

Are you being engaged? Exploring the limits of audience capacity for engagement

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Abstract:

This 'think piece' reflects on uses of the term 'engagement' in our large-scale qualitative audience research project, Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts (Pitts & Price, 2021). In our interviews with 187 attenders of contemporary arts events across four UK cities (see <http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/uaca/> for full details), we found plenty of evidence of audience engagement, as demonstrated through frequent attendance, strong opinions, loyalty to particular artforms or venues, and active involvement in arts practices and volunteering. Perhaps even more fascinating, however, were the signs of the limits of engagement – the ways in which audience members were content with their current levels of activity, or guilty about the extent to which they felt they 'should' do more. Drawing on these empirical insights, we consider the ways in which audience members position themselves – consciously or otherwise – as being resistant to engagement, and think about what this means for arts organisations and promoters, and for audience researchers' use of the term 'engagement'.

Keywords: Engagement, capacity, contemporary arts, arts marketing

Introduction: accidental engagement

We need to start with a confession. When we pitched our recent book on understanding audiences for the contemporary arts to Routledge (Pitts & Price, 2021), we allowed the commissioning editor to add the word 'Engagement' to the title, so contributing to the proliferation of that word on the bookshelves of audience studies (e.g. Conner, 2013; Walmsley, 2019). Unlike those other authors, we gave the word little further attention in our writing, using it frequently but without the deliberate meta-analysis offered by Walmsley (2019, pp.54-6).

Engagement, as a noun and a verb, appears in our research questions, functioning variously as a synonym for openness, meaning, attendance and connection:

How does the public discourse impact on audience members' willingness to engage with the contemporary and shape their experience of an artwork?

What are the routes that take [audience members] past stereotypes [of contemporary artworks] to meaningful engagement, and are these routes open to everyone?

Who is and who is not engaging with the contemporary arts?

(Pitts & Price, 2021, p.2)

In our introductory chapter, we use 'highly engaged' (p. 5) in a similar way to the Arts Council England and related Audience Finder analysis (e.g. Ashton & Gowland-Pride, 2019), to mean people who attend frequently and across a range of art forms, often a shorthand for 'easy to reach' audiences whose level of education, affluence and available leisure time makes them the main ticket purchasers in established arts venues. Comprising a large proportion of the art-going public, these audiences are often a key target for arts marketers and perceptions of what they will enjoy or reject often have strong influence on programming decisions. We argue for a stronger connection of audience research with 'civic engagement' (p. 7), whereby audiences' behaviours are shaped by their relationship with their locality, and the sense of belonging to a place and taking an active part in helping its culture to thrive. Here the moral overtones of 'engagement' come to the fore, where choices to attend go beyond the personal, and are viewed as affecting the collective arts experience through their sharing (maybe even imposition) of values and opportunities.

Where the word features hardly at all is in our extensive qualitative data, resulting from interviews with 187 attenders of contemporary arts events across four UK cities.¹ 'Engaged' was used as a self-description only by some of the arts professionals we talked to, including one who '[works] in the theatre, so I've got friends who are very open and engaged' (Pitts & Price, 2021: p. 113). The extent to which an arts experience was 'engaging' was mentioned sometimes as an absence, when the opportunity to 'have a dance or feel engaged' (p. 188) would have made a listening experience more immersive, or being given clearer information about an artwork would have helped focus attention: 'if they could tell a bit of the story behind it maybe I would be more engaged and care about it more' (p. 163). Beyond these few examples, engagement seemed from this research to be a word that is used *about* audiences by researchers and arts marketers, but largely absent from audience members' own discourse. As our previous research has similarly highlighted the disconnect between the experience of audience members and the subsequent academic interpretations of those testimonies (Hield and Price, 2017), in this short article we take a

closer look at the ways in which audiences describe the nature and the limits of their engagement.

Indicators of engagement

While audience members in our study did not explicitly say they were engaged, they displayed many of the behaviours and attitudes that we (and other researchers) have interpreted on their behalf as indicators of engagement. Alongside frequent attendance as the most readily quantifiable measure, we also witnessed strong opinions, loyalty to particular artforms or venues, and active involvement in arts practices and volunteering. While interviewees justified their attendance habits to us, as researchers inevitably demand (Johanson & Glow, 2015), there were many examples of those cultural choices seeming almost beyond decision-making – an integral part of people’s identity: ‘If I’m in the mood to just be in a theatre, I don’t really care what I watch. Sometimes I just want to be immersed in the atmosphere of it’ (Ld04).² This immersion took some people beyond artform classifications, as they declared an interest in ‘live humans performing in various forms’ (Br31) or saw ‘performance, as in theatre, dance, all as one – live art – all as one cluster called ‘performance’ (Bh51). Engagement, by these lived definitions, went beyond selection, encompassing a state of mind which one participant described as being ‘never more fully myself than when I’m in a theatre’ (Ld16).

Our interviews also included many examples of people whose attendance was more deliberately built into their lives, with routines varying at different stages of life and in changing circumstances. In retirement, for example, some designed a ‘portfolio’ of ticket bookings to fill self-identified gaps in previous experience, while others set up a routine of attending at particular times or with specific people: ‘most Wednesdays now, we do something. [...] We’re all really pleased with ourselves, you know!’ (Lv36). Deliberate engagement might also occur on holiday, as being in a new place generated a sense of needing to experience the cultural offer for which it was famous: ‘We went to the Bolshoi Ballet when we were in Moscow, because you had to do it’ (Lv32). Other participants adopted a tourist mindset when they had visitors at home, particularly in London, where there was also a sense of feeling compelled to stay in the city in order to be part of the vibrant arts scene. These experiences all illustrate how engagement is affected by where people are, both geographically and personally, with an undercurrent of openness to the arts emerging more at different times and stages of life.

Frequency of attendance is not the only indicator of engagement in the examples above, which show participants having affinity to arts organisations, a sense of identity of themselves as ‘arty’ people, and experiencing deep aesthetic and emotional responses to art works. These characteristics can remain stable even as circumstances might change the frequency of visits across weeks, months and seasons: ‘I can go a couple of months without seeing anything, but then I’ll have the space of a fortnight where I’ve got four or five things’ (Ld18). Across a lifetime, the amount of time and money available for cultural activities can vary greatly, and yet an audience member’s view of themselves as someone who spends

their time experiencing the arts might remain stable. While there is an assumption that frequent attendance is connected to more aesthetic or ‘deeper’ engagement, our research shows a more complex relationship between how often someone attends and the experience they have. Consistent with previous research (de Rooij, 2013; Price, 2017), we continue to find examples of frequent attenders more concerned with the routine of arts attendance and its social value, and conversely, infrequent attenders who have profound emotional or aesthetic experiences at arts events. These contrasting experiences show the murkiness of the term ‘engagement’ which at once implies a certain type of behaviour (frequent engagement) and set of experiences (e.g. profound absorption in a work) that are not always found together.

In asking people to talk about a variety of arts organisations in their local area, we also encountered examples of participants visiting the bar, cafe, shop or just the foyer of an arts venue, some without ever stepping foot in the gallery or theatre: ‘I only knew [it] as a cafe? Which is really bad... I didn’t realise there was [a gallery] at the back! [laughs]’ (Br03). Whether this should be counted as engagement is debatable. Shoppers and diners may in some cases be included in visitor statistics, but there are surely few organisations that would be happy knowing that some people were unaware of the cultural function of the building. For some participants, however, these ‘liminal spaces’ (Pitts & Price, 2021, pp.95-97) were not only a place to spend time around an arts event but offered an alternative way to engage with an organisation that could be incorporated more easily into everyday life. By meeting friends at a cafe or buying gifts from a shop within an arts organisation, visitors could offer their support, as well as feeling connected with the venue and its values. The experience of being in those spaces was described as qualitatively different to being in a chain cafe, not only because arts organisations were far less likely to kick you out for not drinking enough coffee, but also because the aesthetic output of the organisation seemed to ‘rub off’ on these liminal spaces: ‘a kind of world that [these spaces] emote [...] you’d like your world to be more like’ (Ld38). The act of visiting these liminal spaces can therefore occupy different positions with regards to ‘engagement’, for frequent attenders, providing another way to interact with and support a venue when perhaps they have already reached their capacity for attendance, whilst non-attenders might encounter a kind of accidental engagement with the venue, or a near-miss as they leave without realising there is a gallery behind the door.

The arts marketing literature is full of advice on how to turn indicators of engagement into increased attendance, spend and loyalty (*c.f.* Bernstein, 2014). Our audience interviewees were often aware of their place in this relationship, and participated by signing up to multiple mailing lists, or taking out memberships with organisations in order to be first in the ticket queue as well as to provide trusted venues with financial support (see Pitts, Herrero & Price, 2020). For some regular attenders, these lines of communication helped to build a relationship with a venue or organisation, generating the security of having ‘tickets behind the candlestick’ (Br30) as a guarantee of future attendance (or at least what used to be a guarantee, before the months of venue closures in 2020).

Sometimes, however, the bombardment of marketing materials damaged the relationship, leading to feelings of overload and demand that resulted in doing less because decisions were harder to make. In an age of information overload, audience members could become frustrated with arts marketers adding yet more emails to their inbox or flyers to the pile, and could at times feel as though their engagement was not being recognised by the constant push to buy more tickets. Experienced audience members readily saw through the marketing strategies of large organisations and were resistant to being manipulated in their attendance decisions, wanting agency rather than obligation in their interactions. On the other hand, particularly in London, audience members sometimes felt insufficiently valued by organisations due to *lack* of contact: one theatre-goer expressed frustration about not hearing about new productions by saying, 'surely they should be finding me somehow, surely these things should be connected up?' (Ld16).

The limits of engagement

Just as there was variation in audience members' willingness to receive communications from arts organisations and so to be guided in their attendance habits, our interviewees also displayed some elements of resistance to being 'developed' or 'engaged' beyond their limits. Audience research rarely asks whether attendees are 'at capacity', but we did exactly that, wanting to know whether the assumption that people are open to persuasion to increase their attendance was a reality to those people who were being approached by arts organisations. The answers referenced predictable factors of limits on budget, time, and availability of babysitters, but also highlighted the ways in which even for highly engaged arts attenders, there is such a thing as too much: 'if I wanted to, I could be out every night, but I'm too tired and too old, so I'm very lucky to be able to choose' (Lv31). Some participants spoke of being 'overwhelmed' (Br14), physically tired, or emotionally exhausted, and so reaching a point where they 'just can't see any more shows because my brain is going to implode' (Ld02).

Interviewees who were satisfied with their level of arts attendance fell some way below this level of overwhelming saturation, gaining intense enjoyment from their arts consumption without it dominating their lives. Many participants had tried a variety of art forms and genres and had become confident in their own tastes: 'I am very open to stuff, but then I guess I know what I like' (Lv07). Even the most open-minded of participants had art forms or genres which they firmly avoided. While a few participants were able to point to specific gaps in local arts provision that limited their attendance, most responses reflected some self-criticism about not engaging further, but ultimately a sense of resolve that they were content with the nature of their arts engagement.

Another type of response to the 'at capacity' question appeared to be motivated by guilt, with many participants showing a readiness to claim that they 'should' be doing more: engaging more frequently, more deeply, or with greater variety. In recognising that arts organisations and artists needed audience members (and their money), participants felt that attending arts events was in itself an act of support, and berated themselves for not offering

more. Our current project supporting arts organisations in South Yorkshire through Covid-19, suggests that the restrictions on arts activity as a result of the pandemic may have increased desire to support, as the financial tightrope of non-profit arts organisations has been more readily discussed in the media.³ This attitude resonates with broader trends in ethical consumption, whereby consumers make decisions to buy from local or environmentally-friendly retailers, for example, spending their money at businesses whose values they agree with (Pitts & Price, 2021, p. 97). With our contemporary arts attenders, this often meant supporting organisations who championed underrepresented artists, were welcoming of and accessible to a wide range of audiences, and produced high-quality work. The cognitive dissonance therefore came when participants realised that they themselves were not attending the experimental new work that they believed should be supported.

These responses to the ‘at capacity’ question show a continuum of engagement, from the guilt of ‘could do more’ attenders, to the satisfaction of those whose attendance fits with their other priorities, to the overwhelmedness that arises when the ‘peaks and troughs’ of attendance become temporarily unbalanced. Above all, they show that ‘engagement’ is as much a state of mind as a model of behaviour: audience members who might think of themselves (not necessarily in these terms) as highly engaged, could nevertheless have strong views about artforms that were ‘not for them’, or could experience – as we all have in the last year – fallow patches of non-attendance, without feeling their identity as an audience member to be threatened. Put simply, our research shows that within every attender is a non-attender (Pitts & Price, 2021, p. 87) – a fact which is obvious to audience members, but rarely considered by arts organisations, or by audience research that focuses only on one element of attendance rather than the holistic understanding of people’s lives.

Conclusions

Our study captured the experience of audiences who, as a result of their habitual attendance, interest in or passion for the contemporary arts, showed signs of ‘engagement’, despite not using that term themselves. By asking participants whether they were ‘at capacity’ with their arts activities, we revealed the internal debates that audiences have around their decisions to attend. On the one hand, they felt a sense of guilt around not attending more often, since they recognised that arts organisations needed their support, both financially and to get ‘bums on seats’. On the other, they were content with the amount of time they currently spent attending arts events and were not intending to increase it. Engagement is therefore not infinite. Audience members’ capacity for engagement has limits that no amount of marketing can counter.

In arts marketing literature, non-attendance is often implicitly assumed to be the result of either lack of awareness or negative attitudes towards an arts activity, depicted as a kind of neutral state which arts organisations should attempt to alter. Our data shows that non-attendance can also be a conscious choice on the part of participants to prioritise other arts events or non-arts activities. Audience members make deliberate and tactical decisions

about where to spend their time, guarding the boundaries of their engagement to ensure that it does not overwhelm their lives and they maintain time for other interests, responsibilities – or simply an early night. Liminal spaces offer one route to encouraging potential attenders to bypass these limits, by providing a way to engage with a venue whilst also working in the cafe, browsing the gift shop, or having a coffee with a friend. Otherwise, audience members' limits are often governed by circumstances and more likely to be adjusted in response to a change in lifestyle rather than a marketing drive: in our study, retirement, the arrival of children, having an empty nest, and moving to a new city were all moments where priorities could rapidly change, as a result of increased or decreased resources and responsibilities and the establishment of new routines.

Engagement is perhaps better defined as a constancy of attitude rather than activity. Each attender has their limits on how frequently they want to attend arts events, with some having smaller or fluctuating capacity owing to their life circumstances and competing priorities. The extent to which arts have priority in whatever free time and money is available, the importance that they play in people's sense of identity, and the demonstration of interest in the arts outside actual attendance (for instance, listening to podcasts about the arts or choosing to shop or eat at an arts venue) are better indicators of highly engaged audiences than the frequency of their attendance. This is of course much harder for arts organisations to measure, particularly those who use ticket sales data as a means of segmenting and understanding their audiences. It means that the marketing approaches needed to reach already 'engaged' audience members are not the same as the evangelical descriptions with which entirely new audience members are sought. What engagement means, therefore, depends where you are starting from – whether as a researcher, an arts marketer, or an audience member.

Biographical notes:

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Notes:

¹ See <http://www.sparc.dept.shef.ac.uk/uaca/> for full details of the project scope and methods. The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2017-20, and the majority of interviews carried out in 2018-19.

² Ethical approval for this research was granted by The University of Sheffield and included the assigning of participant codes to protect anonymity: these codes indicate the interview number and the city in which it took place (Br = Bristol; Bh = Birmingham; Lv = Liverpool; Ld = London).

³ AHRC Covid-19 Response Study: Responding to and modelling the impact of COVID-19 for Sheffield's cultural ecology - a case study of impact and recovery <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/city-region/enhancing-cultural-vibrancy/covid-research>