

Why people go to the theatre: a qualitative study of audience motivation

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Abstract

Theatre is a complicated pastime, bridging the fields of arts and leisure and the drivers of aesthetics, hedonics, emotions, education and entertainment, to name but a few. This complexity perhaps partly explains the persistent lack of insight that we possess into audiences' motivations for going to the theatre.

Pincus (2004) rightly claims that quantitative research has failed to provide a true synthesis of motivation; and according to Getz (2007), how people describe their experience of events still remains a mystery. Some insight can be gleaned from recent research into the motives of museum and gallery visitors and event-goers as well as from impact analysis of arts and cultural events. But the complex motivations of theatre audiences remain unclear and this field of research has remained both niche and predominantly quantitative in its approach.

This primary aim of this paper is therefore to explore the fundamental drivers behind people's decision to go to the theatre. The paper achieves this through a comprehensive qualitative study of theatre-going, which fills a significant gap in the literature on audience motivation. The methods employed comprise a combination of qualitative techniques, including responsive interviews and participant observation. In total, 40 semi-structured depth interviews were conducted at Melbourne Theatre Company and West Yorkshire Playhouse with participants ranging from 17 to 77 years old.

The research found that the key motivating factor for respondents was the pursuit of emotional experiences and impact. This contests previous findings in other arts and leisure sectors, which prioritised escapism, learning, enhanced socialisation and fun. In this study, escapism was the second most motivating factor, followed closely by edutainment. Theatre producers and marketers should therefore acknowledge the fact that audiences expect theatre to provide them with a challenging escape from their daily lives and not shy away from programming demanding work and selling it on its merits

The paper concludes that motivation should be regarded as a construct determined by a complex combination of individually varying drivers and recommends that theatre organisations invest time and money in customised motivational segmentation.

Key words: audience motivation; motivational segmentation; theatre-going; arts & heritage marketing; qualitative analysis.

Author biography

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Introduction

Theatre is a complicated pastime, bridging the fields of arts and leisure and the drivers of aesthetics, hedonics, emotions, education and entertainment, to name but a few. As Bourdieu notes, theatre tends to reaffirm or challenge accepted cultural norms and values, dividing characters on the stage and audiences and social classes off it (Bourdieu, 1986). Theatre is also “people oriented, intangible and perishable” (Hume et al., 2007, p.136). These inherent qualities and complexities perhaps partly explain the persistent lack of insight that we possess into audiences’ motivations for going to the theatre.

Pincus (2004) rightly claims that quantitative research has failed to provide a true synthesis of motivation; and according to Getz (2007), how people describe their experience of events still remains a mystery. Recent literature on the drivers and motivations of event-goers, supported by impact analysis of arts and cultural events, has shed some light on the benefits of cultural and leisure experiences. But the complex motivations of theatre audiences remain unclear; and while some insight can be gleaned from recent research into the motives and values of museum and gallery visitors, this field of research has remained both niche and predominantly quantitative in its approach.

This paper explores why people go to the theatre. It reviews the existing research on audience motivation from the fields of arts, events, leisure, sociology and consumer behaviour, and aims to fill a significant gap in the literature on audience motivation through a comprehensive qualitative study of theatre-going.

Understanding audience motivation

The most comprehensive qualitative study into audience motivation dates back to 1995, when Bergadaà and Nyeck undertook a comparative survey of the underlying motivations of theatre-goers and theatre makers. In terms of audience motivation, Bergadaà and Nyeck (1995) extrapolated four motivational typologies for theatre-going: escapism / entertainment, edutainment, personal enrichment and social hedonism. They isolated underlying values behind these respective motivations, namely hedonism, social conformism, personal development and communal pleasure. Furthermore, they separated theatre-goers into two distinct camps: those who seek intellectual stimulation and those who prefer a sensory experience.

Research in the museum sector has also focused on values, arguing that values provide a deeper insight into motivations because they are “deep-seated and transcendent” (Thyne, 2001, p.120). But this approach seems to circumvent the reality that people with similar values can be driven by different motivations on different occasions; and even among proponents of values research, there is a clear lack of consensus about how they can most effectively be measured. One popular approach is laddering, whereby respondents’ values are mapped hierarchically through probes, which delve behind their actions and attitudes to find core motives or values (Thyne, 2001). When applied to museums, Thyne’s laddering technique revealed that visitors’ most prevalent goal was to spend quality time with friends and family. But as she acknowledges herself, someone can visit a museum to fulfil several different needs and different people can engage in the same activity for a variety of reasons. Slater (2007, p.160) goes even further, arguing that people actively seek out leisure and cultural experiences that will “fulfil multiple motivations”.

Bergadaà and Nyeck's work confirmed earlier research, which also found that the most cited motivations for a leisure experience were pleasure and escapism (Unger and Kernan, 1983). This finding is supported by Slater (2007), whose research into the motivations of visitors to art galleries also revealed escapism as the core motivator, challenging the widely acknowledged view in the museums and galleries sectors that learning was the primary motivation. But it is contested by other research into consumer behaviour in arts and culture, which delineates shared experience and social engagement as dominant motivators (Arai and Pedlar, 2003; Bourgeon-Renault, 2000). This predominant focus on the escapist and entertainment value of the arts and leisure experience is also challenged by Rojek (2000), who supports the view that many people are increasingly seeking more challenging and socially engaged leisure activities.

Hume et al (2007, p.135) acknowledge the suggestion that "in an experiential setting a complex anthology of predictors including the need for affect and goal directed emotional attainment must be considered". But their own qualitative research found on the contrary that value-for-money and value-for-time were the main determinants of satisfaction and that only a small proportion of participants rated emotional experience as crucial to their overall satisfaction, with many participants focusing more on the service-related elements of the overall product offering.

It has been suggested that a leisure experience can be evaluated on the following criteria: anatomy (nature, location and duration of the event); moods, emotions and feelings; involvement; cognitive engagement (ideas, beliefs and meanings); sense of freedom and control (Getz, 2007). These components, which combine to shape and define a leisure or cultural experience, are based largely on motivation theory. The most iconic representation of motivation lies in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. The highest of these is self-fulfilment or self-actualisation, and the literature on audience motivation is replete with references to participants' desire to fulfil this highest echelon of their needs. Recent consumer behaviour research in the field of arts and leisure supports this hypothesis, identifying consumers' tendency towards self-congruence in selecting products which reflect their ideal self-image (Ouellet et al., 2008; Govers and Schoormans, 2005).

Another significant body of research also draws on Maslow's hierarchy, adapting it to represent the findings of dozens of focus groups and extensive quantitative research on why people visit galleries and museums in the UK. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2007) identify four key drivers of attendance starting with social drivers at the bottom of the ladder, followed by intellectual and then emotional drivers. At the top of the hierarchy lie spiritual drivers. Unlike previous research, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre discern key differences in motivations between museums and art galleries. They have also quantified visitor motivation, finding that galleries achieve a deeper engagement, with 15% of their visitors attending for spiritual reasons. This compares with just 3% for museums. Almost half of all museum visits are apparently socially driven, compared with 30% for art galleries. For both museums and galleries, they found that just over a third of visits are driven by intellectual motives while between 11 and 14% attend for emotional stimulation. The emergence of the spiritual driver supports previous work on "reverential" motivation, which argued that museum and gallery visitors seek an escape from their everyday lives in places of fantasy and peace (Slater, 2007). It also echoes Turner's description of "sacred space and time" (Turner, 1982, p.24).

The concept of the experience economy was famously elucidated by Pine and Gilmore (1999) to describe the new environment of customer focus where “experiences are a fourth economic offering, as distinct from services as services are from goods”. Like the Henley Centre (2000), Pine and Gilmore contend that cash-rich, time-poor consumers are increasingly seeking ‘perfect moments’ in their increasingly sparse leisure time. Developing their thesis that successful products must also be memorable and meaningful experiences, Pine and Gilmore highlight the need to enrich the consumer experience, evoking the concept of the “sweet spot” to denote the holy grail of the experiential product, the “distinctive place” where the realms of aesthetics, escapism, education and entertainment overlap (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p.43).

There is some interesting consensus in the literature regarding the process and psychology of cultural consumption, which is often divided into three stages. In his analysis of rituals, van Gennep identifies these stages as pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. Turner (1969) links this concept of liminality with a detached and ritualistic state of being. He argues that in this state of detachment, participants are relaxed, removed from their everyday identities and therefore more open to suggestion. Turner collectivises this state in the concept of ‘communitas’, a shared state of liminality which delivers communal experience and meaning.

Brown and Novak’s (2007) research into the intrinsic impacts of live performances also culminates in the delineation of a three-stage process, namely: Anticipation » Captivation » Intrinsic Impacts. Their model is based on extensive primary research, which indicates that the single best predictor of captivation is positive expectation or a “readiness-to-receive” (Brown and Novak, 2007, pp.10-11). This finding is supported by Pitts’ (2005) qualitative research of a chamber music festival, which demonstrates how audiences’ anticipation can be enhanced by pre-show activities such as introductory talks, which set the scene, provide a context and create a sense of empathy between the performers and the spectators, drawing them into the action and opening up the “communication loop” (Ibid., p. 260).

Brown and Novak (2007, p. 11) found that captivation correlates most highly with satisfaction and conclude therefore that it represents the holy grail of the producer or programmer, the very “lynchpin of impact” idealised in “the state of consciousness described by Csikszentmihlyi’s as ‘Flow’”. The concept of Flow is of vital importance here, as it encapsulates audiences’ often expressed desire to be “lost in the moment” or to “lose track of time”, thus expressing in one single term the complex motivations of escapism, liminality and transformation.

McCarthy et al’s (2004) *Gifts of the Muse* aimed to reframe the debate on the benefits of the arts. It achieved this by reviewing the totality of arts-related benefits, illustrating the relationship between private and public benefits and dichotomising them into intrinsic and instrumental benefits. It isolated pleasure, captivation, empathy, cognitive growth, communal meaning and the creation of social bonds as the main intrinsic benefits.

In the fields of sociology and leisure theory, there is also an increasing awareness of the importance of the arts to community and social engagement. Nicholson and Pearce (2001, p. 460) list “enhanced socialization” as a benefit of cultural events and at the heart of this philosophy is Borgmann’s notion of “focal practices – those pursuits which bring an engagement of mind and body and a centring power – and the way in which such practices create shared meaning and communities of celebration” (Arai and Pedlar, 2003, p. 185).

Cultural and social capital is another important theme in the literature. As Bourdieu (1986) points out, theatre can be (and has been) almost hijacked by certain groups to reinforce their social standing. But Brown (2006, p. 20) adopts a more collective, humanistic position, defining social capital as “the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values that bind human networks into communities”. Brown proposes an extended version of McCarthy et al’s framework, aimed at providing an “architecture of value” to visually articulate the arts experience (Brown, 2006, p.19). This value architecture maps a range of arts benefits by value cluster and Brown divides these clusters as follows: imprint of the arts experience; personal development; human interaction; communal meaning; and economic and social benefits. This enhanced model fills some of its predecessor’s gaps, including aesthetic growth, self-actualisation and wellbeing. It also includes “interpersonal needs”, which Getz (1991, p. 85) defines as “expressions of community and national identity”.

But these frameworks fail to demonstrate any clear connection between benefits and motivation, and while they point towards some possible motivations for theatre attendance, they fail to provide any rigorous insight. In the field of consumer behaviour, any framework runs the risk of being reductive; and because these frameworks are based on secondary research, they lack the depth, authenticity and verisimilitude of a qualitative survey of audiences.

Methods

According to Rubin & Rubin (2005, p.242): “Qualitative work emphasises nuanced, context-dependent analysis that almost by definition precludes a standardised and uniform approach.” As the primary aim of this study was to delve into the overt and hidden motivations of theatre-goers, a deeply qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate option. Following ethnographic principles, the study took an iterative-inductive approach. So instead of testing pre-determined, fixed hypotheses, theories were allowed to emerge as the research progressed, albeit from an informed context and rationale.

The guiding principles of the research methodology were borrowed from the philosophies and practices of ethnography, grounded theory and guided introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). O’Reilly (2005, p.127) has described ethnographic fieldwork as “one long conversation with someone you are fascinated with” and Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.14) have defined depth interviews as “a window on a time and on a social world that is experienced one person at a time”. So the interviews were conducted from an “emic” perspective to allow the participants’ voices to emerge (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). The methods employed comprised a combination of qualitative techniques, including responsive interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and participant observation.

Sampling took place as follows. To counter any cultural bias and specificity and to enable any cultural, artistic or organisational differences to emerge, it was decided to conduct the research both in the UK and in Australia, so two comparable organisations were selected: Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP). Participants at both theatres were essentially self-selecting: at MTC, the research project was announced to subscribers at two post-show discussions, following which a direct appeal was made for volunteers. Contact details were collected at the end of the discussions and volunteers were then contacted to set up an interview. At WYP,

all online bookers for two of the season's main productions, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Death of a Salesman*, were emailed with identical information about the project and a similar appeal for assistance. Around thirty responses came from each of these appeals and just over half of these responses were converted into actual interviews.

The aim of this sampling was to attract participants who were highly theatre-literate and accustomed to sharing their views. This worked better at MTC, whose successful subscription model encourages frequent attendance and a strong culture of post-show discussion. The intention at WYP was to be more embedded in specific productions. This approach succeeded in attracting a more diverse population and enabled a comparative analysis of theatre-goers and theatre-makers. Both methods have their strengths and weaknesses, but in this study, the discrepancies between them limit the validity of direct comparisons between the samples.

The research at MTC comprised sixteen depth interviews with audience members plus three interviews with artistic, producing and marketing staff and observations of two post-show discussions. At WYP, a further sixteen depth interviews were carried out with theatre-goers. The post-show discussion of *Death of a Salesman* was again observed and documented, and an additional five interviews with artistic, producing and marketing staff took place. These included depth interviews with the directors of the two productions in question – the aim here being to compare motivations between theatre-makers choosing to direct a particular play and audience members choosing to see it. There is also an acknowledged methodological gap in the literature in that the vast majority of research to date has sampled either exclusively from the artist/producer population or from the audience/consumer groups (Bergadaà and Nyeck, 1995). In both venues, interviews were conducted until a point of saturation, where existing theories were being reconfirmed and new theories were ceasing to emerge (Arnould and Price, 1993).

In total, 40 semi-structured, open-ended depth interviews were conducted with participants ranging in age from 17 to 77 years. For the audience interviews, 11 men and 21 women were interviewed. The main research questions were as follows:

1. Why do you go to the theatre?
2. What do you hope to get from the experience?
3. How do you choose what plays to go and see?
4. How do you judge a good play, production or performance?
5. What do you do before and after seeing a play?

These questions were by probes and follow-ups to obtain the necessary detail, depth and “thick description” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.13).

Interviews averaged just over one hour each and detailed transcription notes were taken during every interview and during each observation of a post-show discussion, which resulted in over 50 hours of rich qualitative data. This data was then processed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, which facilitated the natural emergence of the key themes and concepts that will be discussed in the following section. The use of qualitative software assisted in reorganising the data and in presenting it in different ways. This process encouraged a degree of distance from the original data, which in turn supported researcher reflexivity and the emergence of “an etic voice that explicates deeper cultural meanings” (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p.352).

Findings

The key motivating factor for respondents was the pursuit of emotional experiences and impact. In the words of one participant: “One of the motivators of seeing something is getting that stripped back emotional response – it’s not the content or how the craft’s delivered.” There was generally a clear preference for plays dissecting human behaviour and relationships: families, obsession, infidelity, angst, “entanglement” and revenge were all mentioned in this context. The vast majority of respondents talked at some length about their emotional response to theatre: their descriptions of their best and formative experiences were littered with epithets such as “tense”, “moving”, “harrowing” and “powerful”.

True and authentic performances were essential determinants of a positive experience; and conversely, unbelievable portrayals of characters were often cited as audiences’ most negative experiences in the auditorium. One respondent admitted to judging a good play by whether it “hit the emotional chord” and several people confessed to seeking, or even needing, “emotional release” or an “emotional hit”. There was an apparent link with empathy here, which transpired as a precondition of emotion, with one respondent defining a transformative play as one which “makes you feel some real affinity with the person on stage”.

The predominant significance of emotional motivation was also illustrated by audience observation and behaviour and by questions posed during post-show discussions. Interestingly, it also reflected theatre-makers’ stated intentions of having an emotional impact on their audiences. For example, Sarah Esdaile, who directed Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, stated one of her major aims as “achieving emotional impact” and believed she could achieve this by being “truthful” and “detached”. To maximise emotional impact, Sarah relied on casting and on “setting up fertile soil for emotion to emanate”. Sarah’s self-declared aim was to “make grown men cry” and from an observer’s perspective, this aim was fully achieved, as evidenced by audiences’ physical reactions at the end of the play and by their post-show comments about how they felt during certain scenes.

Participants’ descriptions of their post-show behaviour (or post-liminal activity) added further weight to the conclusion that theatre-goers are primarily motivated by emotional impact. Over a third of respondents kept tickets, brochures or programmes. While one kept theatre tickets in a dedicated “experience box”, others had collected memorabilia from hundreds of productions over many years, with a minority even displaying their collections permanently in their homes.

The second most motivating factor was escapism. Many participants spontaneously talked about getting away from the everyday to experience something new. One respondent even suggested that this was the whole point: “[Theatre is] all about leaving your existence at the door and engaging in a new, novel experience”. Wives and mothers, in particular, spoke of escaping into a place where they had nothing or no-one else to worry about. One said she particularly enjoyed theatre after a bad day at work as it helped her to “switch off” and provided “a detachment from real life”. Another confessed: “It’s a relief to be taken out of the reality of life for a while.”

There was solid evidence of the pre-liminal behaviour discussed in the literature, with most participants declaring their eager anticipation of going to the theatre well in advance of the performance. For one woman, going to see a show is “like opening a

present on Christmas day – you may have sneaked a peak before it went under the tree.” A minority of respondents consciously strove to get into the right frame of mind before a performance. One avid theatre-goer described meditating for two minutes beforehand; another detailed her escapism as follows: “All day I’ve been aware I’ve been going to the theatre tonight. I don’t take anything in with me; I leave it all at the door. It’s my time. I walk in; at the end I walk out and switch on my mobile. I immerse myself... I can’t have a busy mind.”

This sheer, almost selfish, determination to escape from the real world came up time and again in interviews with the most committed theatre-goers, and it was invariably linked to their desire to maximise the emotional impact of the experience. There were also many references to Flow, with respondents variably describing themselves as “immersed”, “mesmerised”, “enthralled” and “getting lost in (or “transported to”) another world”. Flow was a cherished aspiration of many theatre-goers, associated by them implicitly with the purest form of escapism.

Edutainment was the next most significant motivator. Many interviewees spoke about wanting to be challenged artistically, emotionally, intellectually and ethically, using words such as “uncomfortable”, “dangerous” and “risky”. When asked to describe their theatre highlights, most respondents chose challenging plays such as *Blackbird* and *Medea*. One arts worker chose a site-specific play about women in an asylum, where the female audience members were made to sit on the floor, admitting that “it wasn’t a nice night out at the theatre”; and a young student summed up her theatre preferences as follows: “I’m a fan of shows you have to work hard at ... deep, dark stuff that challenges the audience.” This type of theatre-goer challenges findings in other sectors that leisure seekers’ primary motivation is pleasure.

Many people spoke of their desire to broaden their world-view through theatre. One middle-aged lecturer talked animatedly about her formative experiences, reflecting that “[theatre] showed me that there was a bigger world out there ... a world of imagination and exotica, and I wanted to experience it. It introduced me to this fantasy world, to people who didn’t form the norm of my life.” In a similar vein, one young man crystallised his motivation as follows: “The drive is to relate to other people and their stories in novel situations in other contexts and countries.” For these theatre-goers, the genre clearly broadens their horizons and opens up their minds.

The ritualistic element of going to the theatre was mentioned time and again, either specifically or in passing. One man in his late twenties vividly recalled “being introduced to the ritual of performance ... from getting the tickets ready to finding your seat, the hushed conversation, the whole pre-theatre thing”. He now makes a conscious effort to go and see shows when he’s travelling. He found his motivation for this too complex to explain, but believes that he is “seeking a sense of familiarity – the ritual is still the same [...] quite centring and humbling”. An important part of this ritual, for him and many others, appears to be anticipation of going in the first place, as evidenced by the ritualistic pre-performance behaviour detailed above. Another aspect is getting dressed up for a night out, which several women referred to, admitting that they even varied their attire according to the specific venue and genre. But the biggest commonality in ritual was the unanimous delight in applause, which one participant referred to as an “interactive tribute” to the cast.

A small minority of participants mentioned physical or sensual response. One respondent evoked her “sense of trepidation” and “tingle down the spine moments”.

Others related that they responded more viscerally, recalling “gut, emotion-based feelings” and expressing a liking for “raw” and “earthy” plays. Another said that she often didn’t contribute to post-show discussions because she was “still articulating: I feel plays physically first”. The chemistry created by actors and the wider audience was also mentioned: when describing a theatre highlight, for example, one woman declared that “the air was crackling” and several others spoke about the “buzz”. However, when this theme was probed in subsequent interviews, many participants reported that they responded more physically to music (especially opera), feeling that theatre elicited a more emotional or intellectual response.

There was also a high engagement with actors and with the craft of acting itself. This was particularly the case in Melbourne, perhaps because MTC markets heavily on actor recognition and because the smaller Australian industry means that film and television actors are more often seen on stage. At MTC, some of the older participants spoke of their pleasure in seeing actors’ careers develop over the years and betrayed a sense of ownership of the actors and directors they support. One lady spoke of a “humbling sense of privilege” of being in the presence of actors, both during their performances and in post-show discussions. A psychiatric nurse confessed to flying round the world to see and meet famous actors and collect their autographs, while a male teacher spoke of standing opposite the stage door to watch the actors leave the theatre on the last night of a production.

There was a broad range of other smaller motivating factors, ranging from simple entertainment to a deep desire to reflect. There is no scope here for a full discussion of them all, but Table 2 lists every motivating factor that was mentioned in the interviews, alongside their corresponding deeper drivers, thus adapting the existing Morris Hargreaves McIntyre matrix and transposing it to theatre.

Table 2: Needs, motivations and drivers matrix for theatre audiences.

Audiences’ Needs & Motivations	Driver & Type of engagement
Feeling part of a special community of interest Ritual Escapism & immersion Being ethically challenged Reflection Access to creative people & process Aesthetic pleasure & development Passing on a legacy to children/grandchildren Quality me-time	Spiritual
Tingle-down-the-spine moments Having a visceral response Feeling the chemistry and buzz	Sensual
Empathy Getting an emotional hit Being moved Being drawn in and engaged Mimesis & personal relevance Exploring human relationships	Emotional

Nostalgia Exploring or celebrating cultural identity Storytelling	
Developing world view Being intellectually challenged Self-improvement Learning about history or current issues Stimulating others	Intellectual
Enhanced socialisation Quality time with family and friends Partaking in a live experience Entertainment; a “good night out” Dinner with a show Comfortable seating & good sight lines Good customer service & venue facilities	Social

Discussion and implications

In the course of these interviews, emotion emerged as a powerful drug which keeps theatre audiences coming back for more. At one end of the spectrum, this led to addictive and obsessive behaviour, with some participants admitting to following shows around the world and others spending almost all their spare time and money on theatre. This is good and bad news for theatre companies: while on the one hand they clearly need to capitalise on emotion-based marketing, on the other, they have an ethical duty to consider and manage the effects of their products on their audiences.

Given that escapism and edutainment were common motivators, producers and marketers should take on board the fact that audiences generally expect theatre to provide them with a challenging escape from their daily lives. This acknowledgement could open up all sorts of opportunities to deepen the audience experience through recognised techniques such as Imagineering, which could also heighten the popular rituals associated with theatre. Organisations should also recognise the fact the audiences often want far more than simple entertainment and not shy away from programming demanding or visceral work and selling it on its merits. And creative teams could maximise sensual impact through show-stopping moments and the contrived use of set design, multi-media, music, sound and lighting to hit Pine and Gilmore’s “sweet spot”.

There was almost unanimous agreement that post-show discussions enhanced the audience experience by providing a forum to share ideas, explain complexities, and provide insight into the creative process and a rare connection to actors and creative teams. This supports Pitts’ theory of the ‘communication loop’, which was shown to create a sense of empathy between audiences and performers. It also bears out cognitive dissonance theory, which holds that people are “universally motivated to validate their opinions and abilities relative to those held by others” (Pincus, 2004, p.379). Indeed, this held true for the act of theatre-going itself, with many participants discussing their need to see family and social dramas, to challenge their world-views and to learn more about the wider world.

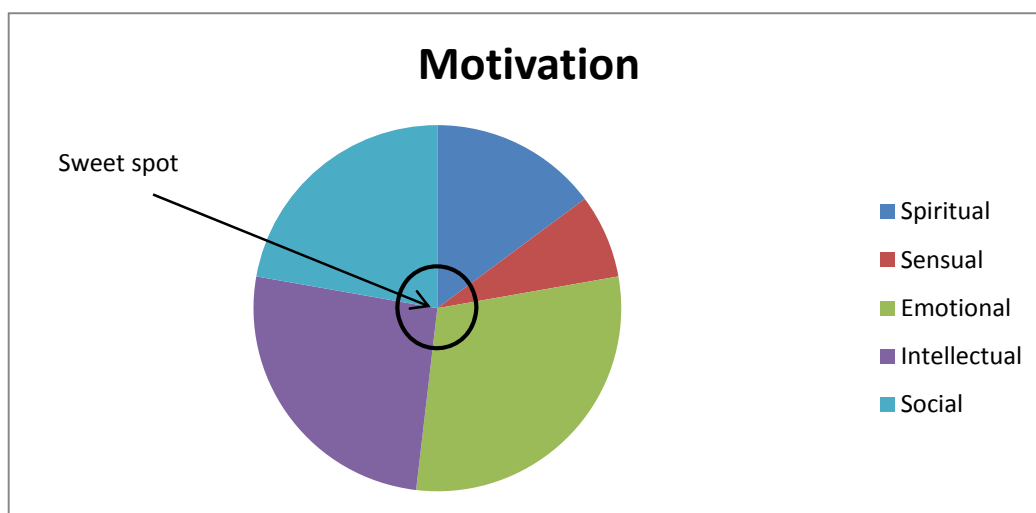
Sharing, reflecting, dissecting and analysing was very important to most respondents, but notably more so to women and to certain typologies of theatre-goer. There was

limited evidence of reviews forming an important role in the post-liminal zone, and the pursuit of self-congruence and collective experience championed in the literature was less apparent amongst respondents here. Although most respondents said they enjoyed being part of an audience, and a small minority were highly motivated by the notion of shared experience – “there is something beautiful about being in the room with other people, on stage and all a round you” – most interviewees were at best ambivalent and at worst dismissive of their fellow theatre-goers, regarding them as distractions which forced them to “zone-out”. Within this sample, theatre generally came across as a self-indulgent pursuit, an intimate personal pleasure. Focus groups often tend to highlight the collective experience, but this more personalised method seemed to elicit a more honest, self-focussed response.

The preceding discussion highlights the need to regard motivation as a construct determined by a complex combination of individually varying drivers. Unlike the Humanistic and laddering approaches, which place value judgements on motivations by ordering them into a hierarchy, this perspective would regard motivation as inherently subjective and would ultimately culminate in personal motivation charts for every individual theatre-goer. This approach would reflect the move towards personal customisation which is facilitated by increasingly sophisticated CRM software. It would also acknowledge Slater’s (2007) finding that people often want to fulfil multiple motivations simultaneously.

But in the meantime, it may be more feasible to segment audiences by their dominant motivating driver. This could be determined through audience questionnaires which could measure key drivers by responses to questions based on the individual motivators outlined above. This could in turn result in a personal motivation chart, as illustrated in Figure 1. This novel way of considering and illustrating motivation also ties in with Pine and Gilmore’s concept of the “sweet spot” in that the pinnacle of each individual’s theatrical experience would lie in the intersecting core of the five key drivers.

Figure 1: Example of an audience motivation chart



The overriding message that echoed consistently through the interviews was the assertion that theatre is live, dynamic and about people. In the words of one respondent: “It’s done live, in front of you, every night, and you’re part of it, you’re part of the experience with the actors, dancers, orchestras, whoever it is.” The management

implications here are that marketers should highlight in their imagery and copy the interactive privilege of watching actors perform, and facilitate deeper relationship building opportunities with actors and creative teams.

Conclusion

This research has clearly indicated the overriding importance of emotional impact in audiences' motivations to go and see a play. In so doing, it has contested previous findings in other arts and leisure sectors, which prioritised escapism, learning, enhanced socialisation and fun. But it has supported much of the existing literature in the field, perhaps most evidently the work of Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, Slater and Rojek. The research has also highlighted the thick description and rich data that can be generated by qualitative methods such as responsive depth interviews and audience observation.

Although the sample size was relatively large for a study of this nature, the limitations of this research include the fact that a sample size of 40 can never be representative of a general theatre audience; qualitative research seeks depth rather than breadth. Future research could therefore add to the debate by testing these new key drivers and their derivative motivating factors through a large scale quantitative study. Further work should also be carried out to investigate the inter-relationships between motivations, to elucidate the emerging theory on sensual and spiritual drivers and to study the relationship between motivation and impact. Researchers should also continue to explore the benefits to arts and leisure organisations of segmenting their audiences through motivational segmentation. For as Pincus notes, "effective organisations will have an increasing need, and appetite, for the complexity of motivational, emotional, attributional and behavioural data" (Pincus, 2004, p.386).

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