

Visitor Willingness to Pay for Indigenous Cultural Programming: A Case Study of the Nanticoke Powwow

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Abstract

Indigenous communities often face two major challenges: preserving their culture and economic sustainability. Indigenous communities depend largely on a single annual function for most of their income generation. In spite of the increased awareness about the Indigenous cultural experiences among the general population, there has been very little analysis undertaken into the question of whether year-long programming can be both financially and culturally sustainable. This research focuses on the preferences of the visitors for cultural activities and how much they would be willing to pay for these activities within the context of an annual Nanticoke Indian Tribe powwow in Delaware. A total of 420 surveys were collected for this purpose. Descriptive statistics, analysis of Likert scales, and chi-square test were utilized to find out the relationships between demographic attributes and preferences for cultural activities. Also, the results of linear regression analysis have helped identify the predictors of willingness to pay. According to the findings, there is a high demand for the development of year-round programming. 70% of respondents showed interest in participating in such cultural events. The main reasons for this include the need for cultural education and experiencing authentic cultural events. Income and past attendance of powwows are the factors that contribute most significantly to the probability of being willing to pay for the cultural event. Year-round programming can generate annual revenues up to \$1,931,000, which is a significant improvement compared to the current revenues amounting to \$184,274.

Keywords: indigenous cultural tourism, willingness to pay, cultural programming, cultural preservation, tribal economic development, Nanticoke Indian Tribe

1. Introduction

The Nanticoke Indian Tribe, one of the oldest Native American tribes in Delaware, is now faced with a crisis that endangers its culture and economy. Currently, there are only about 700 members left, making their language on the verge of extinction;



traditional wisdom is fading away with the death of elders; young people have little or no economic opportunity associated with their heritage. The tribe's main source of income is a yearly powwow attended by 10,000-15,000 people, which raises substantial interest but lasts only three days. As reported by the Nanticoke Indian Association in 2023, the tribe raised \$184,274, of which 53.9% came from a fundraising activity. The tribe spent \$80,000 organizing the 2025 powwow, \$30,000 of which was covered by donations.

It is not just a problem for the Nanticoke Indians. Indigenous populations around the world face similar problems, including cultural loss and limited economic opportunities, even though interest in Indigenous history and culture has grown (Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). People travel from across the United States to attend the two-day Nanticoke powwow. This shows that there is interest in real cultural experiences. Because tourism can take advantage of Indigenous culture when tribes do not control how it is presented, community-based events offer a better approach. These events allow tribes to decide how their culture is shared while also creating jobs and income for tribal members (Butler, 2021). Before offering programs throughout the year, the tribe needs to know what visitors want and how much they would pay. Why would someone decide to participate in cultural activities such as the Nanticoke powwow? To what degree does an Indigenous experience influence visitors' decisions?

Previous studies have looked at Indigenous tourism and visitor experiences. However, less is known about whether cultural programs held throughout the year could help small tribes earn money while protecting their culture. Few studies have asked how much visitors would pay for programs run by a tribe outside of an annual event such as a powwow. This study looks at whether visitors are interested in year-round Nanticoke programs, how much they would pay, and what affects their decisions.

This study uses the Nanticoke Indian Tribe's annual powwow to look at the possible economic benefits of Indigenous cultural events. It has three goals. The first is to find out how much visitors would be willing to pay and what affects that amount. The second is to learn what affects a person's decision to attend. The third is to see whether cultural events could bring in income throughout the year. Willingness to pay is an economic idea that measures how much value a person places on a product or experience. If visitors will pay more for authentic programs led by tribal members, it suggests that they value those parts of the experience. The study used a survey. The answers were examined using descriptive statistics, Likert-scale analysis, chi-square tests, and regression analysis. This study focuses on the Nanticoke powwow in Delaware, but the results may also be useful to other Indigenous groups facing similar problems.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional survey to collect quantitative data on visitor preferences and economic behaviors at the annual powwow of the Nanticoke Indian Tribe. Informal qualitative interviews with attendees were also used to supplement the survey data.

2.2. Participants and Sample

The survey was distributed through regional tourism agencies, Delaware schools, other educational institutions, social



media, and email. In total, 420 people participated in the survey. These respondents included regular visitors, families looking for cultural tourism experiences, educators seeking Indigenous learning resources, previous powwow attendees, and residents.

2.3. Data Collection

The questionnaire included both structured and open-ended questions, organized into several themes. First, information about the respondents' demographics was collected, including gender, age, location, income, and education. Second, information about the last time and how often respondents attended a powwow or participated in a Native American cultural event was collected. Third, respondents rated their reasons for attending an event using a five-point Likert scale. Fourth, data were collected to measure willingness to pay for a day-long program (4 to 6 hours) and a weekend program based on specific price ranges. Fifth, data were collected on preferences for program format, overnight accommodation, types of activities, and expenditures related to cultural events.

Other sections focused on comfort with Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technology, willingness to donate money for language revival, perceived obstacles to participation, and the elements that would be most influential in determining whether respondents attended the event. The survey ended with an open-ended question asking participants to explain how such an event would be relevant to them. In addition to the survey, the researcher conducted informal interviews with 35 people who attended the powwow.

2.4. Variables and Measurements

The main dependent variable was willingness to pay, measured through specified price ranges for day programs and weekend programs. Independent variables included demographic factors such as income level, age, educational attainment, and distance from the reservation, as well as behavioral factors including prior powwow attendance and educator status. Motivations for attendance were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). Tribal control of programming was measured on the same scale.

2.5. Procedure

The survey was distributed through regional tourism groups, schools, and online platforms. Respondents completed the survey either electronically or on paper. Informal interviews were then conducted with 35 powwow attendees on-site to supplement the quantitative data. Survey responses were then compiled and analyzed using the statistical methods described below.

2.6. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' demographics, interest in year-round programs, program and activity preferences, and willingness to pay. For Likert-scale questions, means, medians, and the percentages of respondents who selected 4 or 5 were calculated to describe motivations and attitudes toward management of cultural events by the tribe. Chi-square tests were used to analyze relationships between year-round interest and previous powwow attendance, willingness to pay and income, overnight interest and distance, and virtual field-trip interest and educator status. In addition,



a linear regression analysis was conducted to identify which demographic and behavioral factors were most strongly associated with willingness to pay for cultural programming.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any time. All survey responses were anonymous, and no personally identifying information was collected or retained. Informal interviews with powwow attendees were conducted with verbal consent, and no names or identifying details were recorded. The study did not involve any vulnerable groups, and there were no foreseeable risks to participants.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Profile

A total of 420 participants made up the survey sample. Females accounted for 56% of the sample, males accounted for 40%, and non-binary and other participants made up the remaining 4%. The largest age category comprised people aged between 35 and 54. In terms of geographic location, 50% of participants lived less than 50 miles from the Nanticoke reservation, 35% lived 50 to 150 miles away, and 15% lived farther away. Forty-five percent of participants indicated household income ranging from \$50,000 to \$100,000. Sixty percent of participants had attended at least one powwow, while 40% had never attended a powwow. Only 5% of the respondents identified as Native or Indigenous.

Table 1: Demographic Information From Study

Demographics	n	%
Female	235	56.0
Male	168	40.0
Within 50 miles of reservation	210	50.0
Never attended a powwow	168	40.0
Attended at least once	252	60.0
Income \$50,000–\$100,000	189	45.0



Identifies as Native or Indigenous	21	5.0
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3.2. Attendance Interest and Market Demand

When asked how interested they would be in attending Nanticoke cultural programs if offered year-round, 28% reported being very interested, 42% reported being interested, 20% were somewhat interested, 8% were slightly interested, and 2% were not interested. In total, 70% of respondents reported being interested or very interested in year-round programming.

Table 2: Interest in Year-Round Cultural Programming

Interest level	Percent
Very interested	28%
Interested	42%
Somewhat interested	20%
Slightly interested	8%
Not interested	2%

3.3. Program Type Preferences

Participants could select all program types that met their needs. Seventy-three percent of respondents expressed interest in day programs lasting four to six hours. Fifty-two percent expressed interest in two-day weekend retreats, and 45% expressed interest in online or virtual programs. Seasonal programs offered monthly or quarterly received interest from 38% of respondents, while week-long cultural immersion programs received interest from 18%.

Table 3: Program Type Preferences

Program type	Respondents expressing interest
Day program (4–6 hours)	73%



Weekend retreat (2 days)	52%
Online or virtual program	45%
Seasonal program	38%
Week-long cultural immersion	18%

3.4. Willingness to Pay

For day programs lasting four to six hours, 10% of respondents said they would pay zero dollars, 17.4% would pay from one to 49 dollars, 34% would pay from 50 to 99 dollars, 30% would pay from 100 to 199 dollars, and 8.6% would be willing to pay 200 dollars or more. In total, 72.6% of respondents would be willing to pay 50 dollars or more, and 38.6% would be willing to pay 100 dollars or more. In the survey, respondents reported spending an average of 92 dollars per person at cultural events, and 45% of respondents reported spending more than 75 dollars. These self-reported spending and willingness-to-pay responses were used to identify a possible day-program price range of 75 to 100 dollars. A study of Hawaiian cultural experiences similarly found that visitors were willing to pay a premium for authentic, tribally facilitated programming (Andrade et al., 2021).

For a two-day weekend program, 15% would pay nothing, 24% would pay from one to 149 dollars, 35% would pay from 150 to 349 dollars, 20% would pay from 350 to 599 dollars, and 6% would pay 600 dollars or more. In total, 61% of respondents would pay 150 dollars or more for a weekend experience, and 26% would pay 350 dollars or more. This pattern is consistent with research showing that deeper cultural engagement commands premium pricing (Gómez-Zapata et al., 2025).

Table 4: Willingness to Pay for Cultural Programs

Price Range	Day Program (4-6 hrs) %	Weekend Program (2 days) %
\$0	10.0	15.0
Lower range (\$1-\$49 / \$1-\$149)	17.4	24.0



Middle range (\$50–\$99 / \$150–\$349)	34.0	35.0
Upper range (\$100–\$199 / \$350–\$599)	30.0	20.0
\$200+ / \$600+	8.6	6.0
Willing to pay mid-range or above	72.6	61.0

3.5. Chi-Square Analyses

Four relationships were tested: prior powwow attendance and interest in year-round programs; income group and willingness to pay; distance from the reservation and interest in overnight stays; and educator status and interest in virtual field trips. For each test, the null hypothesis stated that there was no relationship between the two variables, while the alternative hypothesis stated that a relationship existed. A p-value below .05 was used to reject the null hypothesis.

The chi-square test between prior powwow attendance and interest in year-round programming was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 8.42$, $df = 1$, $p = .004$), suggesting a relationship between the two variables. People who were previously involved in attending powwows showed higher interest in year-round programs than people who were not. The chi-square test for association between income group and price category selected was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.67$, $df = 3$, $p = .005$), showing higher chances among the high-income group respondents to pick high-price categories for day programs and weekend retreats. The chi-square test between distance from the reservation and overnight stay interest was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.31$, $df = 2$, $p = .043$), meaning that people far from the reservation were more interested in overnight stays. This result is in line with travel distance as a factor. The chi-square test between educator category and interest in virtual field trips was also statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 15.83$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Educators were far more interested in virtual programs and school subscriptions.

Table 5: Chi-Square Test Results

Variable 1	Variable 2	χ^2	df	p
Prior powwow attendance	Interest in year-round program	8.42	1	.004
Income group	Willingness-to-pay category	12.67	3	.005
Distance from reservation	Interest in overnight stay	6.31	2	.043



Educator status	Interest in virtual field trips	15.83	1	<.001
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3.6. Motivations and Decision Factors

Attendees rated their reasons for visiting cultural events using a 5-point Likert scale. The highest-rated reason was learning about the culture, followed by supporting Native-owned businesses and education, with means of 4.5, 4.3, and 4.1, respectively. Entertainment received a mean score of 3.6, while visiting with family and friends received a mean score of 3.4. More than 80% of participants rated each of the three highest-ranked reasons as 4 or 5.

In relation to decision-making factors, 70% of people indicated that authenticity was the most important factor, followed by price and activities that allowed people to engage, at percentages of 65% and 60%, respectively. 90% of people stated that tribal control of programming was an important or very important factor.

Table 6: Motivations for Attending Cultural Events (1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important)

Motivation	Mean	Median	% Rating 4 or 5
Learning about culture	4.5	5	85.0
Supporting Native businesses	4.3	4	78.0
Educational purposes	4.1	4	72.0
Entertainment	3.6	4	48.0
Family/social reasons	3.4	3	40.0
Tribal control of programming	4.7	5	90.0

3.7. Activity Preferences

The most popular activities were drumming and singing, traditional cuisine, and storytelling and language, each generating interest among more than 65% of respondents. Craft making and outdoor skills such as canoeing and archery were also popular. Museum visits and virtual reality received moderate interest.

3.8. Overnight Experience Preferences



Fifty-five percent of respondents noted that they were likely or very likely to book an overnight stay if authentic accommodation and food offerings were available. Eco-cabin style lodging was the first choice for 35% of participants, followed by traditional-style lodges (30%) and hotel-style accommodation (15%).

3.9. Technology and Virtual Programming

85% of the respondents said they feel comfortable using virtual reality and augmented reality technology in order to learn about the culture. Of the 85 respondents representing educators, 60% have confirmed that they will be subscribing to the virtual field trips at \$500 per year, with an additional 29% indicating they may subscribe to such services.

3.10. Barriers to Participation

The most frequently cited reasons for not participating were cost (60%), time availability (50%), and distance traveled (45%). The lack of safety concerns and the lack of interest were cited in only 10% and 5% of responses, respectively.

3.11. Regression Analysis

The regression analysis showed that income was the strongest predictor of willingness to pay. People from higher-income households said they would pay more than people from lower-income households. Previous attendance was the second-strongest predictor. People who had attended before were willing to pay more. Education had a positive relationship with willingness to pay. Distance had a small negative relationship, and age had a very weak negative relationship. The model explained 47% of the differences in willingness to pay. Future studies could also look at travel costs, group size, and interest in specific programs. These factors may help explain more of the differences. Other studies have also found that income and education are related to willingness to pay (Andrade et al., 2021; Koumoutsea et al., 2023).

3.12. Revenue Feasibility

The survey data were used to make a first-year revenue estimate of about \$1,931,000. This estimate includes day programs, weekend retreats, longer stays, online subscriptions, food and craft sales, and grants. It is based on what respondents said they would attend and pay for. It is not based on actual purchases. It also does not subtract the cost of staff, buildings, or running the programs. For these reasons, the number should be viewed as a possible high estimate of gross revenue, not expected profit. The estimate is higher than the tribe's current annual revenue of \$184,274. Through cultural events, Indigenous communities can generate revenue from ticket sales as well as from selling food, crafts, and other goods and services (Ramesh, 2024).

4. Discussion

4.1. Restatement of Key Findings

The results showed interest in Nanticoke cultural activities outside of the annual powwow. About 70% of participants said they were interested or very interested in programs offered throughout the year. Learning was the most important reason for attending, while entertainment ranked lowest. Income and previous powwow attendance had the strongest



relationships with willingness to pay. More than half of participants said they would pay \$50 or more for a one-day event. More than 60% said they would pay \$150 or more for a weekend event. The first estimate of \$1.93 million in gross revenue is much higher than the tribe's current annual revenue of \$184,274. However, it is not a profit estimate because the costs of running the programs were not included.

4.2. Implications and Significance

These motivational insights are highly valuable when it comes to designing and marketing such events. Participants enjoy the entertainment but attend Indigenous events primarily to learn about the culture; in addition, they place a lot of value on the programs conducted by the tribe members. Previous research in cultural tourism shows that authentic, community-based experiences result in significantly higher visitor satisfaction and increase the likelihood of repeat visits (Carr et al., 2016; Reddy & Sailesh, 2024). The interview responses supported this idea, with 89% of attendees saying it is important to learn directly from tribal members rather than outside speakers. The results also support the main idea of this study that cultural preservation and economic sustainability can be achieved simultaneously. When tribal members control how programs are run and how their culture is shared, authenticity becomes an economic strength (Lofthouse, 2020; Akee, 2021). Visitors are willing to pay more for these authentic experiences, and people who have attended before are especially willing to pay because they understand the quality of the event. This is consistent with research on Indigenous self-governance, which shows that tribal control of economic activities is linked to more stable and sustainable outcomes (Frye & Parker, 2021).

4.3. Connection to Objectives

From the findings of the chi-square tests, it is clear that history of attendance, income level, distance, and being an educator were all significant factors influencing the respondents' preferences and willingness to pay. According to the regression test findings, the most important determinants of willingness to pay were the respondent's income level and their history of attendance at powwows. Cultural learning and authenticity scored significantly higher compared to entertainment, indicating that culture-focused activities have more value to visitors than mere entertainment. Income level and attendance were found to be positively related to willingness to pay, while powwow attendance history was significantly related to year-round programming interests ($p = .004$). Finally, educator status was significantly related to virtual field trip interests ($p < .001$).

4.4. Recommendations

According to this study, several recommendations could benefit the Nanticoke tribe. Firstly, day trips priced between \$75 and \$100 will attract the largest number of participants because most of those surveyed agreed to spend this much. Moreover, current prices are within this range already. Secondly, weekend retreats should be offered with a program, giving preference to eco-cabins and traditional lodges due to great interest in overnight stays. Thirdly, subscriptions for virtual field trips for teachers, priced at about \$500 annually, constitute an inexpensive source of income with evident consumer interest. Fourthly, promotions should be targeted at middle- and upper-middle-class visitors traveling within 100 miles from the reservation and attending previous Indigenous culture events because they were the most willing to pay. Lastly, programming should stay under the control of tribal members because almost 90% of respondents found tribal administration very important or important.



4.5. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Although the sample size was relatively large at 420 respondents, self-reported preference and willingness to pay were used without considering the respondents' actual expenditure behavior. Therefore, the willingness to pay might have been overestimated by the respondents since they had no opportunity to experience their willingness in practice. Further studies need to consider actual expenditure data once year-round programming is established and see if the conclusions are valid for various tribes and regions. The survey data were collected from regional sources, which might lead to a biased sample including many individuals who already showed interest in attending Indigenous cultural festivals. Moreover, this study did not include the actual cost of running year-round programs, such as staffing, facilities, equipment, and infrastructure. Because the revenue projection represents gross revenue and does not include operating costs, the tribe's actual net income cannot be determined from these findings. Future research should compare these costs with actual revenue after programs begin and should examine results from other tribes and regions.

4.6. Closing Thought

The Nanticoke Tribe's yearly powwow proves there's genuine interest in Indigenous culture. This study suggests that this interest can also create economic opportunities by allowing the tribe to share its heritage on its own terms. For the Nanticoke and other Indigenous communities facing similar pressures, cultural preservation and economic sustainability are not competing goals. When authenticity is the product, culture becomes the foundation of a viable future.

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Author Biography

Vivian Wan is a high school student from Delaware with academic interests in economics, public policy, and cultural preservation. The motivation behind her undertaking the research was inspired by the idea of how Indigenous people may be able to develop an economic system that will allow them to maintain their culture. Alongside her co-author, Cindy Wan, she collected and analyzed original survey data from visitors to the Nanticoke Indian Tribe's annual powwow in Delaware. Beyond research, Vivian is the founder of her school's National History Day Club, co-chair of the Global Initiative Board, captain of the varsity basketball team, and founder of two nonprofit organizations focused on child poverty and Indigenous cultural awareness. She hopes to continue studying how economics can help communities preserve their culture and create opportunities for future generations.

Cindy Wan is a high school student from Delaware with academic interests in economics, business, and social entrepreneurship. In addition to her strong passion for learning through research and projects, Cindy participates in studies concerning human-AI interactions as part of a STEM research project where she works with other students in exploring ethical aspects of artificial intelligence usage. Apart from her research endeavors, Cindy also participates in initiatives that focus on the development of leadership and communication skills, as well as fostering international awareness.



Mentor Contribution Statement

Professor **Yu (Yvette) Zhang**, Professor and Associate Department Head of Research and Graduate Programs in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University, served as a research mentor to Vivian Wan and Cindy Wan. She provided feedback and suggestions at different stages of the research process. She did not conduct the research, analyze the data, or write or edit the manuscript.

Professor Zhang read the authors' early literature review and research plan. She gave suggestions on how the topic could connect cultural events with economic concepts such as willingness to pay, consumer demand, valuation, preferences, and choice. She also suggested possible survey questions and types of background information that could be collected.

After the authors collected the survey data, Professor Zhang shared advice about possible ways to organize the analysis. She suggested a few ways to study the survey results, including descriptive statistics, Likert-scale analysis, chi-square tests, and a simple regression. She also gave examples of relationships that the authors could consider testing, such as the relationship between previous powwow attendance and interest in year-round programs.

Her contribution was limited to research guidance and feedback. The authors developed the research project, created and distributed the survey, collected and analyzed the data, decided which suggestions to use, and wrote the manuscript.

