

QUESTION

What are the main tensions and challenges today in thinking about audience development and cultural consumption? How far can arts marketers utilise the theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and cultural omnivorousness (Peterson and Simkus, 1992) to grow and retain audiences, and increase consumption? Use examples to illustrate your answer.

ARTS MARKETING TODAY: THE TENSIONS & CHALLENGES IN GROWING AUDIENCES, FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

As has been discovered through research in the past few decades, cultural institutions require marketing practices like any other consumption-based sector of the economy. Yet these practices require more complex sensibilities specific to a sector ‘characterized by a unique social and experiential dimension’ (Colbert & St. James, 2014, p.566). As majority non-profit organizations, arts institutions rely on government and private sponsorship that fluctuates largely with the economy. This financial precarity, combined with the challenges of increased competition (Colbert, 2009) and declining attendance (Novak-Leonard, et al., 2008), has rendered audience retention an increased concern for cultural organizations, requiring an advanced understanding of the importance and adaptability of arts marketing practices.

With attention to the ‘unique dimensions’ of arts marketing, this paper will firstly explore the main challenges and tensions arts marketers face today. The arts’ complex relationship to the market, increasing technological developments, and the shifting identity and values of cultural consumers will be explored as influential to an audience’s expectations of cultural consumption experiences. As these challenges will show, a new model of arts marketing is needed to address the continued shifting of relationships between cultural institutions and consumers.

Taking arts’ relationship to consumers as a central element in successful arts marketing, I will then examine how sociological theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and cultural omnivorousness (Peterson and Simkus, 1992) may be utilized within marketing practices for further audience development. In studying two cases of Western performing arts companies of traditionally highbrow artforms, the Dutch National Ballet & the London Symphony Orchestra, it is concluded that understanding these theories of cultural capital and omnivorousness are important in expanding audiences, but also have a negative possibility to divide those audiences by class. Drawing on theories from Huntington (2008), it is suggested that arts marketers today must research and develop practices reaching beyond the cultural omnivore, to attract different areas of their current consumer base, as well as those who don’t normally attend, to attract and retain a more sustainable, diverse audience for the cultural organization.

AN EVER-SHIFTING FIELD: CHALLENGES & TENSIONS AFFECTING AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT & CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Arts marketing strategies have advanced rapidly since their first deviation from standard business marketing practices in the 1970s and 1980s (Radbourne, 2013). Originally used for exclusively promotional purposes, the 'one-way communication' of early arts marketing practices has since developed into a consumer-centered model of relationship marketing (Kolb, 2013, p.1). Motivated by consumers' needs, this marketing model sells an arts product as an intangible experience, connecting the arts 'to lifestyle choices and values' (Radbourne, 2013, p.145) of a consumer. Even more recently, this model has 'been challenged by the new arts consumer... where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfill a spiritual need' (Ibid., p.145), calling for marketers to find innovative ways to attract and sustain audiences with evolving values and identities.

The shifts in these marketing models reveal some of the main tensions and challenges within arts marketing today: selling an artistic experience as a product, adapting to audience expectations amidst advances in technology and society, and the broadening of cultural participation to include a new cultural consumer, or 'cultural omnivore'.

An Inherent Tension: Marketing Artistic Experiences as Products

Art's complex relationship to the market contributes to a long-disputed tension within arts marketing. Since relationship marketing emerged, the shifting of power into the consumer's hands has required arts institutions to balance their artistic integrity with the demands of popular culture (Nytch, 2013). Traditional distinctions of high-art classify it as produced free of consumer or market influence, or the 'art for art's sake' philosophy, which clashes with the 'arts for business's sake' philosophy of traditional marketing practices (Fillis, 2010). In positioning art as a product for and with the consumer at its core, that art becomes aligned with the concept of popular culture (Kolb, 2013, p.19). This complex relationship deepens in that art is not a product, in the sense of being an object of utility with tangible qualities (Fillis, 2010). As Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) studied in their work on experiential marketing, because the arts are 'emotion-laden, subjectively-experienced products,' (p.96) consumption of such products is driven by their symbolic elements. Arts marketers then, have the specific challenge of how to communicate their offering of a product with many intangible qualities (Kolb, 2013, p.124).

Amidst this difficulty, arts marketers have attempted to present the value of an arts experience through branding. Similar to the visual dimensions of art, 'a brand carries meaning and associations' (Bernstein, 2007, p.194) by 'connecting values to images' (Schroeder, 2010, p.19), which can inform and motivate future cultural consumption. Nytch (2013) asserts that rebuilding loyal audiences relies on successful branding of the extrinsic values of cultural experiences like 'venue, avenues for social interaction, and incorporation of other media' (p.92). Yet, for Bradshaw, et al. (2010), intrinsic value is just as important to aesthetic experience, suggesting that arts marketers should 'look beyond aspects of extrinsic value... to embrace the key role of aesthetic appreciation as an intrinsically valued self-justifying end in itself' (p.17). In branding an experience, cultural institutions can also focus on intangible features i.e. 'the excitement of live theatre, the grandeur of classical music, or the edginess of contemporary visual art' to distinguish their cultural product from others (Kolb, 2013, p.132).

The aesthetic, experiential qualities of the arts and ‘the personal values and the social norms which impact on the artistic production process’ (Hirschman, 1983, in Fillis, 2010, p.34), contribute to the conflicting theories surrounding the arts and marketing. A balance of communicating both intrinsic and extrinsic values in a new marketing model is needed to address this dichotomy and increase consumption. In applying business-oriented marketing techniques to aesthetic cultural experiences, marketers should pay particular attention to branding based on a company’s mission statement, which will help ensure that the meaning or innovation of the art produced is not fully motivated by market factors (Kolb, 2013, p.56).

Changing Expectations: Technology and Service Experiences

Another current challenge facing the sector is adapting to how technological and societal advancements have changed the expectations of a consumer. While consumption is motivated by both the intrinsic and extrinsic values of the arts, as explored in the previous section, consumers are expecting more engagement from a cultural institution than ever before (Radbourne, et al., 2013). It is both the aesthetic and support service experiences at a cultural institution that shape the consumer’s experience (Caru & Cova, 2005; Quero and Ventura, 2015) and motivates their further consumption.

Technology has played a large part in this shift by allowing the creation and viewing of art to be more accessible, which in turn has led to a consumer who expects and wants to be involved in the creative process itself (Kolb, 2013, p.2). Communicating participation opportunities to a consumer becomes key to successful marketing to this preference, showing the way an arts institution can ‘offer people a way to connect with each other over shared interests’ both physically and technologically (Kolb, p.15, 2013). Additionally, in this evolving informational economy, consumers can seek out and form opinions on cultural institutions themselves through online channels, rather than the traditional opposite process (Bernstein, 2007, p.10). This reality challenges arts marketers to focus less on promoting services, instead requiring more effort in ensuring everything ‘from our marketing materials to the ticket purchasing transaction and the experience in the lobby anticipates and enhances the experience of viewing the performance’ (Ibid., p.18). In short, arts marketers are challenged to provide a consumer-centered service at every point of the arts experience to retain audiences today. If marketers learn to adapt to and utilize the technological communities that will share the values of attending their institutions to others interested in artistic experiences, they will be more successful in attracting further consumption and even diversified audiences (Osborne and Rentschler, 2013).

The Social Sphere: Cultural Capital, Omnivorousness, & the New Cultural Consumer

As demonstrated in the challenges explored above, cultural participation is inexplicably linked to sociological factors (Colbert & St. James, 2014) with two of the most influential theories in the past few decades being that of Bourdieu (1984) and Peterson and Simkus (1992). The underlying high-culture vs. low-culture division of the arts discussed in previous sections marks the issue of taste as elementally important to marketing practices. Bourdieu’s seminal work on social organization related taste to cultural consumption in identifying those people able to appreciate highbrow art as those possessing high cultural capital, which they gained from their family background and/or education level. In aligning cultural capital with income and education level, Bourdieu theorizes that ‘the field of consumption is stratified so that there exist different lifestyles organized by class position’ (Holt, 1998, p.4). Applying this to consumption of the arts suggests that the upper class is born with certain tastes toward

highbrow art and a belief 'that a true appreciation of art forms is innate to their life experience' (Kolb, 2013, p.30).

In Peterson and Simkus's 1992 study on musical tastes and occupational groups, they identified similar class/taste divisions as Bourdieu, whereas 'high-status' individuals were more likely to show interests in the fine arts than 'lower-status' individuals, and also had high rates of education and income (p.160). Yet they found these individuals to have much more varied tastes than in Bourdieu's structure, with a tolerance and appreciation for popular culture along with the fine arts (p.169). They coined the term 'cultural omnivore' to describe such individuals who now valued all forms of art in relation to their status (p.169), though an omnivore only increases the volume of their preferences, rather than categorizing them in a different order (Warde, et al., 2007, p.146). This omnivore effect, along with Bourdieu's theory of taste, has been challenged extensively (Holt, 1998; Warde, et al., 2007), with Peterson himself asserting that omnivorousness still needs to be studied over time to assess changes and trends (2005).

With no firm consensus on what determines taste and how it is expressed through cultural consumption, the deeply nuanced and complex theories of omnivorousness and cultural capital require further research over time (Holbrook, et al., 2002). Still, these sociological theories give the arts marketer a gateway into understanding what leads to consumption. As Peterson and Simkus discovered, the structured distinctions of culture have blurred, with audiences today consuming culture because they believe 'life is enriched by more and varied experiences of any type, which they want to share with others' (Kolb, 2013, p.3). This places demands on the arts marketer to react to a cultural consumer who, without the limitations of high/low culture distinctions, is on a quest 'for appropriation, connectivity and transformation through the arts experience' (Radbourne, 2013, p.147). In searching for these authentic experiences, the intrinsic values of the arts are called upon by the consumer, who will reward cultural institutions with increased loyalty if provided authentic, engaging experiences (Lewis and Bridger, 2001).

EXAMINING SOLUTIONS: UTILIZING SOCIAL THEORIES IN AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT & CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

In examining the challenges facing arts managers today, it becomes clear that adapting to the shifting values and expectations of the consumer is central to developing audiences. As the research above has shown, sociological study can help explain cultural participation, but just how far can the theories of a cultural consumer characterized by Bourdieu and Peterson and Simkus be utilized in audience development? The following examples of performing arts companies in the western world demonstrate marketing practices aimed at omnivorous consumers, as well as their implications on audience development and consumption.

The Dutch National Ballet

In a recent study of the consumption motivators of audiences at The Dutch National Ballet, 15 young adults with university backgrounds were interviewed regarding their reasons for attending a performance within the past year (Boelee, 2015). Through interview questions that assessed the taste patterns of interviewees, their education and background, and motivators for attending, the research aimed to understand if certain levels of cultural capital were relevant to consumption. The study found that audience members were motivated by

recreational, artistic, educational, and inspirational motivators, as well as displaying a 'fan-attachment to certain dancers' (p.67). Regarding tastes, these members were seen to display omnivorous tendencies, with preferences ranging from classical ballet to more modern dance styles and other pop culture (p.67). These findings also supported Bourdieu's theory, as students 'exposed to the social and economic characteristics like education, (domestic) cultivation and the possibility to invest time and resources in cultivation and education' showed aesthetic preferences towards ballet (p.71). Furthermore, their educational backgrounds affected their need for cognition, with 'the desire to learn and know more, for example about the specific ballet piece, backstage, the choreographer and the dancers' (p.71)

In applying the theories of cultural capital and omnivorousness to a study of young audiences, the research revealed commonalities within the subgroup where education level contributed to preferences for more challenging, intellectual experiences. The research suggests opportunities for marketers to attract young audiences with growing cultural capital through student schemes, innovative programming involving both classical and modern work, and encouraging some sort of fan community to form 'to provide these individuals an experience with more depth, in which they could challenge each other and share information' (p.73). These conclusions support the application of cultural capital and omnivorous theories to attract a specific subgroup, in which using academic implications will stimulate more consumption and loyalty.

London Symphony Orchestra

In a study at the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), focus groups aimed to discern if 18-25 year olds were attracted to attend by the implementation of a new ticketing application, and if such technology could be utilized for further expanding audiences (Crawford, et al., 2014). The responses of 81 participants once again applied to the theories put forward by Bourdieu and Peterson and Simkus, as the sample groups indicated their preferences for a wide variety of musical genres, but they were generally 'snobbish in their attitudes towards classical music appreciation and patterns of appropriate behaviour at the live classical music concert' (Ibid., p.20). While the implementation of new technology was successful in signing up more of the symphony's current audience to the student scheme and encouraging them to buy more tickets, these students also showed preferences for only a 'limited' amount of technology, and demonstrated 'continued patterns of distinction and exclusion' (p.20).

Despite the growing research in favor of technology and participatory experiences attracting broader audiences, the participants generally showed a distaste for changes of structure and behavior at a classical music concert, suggesting the high-brow sensibilities associated with classical music is not lost even on young people with omnivorous tastes. The students were omnivores, but were generally influenced by their parents and schooling throughout adolescence to prefer classical music and appreciate the social norms of a concert as important to the experience. Bourdieu's hierarchical theory still applies, as classical music attendance still seems to occupy a narrow demographic and therefore a space 'for the continuation and affirmation of middle-class values, practices and habitus' (p.19).

CONCLUSIONS

Both examples of studies on consumer motivators and experiences outlined above focus on the subgroup of young student consumers, typically of middle class background and within

Bourdieu's realm of those with high cultural capital. The sociological theories of Bourdieu and Peterson and Simkus were found to explain and enhance the findings of the studies at these two performing arts institutions, suggesting they are applicable to consumption research. In the case of the Dutch National Ballet, paying closer attention to the omnivore with a certain level of cultural capital revealed opportunities to innovate programming which will attract more consumers with intellectual interests and create a community around the company.

Still, researchers of both studies caution cultural institutions to look in broader social arenas than the 'omnivore' or consumer with high cultural capital if they want to significantly increase consumption. Both studies targeted those who were already interested in the cultural institution with the hope of finding strategies to attract a broader audience, but found little success in that objective. It becomes clear, especially in the case of the LSO, that in targeting omnivores and current audience members with higher cultural capital, cultural institutions are only furthering the class divisions put forward by Bourdieu. Even with a cultural omnivore's varied tastes, their attendance and attitudes at traditionally high-brow cultural events 'reinforces the underlying assumptions about the performing arts industry and its consumers' (Huntington, 2008, p.139).

The narrowness of these examples reveals that research is needed into other subgroups to holistically understand cultural consumption. Arts marketers should broaden their perspective past the confines of omnivores and current audiences with high cultural capital, as 'increased attention to certain groups traditionally overlooked in performing arts could cultivate new markets for the future' (Huntington, 2008, p.129). Continued attention to groups outside of typical consumers can build up new markets in the long term, once they feel 'included in the marketing concept' (Ibid., p.129). With attention on the consumer a focal point of arts marketing today, marketers are challenged to find ways to meet 'consumers at whatever level of involvement they desire' (Kolb, 2013, p.36), which will require understanding that Bourdieu and Peterson and Simkus's social theories are relevant to current audiences, but also have a distinct way of segmenting and inhibiting paths for increasing those audiences and consumption.

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