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Live Music Venue Marketing in a Post-COVID Northwest Arkansas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Abstract

What does a medium sized music venue, nearing its centennial in a college town, do when its doors have closed for the first time since a short 2004 renovation, due to the novel Coronavirus Pandemic? George's Majestic Lounge, the historic live music venue located in the heart of downtown Fayetteville, Arkansas, ceased operation for 134 days, its longest ever closure, and emerged into a climate massively different from what it had entered the pandemic in (Drury, et al. 2021). This venue has stood the test of time; opened in 1927 by George Pappas, it has remained in its railroad-adjacent position on Dickson Street, surviving nearly a century of global events. The venue closed again in March 2020, and unlike many other businesses, specifically live music venues, would successfully emerge out of the height of the pandemic, finding itself in a new world (Hunt & Seman, 2020).

Directly related to, and within these global & national events, came an intense shift in the area George's calls home; Northwest Arkansas has seen a recent population spike-trend comparable to that of Austin, Texas & Nashville, Tennessee (Wood, 2020); and with the University of Arkansas' largest ever freshman class, the university's already Vatican-like impact on the region only increased (Thomas, 2021). Just north of Fayetteville, Bentonville has continued to expand in population & relevancy, as have the majority of cities of the region. With this influx of newcomers & students, population growth & urban expansion, George's had the opportunity to take a massive leap forward, or risk possible stagnation.

George's Majestic Lounge originally opened as a bar & grille, but over the past ninety-five years has shifted into one of the region's premier live music venues, earning recent accolades such as Idle Magazine's Black Apple Award for best indie music venue & Wedding Rule's #1 venue in Northwest Arkansas, all while also hosting private events alongside its

regular concert schedule. Management has been successful in embracing this concept of change, and continued with their openness to adaptation as they emerged from their recent hiatus.

Being a public gathering space, revenue streams are limited to those of a bar, concert-hall, and the like; however, there is a vast amount of dynamic income forms in this industry (Hill, O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 2012) – private events bookings, merchandise sales, etc. The goal of heightening these elements is highly attainable and can be achieved through a successful marketing overhaul – social media tactics could be more effective in engaging segments, sponsor & partnerships could reach new groups, and internal operations could stand to see some improvements. However, all of this must be executed with great care, as not to tarnish the legacy brand, but to build upon it, as done in years past, so that George's Majestic Lounge can continue to thrive in a post-pandemic Northwest Arkansas. The purpose of this research is to assess what elements of marketing, specifically those showcased via social media, are most effective & should be pursued in order to engage its current customer base.

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Literature Review

Hill, O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan's "Creative Arts Marketing" (2012) opens with a simple statement: "Marketing is still often confused with sales..." While sales are what drives a business, keep it afloat, its effects can be short lived, volatile, or even coincidental (Hill, O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 2012). Sales are an end goal, supported by all other facets of operation; for a music venue such as George's Majestic Lounge, these elements include factors such as streamlined alcohol supplying, well-curated booking & scheduling, proper audio-visual production, and the like. Marketing is a crucial element, just as the aforementioned, however, it is easy to neglect. This is logical – if a business cannot function, it has nothing to market; but for a properly functioning business, marketing should be implemented to showcase its successes (Hill, O'Sullivan & O'Sullivan, 2012).

George's Majestic Lounge finds itself in this position – at 95 years firm, George's has established a role and identity within its area & industry. But with recent environmental changes, such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, new competitive business openings, and a changing region, city & demographic, implementation of an updated marketing plan should be executed & analyzed.

For a music venue, George's in specific, there are examples to be followed in a basic way – certain, similar concert halls throughout the United States that have set a good precedent for what marketing tactics should be engaged, and they have results to show for it (@chspourhouse & @theyman, 2022). In cases such as *The Charleston Pour House* in South Carolina or *The Ryman Auditorium* in Nashville, Tennessee, venues have created a national identity for themselves, and within the music community, that sets them apart from any other, and can even create something of a cult-following. While these venues all have unique characteristics which

set them apart, their marketing has commonalities: they are staples of their region, have a history which they promote, and make a conscious effort to publicly showcase the continuity of this history (@chspourhouse & @theyrman, 2022). These elements build a venue-identity, leading to a type of fandom, that stems from more than just the artists who inhabit the building (@chspourhouse & @theyrman, 2022). After consistent, proper execution, this, in theory, should allow the business to create a cycle of positive growth.

***HI:** Does a live music venue's success hinge not only upon operational & revenue-creating activities, but using marketing tactics to create not only an engaged, but a dedicated following? Social media should act as an indicator & be used to analyze marketing tactics.*

The area surrounding George's Majestic Lounge has seen vast changes & expansion in recent history, once a hidden away college town in the Ozarks & obscure home to a few corporations, it has become a very popular area, and is on track to continue to do so. The University of Arkansas, located in Fayetteville, saw its largest ever freshman class & student body population in the Fall 2021 semester [29,068] (University of Arkansas, 2021), driving the school to not only build new dormitories for on-campus student-housing, but to even have to purchase sections of off-campus apartments for student use. The Northwest Arkansas region sports four primary, interconnected metroplexes – [from North to South] Bentonville, Rogers, Springdale & Fayetteville. This area, as a whole, is projected to host a population of close to one million, by the year 2045 – “almost double this year's population” (Wood, 2020). Washington & Benton Counties, specifically & where these cities are located, are set to take on that million, Benton hosting a bit over half (Wood, 2020); the area, as of 2020, was already sporting nearly 30

new residents per day (Wood, 2020). Gascon & Varley provide some insightful population & demographic statistics: "...the core counties of Benton and Washington have been leading the way with an average population growth of at least 2.4 percent, every county in the region has experienced average growth faster than that of the nation since 1971. Thus, not only has Northwest Arkansas experienced the fastest population growth of any MSA located in Arkansas, but it is also the only MSA in Arkansas [with at least two counties in the state] that has experienced an average population growth above the national average in all counties."

H2: George's target demographic has changed; therefore, should George's adapt their marketing tactics? Using social media insights, George's can analyze what demographics (both personal & geographical) are engaging with their content and seek to improve their reach to these growing segments.

With this growth, George's now has true competitors – two new venues have entered the market in direct competition. While a venue such as the Walmart Amp in Rogers, and other nearby venues exist, none have truly been a direct rival of George's; they focus on a different element of entertainment, target a different segment, or host different size events. Now, with *Tin Roof* opening quite literally across the street, and *JJ's Live* open also in Fayetteville, George's should seek to promote their business, as not to get lost in the mix. *JJ's Live* tends to book a different type of act, and is a newer, fresher venue; however, their target market of college students now often overlaps with that of George's. *Tin Roof*, which is yet to open, will be located in extremely close proximity, and host live music seven days a week; while these are not 'concerts,' per se, it is a comparable alternative. As one can see, even through these basic details,

all three businesses vary, but also overlap. For future research, a comparative analysis of these businesses should be conducted not only regarding operational facets & general success, but of their marketing tactics – specifically social media (Cranny, 2020).

George's Majestic Lounge made a calculated effort to stand out by implementing a series of billboards along Interstate 49, between Bella Vista & Fayetteville, which includes Rogers, Springdale & Bentonville. Note, placement between Tulsa, Oklahoma & Northwest Arkansas [and similarly, even the NWA airport] was considered, but decided against because it was established that George's marketing-power lies within its home city & region's demographic & consumers [its clientele being predominately local]. These billboard advertisements featured a fresh new look – black & orange contrasting colors to break through the typically whiter, brighter advertisements, and embody the classic 'old, dark dive' feeling, if you will, of the venue. They also feature a similarly edited photo of the outside of George's iconic building, for recognizability; these ads included new taglines such as "Experience the Tradition." This style has been adapted into digital advertisements placed on *ArkansasRazorbacks.com*, the university's sports webpage, and have featured specific shows as well. New handbills & print advertisements have also been taken out, highlighting the venue's viability for private events such as fraternity parties, wedding receptions, fundraising events, and the like – the thought behind this being that creating lasting memories for the largest number of people will create a segment of new, repeat customers, who will associate the venue with a unique time in their life, which took place in Fayetteville, and at George's. All of these advertisements, too, are based in the idea that the venue represents the area around it, and by hosting one's event there, a client is not only supporting the community, but becoming a part of it; live music brings "people together by in person and online actions. The festivals connect one another and create lifetime memories

for all... [concerts] are a place where people go to make long lasting memories and to create experiences that they will remember forever. The experiences are what continues to bring people back” (Cranny, 2020). And the more normalized the venue becomes for this type of event, the more that it will be utilized for similar ones. George’s Majestic Lounge, as a part of this effort, will soon place an ad in *The Northwest Arkansas Scout Guide*, a well-respected publication in cities across the country, which highlights local businesses in a ‘high-class’ manner.

Concurrently, this ad will also stand out amongst its neighbors, in that style reflective of George’s ‘personality.’ The thought behind this marketing purchase was engagement of the more ‘Bentonville demographic’ – young professionals, who likely graduated from the University of Arkansas & lived in Fayetteville, who are looking to utilize a classic space they had likely visited during their time in college, for a reasonable price & special event.

All of this should be funneled into George’s social media – the mentioned marketing campaign elements such as history, private events booking, new-age Northwest Arkansas community outreach, and all the like are to be showcased, and tracked primarily through Instagram, due to its statistically insightful nature & mixed-demographic following. This will provide the venue with a look into its campaign’s successes and allow them to properly adapt to the new data.

***H3:** By using social media to promote all the factors of George’s new marketing campaign, will the venue experience an uptick of interactions with their new content / will it be well-received by their following?*

Method

Sample

To address the aforementioned hypotheses & research questions, a statistical analysis of George's Majestic Lounge's Instagram numbers should be run. Instagram tends to be a median indicator for George's social media marketing success levels – it falls, as a general statement, between the older generations' Facebook & the younger's Tik Tok (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). George's Facebook page insights support this theory, as does their Tik Tok account. Each individual platform tends to drive polarizing interactions – Facebook hosting more critical & negative comments, while Tik Tok tends to only yield likes & positive comments. These negative Facebook interactions come in the form of disgruntled patron complaints regarding ticketing, pricing, venue policy, scheduling, artist selection, etc. Tik Tok virtually only sees comments of a supportive nature. George's Instagram, as a platform, has a mixed following demographically, and tends to host a more median engagement (Berg & Sterner, 2015); the platform envelops both Facebook *and* Tik Tok's age base, and interactions reflect this. The platform also allows for a wide variety of media types to be shared & analyzed [photos, videos, stories, reels...], and provides highly detailed & insightful account statistics; through Instagram, George's is able to analyze its following via statistics of reach, engagement, demographics, and post-specifics. The time frame of which one wants to study trends, and to what level of detail, are choices all available to the user.

Measures

A statistical analysis of George's Majestic Lounge's Instagram will be conducted by measuring levels of likes, comments, shares, accounts reached, content interactions & profile activity on posts to create a new marketing plan. Likes are the clearest primary indicator of

positive content interaction, especially when weighed against follower count & content reach – they demonstrate how many people actively liked a post vs. how many subscribe to see them, and how many actually saw the specific post. Comments often provide a more a more qualitative look into engagements, as noted in the sample section regarding positive & negative interactions, though they tend to come in a lesser volume than other categories for George’s Majestic Lounge. Accounts reached is simply the number of Instagram users that a given posts is shown to, interactions are any user activity on the post [likes, shares, comments, etc.], and profile activity assesses the number of times Instagram users opened the George’s profile via the post. Each of these measures is insightful in its own unique way, and can be enhanced by cross-referencing against the others, such as reach vs. shares.

Posts will also be assessed for inclusion of elements such as their new ‘aesthetic,’ University of Arkansas – related content, vintage content, partnerships & giveaways, ‘playbacks,’ private-event marketing posts, merchandise advertisements, ambassador program – related content, and behind the scenes posts. These criteria will be manually entered into an excel spreadsheet for data gathering & organization before moving onto the testing / analysis phase.

Tests

SPSS will be utilized to run chi squares & cross-tabulations on those mentioned elements, with an overarching goal of indicating what factors make up an overall successful post, a highly engaging post, and a well-shared post. This information will provide George’s Majestic Lounge with the opportunity to assess what type of posts should be carried out more often, which should be abandoned, and so on.

Limitations

Some of George's Majestic Lounge's Instagram posts stand out from the others, making them more difficult to include in the data set – examples such as partnered/shared content do not allow the user to see the same insights as normal posts, and statistical outliers exist due to a small number paid promotional posts. Lastly, Instagram's overall trending insights (not individual posts) only allow the user to look at the previous 90 days.

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