



# Exploring Audiences' Behavior in the Theatre Land

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*Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reveal updated insights regarding the theatre audiences' behavior in terms of which are the key motivations that drive them to attend a theatre event, the steps they follow within the making decision process and the variables they take into consideration when evaluating their own overall satisfaction related to the artistic experience.*

*Keywords: motivation, decision making process, arts audience, theatre, performing arts*

## 1 Paper Overall View

Researches have been conducted for identifying and understanding audience's trends regarding participation in the arts since 1966, the final aim being that of informing arts management and education [1]. Still, there is the need of constantly investigate this matter as audiences' behavior are prone to change and, nonetheless, pay attention to the audiences' particularities in terms of the art form they enjoy. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to deliver relevant insights regarding the theatre audiences' behavior such as their motivations and the manner in which they actually take the decision. In the paper sections to come, the author makes a review of the literature related to the topic, present the research methodology chosen for responding to the objectives of this paper, as well as its results and overall conclusions.

## 2 Incursion into Arts Consumer Behavior

In the past years, arts audience has been subject to several changes, making more dynamic the arts market itself. These changes are supposed to be the direct consequence of various facts such as the art itself which is lately presented on stage or the changing way in which the audience is receiving and appreciating the artistic experience related

to the manner in which it is communicated to the audience [2]. Some authors believe that the main reason why the audience has been changing (e.g. in terms of attendance frequency) is because of the way in which the art is described, communicated, priced and delivered to the audience, failing to answer its needs and preferences [3]. However, other authors believe that a new culture consumer is borned, a consumer with a huge access to knowledge that does not believe in the superiority or desirability of certain art forms only, that does not accept to be told what art is and who is or not an artist and who wants to be an active part of the artistic demarche in terms of how it is presented and how it should be consumed [4]. In this view, Kolb proposes a particular audience segmentation according to Abercrombie and Longhurst's model, having as segmentation criterion the relationship between the audience and a certain form of art. There are five audience segments that come out from this segmentation: "consumers" (light and generalized art use), "fan" (use focused on specific stars and programs), "cultist" (heavy specialized use with associated social activities), "enthusiast" (serious interest in the entire art form with structured activities), "petty producer" (amateur producer of art form) [5].

Nonetheless, other segmentation criteria have been used, as well, for defining the audience, in the relevant literature. For instance, according to the art's end consumer, the audience may be interpreted as "arts receptors", "stakeholders" and "customers". "Arts receptors" are mainly encountered in the case of public art, when the art enters people's lives without their intention of being part of it (e.g. sculpture in a public place). "Stakeholders" are represented either by individuals or organizations that are interested in the well-being of the arts organizations by offering them a constant support. Still, it is the "customer" who is the most relevant part of the audience puzzle for arts marketers, as he/she is the one involved in an exchange with the arts organization and whom can be persuaded to purchase or repurchase the access to the arts form [6].

As regarding the arts audience in the role of the customer, questions have been raised whether or not his/her behavior conforms to the general consumer behavior theory. Researches have shown that arts consumer engage in repertoire buying (they attend more than one type of art form), while conforming the double jeopardy (as the arts forms penetration decreases, the proportion of 100% loyals decreases) and duplication purchase law (the proportion of its audience an arts event type shares with another arts event type depends on the size/penetration of the other event) as being valid [7].

Moreover, the decision making process in which the arts audience should engage when choosing to attend a certain art event is also a controversial issue. Most researches agree that the process happens in the same way it usually occurs when other type of products/services are its subject, namely by respecting its five steps: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase behavior [8].

Need recognition is the first stage of the decision making process, in which the arts consumer recognizes a particular problem or need, determined either by an internal stimuli (e.g. the eager to spend in a pleasant way an Saturday evening) or an external one (e.g. the exposure to advertisements, word-of-mouth) [9]. Further, in order to satisfy

their desires, the arts audience will start looking for additional information, their most at hand source being their own previous experience [10], adding up other sources of information as well, if needed, such as: personal (e.g. family, friends, acquaintances), commercial (e.g. advertising, websites), public (e.g. mass-media, award granting institutions) [11]. When the arts consumer is put in the position of evaluating his/her alternatives, he sees each “product” as a bundle of attributes that may more or less satisfy his/her needs. But this stage cannot be reduced to this single process as there are other factors (e.g. cultural, social, psychological, personal) that tend to influence the process of evaluation [12]. Taking the decision is more complex in the case of arts attendance as usually the target is not an individual, but a group and within the group, the roles may divide even more. Thus, the arts consumer may be an influencer (gives an advice regarding the decision), decider (decides whether or not to take part in the arts event), transactor (who buys the tickets) and the consumer (who participates to the event, but not necessarily into the whole process of taking a decision) [13]. In the post purchase stage, the arts consumers decide if their expectations have been met or, on the contrary, they have been disappointed by the artistic experience they were part of [14].

Still, this is how decision is taken according to a rational judgment model. Gerald Zaltman, author of “How Consumers Think” (as quoted by Joanne Scheff Bernstein) sustains that this is mainly the exception rather than the rule. Further, he assumes that the decision making process is automatic, driven by habits and unconscious forces, influenced by consumer’s social and physical context [15].

So, on the whole, which is that force that drives consumers into participating to arts events? As, for instance, a consumer does not buy a ticket for a play only to get into the theatre, but also to see the actors’ performance, enjoy their words and actions, appreciate the stage sets and the whole production [16]. There are those intrinsic benefits that not only create positive attitudes, but also the motivations to return as consumer [17], namely: captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, aesthetic growth and social bonding [18] that represent that trigger for attendance.

Apart from these triggers, there are also barriers that may refrain the arts consumer from attending arts events. Researches have shown [19] that psychological barriers seem to be the most important for most of the people, as for them is rather difficult to overcome the prejudice according to which a certain form of art is “not for people like me”. However, in such cases, the influence of peers seems to be primordial as they have the necessary persuasion tools to convince people to try attending and afterwards judging [20]. Therefore, arts marketers’ attention should be drawn upon this kind of barriers, which seem to be more important and prevailing than the pricing issue.

Starting from this background, the author feels the necessity of exploring all these matters – motivations of attendance, exploration of the decision making process, more profoundly and more specific, according to theatre’s particularities.

### **3 Methodology**

In order to attain such a goal, the author considers that qualitative research tools should be able to help in this respect, due to their ability to provide in-depth insights while examining the attitudes, feelings and motivations of consumers [21]. The particular qualitative tool which is chosen for uncovering the unknown is the focus group. A focus group consists of eight to twelve people who are led by a moderator into a in-depth discussion on a particular topic, the aim being that of understanding what people have to say about that topic and also their arguments about it, and discovering their emotional involvement into the topic [22]. One of the key advantages of a focus group is that it recreates a more natural environment in which people who have certain characteristics in common would normally discuss (in contrast with face-to-face interviews), a permissive environment in which people are encouraged to share opinions and perceptions, without being on the pressure of reaching consensus [23].

Thus, the author conducted three focus groups (8 respondents per group) with 20-30 years old theatre-goers, usually attending at least three plays per season (in the past three seasons), and who in the past six months attended at least one play, so that their information to be fresh enough, enabling them to answer to the research questions and sustain their arguments through real examples. The fieldwork was carried on between 16-20<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012, in Bucharest (Romania). At the beginning of the focus groups, the free association technique was used in order to identify participants' top-of-mind thoughts and feelings on the subject, namely the "theatre", in order to start the discussion from their point of view. When exploring the decision making process the laddering technique was considered to be the more appropriate one for identifying and deepening the benefits, both emotional and rational, associated with a theatrical experience. Also, participants were encouraged to recount experiences from their own lives in order to illustrate both positive and negative experiences in terms of theatre shows (the storytelling technique).

### **4 Results and Discussion**

The reasons why people decide to attend theatre experiences fall into two categories: rational and emotional. The rational reasons are those related to curiosity (for a first-time experience – whether for people who have never been before to theatre or people who see for the first time certain play or a certain actor's performance or a certain director's production), socializing and relaxing (going out with friends and spending a pleasant evening in their company, while disconnecting from the daily problems) and confirming one's status (as a cultivated/intellectual person). The emotional side of the matter refers to benefits such as the possibility to reflect over a certain problem or the alter ego itself, to be able to live in another period of time another life, to be stirred with feelings never know to them until then, to become somebody else. People who are mostly driven by rational motivations such as socializing and relaxing are highly

interested in underground theatres rather than conventional ones. For them, the underground theatre is an alternative to a stiff environment where the theatre is played, namely unconventional free places such as buildings' undergrounds or bars, where the etiquette is put aside and where art is enjoyed while having a great time and a beer, at the same time.

People might come to the conclusion they need to go to the theatre due to their own judgment (e.g. necessity to fill in their spare time) or with a little help from their friends for instance, who may propose them to go out together. From this respect, it seems to be two categories of people: those who make the proposal of attending a theatre play and those who accept it. People from the first category have an active behavior, always being informed about the latest news and trends in the theatre area and familiarized with actors and directors' names, following the course of their careers. They are what one could call "connaisseurs", the people from whom a regular theatre-goer would love to receive a recommendation. People from the second category are more passive than the first ones and they may be, as well, divided in two categories: those who enjoy theatre as art form, but they are too homelike/comfortable to assume the responsibility of a buying process (e.g. in terms of time invested, the choice itself) and those who are indifferent to theatre as an art form, but do not dislike it and who are opened to concessions when going out with friends; they also have a small contribution in the decision making process. So, the "connaisseurs" seem to play a fairly important role in the entire process. Still, between these two extremes there is also another category of people, regular attenders, who pass through the entire decision making process, facing all its challenging.

For these people, it is important to search for additional information about theatre plays and actors in order to have an overall. Their most reliable sources of information are either their previous experiences (with certain theatres, play, actors or directors) or that of their family or friends', including the "connaisseurs" if they are part of their acquaintances. Other sources of information they use are theatre's sites and publications with different events' programs. In addition, the "connaisseurs" may also read critics of the theatre play and pay attention to any rewards the play might have received, as an accreditation of its artistic value. After informing themselves and identifying certain options, people start their evaluation. For some of them it is important the theme of the play or the fact that it is a well-known one, for instance, a Shakespeare play, because it is an assurance of the potential quality. Others want to see the performance of a certain actor, while some just want to attend a certain theatre. The director of a play is a relevant variable mostly for the "connaisseurs", other categories being less aware, in general, of the name or reputation of theatre directors.

But it is only after taking the decision and consuming the artistic experience that they will know if they have taken the right decision, thus if their expectation have been met. And this is reflected by what the audience calls a great or poor experience. But the post-evaluation varies, depending on the audience category: the more is the audience informed and accustomed to the theatre area, the more demanding they become regarding the quality of the theatre experience. However, for all these audience

categories, in a manner or other, a great theatre experience is the one that succeeds in “transmitting the message to the audience” through the actors’ performances that “have given everything on the stage” and changing something in their emotional structure: “I return from the theatre in a different way, somehow changed, sometimes meditative, sometimes cheerful”, “It made me vibrate and think more about what the actor wanted to say on stage”. A poor experience is the one who fails to raise audience’s interest either because of the boredom (“I almost fell asleep during the play”) or the lack of direction (“I did not understand what they wanted to transmit; nothing was coherent in that play”) or actors’ lack of interest or poor performance. Although the post-evaluation mainly focuses on the quality of performance, there are also other variables taken into consideration, such as: seats’ comfort, cleanliness of the auditorium, staff’s politeness, other members’ of the audience behavior that may impact the way in which such an experience is perceived. However, if the performance results in a great experience, all the other variables tend to pass on a second place.

The above results are those of a qualitative study, which means they lack their representativeness. In order to surpass this constraint, a quantitative study should be further conducted for a clear vision regarding the importance hierarchy of the aspects previously discussed.

### **Conclusions**

This paper underlines the importance of knowing what drives the audiences into theatres and how the mechanism of taking a decision works for them. These results are not only relevant for the theoretical area, but also in practice for any theatre organization. Such information may facilitate the way theatre organizations approach their audiences and anticipate their expectations, this being the only way to a better understanding of the audiences and thus to their gaining as regular attendee.

For instance, being aware of the “connoisseurs” who attend a theatre, theatre managers might find a leverage to attract them in further attendance, attendance that might be also doubled by their passive acquaintances that do not make the first step in such a decision. So, if attendance is a problem this might be a way to deal with it.

Furthermore, a way to secure people’s decision (apart from the “connoisseurs”) is to communicate more about the theatre’s play director, who at present, seems to be poorly noticed and thus less relevant for them. Educating people regarding this matter might also be helpful. This might be the case when there are few things through which the theatre may secure people’s decision such as a less-known play interpreted by less-known actors.

Nonetheless, being aware of the aspects that matter most for people when evaluating a theatre performance, may help theatre managers work out that aspect, creating value for customer and thus satisfaction, that will result in a repurchase intention and ultimately in the retention and loyalty of the customer.

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