

The background features a series of overlapping, irregular blue shapes on a white background, creating a fragmented, abstract composition. The shapes vary in size and orientation, some appearing as large blocks and others as smaller, more complex polygons.

My essential reads: Understanding audiences

by Professor Stephanie Pitts

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Background

Audience diversification is a term used widely – alongside audience development and engagement – as a catch-all for the preoccupations that face researchers and practitioners alike: when we work with audiences, are we hoping to attract new people to the arts, deepen the experience of those who already attend, and/or demonstrate the cultural value of live arts events?

It is well known in arts marketing that persuading existing audience members to change or increase their attendance a little is much easier than drawing entirely new people into a venue – but the financial truths behind this marketing approach have to be set alongside broader social responsibilities to make the arts accessible to everyone. Increasingly the ‘diversity’ embedded in ‘diversification’ is at the forefront of debate: researchers want to know not just who comes to the arts, but who doesn’t, and how the impediments to attendance are built into existing social and cultural practices.

I first became interested in researching audiences as part of a larger project on musical participation: I wanted to know what motivated people to spend their time and energy rehearsing together and preparing a performance, dealing with the stresses of learning parts, getting up in front of an audience, and then filling the void left after the excitement of the concert or show was over.

I remembered all of those experiences myself, from many hours spent as a rehearsal pianist at school and university, and then later for amateur choirs and opera groups, so I knew that there were interesting questions in the social psychology of why people come together to be creative, and what they gain from that experience.

The results from a survey in which I asked audiences about the performance showed me how much they felt themselves to be part of the event: lending their support to friends who were performing, having a family night out that was guaranteed to be enjoyable, passing on their enthusiasms for particular repertoire to the next generation, and generally having a good, life-enriching time. Clearly, the people providing the applause had more to say...

From that accidental foray into audience research, this has become one of my main areas of interest, and I’ve branched out from classical music and jazz listeners, to audiences for the contemporary arts, recently finishing a large-scale project which is summarised in an online handbook: *Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts* (Pitts & Price, 2019).

Along the way, I’ve been influenced by other researchers from a whole range of academic disciplines as well as from the arts sector, and have been fascinated by the points of overlap and contradiction across art forms and from different perspectives. Choosing my ‘essential reads’ has been a challenge, but I’ve tried to highlight places to look that will send you down similar connected paths of new discoveries – and I’d love to hear what you find!

My Essential Reads

1. [Stop re-inventing the wheel: A guide to what we already know about developing audiences for classical music](#) by Tim Baker (2000)

It's worth starting with a source that is a reminder to all audience researchers that there's already a lot of research out there. Tim Baker (of Baker-Richards fame, founder of one of the leading audience research agencies) focuses here on classical music, but the point applies more widely: gathering more and more data is not in itself a compelling reason to undertake audience research – there must also be new questions, new connections, new contexts in which understanding of audience development can grow.

Even the concept of audience development is itself questionable; in our recent project with audiences for contemporary arts, Sarah Price and I asked our interviewees if they were “at capacity” in their arts attendance, and a good many replied that they were, so throwing into doubt the assumption that people would attend more if only the marketing was more compelling.

2. [A virtuous circle: The positive evaluation phenomenon in arts audience research](#) by Katya Johanson and Hilary Glow (2015)

Another essential read to make researchers and arts organisations alike stop in their tracks, and question what we are really getting when we ask audiences about their experiences of a performance.

Katya Johanson and Hilary Glow (who with their colleague, Jennifer Radbourne, have made many superb contributions to audience research), probe the biases inherent in many evaluative audience surveys, which are often carried out with the aim of demonstrating value of every kind: showing money well spent and audiences well satisfied, with the underlying hope that similar activity will continue in the future.

While the bias of the institution trying to satisfy its funders might be pretty transparent, Johanson and Glow show how easily research participation can become an act of advocacy for audience members too: in small-scale productions given by precarious organisations, audiences can bring “a high level of politeness to their responses due to the liveness of the event and their sense of mutual obligation to the producers and performers” (p. 262).

Research itself potentially adds to the problem, by implicitly suggesting that there are “right” responses to an arts event, and that expressing dissent from the expected view is a failing in the audience member rather than a justifiably divergent opinion.

Johanson and Glow propose some solutions, including a greater focus on disengagement and “what has not happened” – questions that need to be asked bravely and which are too often avoided.

3. [Be reasonable! On institutions, values, voices](#) by Kirsty Sedgman (2015)

In this brief article, Kirsty Sedgman introduces ideas that are further explored in her book, *The Reasonable Audience* (Palgrave, 2018). Her work highlights the dilemmas for arts promoters in making audiences feel welcome while accommodating diverse needs and expectations: “discourses of reasonableness are often deployed to implicitly encourage certain audience members to participate and speak, while others are effectively excluded and silenced” (p. 123).

The “proper” way to attend live arts events often conforms closely to white, educated, middle class standards of sitting quietly and responding in largely predetermined ways, often leading to a stated commitment to audience diversification that is undermined by a desire on the part of established audience members for things to stay as they are. Classical music audiences, for example, might lament the prevalence of retired people at an orchestral concert, while resisting ideas of changing start times, shortening concerts, or letting in young people who might disturb the reverential silence of a “reasonable audience”.

Participations

The two articles above were selected from *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, which as an online, peer-reviewed journal has done a great deal to make audience studies into a recognisable but still hugely wide-ranging academic discipline. Its topics, often in themed special issues, range from censorship to fan studies, through every kind of audience, and great varieties of methods: the website isn’t easy to navigate but is well worth a browse and the list of past articles is a good starting point for any new area of reading.

4. [Beyond the division of attenders vs. non-attenders: A study into audience development in policy and practice](#) by Nobuko Kawashima (2000)

This is a lengthier essential read, but one that I keep coming back to, as Nobuko Kawashima's call to stop thinking of audiences in binary terms as attenders and non-attenders has been slow to enter the mainstream of research and marketing in the arts.

Kawashima illustrates that audience development often blurs its purposes across four main goals – “financial, artistic, social, and educational” (p. 10) – and is pushed into doing so by the demands of funders rather than the needs of audiences. Audiences, meanwhile, navigate their arts experiences in ways that fluctuate across artforms and depending on the need, occasion and company of the moment, such that “the pyramid model of audience, with the total rejector at the base and the frequent attender at the top, should be seen without an assumption [of] one-way progression” (p. 72).

It is still the case, twenty years on, that too much audience research considers responses to a single event, organisation or venue, without thinking about where that experience fits within audience members' wider social lives and cultural priorities.

Summary

Audience research remains a fascinating area of research with many unanswered questions. Often it is pulled in utilitarian directions, and indeed the pressure to provide support and insight for precarious arts organisations can be keenly felt by research participants and researchers alike – a consideration that will only be on the increase after months of venue closure due to Covid-19 lockdown.

For me, the more fascinating questions are in the area of human behaviour: why do the arts mean so much to people, what wider effects do those cultural connections have on friendships, lifestyles and values, and what do those experiences and attitudes tell us about contemporary society? The essential reads that I've chosen are all reminders about the ongoing relevance of those questions – and the difficulties of answering them.

Biography

Stephanie Pitts is a Professor of Music Education at the University of Sheffield, and director of the [Sheffield Performer and Audience Research Centre](#)

Her recent research projects have included a [national study of audiences for contemporary arts](#) and a collaboration with [Making Music on leisure-time music-making and its impact on local communities](#).



Call to action...

What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.



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