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The Psychological Motivations of Attendees to Engage and Share Their Event Experiences

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS OF ATTENDEES TO ENGAGE AND SHARE
THEIR EVENT EXPERIENCES

by

Denise Matoushek

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Digital Marketing
at
Lindenwood University

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ABSTRACT

Social media usage, content creation and consumption has increased steadily throughout the years. This facet has impacted the event industry and their audiences' expectations of immersive and high-end digital opportunities with the goal of memory capturing and user generated content. In addition to providing digital event opportunities, meeting audiences on their psychological level when in attendance at events heightens the likelihood of revisits, word-of-mouth, and social media sharing. The two main psychological aspects to study are that of belonging and internal motivation. In the event field, belonging is the feeling or association to a community of peers and internal motivation is the desire to seek out positive and enjoyment-inducing experiences.

Keywords: immersive, psychological, social media, marketing, engagement, events, audiences, selfie, belonging, internal motivation

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1. Introduction

The scope of the research paper will be that of immersive photo and video engagement opportunities at events and their psychological influence on the attendees, specifically related to their drive to participate in the experience and then post the experience over social media platforms. Ever since the development of easy internet access through in-home connections and personal devices, reaching audiences online has become an increasing marketing tactic. This seems to have expanded even more with the large-scale use of social media platforms which are utilized by over 82% percent of the American population, which is around 223 million people (Dixon). With the introduction of social media, highlighting life experiences to followers has become increasingly popular. These highlights are shared through photos and videos with eye-catching captions. As a result, this has brought about the rise in picturesque and immersive locations at local and national events.

For this study, the focus will be of furthering the evaluation into the advancement and effectiveness of different types of photo and video locations at events based on the psychological drive of today's audience. This study will specifically be answering the question: How has the evolution of digital platforms advanced the need for the event industry to provide elaborate photo and video opportunities to meet the motivations and psychological needs of their audiences in terms of social media sharing and engagement? The first element examined to answer this research question will be the background of social media. The second to be examined is the mental state of attendees in terms of their motivation to seek fulfilling engagement opportunities while at events. Finally, to be observed is the best practices for creating meaningful spaces for photo and video sharing settings at events to meet these experience expectations for guests.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background on Event Social Media Sharing Platforms

Digital marketing is the component of marketing that uses the internet and online based technologies, such as desktop and handheld computers and mobile phones, to promote products and services to the public (“Digital Marketing”). One of the top digital marketing methods to promote and share event content is through social media marketing. Social media platforms are forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (“Social Media”). The Internet and social media have designed that interpersonal interaction is no longer dependent on face-to-face communication, abolishing time and space barriers (Santiago). Through the multitude of social media platforms, each site provides its own unique attributes to its various users. According to Voorveld, the main platforms are: “Facebook (a social network), Snapchat (an instant photo messaging application), Instagram (a photo-sharing application), X (formerly known as Twitter) and Threads (a microblogging application), LinkedIn (a business and employment-oriented social networking service), TikTok (a short-video sharing application) and Pinterest (a “catalog of ideas” or photo-sharing website)” (40). Each social media platform meets their users’ needs through a variety of intellectual, visual, and emotional avenues.

The reason content is so popularly shared over these sites is because of their vast reach and entertainment factor (Voorveld). Due to internal motivations, users choose to share over social media sites because they believe if they find something enjoyable or amusing, then they want to share the experience with their followers. Therefore, user generated content at social events is so successful, especially among the highly digital Millennials and Generation Z

demographics. The use of smartphones makes this opportunity even simpler. Most social media platforms are application based and accessed through a digital device, most often, a handheld smartphone. With the high-performance technology of photo and video, the ability to capture real-time moments has increased exponentially. In fact, over 92.5% of individuals say their smartphone is their main photo taking device (Digital Imaging Reporter). This combination has helped construct societal experiences and expectations of the 21st century.

Analyzing an event's target audience against each social media site's demographics helps increase the chance that the event marketing is reaching its intended audience on the site they utilize most often. Event organizations have increasingly realized the added value of using social media to favorably frame and successfully market events and places, build collaborative relationships with users, and stimulate their advocacy (Pino). The creation of event organization social media platforms has become a cost-effective and efficient way to reach an organization's audience. Social media uniquely allows event marketers the opportunity to merge organic conversations, as well as brand engagement with their target audience.

The second use for social media to elevate an event is through participant contribution and engagement. Contribution and engagement can be easily defined in the event world as interactions between the attendee and event organization, either online or offline. This study will mainly look at engagement in terms of online, specifically social media image and video posting based on in-person engagement. The most basic way to contribute or engage is through likes, comments, and shares. Having available interactive opportunities at events is an easy way to increase engagement chances among participants and increase event attendance for future events. Participants may directly impact the success of events by sharing, creating branded content, and reviewing brands (Nikolinakou). Pino states:

Social media platforms may initiate excitement among the potential attendees of a certain event and offer event organizers and participants a platform to co-create value. Event organizers can talk with their customers and listen to their reactions. Users can engage in conversations with organizers and other attendees, share their photos and videos, comment on the event, and recommend it to their peers. Thus, boosting online engagement and facilitating the creation of relationships between organizers and potential attendees has become vital for the event industry and may enhance the sustainability of organizers' strategies. (191)

Integrating social media into events is an easy way to drive digital engagement. Brands are also focusing their efforts on motivating consumer content creation of photos, videos, or posts, as they believe user-generated content can make their social media marketing campaigns more authentic and relatable (Nikolinakou).

Tatiana Molina, the business manager for the Army Ten-Miler held in Washington D.C., states that their organization has witnessed huge success in capturing 'moments' at their events and then sharing them over their social media platforms. Molina explains, "Event participants know that we post in-the-moment and high-quality images, therefore, it increases our follower count and page views, because everyone wants to feel special, everyone wants to see their image posted. It builds a relationship when our organization can create that feeling". In addition to expanding organization and attendee relationships, the donor recruitment coordinator for DKMS US, Olivia Haddox, says engagement through user generated content is also highly beneficial. Haddox states, "No matter the platform – user generated content always seems to be the most compelling for our mission and demographic we are targeting. We strongly encourage volunteers and attendees of the events to post about it on their stories which we then share on our stories.

Unsurprisingly, 18- to 30-year-olds capture better quality content that we are able to use.” These organizations are just two of many which have found success through incorporating social media into their marketing plans. As of 2022, more than 93% of companies in the United States are utilizing social media to reach their audiences (Dencheva).

2.2 Attendee Psychological Drive to Engage

With the rise of social media use and the popularity of smartphones, the relationship to visual images has reached a level of ubiquity that is historically unprecedented (Wang). Individuals, especially younger generations, have increasingly developed habitual smartphone usage. This growth in smartphone usage has facilitated easier, quicker, and wider sharing of photographs (Skinner) and videos. Coupling that with social media networks being an opportunity for individuals to present themselves to a wider audience (Devin), society has become visually accelerated. There has been a shift where understanding the environment is being done, not through words, but through images. Social media image development has become a dynamic process of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing (Skinner). In fact, 79% of people have taken more photographs since they started to use social media, 64% believe that a visual post is more convincing on social media than a text-only post, and 85% prefer visual posts to text-only posts (Wang). In addition, social media platforms place importance on visual content by incorporating algorithms to increase the likelihood of these types of medias being viewed by the users.

Some of this image focus can be attributed to the rise in selfies or groupies over social media. The ‘selfie’ is defined as a photographic self-portrait, especially one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media (Wang). A ‘groupie’ is the same concept as a

selfie, but with multiple individuals in the image. For this study, the word ‘selfie’ will encompass both terms. Selfies have been shown to increase social media reach through likes and comments and have become a ubiquitous part of today’s culture (Holiday). The Georgia Institute of Technology survey showed that a photo with a face receives more likes and comments than photos without (Andrew). In fact, the number of selfies taken and shared online each day is 93 million (Bhushan). Subtly or not so subtly, people are constantly pushed by their social approval-loving brains to tweak their work to gather more likes, to create art that will get more comments, and to edit in a way which appeases the masses (Devin).

It has been found that there are four types of motivations behind self or group-posting; which are: attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment (Bhushan). Attention seeking is related to affirmation from others. Communication is the two-way interaction of sharing and receiving likes and comments on content. Archiving is the digital creation of a memory. Entertainment is to highlight a fun life experience for self and others. In addition, it is shown that extroverted individuals are more likely to engage in selfie sharing than other personality types (Bhushan). This image sharing has been psychologically associated to social interaction fulfillment needs. Holiday states that, “selfie users are more likely to take a photo not to show off an outfit or express a mood, but instead to post to friends and family so they know what the user is up to and where they are at” (182). Selfie users want to provide the world with their approved story of their life by sharing their self-photographs instead of keeping them personal.

Furthermore, the rise in social media sharable photography and videography are heightened and connected to designated photo and video locations at events, especially immersive experiences. Immersive experiences incorporate visuals, sounds, and touch in an

elaborate context to make the attendees feel as if they are living in the theme of the event. Event coordinators are capitalizing on social media users' love for photo and video sharing by creating eye-catching and branded selfie sites. Social media has become an integral part of the event experience because for many attendees, part of the fun of an event is documenting and sharing it on social media (In It Live). The new theme is that: if there is not a picture, it did not happen (National Event Pros). In fact, for many, a selfie is not 'complete' until it has been uploaded to social media and viewed by others (Wang).

Being cognizant that event attendees seek to satisfy some intrinsic need that aligns with their identity may help event coordinators design engagement opportunities that address those specific needs (Hodge). One psychological avenue to explore is that of 'belonging'. Belonging is an essential basic human need for emotional health. As elaborated through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, humans are social creatures that crave interactions with others; they need to feel like they are accepted and a part of a group (Maslow). Events are intrinsically social areas. Being immersed in a larger collective creates a sense of solidarity (Berkers). The marriage between events and social media are two collectives that build community (MacKay). Events are the immersion of similar individuals in the physical atmosphere while social media is the immersion through the online atmosphere. The emotional experience is a reason why eventgoers keep attending the same event over the years (Barriere).

Emotional needs to belong and not miss out on engagement opportunities are a push to attend events with friends or family. This can be related to the feeling of fear of missing out (FOMO) that has exploded since the creation of social media sharing. Fear of missing out is the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing, with fear that they are missing out on having rewarding experiences. FOMO links individual differences with factors such as

meeting psychological needs, general mood, and life satisfaction that may affect social media use (Devin).

Eventbrite, an event internet company, polled participants about their association with FOMO; 70% of participants said they regularly experienced FOMO in their life (1). One reason for this is to keep up with “status quo” of their peers posting life aspects on social media. It is on social media that experiences are projected to hundreds or thousands of followers to be seen. The survey showed that over 60% of participants have posted about an event on social media within the past year. One aspect that has been shown to intensify the association with FOMO is the 24-hour access to these sites via smartphones. Social media sites can easily be downloaded as an app to any smartphone. The average American spends 2.5 hours a day scrolling through their phones (Ah-Heeti). Since belongingness is a key psychological trait (Bhushan) in FOMO, keeping communication with others through image sharing over social media helps meet these needs.

The second psychological aspect is that of internal motivation through enjoyment seeking. Motivation is defined as a physiological and psychological need: a lust that arouses, directs, and integrates a person’s conduct and activities (Krajickova). Enjoyment seeking motivation is an important predictor of perceived value and attendee satisfaction. Perceived value is defined as an overall assessment of the utility of a product or service made by a consumer based on the perceptions of benefits and sacrifices (Ahn). Perceived value has been identified as one of the crucial qualifications of behavioral intentions of customers. Event organizers should develop and offer fun-inducing and entertaining activities that can appeal to those who are interested in seeking enjoyment and enhance their perceived value of the event as well as their satisfaction level (Ahn). This value impacts customer satisfaction, word of mouth,

and revisit intentions. Whether a user participates in an event is also related to his records of historical interactions. Different historical events have different effects on the next event, and these effects include positive and negative effects (Liao).

Internal motivations also relate to social media usage as immediate external rewards of likes and comments increase event attendees' enjoyment seeking, perceived value, and positive association of an event. Using social media for internal motivations and engagement has been shown to be linked to emotion states. Social media use can be done through a passive mental state or an active state. Passive is related to mindless scrolling, while active is associated with content creation, which would be the goal state to reach with event attendees. It has been shown that mood greatly depicts which state users will be in when engaging with social media.

According to Saleem, "When users are in a highly aroused positive mood state, production of content occurs, which represents the highest level of social media engagement. Examples of production during highly aroused positive mood state include posting vacation pictures or the achievement of a 'bucket list' event" (75). Contrary to positive mood state, when users are in a negative or low arousal mood, they are more likely to passively scroll. The content of videos, blogs, and photos created by individuals and published has been shown to both entertain and inform their followers (Saleem) about their life.

2.3 Creating Meaningful and Immersive Spaces

When incorporating the proper aesthetics into immersive opportunities, meeting the audiences' psychological expectations of belonging and motivation increases the likelihood of engagement. Each type of event has a different type of audience expectation of engagement. A successful event has the capability to link aesthetics with the social aspects of their attendees

(Berkers), as aesthetics of an event can elevate attendees' experiences. It is important to note that when creating aesthetics for an event, audiences want more interactive engagement and less of a corporate feel (Barriere). In addition, when creating these engagement moments, it is crucial to keep a social media mindset, as 97% of event attendees will post their photo or video to social media (Skinner).

Event audiences continually seek engaging experiences and ways to share their experiences online with others; organizers need to learn to engage with this socially mediated lifestyle of consumers (MacKay). The integration of appealing social media experiences across all phases of event production and consumption benefits both the organizers and attendees as lived experiences are constantly captured, displayed, re-told, and relived across social media networks (MacKay). It is the memory of the experience from the event that is truly valued. It can be argued that once an event loses its connection to place and people, it loses its originality and meaning (Barriere). According to Kelley there are several ways to create an atmosphere that encourages engagement, user generated content, and an overall memorable experience. Kelley states:

Set the scene and know your audience when you are designing your event, consider how you can craft impactful and visual areas that create engagement for them. Make the event an entire experience for them and make photos and videos come alive. You want something memorable, possibly just short of fantastical, so that your attendees' photos will create a world that lasts far beyond your event. (1)

Further, it is pertinent to analyze psychological aspects when creating environments, especially ones that are immersive for audiences. The main aspects are belonging and internal

motivation. In terms of belonging, when in attendance, audiences want to feel as though they are a part of a community of their peers. A feeling that if they had not been in attendance that it would cause a sensation that they are missing out on a fulfilling life situation, and the results of missing out would cause negative emotions. Creating photo and video opportunities for this psychological state needs to be focused on highlighting and making the personality and values of the event come alive in a physical and tangible way. According to Mike Tatoian, the President and CEO of Dover International Speedway who partners with Firefly Music Festival describes:

“Attendees are not just there for the event at hand, they are there to feel as if they went to an entire new world with their fellow peers. A world where every aspect is about the music and the feel you get from listening to it. Festivals are different than standard concerts; it’s not just a stage with a musician. We incorporate the theme into every aspect like lighting, engagement points, relaxation areas, camping, memorabilia, verbiage, etc. All pieces must work together for the theme to work”

These aspects are utilized to bring the attendees together into a community of belonging and shared experiences. Experiences that can only be achieved and felt by attending the event enhances the psychological aspect of communication among the attendees, as they can share an understanding that outsiders will not recognize without attending the event. This feeling is highlighted through photo and video memories at the event, especially if the moments are captured in a way that cannot be achieved in everyday life because of its vastness.

In addition, with the extension of visual technologies, individuals are taking more high-end photos and videos of themselves, so providing a high-quality atmosphere at events is essential. Being able to solidify a positive experience and memory at an event will increase the

likelihood of continued attendance and user generated content. Incorporating expected aesthetics that create a memory or an intensified social experience are going to increase image and video capturing, as well as social media sharing. Through the creation of excitement in these immersive surroundings, consumers would be encouraged to share the experience on social media sites and elongate the positive affect associated with the experience (Saleem). Additionally, if brands want to engage customers in co-creating content, marketers should provide resources to facilitate a highly positive affective state (Saleem). A positive affective state can be referred to as a positive emotional experience that brings about feelings of joy and enthusiasm (Saleem).

The analysis of internal motivation factors is a prerequisite for effective planning, advancement, marketing, marketing segmentation, promotion, positioning, and long-term sustainability (Krajickova). To enhance audience's motivation to attend the event, marketers need to reach this positive mood state. Not only will it entice audiences to want to be a part of the event, but it will increase content creation and sharing from the attendees. Encouraging the positive mood state and content creation increases the likelihood that attendees will have a heightened perceived value of the event and find that the event provides more benefits than sacrifices. To reach this state, aesthetics and theme need to be fun-inducing and entertaining to the attendees. In addition, the aesthetics need to create an atmosphere of socialization, novelty, and the feeling of escape (Krajickova).

Meeting attendees on an emotional level allows them to associate positive feelings with the events (Neves). Interactive involvement helps increase the likelihood of positive emotional levels. Some examples would be graffiti walls, responsive flooring, augmented or virtual reality, intricate mazes, and three-dimensional music experiences. Incorporating sight, sound, and touch

in multiple ways increases the involvement. It needs to be bold, daring, exciting, engaging, interactive, and most of all encourage people to take to social media (Neves). According to Tsangaris:

Hyperreality has come to significantly influence our minds and our behaviors. It is believed that the world is going through an ultimate stage of simulations, in which production has given its central role to the new information technologies, forming processes of social organization that are based mainly on replication models. Virtual reality, simulated environments and the reflection of existence in imagery spaces blur the distinctions between real and virtual communities. (56)

The ability to highlight life experiences to the masses through these engagement opportunities is one of the top driving forces in audience's motivation to attend. Event spaces need to adapt to this need in addition to the need of belonging for success.

3. Research Methodology

The methodology approach is that of qualitative research. Qualitative research focuses on people's beliefs, attitudes, experiences, behaviors, and interactions (Pathak). This research focuses exactly on that. The topic interprets human behavior in relation to social media photo and video capturing and user generated sharing during and after public and private events. The project aims to provide understanding about what mentally motivates event attendees to actively locate engagement opportunities and then proceed to share them digitally. In addition, understanding this motivation helps event managers to develop photo and video opportunities that will meet the needs of their attendees. This data aligns with real-world human conditions which is in the qualitative research realm, and thus the avenue to be explored for the research.

This research will be analyzed through primary and secondary sources of scholarly research articles and current notable digital sources. It is important to obtain both first-hand experiences for this research topic as well as second-hand analyzed data. The scholarly articles have provided the foundation to understand social media sharing, human drive, and event engagement. However, because of the fluid environment of events structures, the reputable websites will incorporate more up-to-date and real-time data pertinent to the research.

There have been several studies on events and social media strategies in relation to overall marketing and user generated content. However, there is still a considerable gap explaining the psychology behind immersive photo and video engagement opportunities to increase the likelihood of attendee interaction with these locations. Also of note, there are few studies directly related to the best methods to creating and marketing said locations to best meet attendees needs. Through the analysis and information collected from the research question, readers will gain and expand their knowledge on the exact type of engagement opportunities to incorporate into their events, how it will play over social media, and how to connect with their audience on a personal level.

The main topic themes seen throughout the paper will be that of social media, psychology, belonging, motivation, selfies, events, attendees, engagement, and photo and video capturing. These themes are interpreted through the methodology of cultural studies and psychoanalysis. Cultural studies were used in relation to social media sharing and event attendance and how it allows individuals in a society to oversee their own cultural “art” and “voice” by what is empowering or important to them. Social media can be analyzed for unbiased cultural messages of the time and moment through online posts, likes, and comments. Social

media platform varieties also allow for cultural preferences for communicating. Psychoanalysis was used to interpret internal and cultural motivations for attending and engaging at events. Human behaviors in relation to their conscious mind is used to understand what internal impulses are activated to push individuals to want to attend events, and in addition, to be immersed in the event. In addition, psychoanalysis was used in relation to active social media usage. Active social media use is the conscious mind utilizing the platform to gather information and have meaningful interaction with followers and other event attendees.

4. Production

The psychological motivations of event attendees to engage and share their experience is visually comprehended through a project. Context for the project is generated from the literature review findings of analyzed human psychological states when in attendance at events, and how to market to those states to create a successful event. The project takes the psychological findings and elaborates on event attendees' drive in terms of belonging, internal motivations, selfie culture, fear of missing out, and social media sharing to create an immersive engagement opportunity to meet those needs.

The project is the execution of a pitch deck for a mock immersive event – the remake of the 1904 World's Fair for its 125th anniversary in St. Louis, MO. This event, along with the pitch deck, are both being created for the purpose of showcasing how to create a meaningful event that targets human psychological behavior and the outcome of their social media usage and user generated content from the event. The pitch deck creates the event parameters in terms of immersive aspects, explains to the audience why immersive is necessary based on the research

from the literature review, and is also a toolkit for future event marketers to base their event(s) upon.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, it has been shown that social media and content creation is here to stay. With the ever-evolving image capabilities on smartphones, audiences are capturing everyday moments more than ever with ease. These images are then shared over social media with a vast reach. Audiences are coming to expect high-quality experiences at events they attend. Not only is it pertinent to provide these immersive opportunities, but the opportunity will only be successful when event managers are considering the psychological drive of their audiences and what aesthetics will meet those drives most effectively.

As seen through the qualitative research provided in this literature review, the top two psychological aspects to focus on are the sense of belonging and internal motivations. Choosing aesthetics and opportunities that positively play to these mental states will increase event revisits and attendance, word-of-mouth, and content creation. Providing audiences the chance to enter a positive mood state increases the feeling of community both in-person and virtually. In addition, the more immersive the event, the higher the chance of the feeling of belonging and internal motivations through the collective of multiple touch, sound, and visual opportunities.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the research question of – How has the evolution of digital platforms advanced the need for the event industry to provide photo and video opportunities to meet the motivations and psychological needs of their audiences in terms of social media sharing and engagement – has been answered. Audiences are inherently social; the

evolution of social media allows audiences to surpass time and space barriers to share their event experiences among their followers. With the array of social events happening, there has risen an expectation of over-the-top aesthetics to document and create a memory, as well as to showcase it over social platforms. Events can be more easily compared to one-another which can affect visit intentions. To increase the likelihood of user generated content from events, playing to the psychological needs to belonging and internal motivations in an immersive world will provide the most successful results.

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