

Audiences as seen beyond the sociodemographic divide: encounters with dissonant arts consumers

Lianne Pelletier, Laurentian University

Abstract

As arts patrons, as cultural workers and as researchers, we have been sociologically accustomed to associate social status with arts consumption. This ongoing doctoral study suggests that audience research suffers because of this antiquated view of a sociodemographic predisposition towards arts consumption. Hence, this paper aims to discuss the value of conducting audience research on arts consumers exhibiting dissonant cultural profiles, as well as the impact that this method can have on the participants' appreciation of local cultural offerings.

Bourdieu's classic theory (1979) seems to stand the test of time among both sociologists and communications professionals. Yes, the average arts consumer corresponds to a fairly specific sociodemographic group: they are highly educated, have a higher income, live in an urban community, and lack physical barriers or other limitations preventing them from attending cultural outings. And yet, while that may be true in many cases, exceptions to this rule cannot be ignored. Lahire (2004), for example, conducted a study on the subject by speaking to over a hundred people about their arts consumption practices only to find that, among people's individual cultural practices, many were inconsistent with what one would consider appropriate for someone of their social status. These findings on "cultural dissonance", as Lahire puts it, demonstrate that dozens of factors are considered when someone decides whether or not to attend an arts event: their personal availability, their access to sites, their personal beliefs and experiences related to arts and culture, their motivations to attend, the effects of their social circle, their parents' or spouse's opinion, etc. Further research shows exposure and experience in the arts are in fact greater determinants of arts participation than are sociodemographic factors (Hill Strategies, 2008). Therefore, although the elevated sociodemographic status of the typical arts patron may be true statistically, in reality – and in the interest of more efficient arts marketing and research – we suggest turning our attention to the atypical arts consumers and non-arts consumers in order to better understand their motivations and expectations towards arts organizations.

By focusing on atypical arts patrons, namely individuals exhibiting interest in the arts that are contrary to what their social and demographic characteristics would imply, we have begun to show through one-on-one interviews that an individual's past experiences with the arts, exposure to arts marketing and participation in audience development initiatives are demonstrably determinant factors of their choices in cultural consumption and practices. In addition, through these interviews, patrons and potential patrons enjoy the opportunity to learn about local artistic and cultural offerings, to reflect upon and justify their choices of cultural practices, and also to voice their fears and rationalize both their positive and negative experiences with the arts.

In essence, speaking with dissonant arts patrons in a comfortable and controlled setting provides valuable insight for arts researchers and marketers, and subsequently introduces potential patrons to artistic events and opportunities corresponding to their personal interests and limitations.



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