

A Grounded Theory Study on Musical Audience Experience

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Abstract. Musical is a comprehensive stage art that integrates music, drama, dance and visual art. It has developed rapidly in China's cultural consumption market in recent years, and audience experience has become an important basis for measuring the realization of artistic value and market acceptance. Most existing studies focus on superficial contents such as audience's behavioral motivation and perception evaluation, and many studies pay attention to attendance rate, ticket purchase motivation, satisfaction and aesthetic preference. However, there is a lack of systematic theoretical research on the complex internal psychological structure, emotional changes, meaning generation and social interaction process in the dynamic experience of audiences from expectation to immersion and then to aftertaste. This study uses qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation to collect first-hand data, establishes a multi-dimensional theoretical model of musical audience experience, reveals the complete psychological process of audience experience from early expectation, on-site immersion to later meaning construction, and constructs a model of the influence of the interaction between individual characteristics, social and cultural background and artistic characteristics of works on experience quality. The research results fill the theoretical gap in musical audience research, and provide theoretical support and practical reference for the sustainable development and localized innovation of China's musical industry.

Keywords: Musical, Audience experience, Grounded theory

1. Introduction

Musical theatre cleverly mixes many art elements such as music, drama, dance and visual design. It uses singing, dialogue and dance to tell stories, create characters and express feelings. Compared with traditional drama, musical theatre pays more attention to the natural mix of music and story. Music is not only used to create background atmosphere, but also to push the story forward and show the inner world of characters.

In recent years, musical theatre has grown clearly in China's cultural consumption market. This is mainly shown in the following aspects: the market size keeps becoming bigger; the number of shows and attendance in commercial theatres in first-tier and new first-tier cities rise steadily; the number of original and imported musicals increases greatly. The audience group becomes wider, spreading from core musical fans to more young people. Discussions on social media are getting more and more popular, such as the reading volume of related topics on Weibo, Xiaohongshu and

the activity of fan groups. The industrial chain is becoming more mature, including the creation and production of original Chinese musicals, theatre tickets and related musical products.

In this active development environment, the audience is the key part that judges the artistic value and directly influences the market. The structure, process and inner mechanism of their watching experience decide the artistic influence of works, market acceptance and even the sustainable development of the whole industry. Although past studies on the musical industry have begun to pay attention to musical audiences, most of them only focus on surface behavioral motivation or single perception evaluation, such as attendance rate, ticket purchase motivation, satisfaction and aesthetic preference [1-3]. However, the complete, dynamic and deep psychological experience of audiences—from building expectations before watching, to deep immersion at the show, to the improvement of meaning after watching—has not been systematically revealed and theoretically explained, especially the complex inner psychological structure, emotional changes, meaning creation and social interaction in this process.

Traditional perception theories focus on short-term group emotions or distant sensory stimulation. Most of these theories come from events and travel, and they depend on standard experience dimensions. But musical theatre experience has high-density interaction, such as real judgment of actors' performances, impromptu interaction with actors and active identity construction, which cannot be explained by these traditional theories. To improve the theory and deeply analyze the multi-dimensional and deep experience of audiences when watching musicals, this study uses the grounded theory method to systematically explore the inner structure and formation mechanism of musical audience experience, and provide theoretical support and practical suggestions for musical creation, performance and marketing.

2. Literature review and theoretical basis

2.1. Review of research status at home and abroad

Grounded theory, a qualitative research method, was put forward by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s and has been widely used in many academic fields. This method mainly focuses on summarizing theories from empirical data instead of testing hypotheses based on fixed theories. In many domestic studies, grounded theory is widely applied in research fields such as user experience and audience behavior. Scholars like Tang Zewei built a conceptual framework of user experience for public welfare crowdfunding platforms based on grounded theory [1], which provides theoretical support for understanding users' experience process in specific situations. These studies show that grounded theory is of great value in exploring complex social phenomena and human experience, and lays a solid methodological foundation for the research of musical audience experience.

The dynamic and deep experience of musical audiences is the core that determines the artistic appeal and market vitality of musicals. However, most existing studies focus on superficial behavioral and evaluation indicators, and the theoretical explanation of their internal psychological mechanism and meaning construction process is still insufficient. To systematically explore this complex phenomenon and build a more explanatory theoretical framework, it is necessary to first sort out the core theories and existing studies related to "perception" and "experience", so as to lay a solid theoretical foundation for the following qualitative analysis.

From a psychological perspective, the audience's theatre experience is a comprehensive psychological process involving multi-sensory effects, emotional stimulation and cognitive processing. First, the Flow Theory proposed by Csikszentmihalyi provides a core framework for understanding the audience's high concentration and immersion state. It describes that when an

individual faces challenges matching his or her own skills, he or she will enter an optimal experience state of complete concentration and distorted sense of time. This theory has been widely used to analyze immersion experience in various cultural consumption activities. Zhou Wenhao explored the factors influencing the audience experience in domestic Live Houses from the perspective of Flow Theory [2], and found that environmental design, performance quality, social interaction and other aspects of music performance venues have an important impact on the audience's immersion experience. Han Weijuan analyzed the development trend of TV entertainment programs from the perspective of audience experience value [3], indicating that improving audience experience value is the key to the success of programs. These studies show the complexity and multi-dimensionality of audience experience from various perspectives, and provide important theoretical references for the research of musical audience experience.

Second, cognitive evaluation theory and emotional arousal theory help us analyze how sensory stimuli trigger specific emotional responses through the audience's cognitive interpretation, thereby affecting their overall experience evaluation. In the field of musical art, Jiang Rong deeply explored the theories and strategies of audience development in the British musical art market [4], and analyzed how musical art institutions expand their audience groups and improve audience participation through innovative strategies and methods. Shang Jiabao and Si Si studied the audience development of Henan Opera based on grounded theory [5], exploring the methods for traditional opera to attract and cultivate new audiences in the current society, which provides a reference from traditional art forms for musical audience research.

After sorting out, it is found that most existing studies on musical or performing art experience focus on macro market and strategy analysis, or single-type perception, or do not discuss the psychological evolution of the whole theatre experience. Therefore, this study holds that it is difficult to fully explain the complexity and uniqueness of musical audience experience by simply applying theoretical models that only focus on single artistic perception or static perception. To deeply understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to introduce an analysis framework that can integrate multi-sensory, multi-dimensional and whole-process factors, which is the core goal of the dynamic theoretical model of musical audience experience that this study attempts to construct through grounded theory.

3. Research design

3.1. Selection of interview samples

The samples were mainly selected from audiences in cities with active musical performances such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Chongqing. Interviewees were recruited through social media apps, Weibo posts and other channels. The screening criteria were: having watched musicals more than 3 times, aged between 14 and 50, having complete ability to express themselves, and being willing to share their viewing experience in depth.

After screening, 26 interviewees were finally determined. These interviewees were well distributed in gender, age, educational background, occupation and viewing experience. Among them, females accounted for 70% of the samples, which is consistent with the gender characteristics of musical audiences (according to industry survey data such as China Musical Industry Development Report, females account for about 70% of musical audiences). Most of them were aged between 20 and 30, showing that this is the core audience group. Most of them had bachelor's degree or above, indicating that musical audiences had relatively high cultural literacy. In addition, their occupations covered education, actors, agents and many other industries.

3.2. Research methods

This study adopted the grounded theory method, and completed coding with the help of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The grounded theory method emphasizes generating theories from original data from bottom to top and is more suitable for exploring new concepts or new theories [6]. The complex phenomenon of musical audience experience covers emotion, cognition, social interaction and many other aspects, and the existing theories are not complete. Therefore, based on the inductive research logic of grounded theory, this study starts from the real experience of the audience, and gradually extracts the core concepts and theoretical models of audience experience through continuous comparison, theoretical sampling and other steps.

3.3. Data collection and processing

This study adopted a phased and progressive data collection strategy to ensure rich data and theoretical saturation. Firstly, the screening criteria for target interviewees were established, that is, audiences who had watched three or more musicals in the past two years and had certain artistic appreciation ability. Then 26 core interviewees were selected through social media recruitment, questionnaire background surveys and other methods. Data collection was carried out in strict accordance with the theoretical sampling principle of grounded theory. The focus of subsequent interviews was adjusted according to the preliminary coding results until the conceptual categories were saturated.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into original text data of about 200,000 words. Then the three-level coding procedure of grounded theory was followed, and the constant comparison method was strictly applied in coding to ensure accurate and consistent concept extraction.

4. Grounded theory analysis

4.1. Open coding

Open coding is to analyze the collected interview data and observation data sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, so as to identify many initial concepts that affect musical audience experience. Concepts extracted from the original data, such as emotional resonance, audio-visual shock, plot immersion, actor charm, stage design sense, etc., belong to the concepts of direct experience elements. These concepts can reflect the real feelings and changes of psychological state of the audience when watching musicals, and show the psychological process from sensory stimulation to emotional investment.

Based on the extraction of initial concepts, similar and related concepts are classified and integrated in the process of constant comparison and induction. Concepts such as musical infection, visual impact and spatial atmosphere belong to sensory experience concepts, while role empathy, plot immersion and emotional fluctuation belong to emotional investment concepts. Audience interaction and social identity are classified as social interaction concepts, and cultural understanding and value cognition are under meaning construction concepts. Such classification and induction help to find out the core dimensions of musical audience experience and lay a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent axial coding and selective coding.

4.2. Axial coding

Axial coding is based on open coding. With the help of axial coding, the initial concepts are further reorganized and integrated according to internal logic. After in-depth analysis of concepts related to musical audience experience, it is found that there are obvious hierarchical structures and causal relationships among various concepts. In the expectation construction stage, the audience's personal cultural literacy, preferences and external information input interact with each other, thus forming the psychological expectation before watching. The on-site experience stage is a variety of parallel processes such as sensory stimulation, emotional resonance, cognitive processing, etc. At the same time, the audience constructs immediate experience through audio-visual feelings, emotional investment and rational thinking in the theater environment. The subsequent aftertaste stage includes the reconstruction of experience memory, the deep interpretation of meaning, and the emergence of social sharing behavior, so as to extend and spread the experience.

Through sorting and refining, four key dimensions of musical audience experience are summarized. The perception dimension includes the direct sensory experience of the audience on objective perception elements such as the appeal of musical melody, the professionalism of acting skills, and the shock degree of stage vision. The emotional dimension reflects the emotional fluctuation and psychological changes of the audience during watching, such as role resonance, emotional catharsis, ideological enlightenment and other subjective experiences. The cognitive dimension shows the depth of the audience's understanding of play structure, theme and artistic value, such as plot comprehension, symbolic meaning interpretation and aesthetic judgment. The social dimension focuses on the social nature of audience experience, including collective experience elements such as on-site interaction, perception of others' atmosphere, post-view communication and sharing. These four dimensions are interwoven and dynamically influenced, forming a complete structural framework of musical audience experience and laying a theoretical foundation for subsequent selective coding.

4.3. Selective coding

Selective coding is a higher abstraction and condensation of the four summarized dimensions. It is determined that "audience experience immersion" is the core category that can govern and explain the whole process of musical audience experience. This core category reflects the complete psychological process of the audience from expectation establishment, on-site perception to subsequent aftertaste, covering emotional investment, cognitive participation, sensory experience and other dimensions. It can also explain the internal mechanism why different audiences have different experiences of the same work. At the same time, audience experience immersion has become a key factor determining the market success of works. This core category has strong explanatory power and generality, which can effectively connect conditional factors such as individual characteristics, work characteristics and environmental factors. Through process mechanisms such as emotional resonance, role identity and aesthetic perception, it finally affects the overall experience quality and behavioral intention of the audience.

4.4. Theoretical saturation test

Theoretical saturation is the core standard of grounded theory research, which means that no new conceptual categories appear when continuing to collect new data, and the existing theoretical framework is sufficient to explain and predict the research phenomenon. It is necessary to further

verify whether the constructed theoretical model of musical audience experience reaches a saturated state. Therefore, the standardized procedure of theoretical saturation test is adopted. In the test, evaluation is mainly carried out from three dimensions: conceptual saturation, relational saturation and explanatory saturation. After coding and analyzing the last five interview data, this study finds that for conceptual saturation, all new open codes can be classified into the established dimension system, and no new concepts are generated.

5. Model interpretation

5.1. Sensory dimension

The sensory experience of musical audiences is first based on the two key perceptual dimensions: vision and hearing, because they are the most direct and fundamental ways for audiences to contact stage works. Visual experience includes stage design, costumes, lighting, stage layout and other elements, while the core components of auditory experience include music, singing, instrumental performance, sound effects and theater acoustic environment. When audiences watch musicals, visual and auditory elements do not work separately, but interact to exert a combined effect on the overall perceptual quality. When stage vision and music are highly consistent in rhythm, emotion and style, audiences are more likely to enter a state of deep immersion. As respondents said: "Music is the core of a musical. If the music is bad, the whole show is hard to save." "Stage design affects the sense of immersion. Good stage design can improve continuity and reduce the chance of feeling disconnected from the show."

The mechanism by which audience experience is influenced by sensory stimulation is a gradual process from shallow to deep. First, sensory contact forms an initial impression, then stimulates emotional resonance, and finally achieves deep experience such as cognitive understanding and meaning construction. When sensory stimulation is rich and varied within a moderate range, audiences are more likely to stay interested and emotionally engaged. If the stimulation is too simple, flat or lasts too long, it may lead to aesthetic fatigue. Some respondents described: "When the lights come on, the whole stage atmosphere appears, and I am immediately drawn into the scene." "The live band and the actors' singing blend together. That shock cannot be compared with recordings at all."

5.2. Cognitive dimension

The core element of audience cognitive understanding and acceptance is plot logic. It is necessary to ensure artistic expression while maintaining reasonable narration [7], which directly affects the audience's acceptance and depth of experience. During the performance, audiences will build their own story framework and predict and verify the plot development. If the plot logic is clear and the causal relationship is definite, audiences can follow the story smoothly and develop deep emotional investment.

For narrative structure, the classic three-act structure is still the most acceptable framework for audiences. Since audiences understand narration mostly based on their existing cultural cognition, works using familiar narrative modes allow them to enter the state faster and achieve emotional resonance. On the contrary, overly stylized narration may cause aesthetic fatigue, so proper innovation while keeping the structure clear is a key strategy to improve audience cognitive experience.

There are obvious individual differences in audience cognitive patterns, mainly due to different educational backgrounds, cultural literacy and personal experiences. Experienced musical audiences have more professional aesthetic judgments and can quickly identify artistic techniques and stylistic features of works. Meanwhile, first-time musical audiences mostly rely on intuitive feelings and emotional reactions, and their cognitive process is more perceptual.

5.3. Emotional resonance dimension

Music is the most direct carrier of emotion. Its melody, harmony and rhythm can quickly arouse the audience's original emotional responses. According to interviews, classic songs in musicals often evoke stronger emotions than dramatic plots. Melody familiarity and connection with emotional memory are key factors in stimulating resonance. In addition, the perfect combination of lyrics and music creates two channels for emotional expression: one conveys emotional information through rational language symbols, and the other deepens and broadens emotional experience through perceptual musical elements.

The emotional appeal of artistic works is reflected in the depth and continuity of musical audience emotional experience. Deep emotion is formed when the audience's personal emotions match the emotional content of the work at a deep level. When the emotional themes presented on stage touch the inner emotional needs or psychological trauma of the audience's own experience, they often bring strong emotional shock and psychological resonance. For example, respondents mentioned that the family line in *Flowers for Algernon* and the plot twist in *The Orphan of Zhao* easily arouse audience resonance. High-quality performances cause physical reactions such as goosebumps and accelerated heartbeat. The gradual accumulation of dramatic tension promotes emotional progression, guiding the audience's emotional experience from shallow feelings to deeper levels. At this time, audiences often need to re-examine their values and deepen their understanding of life to reach a deeper emotional depth.

5.4. Social dimension

The social interaction of musical audiences is diverse, especially in three aspects: on-site interaction, online sharing and extended discussion. On-site interaction includes emotional resonance with companions during the show, collective applause and cheers at the curtain call, and interaction with actors after the performance. Online sharing is achieved through social media platforms by taking stage photos, posting reviews, and joining topic discussions, thus expanding the time and space of experience. This form of interaction encourages audiences to think more deeply about the work.

These sharing and interaction behaviors significantly improve the viewing experience, mainly by increasing experience value and socializing meaning construction. The process in which audiences turn inner feelings into shared content through words and images is actually reprocessing and deepening the performance experience. At the same time, sharing has a feedback mechanism, such as likes and comments from others, which further strengthens the viewing experience, validates feelings, and enhances the recognition of the work's value. More importantly, through the spread of social networks, personal experience becomes collective memory. Individual impressions blend with those of others, and people participate in the social construction of the cultural meaning of musicals. This brings a sense of participation and achievement, and significantly improves overall viewing satisfaction.

6. Audience experience evolution mechanism and driving factors

Based on the four-dimensional experience model established above, the evolution mechanism of audience experience presents a progressive path of four stages: "emotional trigger – cognitive deliberation – emotional resonance – social behavior". In the initial contact stage, high-intensity sensory stimulation attracts the audience's attention, while the cognitive dimension is in a state of basic analysis. Whether the audience can enter the stage of deep participation mainly depends on whether the cognitive dimension's understanding of the theme provides rational support for emotional resonance. When the audience identifies with the show and connects it with their own experiences, emotional resonance occurs, showing emotional excitement or sadness. At this point, the social dimension begins to appear, such as on-site applause after the performance or online discussions. Finally, the social dimension dominates the experience closed loop. Through repeated viewing, fan community interaction and other behaviors, the audience strengthens emotional connection and forms a circular mechanism of "experience – cognitive resonance – re-experience".

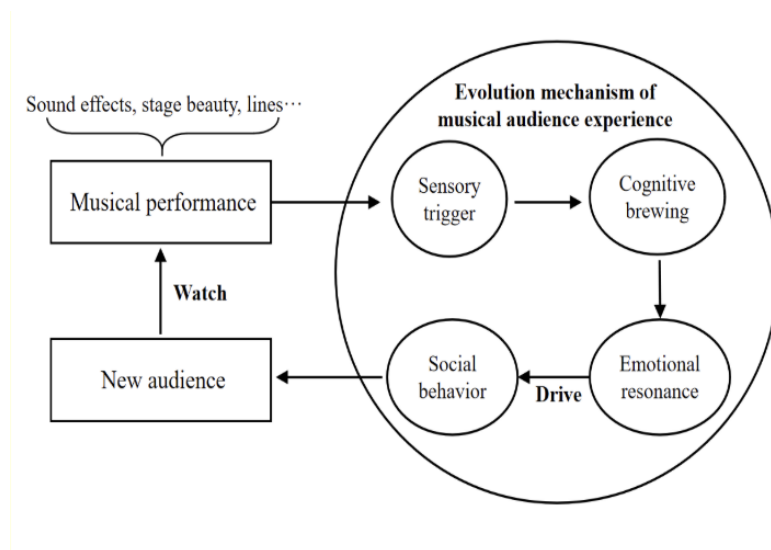


Figure 1. Diagram of the evolutionary mechanism of musical audience experience

This evolutionary process is driven by both audience personality traits and life experiences. In terms of personality, extroverted individuals are more likely to activate the social dimension; highly neurotic individuals have stronger emotional fluctuations; and open-minded individuals have higher acceptance of innovative forms. In terms of life experience, audiences with rich cultural consumption experience have faster cognitive processing and can understand metaphorical plots more quickly. Audiences who have experienced key events such as separation and struggle show more preference for realistic-themed musicals. In addition, audience cognitive patterns differ further due to cultural backgrounds. Audiences with corresponding cultural backgrounds can more accurately grasp the cultural connotation and value orientation of the works and develop a strong sense of cultural identity.

7. Conclusion and prospect

7.1. Research conclusion

This study adopts the grounded theory method to deeply explore the internal structure and formation mechanism of musical audience experience. After collecting a large amount of qualitative data through in-depth interviews and participant observation, a multi-dimensional theoretical model of musical audience experience is successfully constructed. The research shows that musical audience experience is a dynamic and multi-level psychological process, in which pre-expectation construction, on-site immersion experience and post-meaning generation are the three core stages. In the pre-expectation stage, personal aesthetic experience, social and cultural background and expected information of the work form the audience's psychological preset. In the on-site immersion stage, sensory stimulation, emotional resonance and cognitive participation enable the audience to engage deeply. In the post-meaning generation stage, the audience completes the internalization and sublimation of experience through reflection, social sharing and value reconstruction. This complete experience process reveals the complex transformation of musical audiences from passive acceptance to active participation and from individual feelings to social interaction.

7.2. Research contributions

The contributions of this study are multi-dimensional, mainly reflected in three aspects:

First, the construction of a dynamic experience model is the core theoretical contribution of this study. It breaks through the limitations of previous studies on static indicators such as audience behavioral motivation and satisfaction, and systematically constructs an "evolutionary mechanism model of musical audience experience". Starting from the four core dimensions of sensation, emotion, cognition and society, this model clarifies the formation and change mechanism of personal viewing experience under different conditions, providing a new and systematic theoretical framework for the audience acceptance law of comprehensive stage art.

Second, the findings of this study provide direct and hierarchical practical implications for all links of the musical industry chain. For the creation of Chinese musicals, as ordinary audio-visual effects and general plot design can hardly meet audience needs, attention should be paid to the organic integration and rhythmic synchronization of music, narration, performance and stage art to bring audiences a smooth and profound experience.

Third, this study is not a closed artistic discussion. The models and findings constructed are interdisciplinary. It applies psychological flow theory and emotion theory to the theater context, and draws on sociological perspectives of interaction and meaning construction, regarding performance viewing as a kind of collective memory and social behavior. Therefore, this study builds a bridge between art and social sciences, and its discourse and framework can be understood and cited by a wider range of disciplines.

7.3. Implications for improving musical audience experience

The grounded theory findings show that improving musical audience experience requires systematic optimization focusing on the whole experience process. In terms of work creation, it is necessary to strengthen the in-depth construction of emotional resonance, establish an emotional bond between the audience and the work by accurately shaping characters, selecting story themes close to audience life experience and adding localized elements with cultural identity. Moreover, the degree of organic

integration of music, dance and theatrical performance is directly related to the quality of audience immersion. Therefore, the creative team should pay attention to the coordination and unity of various artistic elements to avoid a single art form being too abrupt and destroying the overall harmony. In addition, the control of narrative rhythm and the design of emotional tension should be more refined, with reasonable arrangement of emotional fluctuations to guide the audience through a complete emotional process from expectation to climax and then to aftertaste.

7.4. Limitations and prospects

Although this study has achieved some results in the theoretical construction of musical audience experience, there are still many limitations. Most of the interviewees are from first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, and insufficient discussion is made on the differences in audience experience in second- and third-tier cities and different regional cultures, which may affect the universality of the theoretical model. Future research can expand the sample coverage to include audiences from more regions and cultural backgrounds, making the theory more applicable across regions. It can also focus on the impact of emerging technologies such as AR and VR on musical audience experience, explore new forms of viewing experience in the digital era, and provide more practical theoretical references for the refined development of China's musical industry.

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