Almost like being there?
A conceptualisation of live-streaming theatre

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Abstract

Purpose – The live streaming of theatrical performances to cinemas has become increasingly common in recent years. The practice offers potentially positive returns for audience reach, audience development, revenue streams and global cultural exchange (Cochrane and Bonner, 2014; Nesta, 2011; King, 2016). However, the conceptualisation of live performance transmissions remains under-explored. The purpose of this paper is to review critically selected literature on event experience and apply it to the growing practice of live-streaming theatre (LST). In doing so, the paper develops a new conceptual model that can be used to guide future research on audience expectations, motivations and experience of LST.

Design/methodology/approach – A comparative historic case study approach combines a structured review of relevant academic literature and industry sources. Theories of live cultural experience and authenticity are critically reviewed. The opportunities and threats of LST to performing arts companies are summarised. The approach considers cognitive, affective and behavioural factors in probing themes of audience awareness, perceptions, expectations and experience of LST. The paper uses these factors to develop an original conceptual model for LST.

Findings – The research finds that the practice of cinematic live transmission of performing arts challenges existing conceptual categories and marketing strategies. Fundamental events studies factors such as “attendance”, “authenticity” and “experience” are re-evaluated. The model suggests that despite improvements in digital technology traditional theatre and broadcasted theatre are two different experiences, not substitutes.

Research limitations/implications – As a conceptual paper, the results are subject to being tested in the field. The findings reveal implications for the evolving future of hybrid and mixed event experiences. The potential for LST screenings to attract new audiences requires further study.

Practical implications – The implications of the research reflect the changing business models and supply side dynamics of theatre production and touring. The results suggest that live streaming is of limited effectiveness in addressing the capacity limits of Baumol and Bowen’s (1966) “cost disease” in live arts performance. LST allows major brands to penetrate regional markets thereby potentially squeezing out smaller touring companies and restricting innovation.

Social implications – The findings reveal implications for the evolving future of hybrid and mixed event experiences.

Originality/value – The influence of digital technology on live arts experience is currently under-explored and under-theorised. This paper develops a new conceptual model that captures in greater detail than previously the various factors that may determine audience engagement with, and experience of, LST. The paper contributes to knowledge by expanding the discourse on the gaps between the competing aims of access and authenticity. The analysis expands the academic understanding of hybrid and virtual event experiences.

Keywords Authenticity, Theatre, Broadcast, Digital technology, Hybrid events, Live streaming

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction: digital technology and live events

Recent decades have witnessed a changing relationship between digital technology and live events. In the past, there were fears within academia and the events industry that advances in digital technology would herald the end of live events as understood until

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then. The music industry’s core business model was jarred by the file-sharing phenomenon (Cameron, 2016). The pendulum then swung in the opposite direction as digital technology was embraced for its various new and expanding capabilities. This exuberance was subsequently tempered with a turn to “hybrid” events that mixed both live and online digital content (Sox et al., 2015).

There have been cases where the power of new technology has damaged the reputation of live events. Alleged misuse of social media and online advertising to misrepresent live events has been noted at music festivals (Cresci, 2017) and food events (Crossley, 2016). Meanwhile, there is evidence that the Millennials generation is starting to wean itself off digital content in favour of live experiences. Increasingly, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is accumulated in a social environment where “spending on making memories trumps buying stuff” (Eventbrite, 2014, p. 4). Whilst there have been some research works into the use of digital devices by younger attendees of live theatre (Richardson, 2015), little prior theoretical writing that unpacks the corollary of virtual attendance at live-streamed arts events.

The consumption of cultural goods allows individuals to demonstrate their social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Styles and tastes in the past have distinguished between exclusive “high” and populist “low” art (Bourdieu et al., 1965; Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin, 1976). Digital technology challenges these traditional social distinctions by enabling wider access to “high” art.

LST can be categorised as a form of hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) in that it is a multisensory activity embedded with fantasy and emotiveness. Metaphors of consumption (Holt, 1995, pp. 2-3) include: consuming as experience (the subjective and emotional interaction with the objects consumed); consuming as integration (the way consumers acquire and manipulate the meanings of objects); consuming as classification (according to personal meanings associated with the consumed objects); and consuming as interactive, shared autotelic play. Live-streaming theatre (LST) challenges the notion that the consumption of experiences (Carù and Cova, 2007) cannot be expanded or manipulated. The deconstruction of LST in this paper expands Auslander’s (2008, p. 4) aim to challenge the perceived “oppositional relationship between the live and the mediatized” cultural forms.

Whether digital technology is considered an opportunity or a threat, there can be little question that it has disrupted established business models and practices within the live performing arts and entertainment industries (Waldfogel, 2017). Yet, despite rapid and significant advances in technology, relatively little academic attention has been paid to the challenges that new technology poses to some of the most central concepts within live event studies: what is the essence of “liveness”; what is the meaning of “attendance”; and, indeed, what is an “event”.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) concept of “flow” describes the phenomenon of being completely absorbed and entrained by something. The Independent Theatre Council has published a handbook (Jones and Pulford, 2009, p. 14) which includes measures to capture audience experience. Five factors are identified: engagement and concentration, learning and challenge, energy and tension, shared experience and atmosphere, and personal resonance and connection. However, whether these manifestations of audience experience and “flow” can also be attributed to attendance at LST, and to what degree, remain, to our knowledge, un-explored. We propose in this paper that digital and traditional theatres are two different experiences.

Different terms have been used to describe the phenomenon of the live audio-visual broadcast of performing arts, entertainment and sporting events. These include: “live-broadcasting”, “simulcasting”, “webcasting”, “live-streaming”, “digital broadcast cinema”, “alternate (media) content cinema”, “event cinema”, “livecasting” and “relays”.

These are different designations for describing the filming and live broadcasting of events such as theatre productions to cinemas or providing on-demand content online for people to access from all around the world (Heyer, 2008; Christie, 2012; Cochrane and Bonner, 2014; Miracle Theatre, 2015). A key differentiator is whether the transfer from live to digital formats is by “live-transmission”, whereby the screening is broadcast via a satellite to
cinemas making real-time presentation possible, or by pre-recorded theatrical content (referred to as “encores”), which are later transmitted as regular movies via encrypted Digital Cinema Package protocols to screening cinemas (Cochrane and Bonner, 2014). LST takes place both at indoor and outdoor screening venues.

A key difference between live screenings at public screening venues such as cinemas, and home viewing of live broadcasts (e.g. pay per view television or cable channels) or watching on portable devices, is that public screening venues mimic the physical and social environment of the traditional theatre venue, whether an indoor or an outdoor one. For the purposes of this study, “LST” is defined as the filming and instantaneous (or near-simultaneous) transmission of live theatrical performance to cinemas that may be indoors or outdoors, at events known as “live screenings”. This research has focused mainly on LST at indoor cinemas. Our attention is specifically on traditional live theatre, opera, dance and classical music, in other words the “high” performing arts.

The aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for the deeper understanding of LST and thereby extend the debate on whether digital technology is an opportunity or a threat to the live performing arts industry. In doing so, the paper reconceptualises the notions of “liveness”, “authenticity” and “attendance” in the context of LST. The paper seeks to offer a conceptual framework for analysing the aesthetic factors, social experience and consumer preferences of live digital transmission in the performing arts context. The concluding section notes the significance of the findings and the implications for events management practice and further research.

2. Methodology

The paper has been developed initially as a literature review sourced from academic peer reviewed journals. Opening search terms included technical terms such as “live streaming” and “digital broadcasting”, and sociological terms such as “authenticity” and “liminal”. As the search expanded, three thematic categories emerged: the aesthetic dimension, social experience and consumer behaviour.

The academic literature was supplemented by historical accounts of the evolution of broadcasting and its adoption by the performing arts. This comparative historical approach has been previously used in the arts management literature (e.g. Rentschler, 2002; Rentschler et al., 2014) to underpin content analysis. Rentschler (2002, p. 12) identified periods of “foundation”, “professionalisation” and “discovery” in the evolution of the arts marketing concept. Our application of this historical approach to the understanding of LST research and practice suggests a different order: discovery, foundation and professionalisation.

Industry sources and professional trade magazines were consulted to identify more recent trends and technologies. Media representations and marketing materials of LST from the major culture centres of London and New York City were analysed. These academic and trade sources were then filtered through the analytic prisms of aesthetic quality, consumer preference and social experience in order to construct a conceptual model of LST attendance.

3. The evolution of LST

The origins of LST can be traced to the early days of radio and television. The first radio voice transmission was in 1900 and the first public radio transmission of music and entertainment in 1906 (Belrose, 2002, p. 44). The first live opera broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City was in 1910 (Fellers, 2010; Ruben, 2010). This sets a technological milestone in opening up access to live theatre.

The first demonstration of live television was on 26 January 1926 in London (McGoogan, 2016). Due to the prohibitive cost of video tape, the early days of television predominantly featured live broadcasts, as with radio. Historic footage from the era captures the theatricality of the presenters, as if the medium were documenting a stage performance.
Further introductions like the first public television transmission in 1935 built the foundation for distributing many recorded and live broadcasted theatre productions. The first live sports transmission in the UK was of the Wimbledon tennis competition in 1937 (TV Licensing (UK), 2017).

Live screening of the performing arts in cinemas is a relatively recent phenomenon made possible through the rapid advancements in audio-visual, digital and transmission technology. The ability to align visual and sound transmission is particularly sensitive to the aesthetics of live performing arts. The first such live cinematic performing arts screening event took place in 2006 (Ingham, 2016) with a high-definition (HD) transmission of The Magic Flute from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. Advances in digital technology in recent years have opened a variety of new distribution channels through which audiences can engage with theatrical performances. Pay-TV channels like Sky Arts (Sky 2016), theatrical content made available online live and/or on-demand (fee-based) by theatre houses (Berliner, 2016; Brunning, 2015), and a wide range of free theatrical (professional and amateur) performing arts productions on social media platforms like Youtube.com are all examples on how theatre can reach its audience.

These technological advancements give rise to conceptual questions: is live streaming the same product in different packaging through a different distribution channel, or a different product altogether? From the end-user’s point of view, does the difference even matter, especially in today’s age of ubiquitous hand-held and home devices with internet streaming and video on demand?

4. The business case for LST

“To beam or not to beam” is a dilemma facing performing arts organisations (Gardner, 2015), especially in relation to LST and touring. Yet as with any innovation, LST is potentially a technical “solution” in search of problem. Nonetheless, producers of live performing arts may have several genuine business problems that LST may be able to remedy. Each of these problems can apply both to commercial venues and productions, and to publically subsidised and non-profit ones.

The first problem is how to maximise revenue when there are empty seats in the house. Live streaming offers the opportunity to expand distribution, in addition to the more common practices of in-house yield management such as promotions and last-minute discounts. Live streaming in effect expands the venue’s reach.

The second problem is the opposite: how to maximise returns when venue capacity has been reached. This is a problem in popular venues and with popular shows. For example, the Royal Opera House in London often sells out their top productions, either entirely or in the majority of price ranges. Moreover, full houses can affect non-profit venues and companies more due to their repertory remit and the touring commitments of star performers. Unlike commercial houses, non-profit venues cannot simply extend a run until demand runs dry. When a subsidised venue has a “hit”, the production needs to turn to a commercial venue or to touring to extend its run. Such transfers are rare, though The National Theatre’s “War Horse” did extend on transfer to the West End for nearly seven years. Open rehearsals are another possible response to a sold-out show. However, live streaming offers a potentially even greater opportunity to capture revenue (economic rents from consumer demand), where they still exist even though in-house capacity (production) has peaked.

The third problem is that of diversification of markets. For non-profit venues and companies, subsidies typically come with “audience development” or “widening participation” contractual conditions. Commercial venues likewise cannot afford to ignore “hidden” potential markets. Literature spanning over three decades on applied arts marketing attests to the importance of audience development strategies (Diggle, 1984; Peterson, 1992; Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Keaney, 2008; Bernstein, 2011).
LST can have an impact on the finances of theatre companies that are taking part in transmitting their productions. In 2014-2015, the Royal National Theatre generated £6.1 m (5 per cent of its total income) from live streaming selected productions to cinemas around the world (National Theatre, 2015a, b). The Metropolitan Opera’s revenue from broadcasting amounted to $31.9 m for the season 2014-2015, almost 15 per cent of the total opera’s activity (Metropolitan Opera Association, 2015). Live streaming can have a positive impact among other things on audience reach, audience development, revenue streams and global performance culture (Cochrane and Bonner, 2014; Nesta, 2011a, b; King, 2016).

However, the roll out of new technology to the marketplace is not without its own challenges. Threshold anxiety (Tull, 2018) and threshold fear (Gurian, 2005) refer to discomfort by cultural audiences in dealing with the unknown, or unfamiliar situations or places. In the LST context, this can refer both to the use of LST as a stepping stone into traditional theatre attendance, or to possible misapprehension of traditional theatre attendees to engage with LST.

The obvious threat of live-streaming theatre is that of substitution. Current attendees of traditional theatre may switch to the live cinematic equivalent. Meanwhile, potential traditional theatre attendees may be discouraged from attending the theatrical live performance due to the availability of the live cinematic alternative. Critics fear that the financial success of live-streaming theatre could have long-term effects at the expense of box office income in case live-streaming theatre starts acting as a substitute for regular theatre visits (Tommasini, 2013). In effect, the venue or performing arts company may end up cannibalising its own markets and sacrificing its core product. Whether National Theatre Live (NT Live), for example, will emerge as a viable cultural sub-brand (Rentschler et al., 2014) remains to be seen.

The wider category of “event cinema” includes a variety of cinematic experiences including LST. Such cinematic experiences include film screenings with live orchestral accompaniment (Royal Albert Hall, London), screenings at museums and galleries (Doty, 2016), and experiential (immersive) cinema (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2016). Some observers note an upward trend in attendance to event cinema generally (Miracle Theatre, 2015; King, 2016). The trend may be influenced by an increasing supply of performing arts transmissions to cinemas (Abrahams and Tuck, 2015). Predictions reckon that the global “Event Cinema Market”, which includes all kinds of live-streamed and recorded performances from opera to popular music concerts, will be worth $1.13 bn by 2019 (Event Cinema Association, 2016; Hancock, 2015).

In London, reviews of the National Theatre’s accounts found a steady increase in LST attendance until the end of the 2013-2014 season (Bakhshi and Throsby, 2015; National Theatre, 2014, 2015b). Some observers have argued that rather than acting as a substitute to traditional attendance, live-broadcasting (as “NT Live”) has helped to increase traditional attendance (Bakhshi and Throsby, 2014). However, such analyses are selective and miss certain additional causal factors. In this case, the findings were based on bookings of Phèdre only, which was the National Theatre’s first production to be streamed to cinemas in 2009. Moreover, the involvement of the famous actress Helen Mirren in the lead role would have influenced the results. Accounts for the 2014-2015 season indicated a decline in LST attendance even though National Theatre expanded the number of participating cinema venues, and despite an increase in general theatre attendance (National Theatre, 2015a). Thus calls for more intensive, longitudinal research to verify attendance patterns are justified (Ginman, 2013).

In New York City, research conducted after five years of broadcasts of “The Met: Live in HD” (HD = high definition) found that at the time LST did not appear to cannibalise the local live opera audience but rather it established an audience for itself (Van Eeden, 2011). The “Live in HD” format was viewed as different, not inferior, to live opera and its effects on audiences were mixed. In some cases, audiences re-attended LST because they enjoyed the experience, some decided to subscribe to the live programmes, whilst others began to prefer
the LST format instead. Attendees of “Live in HD” screenings were reported to be very likely to re-attend LST. There was little evidence to suggest that LST generated more live opera attendance or that it brought new audiences into local traditional opera houses.

For the 2014-2015 season, the Metropolitan Opera figures showed a different trend, namely, an increase in live-streaming generated income and a decrease in box office revenue. More recent indicators from the Metropolitan Opera show a further significant change in visitation numbers and revenue loss (Cooper, 2016). This result could be a warning signal for other theatre institutions.

Views from within the performing arts industry are varied. In 2015, the industry magazine *Arts Professional*, undertook a survey that included questions about the impact of theatrical screenings on arts institutions. The respondents were employees within the arts industry. Findings were mixed: 36 per cent reported a mainly positive or very positive impact, 16 per cent said it had a mainly negative or very negative influence, 26 per cent stated screenings had no impact on their institution, and the remaining 22 per cent were indecisive (Romer, 2015a). Touring performing arts companies highlighted that the impact transmissions had on their performance scheduling, as they did not want their performance dates to clash with live streams of the bigger arts companies like NT Live or the Royal Opera House. The survey results showed a rather low willingness of people to pay for both a traditional theatre performance and a live-streaming theatre performance within a short period.

Despite the possible negative impacts of LST on traditional theatres, the financial support it generates cannot be disregarded. The Metropolitan Opera was in urgent need for additional revenue in 2006, and the extra income generated from live-streaming theatre played an important role in its financial survival (Steichen, 2012; King, 2016). However, live-streaming theatre may only be a viable option for bigger scale theatre companies. Smaller theatre companies may struggle to provide the expensive technological equipment which is a requirement for securing a high-quality transmission.

Theatres like the Metropolitan Opera use up to ten cameras to capture the theatre experience for projecting it to the cinema screens. In contrast, theatres that use significantly fewer cameras will only be able to offer lower levels of quality in transmission. An example is the case of the touring company “Pentabus” who only use one camera to film their productions (Freestone, 2014). Moreover, due to smaller budgets they mostly produce small-scale productions (MTM London, 2015). Smaller scale performing arts institutions have more difficulties in collaborating with cinema venues (Abrahams and Tuck, 2015; Romer, 2015b), as on the one side cinema venue slot times are limited and on the other side cinema companies hesitate to stream content from less-known arts organisations out of fear of insufficient quality. Nevertheless, despite the hindrances smaller theatre companies must overcome, live streaming has occasionally been used successfully by small-scale theatres like Miracle Theatre (2015) in their production of “Waiting for Godot”.

Productions being live streamed to bigger cinema venues primarily belong to larger theatre companies with high reputations like National Theatre, which is currently the UK’s leader in terms of box office value from live streams, followed in second place by The Royal Opera House (Abrahams and Tuck, 2015). Further development in the capacity of large scale theatres as the main players in live-streaming their theatrical productions might result in the emergence of a monopoly or oligopoly.

Both Bakhshi and Throsby (2011) and Nesta (2010) noted that the cinema audience primarily found out about the live broadcasting through the cinema’s website and from word of mouth. This finding indicates that other communication channels might not have been used sufficiently or effectively. Given that live-streaming theatre is supposed to attract new audiences and widen the market reach of theatres one would have presumed that different campaigns for the different target groups would be in place. NT Live did reports attracting new audiences with lower incomes through screenings to theatres in general (Nesta, 2011a, b).
Even though the concept of live-streaming performing arts productions to cinemas is still relatively new, the degree of audience awareness has rarely been the focus of researchers. MTM London (2015) found that only 12 per cent of respondents were unaware of “event cinema”. A survey regarding the digital impact on cultural organisations undertaken by Digital R&D Funds for the Arts (2015), displayed the increasing positive impact of digital technology on strategy development and revenue streams in cultural organisations. Specifically, the performing arts venue sector rated “live-streaming performances” as the fastest growing digital-related activity (Digital R&D Funds for the Arts, 2015, p. 18).

Research by Wise (2014) into the perceived experience by attendees of opera live streaming analysed simulcast audience demographics, motivation and experience. She noted audience perceptions that live streaming of opera performances does help to break down prejudices and motivates people to attend live theatre. This shows the positive financial potential of LST as a distribution channel to benefit revenue streams, as well as on social aspects like widening participation. Nevertheless, audiences also stated that incentives are missing for opera “novices” to attend a screening in the first place. When first-time live screening attendees were asked about their motivation to attend an opera performance in the theatre after having experienced the opera screening around a quarter stated they were either motivated to attend “more” or “a lot more”, 70 per cent said it had no effect on their motivation, and only around 4 per cent said they were motivated “a lot less”.

Positive perceptions and reports that express a positive impact through theatrical broadcasts on audience development stand in contrast to various other findings that are less favourable (Tommasini, 2013; Vladica and Davis, 2013; Barker, 2013; Wise, 2014; Abrahams and Tuck, 2015; Shugoll Research, 2008; King, 2016). The perceived experience value by attendees of live-streaming opera varies significantly according to the opera’s audience demographics and characteristics. Vladica and Davis (2013) found that 60 per cent of interviewed participants were older than 45 years old, and the majority had university degrees. In another study (O’Neill et al., 2014), most participants declared themselves as performing arts lovers; more recent reports on live cinema habits agree (Live Cinema UK, 2016).

Findings like these suggest that it is mostly people already interested in theatre, and with similar demographic backgrounds, who are the audience segment mainly attending live streams of theatrical productions in cinemas. Live event cinema may encourage already engaged attendees to visit more “immersive theatre” as well as other cultural events. However, not enough research has been done to determine whether live-streaming theatre has an impact on audience development (Bazalgette, 2014) despite claims of a high potential to do so (Attard, 2014).

Some writers regard LST as a new distribution channel that provides opportunities to overcome financial or geographical hindrances that may otherwise prevent access to theatrical productions (Vladica and Davis, 2013; Nesta, 2011a, b; Bakhshi and Throsby, 2014). As Ticketmaster’s report stated, cost is the biggest hindrance for people to attend traditional venue-based live performances (Cummins, 2013). Not only are LST overall lower ticket costs are welcomed, but the lower travel and non-occurring accommodation costs are also positively acknowledged.

5. Conceptualising LST

5.1 Aesthetic dimensions

The idea of recording theatrical productions has generated debates nearly from its inception. Supporters argue that recordings make it possible for audiences to experience more performing art productions. Opposing views like Beuick’s (1927) maintain that a recording cannot capture the theatre experience to its fullest. As Benjamin (1936, p. 1) notes: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.

Live-streaming theatre
A performance cannot simply be captured; it becomes something different as soon as capture is attempted (Phelan, 1993). Recorded theatrical performances may serve as documentary content (Melzer, 1995), which can be useful in teaching and research terms (McAuley, 1994). However, as Varney and Fensham (2000) point out, cinematography results in a loss of the viewer’s freedom in deciding where to direct their focus.

Similar debates were triggered when LST to cinemas was first introduced in 2006 as a relatively new form of attendance at, or at least participation in, live performance. But not all of the earlier critiques of recorded and live broadcasted theatre performances via radio or television could be applied as live-streaming theatre in cinemas for two reasons. First, LST in cinemas offers an unprecedented improvement in aesthetic sound and visual quality. Second, LST accomplishes one key characteristic that other more individuated forms of digital consumption of theatre performances previously could not, that of a shared event experience (Morris, 2010) similar to the more traditional theatre environment. Live broadcasts to cinemas are a close alternative to the traditional venue-based theatre experience. Transmitted theatre experienced amongst an audience is described as “extending the reach of a production while retaining a sense of occasion, live performance and shared experience” (Miracle Theatre, 2015, p. 3).

Live streams of theatrical performances such as those from the Royal Opera House in London typically are mediated by a presenter who informs the cinema audience about the production. Specially designed camera angles and close-ups ensure a high-quality filming and transmission to the cinema audience. Further enhancements of live streams include exclusive backstage views and interviews with members of the cast. Theatre companies who offer live streams of theatrical performances often also transmit internationally.

National Theatre Live (NT Live) was first launched in 2009 (Nesta, 2011a, b) and regularly airs productions live to cinemas within the UK as well as around the world. Bakhshi and Throsby (2011) and Nesta (2010) undertook a research of NT Live cinema audiences and “physical” theatregoers of the same production to find out about differences in reactions. The findings suggested that overall expectations and their fulfilment were exceeded in cinema audiences but not met for the theatregoers. Further questions arise therefore as to how both parties set their expectations and how and if they are comparable. The investigated theatre production was one of the earliest NT Live broadcasts. The lack of prior audience exposure could mean that the overall expectations were rather low and therefore easier to exceed. Furthermore, cinema audiences felt a deeper emotional connection than the theatre audience. What remains less clear, however, is how to measure and compare this emotional bond if digital live theatre and traditional theatre are two different kinds of experience (Hemley, 2014).

The “clash between expectations and experience” (Christie, 2012, p. 202) amongst audiences reflects the heterogeneity of their make-up. One theatre critic from the New York Times stated that “it is ridiculous to pretend that the distinction [between experiences] does not exist” (Woolfe, 2012b). For example, close-ups showed raw emotions of actors that only live-stream attendees could experience, whereas the deepened effect of the sound authenticity within a theatre venue could in reverse not be experienced to its fullest by the cinema audience.

Adaptations from the performance space to preparation for cinema reception are initially technically rather than dramaturgically motivated (Cochrane and Bonner, 2014). Whilst some aspects such as the use of camera angles otherwise unavailable to in-house theatre audiences, and footage from backstage during intervals, formulate the construction of a different type of relationship to the play, opera or dance piece. The output, however, does necessarily result in making the live broadcast more like a film than a live performance.
Performers also reported to undergo changes in the way they experience the theatre and engage with audiences when LST is involved (Webb et al., 2016). Artists find it challenging to engage with a distant audience. The lack of audience feedback and reactions changes how performers experience theatre. Nicholas Hytner (2012), Director of the National Theatre, claimed that no directional changes had been made for transmissions to cinemas and that what the audience sees in the cinema is the same as any other not transmitted performance of the production. Within the industry, a little over half of respondents in one study regarded live-streaming theatre as a “great idea” (Cummins, 2013). Yet, some Audience members with experience of attending the same theatrical production live in the theatre venue and as a broadcast in a cinema reported with astonishment how similar both experiences were (Sullivan, 2013).

Some authors claim that the perceived event experience of LST is a new art form (McLennan, 2007) due to better views through many different planned camera angles. Others like Fricker (2008) do not see a difference in the art form between digital theatre and traditional theatre and argue the only change is the content delivery which is not significant enough to title it as a new theatrical art form.

Further research on the motives and experience of audiences viewing performing art productions live in cinemas has tested the perceived entertainment value of NT Live and The Metropolitan Opera live broadcasts. Live screening attendees overall rated the theatre experience as satisfying (Vladica and Davis, 2013). Similarly, Wyver’s (2015) investigation regarding attendees’ live-broadcast experience primarily analysed the responses of attendees at a screening by the Royal Shakespeare Company were summarised as “almost all of which were overwhelmingly positive”.

Participants consider live streams as “brilliant but not the same as live” (Wise, 2014). In a study sponsored by Arts Professional magazine, Romer (2015a) found that audience receptions of LST were mixed. Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of participants reported that LST was “always” or “often” as engaging as traditional venue-based theatre. Conversely, nearly a third (31 per cent) said that live digital theatre screenings were “seldom” as exciting as usual theatre visits. The Arts Professional survey was based on responses from employees that belonged to the professional arts industry only. Miracle Theatre’s (2015, p. 35) report confirmed the above findings that live-streaming theatre is overall rated as “satisfying”, though a “less intense experience”. MTM London (2015, p. 20) conducted an investigation about general event cinema in collaboration with Riverside Studios and Arts Council England that concluded that even though digital theatre is “highly satisfying” the participants also said that it is “a poor substitute for the live experience”.

5.2 Consumer preferences
At their core, live arts events bring together People for a specific out-of-the-ordinary Purpose at a particular Place for a defined Period of time. These four P’s collectively constitute the minimum common denominator of any activity that may be deemed a live arts event.

Traditional live theatre has the characteristics of a classic service product that is intangible and perishable, lacks ownership, and whose simultaneous production and consumption serves a heterogeneous audience (Brassington and Pettitt, 2006). A live performance lacks ownership: no one person can “own” the performance, digital- and copy-rights aside. A live performance is intangible in that it is non-physical in that it cannot be touched, although the rise of immersive theatre does challenge this category. Likewise, the performance is perishable in that it cannot be stored. As an inseparable construct, the performance is manufactured at the same time as it is consumed. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the individual audience members and performers, it is difficult to ensure consistency due to “live” production. Each person’s expectation and experience is different.
These service characteristics of live theatre can explain the economic dilemma of arts production. As a service product, arts production suffers from what Baumol and Bowen (1966) call the “cost disease”. The performing arts industry suffers from the dilemma that costs continually rise due to staff costs and general inflation. Ticket prices do not rise accordingly to the expenses and in arts production, as across the services sector, technological advances have limited impact in cost reduction. Improvements might be seen backstage (e.g. computerised lighting controls, electronic rehearsal diaries) and in the front of house (e.g. online box office ticketing). However, such technology is of little benefit in the actual production on stage. Unlike a motor car or an aeroplane, “faster” does not mean “better” in a production of Romeo and Juliet. Therefore, performing arts institutions constantly struggle for survival.

Participation at hybrid events is influenced by different audience motivations (Ivkov et al., 2015) and demographic factors such as age (Sox et al., 2015; Sox, 2014) that determine practices, opportunities and barriers. In business events, a variety of factors such as increasing familiarity with online platforms, the maturation of the events industry, financial pressures on travel budgets and concern for sustainability can potentially encourage greater audience engagement with virtual media (McLoughlin, 2014).

LST offers more choices of venue, with major cities like London offering numerous options as compared to the one venue, where the traditional performance is being played. Regular cinema visitors who come “to try out” live theatre broadcasts are mainly attracted by the novelty this new form of theatre presentation (Christie, 2012). As time has passed since the first HD simulcast of a theatre production in 2006 the novelty of this experience has worn off (King, 2016). Other, less significant motives identified by Nesta (2011a, b) for attending a digital transmission of a theatrical production rather than visiting the theatre house included geographical distance, interest in the play, interest in the cast, and ticket prices. In the Shugoll Research (2008) survey which analysed attendees of the Metropolitan Opera Live in HD transmission, the analysed motives were mostly congruent with Nesta’s (2011a, b) findings. However, a higher response rate was noted for the motive of “wanting to see as many theatrical performances as possible” discovered as a reason for attending a theatrical live-stream. Similarly, Wise (2014) analysed live-streaming attendees’ choice regarding whether they are attending more traditional theatre performances or live broadcasts. She found out that apart from the majority who said they are attending both options equally often, other attendees were inclined to say that they visit cinema broadcasts more often than attending theatre performances.

A reverse effect has also been noted, with some theatre fans reportedly avoiding live broadcasts out of fear that they would endanger the traditional theatre’s existence (Concetta and Ateca-Amestoy, 2014). This fear of digital theatre substitution for regular traditional theatre attendees highlights the possibility that it is changing theatre as we know it (Hemley, 2014; Freestone, 2014). Directorial changes in the conception of new productions may shift focus in favour of the faraway audiences (Woolfe, 2012a, b; Ross, 2012).

5.3 Social atmosphere

In both the traditional theatre and digital streaming theatre, the social experience of the audience encompasses elements of communitas, liminality, liveness and authenticity. In this section, we explain each of these terms in brief and note how they apply to each version of attendance.

Communitas. For both the physical and the virtual attendee, attendance at the “performance” offers the chance to engage in the social bond of communitas (Turner, 1969, p. 132). Communitas allows for the opportunity of shared experience that can overcome class, gender, age, ethnicity and similar sociocultural divisions (Turner, 1982).
Communitas is achieved in the traditional theatre through uniform seating, typically in rows of chairs, with various classes of seats reflected in the pricing. In the cinematic screening, the physical arrangement of seats is in a similar theatrical style; however, there is less distinction between classes of seats. Other than some cinemas that offer a small number of centrally located rows with more comfortable seating as “premiere” seating, cinema seating is typically “one-price”. Cinema seating may be reserved or open (general seating). Ushers in cinemas tend to act more as gate-keepers whereas assistants at live theatre reflect in the ritual of performance. On balance, cinematic screenings would seem to offer a more level field of communitas than traditional theatre which continues to carry class-oriented distinctions.

Liminality. The heterogeneous composition of audiences means that for some theatregoers the act of attending may be liminal activity (Turner, 1974), that is to say, a ritual that is “sacred”. Miller et al. (2004, p. 293) defined rituals as “patterned forms of behaviour”. The rituals of performing arts attendance include: the reading of reviews and previews, seeking tickets, queuing behaviour, service on arrival, seating arrangement, attendee decorum, interval activities, bowing, clapping, and post-show chatter. In short, live arts attendance is a structured experience. As Turner (1975a, pp. 31-32) noted, such rituals and symbols “are not merely epiphenomena or disguises of deeper social and psychological processes, but have ontological value”. In many of these respects, both traditional and LST audiences experience as similar range of structured behaviours. A significant difference, however, is that the performers cannot gauge the response of the cinematic audience. The performers are unable to engage in direct eye contact with the cinematic audience either during the performance or during the applause. To so do would involve looking into the camera, in itself an act of recognising the camera as intermediary. Moreover, a performer’s looking into the camera would signal to the theatrical audience of an absent “other” audience elsewhere. In short, the one-way transmission restricts the liminal value of cinematic attendance compared with traditional attendance.

Whether “sacred” or “profane”, both versions of the experience are outside of the normal and the routine (Falassi, 1987; Thomassen, 2012) providing “a sense of occasion” (Miracle Theatre, 2015). However, the increasing normalisation of live arts performance, whether via previous modes such as recorded media or live digital streaming may suggest a depletion of liminal space. Liminality, as Szakolczai (2009) argued, requires structured but transitory situations in which participants experience transformative events. The proliferation of live arts outlets, for example live streaming in cinemas or in a park, may inevitably result in what Thomassen (2012:31) called “a gradual loss of the distinction between liminal and ordinary spaces” whereby:

[t]he proliferation and celebration of liminal spatiality has become connected to the commercialization and intensifying social and political control of exactly such spaces, annulling their transformative potential while flattening our mental and physical landscapes.

On the other hand, certain liminoid elements shared by both of traditional and cinematic forms of attendance. Liminoid leisure activity is reflected in festivity, revelry and the carnivalesque (Getz, 2012, p. 76), in simple terms, a fun night out. On this point, the cinematic environment is more permissive in allowing food and drink into the auditorium compared with traditional theatres.

Liveness. Liminality has both spatial and temporal characteristics (Thomassen, 2012) that are inherent in the notion of liveness. Due to the simultaneous or near-simultaneous transmission capacity of digital broadcasts, on the temporal level both traditional theatre and cinematic screenings can be considered “live”. However, the temporal “liveness” of traditional theatre is complemented by spatial liveness, in which both the audience and the performers are both “here” and “now”.

Live-streaming theatre
In the case of live cinematic streaming, the sense of liveness is conveyed by the on-screen visibility of the live audience at the physical theatre and through the atmosphere of sharing the experience with other attendees (Romer, 2015a; Wardle, 2014). The shared atmosphere is what makes watching a theatrical performance in cinema special and unique (Steichen, 2012; Miracle Theatre, 2015; Nesta, 2010; Wise, 2014) compared to, for instance, watching a DVD or live stream at home.

The spatial and temporal liminal attributes are readily apparent in traditional live performance. In the context of live broadcast, “liveness” takes on a different guise. Liveness in live broadcast has four key aspects (Bourdon, 2000, p. 535):

1. the (near) simultaneity of the performance and transmission;
2. the lack of pre-recording (these two points re technical status of live not edited);
3. the connection of different locations within the programme; and
4. unprepared, unedited, even amateur.

The core elements of liveness in performing arts include: the connection of people to people, that is, people watching together (social) and people watching people “live” in time; and the naturalness of the experience. “Live” incorporates an element of danger in that it disallows the opportunity for second takes. In this, LST is closer to traditional performance than to cinema.

“Encore” screenings are cinematic re-broadcasts either of the original live transmission, or of the live performance but at a later date. Encore performances therefore add a further layer to the notion of “liveness”, i.e. is liveness a process or a product? Depending on the time-zone of participating countries, theatrical live broadcasts are not always an available option for theatre companies. However, problems of time differences are not always the reason why encores are being screened to cinemas instead of direct live streaming. “Encore” screenings may be offered due to popular demand for repeats or due to a need for editing before broadcast. Barker (2013) reported that 50 per cent less interest exists for performances being streamed 24 hours after its live recording. The option of screening “encores” is attractive to smaller performing arts organisations. The pre-recorded format offers greater flexibility with allocated cinema time slots, as well avoiding possible live-stream technical difficulties and allowing time for editing (Miracle Theatre, 2015).

Authenticity. Ultimately, the difference between a rehearsal and a live performance is the presence of an audience. Concern with the authenticity of cultural experience has been a response to the commodification of culture (Greenwood, 1972) with the rise of jet travel tourism in the 1960s. Authenticity relies on an “aura” of social context in time and space that the mechanical reproduction of art cannot achieve (Benjamin, 1936). According to Moscardo (2010, p. 50), perceived authenticity requires “access to original or real objects, places or people” (objective authenticity), “genuine social interactions with staff and others in the setting” and “the opportunity to engage in activities seen as reflecting one’s true self” “existential authenticity”. Adorno’s (1973) more critical view on the other hand suggested an over-fixation with authenticity as subjective escape. This research asks what can be deemed “real” and “genuine” in the new technological world, where the near-instantaneous transmission of live events is possible.

In traditional theatre attendance, authenticity is reflected in the architecture of the (often purpose-built) auditorium, the history of the venue as a ritual site of performance and the ability of the audience to engage tactilely with the sensory environment, for example seating, ambient lighting and lobby facilities. In cinematic live streaming, similar facilities may exist; however, whilst they may replicate the traditional theatre, they are
less authentic being located in a surrogate space. On the other hand, the LST experience allows for close-up views of the performers that are otherwise inaccessible for most traditional theatre audiences (other than with opera glasses). These close-ups may offer a more nuanced, hence authentic, “reading” of the performance.

6. Conceptual model
Any definition of “live event” must unite the elements of time, place, purpose and people. The model developed here reflects the debates and transitions in physical vs virtual attendance developed in this paper. The model incorporates the aesthetic dimension (audio-visual quality, authenticity, liveness), social experience (liminality, ritual, communitas) and consumer factors (cost, convenience, accessibility). The discussion in the earlier part of this paper unpacked meanings, similarities and differences amongst these three categories. In some regards, LST and traditional theatre were sound to share similarities; in other ways, the two experiences were found to be markedly distinct.

We propose that the two experiences are different enough to be considered as separate and distinct event experiences. The review of the academic literature and practice in the field suggests that rather than being simply a facsimile or sub-brand of live performance, LST is emerging as a distinct distribution channel for live performing arts or event a new product category. Attendee expectations of aesthetic experience, social experience and more basic consumer preferences will determine the likelihood of attending LST or traditional theatre. We accept that these three sets of expectations may be derived in part by demographic factors and previous attendance habits. In this model, we focus less on past habits and more on future intentions based on the LST experience. Future research could explore further the relationship between attendance, re-attendance and cross-attendance between traditional theatre and LST (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of live-streaming theatre

Source: The authors
This model offers a deeper understanding of the cognitive, affective and behavioural factors that affect audience decisions to attend, or not attend, LST than pre-existing of marketing strategy consumer choice models such as AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) proposed by Blythe (2012).

7. Conclusions, implications and limitations
LST is an increasingly popular cultural pursuit, and a controversial and timely topic for research. This paper has offered a summative analysis of the secondary literature. LST reflects the changing dynamics of the supply side theatrical production and touring. Smaller companies may be squeezed out of the regional touring market due to dominance of tried and tested brands.

The relationship between LST attendance and Traditional Theatre attendance, its profitability, and its experience have until now remained unsettled. A consensus in the literature suggests that conventional theatre visits differ from LST experiences. However, LST does not appear to have a meaningful direct negative or positive impact on the participating theatre’s box office bookings, at least within the UK (Bakhshi and Whitby, 2014; King, 2016). The findings from the US market suggest that UK theatres should heed the risks of audience cannibalisation.

Many of the writings summarised in this paper are from a practitioner perspective. We offer a more rigorous and detailed approach from which future research may benefit. By adopting the conceptual model developed in this paper, researchers will be better positioned to be able to determine the aesthetic, social and consumer factors that influence attendance of LST, and its impacts on their future attendance behaviours. Analysing the motives of both sets of attendees would help to understand attendee (and potential attendee) expectations and inhibitions and further contribute to adapting and developing strategies to progress audience development and market reach.

Furthermore, as performances increasingly are being transmitted internationally, more up-to-date study on recognition and adoption rates in foreign markets would be beneficial. Deeper demographic background analysis could identify potential for progressing live-streaming theatre economically and socially.

Drawing on the conceptual model built in this paper, future field research would benefit from a focus on questions such as:

1. What is the level of awareness of live-streaming theatre?
2. Does live-streaming theatre attract new audiences? Why?
3. Does live-streaming theatre widen audience reach?
4. What are the perceptions and expectations of live-streaming theatre amongst attendees and non-attendees of traditional theatre and do these differ?
5. What are the experiences of live-streaming theatre amongst attendees and non-attendees of traditional theatre? In which ways are these similar/different?
6. What other demographic characteristics influence LST attendance, re-attendance and cross-attendance (LST to traditional and vice versa) audience habits?

This paper has developed a new conceptual model that captures in greater detail than previously the various factors of audience engagement with, and experience of, LST. The paper contributes to knowledge by identifying and expanding the discourse on the competing aims of access and authenticity in live performance. The analysis expands the academic understanding of hybrid and virtual event experiences. As a conceptual paper, the results are subject to being tested in the field.
References


Further reading


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