

Westdale Theatre

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About the Organization:

The Westdale Theatre, built in 1935, was Hamilton's first talking movie cinema and a community anchor for entertainment. In the '60s and '70s, it transformed into a full-scale movie house. However, after over 30 years in business, the movie house fell into a state of disrepair. In 2016, the Westdale Theatre went up for sale, and a group of community-minded volunteers and philanthropists purchased the cinema and restored it. In 2019, the Westdale Theatre re-opened as a not-for-profit organization, marketing itself as Hamilton's "premier cinema and cultural event space" with a service model of approximately 80% second run (i.e., after mainstream cinemas) and arthouse films and 20% community events or live performances.

In March 2020, the Westdale Theatre closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shifted its business model to include online programming. The cinema re-opened again in February 2022. Leadership has noted that regular film attendance has been low and is cognizant that peoples' viewing habits have significantly shifted towards streaming from home, especially during the pandemic. The organization is currently kept afloat through a government wage-subsidy program and grants and is concerned about the sustainability of its service model.

About the Project:

In the past, the Westdale Theatre has received consistent patronage from local residents. Before the pandemic, a loyal group of residents would come out for dinner and a movie at least once a week, but that isn't happening anymore. The Westdale Theatre would like to re-engage with local residents to investigate their shift in habits, their awareness of the theatre and its diverse offerings, and ultimately what programming and marketing efforts might gain their patronage again. The key differentiator of The Westdale is that it's a not-for-profit charity that screens art, independent, and Canadian films along with concerts, talks, and comedy. As such, The Westdale would also like to gauge the public's knowledge of their not-for-profit charitable status.

Research Question:

The research is guided by the following questions, which will constitute *two* Research Shop projects over the course of two semesters:

1. (Semester 1, Fall 2022) To what extent are local residents aware of the Westdale Theatre's presence and its offerings?
 - a. To what extent are they interested in its offerings?
 - b. What alternative offerings, if any, are desired?
 - c. Do they know that The Westdale is a registered not-for-profit charity?
2. (Semester 2, Winter 2023) How, if at all, have people's film viewing habits changed within the last few years (including the pandemic)?

- a. How have small arthouse cinemas responded to these shifts in viewing habits?

For the purposes of this project, local residents are defined as those living within 2km of the building.

Research Activities:

Research activities for question/semester 1 will include surveys and/or focus groups with local residents.

Research activities for question/semester 2 include:

- A review of research, trade journals, etc. investigating changes in movie viewing habits of consumers within the last 3-5 years (with a focus on a shift in habits as a result of the pandemic)
- Interviews with the owners of other small arthouse cinemas

Audience:

The research will be used by the community partner to reconsider changes to the Westdale Theatre's business model, including recommendations around programming changes and marketing efforts.

Deliverable:

Plain language research reports with context, methods, findings, and discussion/conclusion.

Timeline:

Project 1 will commence September 2022 and wrap up early January 2023. Project 2 will commence immediately following Project 1 and will wrap up at the end of April 2023.

Community Partner Role:

The community partner will help to refine the project scope, collaborate on a methodology, be available for consultation when needed, review major project deliverables, and, where feasible/needed, support participant incentivization (e.g., gift card draw for completing survey; refreshments for focus groups).

Note: Neil is on vacation from September 8th to 20th.

Interest for Students:

This project will be of interest to students who are interested in market research, arthouse cinemas, consumer behaviour/habits.