Key conversations & takeaways:
SXSW 2021

March, 2021

Wavemaker

What is SXSW?

Founded in 1987, the annual South By Southwest (SXSW) conference and festival, traditionally held in Austin Texas, is an exciting incubator of creativity featuring the best and brightest minds, companies, technologies, and emerging startups from around the world and across industries. Comparable to Wavemaker's belief in Positive Provocations, SXSW's legacy is based on the honest conversations and elevated platforms it gives so many unique voices and perspectives.

After an unprecedented year, SXSW pivoted to SXSW Online, a 5-day digital experience designed to bring facets of SXSW's serendipity of experiences to life. The promise of SXSW is that you never know who you'll run into between sessions and within brand activations, or what kind of inspiration you will find to spark new ideas. This year, it was about unexpected discoveries and conversations, with built-in online networking opportunities.

A global pandemic; an online pivot

A fascinating aspect of SXSW is that it constantly works to keep pace with the topics driving conversation and culture, making every year a little bit different. Despite the event pivoting from a 280,000-person festival to an online experience this year, SXSW launched a slew of digitized experiences.

For example, attendees with access to a PC, PCVR, or Oculus Quest headset, could be virtually transported to two infamous areas of downtown Austin – Congress Avenue and the Red River Cultural District – to explore the neighborhoods, including venues hosting live meetups, panels, events, and other special events, ideally providing some semblance of the magic and serendipity SXSW has traditionally offered attendees in real life. Offering event-goers the chance to support local businesses in Austin, the SXSW VR portal offered everyone a chance to donate to *Banding Together ATX,* a local charity supporting the live music community.

While SXSW Online XR's live panels, meet ups, events, 360° videos, and 2D video feeds were no replacement for the excitement SXSW IRL delivers, we were able to listen in and engage in dialogue that felt novel for these strange times.

A deeper dive into the core themes driving culture and conversation at SXSW 2021

SXSW's core themes driving culture and conversation

01 *Into the unknown: Charting a course in an uncharted future*

02 *Entertainment: The future of hybrid models & stages*

03 *Citizen Self: Tapping into a sense of urgency*

04 *Come together: Rallying communities for cause*

05 *Lose yourself: Finding connection in disconnected times*

06 *Storytelling: Mining emerging media & elevating marginalized narratives*

# Into the unknown: Charting a course in an uncharted future

SXSW is known for its timely conversations and topics of interest. Its 'Uncharted Future' series was designed to reflect on lessons learned from the last year of the pandemic, as well as debate what the future could bring for humanity (and brands).

The conversation around how to pave a path forward through the emotional, mental, physical, and financial rubble of the last year included doctors, medical professionals, frontline workers, scientists, government, and others working to build a better, more resilient future.

When it comes to the dissemination of news that has the power to change mindsets, behaviors, and political outcomes, a lot of the conversation focused on the role everyone – you, the media, celebrities, medical professionals, etc. – must play to fact-check content before sharing it across platforms to ensure false information is not amplified. Ed Simcox, Chief Strategy Officer at LifeOmic (former CTO at US Department of Health and Human Services), noted that the need to embrace failure and mistakes is critical to moving forward. He noted that "Failure is not typically tolerated in Washington and that is very different than the science world, which is backed by the scientific theory that is established on failure. In Washington, we try to cover up failure, we try to make excuses for failure but it's important to make yourself vulnerable and admit your failures." As actress, Kristen Bell, explained, "We have to figure out how to understand our responsibility for different elements of disseminating information and it can't just be done by the medical community or the science community or the storytellers. And it can't just be done by the media. It must be a team effort to bring these views together to bridge the gap and bring information to the public. So before re-posting anything, Pause. Double-check."

01

Why this matters to brands
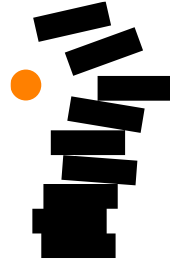
The unknown is scary. The unknown is exciting.
Brand confidence is critical to helping consumers gain their own confidence. Whether you are helping consumers embrace pre-pandemic activities (e.g., in-store shopping or attending indoor experiences like movie theaters) or helping them adapt new ones (e.g., remote working), providing the tools to help consumers find their groove and self-assurance is priceless.

In a world of misinformation, transparency and brevity are key.
Whether you have legacy in a particular space or are learning and evolving (e.g., social causes, health protocols, etc.) finding meaningful ways to address consumers with transparency, brevity and critical detail, helps them digest the information you're sharing and make informed purchasing and behavioral decisions.

Embrace the pivot.
Every brand needs to be comfortable knowing that we don't know what will 'scab' or 'scar' short and longer term when it comes to consumer beliefs, behaviors, government protocols, and other eventual norms. Taking on a pivot mentally will enable you to embrace change – be it in messaging, creative, strategy, internal structure – as needed, to evolve with the times.

Entertainment: The future of hybrid models & stages

SXSW – historically a hub of immersive experiences across screens, stages, VR devices, and everything in-between – served as a platform to discuss the future of entertainment, and how the landscape will evolve to accommodate both pandemic-driven needs, as well as long-standing artist and fan demands. After all, the entertainment industry was one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. As booking agent Michelle Cable noted, "we were the first to shut down and we'll probably be the last to open."

For example, when it comes to live experiences (while nobody doubts that in-person entertainment will eventually resume), Timbaland and Swizz Beatz – artists and co-founders of the livestream series *Veruz* – predicted that livestreams will remain a steady offering, noting "there's too much money in streaming" and that "people are getting very comfortable being in their own space." He also noted that while a hybrid model is most likely the solution to accommodating all consumers' needs – price points, comfort, concerns, and physical ability to attend – there are plenty of questions as to what the future could look like.

While the future is unknown, the uncertainty around it poses both challenges and opportunities. Keynote speaker Willie Nelson explained, "I don't know what it will feel like because I don't know what kind of comeback it will be. I don't know who will be able to come to the show and I don't want to do a show anywhere, anytime, that has a danger of somebody getting sick."
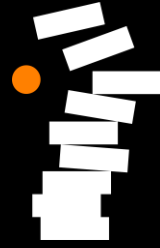
Why this matters
to brands

This is the year of trial & learn

Swizz Beatz explained that when it comes to creating a comfortable environment for watching your content of choice, until there's comfort around safety and security, "I'll just set it up in my living room and I'll have my own 15-20 people over and we'll enjoy it from the VIP — which is my house." Recognizing that different industries and experiences will come back on different timelines and to different extents is critical when evaluating how to invest in everything from pop-ups to music festivals. Understanding the range in consumer behavior – due to comfort, concerns, or frankly the enjoyment of watching a concert in your pajamas – provides opportunities to reach new audiences in unforeseen ways.

Embrace the hybrid mentality

As event types and structures test hybrid on and offline models to maximize the audience and content reach, it's an opportunity to connect with more people than physical restrictions (e.g., location, fire code, timing) previously allowed. Expanding your audience to include those who wouldn't have been able to physically attend (i.e., due to location, timing, being introverted and less likely to go, etc.) presents new opportunities and challenges.

Listen to what consumers miss to deliver on their daydreams

Attempting to simply copy and paste or supplement a physical experience online (or vice versa) isn't enough. You need to understand which components of a physical experience can translate online, and which need to be complemented. You need to understand the EQ-driven reasons why consumers miss live experiences — Is it the energy? The excuse to see friends? The connections forged through a bonding experience? – to determine how to best bring those facets to life no matter where you show up.

Citizen Self:
Tapping into a sense of urgency

A critical lesson of 2020 was that all of us have the ability, and the need, to do better as citizens and fellow humans; to show up when we are needed, to call out behaviors when warranted, and to take stands in support of values that we believe in.

Author and podcast host, Baratunde Thurston, touched on this during his talk on what it means "to citizen" in 2021, and the work we must do – through civic engagement and mutual aid to each other – as we work towards a better, healthier society. As he explained "it's work we take on to liberate all of us." Author Charles Yu underscored this notion, explaining that the idea that Asian Americans are "a homogenous monolith is not only wrong, it's damaging."

We're seeing a variety of platforms doubling down on delivering empathy and helping people see the world through other people's eyes to drive changes in how they move through it. For example, 3D software engine maker Unity launched "Our America," a game billed as "an autobiographical VR Experience" in which the player takes on the role of a Black man driving with his son when the car is pulled over by a police officer.

Doing the work includes brands. As Thurston put it, "as marketers, makers and community builders, we conjure up realities all the time, so let's conjure up a new one that benefits all of us." It's critical to reflect, restructure, and reinvest in both your company and your audience in ways that may have been historically overlooked or ignored. While changing the future doesn't rest solely on brands' shoulders (Thurston reminded listeners that, "We've created this world where we need companies to be our heroes...We hope a brand will release the right press release. To signal the right virtues...We shouldn't solely rely on them."), the reality is consumers do take into consideration your brand's beliefs and behaviors when evaluating for purchase.

This is a critical part of ensuring the stories we tell are inclusive and innovative. As Ed Simcox - Chief Strategy Officer at LifeOmic. former CTO at US Department of Health and Human Services - explained, Human Centered Design is critical to ensure empathy, collaboration and consideration of those involved is built into the storytelling process.

Why this matters to brands
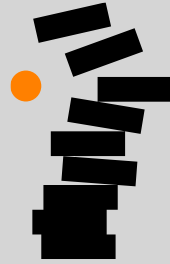
Help your consumer find tangible, digestible ways to drive and support lasting change

As Thurston noted, "A greater 'me' equals a greater 'we.'" For those who want to support anti-racism, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial work, but aren't always sure how to get started or to do it 'right,' an easy way to start is aligning with brands with strong, loud positions on their beliefs and behaviors. How are you projecting and pushing the future forward through both your company's work and your marketplace stories? Plan, determine your timeframe and metrics, and move with intentionality.

We're still hearing too many brands talking the talk, but too afraid to walk the walk

This work takes time. It takes serious reflection and reckoning. But we are all better for the hard conversations and the company policy changes in the longer term. Before you talk about the brand supporting the work, you need to do the work yourself. As Stacey Abrams put it, "part of our responsibility is to share what we know, to invite others in, and to recognize that compromise is not evil. I don't compromise my values, but I will have conversations about the approaches I'm willing to take."

Increase the exposure of how to positively utilize the current digital movement to your benefit. As Emmanuel Acho explained, "you can't be something if you don't see something. We need to allow our young learners an opportunity to see people that look like them."

Come together: Rallying communities for cause

Every community is formed based on shared passions, beliefs, or aspirations. Whether those communities congregate online or offline, across platforms or only a select few, community members' connections and values serve as a compass for how they behave, invest, and act. Understanding the nuances of every community helps you uncover what they care about, but also how they can act about the causes they're passionate about.

For example, the ability of video games to help others was a hot panel topic, with many sharing how the community-driven mentality of gamers enables them to mobilize quickly to support causes in need of attention. Noting how esports athletes and influencers have raised millions for charity via Twitch games, gamers came together to discuss how gaming provides connection, community, and support in ways you may not consider. Gamers Outreach shared how they have provided video game carts to 230 children's hospitals across the country to provide entertainment and escape. As founder Zach Wigal explained, "when all us gamers get together around what we are impassioned about, it's a way to mobilize." Skillz, a mobile esports platform, shared how they utilize their prize money to simultaneously support non-profits that have struggled to raise money between traditional fundraising events. Jeff Freedmans, their Global Head of Business Development, explained, "we can make that accessibility even easier to support organizations and continue to do good at massive, massive scale."

Why this matters
to brands
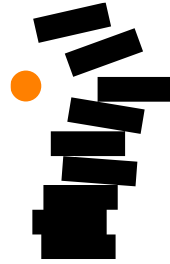
**Understanding the nuances of your
communities helps uncover how they care.**
As Wigal explained, "I think gamers have actually
figured out ways to structure and organize that
don't quite exist yet in broader society." He goes
on to note that gamers' natural behaviors around
coming together to work through shared
problems, and supporting each other, lends itself
to finding causes to support.

**Don't look at strong opinions and stances
as a negative or something to shy away
from.**
As Willie Nelson put it, "it's very important that
people have something that they believe in.
Something they can live for, argue about, fight
for. It's important to have those valuable things
to keep you going." Cause and passion is what
has driven humanity for centuries. Lean into it,
no matter the potential discomfort.

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Lose yourself: Finding connection in disconnected times

Pre-pandemic, plenty of people struggled with feelings of isolation and loneliness, with mental health being one of the biggest health crises in the United States. 2020's sudden tidal wave of seclusion – from family and friends and the bringing where we work, play, learn, entertain, and live into the home – have taken a massive toll on the mental health of people around the world. Plenty of panels focused on mental health, and creative ways of supporting it.

Actress Taraji P. Henson focused on mental health care for people of color, explaining, "We have to break this down, because our people are suffering. The trauma is so deep with us. We take on these titles like 'strong Black woman' and 'Black girl magic,' but it can be detrimental to our health. Generationally, we have been pushing through trauma, but we have to stop. At some point we have to deal with this trauma. At some point we have to talk about it."

Olympian, Alexi Pappas, and comedian/actor, Bill Hader, shared personal mental health experiences, emphasizing the need to be compassionate to the "yesterday self." As Pappas explained, "If you had a sprained ankle, no one would be like 'fix this tomorrow,'" while Hader shared how his own experience of actively seeking therapy led to a proper diagnosis and support.

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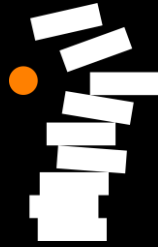
Why this matters to brands

Consider the support mechanisms that community building brings.
With people more physically disconnected from the communities and people they care about, as well as the content they enjoy and rely on (e.g., movies in movie theaters with friends, fan conventions, theme parks and brand activations, industry trade shows), seeking online sources for community building and networking with likeminded people has been a coping mechanism and lifeline for many people.

Understand the communities your consumers care about and are a part of.
The benefits for building online community engagement go beyond brand-building opportunities for marketers. It's the chance to leverage the power of disruption (i.e., Covid-19) to empower people through virtual communities for confidence, connection, support, and the intrinsically EQ-driven needs we all have. These needs might not have been met in the ways we've traditionally relied on in the past 12 months.

DON'T GIVE UP

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

YOU MATTER

# Storytelling: Mining emerging media & elevating marginalized narratives

Storytelling is an intrinsic component of the human experience. Storytelling has proliferated into more platforms – on and offline – that have enabled us to aggregate and access stories more than ever before. We've also never had as many tools at our disposal for creating and sharing our stories. Many conversations at SXSW focused on pivoting from content creation to content conception, doubling down on the power of original content made through the lens of personal experience. As TikTok influencer AJ Curry put it, "Don't just post on TikTok, make TikToks."

Audio-first platforms were a major source of conversation, with the recent rise of Clubhouse and Twitter Spaces. As Zaid Al-Zaidy, Group CEO of The Beyond Collective, noted re: Clubhouse, "the pandemic might have made our physical worlds smaller, but the opportunity to expand our horizons by connecting with new people via online meetings is a positive we can all take advantage of." In the grand traditions of platforms launching at SXSW (Foursquare, Twitter, etc.), Swell unveiled its free, voice-based social platform, designed to enable users

to easily start, join and share voice conversations online. It's a platform focusing on asynchronous audio conversations, which do not require users to be online at the same time, encouraging authentic conversations with posts that can contain links, photos and up to five minutes of audio. Taking a stance against real-time – and the anxiety and pressure it can put on people – this evolution of audio platforms signifies that we're going to see massive growth in this space when it comes to both platform offerings and brand opportunity.

Other emerging tech like VR shouldn't be counted out. As Oculus VP Mark Rabkin noted, "on the experiences side, everything is becoming more social... [VR is] really expanding into people who want to jump in, people who want to hang out, people who want to play games, people who also want to do more. You don't have to be just a tinkerer anymore." It's an interesting concept, especially as much of the transportive effects of VR require audio.
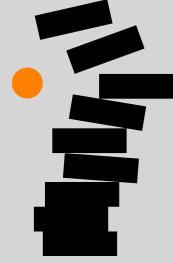
Why this matters to brands

Representation matters.
Authentically enabling and supporting historically marginalized voices not only enables you to drive (vs. chase) culture but also allows your brand to pass the microphone to people who haven't seen themselves in the media they engage with. For example, Zelda Barnz, writer and producer of HBO Max show, "Genera+ion," said: "as long as straight is the default, queer representation will be important," noting that 30-50% of Gen Z identify on the queer spectrum (and she thinks that's an undercount considering how many Gen Zs may not have figured out how they identify yet).

Storytelling enables a brand to align its ethos to the moment.
As Deborah Pardes put it, "we are what we share." Your brand has the chance to invest in sharing the stories (or amplifying the ones already in existence) that deliver on who your brand is, what your brand's voice is, and what your brand believes in.

Strong content strategy requires that you understand the nuances of different platforms and audiences.
As TikTok's GM of U.S. Global Business Solutions, Sandie Hawkins, said, "it's about finding your personality and your ethos, and not trying to do something that you're not. Being able to maintain the realness of those moments is really what drives the community to be involved. That takes brands being able to take risks and jump[ing] on these trends." Risk-taking requires the kind of confidence gleaned through education and understanding platform/audience differentiations.

Our favorite brand activations at SXSW

We've seen wild brand activations at SXSW over the years. From Lady Gaga performing inside a 62-foot-tall Doritos "vending machine" to USA Networks promoting Mr. Robot via a 100-foot functioning replica of the Coney Island Ferris Wheel. This year, we saw brands bring their experiences to life both on and offline, leveraging traditional mediums like at-home mailers and emerging ones such as VR. Each touted immersive experiences designed to connect attendees to the brand, the larger SXSW community, and to the world we've been so disconnected from lately.
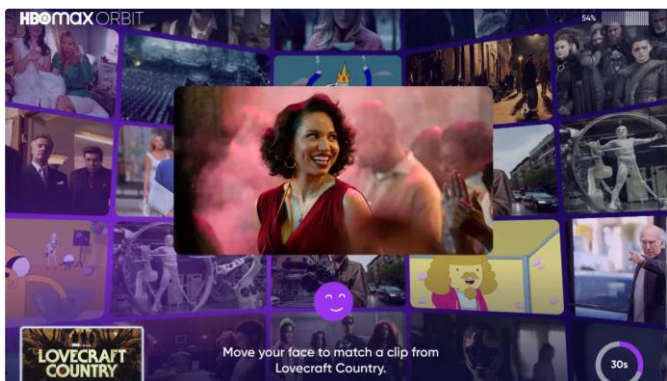
## HBO Max: Bringing interactive customization to new heights

HBO – known for mind-blowing, headline-grabbing SXSW activations to bring shows like 'Westworld' and 'Game of Thrones' to life – launched an online digital experience showcasing the shows and films available on HBO Max. Focused on personalized recommendations, the HBO Max Orbit experience utilized a user's facial movements and voice to create a curated, personalized playlist of content from HBO Max's library as well as over 150,000 scenes clipped for the experience.

While only accessible via desktop, web browsers, or smartphone (iOS and Android), both physical and verbal cues could be leveraged to create a custom experience that highlighted the breadth and depth of HBO Max's content. These cues encouraged people to dive deeper into HBO Max's offerings (especially when people are hungrier than ever for content based on their interests and needs). Among the available clips were brand-new teasers for select films coming to HBO Max at the same time as they hits theaters, as well as engaging "challenges" like getting users to recreate facial experiences, movements, and quotes from clips to unlock more content. For those who crave in-person experiences post SXSW, a few AT&T flagship stores will tout in-person installations offering the SXSW online attendee experience, with a few added physical tracking dimensions.

Mashable: Next-level in-home shopping

A mainstay of SXSW is branded activations in the form of branded physical 'houses,' where attendees could take a break, charge their devices, grab a drink, and do everything from hearing invite-only speakers to demo'ing the latest VR experience. Mashable pivoted its Mashable House to Mashable Home, a virtual experience touting a 3D virtually-rendered home offering shoppable content from Walmart. As users navigated through the home, they uncovered interactive games, live on-demand programming, editorial content, and shoppable hotspots where they could directly purchase products via Walmart.com. It's a way for Mashable to offer partners the chance to connect with the SXSW audience, despite it being an online event, while giving Walmart the chance to demo emerging technology opportunities and see what shoppable content is capable of within different channels.
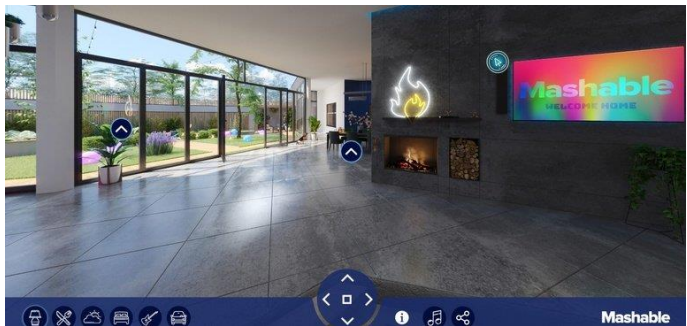
Our favourite brand activations 'at' SXSW

CNN: Delivering a taste of local
To mirror the traditional tastes and smells of Austin, CNN shipped gift boxes to select regular attendees of CNN in-person activations filled with local Austin treats and cocktail recipes from the specific Austin bars that have catered CNN's SXSW house in the past.


Wisconsin Cheese: Pivoting to online events
Replacing its Cheeselandia live activation, Wisconsin Cheese sent the first 2,021 registrants of its #SXSWisconsin event a gift package of cheese for a virtual tasting event with actor Nick Offerman. The goal was to bring the taste, smell, textures, and sounds of Wisconsin Cheese, and its infamous event, as much as possible.

WarnerMedia: Rising above the noise
WarnerMedia launched the digital WarnerMedia Rise House, a three-day showcase of exclusive WarnerMedia content, touting screenings, panel discussions, and appearances across the platforms' stories and talent. All content was designed to bring fans through different experiences curated against three core themes: Closer to Your Heroes, Future Realities, and Culture in Motion. The most exciting activation was the brand's partnership with AdultSwim to create limited edition BirdGirl NFT (nonfungible tokens) that could only be won by visiting the digital 'house.'
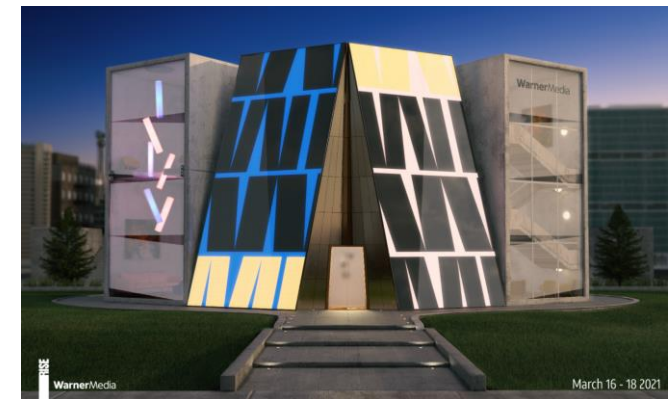
Before we log off from SXSW...

SXSW celebrates the convergence of the interactive, film, and music industries. The most unexpected discoveries happen when diverse topics and people come together, with shared viewpoints and dialogues from SXSW sessions, showcases, screenings and exhibitions, leading to unparalleled discovery and learning.

This was the year we missed the long lines to get into panels and local BBQ restaurants. We missed the spontaneity of hearing fresh perspectives, and the kismet of meeting someone new while adventuring between brand activations. We missed being with colleagues and clients in Austin, learning from the thousands of selected voices, as well as from each other.

We also found a silver lining at this year's SXSW. We had more diverse, and impressive, speakers than ever – Oprah, Stacey Abrams, Priya Parker, Charles Yu, Willie Nelson – tuning in live from their homes to deliver keynotes and provocative conversations.

So many ideas and opportunities sparked can be overwhelming. As marketers, we face an exciting, and daunting, challenge to rise to the occasion and commit to the themes we shared and find ways to deliver real utility to our consumers - be it through quality content, social change, and everything in-between.

As we think about the key themes of SXSW Online 2021, rooted by emotionally-charged, data-driven conversations, we leave you with the future-forward quote from Stacey Abrams' keynote: "I'm not pessimistic or optimistic, I'm determined."

With that, let's keep moving forward.

Want to positively provoke new ideas with a work session?

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