

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 an emerging form of cultural consumption space—has become a liminal space for urban youth to escape reality and pursue emotional resonance. Adopting an integrated framework of liminality theory and spatial consumption, this study explores young people's liminal experiences and consumption behaviors in environmental theatre 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 in this culture context 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, thereby 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 has emerged as a novel format of the experience economy, independent of the traditional theatre industry. By meeting the experiential needs of theatre enthusiasts within a "15-minute living circle theatre cluster" in terms of distance and time (Zhang, 2022), this cultural sector—pioneered by Shanghai's first environmental play *Mia Famiglia*—has achieved nearly full houses thanks to its unique advantages of proximity, strong audiovisual effects, and immersive settings. 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 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. This trend also mirrors the reality that in the digital age, fragmented online interactive experiences struggle to satisfy the deep emotional needs of youth, making embodied offline scenarios an effective pathway for self-reinvention. By providing participants with immersive experiences, environmental theatre offers emotional value. This is not merely entertainment consumption; on a spatial level, it creates a field where participants can temporarily detach from their real-life social roles. Concurrently, young people engage in continuous symbolic interaction within this field, forming rich cultural practices encompassing both offline experiences and online expressions.

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 from American theatre theorist Richard Schechner who explored new performance methods and audience–performer relationships by adapting performance spaces for specific dramatic works, with an emphasis on spectacle and immersion (Schechner, 1968). 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 (Schechner, 2001). 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 (Wu, 2020). For a long period afterwards, environmental theatre practice did not garner significant audience attention. It was not until 2019, following appeals from the Shanghai Performing Arts Association and cultural authorities, that Shanghai took the lead in promoting the environmental theatre brand. The goal was to further benchmark against the performance industries of metropolises like New York, London, and Tokyo, serving Shanghai's urban development objective of becoming the "Asian Capital of Performing Arts." Environmental theatre quickly became a highlight of Shanghai's experience economy (Zhang, 2024). Venues originated in the Huangpu District's "Asia Building," later radiating to surrounding traditional performance venues and shopping malls like Dashijie, World Mart, and No. 1 Department Store. Through renovations, old office buildings were transformed into clusters of small-scale performance spaces, meeting the cultural and entertainment needs of Shanghai's youth (Wu, 2024). 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 (Liu, 2022). 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 serve as a branding tool for urban cultural tourism (Tang, 2023), possessing unique advantages in revitalizing the performance market and cultivating new forms of cultural consumption (Luan & Zhang, 2024). It is not only a new scenario for boosting cultural tourism consumption but should also become an innovative practice of modern Chinese narrative (Pan, 2022). Second, from an industry operation perspective, research explores innovations in physical space construction, artistic space elements, and interactive relationships among people within the space (Liu, 2022). Successful operation requires high-quality repertoires, distinctive positioning, accurate market forecasting, and sensitive risk warning mechanisms (Li, 2024). 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 (Liang, 2022). The theatre is primarily a physically existing territory, but it also functions as a virtual space in the information age (Fu, 2023).

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 to reveal the spatial functions of 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 theatre, 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 (He, 2007). The relationship between humans and space shifts from spatial production to spatial consumption, meaning space itself becomes both a consumable object and a tool for consumption, possessing dual attributes. Specific social groups achieve dual value through spatial venue selection: externally displaying group behavioral characteristics and internally constructing identity systems (Liu & Shen, 2025). 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 concept of “liminality” originates from cultural anthropology, Van Gennep employed the term to describe the threshold state of detachment from the ordinary within ritual processes, emphasizing the position between two phases (Van, 2010). Within this space, it highlights micro-level experiential engagement and evolving contexts (Pan & Yu, 2015), 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 (Turner, 2006). Subsequent researchers contend that liminality's purpose lies in revealing the shortcomings of established structures, fostering social integration, and mitigating conflicts (Li, 2021). Environmental theatre 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.

From the perspective of the liminal concept's application in modern life, liminal spaces possess specific spatio-temporal characteristics. By deconstructing the symbolic systems of existing social orders, these spaces construct deconstructive spiritual buffer zones. Within this space, individuals experience content distinct from daily life, carrying a nuance of resistance against reality. This experience of resisting reality enables the liminal subject to detach from the original social structure, dissolving hierarchical relationships and conflicts (Wang, 2007). It provides an escape from both the real world and the digitally mediated society—a utopia free from social class relations and contradictions, where one can focus solely on enjoying the present moment. Young consumers' engagement with cultural products carries this resistance to reality, yet this resistance manifests as a self-satisfying practice (Sun & Liu,

2022)—a self-contained act that only temporarily defies real-world pressures in imagination. When the drama ends, they must return to reality.

In summary, the immersive theatre space is a domain brimming with transformation and tension, where the spatial characteristics diverge from those of the real world. The young participants, setting aside their phones, immerse themselves wholly in the theatrical environment, embodying a “counter-structural” essence and achieving personal growth. It is precisely in this sense that immersive theatre 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. The author deeply engaged in multiple environmental theatre performances in Shanghai. This immersion provided comprehensive insight into performance procedures and participant behavior. Operating across both physical and online fields, the author documented behavioral chains spanning online-to-offline-to-online interactions. Throughout this process, the author connected with several environmental theatre enthusiasts, exchanging and recording their perspectives and experiences.

In semi-structured in-depth interviews, 15 frequent theatre-goers who actively engage with theatre were recruited as interviewees through platforms like Xiaohongshu, WeChat groups, and offline channels. Centered on the core research questions, the interviews focused on understanding motivations for consuming immersive theatre, experiences during performances, post-performance reflections, and subsequent behaviors. 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.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Identity	Residence	Participation Frequency (Last 6 Months)
N01	Student	Shanghai	36
N02	Student	Shanghai	29
N03	Student	Shanghai	11
N04	Legal Professional	Shanghai	22
N05	Internet Industry	Shanghai	8
N06	Student	Liaoning	8
N07	Student	Shanxi	13
N08	Pharmaceutical Professional	Hunan	22
N09	Student	Shanghai	35
N10	Education Professional	Shanghai	28
N11	Education Professional	Zhejiang	24
N12	Student	Jiangsu	25
N13	Student	Shanghai	10
N14	Student	Zhejiang	6
N15	Internet Industry	Shanghai	26

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 limit the widespread diffusion of this cultural industry. Consumers can only obtain performance information online, make consumption decisions, and purchase tickets to enter the venue. Factors driving initial consumption versus repeat consumption differ. Initial consumption stems from more complex reasons, while repeat consumption is mainly driven by the on-site 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 (He, 2019). "I recall my first time buying a ticket to a theatre—I didn't even know what it was about. At work, I'd ponder what to do after hours, stumbled upon it on Damai, found it intriguing, and just went" (N05); "On weekends, friends and I agonized over where to go for fun. We'd grown tired of our usual entertainment, so we decided to try something new" (N13). 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" (Ao, 2021). After the initial experience, consumers whose emotional fulfillment needs are met by the immersive theatre environment will continue to engage in consumption. "After the first show, this experience completely wiped away my work fatigue. I felt those two hours were well worth the cost" (N05). 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. "I first learned about musical theatre and fell in love with this art form while watching the variety show 'Voice of the Heart.' When I came to Shanghai, I went to see a show without hesitation" (N01); "I first encountered musical theatre during music classes as a child and have followed it ever since. Since large-scale theatre performances aren't always available, I consistently choose to see shows at theatres with resident productions" (N09); "I first saw official footage of foreign musicals on Bilibili and was utterly captivated by the art form. Later, I discovered Chinese musicals and learned about Shanghai's resident musicals, which felt like an elevated

experience, so I decided to see one right away” (N08). 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 consume, 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 influence from 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. “My friend really enjoys going to theatres to watch musicals and has always wanted me to go with her, so I bought tickets to accompany her” (N13); “I’m a theatre enthusiast myself. When I saw terms like ‘cosmic masterpiece’ in recommendations on Xiaohongshu, it piqued my curiosity—I wanted to see what performance earned such praise” (N14). 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 (Ji, 2020). 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 theatre’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

After watching “Apollonia,” I was thoroughly impressed by both the actors and the production environment. However, the plot logic felt a bit tangled after just one viewing, so I decided to buy another ticket. (N10). “My most recent repeat purchase was for The Art Supplies Store on Xingji Road. I loved the story and the songs were beautiful, so I immediately wanted to see how other actors interpreted it and if there were any differences.” (N15). The dual-dimensional experience created by the theatre—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 theatre 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 theatre environments. Due to the theatre'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. “Because I love the character Richard, different seats let me experience distinct perspectives and interactions. I wanted to try out various seats, then compile a guide to share on Xiaohongshu, hoping to offer seating advice to others” (N15); “Since the actors perform right in front of you, each performance is different based on the actor's state. Every show is unique, and I don't want to miss any” (N09). 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 theatre 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 theatres and performers, transforming accumulated viewing experiences into online guides for seat selection and actor evaluations. Respondent N09 attended 35 immersive theatre productions within six months, frequently posting notes on the platform Xiaohongshu and amassing over 2,500 followers.

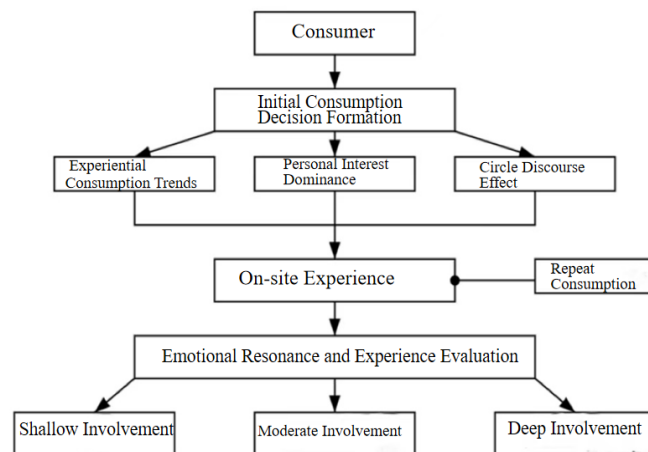


Figure 1. Motivational Logic of Youth Cultural Practice in Environmental Theatre

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

5.1 Theatre Scenic Characteristics of Environmental Theatre

From the perspective of theatre spatial design, the traditional proscenium stage's binary “viewing–performing” structure often leads to low spatial efficiency and weak immersion.

Environmental theatre uses spatial strategies to dissolve the audience's one-way gaze at performers, turning spectators from invisible observers into visible participants. "Seeing the actor shed tears right before my eyes, even I—usually quite rational—couldn't help but cry along with him. I feel this kind of experience is only possible in an intimate immersive theatre. In large theatres, I often find myself zoning out mid-performance" (N12). Specifically, traditional large-scale tiered seating struggles to adapt to irregular spaces within buildings. To address this spatial conflict, immersive theatres 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.

Taking Shanghai's first immersive theatre production, "Apollonia," as an example, the main stage features elongated wine tables in shades of red. Audience seating is divided into color-coded sections—orange, green, blue, and purple—with ticket prices increasing progressively toward the stage. Booths, bars, and wine crates are seamlessly integrated into the set design. This stage design enhances audience immersion while ensuring uninterrupted performances, effectively bridging actors and spectators (Zhang, 2023). The space's distinctiveness continuously draws audiences into the theatre, fostering an intimate viewing atmosphere. By prioritizing entertainment value, immersive theatres have evolved beyond artistic expression platforms to become vital leisure destinations for audiences.

Henri Lefebvre pointed out that space encompasses both objects and the relationships between them. Space is no longer static, objective, or passive, but possesses complex social and political attributes, with space and society intertwined in dynamic interaction. This dynamic spatial cognition breaks the traditional theatre research paradigm that views the stage as a fixed physical carrier. "The set design and stage aesthetics in the sensory theatre environment are incredibly refined, brimming with attention to detail. The scents and temperatures tailored to the plot create an exceptionally strong sense of immersion" (N03); "During immersive theatre experiences, one feels a powerful emotional impact. When interacting with actors or making eye contact, you might even feel like you're part of the environment" (N09). Overall, immersive theatre 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 theatre dissolves the boundary between performance and audience. Performers shift from sacred stage rhetoric to everyday presence, while audiences transform from passive observers in traditional theatre 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 theatre. The exploration of immersive theatre 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 theatre generates what Randall Collins describes as an interactive ritual chain: shared physical space, focal concentration, emotional solidarity, and collective memory. Environmental theatre 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 (Gajgin & Zhou, 2006), while environmental theatre constructs symbolic spaces that challenge the structures of daily society, where real-world class labels and identity disciplines temporarily lose their power. “In the theatre, life hits pause, allowing me to realize that straying from the path isn't the end of the world—life goes on. The moments of profound emotion are truly worthwhile” (N05); “In this fast-paced era, it's hard to settle down and watch a whole piece; we always want to fast-forward. But in the theatre space, you can't fast-forward—it gives me more room to think and absorb” (N07). Voluntary digital detox within the space enhances its ritualistic quality. Simultaneously, the theatre creates a relatively equal standing for all audience members. As spectators shed professional attire and silence their phones, societal identity markers are temporarily shed. “In the theatre, free from phone notifications and cameras, the dim surroundings draw everyone's gaze to the bright stage. It allows me to temporarily set aside work and study pressures” (N09); “I could feel the creators and performers pouring their hearts into the show. Life offers few moments of pure joy, but this passion allowed me to savor genuine happiness—it felt profoundly worthwhile” (N11). This egalitarian, pressure-free positive ritual experience facilitates the construction of liminal space.

The theatre, as a liminal space, also embodies emotional fusion. “Entering the theatre alone allows for a private emotional experience, yet within a shared setting, we feel an emotional resonance with both the performers and fellow audience members present” (N13). 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 theatre's emotional resonance beyond the venue's walls onto the streets, and further into the digital realm online.

6. From Physical Space to Virtual Digital Space: Digital Labor and the Shift Towards Attention Economy

6.1 Atomized Participation and Digital Labor Production

In 2023, solo attendance for musical theatre performances reached a staggering 61%, ranking first among all theatrical productions. Immersive theatre once served as an offline escape for young people eager for emotional connection. Driven by the digital age, however, it has returned with them to digital existence and the traffic economy, becoming a vassal of silicon-based spaces. Today, emerging fan cultures exhibit distinct “disorganized organization” traits—loose yet highly coordinated community structures formed through digital platforms, reflecting Generation Z's collective loneliness. Unlike traditional fan circles rooted in collective action via Weibo, young participants in this culture prefer individual initiative, building digital spaces on platforms like Xiaohongshu. Xiaohongshu's algorithmic logic emphasizes personalized emotional narratives and aesthetic autonomy, providing youth with a decentralized arena for expression. Through differentiated content distribution mechanisms, it constructs a safer, more comfortable online space for the digitally native generation yearning to “carve out their own little worlds.” Yet this freedom to “carve out their own little worlds” is fundamentally an illusion of technological empowerment: the platform precisely anchors users within vertically segmented content silos, forming a new disciplinary structure of what Gilles Deleuze termed the “society of control.”

The personalized presentation and emotional experience emphasized by Xiaohongshu's algorithm reinforce the digital laborer attributes of young people in another way. Watching a performance, taking photos, writing reports, creating graphics, and uploading to Xiaohongshu—this has become the standard operating procedure after attending a play. These intricate yet solo-executable “tasks” form part of Xiaohongshu's digital infrastructure. Each time a creator posts a theatre report or photo recap, they receive virtual social currency like likes or saves as emotional compensation. “During every SD session, everyone's bent over editing photos, like we're collectively hitting some data KPI” (N12); “The only time during the entire play when photography and recording are allowed is the final five-minute curtain call. Most audience members have their own cameras, focusing on their favorite actors” (N11); “Encore videos and reviews for today's performances are already flooding Xiaohongshu right after the curtain falls” (N13). This digital labor has become the most crucial element in the industry's marketing strategy, as young audiences deconstruct embodied theatrical experiences into quantifiable visual symbols.

6.2 Attention Economy Shifts and Market Changes

Meanwhile, the attention-driven demands of the traffic economy have heightened the emphasis on actor presence, set design, and reshoots. This growing prominence of actors has fueled the fan economy and fandom culture. The immersive and interactive nature of environmental theatre once resonated with the digital generation's yearning for offline interpersonal connections and emotional bonds, showcasing its strengths as a physical space. However, if environmental theatre relies solely on this advantage to pander to traffic and platforms, endlessly producing actor appearances, personas, and settings tailored for online dissemination, its spatial vitality will steadily erode.

Today, the content ecosystem of over 30 vertically distributed micro-theatres is increasingly catering to contemporary viewing habits that favor short, fast-paced content and the dissemination demands of short-video platforms. “When watching shows, especially on SD, I often wonder if we've lost sight of our original intent. Some actors may have strong visual appeal but lack solid singing and acting skills, yet they still garner significant attention” (N07); “Some new productions clearly pander to market demands, featuring simplified plots packed with emotionally charged elements popular with audiences, sacrificing logical depth” (N08). This landscape has triggered subtle shifts in the market: First, actor training increasingly prioritizes camera presence, fostering a “close-up-friendly” performance style; Second, production focuses on creating viral moments rather than dramatic integrity; Third, auditoriums have evolved into “second soundstages,” with stage designs incorporating extended curtain call durations for filming. This transformation increasingly positions immersive theatre as a tangible manifestation of the traffic economy, redefining its original liminal qualities. As algorithmic logic permeates cultural production, theatre spaces become new film studios for manufacturing viral moments; seats meant to hold collective memory gradually transform into “digital landmarks.”

7. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper reveals how environmental theatre, as a vital vehicle for urban youth cultural practices, shapes young people's liminal experiences and drives their consumption behaviors through spatial reconfiguration and interactive rituals. The key research findings are as follows: First, environmental theatre reconstructs physical spaces while emphasizing psychological “anti-structural” connotations, creating liminal fields where youth detach from societal roles. This enables temporary identity reshaping and emotional release through immersive experiences. Second, youth consumption follows a dual logic of “emotional resonance” and “symbolic collecting.” Deeply engaged participants build subcultural identities through high-frequency consumption, transforming offline experiences into symbolic labor via digital platforms. Light participants prioritize experiences driven by the convenience of the “15-minute lifestyle circle.” Moderate participants exhibit repeat purchases fueled by emotional resonance, while deep participants achieve identity leaps from individual consumers to community opinion leaders through high-frequency “collecting.” This reveals how spatial consumption becomes a symbolic practice for youth constructing social identity. Third, the emotional value function provided by environmental theatre culture also reflects young people's existential predicament of “collective loneliness.” Digital labor practices intensify the digital laborer attributes of the youth demographic, while the attention demands of the traffic economy further reinforce environmental theatre's emphasis on visual symbols. This leads to actors and program designs increasingly catering to the need for quick, shallow dissemination, undermining artistic integrity and critical potential.

These findings reveal the intrinsic motivations of youth consumption. Immersive theatre not only meets the needs of emotional release and self-expression but also strengthens identity through community interaction. Simultaneously, this paper critically notes that while such theatres 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 theatre 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 theatre, offering a fresh perspective for studying youth subcultures. This not only enriches our understanding of immersive theatre 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 theatre 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 theatre 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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