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A Study on Immersive Experiences in Chinese Musicals in the Digital Media Environment: Taking the Immersive Small Theater at Shanghai Asia Mansion as an Example

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of rapid development in digital media, immersive theater has reshaped the relationship between audiences and performances by breaking down traditional boundaries between spectators and performers, becoming an important phenomenon in contemporary urban culture in China. Taking the immersive theater musical series "Star Space" at Shanghai Asia Mansion as its research object, this paper explores the characteristics of immersive experiences and the reconstruction of audience-performance relationships in Chinese musical theater within a digital media environment. Based on the "Uses and Gratifications Theory", the study employs in-depth interviews, conducting semi-structured interviews with three audience members and three theater professionals, combined with literature analysis, to reveal the essence of immersive experiences and their impact on the industry ecosystem. Research has found that, first, close physical interaction in a physical space significantly enhances audience emotional engagement, transforming them from "bystanders" to "participants," and extending emotional connections through the "stage door session" after the performance. Second, digital media drives "organic" dissemination through online communities, forming a "fan economy"-driven cycle of repeat viewership and emotional closure, but also exacerbating content homogenization and market segmentation. Finally, the industry faces challenges such as weak originality, overreliance on core fans, and talent shortages. Research has found that immersive small theaters need to strike a balance between entertainment and artistry. This article provides a new perspective on the theory and practice of immersive theater and offers optimization suggestions for the innovative path of small theater musicals in China.

Keywords: Musical, Immersive Small Theater, Asia Mansion, Emotional resonance, Uses and Gratifications Theory

1. Introduction

In the era of rapid development of digital media, immersive theater, as a new form of performance that integrates space, performance, and audience interaction, is rapidly emerging in China's urban culture. Especially in Shanghai, the "Star Space" series of small theaters at Asia Mansion has become a new landmark for urban cultural consumption with its unique immersive experience and

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diverse performance content. In recent years, Chinese musicals have entered the public eye thanks to digital media. Following the huge success of the immersive resident musical theater production "Apollonia" staged at the Asia Mansion on Hankou Road in Shanghai in 2020, immersive resident musical theater productions began to develop rapidly.By now, Shanghai Asia Mansion has become a gathering place for musical theater fans, with more than ten shows being performed simultaneously in the building every week, gradually forming a new type of culture. Traditional musicals are based on a one-way viewing model between the stage and the audience, but the rise of digital media has given audiences more rights to create derivative works and provide feedback. Audiences can build online communities outside the theater, and subcultures can form among audiences, directly influencing the reputation and spread of a production. Immersive performances in small theaters are very close to the audience, with many interactive segments, and closer communication between actors and audience members.

This paper takes the immersive theater at Shanghai Asia Mansion as its research object and explores the evolution of immersive experiences and audience-performance relationships in Chinese musical theater in the context of digital media environments. By analyzing the performance model, audience interaction methods, and integration with digital media of the "Star Space" series of plays at Asia Mansion, this study reveals how immersive theater is redefining the relationship between audiences and the stage, thereby driving the development and innovation of small theater musicals in China.

2. Manuscript preparation

2.1. Core features of immersive experiences and spatial reconstruction

The core feature of immersive theater lies in breaking down the "fourth wall" of traditional theater, reshaping the audience experience through close physical interaction and emotional immersion. This transformation in spatial form and emotional mechanism echoes the openness of the stage space advocated by Alato's "cruel theater" and the theater of the absurd, and can also be seen as a reinterpretation of theater as a "third space," i.e., an intermediary place that blends materiality and spirituality [1]. Based on the "third space" theory, some studies have pointed out that Asia Mansion has transformed its office building into an environmental theater, incorporating scenes such as "bars" and "casinos" into the stage design, creating an immersive space where the audience and actors coexist [2]. Another study, using 'Apollonia' as an example, emphasizes the zero-distance contact between the circular stage and the audience, allowing the audience to become witnesses to the story, and stimulating repeat viewings through a multi-cast rehearsal strategy [3]. Furthermore, some scholars have suggested that the spatial transformation of the Asian Building is not merely a physical renovation, but also a process of reproducing social relations, with audiences constructing an emotional utopia that allows them to escape reality through interaction [4]. In terms of urban cultural development, immersive performance spaces are considered an important way to "infuse places with cultural warmth." They break through the spatial and temporal limitations of traditional theaters and have become one of the key measures for Shanghai to establish itself as the "Asian capital of performing arts" [5]. Small theater performances not only satisfy individual emotional and aesthetic needs but also continuously promote the formation and renewal of the urban cultural ecosystem [6].

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2.2. Digital media's reconstruction and empowerment of the relationship between audience and performance

Digital media has played a key role in the dissemination of immersive musicals and the building of communities. Research has shown that Asia Tower has used social media platforms (such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo) to release behind-the-scenes footage and encore videos of actors, triggering “organic” dissemination and attracting a large number of young audiences to participate in online communities [7]. Related empirical research shows that fan groups share viewing reports and card collection strategies through channels such as super topics and fan groups, extending the offline viewing experience to online interaction and creating a closed loop that combines emotion and consumption [8]. At the same time, other studies from a media theory perspective argue that digital technology has broken through the temporal and spatial limitations of immersive experiences through virtual theaters and online live streaming, but there is still a lack of systematic empirical analysis on the application of emerging technologies such as VR and AR in immersive musicals [9]. Building on this, some scholars have used the “input-transformation-output” model from systems theory to break down immersive performance consumption: input variables include audience expectations and external marketing stimuli, the transformation process involves sensory stimulation, perceptual analysis, aesthetic understanding, and imagination, and the final output is functional experience and aesthetic resonance. This provides a theoretical framework for understanding how digital media can intervene in and optimize the relationship between performers and audiences [10].

2.3. Empirical discussion of industry challenges and optimization pathways

Research has generally pointed out that immersive small theaters face issues such as content homogenization, over-reliance on fan economies, and high costs during their development. Based on box office data, some analyses have shown that the repurchase rate at Asia Mansion is as high as 40%, but excessive pandering to fan demands has led to uneven production quality, with some works exhibiting vulgar tendencies [7]. Some studies have also suggested that theaters should strike a balance between entertainment and artistry, leveraging original scripts and technological innovation to achieve differentiated content development. Further findings from related interview studies indicate that while Asian Building has reduced operational costs through a vertical clustering model, talent shortages and insufficient original creativity remain the primary bottlenecks to industry development. It is necessary to cultivate specialized teams through policy support and university-industry collaboration to promote sustainable development [8].

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3. Research methods

3.1. Methods

Table 1: Respondent information

Number	Gender	Age	Occupation	Respondent perspective
A	female	22	Student	Audience perspective
B	female	22	Student	Audience perspective
C	female	23	Theater Manager	Practitioners' perspective
D	female	22	Student	Audience perspective
E	female	21	Theater Promotion	Practitioners' perspective
F	female	24	Stage Manager	Practitioners' perspective

In an immersive theater, the audience is no longer traditional "spectators" but rather part of the plot. For example, during the performance, they may become a character in the play and interact with the actors. The blurring of the boundary between spectators and performers greatly enhances the audience's sense of presence. Immersive theaters are usually detached from everyday life. Close-up performances allow audiences to feel as if they are part of the action, making it easier for them to empathize with the intense or moving plot. This paper will explore changes in audience-performance relationships and audience behavior in small theater musicals from the perspective of uses and gratifications theory. The research process involved in-depth interviews with audiences who frequently attend immersive musicals at Asia Mansion and staff members working at the immersive theater within Asia Mansion. Compared to questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews can uncover the detailed feelings and underlying psychological reactions of audiences during their experiences, making them more suitable for studying the complex subjective experiences of immersive theater.

During the study, six participants were recruited. Their basic information is shown in Table 1.

3.2. Interview design

The interviews were conducted face-to-face offline, with each interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes and led by the researcher herself. Before the interview, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to the interviewees, and their consent was obtained for recording and anonymous use of the data. This study focuses on the theme of "the relationship between audience and performance in immersive small theater musicals." From the audience's perspective, 13 semi-structured interview questions were designed. The questions were designed based on the audience's viewing motives, behavioral habits, interactive experiences, emotional responses, and extended participation, with the aim of exploring the construction mechanism and cultural significance of immersive viewing relationships. The specific interview questions were designed based on the following logic:

Questions (1), (2), and (4) focus on the motivations and preferences of audiences who choose to watch immersive small theater musicals, examining the driving factors and type preferences behind their viewing decisions. The aim is to analyze the core characteristics and differentiated advantages of immersive small theaters in terms of their appeal. Questions (3) and (8) focus on audience viewing frequency and repeat viewing behavior, exploring whether immersive performances have sustainable appeal and audience loyalty, as well as factors that influence repeat viewings, such as actor performance and changes in performance details. Questions (5), (6), and (7) focus on the

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interactive experience at the performance venue and audience identity recognition, with an emphasis on understanding whether the audience has transformed from “passive viewers” to “active participants,” and further analyzing the impact of post-performance interactions (such as Stage Door) on audience emotional engagement and identity construction. Questions (10), (11), and (13) approach the topic from an emotional and psychological perspective, focusing on whether the immersive viewing experience triggers emotional fluctuations in the audience, provides psychological comfort, or induces a sense of escapism from reality. This assessment aims to evaluate the emotional depth and potential therapeutic functions of immersive experiences. Question (12) focuses on extended participation behaviors beyond the performance, including whether audience members join fan communities or post content related to the performance on social media platforms. The aim is to explore how audience members extend their offline viewing experience to online interaction and dissemination, and to reveal the operational mechanisms of immersive small theaters in terms of fan culture and user-driven dissemination. Question (9) examines the audience's recommendation tendencies, with the intention of analyzing the acceptance threshold and dissemination potential of immersive performances from the perspective of their role as “cultural intermediaries.” In summary, this interview design employs a systematic arrangement of questions to comprehensively understand how immersive small-theater musicals reconfigure traditional audience-performance relationships, confer new cultural identities and participation pathways upon audiences, and provide empirical foundations and individual perspectives for subsequent case analyses and theoretical discussions.

To comprehensively understand the relationship between audience experience and performance in immersive small-scale theater musicals, this study, building on audience interviews, further designed semi-structured interview questions targeting backstage staff. These questions focused on their observations and assessments of audience behavior, performance outcomes, operational experiences, and the current state of the industry. By approaching the subject from the perspectives of creators and managers, this study aims to supplement the blind spots in audience subjective experiences, thereby achieving a more structured and systematic analytical perspective. A total of seven questions were designed, with the following specific design logic:

Questions (1) and (2) focus on the understanding of the audience's viewing motives by the people behind the scenes, exploring the psychological expectations and actual orientations of the audience when entering an immersive theater, especially the tension between “the content itself” and “the appeal of the actors.” This helps to clarify the driving forces behind the audience's viewing behavior and the interactive relationship between the content of the performance and the fan culture of the actors. Questions (3) and (4) delve into the viewing mechanisms and experiential effects of immersive theater, evaluating from the perspective of staff whether immersive performances are more satisfying than traditional theater, and examining the transformation of audience identity in such performances—that is, whether they transition from passive “viewers” to interactive “participants,” thereby truly achieving the goal of “immersion.” This holds direct theoretical value for the “reconstruction of the viewer-performer relationship” that this study focuses on. Question (5) focuses on the phenomenon of repeat viewings by audiences, analyzing the mechanisms, value, and potential creative/operational feedback behind “multiple viewings” from the perspective of the performance organizer, providing an important supplement to the discussion of how immersive performances can construct a “repeatable viewing experience.” Question (6) focuses on common vocabulary used in audience feedback in operational and promotional practices. It aims to extract the core elements that move audiences in immersive theater from actual communication experiences, and analyze high-frequency keywords in audience language to capture their emotional trends,

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aesthetic focus, and psychological resonance points. Question (7) focuses on industry-level issues, inviting staff to summarize and reflect on the practical challenges faced by immersive theater in its development. These challenges may include theater space limitations, the difficulty of content innovation, actor training, audience education, and profit models, among other aspects. The aim is to reveal the structural difficulties and areas for improvement in the development of immersive theater.

Overall, the interview questions in this group aim to reconstruct the creative concepts and audience relationship-building logic of immersive small theater musicals from a professional perspective. They supplement the industry knowledge that may be lacking from the audience's perspective and further deepen this study's overall understanding of how “immersive experiences” are constructed, maintained, and responded to in practice.

4. Research methods

This study uses the theory of uses and gratifications to explore how immersive small theater musicals satisfy the multiple psychological needs of audiences. Through in-depth interviews with multiple audience members and behind-the-scenes staff, the study summarizes that audiences primarily obtain five types of satisfaction when watching immersive musicals: emotional release and escape from reality, social interaction and community participation, cognitive enhancement and aesthetic deepening, individual identity and value resonance, and entertainment experience and novelty. The following sections will discuss each of these points in detail.

4.1. Dual satisfaction of emotional release and escapism

Among the audience members interviewed, most clearly stated that watching immersive small theater musicals helped them release their emotions and relieve stress. Respondent A mentioned that “theater always gives people the ability to dream” and “immersive theater is like a wall that isolates you from the outside world,” directly expressing the escapist function of theater. This “immersive” experience is not just about being physically close to the performance space, but about the audience entering the world of the play on a psychological level and temporarily escaping the pressures and worries of real life. In the high-pressure pace of urban life, immersive performances have become a valuable means of regulating emotions. Respondent D also said that when life gets stressful, watching a show is a way to “find some peace and freedom”. This function fits with the “escape from reality” and “emotional fulfillment” needs in the theory of uses and gratifications. Through plot immersion, actor interaction, live music, and other forms, the audience goes from “watching” to “emotional involvement”, experiencing crying, laughing, and being moved during the performance, and going through a process of emotional “purification”.

4.2. Social integration and audience community participation mechanisms

Another major feature of immersive musicals is their ability to foster a strong sense of social experience and group identity. In interviews, many audience members mentioned that they not only felt a sense of interaction with the actors during the performance, but also participated in “stage door” activities after the show, where they were able to engage in face-to-face conversations with the actors, share their feelings, and convey their emotions. At the same time, many audience members join fan groups or social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo to engage in secondary creation of the performance content, such as writing reviews or creating visuals for actors on social media platforms. These actions allow them to maintain a sense of ongoing participation in

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the performance even outside the theater. This behavior reflects the “social integration” function of the uses and gratifications theory, which involves establishing or strengthening social connections with others through media use. Behind-the-scenes staff have also observed that frequent audience members typically have a strong “emotional attachment” mechanism. They keep coming back to the theater not only for the performances themselves, but also to maintain their emotional connection with specific actors and fan groups. The formation of this “performance community” has transformed immersive theater from a linear, time-based art consumption space into a social arena characterized by extensibility and interactivity.

4.3. Deepening understanding and enhancing aesthetic experience

Although immersive small theater musicals are often considered to be more entertaining due to their interactive and intimate spaces, many interviewees expressed a high level of concern for content and performance quality. Both audience members B and D mentioned that they watched the same work repeatedly “because of the power of the script and music,” emphasizing the “thought-provoking value” of the performance. In addition, some audience members explored the diversity of character interpretations by comparing the differences in performances between different casts. This behavior demonstrates the audience's active understanding and reconstruction of the performance content. According to the theory of uses and gratifications, this behavior belongs to the fulfillment of “cognitive needs”， that is, the audience obtains new knowledge, ideas, and ways of understanding the world through viewing works of art. At the same time, some audience members use musicals as a medium for aesthetic education, enhancing their personal aesthetic appreciation by observing the actors' performances and experiencing the script structure and musical style in person. Immersive theater provides audiences with a closer, more intimate performance space, allowing them to capture the actors' subtle facial expressions and body language, thereby gaining a richer artistic experience. This high-frequency interaction between the visual and psychological aspects provides fertile ground for the cognitive development and aesthetic deepening of the audience.

4.4. Feedback mechanism of individual identity and emotional value

Another core appeal of immersive performances lies in their ability to satisfy the audience's psychological desire for “individual identity.” Audience members project their affection for a particular character or actor, thereby confirming their own emotions and values. Respondent B said, “I really want to tell her that she did a great job today,” while staff member C pointed out that the main motivation for some audience members to watch the performance was “the emotional value of receiving feedback from the actors.” This “emotional response” mechanism blurs the boundaries between performers and audiences, transforming audiences from passive aesthetic observers into active participants who engage emotionally. In the theory of uses and gratifications, this falls under the category of “personal integration needs,” which refers to the reinforcement of self-identity, self-worth, and emotional belonging through media use. Immersive performances use multiple interactive methods to allow audiences to “emotionally attach” themselves to the actors, gaining identity confirmation and value resonance. This resonance is not a simple preference, but rather an emotional dependence and psychological construct. With the improvement in performance quality and the maturation of fan culture, this type of audience has a high level of loyalty and repeat viewing frequency for immersive theater, becoming an important driving force for the stable development of this type of performance.

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4.5. Entertainment motivation and the appeal of novelty in media

Many first-time visitors to immersive theaters view it as a “novel and interesting” media experience. Staff member F pointed out that a large number of audiences attend immersive performances for the first time out of curiosity about “breaking the traditional frame” and seeking the novelty of “being there.” This curiosity-driven behavior is a typical manifestation of the “entertainment and leisure needs” in the uses and gratifications theory. The immersive theater's design features, such as “spatial proximity,” “sudden plot developments,” and “environmental set participation,” break down the boundaries between audience and performance in traditional theaters, giving viewers a stronger sense of “being enveloped” and “being there.” This type of experience has attracted many non-musical theater enthusiasts, giving immersive performances the potential to break through to new audiences. At the same time, this novelty is often one of the reasons for repeat viewings, as the details and interactive content of each performance may differ, keeping audiences eagerly anticipating each new show. Under the influence of the digital media environment, this “variability” and “unpredictability” have also become content that young audiences are eager to share and disseminate, further deepening their media stickiness.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the immersive theater musical at the Asia Mansion in Shanghai as an example and combines the theory of uses and gratifications to explore in depth the audience's experience and psychological satisfaction mechanisms during the immersive viewing process through interviews. Research has found that immersive small theater musicals can satisfy the psychological needs of audiences on multiple levels, presenting multidimensional immersive experiences: on an emotional level, audiences gain strong emotional resonance and stress relief through plot immersion, actor interaction, and the atmosphere of the venue, achieving both emotional satisfaction and escapism. At the level of social integration, audiences achieve social connection and group identity through post-performance interactions, joining audience communities, and creating content on social media platforms. Immersive performances become an extended social experience. At the cognitive and aesthetic level, audiences deepen their understanding of musical theater and enhance their artistic aesthetic abilities by comparing their understanding of the plot with the actors' performances. More importantly, immersive theater satisfies the audience's expectations for individual identity and emotional feedback through emotional connections with the actors, making the performance not only a cultural consumption experience but also a process of constructing one's own emotional value. Finally, the interactivity of the performance, the intimacy of the space, and the irreproducible spontaneity of the live event also satisfied the audience's psychological need for entertainment and novelty. Overall, immersive small theater musicals not only break down the boundaries between performers and audiences in traditional proscenium theaters, but also create a comprehensive experience space that integrates entertainment, emotion, cognition, and social interaction, demonstrating a new way of constructing audience-performer relationships in the digital media environment. The research content is based on the psychological needs of the audience, combining the characteristics of immersive theater and audience behavior, providing strong empirical support for understanding the reshaping of the relationship between audience and performance in the context of digital media. On a theoretical level, this paper introduces the “uses and gratifications theory” into musical theater research, enriching the application of media psychology in the performing arts field and expanding the perspective of discussion on “audience subjectivity” in musical theater research. On a practical level, this study provides targeted suggestions and references for the

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creation and operation of immersive musical theater. In addition, this study also reveals potential issues in content creation, actor selection, and theater operations in current immersive small theater musicals. If these issues are not effectively addressed, they may lead to a vicious cycle for this type of theater. Therefore, this study not only helps relevant practitioners improve performance quality and audience retention, but also provides forward-looking insights for the healthy development of the entire industry.

Since this study uses the Asian Building Immersive Theater as an example, the selected plays and interview samples have certain regional and typological limitations. The research results may not be fully applicable to other cities or types of immersive theaters. Future studies may consider expanding the sample scope to include more regions, more diverse theater types, and audience groups to obtain more universal and representative conclusions.

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