

6 From experience to engagement: Theory and methods

A central dimension of communication for event management concerns the ability to stimulate reactions from participants. This means that both live and online attendees must be able to feel involved and protagonists of a narrative process in which their experience defines the meanings and the very value of participation and social interactions with others. The chapter builds on theories of experience to examine strategies of gratification, satisfaction, and engagement. The approaches allow, both physically and online, immersion in experiences that create bonds and strengthen the sense of loyalty to the event. Furthermore, on a digital level, they also favour the activation of engagement and co-creation.

At the end of the chapter readers should be able to understand and apply:

- How to enhance the value of experiences by stimulating interaction and participation.
- How experiences increase participants' engagement and participation in the event.
- How to stimulate and enhance involvement and engagement.
- How to stimulate co-creation processes.
- How to make experiences more engaging and immersive.

Creating experiences through interaction and participation

This chapter aims to identify the set of mechanisms by which communication can increase participation in an event and strengthen bonds with it over time. In the contemporary era, in which communication occurs not just face-to-face and through the mass media, but digitally and virtually, the tools for stimulating participation, involvement, and bonding have increased. This evolution of tools has, in part, given more visibility and accessibility to events but also requires greater commitment and systematicity to prepare effective communications and achieve the goal of involvement. To obtain this result, it is necessary to amplify the value of experiences through the combination of communications transmitted at the physical level and those conveyed at the digital and virtual levels. The opportunities offered by technological innovation are infinite and amazing, but they are not only used to create alternatives to physical events. Rather, they serve to enhance and expand physical events with supplementary or complementary digital and virtual activities. This conception has been confirmed by several studies carried out during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Seraphin, 2020; Weed, 2020; Jauhiainen, 2021). These authors have shown that, although

exclusively digital and virtual experiences are valid, they are more effective if they integrate physical events. For this reason, the argument in this chapter is not focused on detecting differences between the types of more or less technological experiences but on understanding the value of experiences in themselves in order to identify the most effective opportunities to combine the use of technologies in the service of experiences at events.

The path starts from basic elements, such as human interaction and participation, to understand how to exploit the means increasingly used today to stimulate people to gain experience and produce the results that event organizers hope to see. One of the main aspects addressed in this first section concerns the value of experience as an element that can create a bond. In the following sections, subsequent steps concerning increased involvement and engagement are detailed. The argument starts with the concept of interaction.

Using a synonym, we can consider a relationship an interpersonal action, that is, an *interaction* that takes place between several people. Its evolution depends on how the individuals involved introduce content and resources to give more or less value to this joint action. The value of a relationship depends on these choices (Scholl, 2013). It is influenced by expectations and motivations. When they coincide between two or more people – as happens in events because they converge on the same interest – the comparison between them also determines a feeling of sharing. The latter, in turn, reinforces the desire to belong to a community that shares themes and experiences. This sharing is therefore enhanced by the emotions people feel in relation to the event. The more the opportunities for sharing and the experiences that derive from it are well organized, the more they develop a collective emotion that positively affects the moods of individuals and groups.

Some scholars (Armbrrecht & Andersson, 2020; Biaett & Richards, 2020) speak of a mix of subjective and intersubjective states that leads to a state of *happiness*. This is used as an indicator of subjective and intersubjective well-being and depends on the intensity of the degree of satisfaction derived from participation in an event. According to the authors, happiness can be *hedonic* when it is the result of the satisfaction of expectations and motivations, and therefore when it is useful for people, or *eudemonic* when it is the result of the satisfaction that people feel with the relationships they have developed with others, and thus, when it is socially relevant. This second perspective also recalls the more classic concepts of strengthening community ties (or *communitas*: Tönnies & Loomis, 2002, 1887; and *liminality*: Turner 2017, 1969) thanks to the consolidation of relationships and the value of emotions. The traditional meaning of community is that it is the result of an aggregation between individuals united by the same identifiable interest in an object (e.g., an event's theme). This communion is reinforced by in- and out-group dynamics that are developed in a different way depending on the scope of the event. For example, following a band's concert, an auto-motorcycle rally, or one's favorite sports team develops strong recognition among the fanbase and, consequently, increases their sense of belonging. But this is also true during a fair or congress, where the emotions may be less intense, but relationships are still consolidated within a commercial, scientific, or professional community.