

## THEATRE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES AND AUDIENCE VIEWING EXPERIENCES

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### ABSTRACT

*A digital native audience may find it more difficult to be captivated by a theatrical performance in the age of technology, yet theater has evolved and survived every technological advancement. The popularity of the plays in Shakespeare's day appears to have been largely dependent on audience behavior, much as it was in the times of Aristophanes and Plautus. In our local Pakistani context, the study investigates whether theater can survive in the present digital media landscape and addresses the key elements that can affect a viewer's decision to see theater in a live setting. A good play, production, and performance are evaluated by audiences who are highly "theatre-literate. Despite the latest developments in technology, there are audiences who are essentially motivated by human interaction and insight, who yearn for the live experience, who appreciate being live in the room with the entertainer and that audience is the reason for the survival of theatre in a digital age. A survey method is utilized to collect data from 200 theater-savvy audiences in order to glean the most pertinent information and enhance the analysis of the information gathered. The results will demonstrate that regular theatergoers choose to attend theater live rather than for free online in order to experience a sense of relationship with the performers and other audience members. The majority of theatergoers said that attending live theater in an era of digital technology was still very much worthwhile. Because theater is a global cultural phenomenon that exists in all societies, the study is important on both a national and international level.*

**Keywords:** Theatre, Digital culture, Technology, Audience, Liveness, Brecht Theatre.

### INTRODUCTION

Theatre has a new meaning as society transitions to the digital era. In the age of the media, theater offers a unique sense of reality. People are told what to think and feel by the television since they have access to a lot of information and many events are interpreted for them as well. But there are no interpreters in a play, thus there are no such filters. The audience watches the story, observes human behavior, and makes choices for the characters. They find it meaningful to be in the theater environment where they may watch characters struggle with the complicated themes that theatre addresses through a narrative. They have a maximum of two hours to ponder about these matters for themselves as well and come to conclusions on their own. Theater likewise can be unpretentious, mysterious, and vague (Bucea & Pensule, 2014). In this age of reality TV, the theatre offers a hallowed space to exercise one's thoughts and imaginings. The digital age implies

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that individuals have an increasing number of options, especially the generation that was raised in a technologically advanced and internet-dependent environment. Their preferred TV show, movie, drama, or even theater is just a click away. These days, theater content is being repurposed for use on television, movies, mobile devices, streaming services, and even downloads, giving them access to new channels. As a result, audiences and performers alike are now more accepting of live theater thanks to the digital culture. (2022 Marshall)

Theatrical entertainment is distinct from other types of entertainment. There is an implicit understanding between the actors and the theatergoers. The drama takes the audience from the real world into the imaginary one as it develops. Now that technology is becoming more accessible, it seems to miss the chance to foster a personal connection between performer and audience. Particularly among young people, it appears that live performances no longer hold the same allure. Due to a number of factors, they find it challenging to decide between living places and technology spaces. Theater artists' work is impacted by this digital trend on numerous levels. The way that new technologies affect attention is different. Anyone involved in the theater community should be aware of this (Bucea & Pensule, 2014). This raises a concern that is the audience change or is theatre fit to the way people used to have their attention focused on something.

As a result, the research study examines the presence of theater in Pakistan in the digital age and considers the key variables that may affect a viewer's choice to watch theater in a live setting. This implies, in a way, that theatergoers frequently switch between real-world settings and technological settings in their daily lives. There are still worries, however, about whether or not this relocation of theaters will harm their artistic prospects.

### **Theatre in Pakistan**

For a very long time, theater has been an integral element of Pakistani culture. Since the early years of Pakistan's existence, it has continued to tell tales and hold the attention of audiences. Theatre has worked hard to maintain its rightful place in our society, from Agha Hassan's Inder Sabha to Sadat Manto and the comedy of Umer Shareef. The theater first faced the advent of near grief with the advancement of television and the start of shows and films. This form of entertainment became the degraded wreckage it is now because of a lack of substitute theatrical activities and a lack of government support in the area (Dawn, 2015). There are now five private theaters in Lahore, Pakistan: Tamaseel, Mehfil, Alfalah, Shalimar, and Alhamra theatre (Dawn, 2015). Now community theatre groups in Pakistan like Ajoka, Rafi Peer and Lok RaHS are once again promoting the theatre. Their plays are focused on social issues and finding solutions through art-based development

The theater first encountered the advent of near grief with the advancement of television and the start of shows and films. Only a small number of fossils have survived up until the present day, and they are almost extinct. Ajoka, Rafi Peer, and Lok RaHS, community theater organizations in Pakistan, are once more promoting the theater. Their plays focus on addressing societal problems via artistic development. Ajoka, Punjab's most vibrant and dynamic theater company, is led by Madeeha Gauhar, who has spent the preceding 30 years tackling social concerns and performing authentic theater. The Rafi Peer Theatre in Lahore is another of these incredibly rare relics which was begun by the Peerzada family (Syed, 2013). The Rafi Peer Theater has dismantled all social and financial taboos that stood in its way and is providing audiences with the same vintage delight that theater used to provide. After years of development and growth, what started out as a puppet theater in 1974 has evolved into a shining representation of any amazing theater in any great nation. Although initially and mostly known for its perplexing puppets, during the past thirteen years, the Rafi Peer Theatre has hosted around nineteen international celebrations of puppetry, movies, shows, music, and cinema. The only source of entertainment in rural villages has historically been street theater, especially during the post-harvest season. In numerous parts of South Asia and Africa, it has been progressively used as a development and awareness-raising tool by civil society and development organizations. The theatre groups like Lok RaHS and Ajoka have revitalized street theatre in Pakistan.

The research study attempts to investigate the factors that have contributed to Pakistani theater's survival in the digital era. The study focuses on Pakistan's community or parallel theater because it is widely

believed that commercial theater there is already in decline due to elements of vulgarity and did not contribute to the well-being of society. This study investigates why people still go to the theater in the age of technology when they can watch theater at home with just a click, as well as how theater satisfies the audience's unfulfilled demands. On the one hand, the emphasis is still on a theatrical production, emphasizing the essential components that draw audiences to live performances. However, what encourages viewers to go watch theatre? Whether these are emotions, education, entertainment, or shared cultural values. The research work reviews the existing study on audience motivation to go watch theatre in a digital age.

### **Research Question**

This research work seeks to answer the following research question:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** What are the major factor(s) that influence digital native audience(s) towards theatre?

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Modern theatre creators are now incorporating cutting-edge digital technologies into this ancient piece of art to produce a performance that will appeal to audiences who were born into the digital age (Murphie & Potts, 2003). In her study, Mundrawala (2014) examined the growth of theater in Pakistan while taking into account the nation's complicated beginnings, its social and political history, and the current situation that could have impacted the nation's future development. Her research showed that over the long period of the nation's existence, theater organizations have risen and fallen out of favor under a variety of political and social circumstances, leaving a trail that has grown to become a part of the overall history of inherited customs. In her book "A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan," Khan (2005) sets out to describe the development of alternative theater, a stage of creative verbalization that has thus far been overlooked by those wishing to reflect on the cultural and social history of Pakistan. Working on a smaller scale has generally allowed theatre to transcend national boundaries, with local theater companies making the most of it by expanding their performance chances abroad. A local Pakistani theater troupe gave a performance in 2012 as part of the World Shakespeare Festival at the Globe Theater in London. (2017), in his article, also shed light on commercial plays in Urdu that are intended for the family audience, have likewise taken the contemporary scene of Pakistani theatre by storm, and in this regard the name of KopyKats Productions based in Islamabad becomes noticeable. the unqualified period drama "Dara" by the Ajoka Theater was translated into English by the National Theater UK, while the Partition-themed play "Daagh Daagh Ujaala" by the Islamabad-based theater company Theater Wallay is touring the US (Hussain, 2017). The amazing Pakistani playwright Anwar Maqsood wrote some of Hussain's most well-known plays for this Theater Company, including "Pawnay 14 August" and "Half Plate."

The study explores the major factor(s) that influenced the viewer's decision to watch theatre in live space. Internationally theatre is perceived as a significant sociable activity where people go and watch theatre very frequently rather than relishing it free online. An opinion is found in the work of Reason (2006) that the 'Liveness' of theater performances is frequently introduced as key to its definition, especially when compared to the non-live performances on film or Television. However, little experimental study has been done to determine whether the theater experience has a special quality that is determined by how it is performed live. In Britain, a sizable number of groups provide live theater in theaters that have been specially constructed and decorated. Nobody will live more than 30 miles from a performance of any kind at some point throughout the year. Theater performances take place across the nation in both urban and rural locations. In a typical year, more than 33% of the adult population attends live theater, and 6% attends opera or ballet, according to Quine's (1999) research, which conducted a poll of theatergoers, which is likely to be performed in urban centers. The most comprehensive qualitative study on audience motivation goes back to the work of Bergadaà and Nyeck who carry out a comparative survey of the core inspirations of theater-makers and goers. By conducting extensive interviews with thirteen theater-makers and fourteen consistent theater-goers, they established the result that both makers and consumers of the theatre were linked in their inspirations not by the outcome of theater itself, but instead by shared cultural values based around a typical respect for high or "legitimate" culture (Bergadaà & Nyeck 1995, p. 41; Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bergadaà and Nyeck's research, "pleasure and escapism" are the two most frequently cited

reasons for engaging in leisure activities (Unger & Kernan, 1983). This conclusion is confirmed by Slater's (2007) research, which challenged the widely held belief in the museums and art gallery sectors that learning was the primary motivation by revealing escapism as the primary driver of the inspiration of visitors to art galleries. Theater experiences involve more than just what takes place on stage. The performance's surroundings, the audience, and the auditorium: all are important aspects of a theatrical event (Sauter, 2000; Cremona et al., 2004). Due to negligible research in the field of theater, the writings from other works of art have so far given helpful perceptions into theater inspiration; and arts marketing is developing as a field of practice and research in its own particular right (Fillis, 2011; Dennis et al., 2011), it is authentic to review the literature from across the spectrum of arts. The research work of Lindelof and Hansen (2015) study indicates that the feeling that the performance is going on in front of you offers a sense of inclusion because of the impression that one's own presence has significance within the performance. The quest for emotional experiences and effects emerged as the primary driving element for respondents in the qualitative study "Why people go to the theatre: a qualitative study of audience motivation" which examined the diverse motives of theatre audiences (Walmsley, 2011).

The phrase "all the world is a stage" isn't just a catchphrase, as Kattenbelt (2006) notes, because electronic world stages are being developed that connect performances and public spaces all over the world. According to Laurel (1993), theater has evolved into an allegory for modern forms of communication and technology. Few performers inhabit the same physical space as an audience during a "live" performance (Zerihan, 2006). It is crucial for actors, audience members, and anyone using the same physical space to engage with one another (in at least one location if there are multiple crowds). At the location of the main artistic event, it is essential that open space is shared (Masura, 2007).

In ancient tribal ceremonies and native dances, audience participation in performing arts dates back thousands of years. Italian futurists led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti were the first to come up with the idea of creating a stage that relied on audience participation and reaction in the 20th century. The phrase "Throw an idea instead of potatoes, idiots" was prompted by the audience's response of throwing fruits or eggs onto the stage (Smith & Dixon, 2007, p. 559). Bertolt Brecht, a well-known theatre director, talked about the impact of radio's interactive ability, which allows listeners to hear and participate with their own ideas. This succinctly expressed his expectations for the impending Internet age in the coming future (Smith & Dixon, 2007, p. 560). People are still striving for the resurgence of theater today. Ten arguments were offered by Dr. Kevin Brown, an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre at the University of Missouri, Columbia, to demonstrate the value of theater in the modern world. He claims that theater gives us the power of expression by enhancing our capacity for cross-cultural communication, message dissemination, and improved intercultural interactions. By putting history on display in front of our eyes rather than merely reading about it in a book or making up our own stories, theater keeps the treasure of history alive (Brown, n.d.).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Brechtian theories and methods were chosen for this research project, which is obviously essential for any investigation into audiences and theater. Brecht's contributions to theater—as a playwright and a theorist with the capacity to inspire social change—along with his efforts to reactivate stage-audience interaction—have had a colossal and profound influence on theater practice as well as on reviews of plays and performances. Bertolt Brecht developed a lot of dramatic strategies to convey his message. The Brechtian theory of epic theater is understood by techniques like the alienation effect, didacticism, breaching the fourth wall, gesture, narrative, and song use.

Brecht's theory and method are commonly referred to as "epic theatre." It is more like a collection of haphazardly connected vignettes than a coherent story with a climax. Although the placement is not practicable, it is recommended, and occasionally they are kept in full view of the crowd. The epic drama makes things seem strange to the audience in order to encourage thoughtful viewing, reflection, and comprehension of the play. By forcing the audience members to make choices and bring them to the point of recognition, this theater transforms the audience member into an observer (Willet, 1974). The concept of Brecht's epic theatre is fetching new dimensions of the audience by changing the connection between

what and how a performance is watched. The spectators would have in mind as a primary concern that a theater performance is being viewed, instead of enabling itself to suspension of doubt. Russell E. Brown (1990) believes, "Without his [Brecht's] doctrine of Epic Theatre, theatre in both East and West would be hard to imagine today"(p. 57). Brecht created the "alienation effect"—the use of anti-illusive techniques to draw audience attention to the fact that they are in a theater watching a portrayal of reality rather than the reality itself—in order to encourage them to adopt a more serious attitude toward what was happening in front of them.

The research study focuses on the audience viewing experience of the theatre, for instance, to observe if the audience is emotionally involved with the characters or relating the event with their own life. In the realistic theatre of illusion, the audience had a tendency to relate to the characters on stage and be emotionally and passionately connected to them instead of being mixed to consider his own life. As Brecht anticipated, the theater should draw people in according to his logic rather than the sentiments of the audience. It should be genuinely moralistic and capable of igniting social change while still entertaining the audience. It is something that contemporary theatrical creators to some extent disagree with. They held that there should only be a minimal, respectable level of emotional involvement on the part of the audience. Brecht argued that in order to fully address current social difficulties, dramatization must be non-Aristotelian. He declined to utilize the Aristotelian devices customarily connected with strong plotting such as suspense, reversals, and disclosures. As per Brecht, these devices are really obstructions to thinking and judgment.

Modern theatre creators seek to emotionally engage the audience because they think this is what our audience needs given the state of theatre in Pakistan today. Theater groups like Ajoka tackle political and social topics in society while also asserting that the audience is no longer restrained and is free to think for itself and make its own decisions. However, they also concurred that the audience's feelings should be separated from the play's actions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The identification and exploration of the major factor(s) that influence digital native audience(s) towards theatre and finding their viewing experience of a live performance. This was done by detecting the factors through a survey and comparing them across the strategies and characteristics of the theatre. In addition, the study also assessed the impact of risk factors on the survival of theatre in this digital age. Owing to this, a survey was chosen for data collection on 200 participants. In order to proficiently use the survey method a questionnaire was made. The online survey was designed to find the viewing experience of the audience of a live theatre performance in an age of technology. The survey questions were statistically analyzed on the basis of factors such as economic factor, performance factor, technological, emotional attachment, cultural, digital marketing, and theatre-quality factors, furthermore correlated with age, gender, and time.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The Pearson Correlation approach was used to determine the link between the demographic characteristics of our respondents, such as age, gender, and time, and the mean variables derived from interviews done in the early part of this study. The Pearson correlation method is used to investigate the linear relationship between two continuous variables, such as whether Y increases or decreases when X decreases. For continuous data, the Pearson Correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) varies between -1 and +1. Various scholars offer various interpretations, but Cohen (1988, pp. 79–81) offers the following rule of thumb for the strength of a relationship:

Small relationship,  $r = 0.10$  to  $0.29$

Medium relationship  $r = 0.30$  to  $0.49$

Large relationship  $r = 0.50$  to  $1.0$

( $r$ ) is the Pearson's correlation coefficient which is a measure of the strength of the relationship between two variables whereas positive or negative sign represents the direction of the relationship. Economic factors show no significant correlation between choosing to attend a live performance rather than watching one for free online, along with age and gender, but when a correlation is multiple times positive and of

medium strength and the Pearson value is positive and greater than significant value (0.01) and above 0.30, it can be inferred that regular theatergoers prefer to attend live performances rather than watching them for free online. Between preferred theatre shows with free entry along with age, gender, and number of times no significant correlation was found as the Pearson value is less than significant value so it could be concluded that all regular and non-regular audiences prefer free entry to watch theatre independent of age and gender. Between see the budget for buying tickets to live theatre along with age, gender, and number of times no significant correlation was found as Pearson value is less than significant value so it could be concluded that all regular and non-regular have to see the budget for buying tickets of live theatre independent to age and gender, it might be because of expensive tickets of live theatre. A positive and small correlation is seen with the amount of time spent watching theater, suggesting that while regular audiences consider performance to be an important factor in choosing to attend a specific live performance, non-regular audiences do not place much weight on it. This was found between the performance of the theater and its actors, along with age and gender. Performance is a factor that affects everyone equally, regardless of age or gender.

A significant correlation was found between emotional attachment with theatre and its actors along with the age of respondents and the number of times to watch theatre as the Pearson value is greater than the significant value (0.05) and above 0.10 then, therefore the positive and small correlation is observed with number of times to watch theatre whereas negative and small correlation is observed with age. No significant correlation was found between emotional attachment and gender. So it could be concluded that aged respondents have a more emotional attachment to theatre and its actors than youngsters while all regular audiences consider emotional attachment a less important factor in visiting a particular live than non-regular audience however gender of respondents is independent of emotional attachment. Similar to this, a significant correlation was discovered between the theatre's technological adaptation and respondents' ages, as long as the Pearson value was higher than the threshold for significance (0.05) and above 0.10, at which point a small and negative correlation could be seen. However, no significant correlation was discovered between respondents' gender or frequency of theater attendance. As a result, older respondents place more importance on technological adaptability than younger ones. However, respondents' gender and the amount of theater they see are unrelated to the degree of technological adaptation.

When the Pearson value is higher than the significant value (0.01) and above 0.10, there is a negative and small correlation between theatre performances and respondents' ages, whereas there was no significant correlation with respondents' gender or frequency of theater attendance. It is found that older respondents believe that theatrical productions express cultural legacy, whereas younger respondents do not. However, respondents' gender and the number of times they attend plays are unrelated to how the cultural legacy is expressed in the plays. Similarly, between digital/social media marketing of theatre along with age of respondents and number of times to watch theatre as Pearson value is greater than significant value (0.05) and above 0.10 then, thus positive and small correlation is observed with no. of times to watch theatre whereas negative and small correlation is observed with age. The marketing of theater on social media and digital platforms did not significantly correlate with gender. Therefore, it can be concluded that younger respondents value digital/social media marketing of theater more than older respondents, while all regular audience members value it less than non-regular audience members. The gender of respondents is unrelated to digital/social media marketing, however, as both men and women take it seriously. It can be concluded that all regular and non-regular theatergoers must-see theatre quality regardless of age and gender because audience members must pay expensive live theatre ticket prices in exchange for the demand for quality performance. For the theatre quality factor, no significant correlation was found between theatre quality along age, gender, and number of times as all Pearson values are less than significant.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our theater companies, whether they specialize in interactive, commercial, community, or contemporary theater, face both opportunities and challenges in the digital world. On the one hand, you're fascinated by how technological advancements have given live performances of theater, dance, and music the possibility to reach new audiences, particularly the younger generation. Despite the most recent technological

advancements, there is an audience that is primarily driven by human interaction and understanding. And it is because of this audience that theater has survived in the digital era. There are people who do make an effort, people who already have exposure to theatre, who used to watch theatre but didn't for a time period and now out of nostalgia, out of their old practices they come back to see theatre. Regular theatergoers prefer to view plays live rather than for free online. They become engrossed in the performance and develop a relationship with one or more play characters. The majority of theatergoers become emotionally invested and reflect on their own lives or experiences while watching a performance. The utilization of cutting-edge technology in theater productions, such as multimedia, sound, and lighting effects, is unquestionably popular with the audience. The majority of them think that theatrical performances honor our cultural past or express a component of who we are. The use of social media and digital marketing by a certain theater company has increased the number of young theatergoers. Independent of age and gender, every frequent and occasional theatergoer agrees that theater quality is improving. They believe that it is worth going to live theatre in a digital era.

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