

Retraction: Liminal Experience and Spatial Consumption: The Cultural Practice of Youth in Environmental Theatre

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Abstract

With the rise of the experience economy, environmental theatre, as a new form of cultural consumption space, has become a carrier of "liminal space" for urban youth to escape reality and seek emotional resonance. From the perspective combining liminal theory and spatial consumption, this study explores the liminal experiences and consumption behaviors of young people in environmental theatres through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and netnography. It reveals the endogenous dynamics of this cultural industry and the cultural practices of youth participation. The findings are as follows: (1) Environmental theatres construct spatial liminality by reorganizing physical space within urban buildings; by offering audiences liminal experiences, they provide a field for disembedding from reality and self-reinvention within the city. (2) The consumption practices within this culture are driven by a dual logic: "emotional resonance triggers" and "symbolic stamp-collecting psychology." Meanwhile, deeply involved participants construct their identities through high-frequency consumption and engage in symbolic interaction practices on digital platforms, guiding consumption within their circles. (3) Under the influence of the attention economy, environmental theatres increasingly emphasize visual symbols, leading to new shifts in market trends.

Keywords

Environmental Theatre; Liminal Space; Spatial Consumption; Youth Subculture

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

In recent years, environmental theatre, emerging independently from the traditional theatre industry, has risen as a novel form of experience economy. By meeting the experiential needs of theatre enthusiasts within a "15-minute living circle theatre cluster" in terms of distance and time (1), this cultural industry, starting with Shanghai's first environmental play "Mia Famiglia", leverages its unique advantages

of proximity, strong audiovisuals, and immersive environments to achieve nearly sold-out performances. It has become a carrier of "liminal space" for urban youth seeking to detach from reality and pursue emotional experiences in the context of modernity. According to the 2024 China Musical Market Annual Report released by the China Association of Performing Arts, from January to October 2024, environmental theatre performances accounted for as high as 69.9%, with a box office share of 20.7%. Furthermore, the audience for this cultural industry has formed a relatively stable consumer base, characterized by high education levels, high spending, and high loyalty.

The rise of environmental theatre not only reflects the diversified prosperity of the experience economy but also highlights the need for young people in a fast-paced society to relieve stress promptly in physical spaces, where micro, first-hand experiences are carried and valued.

1.2. Research questions

Based on this, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. What intrinsic motivations drive youth consumption in environmental theatre?
- ii. How does environmental theatre attract, support, and shape the liminal experiences of participating youth?
- iii. What cultural practices do young people exhibit through their participation?

2. Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

2.1. Development Trajectory and Research Status of Environmental Theatre

The concept of "environmental theatre" originated with American theatre theorist Richard Schechner, referring to the exploration of new performance methods and spectator-actor relationships by tailoring performance spaces for specific dramatic works, emphasizing spectacle and immersion (2). Schechner's theory of environmental theatre encompasses three core dimensions: First, it breaks through the traditional text-centric framework centered on dramatic dialogue, expanding performance venues to commercial entertainment spaces, theme parks, and non-traditional performance sites. Second, it systematically integrates sound, body movement, and the physical environment, making the audience an organic part of the theatrical ecology. Third, "all spaces can be transformed into performance fields," where performer, spectator, and environment are organically unified, with no "wall" separating them (3). Most of these characteristics have been inherited and developed by domestic environmental theatres.

In 1989, Schechner directed "Tomorrow He'll Leave the Mountains" at the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, modifying the traditional theatre space. This is considered the initial attempt at environmental theatre in China (4). Today, a single building hosts an average of over ten different performances daily, attracting production

companies from across the country and a large number of enthusiastic fans. Environmental theatre is no longer just a substitute for traditional theatres during special periods; it has created new demands, formed new characteristics, and guided new trends.

Current academic research on environmental theatre mainly follows three directions. First, from an urban communication perspective, environmental theatre forms a branding communication tool for urban cultural tourism (5), possessing unique advantages in revitalizing the performance market and cultivating new forms of cultural consumption (6). It is not only a new scenario for boosting cultural tourism consumption but should also become an innovative practice of modern Chinese narrative(7). Second, from an industry operation perspective, research explores innovations in physical space construction, artistic space elements, and interactive relationships among people within the space (8). Successful operation requires high-quality repertoire, distinctive positioning, accurate market forecasting, and sensitive risk warning mechanisms (9). Third, from a spatial scenography perspective, it is suggested that theatre development paths should emphasize scene creation, emotional identification, build dramatic atmosphere, and actively expand new formats (10). The theatre is primarily a physically existing territory, but it also functions as a virtual space in the information age (11).

Most existing research comes from theatre industry operators and experts, lacking a consumer perspective and not examining the internal dynamics of environmental theatre or the cultural practices of youth participation. Therefore, based on the theoretical perspective of liminal experience and spatial consumption, this paper takes participating youth as its research object. Through long-term participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, it aims to reveal the spatial functions brought by environmental theatre and the cultural practices generated during youth participation.

2.2. Spatial Consumption and Liminal Space

Building upon existing research, to understand the motivations driving consumption in environmental theater, we must first focus on space as the primary subject. Since the mid-to-late 20th century, the New Urban Sociology School has challenged traditional paradigms, arguing that space is no longer merely a physical carrier(12). The relationship between humans and space shifts from spatial production to spatial consumption(13), meaning space itself becomes both a consumable object and a tool for consumption, possessing dual attributes as both a consumable entity and a medium. This consumption of spatial symbols has gradually evolved into a vital practical pathway for individuals to gain social recognition, express life philosophies, and build social relationships. As consumer society evolves, Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption has transformed into everyday consumption practices—shifting from material display to emotional fulfillment,

identity affirmation, and experiential acquisition. The growing trend of aestheticized consumption in daily life, prioritizing quality and experience, drives the dynamic evolution of spatial consumption to adapt to subject-driven needs.

The concept of “liminality” originates from cultural anthropology, where Van Gennep employed the term to describe the threshold state of detachment from the ordinary within ritual processes, emphasizing the position between two phases (14). Within this space, it highlights micro-level experiential engagement and evolving contexts (15), constituting a consumption space characterized by greater micro-level distinctiveness. British anthropologist Victor Turner expanded this theory, defining liminality as an ambiguous state where individuals straddle two social structures—neither fully belonging to past roles and statuses nor fully integrated into new identities and relationships. This uncertain transitional phase brims with power and potential, enabling individuals to reflect on their experiences and identities while offering opportunities for self-reinvention and growth (16). Subsequent researchers contend that liminality's purpose lies in revealing the shortcomings of established structures, fostering social integration, and mitigating conflicts(17). Environmental theater provides the spatial vessel for generating liminal experiences, enabling consumers to detach from their past social realities and attain ritualistic emotional experiences that facilitate self-reformation to a certain degree.

In summary, the immersive theater space is a domain brimming with transformation and tension, where the spatial characteristics diverge from those of the real world. The young participants immerse themselves wholly in the theatrical environment, embodying a “counter-structural” essence. It is precisely in this sense that immersive theater possesses the liminality of its spatial setting, and the presence of multiple subjects within it generates a shared liminal experience.

3. Results

This study primarily employs participant observation and semi-structured interviews to conduct in-depth fieldwork, supplemented by online ethnography to gather research data. In semi-structured in-depth interviews, 15 frequent theater-goers who actively engage with theater were recruited as interviewees through platforms like Xiaohongshu, WeChat groups, and offline channels. For the online ethnography, Xiaohongshu—a platform with vibrant user-generated content—was selected as the field site. Continuous participatory observation and in-depth documentation were conducted on the interactive practices of content publishers.

4. Entering the Liminal: Exploring the Motivational Pathways for Consumption

Theatre culture has industry norms like "no photography or video during the

performance." Venues are often hidden deep within buildings, and ticket prices for environmental theatre range from 199 to 499 RMB. These factors collectively hinder the wide dissemination of this cultural industry. Consumers can only obtain performance information online, make consumption decisions, and purchase tickets to enter the venue. The consumer base has certain thresholds, specifically economic capacity and aesthetic appreciation. Factors driving initial consumption versus repeat consumption differ. Initial consumption arises from more complex reasons, while repeat consumption primarily stems from the live experience of the first visit.

4.1. Initial Consumption: Experiential Consumption Trends, Personal Interest, and Circle Discourse Effects

Thomas Friedman observes that socioeconomic growth reshapes national character; younger generations seek to fulfill individual spiritual needs and discover a sense of belonging through consumption (18). This "killing time" motivation concretely articulates the trend toward experiential consumption. Experience refers to the holistic subjective perception formed through sensory and psychological interactions with the external world. Consumer experience, then, is the aggregate of perceptions and cognitive feedback formed during the use of a product or enjoyment of a service. Through integrating subjective psychological experiences with symbolic contexts, consumers construct multidimensional emotional fulfillment mechanisms within consumption spaces. This fulfillment manifests as a composite pleasure experience during consumption: visual enjoyment, emotional comfort, sensory satisfaction, and psychological resonance. It also encompasses identity construction and spiritual fulfillment under the gaze of "others" (19). After the initial experience, consumers whose emotional fulfillment needs are met by the immersive theater environment will continue to engage in consumption. However, interview findings indicate that experience-driven consumers attend fewer sessions, averaging around 10 consumption instances over six months. They are also less influenced by social circles, primarily treating this experience as a spice for real life to satisfy their immediate spiritual needs.

The primary reason for the first purchase was driven mainly by personal interest. Regardless of the entry point, a common thread is the strong dominance of personal interest. Their passion for musicals, plays, and theatrical performers drives them to engage in consumption, transforming the performances they watch on their phones and the musical scores they listen to through headphones into live, in-person experiences. This sense of immediacy provides them with continuous positive reinforcement, making them willing to pay for the experience. Interest-driven consumer groups exhibit a stronger desire to integrate into niche communities, thereby fueling the growth of niche economies.

Another major channel for initiating first-time consumption is influenced by like-minded groups both online and offline. In the internet era, young people with

shared interests primarily connect through cyberspace, organizing themselves into specific virtual communities and actively engaging across major social platforms. John Fiske's mass culture theory posits that the formation of cultural identity drives group identity construction, thereby fostering mass cultural fan communities and their cultural practices (20). Driven by a sense of belonging, group dynamics, and emotional factors, young people purchase these "experience products" to express their identity and values, completing their identity construction. This discourse expression and identity display further integrate them into online and offline social circles. Within the cultural consumption market, immersive theater's advantage lies in its ability to better satisfy diverse personalized needs, align more closely with young consumers' preferences, and readily generate synergistic effects with other industries. This unique strength elevates it beyond a temporary experiment or substitute during exceptional times, instead spawning distinctive industrial models and fostering independent communities united by shared interests.

4.2. Repeat Consumption: Emotional Resonance Triggers and "Stamp Collecting" Psychology

The dual-dimensional experience created by the theater—emotional immersion and social interaction—forms a unique gravitational pull for consumption. On the other hand, the cognitive gaps left by narrative ellipses trigger psychological compensation mechanisms. By fostering emotional resonance and interactive experiences, the theater extends the live experience. Repeat purchases often occur shortly after the initial experience, when consumers remain immersed in the performance's afterglow and retain an attachment to the venue, making them highly receptive to repurchase. This behavior hinges on the brilliance achieved through the synergy of the play's script and the actors' performance. This pattern of immediate feedback driving instant action essentially creates an addictive state that fuels continuous consumption.

"Collecting performances" is a unique phenomenon driven by immersive theater environments. Due to the theater's spatial design and actors' long-term residencies, each seat offers distinct perspectives. Different actors interpret the same role uniquely, and their interactions create singular dynamics—all of which compel enthusiasts to revisit performances repeatedly. Consumer behavior can be broadly categorized into three levels of involvement: shallow, moderate, and deep. Corresponding purchase behaviors are observation, identification, purchase, and repurchase. The core characteristic of deep involvement is repeated secondary and multiple consumption of the same product, sustained by the synergistic effect of the "motivation-ability-trigger" model. Simultaneously, the immediate and potent feedback received within the theater space continuously satisfies their consumption motives and psychological needs, fostering an addictive state. When this addictive mechanism receives timely reinforcement, the addictive subject enters a state of

flow. The persistence of this consumption behavior also strengthens consumers' identification with and sense of belonging to the cultural sphere and community. "Never want to miss a single live show" epitomizes the discourse of deeply engaged participants. Through high-frequency consumption, they forge stronger bonds with theaters and performers, transforming accumulated viewing experiences into online guides for seat selection and actor evaluations. Respondent N09 attended 35 immersive theater productions within six months, frequently posting notes on the platform Xiaohongshu and amassing over 2,500 followers.

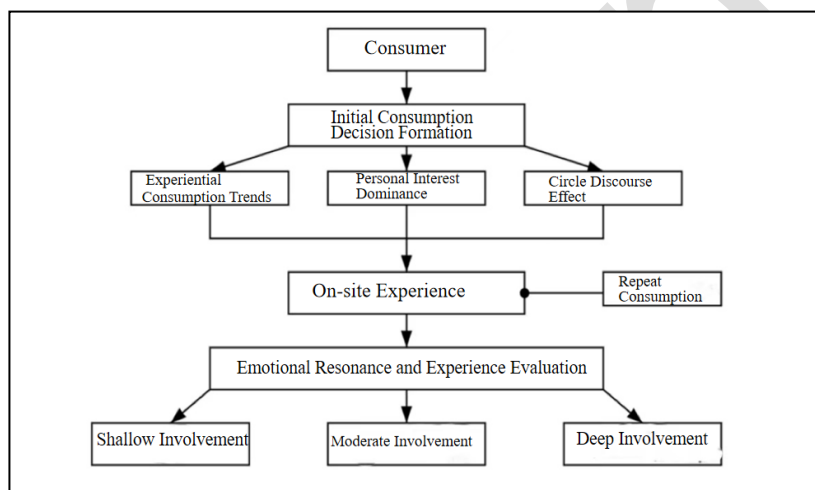


Figure 1. Motivational Logic of Youth Cultural Practice in Environmental Theatre

5. Liminal Space: The Spatial Potential of Environmental Theatre Providing Ritual Sites

5.1. TheatreScenic Characteristics of Environmental Theater

From the perspective of theater spatial design, the traditional proscenium stage's dichotomous viewing-performance structure often leads to diminished spatial efficiency and weakened immersive experiences. Environmental theaters employ spatial strategies to dissolve the audience's one-way gaze upon performers, transforming spectators from invisible observers into visible participants. Specifically, traditional large-scale tiered seating struggles to adapt to irregular spaces within buildings. To address this spatial conflict, immersive theaters innovatively adopt a central radiating spatial layout strategy. Its core feature lies in dissolving traditional performance boundaries through a central stage structure, creating a surround-style viewing model. Overall, immersive theater compresses the physical distance between performers and audience to an average viewing range of 3-5 meters. Psychologically, it reconstructs perception by shifting the audience's perspective from an elevated view to eye level. Socially, it reshapes interactions, forming micro-communities of shared emotion between performers and spectators. Through spatial deconstruction strategies, immersive theater dissolves the

boundary between performance and audience. Performers shift from sacred stage rhetoric to everyday presence, while audiences transform from passive observers in traditional theater to active participants. This approach also sparks a paradigm shift in theatrical aesthetics: the dissolution of the fourth wall.

French playwright Denis Diderot introduced the concept of the "fourth wall": "Whether writing or performing, do not think of the audience; simply pretend they do not exist. Perform as if the curtain were never raised." This implies that the stage front constitutes the "fourth wall" within the theater. The exploration of immersive theater fundamentally constructs spatial scenes by breaking down this "fourth wall." This innovative practice builds authentic perception through spatial characteristics and embodied performance, as Peter Brook stated in *The Empty Space*: "When spectators and performers share the same air, false performances are instantly exposed." Diderot's "fourth wall" theory fundamentally ideologizes spatial separation. By deconstructing this division, immersive theater generates what Randall Collins describes as an interactive ritual chain: shared physical space, focal concentration, emotional solidarity, and collective memory. Environmental theater constructs new domains in the spatial dimension while leveraging the interactive ritual chain to forge connections in the psychological dimension. The discourse of N09—"becoming part of the environment"—further validates the psychological identification stemming from these spatial characteristics.

5.2. Interaction Rituals Generating Liminal Experience

Rituals are special, unique events separated from everyday life. Rites of passage focus on the transformation of the subject's state(21), while environmental theater constructs symbolic spaces that challenge the structures of daily society, where real-world class labels and identity disciplines temporarily lose their power. Voluntary digital detox within the space enhances its ritualistic quality. Simultaneously, the theater creates a relatively equal standing for all audience members. As spectators shed professional attire and silence their phones, societal identity markers are temporarily shed. This egalitarian, pressure-free positive ritual experience facilitates the construction of liminal space.

The theater, as a liminal space, also embodies emotional fusion. The rhythmic interplay of emotional energy serves as the core driving force of interactive rituals, while embodied emotional resonance possesses greater longevity. Through embodied resonance and collective excitement, an emotional community is momentarily catalyzed. Moreover, this emotional energy does not dissipate instantly with the performance's conclusion. During the SD (abbreviation for Stage Door, the post-performance meet-and-greet), interactions between audience and performers extend the theater's emotional resonance beyond the venue's walls onto the streets, and further into the digital realm online.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The findings reveal the intrinsic motivations driving youth consumption. Immersive theater not only fulfills emotional release and self-expression needs but also strengthens identity through community interaction. Simultaneously, this paper critically notes that while such theaters offer urban youth a “buffer zone” against real-world pressures, overreliance on traffic-driven logic risks their gradual transformation into commercial gimmicks, eroding artistic integrity and public value. From a consumer perspective, this paper reveals the intrinsic motivational mechanisms of immersive theater and the spatial potential offered by its venues, providing theoretical insights for understanding youth subcultural practices, youth consumption, and the reproduction of urban space. Applying threshold theory to urban cultural space research, this paper proposes the dual threshold nature of immersive theater, offering a fresh perspective for studying youth subcultures. This not only enriches our understanding of immersive theater as a cultural industry but also deepens insights into contemporary youth cultural consumption behaviors. Constrained by the Shanghai-centric sample geography and the brevity of the research period, future studies could compare different cities, conduct longitudinal tracking of the lifecycle of theater formats, and explore the influence of regional culture on spatial consumption patterns. This would aim to provide more dynamic references for urban cultural policy formulation. The critical implication of this paper lies in warning that the cultural industry must seek a balance between artistic authenticity and commercialization. If immersive theater relies solely on viral gimmicks and the aesthetics economy, it will ultimately lose its critical potential as a “third space.” When pursuing the development goal of building a “Performing Arts Capital,” urban cultural policymakers should guard against aesthetic homogenization caused by standardized replication and encourage diverse, innovative spatial production models. Only by upholding the original intent of fostering emotional connections and public dialogue can sustainable vitality be achieved within the urban cultural ecosystem.

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