



Development of the Wheel of *Belonging*

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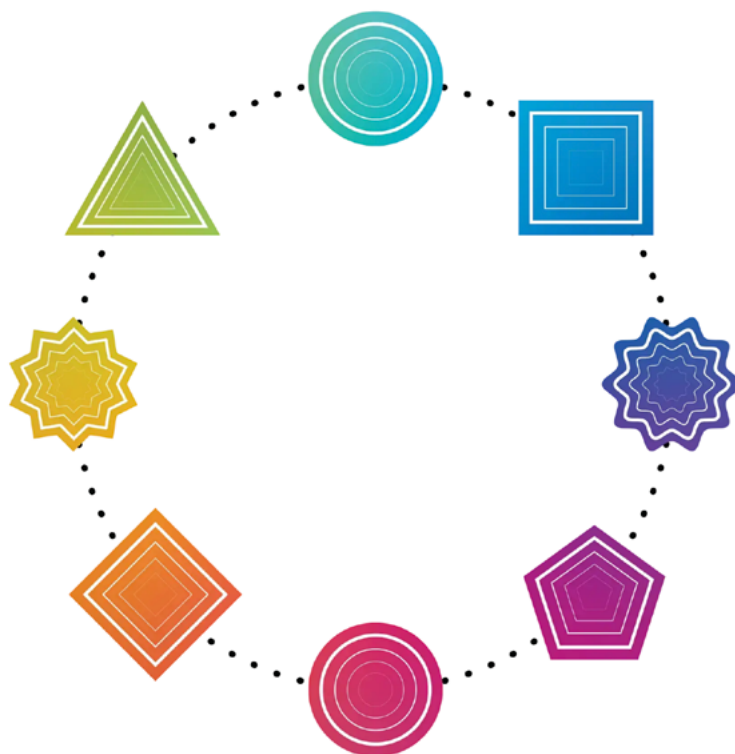
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Abstract

The “Wheel of Belonging,” developed by Storycraft Lab, is a framework designed to measure belonging in event settings by identifying eight unique pathways to belonging: Empowerment, Freedom to Be, Purpose-full, Fulfillment & Joy, Love & Appreciation, True Authenticity, Thinking Differently, and Universality.

Each pathway represents a progression from an emotional state to social connections and personal transformation. Through analysis of participant responses across 16 events, the framework highlights key elements like connection, community support, and shared experiences.

Participants mapped personal belonging journeys, providing actionable insights for event organizers to enhance engagement and satisfaction. While limited by subjective data collection and sample specificity, the Wheel offers a nuanced approach to designing inclusive experiences. Future research aims to expand its applicability and refine metrics for measuring belonging. This model emphasizes the transformative power of intentional design, addressing belonging as a fundamental human need essential for individual and collective well-being.



Development of the Wheel of *Belonging*

Imagine stepping into a bustling event, only to feel an overwhelming sense of disconnect from the people around you. The buzz of conversations, laughter, and shared excitement feels distant, and as the minutes tick by, the feeling of exclusion intensifies. Rather than engaging, you're more likely to withdraw, experiencing a diminished sense of enjoyment and fulfillment. This scenario illustrates the crucial role of belonging: research shows that when people feel disconnected, they are less likely to engage in activities, reducing their overall satisfaction and even the likelihood of future participation (Jetten et al., 2015).

Belonging represents a fundamental human need, essential for psychological well-being and social functioning. According to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) "belongingness hypothesis," human beings are intrinsically motivated to form and maintain at least a minimal number of meaningful relationships. Failure to satisfy this need can lead to negative psychological outcomes, including loneliness, depression, and increased stress levels (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Therefore, belonging is not merely a social desire but a psychological requirement, essential for individual growth.

***BELONGING IS NOT
MERELY A SOCIAL
DESIRE BUT A
PSYCHOLOGICAL
REQUIREMENT***

Belonging plays an equally pivotal role in shaping experiences within organized events and gatherings. Events that foster inclusivity and a sense of connection allow attendees to feel valued and engaged, leading to richer, more memorable experiences (Allen et al., 2011). Research suggests that when people feel included and appreciated within a group setting, they exhibit greater trust and cooperative behavior, ultimately enhancing both individual and group-level outcomes (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Given these findings, a structured approach to fostering belonging within event settings holds substantial promise for deepening attendees' emotional and social engagement.

*WHEN PEOPLE FEEL INCLUDED
AND APPRECIATED...THEY
EXHIBIT GREATER TRUST AND
COOPERATIVE BEHAVIOR*

Storycraft Lab's "Wheel of Belonging" was developed to address this need, offering a conceptual framework aimed at fostering feelings of connection and community among participants. The Wheel is designed to identify core elements that facilitate belonging, enabling event organizers to create more inclusive, engaging experiences. By providing

*THE WHEEL IS
DESIGNED TO IDENTIFY
CORE ELEMENTS THAT
FACILITATE BELONGING*

a practical tool grounded in psychological principles, the Wheel of Belonging extends beyond individual experience, encouraging

group cohesion and enhancing overall event quality. The following studies aimed to describe the development process and empirical validation of the Wheel of Belonging, addressing a critical gap in event design by focusing on mechanisms that promote inclusive and supportive environments.

Study 1

Collection of Belonging Features and Phrases

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

We conducted user interviews with a convenience sample of 40 participants, recruited at events and during dedicated office hours designed to better understand belonging. Participants represented a wide range of demographics. We followed the procedure of saturation, meaning we continued collecting data until no new themes emerged, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

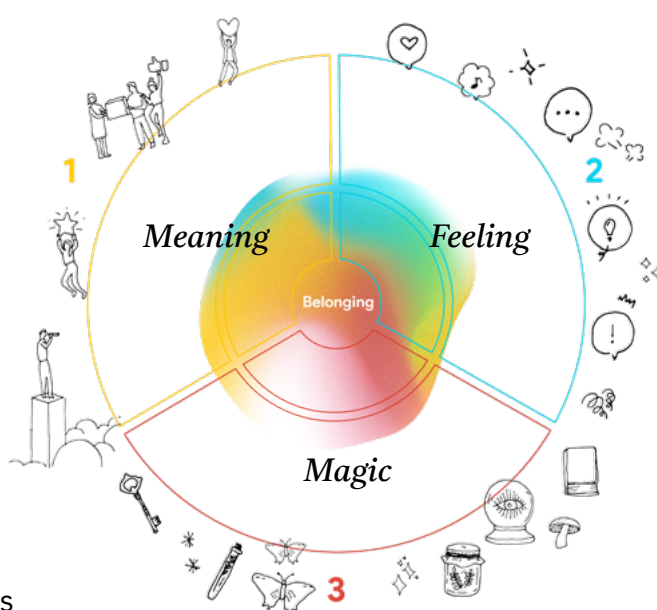
PROCEDURE

Participants were interviewed through three open-ended prompts related to belonging. The first question focused on emotion, and asked the participants to finish the following sentence: "When I belong I feel...". The second focused on finding meaning or relevance and asked participants to finish the sentence: "I belong here because" Participants were given example items of potential ways of finishing the sentence if they had a difficult time providing a response. For example, "I belong here because ..." "these people think like me" or "I am learning something that will help me be better/do better." The final prompt focused on a transformational experience. Specifically, participants were prompted to find a cherished memory and share it to identify moments that resulted in a change in behavior. These conversations were recorded with the purpose of creating transcripts for a more in-depth analysis of the interviews.

RESULTS

The open-ended responses were coded using thematic word counts to map and quantify emerging concepts. We identified common themes and words used by participants (e.g., recurring terms like “authenticity”). We separated words into the three categories: **Feeling**, **Meaning**, and **Magic**. The feeling theme represented how people connect to others and themselves. The meaning theme represented experiences that leave a lasting impact and prompt people to reflect. The magic theme represented possibilities that open people’s minds to new worlds that can result in a change in behavior. This process allowed us to group words into broader themes based on frequency and relevance to belonging.

We used the frequency of key words that connected with the three categories outlined prior in order to quantify our findings derived from these interviews and reveal the eight pathways (e.g. The Love & Appreciation pathway is directly associated with engaging feelings). Those themes became the Belonging Pathways, each intertwining with each other to create a unique journey to Belonging for all participants. Each of these eight pathways illustrate a unique progression toward a sense of belonging. These ranged from foundational emotional states to more complex social connections and personal transformations. We consider these categories fundamental in fostering belonging, with each category having a unique set of subcategories that lead to the broader themes, and eventually belonging. See descriptions of all pathways on the following page.



Overview of Key Pathways



Empowerment

In the empowerment pathway, the participant begins with seeking dialogue with like minded people, and through a process of knowledge exchange they become inspired, and uniquely understood — they are ultimately empowered to act and spark action as a result of group affirmation.



Purpose-full

Within this pathway participants begin in a reflective state, seeking clarity through knowledge-driven discovery. They continue with synthesis, knowledge acquisition, and reflection until they reach a point of clarity. This allows them to become advocates for meaning and reach belonging as a result of purpose-full energy where they can contribute and receive from a community of knowledge and practice.



Fulfillment & Joy

This pathway begins with the participant as a passive viewer, and aims to create joy through meaning and feeling. It is sparked by curiosity that enables the participant to grow in confidence through controlled experimentation, leading to participation and encountering increased creativity creating a sense of belonging for the participant within a community.



Freedom to Be

The entry state on this pathway is fear. The attendee moves from fear, to safety, to trust, expression, and lastly a feeling that they are able to exist, as they are, within a group or experience.



Love & Appreciation

This pathway begins with being welcomed. From here our experience design must support the audience to enable feelings of acceptance, recognition, consideration, value, and appreciation. This manifests in the knowledge that the experience would not be the same without them.



Thinking Differently

This pathway is between magic and meaning, and begins with the attendee feeling interested in the daily relevance that an event or experience might offer. On this pathway they move toward transformed mental models as a result of re-framing and re-setting to break away from the ordinary to discover through conversation, reflection, and revelation.



True Authenticity

This pathway sits between feeling and magic, with the entry state beginning at expectancy and hope. Through the pathway of True Authenticity the attendee brings a desire to innovate or change, and encounters community support through the work of vulnerability, risk and release opening up a space for change. The ultimate destination is a changed state — being able to operate openly without masking.



Universality

Universality operates differently than the other pathways, as there are three unique paths that the attendee can take to reach Universality, and eventually Belonging.

The first pathway is more **solitary**, moving from the context of an individual journey of discovery, to heightened sense of agency, to introspection and reflection, at which point they begin to externalize and connect to a universal dialogue. The second pathway is **serendipitous**, based on one to one, or one to few interactions. Beginning from a state of open-heartedness and a desire to find commonality, this pathway uses serendipity to make unexpected interactions that generate intersectional connections. The third pathway is **social**, and begins with a desire for a shared experience and through acts of co-creation, the individual increases self-awareness through a reciprocity loop with others. As their sentience increases they see themselves and their impact within and upon the universe magnified.

Study 2

Advancing Belonging

The purpose of Study 2 was to replicate the belonging pathways and underlying themes discovered in Study 1. We also sought to increase our sample size to investigate if the belonging features discovered in Study 1, resonated with a larger sample size. Another goal of Study 2 was to put into practice and assess the real-world applications of the Wheel of Belonging, applying it to 16 unique events to analyze belonging in those settings. Furthermore, we sought to improve the Wheel of Belonging, and refine touchpoints.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants (N=921) were recruited at different events, including conferences such as IMEX Americas and Europe, executive training, and community summits in 2024. Participants represent a wide variety of industries and roles, ensuring responses that represent diverse backgrounds and experiences.

PROCEDURE

Data was collected through multiple mediums, including: user interviews facilitated by belonging facilitators, and self-activation through our belonging application. The Wheel of Belonging was applied in multiple environments, this includes events, executive training, and team building settings. We asked participants to consider an experience where they felt a sense of belonging, what their mindset was going into that experience, their aspirations for the experience prior to it, and how engaging with touchpoints builds their sense of belonging. Participants share their story of belonging while a facilitator tracks the features that arise during their story.

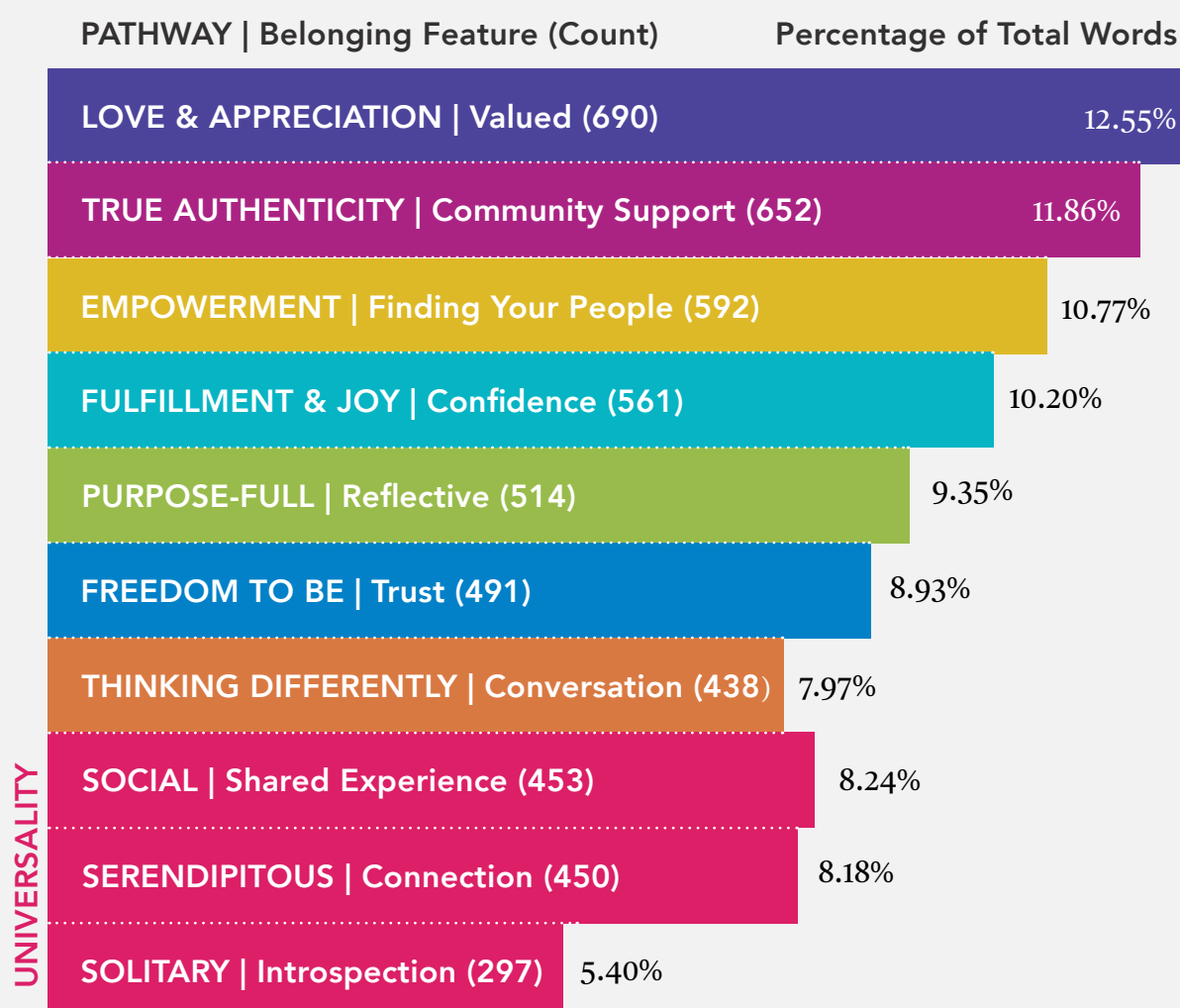
This facilitator selects words or phrases that are included in the participant's story of belonging and serve as significant aspects of their story, as well as manually inputting words that may not be included on the Wheel of Belonging, building a comprehensive story of their unique path to belonging. Outside of facilitated workshops and events, participants can make use of the Wheel of Belonging through self-activations. We used the same prompt provided to participants in facilitated workshops.

Participants were given a word bank of touchpoints included on the Wheel of Belonging where they can map out their own path to belonging, while also allowing them to input their own unique words that are not included in the word bank. Following the selection of their touchpoints, participants confirm their selection, and are also able to re-arrange the order of the touchpoints to build an accurate representation of their path to belonging.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the frequency of words and phrases most commonly used by participants in their Belonging Journey's, sorted by their related pathway. The percentage indicates the frequency of words in each pathway that were engaged with when compared to the total number of words chosen by the sample (e.g. words in the Empowerment pathway were chosen 592 times out of 5499 words chosen total). See Table 1 for detailed results. Table 2 shows the frequency of the most common touchpoints in each pathway.

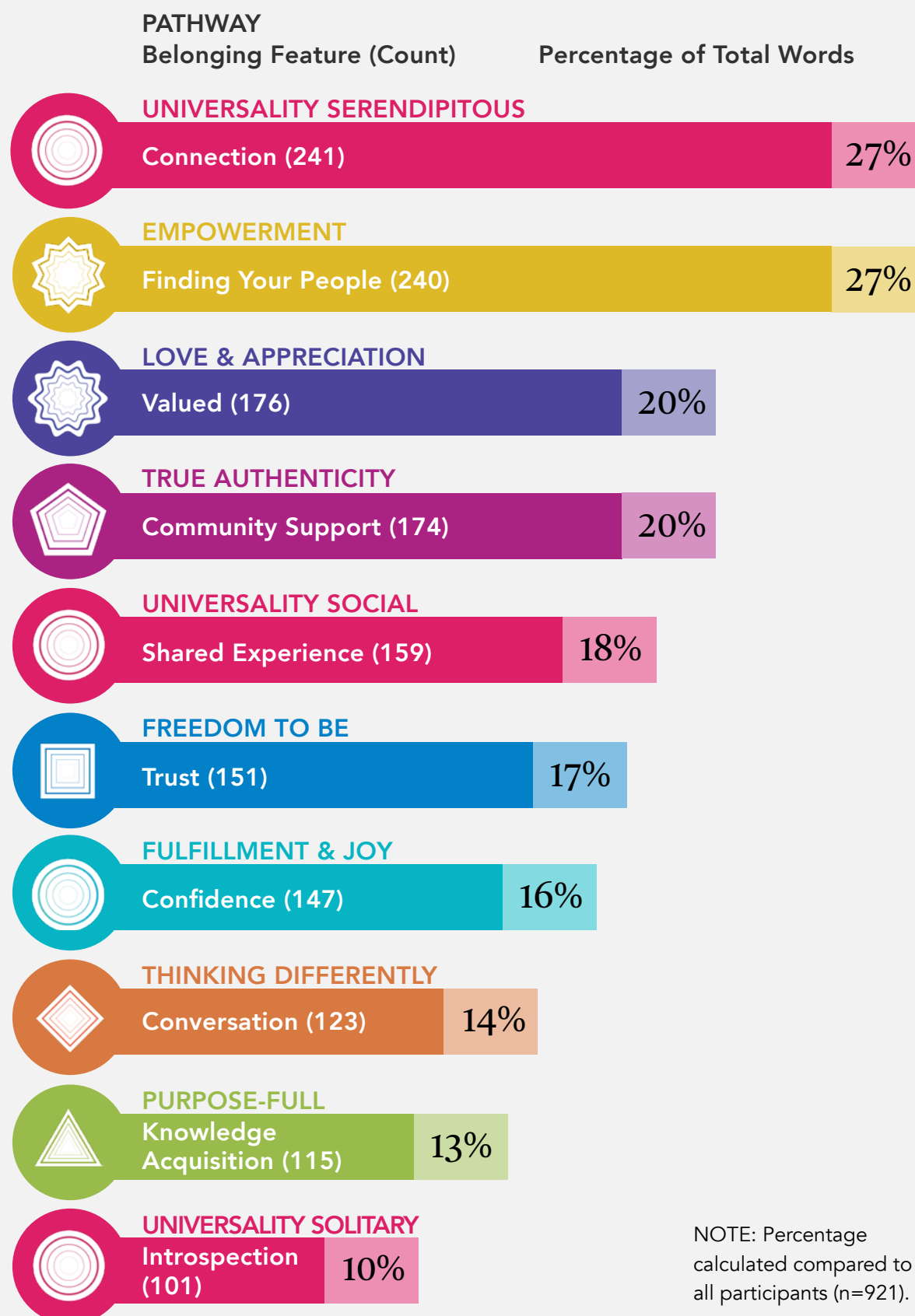
TABLE 1
Frequency of Pathways Engaged & Most Common Touchpoints



NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100% as participants are able to write-in their own unique words not included on the Wheel of Belonging.

TABLE 2

Frequency of Most Common Touchpoints & Corresponding Pathways



Discussion

The “Wheel of Belonging” developed by Storycraft Lab presents a structured approach to measuring belonging within event settings. This framework, based on empirical findings from thematic analysis of participant responses, identifies eight unique pathways to belonging: Empowerment, Freedom to Be, Purpose-full, Fulfillment & Joy, Love

& Appreciation, True Authenticity, Thinking Differently, and Universality.

Each pathway reflects a distinct progression, from foundational emotional states to complex social connections and personal transformation. Commonly used themes such as “connection,” “finding your people,” and “community support” were identified as central to belonging. By categorizing experiences and feelings within these pathways, the Wheel provides event organizers with actionable insights to enhance attendee engagement and satisfaction.

*THE WHEEL PROVIDES
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ENHANCE ATTENDEE
ENGAGEMENT AND
SATISFACTION*

16
UNIQUE
EVENTS

engaging with
participants across a
variety of industries

Since the creation of the Wheel of Belonging, Storycraft Lab has used this tool at 16 unique events, engaging with participants across a variety of industries. Through this data collection we have been able to identify the most commonly used words or phrases, and referenced themes within each individual pathway. Participants were asked to map out their own personal path to Belonging by selecting words and phrases that were essential to their own feeling of Belonging. Additionally, they were asked to order those words and phrases to indicate their unique path to Belonging.

Implications

The Wheel of Belonging holds important implications for the event and experience design industry. It moves beyond generic approaches to engagement by offering a nuanced understanding of how specific emotional and social states contribute to a sense of inclusion. Event organizers can use this model to intentionally design experiences that prioritize belonging, thereby enhancing attendee satisfaction and creating lasting impacts. Furthermore, the Wheel demonstrates the potential for event experiences to support well-being by fulfilling attendees' needs for connection and community. Organizations that use the Wheel may find it fosters not only individual engagement but also collective cohesion, supporting both psychological and social outcomes in attendees.

THE WHEEL DEMONSTRATES THE POTENTIAL FOR EVENT EXPERIENCES TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING

In addition, the pathways suggest that belonging is multifaceted and can be achieved through various experiences. For instance, while the Universality pathway offers a broad perspective on shared human experiences, the Empowerment pathway emphasizes individual affirmation through dialogue and community support. This diversity in pathways acknowledges the unique ways people experience belonging and provides organizers with a flexible, adaptable framework.

BELONGING IS MULTIFACETED AND CAN BE ACHIEVED THROUGH VARIOUS EXPERIENCES

is vital in fostering a sense of belonging, and through story-sharing, participants are invited to be vulnerable with each other, and themselves to strengthen relationships and results.

Study 2 showed the value of measuring belonging through a story-sharing modality. Through this medium, a connection between sharing personal stories and emotional connection formed. Emotional connection

Future Directions

Despite its strengths, there are some limitations that warrant consideration. First, reliance on open-ended prompts, while valuable for in-depth responses, may have introduced subjective biases, as participants may have varied interpretations of “belonging.” To account for this, future studies could integrate more structured survey items alongside open-ended questions to mitigate interpretive bias. Second, the data were collected at specific types of events, so a broader application of the Wheel to a variety of settings will ensure the framework gains a more robust cross section of verticals and other participant segmentation.

Further research could validate the Wheel of Belonging in diverse event contexts and with larger, more heterogeneous samples. Comparative studies across different event types (e.g., corporate, social, and cultural events) would reveal whether the Wheel’s pathways hold universally or if specific pathways resonate more strongly in particular settings. Future research might also explore longitudinal effects, assessing whether fostering belonging through the Wheel translates into sustained engagement, trust, or well-being over time.

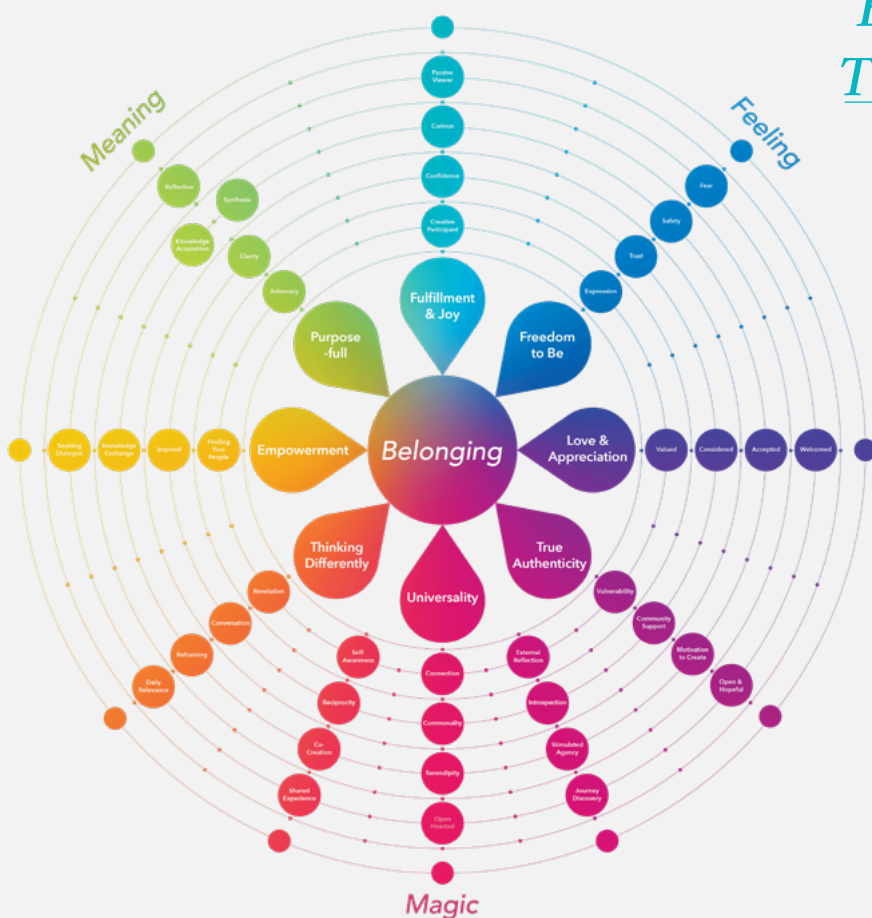
We are constantly seeking to improve the Wheel of Belonging, and we aim to refine touchpoints and pathways in 2025. To do this we are in the foundational stages of developing a synonym database regarding words and phrases that are typically associated with all touchpoints on

the Wheel of Belonging, as well as a scoring system to evaluate the effectiveness of touchpoints towards fostering belonging. This scoring system could produce a benchmark for belonging, in multiple contexts, allowing for us to quantify belonging, and apply it to a variety of settings. We hope to couple this development with the integration of machine learning and AI to maximize the effectiveness of the Wheel of Belonging, as well as continue to make further improvements. We believe that the development of these aspects can be used in applications outside of just the context of a belonging-specific prompt, and can be used to support the story-sharing modality through a wider scope.

***THIS SCORING
SYSTEM COULD
PRODUCE A
BENCHMARK FOR
BELONGING***

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Wheel of Belonging developed by Storycraft Lab represents a valuable tool for enhancing the attendee experience by fostering feelings of connection and inclusion. By identifying and categorizing distinct pathways to belonging, this framework offers event organizers practical strategies for engaging audiences meaningfully. While the study is limited by its sample size and subjective data collection methods, it opens promising avenues for future research to further explore and validate the model across varied settings and populations. Ultimately, the Wheel of Belonging exemplifies the transformative potential of thoughtfully designed event experiences, underscoring the role of belonging as a fundamental human need that, when nurtured, enriches both individual and collective experiences.



*THE WHEEL OF BELONGING
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