrote about resort workers' complaining about several pool guests ignoring the safety protocols (Schulz, 2020). And, according to some witnesses, the situation on the Strip and Downtown Las Vegas worsened during Labor Day and New Year's Eve (Puit & Ford, 2020; Ford, 2021). While it is easy to point the finger

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at irresponsible tourists and weak employees, we have to understand that the issue is more complex than it looks. It is partially rooted in the largely debated hosts-guests relationship, especially when it comes to guests' perception of the local community.

If we want to understand the COVID-19 situation in Las Vegas, it is necessary to reflect on the image of the city in the mind of the public. When, in 2003, the Las Vegas Visitors and Convention Authority (LVCVA) launched the tag line "What happens here, stays here," it quickly became one of the most successful marketing campaigns ever created (Bock, 2014). Launching that message, LVCVA assured tourists that, whatever they did during their stay would never have left the so-called Sin City. The media played a big role reinforcing that idea, as movies like *Ocean's Eleven* and *The Hangover* showed (Borer, 2016). Therefore, while investigating tourism in Las Vegas during the pandemic, a simple question arises. After promoting itself as the destination where everything was allowed, how was it possible to convince guests, in an extremely limited amount of time, that there were some rules to respect?

In June 2020, LVCVA launched the marketing campaign #VegasSmart, widely promoting it on social media. The challenge was to educate visitors to the new COVID-19 restrictions without spoiling the Las Vegas's brand identity they have been marketing for years. In an Instagram video posted on June 15, 2020, LVCVA showed the images of resort employees working hard to ensure safe environments, suggesting, "Say 'Vegas, Baby' 20 times while washing your hands." Ten days later, a post stated: "There's a lot you can do in Vegas that you wouldn't do anywhere else. All we ask is that you do it with a mask on." The post was accompanied with multiple pictures of neon-sign looking messages (Figure 1) that ranged from: "Cover your face not your wild side" to "Mask your face not your fun" (LVCVA, 2020).

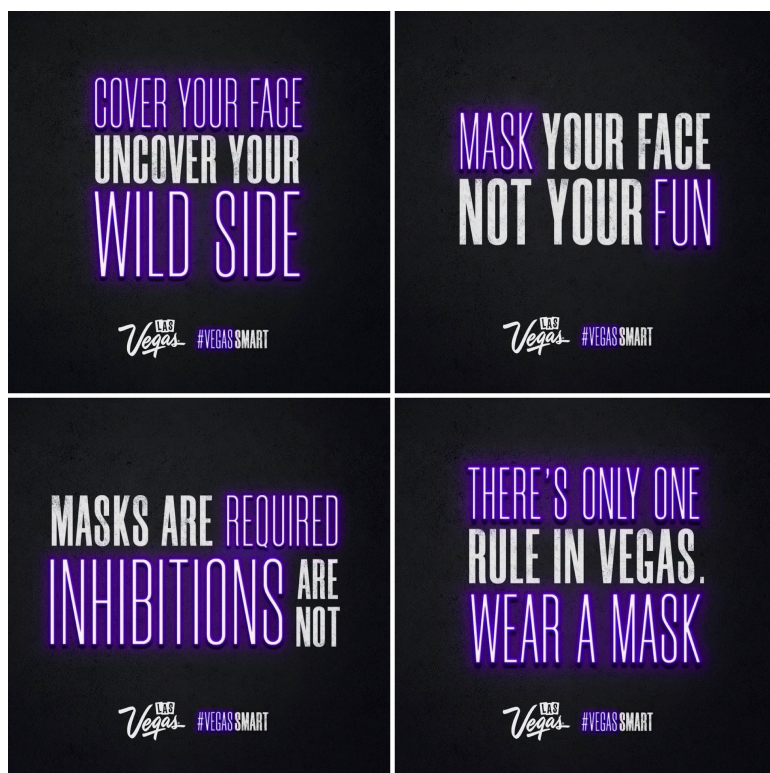


Figure 1
LVCA's #VegasSmart Instagram campaign.
Credit: [visitvegas.com](https://www.visitvegas.com) Instagram profile.

Trying to balance the campaign launched 13 years earlier with the severity of the mask mandates, LVCVA's new tag lines revealed a bitter truth: what happens here does not stay here anymore. Tourists' misconduct, in fact, could facilitate the spread of COVID-19 not only throughout the Las Vegas' community, but also in the states of origin of the tourists who visit the city's attractions. This posed the need for a thorough reflection on the best strategies to educate guests during the pandemic, for their own good and also for the hosts'. However, marketing campaigns and the media are not the only promoters of a superficial view of Las Vegas.

In a 2011 article titled *Is Las Vegas a "Real City"?* sociologist David R. Dickens denounced a trend of drive-by journalists and scholars who, after visiting the Strip for just a couple of days, "return to their hometowns to write an article or book condemning an entire metropolitan area of two million people" (p. 119). The article was an answer to urban sociologist Sharon Zukin, who in a video screened during the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting held in Las Vegas the same year, declared hating Las Vegas, which she defined as "not a real city." Zukin, however, is just one of the many scholars who fell in what Borer (2016) defined as a trap, "assuming that the Strip offers the only lessons to be learned from Las Vegas" (p. 112). The main point, in this sense, is that those scholars ignore some key elements that could confer validity to their statements, especially when it comes to the experiences of the members of the local community.

Similar to Dickens and Borer, in the past few years a number of other social scientists conducted in-depth studies of Las Vegas, going beyond the Strip's stereotypes. Many of these are carried out by sociology, history, and architecture scholars who work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. That scholarship raised awareness of some fundamental aspects, such as the city's history, identity, and culture. But how does all of this fit within the host-guest relationship? Looking at the images of crowded sidewalks and pools during the pandemic, one wonders if tourists realize that their behavior could be harmful for the host community. In light of the above-mentioned stereotypes, the real question is if visitors are even aware that Las Vegas has a community.

In a context in which educating the hosts towards a more responsible behavior seems to be key, it is important to reflect on both short and long-term strategies. On the one hand, LVCVA launching the #VegasSmart campaign and integrated resorts enforcing their guidelines could be efficient immediate solutions. On the other hand, taking a sociological perspective might be helpful in the long run. The COVID-19 crisis in Las Vegas revealed the urgent need for a shift in public opinion. In the past few years, sad events such as the 2017 mass shooting, and cheerful happenings like the successes of the professional hockey team Vegas Golden Knights, seemed to have changed the collective imagination in seeing Las Vegas as a real city. This was supported by the growing marketing initiatives that, before the pandemic, centered around the promotion of off-the Strip attractions, such as Red Rock Canyon and the Arts District.

Although unhurried, this process might be key in solving some host-guest relationship-related issues in Las Vegas, with tourists being conscious that, even if their actions might "stay in Vegas," they could have damaging consequences for the locals. In other words, for a city that in 2019 registered a visitor volume higher than 42.5 million (LVCVA, 2019), responsible tourism should be a priority. The pandemic hiatus might represent a unique opportunity to reflect on those topics and take action. In 2017, while recovering from an unbearably painful collective trauma, the Las Vegas community made its voice being heard through the hashtag #VegasStrong. Four years later, that same hashtag became the symbol of residents' solidarity during COVID-19. A voice, however, needs someone who hears it. Therefore, were tourism stakeholders, scholars, and the media to move towards a more community-based view of Las Vegas, this might help raise tourists' awareness of important aspects they ignore. Because, in the end, #VegasStrong and #VegasSmart are two sides of the same coin, which is the safety of both hosts and guests. And, even in Las Vegas, gambling on that cannot be allowed.

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