

# **CONSUMPTION DRIVEN BY EXPERIENCE: EXAMINING THE THEATERGOERS' CONTINUUM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to conceptualize the motivational factors of theatergoers as an experiential consumer. In examining field notes and transcripts, the extent and intensity of an individual's exposure to theater across the lifespan seems to affect how far and to what extent the individual evolves as an avid theatergoer.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Early empirical research suggests that audiences for live theater comprise a narrow and elite portion of the American population. A review of over 200 audience studies in the performing arts found consistent evidence that those attending these events are better educated, higher in job status and income, and less likely to include minorities than the general population. In addition, these researchers found no evidence that this elitism in the performing arts is declining [2]. Although much of the empirical data in these studies focused on the socioeconomic status of theatergoers, little research has been undertaken to understand the underlying motivations that drive theatergoers to attend theater performances. Any study that attempts to draw conclusions about a consumer tribe that has limited appropriate historical data to draw from has some inherent challenges that other research projects may not. In that context, undertaking an investigation that strives to deepen insights into an unexplored potential consumer group, such as theatergoers, must be carefully designed [3]. The most direct application of the results of this type of study is that consumers can be more individually segmented within the broader entertainment or leisure activities consumption group.

## **BACKGROUND**

This study attempts to conceptualize the motivational factors and internal drivers of theatergoers as consumers. For theater, the consumption experience is an end in itself and serves as the primary benefit. The dominant benefit of experiential products, such as theater, is hedonic consumption. This hedonic consumption is driven by the feelings, emotions, and sensations experienced during product usage [4] [8]. Since the consumption of theater differs from consumption of other products, any study needs to be appropriately designed. Theater and other experiential products are so multi-dimensional they discourage the application of methods widely used in the case of simple utilitarian products [6] [7]. For this reason, quantitative techniques are sometimes not as useful initially, when depth of information is desired [5]. Andreasen and Belk [1] indicate that lifestyle, attitudes and developmental experiences are the most conceptually useful variables with which to understand consumer behavior regarding theater and other performing arts. This approach was followed by employing in-depth interviews and field observations to understand lifestyle, attitudes, and developmental experiences of theatergoers. This information was then used to derive theatergoers' underlying motivations.

## **METHOD**

In this study, several research assistants and I began by a search for the most efficient research methods to use in building on preliminary field visit observations to several theater productions months prior to beginning a more in-depth investigation. At that time, our effort was prompted by a mutual interest in two major Midwest theater communities, Minneapolis and Chicago. Our goal was simply to make as many observations as possible within the environment. During these visits, we had the opportunity to make superficial field observations and used the opportunity to initiate conversations with theater-goers at theater sites in these cities during performance breaks, and afterward at nearby clubs that appeared to be frequented by theater-goers. During this period, we were often able to speak with several people at once, acquiring information that we felt was similar to information that might be acquired during focus groups. As a result of these preliminary inquiries, our research team felt that we had a sufficient knowledge base of information to launch directly into in-depth, one-on-one interviews for this project.

The participants interviewed in-depth were recruited from audience members we encountered at six different performances, three in Minneapolis and three in Chicago. We arranged 24 interviews of 10 men and 14 women, ranging in age from 15-years-old to 57-years-old. There were a wide range of occupations and economic classes represented as well. Four of these interviews were conducted in a public restaurant/bar, 12 in a university office space, and eight in the respondents' homes. In spite of the knowledge base acquired in earlier months, we felt it was necessary to revisit the theater community environment to expand our naturalistic inquiry data in situ. With this goal in mind, we made two additional visits to the same theaters we had visited previously in Minneapolis and Chicago. All of the theaters visited charge a mid-range price for many of their performances. The rationale for this was that our earlier discussions with theatergoers suggested that the audiences attending these performances would encompass the broadest segment of theatergoers in the cities examined. While we would have preferred to be more inclusive of a wider range of theatrical performance venues, we were unable to do so as a result of limited financial resources and time constrictions. Further research that is more inclusive of these aspects might reveal deeper insights than we discovered through our investigation.

Our investigation of theatergoers in situ, however, began with field visits in which we arrived at least half an hour prior to performances. The purpose of this early arrival was to carefully observe audience members not only entering the theater, but also their mode of transportation to the theater, as well as whether they traveled alone, with one other person, or with a group of people. Further, we attempted to determine whether there was a tendency toward opposite-gender couples, same-gender couples or groups, or mixed gendered groups. Once inside the theater, we went into the performance area of the theater to carefully peruse the audience members, taking note of seating patterns, dress, age, and possible inter-connections between these factors. During performance breaks, we took note of interactions between those who came together and anyone who had not originally accompanied them to the performance. The major observation was that while there were many groups, couples, and even a few individuals who came alone, it appeared that more than half of those observed exchanged greetings with at least one other individual, couple, or group, who they did not arrive with. This observation led us to conclude that a significant number of the people attending these performances already appeared to be acquainted with each other, suggesting that this particular tribe might be a tight-knit community.

This phenomenon of familiarity with others within the consumer tribe was confirmed through our observations at nearby clubs where we saw attendees migrating to after performances. We followed several groups of theater-goers to make further observations at these post-performance activities and confirmed that a significant number of the pairs or groupings of people that originally arrived at the theater together were sitting with other pairs or groupings of people they had not arrived with. In

comparing and triangulating our field notes and transcripts, we identified an interesting phenomenon among theatergoers. Basically, the extent and intensity of an individual's exposure to theater across the lifespan affects how far and to what extent the individual evolves as an avid theatergoer. While it seems highly likely that there is a wide range of consumer segments along the theatergoers' continuum, each representing a varying level of evolutionary development, we identified three major points of development or segments.

### **CONSUMPTION SEGMENTS THAT EMERGED**

The first and least developed major consumer segment fell into what we termed the "spectator" state, where theater only comprises one small portion of that individual's life. This group had virtually no early childhood exposure, nor experiences through intimate others, of any theatrical events.

The second and more developed consumer segment of theatergoers fell into what we termed the "enthusiastic appreciators." These individuals had some early childhood exposure to theater, but the level of promotion by intimate others and the intensity of that exposure was minimal. For these individuals, theatrical activities encompasses a fairly major segment of their lives, but they still retained significant pieces that had no connection whatsoever to the theater.

The third and most highly developed major point of development or consumer segment of theatergoers fell into what we termed the "hard-core participants." We found that individuals falling within this highly developed segment of theatergoers had usually been exposed to a wide variety of theater events, and at many levels of participation, as young children. Further, for this segment, not only was the exposure extensive at a very young age, but the level of promotion by the intimate others surrounding them was intense and extremely consistent. This appeared to create and nourish individuals to evolve to the highest level of immersion into the theatrical consumption community. For the most part, they were involved at a level that always went far beyond mere performance attendance. For these individuals, the very core of all aspects of their lives was tied in some way to the theater. Their involvement not only encompassed attending theater, but extended to onstage and backstage activities as well. As suggested previously, one of the major factors we identified as influential in determining the development of individuals to this stage was the age at which he or she was introduced or "baptized" into the world of theater.

### **CONSUMPTION THEMES THAT EMERGED**

The first major theme that emerged from our analysis and triangulation of in-depth interviews and field notes was what we termed the "baptism" into the world of theater. This seemed an appropriate term for our first identified theme, as the point at which experiences and reinforcement of those experiences was inculcated into an individual's life has strong bearing on their involvement as a theatergoer throughout the life span. Those who were surrounded as a child by influential others, whether parents or childhood friends, and had vivid recollections of those early experiences, were essentially "baptized" as children—hence the term "child baptism"—and developed into hard-core participants. We also discovered that it appeared an early baptism might also lead to a child creating further theatrical activities as their form of "play"—mimicking the activities they saw the influential others surrounding them engaged in. Some respondents own words were evidence of child baptism and early experiences, two sub-themes within baptism, were prime examples of our hard-core participants. The theme of child-baptism is similar to the "sensitive period effect" described by Holbrook and Schindler [7]. Exposure to an aesthetic experience during childhood, particularly early adolescence, encourages a deeper and more long-lasting

“imprinting” of the aesthetic stimuli experienced. This was found to be particularly strong for forms of entertainment that satisfy consumer wants in the hedonic and aesthetic realm, like theater, music, and movies. If this early period of one’s life is associated with an elevated level of exposure, this concentration of exposure often results in a lifelong preference for the experience that occurred during that period [7].

Those baptized into the theatrical world as adults represented another sub-theme under the general baptism theme, and we categorized these individuals as experiencing an “adult baptism.” Respondents that we classified under this sub-theme did not experience their initial exposure to theater until later in life. These individuals, baptized as adults, generally evolve only to the spectator level, but we would expect that it is possible that they might develop further if we were to revisit them ten years from now. It seems that part of the reason for their limited evolution within theater participation is a direct result of a lack of extensiveness of exposure, and the intensity of that exposure, in their earlier years. For these individuals, their theatrical awareness, artistic appreciation, and literacy comprehension seem to be at an embryonic stage in comparison to those baptized into the theatrical world as children.

The second theme that emerged seemed to be determined by the depth and type of creative, emotional, and psychological need that theater fulfilled within existing dimensions of each person’s life. We labeled this theme “spirituality,” and the sub-themes reflected within this were minimal for spectators, peripheral for enthusiastic appreciators, and extensive for the hard-core participants. For the hard-cores, immersed as a child, they have an intense need to have the very core of all aspects of their lives revolve around theater. Even if their “day job” is far removed, they must feel that theater is still the “core” of their existence, and that their job is merely a means of financial sustenance. The ultimate spiritual experience for the hard-cores and the enthusiastic participants is the pilgrimage to what is viewed as the head of the theatrical community—New York City. Often heralded as the center of the theatrical scene within the United States, an opportunity to visit this city and participate in theater in this locale—even if only as a spectator—is held in high esteem by these experiential consumers. These visits are perceived to be on a scale comparable to visiting a key religious center, like Mecca or the Vatican. Participants echoed sentiments that made it clear a trip to this locale—New York City—was often a lifelong “mission” of accomplishment.

The concept of faith refers to the third theme, a distinction between the true believers in theater and the non-believers. For them, theater is the most important aspect of their lives. All other aspects of their lives revolve around theater. As evidenced in the spirituality theme, theater *is* their life. Hard-core participants distinguish themselves from spectators. We can describe spectators as the segment of people for whom theater is an event. It is not better or worse than any other event. Spectators are looked upon as non-believers. It must be noted that most of our participants fell into the “hard-core participants” and “enthusiastic appreciators” categories and we did not interview many spectators. Most of the information presented on spectators is the perceptions of the hard-core participants and enthusiastic appreciators. With these perceptions in mind, hard-core participants seem to distance themselves from the status conscious. They attend plays because of their love of the theater. They tend to look down upon anyone who attends theater as a symbol of their status in society or purely because they can afford to, and want to be seen. Spectators tend to be more status conscious. They attend theater for the sake of attending theater. Spectators are perceived as being unaware of the intellectual, emotional, and philosophical significance of plays. Hard-core participants consider theater a highly intellectual event. For them, theater is completely about discussion of the various themes of the play in to determine what the playwright intended the audience to understand. They attempt to analyze the discussion of issues

based on the mindset of the audience of the time. For enthusiastic appreciators, theater is partly intellectual and partly entertainment.

The concept of orthodoxy refers to the fourth theme, the distinction between traditional and experimental theater. Hard-core participants look upon experimental theater as sacrilegious. For example, one of our hard-core participants claimed to like all types of theater. However, he did not attend experimental theater. He considered experimental theater to be “pop culture.” To the hard-core participants like him, pop culture and theater do not intersect. As far as he and other hard-cores were concerned, experimental theater is not part of their definition of theater. To hard-core participants, traditional theater is the only *real* kind of theater. Enthusiastic appreciators also lean toward traditional theater. Spectators do not understand, nor care, about the distinction between traditional and experimental theater. To spectators, theater can be in any form. In their view, as long as a play is being performed on a stage, it constitutes theater.

Communion is a fifth theme and refers to the intense emotional feeling that theatergoers feel while watching a play. It is the point at which the theatergoer feels that he or she is part of the play being enacted on stage. The theatergoer forgets his or her surroundings and becomes one with the characters and the scene on stage. This immersion was described by many hard-core participants as a complete “suspension of disbelief.” To them, that was the sign of a good play. That, they stated, is what theater spectators demand and want. They want to be engaged to the degree that they get a suspension of disbelief. In the case of hard-core theater participants, a play is a good play only if the individual reaches the stage of immersion. That is the yardstick by which they appear to judge all plays. Participants described the experience as a passionate venture that is sensuous when the play is done well. They described it as a force that engulfs them and an experience where they can feel the emotion wrapping around them. Interestingly, hard-core participants claim that as years go by, it takes them longer to be totally immersed in this emotional cocoon. Since they are involved at one point or another in all aspects of theater, they tend to observe other aspects of the performance before getting into the flow of the play. They observe the costumes, set design, and lighting in the initial stages of the play. Only after they have absorbed these details is their mind free to be immersed. Therefore, it takes a much more skillful acting performance to get hard-core participants into the flow of a play.

The concept of “parish” involves the theater as a community and is a sixth theme we identified. Three essential connections provided a sense of unity and community, and this was a driving force for hard-core participants. First, the social aspect of attending plays was a very strong component of the overall theater-going experience. This phenomenon is a common theme throughout both enthusiastic appreciators’ and hard-core participants’ lives. Second, the theatrical community is self-perpetuating in that as a person attends more and more theater, fellow audience members become more familiar.

Finally, the entire group is similar in their use and frequent reliance on reading reviews. To this extent, the theatergoers are all “reading off the same page.” They read the same papers and are exposed to the same interpretation of world and local events. However, the way in which the tribe utilizes these reviews varies. The enthusiastic appreciators tend to rely on reviews a bit more than the hard-core participants do. The hard-core participants use reviews as a form of intellectual exercise, which includes reading and evaluating the reviews after having watched the play under review. As a result of frequent exposure to a particular critic’s tastes, the theatergoers were able to judge whether or not a particular play was suitable to their tastes.

The concept of “evangelism” describes the reaching out of the theatergoers to a world outside of their own. Similar to the final step in a 12-step treatment program, this concept is the seventh theme and the final point on the continuum. This concept is more than simply asking friends or family to attend a theater production. Rather, evangelism is the act of bringing another person into the realm of theater attendance and the theater experience. A hard-core participant may begin in the symbolic role of selling tickets, even though ticket selling is a passive form of evangelism. Eventually, the theatergoer begins to encourage others to attend theater. One gentleman would even routinely recruit fellow employees to participate in actual play production. He brings his worlds together through the act of recruiting others into the theater world. Evangelism may also take the form of parents’ encouraging their children to participate in the theater. This may take the form of children’s theater classes, attending plays, or participating in the backstage activities of a performance. This action is the process of “childhood baptism.” The circle is then complete and this inculcation can be viewed as a way to ensure continuity of the theatergoer’s species for the hard-core participant. In the theatergoers’ continuum, the spectators did not appear to practice evangelism. A spectator would invite others to attend performances, but it would be expected that one would invite others to attend theater given that theater is a social event and not a solitary experience. However, this proselytizing witnessed in the hard-core participants is not found in the spectator experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

The theatergoers’ experience can be classified on a continuum. Within each category the intersection of theme and theatergoer exhibit differing attributes. The category with the widest range of characteristics is that of the enthusiastic appreciators. As the midpoint between the spectator and the hard-core participants, these individuals in the middle exhibit characteristics of the two outlying groups. Frequently, as the amount of time available to devote to the theater-going experience changes, people in this category will shift along the continuum. People will tend to enter and leave the enthusiastic appreciators category, but once they move to the hard-core participant stage, they rarely shift back. In our research, we did not observe any former hard-core participants. Based on the extensiveness of the theater-going experience and the intensiveness of that experience, theater-goers appear to pass through stages and dimension of behavior and emotion. There is a continuum ranging from purely spectators to hard-core theater participants who can be used to classify these dimensions. Of these categories, the intermediate stage of “enthusiastic appreciator” is the most fluid. It is at this level that theatergoers exhibit attributes of both the anchors of “spectators” and “hard-core participants.” Once the line is crossed into the highest level of involvement, a participant rarely reverts back to a previous category or drops the passion for theater altogether.

The most direct application of the results of this study pertains to market segmentation within the experiential entertainment consumer group. By pinpointing the relative location of an individual on the theatergoers’ continuum, it is possible to develop marketing tactics and strategies to appeal to these consumers. In particular, appeals directed to the verisimilitude aspect of the theater experience would be such a possibility. Hard-core participants were able to recall the feelings and emotions associated with their very first theater experience. These recollections were filled with emotion, amazement, and wonder. A larger than life form of magic accompanied these thoughts. Media campaigns that incorporate sentimental, nostalgic times, places, and events, would be especially appropriate. In short, taking an ordinary consumption experience and turning it into an extraordinary event is a key strategy that capitalizes on the tenets and principles found in the continuum of the theatergoer consumer group.

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