

SXSW, Amazon, and the difficulty of staging an exclusive event online

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When a major festival such as South by Southwest (SXSW) is postponed, cancelled, or otherwise altered, the effects are widespread and impact upon those connected with the event in various ways. Given the speed at which the COVID-19 pandemic spread in early March 2020, and how close that was to the planned dates for SXSW, the festival's organisers needed to think and act extremely quickly, quite possibly without a contingency plan for a situation of such magnitude.

This scramble to save SXSW highlighted a number of issues that other festivals continue to wrestle with as the pandemic drags on. Film festivals are crucial as media events[1] that set agendas for global cinema, directing the attention of cinephiles worldwide; they also generate buzz for the films they screen, as filmmakers seek distribution for their work or prepare it for wide release.[2] Can film festivals still function as media events without physical components? How might both their exclusivity and opportunities for social interaction be approximated online for filmmakers and audiences alike during a pandemic?

Taking place in Austin, Texas since 1987 as a music event before expanding to include film and interactive media in 1994, SXSW is a hugely popular and significant cluster of media festivals in the United States. For more than three decades it has grown alongside its host city to become a major hub for the creative industries and technology sector. The rather corporate nature of SXSW in Austin's 'Silicon Hills' is particularly apparent this year with how it rebranded itself as 'Prime Video presents the SXSW 2020 Film Festival Collection' after Amazon approached organisers with the idea.[3] However, this partnership was not the only effort made to connect films with audiences in

the cancellation's aftermath. Pieces of this year's program were continuously salvaged over the course of months, brought online to a variety of platforms

The decision to take SXSW online was ultimately made with great thought and consideration for the festival's many stakeholders. Of these the filmmakers were essential, as without their films there would be no festival at all. Having originally programmed its exciting variety of narrative features, documentaries, shorts, and special events, controversy over the virtual festival's exclusivity meant that the filmmakers of only seven feature-length films (both narrative and documentary) decided to accept the virtual festival offer, with another 32 shorts accepting the offer, totaling 39 films. The makers of feature films were the most notable group who rejected the offer, as the seven which did screen represented just over 5% of the originally programmed 135 features.

Filmmakers' experiences

Phil spoke with eight filmmakers who screened films at SXSW this year. Through a series of exchanges with directors or producers of shorts – all of whom chose to screen their films as part of the Film Festival Collection – several key questions were explored: the reasons why the filmmakers decided to participate in the virtual festival; what they considered to be the key differences between a physical and virtual festival; whether the experience encouraged them to enter their work into virtual film festivals in the future.

The number of filmmakers who accepted the virtual festival offer immediately appears low, but the *reasons* behind these rejections provide further insight into individual thought processes. Narrative feature films might aim for a theatrical release, whereas shorts and some documentaries are often destined for online exhibition. Furthermore, the originally-programmed films would have varying budgets and release strategies, the filmmakers would have differing levels of career experience, with some possibly being just as interested in self-promotion as publicising their films, and therefore networking events might gain an increased importance. Some filmmakers might also feel that while Prime Video's Film Festival Collection carries the respected branding of SXSW, screening their film online via a platform provided by a huge corporation such as Amazon does not equate to their independent sensibilities.

Reasons for accepting the virtual festival offer

The filmmakers were asked: 'What were the main reasons for you choosing to show your film through Amazon Prime Video's Film Festival Collection?' It was immediately clear that exposure to a larger audience – as well as a more diverse one – were motivating factors in the decision, with Travis Wood (director of *Affirmative Action*) saying that he was 'excited to reach a larger audience' for his film. Furthermore, not only did the use of Prime Video as a platform increase the audience reach, it also acted as an attractive brand-association for some filmmakers, who were proud to be affiliated with a company with Amazon's reach and reputation. Addison Wright (director of *Hiplet: Because We Can*) referred to this by saying that he 'wanted to gain some exposure on a huge platform', with Izzy Shill (director of *Face To Face Time*) feeling that Amazon is a 'highly respected institution' that would 'add clout to the project'. In the responses received from filmmakers regarding the reasons for accepting the virtual festival offer, financial gain was – perhaps surprisingly – rarely mentioned. Carol Nguyen (director of *No Crying At The Dinner Table*[4]) did, however, feel that she received 'fair licensing fees for the film', and owing to having already received offers to screen at other festivals, the decision to accept the SXSW offer was 'a lot less hard than, for example, a filmmaker who would have to make the choice of premiering their film online'.

What was lost?

In an attempt to compare the overall festival experience to physical festivals they had attended in the past, the filmmakers were then asked: 'What do you think the festival "lost" as a result of moving online?' A common response to this question related to the inability to network with other filmmakers and the collaboration possibilities which might result from networking. Having attended many film festivals in the past, Nguyen alluded to the buzz around their films that filmmakers seek to generate, by saying the online version of SXSW 'lost the whole festival experience', which also includes getting to 'watch films with another type of energy... Unfortunately, no online event can substitute for the feeling you get by attending festivals.' Dean Colin Marcial (director of *Reminiscences of the Green Revolution*) said that 'the energy of the screenings is impossible to replicate online; you're watching at the comfort

of your own home, instead of reacting with hundreds of people next to you in real-time', further echoing filmmakers' desires to generate buzz around both their work and themselves as artists.

Contrasting with Nguyen's position as a filmmaker who has previously screened her work at multiple festivals, Ingrid Haas (director of *Still Wylde*) said: 'As a first time filmmaker, I was really eager to get the chance to meet with fellow filmmakers, make new friends and find future collaborators.' – highlighting the important role that networking plays in the development of filmmaking careers in their early stages.

Virtual film festivals in the future

Finally, the filmmakers were asked: 'Would you want to screen any of your future films at virtual festivals?' This elicited many positive responses; it suggests a positivity about the offer they received from SXSW and the experience of screening their work via Prime Video. Wood saw the increased audience possibilities that virtual film festivals provide by saying that such events would help him get his 'work out to as many people as possible'. Shill's response on the other hand hinted at the community spirit which can exist between independent films and some festivals, by stating that she 'would agree to it for the benefit of the festival, as it is a symbiotic industry and we all lean on each other for opportunities'. Further reflecting positively, from yet another angle, was Haas, who felt that screening online meant that she 'heard from so many viewers through [her] Instagram how much they connected with [her] film'. Social interaction is crucial for both filmmakers and audiences at festivals, and social media platforms can play a huge role in ensuring that aspect remains possible.

Many filmmakers did offer cautionary notes however, making comments such as 'I would absolutely do it again but I would never want to replace the live festival experience' (Haas), 'interactions just become a lot more unnatural and stilted when done online' (Graham Parkes, director of *The Voice In Your Head*), and 'I see it only as temporary' (Kamila Dohnalová, producer of *Figurant*). For these filmmakers, virtual festivals should not completely replace physical ones, regardless of the advantages created.

Online audience experience

In preparation for this section, Brad conducted digital ethnography of his ‘attendance’ at SXSW.

Ad hoc virtual adaptations

SXSW took a new shape in 2020. The suddenness of its cancellation a mere week before its scheduled start unraveled the festival across a wide range of decentred interventions, coming together most notably in late April for the Amazon partnership, before fraying out again. A timeline might include the following. In March, *IndieWire*[5] started to publish reviews of selected films that consented to their coverage, and SXSW itself went ahead with awarding films across its competitive sections.[6] Short of the Week arranged a special event that presented nine SXSW shorts to the public over as many days,[7] and Mailchimp, an email marketing service, began hosting the entire catalog of shorts selected by the festival.[8] In early April another partnership with Vimeo brought SXSW pilots online.[9] Together, these various efforts meant that by the time the official dates and program for the SXSW Film Festival Collection were finalised, all 39 titles apart from the seven features were already online. To ‘attend’ SXSW 2020 meant following virtual threads, to interface as users across many different social media and streaming platforms that had previously only relayed and amplified each year’s happenings. It meant no shortage of redundancy and confusion.

Throughout these efforts to transition online little attention was given by the festival or the media to the question of who, exactly, the audience for such content was supposed to be. ‘There’s a huge difference between having a thousand people see your film and sell it based on buzz, and have [*sic*] 300 million people see your movie unlimited times for ten days’, one anonymous producer told the online magazine *Inverse*. [10] The partnership with Amazon meant selected films *could* be seen by a truly mass audience. However, amidst the early pandemic controversies around the matter of exclusivity, the appeal of the SXSW program to a mainstream audience was overestimated and opportunities for the many interactions that define film festivals – arguably the main draw for the passholders and other stakeholders that constitute a festival’s community and audience – were overlooked.

Simulated festival going

The SXSW 2020 Film Festival Collection was available from 27 April to 6 May. Content was hosted in front of Amazon's paywall to maximise accessibility, though a degree of exclusivity was touted at the start of each stream in the form of a (more often than not) erroneous claim that what you were about to see was 'only on Prime Video'. The festival collection appeared in the fourth row of my non-member homepage and clicking through took me to a unique event page where all of the 39 titles could be browsed, watched, and even reviewed.



Fig. 1: The SXSW 2020 Film Festival Collection on Prime Video. Image: Brad Limov.

I took my usual approach to selecting films by letting word of mouth guide me. This had three main sources: recommendations offered by friends or media outlets, promotions on the SXSW Facebook and Twitter pages, and discussions happening within the reviews accumulating on each film's Prime Video page.

To give one example: *TFW No GF* was my final film on the first day, which I chose after I saw it promoted on the SXSW Facebook page. One of two documentary world premieres among the seven features in the collection, 54 users had already rated it an average of 4.6 out of 5 stars. Director Alex Lee Moyer explains to SXSW Director of Film Janet Pierson in a pre-recorded YouTube interview[11] that she felt this was the best way to reach her intended audience, echoing the sentiment shared with us by our filmmaker

contacts. The film's synopsis on Prime Video describes this group as 'a generation of disaffected young men search[ing] for meaning in the dark corners of the internet'. Moyer received quite a bit of press coverage by opting into the collection, and *TFW No GF* ultimately generated the most interest among all of the available films with a total of 247 customer ratings and 176 reviews at the end of the streaming period.

An event without an event

A total of 247 customer ratings is by no means a small number for festival fare, and the overall audience was likely many times larger, but it suggests that the viewership reached on Amazon fell far short of the '300 million' users who theoretically had access to the films. This begs the question: what does the audience get out of watching a virtual film festival film like the seven titles offered by SXSW over, say, viewing any other movie readily available for streaming online? SXSW content was pre-recorded and unceremoniously uploaded, left to compete for our attention in a crowded field. The most anticipated titles[12] did not accept the offer to stream on Amazon, and those that did were up against the stronger curation of platforms that offer festival films year-round, like MUBI and The Criterion Channel.

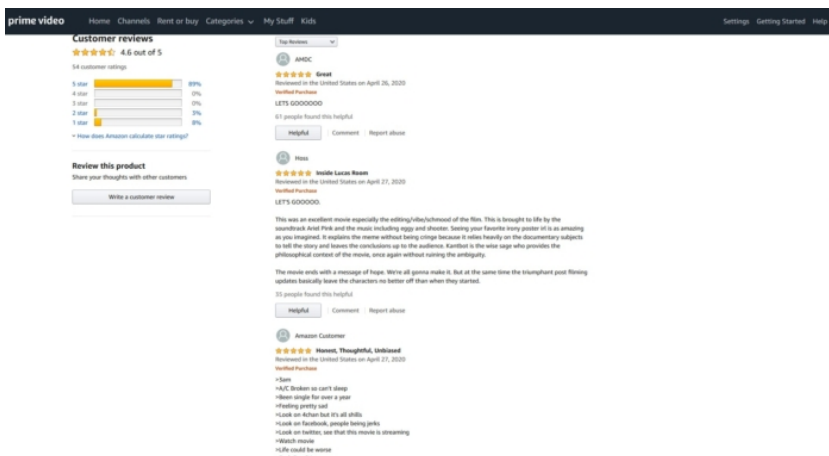


Fig. 2: Memes meet film festival with *TFW No GF* on Prime Video. Image: Brad Limov.

Film festivals are not just film markets or screenings – they are festivals. Festival goers want to watch films, of course, but they also expect and pay for an experience that they would otherwise not be able to access, for spontaneous interaction with members of a community that they would otherwise not see. These elements were not present beyond Amazon user reviews and social media comment threads. Little was done to stage an ‘event’, even when now, more than ever, technology affords us the ability to approximate real-time, live engagement for geographically dispersed audiences like those of the SXSW community. Had SXSW at least programmed live discussions with audience engagement through chat features, or even arranged video conferences through Zoom or other applications, then valuable interactions with fellow attendees might have taken place.[13] Breakout sessions could similarly have encouraged this kind of connection, though more artificial than a chance encounter while queuing up for your next film.[14] At the end of the day, little was done to recreate that film festival ‘energy’ discussed in our exchanges with filmmakers.

A virtual festival future

SXSW 2020 ultimately attempted a virtual festival format that had never been done before, pulling together a solution within the chaos of an erupting pandemic. It became a target of criticism the moment its partnership with Amazon was announced,[15] and was left with no time to react when only a handful of filmmakers accepted their offer. Nonetheless, the actions taken by the SXSW organisers placed their commitment to their filmmakers front and center, even if most had to refuse due to the economic risk posed by the festival’s handling of exclusivity.

Particularly for the directors and producers of short films like the ones we interviewed, the SXSW Film Festival Collection on Amazon still proved to be a valuable experience. Independent films need to be seen to exist. Audiences were reached and connections with fans were made, even if these were indirect, through external platforms like Instagram. However, our interlocutors still expressed their desire for the energy of a live event and the intimacy of the interactions with their audiences and peers that it affords. Moreover, screening fees that were deemed reasonable to some proved to be outright ‘laughable’ to others,[16] and as noted 95% of feature directors did not screen their work as part of the collection. For these filmmakers, SXSW

still worked to use its brand to promote their films as they were gradually premiered or released over the subsequent months through other channels.

At the time of writing, COVID-19 continues to be a problem for events worldwide. Some, like Far East Film Festival in Udine, Italy, have taken more innovative approaches to the problem of approximating the exclusivity and liveness of a physical event. Others, like San Diego Comic-Con, continue to make the same mistakes half a year after SXSW first faced the dilemma of its sudden cancellation.

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Notes

- [1] See Dayan 2000.
- [2] See de Valck 2007.
- [3] <https://www.kut.org/post/sxsw-film-was-canceled-now-its-partially-back-and-free> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [4] Won the Best Documentary Short award.
- [5] <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/sxsw-canceled-indiewire-coverage-2020-coronavirus-south-by-southwest-1202216594/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [6] <https://www.sxsw.com/film/2020/the-2020-sxsw-film-festival-announces-jury-and-special-awards/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [7] <https://www.shortoftheweek.com/news/short-weeks-sxsw-shorts-week/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [8] <https://mailchimp.com/presents/sxsw/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [9] <https://vimeo.com/channels/sxswshorts> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [10] <https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/amazon-sxsw-streaming-festival-is-bad> (accessed on 23 August 2020)

- [11] <https://youtu.be/pKrd4Y0rPD8> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [12] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbean/2020/04/04/the-10-most-anticipated-sxsw-movies-that-could-be-coming-to-amazon/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [13] Private industry screenings were arranged through the Stage 32 streaming platform, however the level of exclusivity transcended what could be considered a festival or event. <https://screenings.stage32.com/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [14] Though of a different scale and scope, Austin's Indie Meme Film Festival was able to leverage Zoom and Vimeo to program (and even expand) many of the functions and interactions festivals can offer their filmmakers and audiences. Its dates overlapped with the SXSW Film Festival Collection in early May.
- [15] <https://variety.com/2020/film/festivals/filmmakers-accept-online-festival-premieres-corona-virus-tribeca-cphdox-alex-winter-zappa-1234576233/> (accessed on 23 August 2020)
- [16] See note 10.