

A Review of Audience Experience and Audience Development in Theatre Performance: Exploring Key Dimensions and Impacts

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Abstract: This review explores the dynamic relationship between audience experience and theatre performance, focusing on key elements such as knowledge, risk, authenticity, and collective engagement. It examines how theatre fosters emotional connections, motivates engagement, and delivers lasting benefits such as enhanced wellbeing, strengthened relationships, and broader perspectives. The review further discusses audience development strategies, including outreach, marketing, education, and taste cultivation, while addressing the challenges posed by shifting audience demographics and preferences. Drawing upon these empirical insights, the review highlights theatre's enduring ability to inspire, connect, and transform, reaffirming its significance as a cultural cornerstone and a driving force in enriching shared human experiences.

Keywords: Audience Experience; Theatre Performance; Audience Development; Audience Motivation.

1. Introduction

“Theatre is both part of our heritage and a modern arena for contemporary debate. It is a source of controversy and comfort, provocation and proclamation” (Naylor, Lewis, Branzanti, Consulting, Devlin and Dix, 2016, p.11). The word “theatre” means a venue where plays and shows are performed, which delivers a variety of artistic performances. Having been an important medium for artistic communication ever since ancient times, theatre is so influential and indispensable to human society. To begin with, theatre is like a living dialogue that can define and develop our identities as individuals, communities, regions and nations (Naylor et al., 2016, p.11), serving as a spiritual manifestation of them. Further, studies have indicated the positive impacts of theatre on people, especially the younger ones’ appreciation of culture and the arts in physical, emotional, social senses (Levy, 2007, pp. 66–69). These partially explain why many European countries, the UK included, have attached greater significance to the ‘audience development’ as part of their cultural policies since the 2000s (Kawashima, 2000, p.1). However, the emergence of more art forms (such as art festivals and live concerts), means the options available for audience are increasing, which inevitably puts theatre under greater competitive pressure. Known for a place for relaxing, theatre in the past two decades had been struggling with a serious problem: declining audience. According to Snow’s report (2018), the UK Theatre’s membership venues, including more than 200 auditoriums, witnessed a reduced total ticket sales in 2017 by making £469.8 million, a decrease of £1.9 million from last year. Other than the sales amount, the number of tickets sold were also 1.87% less than in 2016, from 19 million to 18.7 million. Although the total number of shows in 2017 increased by 2.9% to 44,435, the average attendance per show dropped from 445 to 424.

While these figures give a general sense of the continuing difficulty facing theatre, reduced funding and rising operating costs are more underlying concerns. Although the

government has provided a series of policies and financial assistance, they are basically insufficient for theatre to get out of financial difficulty. For example, the British Arts Council played a decisive role as the government’s main funding body issuing subsidies to theatre, which made up a large proportion of the cost of theatres like the Royal National Theatre in London. In the meantime, the financial difficulty facing the theatre remained unalleviated. Despite of their high seat sales and rising price, the huge operating costs keep the theatre on a tight budget. The demographical data also predicts a gloomy future: most of the audience members participating in the theatre today are made up of middle-class Londoners or tourists, as ordinary residents are no longer willing to pay expensive tickets (Bennett, 2009, p. 113). Put simply, the decreasing financial support and enormous costs of daily operation force theatre expand the sources of income, including maintaining the existing audience and attracting new audience. Therefore, it is of research importance for this review to critically examine the dynamic interplay between audience and performance, focusing on key components such as knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement, analysing factors shaping audience experiences, including emotional and intellectual impacts, while addressing strategies for audience development and motivations. The review aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of theatre’s influence on audience engagement and its broader societal and cultural significance.

2. Audience and Performance

Traditionally, the word “audience” is defined as a group of people gathered in public for watching or listening to specific activities. In other words, whoever watches a drama, a movie, or listening to someone’s speech can be called “the audience.” In most cases, the audience enjoys plays and shows in a passive manner. Specifically, Wheeler (2010, p. 336) proposes that the stage is a box separated from the real world, even if the line between the stage and the audience is invisible. From the performer’s point of view, the audience is both

invisible and silent, except for the applause from time to time. The objects of attention (such as drama, dance, songs, reading) are performed by the artist, and the audience watched patiently, waiting to be attracted by the activities taking place on the stage (Wheeler, 2010, p. 336).

3. Four Components of the Audience Experience

The audience experience consists of different parts. Wheeler's (2010, p. 19) research suggested four components of the audience experience: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement. These four components are a decisive benchmark for audiences' measurement of their experience. If these elements can be numerically measured, they can be an indicator of the artistic experience ((Radbourne, Johanson, Glow and White, 2009, p. 22).

Knowledge refers to the information that the performance brings to the audience, enabling them to better understand or viewing the performances they are experiencing so they can gain what they seek from the performances (Kawashima,2000, p.12). In other words, the audience can get "knowledge" from different aspects before and after the performance. For example, artists can engage in self-program (propaganda for their work), self-explanatory assistance (opening relevant websites outside the performance to help the audience understand the work) and interpreting assistance (during the performance) (Radbourne et al., 2009, p. 20). The basic rationale of applying knowledge strategy is that the deeper the audience understands the works, the higher their praise and return visit rate (Kawashima, 2006). A knowledge strategy also connects with what Kotler and Scheff (1997.P. 193) refer to as the "augmented product" - features and benefits beyond what the target audience normally expects. Also, Zeithal, Parasuraman and Berry (1990, p. 45) suggested that commodity exterior and planning design would not only affect consumer' expectations of service and future confidence. The combination of the aforementioned theories is sufficient to demonstrate that the impact of "knowledge" on the audience experience is profound. A good product's quality experience not only is reflected in the performance process but also includes the preparation of the performance, the surrounding and after-sales service.

Risk refers to the possibility of loss or gain caused by the activity. In 2001, Colbert et al. (2001, p. 84-85) proposed four related risks that determine the likelihood of re- consumption by theatre audiences: functional risk (the likelihood that the product does not meet consumer's expectations); economic risk (the cost concern makes the decision-making process even more complex); psychological risk (the product poses a threat to the consumer's desired self-image); and social risk (it unnecessarily focuses on how consumers want to be perceived,). Besides, potential negative risks also include the fear of direct and fierce confrontation. For example, the audience may face some ethical issues, moral choices and emotional challenges (Hirschman, 1983, p. 49). Hirschman also mentioned that hedonistic consumption required a certain degree of imaginative participation and emotional spending by the audience so that they can choose to use or avoid a certain product. Namely, the perception of negative risk is positively associated with the likelihood of participation (Crealey, 2003, pp. 30-32). Risk serves as a part of an activity that must be taken seriously, and will determine people's willingness to attend the event. Therefore, it is the

responsibility for the art organisation to maximise the four related risks mentioned by Colbert et al. (2001) and minimise negative risks so that the audience can enjoy the performance in a relatively comfortable environment.

Authenticity is one of the most important factors determining the audience experience. In the process of performance, authenticity can be broadly defined as "a real form of performing arts activities". The more authentic the performance seems to the audience, the more they can blend into the atmosphere to enjoy the experience (Radbourne et al., 2009, p. 20). Authenticity consists of two main components: the authenticity of the content delivered and the emotional perception of the audience. The authenticity of the content delivered refers to whether or not the performance meets the technical standards. For example, whether the performance is original and whether the accompaniment is played according to the original score. The emotional perception of the audience means that authenticity is usually related to reality, truth and credibility, but these qualities mean differently to different consumers (Radbourne et al.,2009, p.20). Because each audience is an independent individual who has an independent feeling. So the works judged by experts, intellectuals or elites to be non-authentic may be identified by the audience as interesting and vivid from the perspective of a theme (Wang, 1999, p. 353). Therefore, the audience's sense of "authenticity" does not necessarily guarantee the performance's compliance with the original script or soundtrack.

Collective engagement refers to a sense of participation that the audience derives when engaging with the performers and other judges before or after the performance (Boorsma,2006, p.83). This sense of participation can be verbal and non-verbal, as well as inner and interpersonal. Verbal participation means that people socialise through activities. For example, audience with different cultural backgrounds have the opportunity to communicate with others and gain new angles of vision and relationships. Eversmann (2004, p.171) emphasised the importance of the audience's inner and interpersonal relationships in determining the experience of theatre. Although each person's emotional experience and perceived dimensions are different, people may react similarly (such as smiling) to a certain part of the performance process. From an observers' angle, it can be perceived as that all the audience members have the same feelings about this performance. Whether it is the construction of individual or collective meaning, it is part of the artistic experience that provides value to consumers (Boorsma, 2006, p. 83). People gain great value from the collective participation in art because it allows personal emotions to be shared by watching performances, and reduces the audience's feeling of loneliness.

4. Factors that Affect the Audience's Experience

Previous scholars tried to explore the impact of theatre on the audience in both the short-term and long-term. As one of the most influential work, Walmsley's (2013, p.1) qualitative study deconstructed the concept of influence through a textual analysis of 42 semi-structured in-depth interviews, reinterpreting the impact of drama on people's lives from the perspective of the audience. As informed by the relevant studies, the impact of theatre on people's lives can be analysed according to seven key themes: flow, distraction,

catharsis and transformation, wellbeing and long-term impact, relationship building, world view and life without theatre.

“Flow appeared to be closely linked with Turner’s concepts of liminality, communitas, and pre-liminal behaviour as described in both collective and individual terms” (Turner and Jean-Paul, 2018, pp. 347–348). This can be explained by the fact that people can influence both collective and individual behaviours through the activities they participate in. In the study, an interviewee from Leeds said she was happy because she saw the audience's enthusiastic response to the performance reached her expectations. Interviewees from Melbourne believed that good performances allowed her to immerse herself into any display, sound or activity. On the other hand, “Flow is regularly discussed in terms of escapism and immersion” (Walmsley, 2013, p. 80). In other words, People will participate in theatre activities for a transient self-escape. Many interviewees mentioned that they often forgot the time when they watch performances. Several interviewees judged a good drama by looking at the watch, losing consciousness to the surrounding environment, and participating in it. Some viewers even referred the theatre to as another world, believing that being temporarily out of reality is a relief. In that way, they can better adjust their mindset to their lives in reality.

Distraction is important as most audiences believe that unexpected situations that occur during the event may affect their experience (Walmsley, 2013, p. 81). In Walmsley’s study, many respondents expressed anger at rude behavior and noise as they believed that watching a performance in a theatre was more memorable than movies and television. Theatrical audiences are more sensitive than the movie audiences because of their better understanding of the rules of performance and recognition of the theatre's code of conduct. One interviewee said that her experience was ruined by the distraction from background noise. Put simply, distraction determines whether or not people will re-consume the product, and therefore indicates the audience experience.

Catharsis and transformation can be understood as the impact and change that theatre activities bring to the audience (Walmsley, 2013, p. 82). The biggest motivation for watching theatre is the emotional impact. In Walmsley’s study, some interviewees admit that "emotional release" motivated them to go to theatre. Hirschman and Holbrook's (2019, p.94) hedonistic consumption theory mentioned that emotional catharsis is to generate a physical response (laughing or crying) by encouraging viewers to release emotions freely. This way of catharsis has a clear effect on self-improvement, self-reflection and self-adjustment.

Wellbeing is one of the long-term impacts of theatre on the audience. Wellbeing is an intangible and subjective concept that differs according to contexts. In Walmsley’s study, participants provided an in-depth description of the long-term impacts of theatre: more than half of them admit that they would like to collect tickets and even theatre diaries as souvenirs of their own theatre experiences. Some interviewees acknowledged that theatre improved their quality of life and often described the entire performance to many of their friends in detail. These audiences described the impact of theatre on their lives as subtle and gradual. Hedonic products tended to have long-term effects on people before, within and after the use of the product. This is also in line with the three stages of cultural consumer psychology: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal (Van Gennep, 1960).

Relationship building refers to the fact that participation of

art activities can improve interpersonal relationships and family cohesion (Brown,2006, p.19). Many interviewees from this study believed that the theatre offered an ideal opportunity to spend quality time with family and friends. As a unique space, the theatre can help the audience evoke memories and, strengthen relationships. World view became the second most popular motive for watching movies. More than a third of interviewees said that theatre enriched their lives by broadening their worldview. McCarthy et al (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks,2004) mentioned the benefits of art to the audience. Art can bring benefits to both privately and publicly, which can be further divided into intrinsic and instrumental benefits. In terms of instrumental benefits, McCarthy et al put the benefits of educational, health, economic and social capital benefits; In comparison, intrinsic benefits contained captivation, pleasure, cognitive growth, increased capacity for empathy, and enhanced social understanding and bonding. Some interviewees mentioned that theatre can not only make them be aware of their position in the world, but also give them a sense of cultural enrichment, which confirms the intrinsic influence of the theatre on the audience and helps people broaden their horizons.

Life without theatre is the most interesting part of the interview. Most of the interviewees from this study replied that it would be unthinkable if they had to live without theatre: the shared experience of theatre is becoming increasingly significant in today’s fragmented society.

5. Audience Development

Urban development, such as the development of museums, theatres, and other commercial establishments, contributes to the shape of the social, cultural, and visual landscape of a city or country. Especially, the art consumption model has become an important way to stimulating economic and cultural communication (Wing and Wai, 2006). The cultural products of the Opera House (high arts) are often consumed by a selected group of people. However, the younger generation and the lower socioeconomic class are considered to be vulnerable, especially to the theatre (Karkou and Glasman,2004). Although the cultural policies of many developed countries in recent years have increased their appeal for more art and cultural organisations, making relevant activities available to more people, the situation is yet to be optimistic (Kawashima,2006, p.55). According to theatre statistics from Boston, theatre audiences are growing older. Most of the seats were occupied by the generation of people born before and after World War II. People aged between 20 and 30 will become increasingly scarce (Aucoin,2012).

Nowadays, “audience development” has become a top priority for many theatres. In 2006, the Arts Council England defines audience development as: “Activity which is undertaken specifically to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences and to help arts organisations to develop ongoing relationships with audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, education, customer care and distribution”. (Barlow and Shibli,2010, p.105). In 2009, Hazelwood, Lawson and Aitken (2009, p.790) proposed that audience development is the term coined to describe strategies for creating new audiences and sustain relationships with existing audiences. Besides, audience development is a planned process that involves building relationships between individuals and art (Barlow and Shibli,2010, p.105). The study published by the Arts Council

England (Hassan,2004) described the basic nature of attracting new audiences, “It is about giving people an experience that inspires, moves or challenges them. It is about giving them something they did not have before and, more importantly, it is about turning a single encounter into a long-term affair”.

6. Four Types of the Audience Development

Kawashima divides audience development into four areas: Outreach (previously called “Cultural Inclusion”), Extended marketing, Taste cultivation and Audience education. Outreach refers to the projects that extend the geographical reach of art resources, making them more available to the public. For example, theatres may deliver tailored participatory art projects to specific disadvantaged groups and communities, including patients, prisoners, welfare receivers, asylum seekers and refugees. While looking different from the traditional audience population, they are likely to go to the theatre if access available (Kawashima, 2006, p. 57).

Extended marketing focuses on people who have high attendance potential but are not yet in the customer group. It is largely based on art marketing, stimulation, persuasion and the enhancement certain aspects of art attractive to targeted group (Kawashima, 2000, p.9). Further, the first step of the strategy is to identify non- participants with greater potential and to understand the specific reasons for their absence. The next steps are to either eliminate the tangible and intangible obstacles or reward attendance.

Taste cultivation refers to the efforts to cultivate the existing audience’s taste. It attempts to introduce different artistic genres and forms to participants in order to raise their interests in more diversified forms of arts. For example, a project can introduce contemporary music or stage plays to people who regularly attend classical concerts. This type of audience development can be achieved through cooperation between art organisations, such as the exchange of customer databases between agencies.

Audience education is similar to taste cultivation which mainly aims at existing audiences, but it tries to use some methods (such as experience sharing sessions and symposia) to improve the current audience's understanding and enjoyment of the art form they are used to. While outreach and extended marketing focus on how to increase audience attendance, audience education focuses more on the quality of the audience experience. This does not directly drive the immediate expansion of the market but is long-term oriented: a good audience experience encourages the core audience to consume more frequently.

In summary, the current definition and origin of the term audience development suggest its four distinct aspects: finance, art, society, and education. The benefits of audience development include promoting the development of the art industry and providing greater financial security, increasing artistic opportunities, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting personal development and realisation (Kawashima,2000, p.10).

7. Understanding Audience Motivation

Bordieu (1984) pointed out that class is habitus. This habitus includes the way of thinking/behaviour, body habit, taste, and influenced by the growing environment (family and education). The class can be divided into high class and low

class. High class refers to people who have high education, economic and social capital, and strong attraction to “high culture” (such as theatre and ballet). By contrast, low class refers to people who are deprived of these capitals and attracted to target mass culture (such as Jazz and Pop). Therefore, Bourdieu believed that the audience's choice of art form is related to their educational level. In 1995, Bergadaà and Nyeck (1995, p. 41) inferred four types of motivation to participate in theatre activities: escapism and entertainment; edutainment; personal enrichment; and social hedonism. These motives correspond to namely hedonism, social conformism, personal development and communal pleasure. In addition, audience motivation is divided into two distinct types: intellectual stimulation and sensory experience. Bergadaà and Nyeck then concluded that the motivation for theatre attendance was driven by the desire to satisfy deep-set values. In addition, some other scholarly works also sought to explain the motivation for theatre attendance from different angles.

Hume, Mort and Winzar's (2007, p. 135) research explored performing arts might challenge more traditional service marketing and management theory. The authors believed that the audience's re-consumption was driven by value, service quality and customer satisfaction. Also, Unger and Kernan (1983, p. 381) argued that the most common motivation for leisure experiences was pleasure and escapism. They believed that the motivation for attendance was simple, because they can get a novel experience and temporarily escape from real world by participating in art activities. This result is supported by Slater (2007, p. 160), whose research on the motivation of museums and galleries consumers also revealed that escapism was the core motivation instead of learning. In the fields of sociology and leisure studies, people are increasingly aware of the importance of art to the community and social participation. Nicholson and Pierce (2001, p. 410) listed “enhanced socialisation” as one of the important motivations for participating in artistic activities. Art activities as a whole is human society in a nutshell. Participants enhance their social presence and sense of responsibility by attending this “mini” society. Also, Walmsley's (2011, p. 11) study shows that the respondents’ main motivation was the pursuit of emotional experience and impact. Specifically, emotional experience refers to the fact that one criterion for people to judge a good theatre is to see if it “touches the emotional heartstring”, which may be related to the audience's experience. Actually, audience may want to be challenged. Many interviewees said that they want to be challenged in the senses of art, emotion, intelligence and morality, because theatre gives the audience a space to imagine, reflect on some problems that may not be easily thought of in real life, and learn life reasons (Walmsley, 2011, p. 12).

8. Conclusion

This review offers a thorough examination of the complex interplay between audiences and theatre performances, focusing on the multidimensional aspects of audience experience, including knowledge, risk, authenticity, and collective engagement. It explores the key factors shaping audience perceptions and motivations, illustrating how theatre generates profound emotional, intellectual, and social impacts. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of strategic audience development through initiatives such as outreach, targeted marketing, education, and taste cultivation, addressing contemporary challenges in the cultural landscape.

Through integrating these insights, the review emphasises theatre's critical role in enriching cultural value, fostering societal cohesion and meeting the evolving expectations of diverse audience demographics.

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