

**Immersive event experience and attendee motivation: a  
quantitative analysis using sensory, localisation, and participatory  
factors**

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# **Immersive event experience and attendee motivation: A quantitative analysis using sensory, localisation, and participatory factors**

## **Abstract**

“Immersive events” is a growing category within the range of event typologies that includes participatory theatre, interactive launch parties, ‘escape rooms’ and dress-up cinema.

A conceptual model reflects three core elements of the immersive events: Interaction, Sensory experience, and Localisation. A targeted online survey obtained a sample of  $n = 201$  participants who had attended an immersive event within the past year.

The results reveal that novelty and entertainment are highly important to attendee motivation. Gender, marital status, age, and education affected attendance patterns. Attendees were drawn to the uniqueness and participatory aspects of the immersive event. Deterrents to attendance were cost and perceived value.

Rapid developments in digital technology suggest even greater degrees of immersivity on the horizon. These findings offer a timely contribution to the better understanding of the immersiveness concept, and its influence on attendee motivation and experience.

*Keywords: immersive events; participatory theatre; experience economy; attendee motivation; audience experience*

# Introduction

Live events are one of the fastest growing sections of the leisure industry and they play a major role in shaping societies and culture (Page and Getz, 2016). The sector's growth is being driven by consumer appetite for experiences with the UK leisure industry valued at £125 billion in 2017 (Mintel, 2017). A report by Innovate UK (2018) found that the creative industries sector will be investing £33 million in immersive technology, products, services and experiences with the aim of doubling Britain's share of the global creative immersive content by 2025.

More specifically, in recent years, immersive events have gained mass-market appeal. Attendees are becoming accustomed to the unusual, highly interactive, and individual experiences (Cope, 2016). In response to the increasing demand for experiential consumption, events are evolving into highly engaging and interactive experiences. Event managers increasingly need to create immersive events in order to remain competitive in the increasingly crowded 'experience economy' marketplace (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Understanding the motivations which influence event attendee behaviour is key to the effective design, planning, and marketing of events (Poulsson and Kale, 2004).

Attendance is a key element to an event's success or failure, therefore research into the reasons behind event attendance is crucial to the industry development (Ghazal, 2012). Attending events is an effective way to meet one's socio-psychological needs (Crompton, 2003). Motivating factors to attend events include escape, novelty, socialisation, culture, family togetherness and excitement (Backman et al., 1995; Formica and Uysal, 1998; Mohr et al, 1993; Crompton and McKay, 1997). General event motivation studies are key to designing offerings for attendees and understanding their decision-making process (Xiang and Petrick, 2006) and different types of events reveal different motivation factors

(Thompson and Schofield, 2007). However, until now, relatively little academic research has been conducted specifically into understanding the motivations and experiences of attendees in the growing events sub-sector of immersive events.

The paper proceeds as follows: First we review the literature relating to the immersive events phenomenon. From this we construct a conceptual model. The research design is then presented, followed by findings and analysis. The paper closes with a reflection on the implications for future research and practice.

## **Immersive events**

### **The rise of immersive events and experiences**

In recent years, general consumers and event attendees alike have been seeking more engaging experiences and many businesses are fulfilling this by providing highly interactive activities. Event experiences are evolving in response to event attendees' expectations for more unique and unusual experiences, and to be a part of the action. A report produced by Eventbrite (2018) revealed that more than 78% of Millennials would choose to spend money on an engaging event or experience over buying a material product.

The term "immersion" in its common usage refers to the notion of a person being surrounded or deeply involved in a particular activity or experience. From this generalist perspective, all live events are to some degree 'immersive' in that they require from the attendee a level of mental attention and physical involvement. However, 'surrounded' and 'deeply' are variable and subjective terms. The next step of this paper thus is to unpack to phenomenon of 'immersive events'.

Firstly, we distinguish immersive performing arts events from experiential marketing type branded experiences. Outside of live arts, customers are being offered more interactive and up-close experiences with new technologies creating opportunities that make these more engrossing (Mintel, 2016; Intel, 2017). Whilst these experiential marketing experiences might appear immersive, there is less depth to them; they are simply interactive and tend only scratch the surface of the more fully immersive event experience.

Secondly, we note that the distinctions between events generally and immersive events more specifically are both qualitative and quantitative. Leisure businesses must constantly adopt innovative strategies to help maintain their competitiveness in the events industry in the face of changing consumer tastes (Rumelt, 2008). A superficially immersive experience such as a murder mystery weekend may offer some semblance of blurring between fiction and fact; and between event and spectator. By contrast, more fully immersive theatre events are

conceived, designed and executed as experientially works of art that have a lasting, emotional and intellectual impact” (Machon 2013, p. 69).

The origins of recent immersive performing arts events can be traced back to the ‘happenings’ of the 1960s. These ‘happenings’ were a series of performances that unfolded in art galleries in New York City that combined elements of music, dance, poetry, theatre and visual art that challenged and blurred the established boundaries between actor and audience to construct a new method of artistic performance (Cain, 2016). Since then, the term ‘immersive’ has been related to the processes of audience engagement within theatre, dance, video gaming, performance and other popular forms of culture.

Whilst ‘immersive’ has been used as a descriptor of live performances since the mid-1990s, the term ‘immersive theatre’ only gained currency in academia and artistic practices

about a decade later (Ritter, 2016). By the early 2000's the term 'immersive' was being used to describe immersive experiences that would take place in museums or heritage organisation (Biggin, 2017). These interactive and artistic events included immersive features and offered visitor participation, various media elements and live performances. Theatrical events like these were intended to bring the spaces and exhibitions to life and thus they can be accepted as part of a continuum of immersive work that engages the event attendee in an experiential manner.

A leading proponent of immersive theatre is the company Punchdrunk (founded in 2010) who turn unconventional buildings into carefully designed spaces that creates an open stage for both performers and audience members who become a part of the action (Cao, 2014). More recently, 'immersive performance' has replaced 'immersive theatre' which suggests a wider recognition of many disciplines now contributing to the immersion of audiences. The highly localised nature of immersive events enhances the event-specific motive to attend, especially given the inherent uniqueness of events and specific benefits that can accrue from attendance. The rise of immersive events has created a shift in the expectations of attendees.

## **Attendee motivation: Escape, Socialisation, Localisation**

Motivation is a central factor in understanding an individual's behaviours and their decision-making process. A motive has been defined as

an internal factor that arouses, directs and integrates a person's behaviour (Iso-Ahola, 1982, p. 230).

Crompton (1979) devised a two-dimensional 'push and pull theory' in which push factors are internal motivations which create the desire to travel or go to an event and pull factors are motivations which are external to the individual.

#### *Escaping from everyday life.*

The desire to escape from the everyday rhythm of life is a core intrinsic motivating factor for leisure event attendees (Getz and Cheyne, 2002). Iso-Ahola's (1982) 'escaping-seeking' dichotomy; the theory suggests that individuals are engaged simultaneously while escaping from their routine and seeking rewards, both on psychological and social dimensions. Among forty-six articles reviewed by Maeng et al (2015), twenty-one of the studies contained the novelty factor. 'Novelty' describes the desire to seek out unique things and experience thrill, adventure and surprise whilst satisfying one's curiosity (Crompton and McKay, 1997). 'Excitement' is less likely to be the travel motivation for older attendees, and single visitors are less likely to attend festivals for family motives (Yolal et al., 2012).

#### *Social interaction.*

Ralston and Crompton (1988) analysed participants' motives for attending festivals or events. They found seven motivation domains: 'family togetherness', 'social contact', 'stimulus seeking', 'meeting or observing people', 'learning and discovery', 'nostalgia' and 'escape from personal and social pressures. These seven motivation domains have become commonly accepted factors in research across different events and festivals (Li and Petrick, 2006). Bouchet et al. (2011) found that sporting-event attendees can be categorised into four types based on their motivations to attend a sporting event experience: aesthete, interactive, supporter, and opportunist. The socialisation dimension has been found to be a common factor across event types (Nicholson and Pearce, 2001).

### Localisation

Motivation is a dynamic concept which may differ from one market segment to another and from one decision-making process to another (Kozak, 2002). Event attendees are heterogeneous groups and therefore require segmentation. Previous research on event attendee motivations has tended to focus on festivals using the framework of tourism motivation (Nicholson and Pearce, 2001; Scott, 1996). The present research goes beyond the tourism framework to incorporate views from both local attendees and visitors.

—In reviewing the previous meta-analytic literature on motivation, we have extracted the recurring themes and synthesised them into three categories: Social interaction, Sensory experience, and Localisation (Table 1):

	<i>Backman et al. (1995)</i>	<i>Uysal and Li (2008)</i>	<i>Funk et al. (2009)</i>	<i>Maeng et al. (2016)</i>
<b>Social interaction</b>	family, socialising	socialisation; family togetherness; cultural exploration	socialisation; esteem	socialisation; family togetherness; learning
<b>Sensory experience</b>	relaxation	novelty; excitement; entertainment	excitement; performance	novelty; excitement; relaxation; entertainment
<b>Localisation</b>	external	escape	diversion	escape; cultural exploration; festival attraction

Table 1. Summary of event motivation factors (the authors)



## Concept of ‘immersion’

The term ‘immersive’ stems from the complexity that is ‘immersion’. The concept of ‘immersion’ is not new; it has been studied from a range of perspectives such as communication, psychology and education. The original meaning of the term ‘immersion’ relates to the submersion of an object in water. Over time, this has been converted to areas pertaining to experiences; performance art, theatre, dance, music and others which can create stages of immersion and participation for the audiences (Oprean, 2014).

Pine and Gilmore's (1999) model of experiences suggests that immersive theatrical events are essentially ‘escapist’ experiences that combine Immersion and Active Participation. Attendees "personally affect the performance or event that yields the experience" (1999, p.30) and "become physically a part of the experience itself" (1999, p.31). Immersive events present participants with situations and experiences that emphasise the specialness of the event itself (O' Hara, 2017). The desire for adventure and spontaneity is driving the demand for immersive events and event attendees are becoming accustomed to the amount of audience participation involved in these events.

“Immersion” is both a physical and psychological experience (Murray, 1997) in which the physical aspects are related to the perceptions of sensory engagement (Biocca and Delaney, 1995). Immersive experiences encompass an intense experience of presence (Biggin, 2017). In the performing arts, this intensity empowers the audience to “inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors” (Nield, 2008, p. 531) and engage in “a heightened state of awareness” (Barrett, 2013). Immersive theatre is a “multisensory engagement at an experiential level’ that involves ‘explorative forms of audience participation” (Machon, 2016, p.35).

An immersive event or experience can consist of series of graded states in which a member of the audience may well remain in control (Biggin, 2017). The experience is not

guaranteed by any particular performance types and the audience member is not inevitably active and empowered the moment they step into the scene. Instead, the sensation is a more nuanced and graded state, in which the attendee must overcome barriers to become fully engaged. Immersive events do not necessarily involve co-creation (van Limburg, 2008; Horbel et al., 2016) by the audience, although in some cases this may indeed be part for the experience.

For the purpose of this research, the term 'immersive event' is used to describe immersive experiences or performances which involve substantial elements of audience-performer Interaction, Sensory experience, and Localisation. Events that comprise these three elements have been produced and presented by companies such as Punchdrunk, Gingerline, and Secret Cinema, who have been pioneers in the exposition of immersive film, dining and theatre experiences (Machon, 2013). Their events incorporate all three features of immersive practice as described by Machon (2013) and Suvin (1970). Such events are exceptionally creative in that they are often staged in unconventional spaces and involve elements of highly- and multi-sensory activities and incorporate extensive audience participation as compared to traditional (western) theatre.

Machon (2013) proposes three features which are key to identifying an immersive performance. 'Happenings' displayed practices which were immersive and author Suvin (1970) describes a series of Happenings performances in the 1970 *Drama Review*. There are some similarities in Suvin's (1970) descriptions and Machon's (2013) definition of immersive practice (Table 2). Although the descriptions of Happenings indicate an immersive nature of the practice, the term was not yet then applied to the work and names such as site-specific theatre or work were embraced by companies using immersive techniques.

	<i>Suvin, 1970</i>	<i>Machon, 2013</i>
<b>Interaction</b>	<p>“Its performance depends on the interaction of the participants and a rehearsed troupe” (Suvin, 1970, p. 127)</p> <p>“Happenings can assign the audience the same ontological status as the performers: both can provide performance-events by action and provoked reaction; both can be, and often are, treated as objects” (Suvin, 1970, p.132)</p>	<p>“the physical insertion and direct participation of the audience member in the work...is absolutely central to the movement and sensual design of the event” (Machon, 2013, p.57)</p>
<b>Sensory experience</b>	<p>“...combined with physical action, optic or acoustic effects, and some scenery” (Suvin, 1970, p.129)</p>	<p>“a prioritisation of the sensual world that is unique to each immersive event” (Machon, 2013, p.67)</p>
<b>Localisation</b>	<p>“A forest/room/street/city or whatever the space of a Happening may be does not pretend to any other imaginary localization.”</p> <p>“Both space and time are no longer conventions but problematic materials whose extent and character, structured through object-relations, largely are a Happening.” (Suvin, 1970, p.133)</p>	<p>The role of space and place particularly the “architectural details and design” and the way that artists may “incorporate a focus on geographical location, community and local culture, history and politics” (Machon, 2013, p.70)</p>

**Table 2.** A three-factor typology of immersive event practise (the authors, based on based Suvin, (1970) and Machon (2013))

Thus, we construct a model of Immersive Events that incorporates both the theoretical aspects of ‘immersion’, and the previous literature on attendee motivation. In our model, the three key elements are attendee-performer Interaction, Sensory experience, and Localisation (Figure 1). The Immersive Event arises when all three factors are present concurrently in the same time-space continuum.

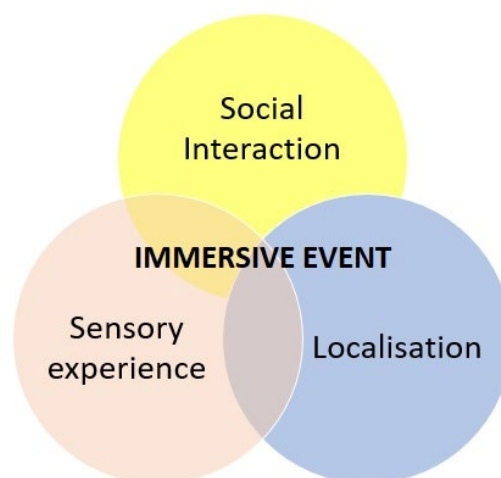


Figure 1. The three key elements of an immersive event (the authors)

## Research questions

This paper aims to expand the understanding the experience of immersive events and the motivation of attendees. This new knowledge can then be applied to predicting attendee behaviour, better segmentation of participants, and thereby better planning of immersive events (Crompton & McKay, 1997). Using the conceptual model developed above (Interaction, Sensory experience, Localisation) the following research questions were posed:

1. What drives people to attend an immersive event?
2. What are the socio-demographic characteristics of immersive event attendees?
3. How do socio-demographic characteristics affect event attendees' motivations?

## Research design

Numerous authors have constructed various experience scales aimed at measuring the event experience (De Geus et al, 2016; Richards, 2017), often from the perspective of tourism studies (e.g. Barrera-Fernández & Hernández-Escampa, 2017). Some prior research has focused on the audience experience in the broader performing arts setting (Radbourne et al, 2013; Independent Theatre Council, 2005) or the role of technology in virtual environments (Slater et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2013). Radbourne et al. (2009) have proposed an Arts Audience Experience Index (AAEI) which formulates that performing arts experiences are comprised of four components: authenticity, collective engagement between audiences and performers and amongst the audience themselves, knowledge and intellectual stimulation, and risk (value for money; fit with self-image). Until now these models, to our knowledge, have not yet been applied specifically to the immersive event context.

In order to probe more deeply, five immersive event motivational statements were constructed:

1. *Escape*

Immersive events are 'escapist' in nature as defined by Pine and Gilmore's (1999) concept, therefore this is an important motivating factor and it involves escaping from daily routines or stress (Maeng et al., 2016).

Statement - *To get away from the demands of life*

2. *Socialisation*

Socialisation comes from the desire to interact with a group and its members (Crompton and McKay, 1997).

Statement - *So I could do things with my friends*

3. *Entertainment*

Entertainment derives from the inclination to enjoy the stimulating events of the unique environment that an immersive event offers (Li et al., 2009).

Statement - *To experience something stimulating and exciting*

4. *Event novelty*

Novelty involves experiencing thrill, adventure and surprise at an immersive event to satisfy one's curiosity or alleviate boredom (Schofield and Thompson, 2007).

Statement - *Because I was curious*

5. *Participation and learning*

Immersive events rely on audience participation and in addition, the 'newness' of the term suggests that individuals may want to learn more about them (Chang et al., 2006).

*Statement - Because I like to participate in immersive events that are not easy for me to attend*

A positivist philosophy and deductive approach was used, consistent with previous authors of event motivation studies (Uysal et al., 1993; Scott, 1996; Nicholson and Pearce, 2001; Yolal et al., 2012; etc.). Data collection was achieved using a survey based on an observational, cross-sectional design to compare different population groups at a one point in time. This method allowed for the data to be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics thus making the method suitable for this study (Payne & Payne, 2004). To avoid selection bias, the study used a random self-selecting selection procedure to allow for a higher probability of the sample being representative compared to any other sampling method.

Event audiences consist of a diverse range of attendees. Further analysis is required to enable event managers to develop and promote the event features preferred by these various audiences. The most popular segmentation approach is a combination of demographic, geographic, psychographic and behavioural bases (Kaczynski & Rundle-Thiele, 2011). The most commonly used variables in event motivation studies are socio-demographic characteristics; age, gender, marital status, income, place of residence or education (Baes & Devesa, 2014).

The target population for the study were adults of any age who have attended an immersive event produced by Gingerline or Secret Cinema. Both of these companies are leading proponents of immersive experiences in London, England. Gingerline has been producing events since 2010 (Gingerline, 2019). Secret Cinema was established in London in 2007, and tickets to their events currently cost between GBP69 and GBP129 (Secret

Cinema, 2019). Secret Cinema has produced their immersive events internationally in France and the USA, and more recently have expanded to China (PRC).

A convenience and snowball approach to sampling was used. Various social media groups were contacted, and the pages of immersive event companies were also targeted to ensure the right respondent type participated in the survey. The efficacy of this method has been tested by previous researchers such as Ahmet (2016) with positive results. Participants needed to have attended the event within the last year and this was ensured by a closed question.

A web-based questionnaire was devised using the Microsoft Forms survey tool and this gathered information from individuals that have participated in an immersive event. This inexpensive and user-friendly method is an example of primary data collection and it offered the option to adapt the format to the researcher's choice (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). The survey was completed by 207 respondents over a three-week period. Out of the total number of surveys submitted, 201 were valid for analysis. Prior to the main study, a small pilot study was conducted to ensure that the survey was measuring what it intended to measure and appropriate for the target group. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymised. The survey was not incentivised. The research was carried out under normal research ethics procedures including right of withdrawal.

A multi-item questionnaire consisting of 14 questions was developed. The first section asked participants if they had attended an immersive event in the last year and collected qualitative information on their least favourite and most favourite part of the event. The second section of the questionnaire collected information regarding their motivations for attending an immersive event. Based on the review of relevant literature, the most appropriate motivation dimensions were selected to construct 15 motivation statements. The third section asked a range of socio-demographic information that included multiple-choice questions with

a single response. This included asking respondents about their age, gender, occupation, ethnicity, marital status and education. Free-text boxes were also included throughout to allow participants to comment openly on their own experiences and allow for other possibilities pertaining to their reasons for attending the event. The questionnaire was designed also to accommodate undecided or neutral feelings of participants (Hartley, 2013).

The questionnaires were analysed using SPSS version 25.0. This advanced analytical procedure delivered a fast and accurate data analysis of the online questionnaire (Field, 2015) and is widely accepted as the most common method for quantitative data analysis (Johns, 2010). The analysis of data was organised into different stages. First, data cleaning prepared it for better visualisations and more precise information (Grace-Martin, 2018). This helped to eliminate any errors, including excluding the questionnaires that were incomplete or did not meet the criteria of attending an immersive event within the last year. Secondly, the participants' socio-demographic information was profiled in percentages and frequencies. Thirdly, the means of each motivational statement were calculated to determine the importance score. Fourthly, a range of tests were used to further investigate any differences between the two variables (Chang & Yuan, 2011).

The raw qualitative data from the survey was analysed using an inductive analysis strategy by which the themes, categories and patterns “emerge out of the data rather than being decided prior to data collection and analysis” (Quinn-Patton, 1987:150).

## **Results**

### **The sample**

According to the sample returned, a typical immersive event attendee is female, White, well educated, and in their early 30s. Slightly more than half the attendees were single (56.6%).



The majority of respondents (87%) were of White ethnicity, using the UK census definitions of ethnicity for England and Wales (ONS, 2012). Over half (56.6%) were educated to degree level, with a further 27.8% holding post-graduate degrees. Given these levels of education, it is of little surprise that over four-fifths (81.2%) were employed in professional or related work. Thus, the overall profile of attendees is well-educated knowledge workers.

The dominance of these sociodemographic categories may be typical of immersive events audiences generally. On the other hand, we must also consider the possibility that the uniqueness of each immersive event may draw a highly specific audience base. The preponderance of White respondents suggests that immersive theatre in its present, Western form may be more attractive to this ethnic segment compared to other ethnicities. In cultures outside of the West European traditions, the distinction between ‘immersive’ theatre and ‘regular’ theatre is not as strictly separated, for example in Asian and African performance traditions (Turner, 1988; Schechner, 2017). The apparent overlap of education, occupational category and ethnicity suggest possible differences in participation rates in immersive theatre.

## **Analysis of motivation factors**

To measure motivations to attend an immersive event, participants were asked to respond to 15 motivation statements using a five-point scale ranging from 1, “strongly disagree,” to 5, “strongly agree.” The study measured the frequency of each motivation factor (see figure 1), it was revealed that the motivation factor with the highest frequency of agree was novelty (93%), followed by entertainment (75%), socialisation (52%), participation and learning (49%) and lastly, escape (41%).

Seven of the motivation statements in this study had mean scores of more than three (above neutral). Standard deviations are mostly from 0.71 to 1.03. Responses on each motivation statement are presented in Table 4.

Dimension	Motivation statement	Mean	SD
Escape (41%)	To have a change from my daily routine	3.52	1.14
	To relieve stress and tension	2.83	1.02
	To get away from the demands of life	3.02	1.09
Socialisation (52%)	So I could do things with my friends	4.28	0.83
	Because I enjoy the crowds at immersive events	3.36	1.08
	To meet new people and socialise with people attending the event	2.68	1.02
Novelty (93%)	Because immersive events are unique	4.53	0.76
	Because I was curious	4.22	0.92
	Because it sounded like fun	4.55	0.71
Entertainment (75%)	To experience something stimulating and exciting	4.58	0.72
	To see the entertainment (including food and drink)	4.24	0.80
	Because I am interested in something specific	3.30	1.03
Participation and Learning (49%)	I like to participate in immersive events that are not easy for me to attend	2.78	1.13
	To increase my knowledge and understanding of immersive events	3.03	1.17
	Because I like to explore the variety of things to see and do	4.25	0.85

**Table 4.** Summary of motivation statement scores (the authors)

Table 5 below shows the statements of motivation that had the highest ratings of agree and the statements of motivation that had the highest ratings of disagree. Two out of the three statements that had the highest ratings of agree were from the novelty factor and one was from the entertainment factor. The statements that have the highest ratings of disagree included statements from the socialisation, escape and learning and participation factors.

<i>Statements with the highest ratings of Agree</i>	<i>percentage</i>
To experience something stimulating and exciting	97%
Because it sounded like fun	96%
Because immersive events are unique	94%
<i>Statements with the highest ratings of Disagree</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
To meet new people and socialise with people attending the event	46%
I like to participate in immersive events that are not easy for me to attend	41%
To relieve stress and tension	40%

**Table 5.** Frequency of agree and disagree statements

Thematic analysis was carried out on the textual qualitative comments from participants on that they enjoyed the least and most about the immersive event. The first theme in relation to what they enjoyed the most, was the *uniqueness* of the event. Many participants commented on the *multi-sensory* set, dressing up and being immersed in an *unusual experience*. When asked about their least favourite aspect of the event, a common thread was the *cost*. Attendees commented on the expense of immersive events and the *value* for those who had less disposable income.

The most popular motivation statements were those of *novelty* and *entertainment*.

According to the literature, it was expected that novelty would be one of the motivation factors which would have a higher frequency rating due to the novelty of immersive events. Comments collected from the participants indicated that novelty is a popular motivation factor amongst attendees:

“Extremely engaging, unique and fun! I recommend many immersive experiences and always jump at the chance to do them, despite the cost (which can be rather expensive!)” (participant 183, female, white, 18-24yrs, student, London)

“They are such a unique, amazing activity and I can't wait to do more and more” (participant 47, female, white, 25-34yrs, professional, London)

In addition, the motivating factor of *entertainment* is important to immersive events.

Attendees are expecting to be entertained and to enjoy the stimulating and exciting activities that an immersive event has to offer (Nicholson and Pearce, 2001).

“The performance of the employees involved was fantastic and made it so much fun to participate. The food was also fantastic and this fact they catered for a variety of eating preferences was great!...I'm so happy I ended up going with her because it is one of my top 5 favourite experiences I've had in London.” Anonymous  
(participant 182, female, White, 25-34yrs, professional, London)

“I predominantly choose to go to secret cinema based on how much I enjoy the film and the world it's set in.”  
(participant 51, female, Asian, 35-44yrs, professional, London)

The statement which respondents related to the least, was ‘To relieve stress and tension’ which is part of the escape dimension. Escape as a motivational factor has been used in many studies and it is used to describe one having to escape everyday life and having a change from routine (Foster and Robinson, 2010) However, the results demonstrate that escape may be a general factor to measure escape in tourism, but it is not a suitable motivational factor for immersive events.

According to the findings, the third socialisation statement *‘To meet new people and socialise with people attending the event’* was not an important aspect for participants. As the other two statements of socialisation scored reasonably well, it may be concluded that participants of survey are more motivated to attend an event to further opportunities of socialisation with their own circle of friends rather than people they may meet at the immersive event. Lastly, the first learning and participation statement ‘I like to participate in immersive events that are not easy for me to attend’ had the second highest level of disagreement, which may suggest that barriers affecting event participation is not of importance when it comes to motivation to attend an immersive event.

# Discussion

The findings demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between motivation and socio-demographic characteristics. The results revealed that age, education and marital status influenced motivation. In addition, single participants were more likely to attend for socialisation reasons compared to married participants and older attendees were less likely to attend for learning and participating reasons compared to younger attendees. Gender and ethnicity showed no statistically significant differences. The results were consistent with the findings from previous studies (Backman et al, 1995; Thompson and Schofield, 2007; Snipes and Igram, 2007; Yuan et al., 2005) that found a relationship between event motivation and socio-demographic characteristics. Yolal et al. (2009) revealed that gender showed variation in motivation amongst festival attendees, however, the findings of this study found little relationship between gender and motivation. Regarding ethnicity, although some studies have collected the ethnic makeup of participants, it has not been tested as a variable to predict motivation and this study has revealed that there is little variation across immersive event motivation in relation to ethnicity.

Results of the descriptive statistical analysis revealed that participants assigned the highest importance to Novelty, whilst the second was Entertainment. The third most important factor was Socialisation followed by Participation and Learning and then Escape.

The concept of **Novelty** in this study, related to the curiosity and uniqueness of an immersive event and can be seen as a push factor. This factor has emerged as a key motivation factor in event motivation literature (Schofield and Thompson, 2007) and due to the inherent uniqueness of an immersive event, this factor is very significant and therefore it is no surprise that it was the most important factor according to immersive event attendees.

The **Entertainment** factor relates to the desire to enjoy the exciting offerings of an immersive event and is a pull factor. This can be particular interests surrounding an immersive event, such as a specific film at a Secret Cinema event and thus it is a relevant factor that serves as a strong enticing agent. Socialisation refers to the willingness to extend social contacts and meet with people from beyond the normal circle of friends. It has been a well-established factor in previous event motivation studies (Crompton and Mckay, 1997; Chang, 2006; Yolal et al., 2009), however immersive event attendees did not rate this factor highly and the findings suggest that they are not likely to attend an immersive event to meet or socialise with new acquaintances. Due to the high level of participation that can take place during an immersive event, the learning and participation factor refers to the desire to explore, learn and participate at an immersive event. This factor had mixed responses and the findings suggest that participants are more likely to attend an immersive event to explore the variety of things to do rather than to learn and gain knowledge.

Lastly, the **Escape** factor is another push factor that refers to recovering from life's stresses, however it was not rated highly amongst participants which suggests that it is not an important motivation factor for immersive event attendees.

Findings from this study partially support Getz and Cheyne's (2002) framework of event motivation and it is useful in categorizing immersive event motivation. The overlapping categories to evaluate motivation include intrinsic motives, event-specific motives and extrinsic motives. Descriptive statistics revealed that 'novelty' and 'entertainment' are considered the most important motivation factor for participants. These event-specific motivations are more specific to the event than 'to see the entertainment' and 'because immersive events are unique'. These targeted benefits provide the external motivators which are a part of Getz and Cheyne's (2002) framework.

Intrinsic motives were the second part of the interacting components and these relate to the escape and learning and participation motivation factors. Nicholson and Pearce (2001) found that that the escape factor is of lesser importance to attendees and event-specific motivations were rated higher and are crucial to attracting event attendees. In our sample, a similar result was obtained whereby the escape factor was rated the least important. The third dimension of Escape includes extrinsic motives, unrelated to any particular appeal of the event itself. In our sample, the Escape factor was not strongly present amongst immersive event attendees.

There is no universal scale to measure event motivation and given the current lack of literature in immersive events there is no scale that can be fully applied to the uniqueness of immersive events. Many of the festival and event motivation studies have been conducted under the theoretical framework of travel motivation research (Getz, 1991; Nicholson and Pearce, 2001; Scott, 1996) and the motivation dimensions are founded on either Iso-Ahola's escape-seeking dichotomy (Iso-Ahola, 1982) or the push-pull model (Crompton, 1979). These motivation theories are dated, and they do not consider the unique characteristic of an immersive event. In addition, the rise of digital technology means that audiences have changed, and they are constantly seeking engaging and interactive experiences, so studies on immersive event motivation should consider the needs of event attendees, rather than the needs of tourists (Maeng et al., 2016).

## **Conclusions**

The purposes of this study were to investigate the relationship between immersive event motivation and socio-demographic variables, identify the socio-demographic characteristics of attendees and examine the frequency of established event motivation factors. The

objectives were met through the devised research design, developed from the reviewed literature. In relation to the first research question, ‘What drives people to attend an immersive event?’, event-specific motives are shown to be key to immersive events, as the study revealed that novelty and entertainment factors are highly important to participants. This supports the findings of previous research on motivations for visiting a range of different events (Savinovic et al., 2012; Thompson and Schofield, 2007).

In answer to the second research question, ‘What are the socio-demographic characteristics of immersive event attendees?’, our study revealed a high number of female participants and most attendees were aged between 25 and 44. The socio-demographic information is useful to understand the diversity of their motivations for attending an immersive event, however a larger sample that can be representative of the population is recommended for future research. With regard to the third research question, ‘How do socio-demographic characteristics affect event attendees motivations?’, the results revealed significant associations in motivation existed among the socio-demographic characteristics of immersive event attendees, including marital status, age and education. However, there was no relationship between motivation and gender or ethnicity. Our findings support the conclusion of previous studies (Scott, 1996; Nicholson and Pearce, 2001; Schofield and Thompson, 2007) that motivation will vary depending on specific event-related factors.

Immersive events are becoming highly anticipated events that allow attendees to produce their own content and experience multi-sensory engagement. Advanced technology will enhance these experiences and provide important leisure activity outlets. Authors such as Machon (2016) discuss the evolving sector of immersive events and the danger of this term becoming so fluid that it is applied to anything and everything. The novelty of Immersive events is an attractive feature, however the term ‘immersive event’ runs the risk of becoming overused as a temporarily fashionable label for broader marketing activities, or as a tag to



describe anything from launch parties to escape rooms to cabaret nights. In the process, there is a danger that the original radicalness of the immersive event theatre experience as compared to more traditional forms of western performance may be increasingly diluted.

## **Contribution, implications, limitations and future research**

### **Contribution**

Immersive events and experiences are a highly topical yet comparatively under-researched area of study. Fascination with the aesthetic potential of immersive events needs to be complemented by solid research into how audiences actually experience such events and what motivates them to attend. The present paper has moved this line of inquiry forward by unpacking in detail the concept of “immersiveness” and capturing quantitative and qualitative data and specific event attendee experience.

This paper has demonstrated how the development and expansion of immersive live events continues to challenge established conceptual categories and production methods. Whilst all events on some level may be deemed to be inherently immersive, the present research has observed that some events are more immersive than others.

Research specifically on immersive events until now has been limited. This study contributes to the growing body of literature about event motivation and immersive events. It provides insights into the socio-demographic background of immersive event attendees and

how these variables can affect motivation. These findings can be used theoretically and practically, and they can influence the planning and marketing of future immersive events.

## **Implications**

The findings support Alston (2013) in suggesting that the demographic profile of immersive event attendees reflects social values embedded in immersive theatre practice. The results of this study offer important implications for local communities, public and private event organisers in their planning process to create a range of immersive events, if such events are to attract a wider demographic of audiences, especially where public funding support is involved.

The analysis of event motivation is useful to identify the different wants and needs in order to satisfy particular target markets. Our analysis identified statistically significant differences in selected motivation factors in terms of age, marital status and education. Organisers may use the socio-demographic information to gain a better understanding of their prospected target needs and improve their services (Savinovic et al., 2012). In particular, if organisers utilise event design techniques that enable a learning or educational environment, these should be promoted to younger attendees, as results from this study show that learning and participation motives are less important to older attendees.

The strongest motivation factors were novelty and entertainment and immersive event organisers should take this into consideration to improve their marketing strategies. Specifically, event managers can provide more elaborate promotion of the event-specific factors that contribute to the novelty of the event.

There is a growing need for experiential productions and traditional activities such as theatre and cinema are being reborn, so local governments should realise the market potential

of immersive events in their promotion efforts in order to maximise the economic and financial benefits.

## **Limitations**

The study has a number of limitations that can potentially affect the strength of the findings and the ability for the findings to be generalised. One of the issues is that the sample size might be considered as small compared to similar event motivations studies (Van Zyl & Botha, 2003; Chang, 2006; Crompton & McKay, 1997; Kim et al., 2002). A larger sample would be useful to determine whether the findings specified in this study are broadly applicable. Motivation is an important precondition for behavioural change, so it is key to measure variables using the appropriate motivation scales (Moorman & Matulich, 1993). Event motivation scales are mainly conceptually grounded on the notion of tourism and future research should validate motivation scales in event contexts before generalizations can be made. Given the scope of the current research, other possible reasons for attending an immersive event are not taken into account.

## **Future research**

The results of this study will be useful as a basis for future research to segment immersive event attendees. Segmentation and understanding the characteristics of attendees based on their motivation can act as a strong marketing tool that would allow event managers to promote the event features that are valued and preferred by target segments (Formica and Uysal, 1998). Other event motivation studies have also investigated the relationship amongst event attendee characteristics, event motivation and satisfaction (Lee et al., 2004; Mohr et al.,

1993; Lee and Lee, 2001; Savinovic et al., 2012). It is recommended that future research should continue to test these relationships, to see if motivation has any bearing on satisfaction and thus improve event attendance.

Further research should aim to capture a better understanding of social inclusion and immersive theatre in relation to class, race, and ethnicity. Such lines of inquiry would benefit from wider and more purposeful sampling strategies.

Further motivation research on immersive events is suggested to test the reliability of the findings and it will be interesting to replicate this study across different types of immersive events to compare the results. Participants may be influenced by event-specific motives such as performance quality, set design and technology. Alternatively, they may be influenced by intrinsic motives such as self-esteem or loyalty to an immersive event. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to examine other motivation factors in relation to immersive events to provide a better understanding of attendee's behaviours. The expanding and shifting domain of immersive event experiences will continue to warrant more research in the years to come.

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