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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.

Pincus (2004) claims that quantitative research has failed to provide a true synthesis of motivation; and while some insight can be gleaned from recent research into the motives of event-goers and museum and gallery visitors, as well as from impact analysis of arts and cultural events, the complex motivations of theatre audiences remain unclear.

This paper therefore aims to explore the fundamental drivers behind theatre-going and to fill a gap in the literature on audience motivation. The paper achieves this through a comprehensive qualitative study of theatre-going at Melbourne Theatre Company and West Yorkshire Playhouse, which was carried out in 2010. The methods employed comprise a combination of qualitative techniques, including responsive depth interviews and participant observation.

The research finds that the key motivating factor for participants 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. The paper concludes that motivation should be regarded as a construct determined by a complex combination of drivers and recommends that theatre organisations invest time and money in customised motivational segmentation and in enhancing the audience experience.

Key words: audience motivation; consumer behaviour; arts marketing; theatre-going; motivational segmentation.

Author biography

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Ben holds an MBA from Surrey University's School of Management and a PhD in French Theatre from the University of Glasgow. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, an Artistic Assessor for Arts Council England, and an active member of the Academy of Marketing and the Arts Marketing Association. His research interests are related to the qualitative value and impact of theatre and the arts.

Why People Go to the Theatre: A Qualitative Study of Audience Motivation

Introduction

It has been argued that quantitative research has failed to provide a true synthesis of motivation because it fails to account for the “behavioural and emotional meaning of unmet needs” (Pincus 2004, p. 375). Recent literature on the drivers and motivations of event-goers (Getz 2007; Nicholson and Pearce 2001), supported by impact analysis of arts and cultural events (Brown and Novak 2007; White and Hede 2008), has shed some light on the benefits of arts and leisure experiences. But the complex motivations of theatre audiences remain unclear. While some insight can be gleaned from recent research into the motives and values of museum and gallery visitors (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2007; Slater 2007; Thyne 2001), this field of research has remained predominantly quantitative in its approach. While qualitative studies do exist (Thyne 2001; Carù and Cova 2006; Pitts 2005), they are predominantly exploratory in design and, with the exception of Bergadaà and Nyeck (1995), relate to art forms other than theatre.

This gap in the literature presents a problem for theatre marketers and managers because if they are not equipped with the research to help them understand why people engage with theatre, their marketing may fail to connect with their audiences and their sales may suffer accordingly. This paper will therefore explore why people go to the theatre and how theatre can fulfil their unmet needs.

Theatre is a complicated pastime, bridging the fields of arts and leisure and the drivers of aesthetics, hedonics, emotions, education and entertainment. Theatre is also “people oriented, intangible and perishable” (Hume et al. 2007, p. 136). These complex qualities make theatre a social, situational and experiential phenomenon rather than a fixed or tangible product, and this has led the methodology down a more anthropological route. This study will review the existing research on audience motivation from the fields of arts, events, leisure, sociology and consumer behaviour; it aims to fill a gap in the literature on audience motivation by providing a rich and 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 -makers. Having conducted depth interviews with fourteen regular theatre-goers and thirteen theatre-makers, they found that producers and consumers of theatre were connected in their motivations not by the product of theatre itself, but rather by shared cultural values based around a common regard for high or “legitimate” culture (Bergadaà and Nyeck 1995, p. 41; Bourdieu 1986). Bergadaà and Nyeck extrapolated four motivational typologies for theatre-going: escapism and entertainment; edutainment; personal enrichment; and social hedonism. They then isolated underlying values behind these respective motivations – namely hedonism, social conformism, personal development and communal pleasure. Furthermore, they separated theatre-goers into two distinct motivational typologies: intellectual stimulation and sensory experience.

Their research concluded that motivation behind making or attending theatre was ultimately driven by the desire to satisfy deep-set values, and the literature on satisfaction can therefore serve to illuminate the motivations behind arts attendance. Hume et al. (2007, p. 135) suggest 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.

Given the current lack of research in the field of theatre, the literature from other art forms has thus far provided invaluable insights into theatre motivation; and as arts marketing is emerging as a field of practice and research in its own right (Fillis 2011; Dennis et al. 2011), it is legitimate to review the literature from across the spectrum of the arts. Bergadaà and Nyeck's work confirmed earlier research into consumer behaviour, which 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) and Stebbins (2007), who support the view that many people are increasingly seeking more challenging and socially engaged leisure activities. In the fields of Sociology and Leisure Studies, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the arts to community and social engagement. For example, Nicholson and Pearce (2001, p. 460) list "enhanced socialization" as a motivation behind cultural participation. At the heart of this philosophy lies 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).

Research in the museum sector has focused more 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 circumvents the possibility that people with similar values can be driven by different motivations on different occasions (Slater 2007); and even among proponents of values research, there is a lack of consensus about how values 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 values or motives (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 cultural and leisure experiences that "fulfil multiple motivations".

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 are based largely on motivation theory, the most iconic representation of which appears in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. The highest of these needs is self-fulfilment or self-actualisation, and research into audience

motivation often reflects participants’ desire to fulfil this highest echelon of their needs. For example, recent research in the field of arts and leisure identifies 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 by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 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: social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. They map these against visitors’ stated needs and motivations and also against Maslow’s human needs, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Needs, motivations and drivers matrix.
Adapted from Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2007, p. 28).

Visitors’ Needs & Motives	Drivers & Type of engagement	Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs
Escapism Contemplation Stimulate creativity Aesthetic pleasure Awe and wonder	Spiritual	Self-actualisation Aesthetic
Being moved Personal relevance Experience the past Nostalgia Sense of cultural identity	Emotional	Cognitive / Esteem
Academic interest Hobby interest Self-improvement Stimulate children	Intellectual	
Social interaction Entertainment Seeing & doing Inclusion & welcome Access, comfort, warmth & welcome	Social	Social Safety, Physiology

The emergence of the spiritual driver here supports previous work on “reverential motivation”, which found 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, meaningful experiences, Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 43) also 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 & Gilmore (1999, p. 165) also highlight the transformational aspect of performative events in their description of the experience economy: “When you customize an experience you change the individual”. This idea is developed by Hover and van Mierlo (2006, quoted in Getz 2007, p. 181) who identify three levels of experience (basal, memorable and transforming), defining a transforming experience as one which affects “durable change on a behavioural or attitudinal level”. But as Belfiore and Bennett (2008, pp. 5-6) point out, claims regarding the transformative power of the arts are “extremely hard to substantiate” as “the idea of transformation is so complex that it is impossible to imagine how it might be reduced to a set of measurable attributes”. Although qualitative enquiry into motivation for arts attendance has moved beyond measuring constructs such as transformation, there remains scarce evidence of transformation in the literature, despite its increasing proliferation in arts organisations’ mission statements.

There is some 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 (1960) identifies these stages as pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal, and Turner (1969) links this concept of liminality with a “detached state of being associated with ritual”. He argues that in this state of detachment, participants are relaxed, removed from their everyday identities and therefore more open to suggestion. Brown and Novak’s (2007) research into the intrinsic impacts of live performances also culminates in the delineation of a three-stage process (anticipation » captivation » intrinsic impacts) and sheds further light on the relationship between motivation and satisfaction by unpacking the process of impact. Their model is based on an extensive quantitative study, which concluded that the single best predictor of captivation was positive expectation or a “readiness-to-receive” (ibid., pp. 10-11). This finding supports Pitts’ (2005) qualitative research of a chamber music festival, which demonstrated 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” (p. 260).

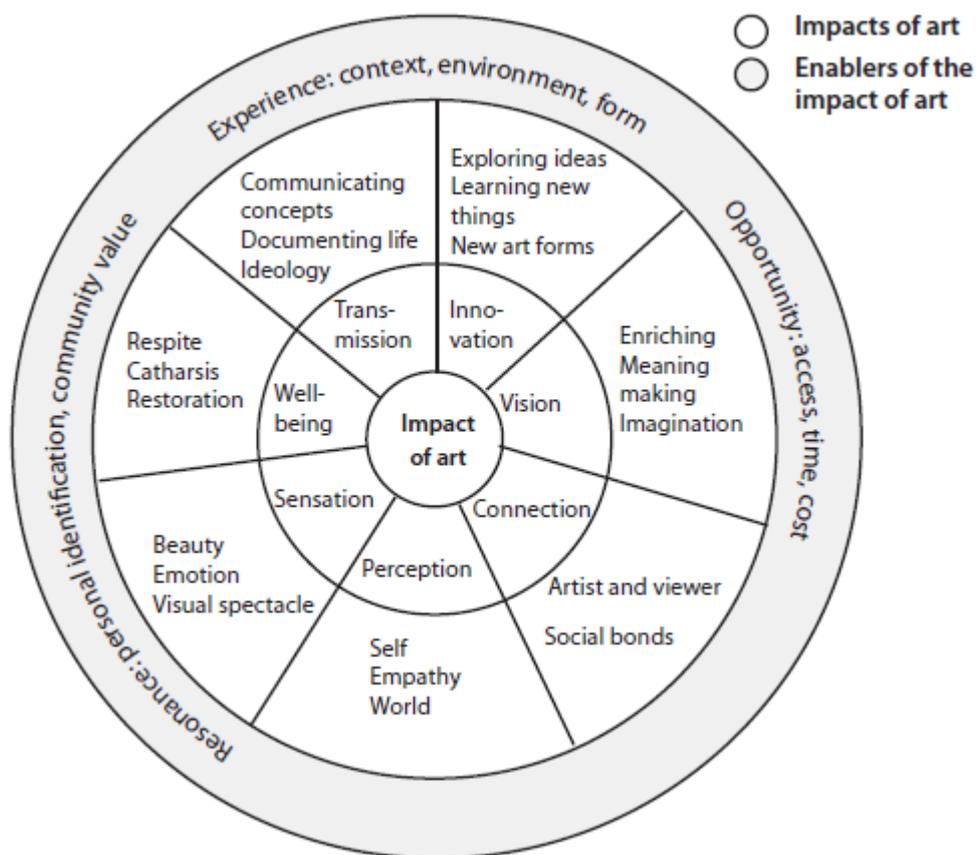
In Brown and Novak’s research (2007, p. 11), captivation correlates most highly with satisfaction and it therefore represents the holy grail of the producer or programmer, the very “lynchpin of impact” idealised in the state of consciousness which Csikszentmihlyi labels “Flow”. The concept of Flow is a significant one, 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.

The Benefits Approach to Motivation

In the past decade, there has been a revival of interest in the intrinsic benefits of the arts. At the forefront of this research was McCarthy et al.’s (2004) *Gifts of the Muse*, which aimed to reframe the debate on the benefits of the arts. It achieved this through secondary research by reviewing the totality of arts-related benefits, illustrating the relationship between private and public benefits and dichotomising them into intrinsic and instrumental benefits. The framework distinguished pleasure, captivation, empathy, cognitive growth, communal meaning and the creation of social bonds as the key intrinsic benefits. Brown (2006) developed this framework into a more comprehensive

“architecture of value”, which mapped a range of arts benefits into the following value clusters: imprint of the arts experience; personal development; human interaction; communal meaning; and economic and social benefits. White and Hede’s (2008) impact model marked a significant development in the literature by removing the traditional dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental benefits and by exploring the process of impact accrual. While previous frameworks were based on secondary research and divided benefits into discreet clusters, White and Hede’s model was based on a qualitative methodology of narrative enquiry, incorporating the fields of theatre and performance studies, aesthetics, ethics, hedonics and marketing. In terms of motivation, their model, illustrated in Figure 1, encapsulates Slater’s (2007) notion of multiple motivation fulfilment, depicting a complex wheel of possible motives for arts attendance.

Figure 1: Circumplex of preliminary impacts and enablers of the impact of art



Source: White and Hede (2008, p. 27)

But while the benefits approach points towards some possible motivations for theatre attendance, it fails to provide any rigorous insight into motivation as articulated by theatre-goers themselves. This is essentially because it attacks the research problem from the opposite end of the spectrum, considering ideal end benefits rather than reasons for engaging in the first place. In the field of consumer behaviour, any benefits framework runs the risk of being reductive and lacking the depth, authenticity and verisimilitude of a qualitative enquiry into motivation (Pincus 2004). By approaching the research question from a reflexive, situational angle (Oliver and Walmsley 2011), the forthcoming study aims to avoid these pitfalls.

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 motivations of theatre-goers (both overt and hidden), a deeply qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate option. Following the ethnographic principle of being led by the subjects of observation, 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” so the interviews were conducted from an “emic” perspective to allow participants’ voices to emerge (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). The methods employed comprised a combination of different qualitative techniques, including responsive interviews (Rubin and Rubin 2005) and participant observation, which took the form of the researcher observing theatre rehearsals, performances and post-show discussions. All participants gave written informed consent.

Sampling took place as follows. To counter cultural bias or 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 similar organisations were selected: Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP). The comparable size, producing remits and international profiles of the two companies enabled a comparative study; and the similar arts funding structure and shared Anglo-Saxon heritage of the two countries facilitated cultural comparison. MTC is the oldest professional theatre company in Australia and produces up to twelve productions each season. Its mission is “to produce classic and contemporary Australian and international theatre with style, passion and world class artistic excellence in order to entertain, challenge and enrich audiences in Melbourne, Victoria and Australia” (Melbourne Theatre Company 2010). WYP is one of the UK’s largest producing theatres. It produces up to sixteen productions every year in addition to presenting a broad touring programme. Its mission is “to demonstrate the power of theatre to change *people’s* lives by serving the communities in its region and maintaining an international profile for the quality of its work” (West Yorkshire Playhouse 2010). This mission reflects the claims in the literature for the transformative power of the arts.

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. So the sample population at MTC was on the whole more passionate about and used to analysing theatre. 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 populations.

The research at MTC comprised 16 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 18 depth interviews were carried out with theatre-goers. The post-show discussion of *Death of a Salesman* was observed and documented, and an additional five interviews with artistic, producing and marketing staff took place. These included 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. This approach represented an attempt to fill the acknowledged methodological gap in sampling from both the artist/producer population and from audience groups (Bergadaà and Nyeck 1995). In total, 42 semi-structured, open-ended depth interviews were conducted: eight with professional theatre workers and 34 with audience members, with participants ranging in age from 17 to 77 years. The socio-demographic profile of the audience participants is displayed in Table 2:

Table 2: Profile of audience participants.

Country of residence	Gender	Age	Education
UK =18	Male = 12	Under 20 = 1	School leaver = 10
Australia = 16	Female = 22	20-29 = 4	Degree = 16
		30-39 = 3	Higher degree = 8
		40-49 = 5	
		50-59 = 5	
		60-69 = 14	
		70-79 = 2	
Total = 34	Total = 34	Total =34	Total = 34

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

Interviews were all conducted by the same researcher and averaged just over one hour each. 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, anonymised 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 a young male MTC subscriber: “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, an “emotional release” or “hit”. A rich description of emotional motivation came from a female Music Enterprise Officer: “Theatre makes an ordinary day a more exciting day, a special event. I notice a difference in myself if I *haven’t been for a while. It’s a bit like an experience fix.*” There was an apparent link with empathy here, which transpired as a precondition of emotion. For example, a fifty-two-year-old manager from Leeds defined 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 observation of audience behaviour and by questions posed during post-show discussions. 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 reacted to 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 young woman 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 edutainment, which confirmed the perspective of Rojek (2000) and Stebbins (2007) that many leisure seekers want to be challenged, and reflected the presence of cognitive and aesthetic growth in the various benefits models (McCarthy et al. 2004; Brown 2006; White and Hede 2008). Indeed many interviewees declared a desire to be challenged artistically, emotionally, intellectually and ethically, using adjectives such as “uncomfortable”, “dangerous” and “risky” to describe their favourite plays. When asked to describe their theatre highlights, most respondents chose difficult, challenging plays such as David Harrower’s *Blackbird* and Euripides’ *Medea*. The Music Enterprise Officer from Leeds chose a site-specific play about women in an asylum, where the female audience members were made to sit on the floor, describing her experience in these terms: “It was so odd and extreme – it made it much more powerful and emotional because you were a little bit affronted that you *weren’t allowed a chair: it wasn’t a nice night out at the theatre*”. A young Australian 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. Indeed many respondents reflected the sentiment that theatre “gives you scope to think about something you might not in your everyday” and “teaches you life lessons”. On a more simple level, many participants at West Yorkshire Playhouse had chosen to see *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *Death of a Salesman* because they “felt they should” or knew that they were “classics”.

Many people communicated their desire to broaden their world-view through theatre. A fifty-eight-year-old Lecturer in Education talked animatedly about her formative experiences, reflecting: “[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, a young male educational policy advisor 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 audience members, theatre clearly broadens their horizons and opens up their minds.

Escapism was the next most significant motivator, reflecting the findings of Unger and Kernan (1983) and Slater (2007). Many participants spontaneously mentioned a desire to escape from the everyday and 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.*” Other women credited theatre with providing a rare opportunity to “reflect and get away from it all”. Men tended to discuss escapism more positively, in terms of fantasy and illusion. A retired school teacher, who has been going to MTC with his wife for over forty years, said he liked to “enter into a make-believe world”.

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 play 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, a forty-four-year-old consultant and MTC subscriber, described meditating for two minutes to “clear her mood” before a play because “*this is my experience and I’ve got to enjoy it*”, while the Lecturer in Education detailed her preparation 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. This finding reflects the growing acknowledgement of captivation in the literature and substantiates Belfiore and Bennett’s argument that “commitment and absorption” lie at the heart of the audience experience (2008, p. 97).

The ritualistic element of going to the theatre also featured frequently, confirming the theories of Turner (1982) and van Gennep (1960) and providing further insight into the audience appeal of theatricality. The educational policy advisor 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”. As an adult, 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 of the ritual emerged as getting dressed up for a night out. Several women referred to this ritual, admitting that they even varied their attire according to the specific venue and art form. But the biggest commonality in ritual was the unanimous delight in applause, which one participant referred to as an “interactive tribute” to the cast. These rich insights into the motivational influence of ritualism highlight the importance of the traditional, interactive and performative elements of theatre, which set the performing arts apart from other art forms.

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 respondents spoke of their pleasure in seeing actors’ careers develop over the years, betraying a sense of ownership of the actors and directors they support. One woman 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. The implications here are again that theatre is appreciated by audiences for its performative and interactive elements – in this case human rather than ritualistic. In the words of a semi-retired English teacher: “*Theatre is live: there’s an immediate chemistry between the audience and the actors on stage that’s tangible.*”

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 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 3 captures all the motivating factors mentioned in the interviews, alongside their corresponding deeper drivers, thus adapting Morris Hargreaves McIntyre’s existing matrix and transposing it to theatre. The table presents the full range of motivating factors and divides them into five key drivers, adding sensual engagement to the existing matrix to reflect the responses from theatre audiences. The matrix therefore provides a useful point of reference for future research in the performing arts.

Table 3: 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 Nostalgia Exploring or celebrating cultural identity Storytelling	Emotional
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 activities 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 and 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”.

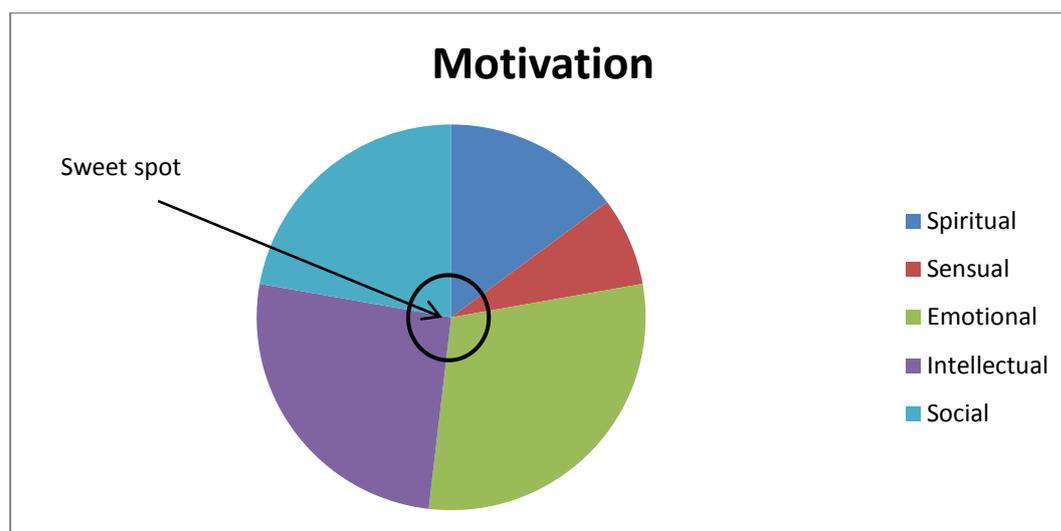
There was almost unanimous agreement that post-show discussions enhanced the audience experience by providing a forum to share ideas, explain complexities, and provide insight into the creative process and a rare connection to actors and creative teams. This supports Pitts’ theory of the “communication loop”, which was shown to create a sense of empathy between audiences and performers – a desire also expressed in these findings. 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. The implications for theatre managers and marketers are that post-show discussions could fruitfully be used to extend and deepen their audiences’ experience and engagement. Commercially, of course, this might increase the time spent in venues and money spent on augmented products, which in turn could help to develop customer loyalty.

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 around you” – most interviewees were at best ambivalent and at worst dismissive of their fellow theatre-goers, often 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 also acknowledge Slater’s (2007) finding that people often want to fulfil multiple motivations simultaneously. While this may strike terror into theatre marketers, it does reflect the move towards personal customisation, which is facilitated by increasingly sophisticated CRM software. But in the meantime, it may be more practicable 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 2. 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 2: Example of an audience motivation chart



The overriding message that echoed consistently throughout 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, both on and off the stage. This recommendation provides a timely reminder and insight into consumer behaviour generally – namely that despite the latest developments in creative technology, consumers are ultimately human beings who are essentially motivated by human interaction and insight.

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 this and 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. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre identified four drivers to arts attendance, including the emerging driver of spirituality; this study confirmed their research in the museums and galleries sector, extending its validity to theatre and adding a fifth driver of sensuality. Slater's insights into escapism, spirituality and multiple motivation fulfilment were all confirmed, and Rojek's observation that leisure seekers like to be challenged also found congruence with the respondents.

The research has also highlighted the 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 42 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 emerging 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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