Conference report

Digital Engagement Conference: A Road Map for the Future of Festivals, July 9-11 2014, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset, United Kingdom

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## Background to the Digital Engagement Conference

The Digital Engagement Conference is an output of the Festival Impact Monitor (FestIM), a project funded by Bournemouth University and supported by project partners, which include: the University of Bedfordshire, the European Tourism Futures Institute, Bournemouth Council, Arts Council England and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Its aim is to develop a festival evaluation approach to overcome the limitations of existing qualitative and quantitative methods (Plate 1).

9 July 2014 – opening: defining digital engagement

The conference was opened by Dr Nigel Williams, Principal Investigator for the FestIM project who provided insights into the background and rationale for the conference. He explained that with the rapid growth in the usage of networked mobile devices, individuals are increasingly capturing, reviewing and reporting on "live" experiences. The academic and also professional communities attached to festivals and events have little understanding of the interactions of these online communities and their impacts. Thus, this conference was devised as a means of exploring the issues that arise when the digital world and the live experiences of events and festivals collide (Williams, 2014).

Dr Robin Croft, Reader in Marketing at the University of Bedfordshire was the keynote speaker on the opening day of the conference and provided a fitting start to the discussion around digital engagement by presenting a *Virtual Engagement Typology*, which builds on Croft's (2013) ethnographic research into Web 2.0., which explores his experiences in a number of social media platforms. In his presentation he separated virtual engagement (a term he prefers to digital engagement) into two distinct types of behaviours – experiential consumption and virtual consumption. These behaviours were then further sub-divided into a number of categories: synchronous and asynchronous (real-time and reported activities), possible and fanciful (activities that individuals might engage in and wished they could engage in) and positive, negative and ambivalent (feelings expressed about activities experienced both in real-life and virtually). Croft noted that attendees that engage with festivals online display the full range of behaviours highlighted by the *Virtual Engagement Typology* and that festival organizers need to
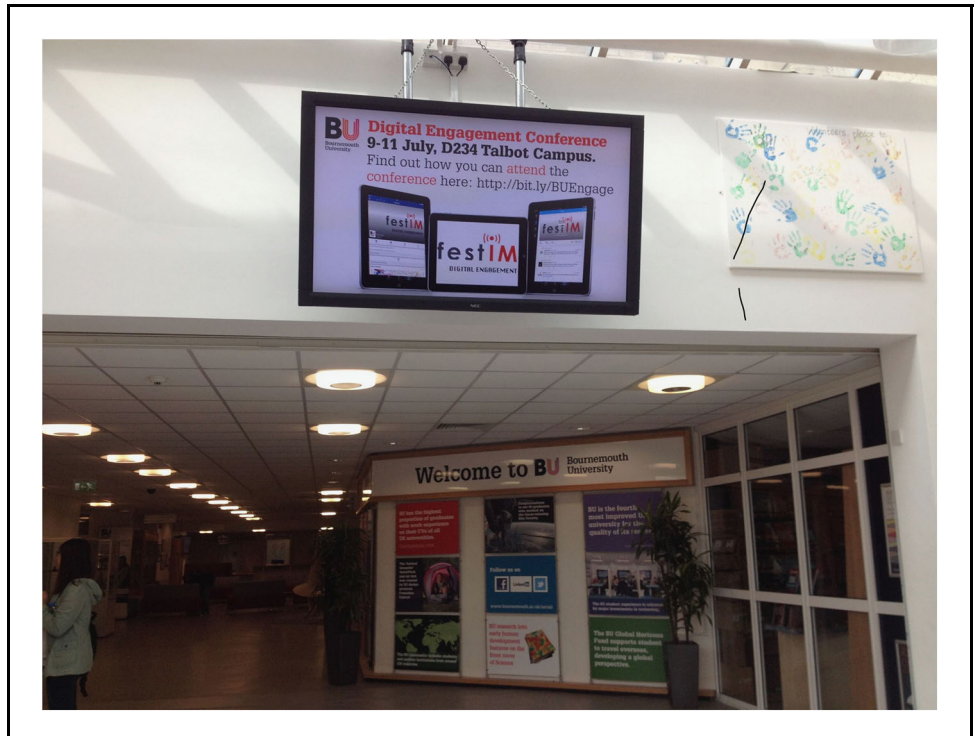
recognize that the balance of power has shifted from the owners of events to their audiences because virtual engagement is increasingly blurring the boundaries between audiences, performers and producers. Festival organizers must therefore develop strategies to respond to and shape the stories being told about their events online (Figure 1).

Aminu Bello, a doctoral candidate at the University of Bedfordshire through a structured conversation with conference attendees highlighted possible lessons that could be learned from Virgin Atlantic, a consumer brand perceived to be the epitome of customer orientation. Bello shared with the audience his experiences which were acquired first through *netnography* and then through ethnography. He explained that traditional marketing and branding still has a role to play because even with a youth-oriented brand such as Virgin Atlantic, a significant proportion of customers are not digital natives, as described by Prensky (2001). However, he did emphasize that festival organizers like other businesses have no choice but to engage with the digital environment as digital engagement is here to stay. Bellow suggested that the challenge in the future will be to further digitize the customer experience.

Rogan Sage, an undergraduate student at Bournemouth University delivered the second student presentation which explored the potential of twitter to inspire social activism within the festival environment. His presentation entitled, *Exploring the Social Impact of Events on Social Media Communities: An Iconic Case Study of Glastonbury Music Festival 2013,* focused on his research on Glastonbury, a festival with a long history of social activism. Sage utilized a mixed method approach, in which Social Network Analysis (SNA), word frequency analysis and context analysis were combined to supplement quantitative filtering techniques with qualitative analysis of the relevant data. In his presentation, it was revealed that despite the hype surrounding the potential of social media platforms for social activism, festival attendees for the most part failed to engage with the social cause-based messages that festival organizers and their partners sought to promote. Although there was some evidence that celebrity endorsement does help increase the interaction with social causes amongst some festival attendees within social networks, his research suggested that attempts to manufacture social activism by festival organizers will be unsuccessful, confirming previous research by Daugherty *et al.* (2008). Sage suggested that festival organizers need to use social media strategies which empower festival
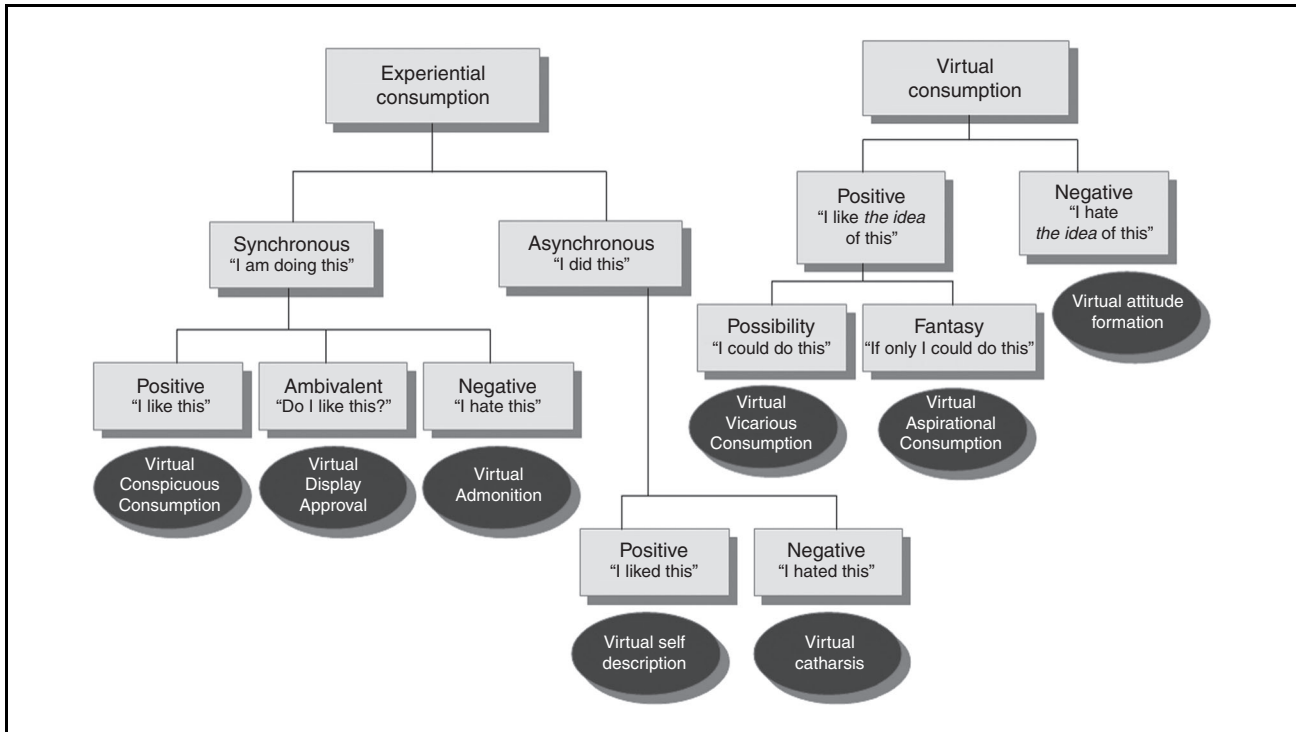
attendees and emphasize freedom of expression and that celebrity endorsement of social causes needed to be deployed carefully.

10 July 2014 – day two: digital engagement and the future of festivals

The second day of the conference started with a keynote from Professor of Scenario Planning, Dr Albert Postma of the European Tourism Futures Institute. His presentation on the Digital Futures of Events utilized the scenario planning process to predict the future of events. Scenario planning uses key uncertainties as a starting point to develop multiple versions of the future. For festivals Postma highlighted the mode of attendance and nature of audience engagement as key drivers of uncertainty. He then presented four contemporary festivals which provide a glimpse of some possible future types of events. These were: the Lowlands Festival, characterized by a large-scale, spectator-type and local audience; Oerol, described as local and small-scale with a strong emphasis on co-creation; Hatsun Miku, a large spectator event which combines virtual and live attendance and uses technologies such as augmented reality and holographic techniques to enhance the viewing experience of the audience and the Xbox 720 IllumiRoom shown at CES Festival 2013, which showed the possibilities of virtual reality and interactions amongst participants engaged in online activities (Figure 2).

Dr Heather Skinner, a tourism consultant in Corfu, Greece presented *Destination Engagement and Destination Event Strategy* and highlighted the problems of developing event marketing strategies which include digital engagement in societies in which social media usage is not as pervasive as in other European countries. Skinner recommends that those engaged in developing digital event market strategies need to take a step back from focusing on the technology and the various social media platforms and get in touch with the needs of festival organizers and attendees. Dr Herbert Daly, Senior Lecturer in Computing at the University of Bedfordshire in a similar vein encouraged conference attendees to take a step backwards to remember the source of inspiration for the technologies that facilitate digital engagement. Daly reminded the audience that many of the technologies being used today were first dreamt up by science fiction writers. For example, William Gibson's (1984) *Nueromancer* is the origin

Figure 2 Future scenarios for festivals
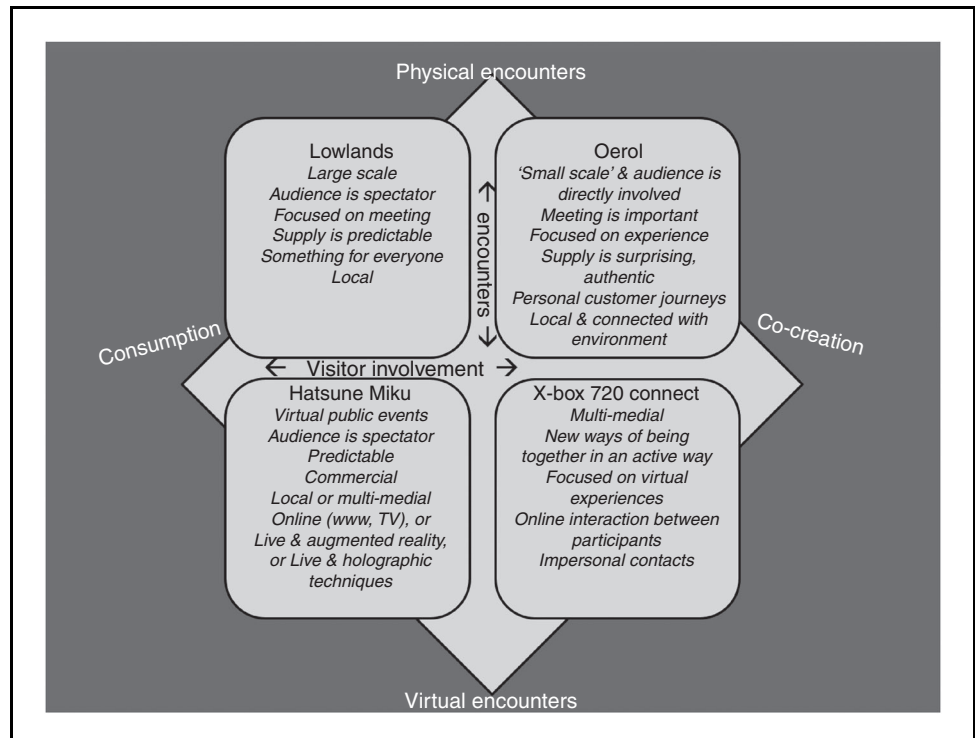
of the term "cyberspace". This highlights the potential for festival organizers to play a role in developing the technologies that will engage their customers in the future. Daly recommended that they should not wait passively for what technology experts develop and that like science fictions writers of the past they should be dreaming up the technologies they would like to see in the future.
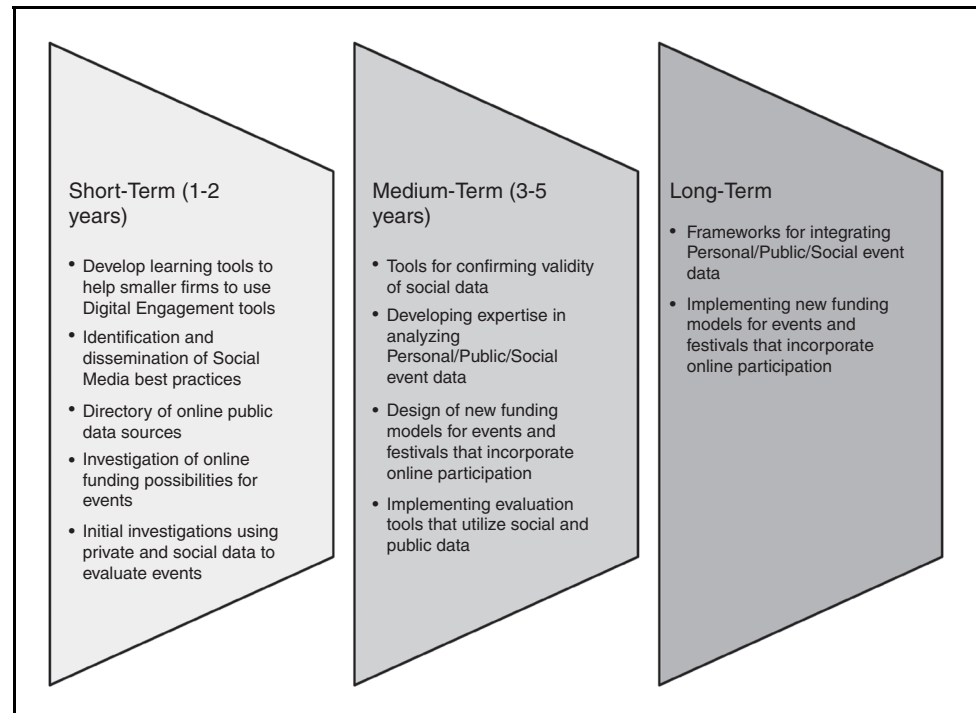
11 July 2014 – closing: first steps towards the future of festivals

The closing day started with a presentation from Dr Nigel Williams from his paper *Social Media and Festivals as Destination Marketing Tools: A Study on Twitter Conversations*, which represented the first major research output to come out of the FestIM project. It is an exploratory study focused on the Twitter conversations about the Bournemouth Air Festival 2013. Findings revealed that festival organizers and their partners have yet to achieve significant online engagement from Twitter users. The traffic generated on Twitter about the festival showed a "broadcast" pattern in which a few official stakeholders shaped the conversation and content, indicating that the social media platform was being used like traditional media outlets and was limited to mainly distributing official content about the air show.

Dr Alexandra Ott, Learning Technologist at Bournemouth University delivered the final presentation of the conference which focused on the development of the Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) for the FestIM project. She demonstrated the Xerte Online Toolkit developed by University of Nottingham, which was used extensively in the development of the RLOs. The RLOs included basic lessons such as getting a research project started and an explanation of the SNA approach used by the FestIM project.

Dr Nigel Williams closed the conference by briefly talking through the research gaps highlighted by the conference which would form the basis of the road map for the future of festivals and digital engagement. These gaps included: specific tools and techniques for smaller festival organizations, how online conversation about festivals affect what happens at the live festival sites and opportunities and issues surrounding the integration of personal, public, social and sensor data.

Short-Term (1-2 years)

- Develop learning tools to help smaller firms to use Digital Engagement tools
- Identification and dissemination of Social Media best practices
- Directory of online public data sources
- Investigation of online funding possibilities for events
- Initial investigations using private and social data to evaluate events

Medium-Term (3-5 years)

- Tools for confirming validity of social data
- Developing expertise in analyzing Personal/Public/Social event data
- Design of new funding models for events and festivals that incorporate online participation
- Implementing evaluation tools that utilize social and public data

Long-Term

- Frameworks for integrating Personal/Public/Social event data
- Implementing new funding models for events and festivals that incorporate online participation

Conclusion: the roadmap for the future of festivals and digital engagement (Figure 3)

The conference highlighted that there is still much for both academics and practitioners to learn about how best to harness the power of digital engagement in the planning, management and evaluation of festivals. Digital engagement is a constantly evolving process that all festival stakeholders must engage with. In the short term it is essential that time and energy be devoted to understanding how online interactions are impacting festivals and events, so that in the medium and long-term festival organizers can begin to develop strategies to leverage the huge potential of the data generated within social media platforms about festival audiences.

References

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