



Australian Government



The Digital Front Row:

Understanding online and
digital theatre audiences



Acknowledgement

Creative Australia proudly acknowledges all First Nations peoples and their rich culture of the country we now call Australia. We pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge First Nations peoples as Australia's First Peoples and as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we live.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of First Nations peoples and communities to Australian life, and how this continuation of 75,000 years of unbroken storytelling enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards ensuring an equal voice and the equality of outcomes in all aspects of our society.

The Digital Front Row: Understanding online and digital theatre audiences is published under Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Non-Derivative Works 2.5 Licence.

Attribution: Creative Australia 2023, *The Digital Front Row: Understanding online and digital theatre audiences*.

Contents

Key findings	2
Online theatre	2
How are audiences engaging with online theatre?	2
What are the drivers and barriers to online theatre engagement?	2
Digital theatre	3
How are audiences engaging with digital theatre?	3
What are the barriers to digital theatre engagement?	3
Opportunities for online and digital theatre audience development	3
Introduction	4
What are the differences between traditional, online, and digital theatre?	4
The project	6
Results	7
What, who and how	7
Traditional, online and digital theatre engagement overview	7
Online Theatre	8
Online theatre engagement	8
What are the drivers to engage with online theatre?	12
What are the barriers to engagement with online theatre?	14
Digital theatre	16
Digital theatre engagement	16
How do audiences understand digital theatre?	18
What are the barriers to engaging with digital theatre?	20
Information for audiences engaging with online and digital theatre	22
Areas for potential audience development	24
Enable interaction and connection	24
Enhance the current experience for audiences	24
Create new and innovative audience experiences	25
Increase accessibility and awareness	25
Appendix A: Sample and methodology	26

Key findings

Technology has played a significant role in the creation of theatre performance for many years.

Recent innovations include the incorporation of digital technology as an essential part of live performance. In addition, during COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, online streaming and on-demand viewing of performances offered a crucial lifeline for theatres and audiences to remain connected and engaged. Since the return to in-person performances, digital and online theatre have remained an important part of the theatre industry, offering new ways for audiences to engage with theatre performers and performances.

The Digital Front Row: Understanding online and digital theatre audiences offers current insights into how and why audiences are choosing to engage, or not engage, with these forms of theatre.

For the purposes of this research, **traditional theatre** is defined as a theatre performance presented live in front of an audience occupying the same space as the performers. Nearly all theatregoers attended traditional theatre in the preceding 12 months (97%).

Online theatre and **digital theatre** attendees are predominantly a more committed subset of in-person theatregoers. For them, technology complements in-person theatre, but is not a substitute for it.

Online theatre

Online theatre involves streaming or recording live theatre performances and presenting them for online viewing.

How are audiences engaging with online theatre?

- Just over half of theatregoers attended performances both in-person and online in the preceding 12 months (53%) and 44% attended in-person only.
- More online theatre audiences view online theatre on-demand, but those who stream performances do so more frequently.
- Most online theatre audiences use well-known platforms to access performances on-demand.
- Online theatre audiences most commonly engage alone, though some solo viewers communicate with friends or family who are watching in separate spaces.
- Online theatre audiences are more likely to actively engage with theatre companies than in-person only attendees.
- 38% of theatregoers who have not yet engaged with online theatre would consider it in future.

What are the drivers and barriers to online theatre engagement?

- Online theatre audiences see this form of engagement as convenient, accessible and affordable.
- Theatregoers who have not engaged with online theatre commonly feel that it cannot provide the same multi-sensory experience as in-person attendance. Some lack awareness of online performances, and a small percentage experience technical barriers to engagement with online theatre.

Digital theatre

Digital theatre is defined as a live theatre performance that incorporates digital technology as an essential part of the performance. It sometimes uses digital elements to stimulate interaction and/or participation from the audience.

How are audiences engaging with digital theatre?

- Digital elements are largely not a driver of performance choice, and inclusion of digital elements in a performance is not always noticed by audiences.
- Audiences typically view digital technology as a tool to enhance traditional live theatre rather than creating a new type of theatre.
- Younger theatregoers are most likely to have experienced digital theatre.
- Comfort levels around digital theatre are fairly evenly split between comfortable, neutral and uncomfortable.
- Smartphones are the medium that audiences feel most comfortable using to engage with interactive digital theatre.
- 68% of digital theatre audiences say they would be willing to pay more for productions featuring digital elements.

What are the barriers to digital theatre engagement?

- Active audience use of technology during a performance is seen as a distraction for many theatregoers who prefer immersive, non-interactive experiences.
- Some participants are concerned that their lack of technological expertise may prevent them from participating in an active digital theatre performance.

- Those considering digital theatre often feel uncertain about what to expect and the effort that might be required of them. Audiences say they are more likely to feel comfortable attending digital theatre if they have full control over their level of active interaction with a performance.
- Theatregoers living with a disability are open to attending digital theatre but find it challenging to determine if a digital theatre performance meets their accessibility needs.

Opportunities for online and digital theatre audience development

Technology in online and digital theatre can be used to:

- enable connection and interaction
- enhance the audience experience
- create new and innovative audience experiences
- improve accessibility and awareness.

Introduction

New technologies have long been used in theatre productions to enhance the dramatic and aesthetic qualities of the performance.¹

In recent decades, the use of digital technologies in live theatre productions has grown in popularity and in the diversity of technologies being integrated. Constantly evolving technologies provide theatre-makers and performers with new opportunities to augment their creative practice and provide new and unique experiences for audiences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when live performance opportunities were severely restricted, many theatres pivoted to offer theatre online for audiences to stream or view on-demand. Some used digital technologies such as Zoom to create innovative new forms of live performance and audience engagement.

Previous research conducted by Creative Australia (previously known as the Australia Council for the Arts) highlighted a range of new digital innovations across the Australian theatre industry.² This project was initiated to gain a better understanding of audience perspectives on the use of digital media in theatre and how and why audiences are choosing to engage, or not engage, with these innovations.

What are the differences between traditional, online, and digital theatre?

Traditional theatre performances are presented live in front of an audience occupying the same space as the performers. Performances are most often held indoors inside a theatre building but can also be held in other non-traditional venues (for example, outdoors).

In recent years, the streaming or recording of live performances for online viewing has become increasingly popular. This type of dissemination of traditional theatre is referred to as **online theatre**. Online theatre became widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic as shuttered theatres around the world were forced to seek alternative ways of engaging audiences. It has remained a feature of the theatre industry since the return of live productions, with many theatres maintaining their own online streaming platforms. Australian examples include Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney's Belvoir Theatre and Australian Theatre Live.

Digital theatre is distinct from online theatre. For this report, it is defined as a live theatre performance that incorporates digital technology as an essential part of the performance itself.³ Examples include:

- use of video and projection, including videoconferencing software
- use of virtual reality
- facilitation of audience interaction and content creation, such as with mobile devices
- use of robotics and artificial intelligence.

In this report, two types of digital theatre are discussed:

- **non-interactive digital theatre**, where digital elements are used but do not require any active interaction or participation from the audience
- **interactive digital theatre**, where digital elements are used for the purpose of stimulating interaction and/or participation from the audience.

¹ Dixon S and Smith B 2007, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Performance Art and Installation*.

² Australia Council 2021, *In Real Life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century*.

³ Masura N 2020, *Digital Theatre: The making and meaning of live mediated performance, US & UK 1990-2020*.

Everyone Goes To Heaven In The Clothes They Died In

David Gagliardi

Non-interactive digital theatre

Everyone Goes To Heaven In The Clothes They Died In is a multi-faceted arts project by regional Victorian artistic and executive director David Gagliardi.

The live component of this project is both heart-warming and heartbreaking, depicting six characters at their final moments of life. An intimate journey about life and death, this project is a large-scale interactive new media experience which combines live performance, emerging technology, illustration, animation, video art, sound design, lighting design and a composition for six pianos.

All video art, animations, lighting and soundscapes are synced to a click track, fully automated and housed in a digital toolbox. The toolbox is supplied to the presenter electronically, and the presenter supplies local screens, pianos and pianists. This option allows the work to be presented nationally or internationally at almost any time.



Everybody Goes To Heaven In The Clothes They Died In by David Gagliardi. Creative Development, Ulumbarra Theatre Bendigo, Dec 2021. Credit: Press One photography.

The project

Between June 2022 and March 2023, the Australia Council (now Creative Australia) commissioned Screen Audience Research Australia (SARA) to conduct a multi-stage research study speaking to Australian audiences across the nation. The study incorporated key audience segments including those living in regional areas, those living with a physical or mental disability, First Nations people and members of the LGBTQI+ and gender diverse community.

This research was conducted during a period when COVID-19 restrictions had largely been lifted. However, the pandemic has created an ongoing shift in audience behaviour, with people attending arts events less frequently compared to pre-COVID-19.⁴ Though audiences are gradually returning to in-person arts events, seven in ten audience members continue to see a role for online arts experiences in their lives.⁵

The first stage of the research included a trends audit as well as focus groups with key audiences. These focus groups explored current experiences with, and expectations of, online and digital theatre, seeking to understand what would drive greater engagement and provide better access. The second stage included a nationally representative survey distributed to both existing arts audiences and others representing the Australian public. See Appendix A for more detail on the project sample and methodology.

The aims of the project were to investigate:

1. digital and online theatre audience characteristics
2. how audiences are currently engaging with digital and online theatre
3. audience expectations of digital theatre
4. potential new avenues for digital theatre audience engagement and access.

⁴ Creative Australia 2023, *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

⁵ Australia Council 2022, *Audience Outlook Monitor: Digital engagement outlook*, Patternmakers.

Results

What, who and how

Traditional, online and digital theatre engagement overview

Approximately half of all theatregoers currently engage with online and/or digital theatre.

Theatregoers were asked to identify the type(s) of theatre they had viewed or attended in the previous 12 months and the frequency of attendance (see Figure 1).

In the preceding 12 months:

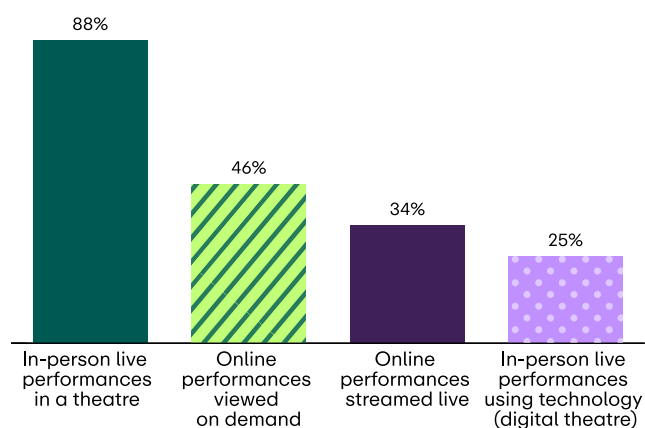
- most theatregoers (88%) stated that they had attended a live theatre performance at least once
- a total of 52% had viewed a live theatre performance online or attended a live performance that utilised some form of technology (digital theatre)
 - 46% viewed an online theatre performance on-demand
 - 34% viewed an online live-streamed theatre performance
 - 25% had attended an in-person live performance using technology.

It is possible that engagement rates for online and digital theatre may have been impacted by the limited availability of these performance types compared to in-person theatre performances.

Online theatre engagement was both more common and more frequent than digital theatre engagement (see Figure 2).

Figure 1:

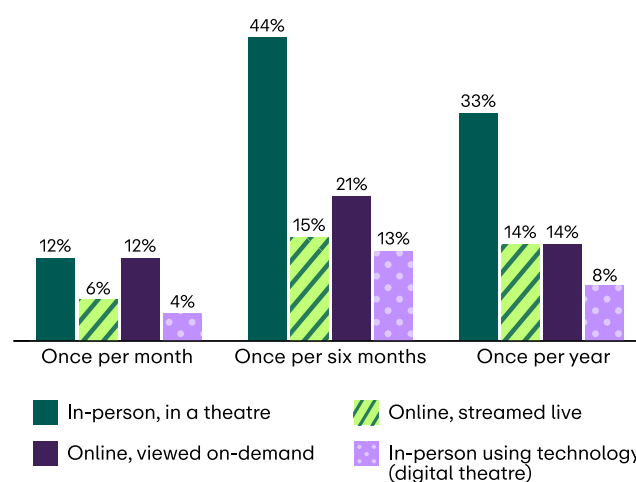
Theatre performances attended in the past 12 months



Q. When was the last time you viewed or attended a theatre performance either in-person or online? | Base: Australians 18+ n=500.

Figure 2:

Theatre engagement by type and frequency



Q. And how often would you say you view or attend theatre performances either in-person or digitally? | Base: Australians 18+ n=500.

Online Theatre

Online theatre involves the streaming or recording of live performances presented for online viewing.

Although the recording of live theatre performances for online viewing predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it became a popular way to keep audiences engaging with theatre during the lockdown periods. Many theatres have continued to offer online theatre to audiences, but engagement rates remain limited. This may be partly due to the limited availability of online performances, which remains limited compared to traditional live theatre.

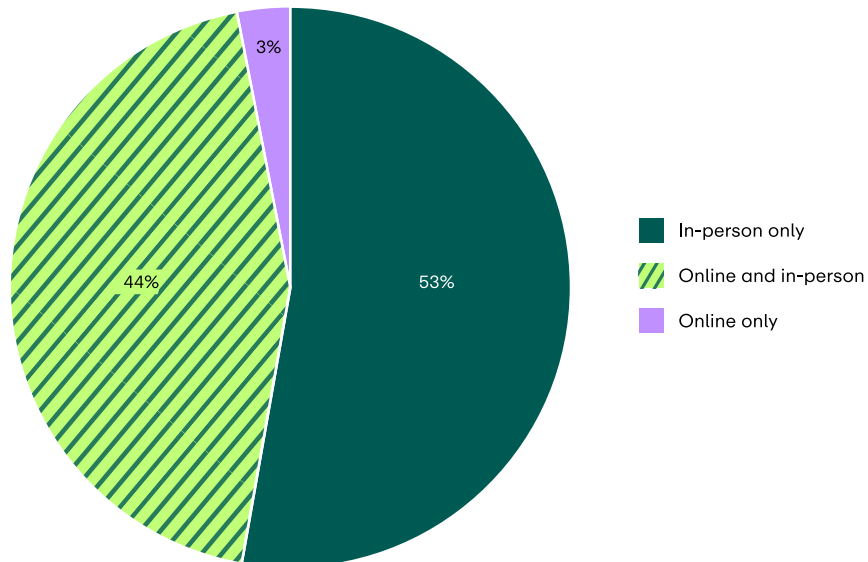
Online theatre engagement

Online theatre viewers are mostly a subset of audiences who also attend in-person theatre performances.

- Just over half of theatregoers attend performances both in-person and online (53%), while 44% attend in-person only (Figure 3).
- Nearly all theatregoers attend at least some performances in-person (97%). The number of respondents who only attend online performances is small (3%).
- Of those who viewed a performance online in the preceding 12 months, almost all also attended an in-person live performance (95%). This suggests that online performances are largely consumed by audiences who also attend in-person performances.

Figure 3:

Mode of theatre engagement

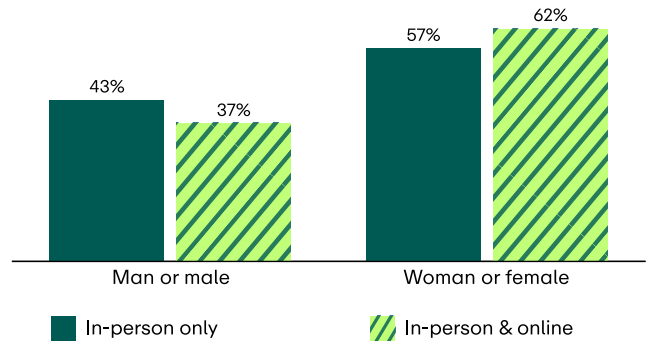


Q. On average, how often do you view or attend each of the below types of theatre performances? | Base: Australians 18+ n=500; In-person & online n=247.

- Female theatregoers are more likely to attend both in-person and online, whereas males are more likely to attend in-person only (Figure 4).
- Younger theatregoers are more likely to engage with both in-person and online performances than older theatregoers, who are more likely to only attend in-person (Figure 5). The engagement of younger audiences with online theatre has been identified by international research.⁶

Figure 4:

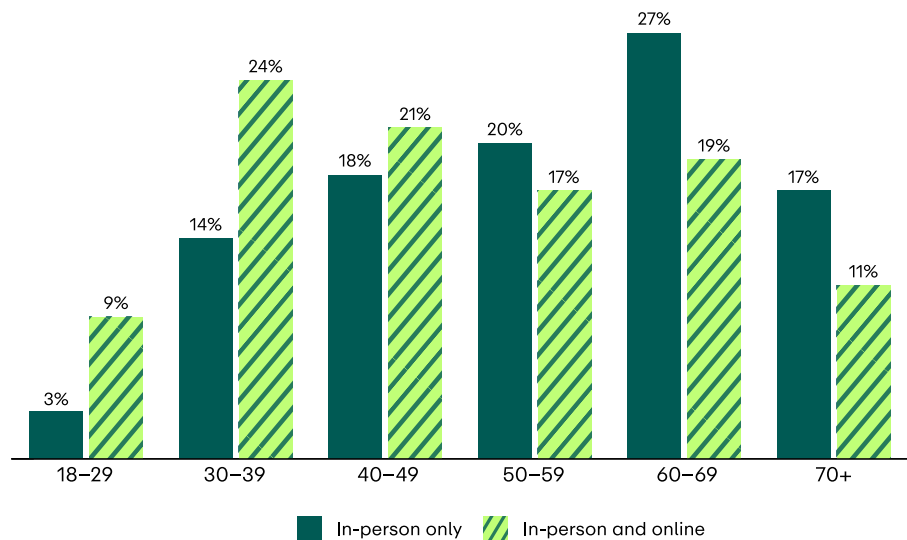
Theatre engagement by gender



Q. On average, how often do you view or attend each of the below types of theatre performances? | Q. How do you describe your gender? | Base: In-person only n=205; In-person & online n=247. Note: Numbers of non-binary participants were too small to include in analyses of the data by gender. See Appendix A for participant demographics.

Figure 5:

Theatre engagement by age group



Q. On average, how often do you view or attend each of the below types of theatre performances? | Q. And please tell us your age... | Base: In-person only n=205; In-person & online n=247.

⁶ AEA Consulting for Arts Council England, UK Theatre and Society of London Theatre 2016, *From Live-to-Digital: Understanding the impact of digital developments in theatre on audiences, production and distribution.*

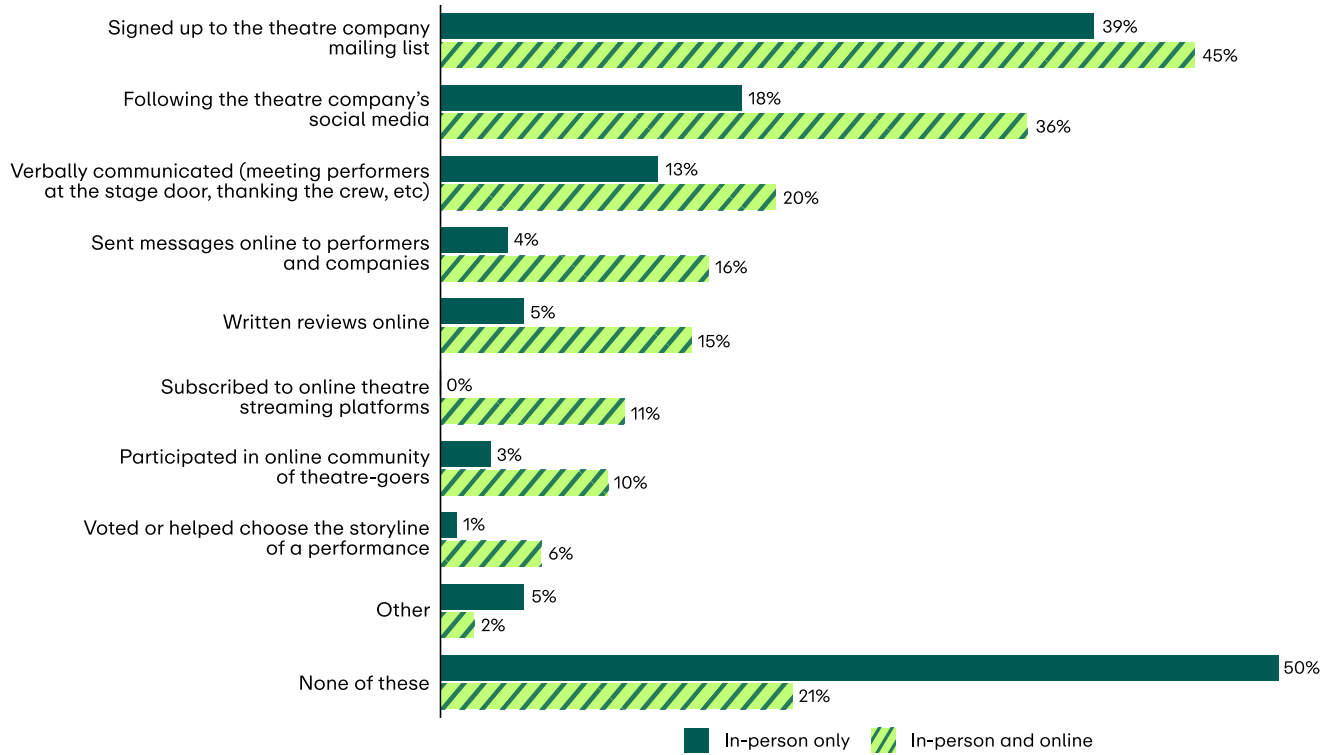
Most online theatre viewers accessed content on-demand through well-known social and streaming platforms.

- Many online performance viewers access content on-demand, using paid (56%) and free (48%) platforms.
- Fewer view live-streamed performances, using free (39%) and paid (29%) platforms, or via social media (34%).
- The most popular platforms for engaging with online theatre are existing well-known social and streaming platforms, including YouTube (56%), Netflix (51%), Facebook (33%), and Disney+ (23%).
- Fewer viewers use dedicated theatre platforms such as those owned by theatre companies (20%) or aggregate platforms like those owned by venues and theatre companies (15%).
- Viewers report watching online performances alone (57%) or with family (44%) or friends (21%) in the room with them. A smaller percentage report watching with friends or family in separate spaces (19%).
- Of those who watch with others in separate spaces, most communicate through messages (59%) and some through voice calls (36%). This suggests that online audiences still value simultaneity; that is, a feeling of experiencing a performance at the same time as others.⁷ Less than one quarter of viewers did not communicate at all during the performances (23%).
- Most viewers prefer to watch an online performance in full (62%), while 38% tend to watch performances in parts.
- People who engage with online theatre are more likely than in-person only attendees to actively interact with theatre companies and performers, such as through social media, participating in online theatre communities and writing reviews (Figure 6).
- While it is more common for audiences to watch on-demand, those that watch live-streamed performances do so more frequently (Figure 7).
- Most theatregoers who have not yet engaged with online theatre would not consider engaging in the future (62%). Of those who would consider engaging, a majority would prefer to access performances for free, either live-streamed (27%), on-demand (22%) or via social media (9%).
- Theatregoers living with a disability are more likely to subscribe to an online streaming platform (17%) compared to people without a disability (7%).

⁷ Australia Council 2021, *In Real Life: Mapping digital cultural engagement in the first decades of the 21st century*.

Figure 6:

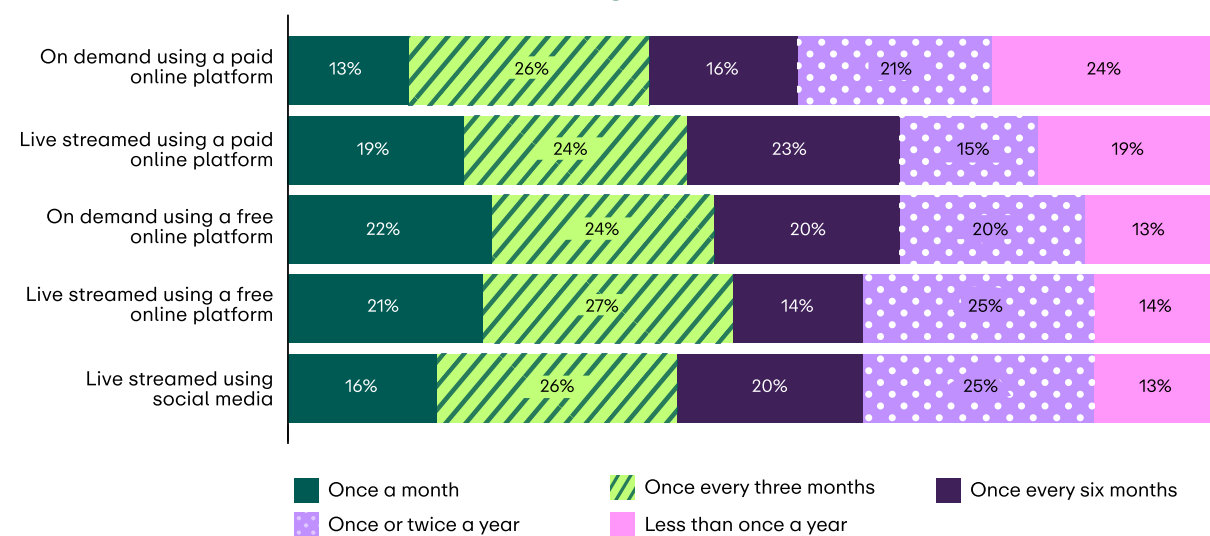
Types of interaction by theatre engagement mode



Q. In which of the following ways have you interacted with theatre performances, performers, audience members or theatre companies? | Base: In-person only n=205, Online and in-person n=247.

Figure 7:

Frequency of online performance viewing



Q. Which of the below types of online theatre performances have you ever viewed? | Q. And how often do you view each of these types of theatre performances? | Base: Online theatre viewers n=243.

What are the drivers to engage with online theatre?

Online theatre viewers appreciate the convenience, flexibility, accessibility, reduced price and social aspects of engaging with online theatre.

The most common driver for engaging with online theatre is the flexibility of being able to watch the performance at a convenient time (60%), followed by the ability to watch performances that viewers would otherwise not be able to access (51%; Figure 8). This is in contrast to the most common reason for attending a live theatre performance, which is a love of the atmosphere inside a theatre (81%).

Convenience and flexibility

Three in five online theatre viewers enjoy the convenience that it offers, allowing them to watch performances at a convenient time (60%). Viewers also enjoy the convenience of watching performances from the comfort of their own home (42%) and having the ability to rewatch (40%) and pause the performance (37%).

'The spectacle of a live performance without the need to dress up, travel to the venue, park etc.'

'It's easily accessible and I can watch from the comfort of my own home.'

Online theatre removes the issue of location, which was frequently raised as a barrier to attending in-person theatre performances throughout the research project. Respondents who attend in-person performances report that the location of performances of interest is often inconvenient (28%) or there is a lack of appealing performances nearby (35%). A total of 15% of theatregoers find it difficult to organise the logistics required to attend a live theatre performance, such as organising a group of friends to go to the performance.

'Sometimes the location and how big the venue is sometimes deters me from wanting to see a performance, they might be too big and feels too arduous and difficult to get to on public transport.'

Accessibility

In many ways, online theatre is considered more accessible than in-person performances. When attending in-person performances, audience members with accessibility needs report they are limited to certain theatres they can attend and lack the information to plan their routes through the theatre in advance. Online, these viewers can watch performances that they would not otherwise be able to access (51%) and that meet their accessibility needs (15%). Viewers also appreciate that the performance can be viewed from multiple angles, allowing the best possible perspective compared to a static seat (25%).

'It is convenient to view it this way if I cannot get to a live performance.'

Price

Many online theatre viewers (40%) find online theatre affordable, which encourages access and removes a common barrier to attending in-person performances. Despite many theatregoers expressing a desire to support artists and theatre companies, 63% raised cost as the primary barrier to attending live theatre performances, preventing them from attending as often as they would like. This finding is aligned with the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey, which found cost to be the main barrier to arts attendance.⁸

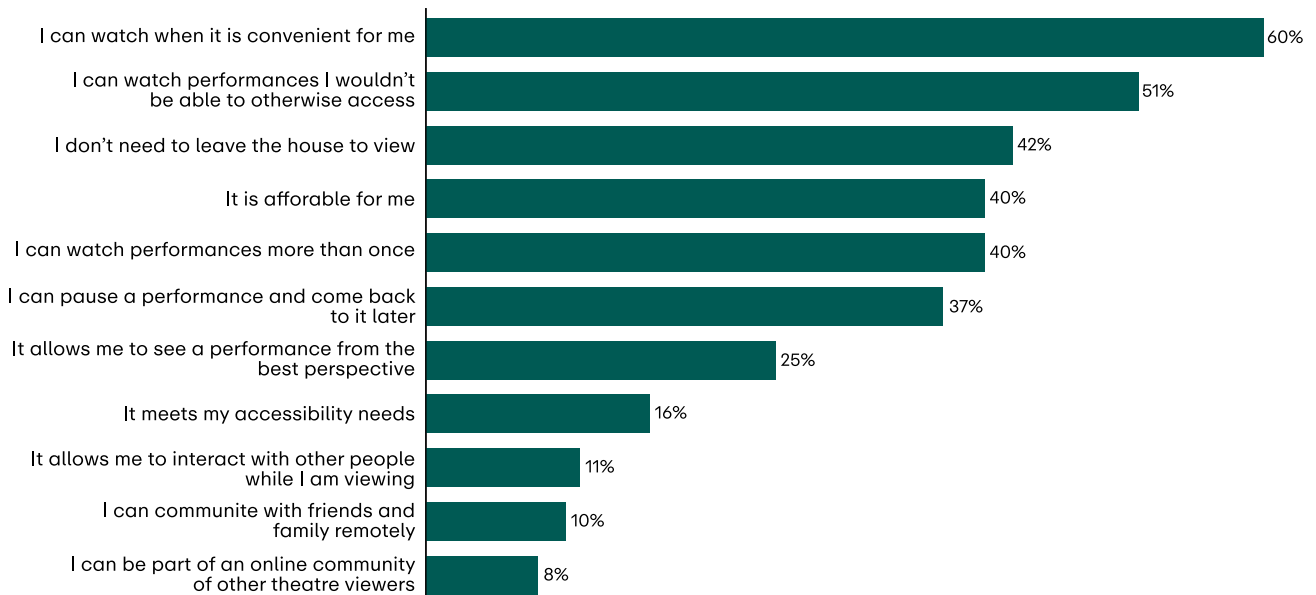
Social interaction

Some online theatre viewers are attracted to online theatre because of the additional opportunities for social interaction, both during the performance and between performances. Viewers can interact with other people while viewing the performance (11%) and can communicate with friends and family remotely while watching (10%). Some viewers also enjoy being part of online community of theatre viewers (8%). This may be a method of replicating the social experience of live theatre; theatregoers who attend in-person performances note the importance of sharing the theatre experience with others. They view a theatre performance as a vehicle for interaction with others and creating memories, as well as a way for them to support their community.

‘Sharing the experience is important then you can revisit it and talk about it afterwards “remember that..., that was great...”’

Figure 8:

Drivers of engagement with online theatre



Q. What do you most enjoy about viewing theatre performances online? / Q. Although you might have already told us, for which of the below reasons do you enjoy viewing online theatre performances? / Base: Online theatre viewers n=250.

8 Creative Australia 2023, *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

What are the barriers to engagement with online theatre?

Theatre-goers who do not engage with online theatre commonly feel that it cannot replicate the experience of an in-person live performance.

The key barrier that hinders engagement with online theatre is the feeling that online theatre is not the same as live theatre (69% of respondents who have not viewed online theatre; Figure 9). Other barriers include a lack of awareness of where to access online theatre performances (22%), difficulty finding performances they want to watch (8%) and lack of technological capability (7%).

Feeling that theatre is meant to be viewed live

Most respondents who had not engaged with online theatre in the previous 12 months report that online theatre does not feel the same as in-person live theatre experiences (69%). This aligns with results from the 2022 National Arts Participation Survey, which found that three in five Australians (60%) agree they miss the atmosphere of a live event/exhibition/experience when viewing online.⁹ Theatre-goers who attend in-person theatre recognise the sensory engagement and connection that a live performance brings to the audience, with the knowledge that each performance is a unique moment in time that cannot be exactly replicated. They spoke about the multi-sensory experience of being in that moment, with the feel of the seats and the smell of the theatre being a part of experiencing this craft. This cannot be replicated in the online medium.

'I want to personally see it live and be there or not at all. Online live to me is not live.'

'The atmosphere isn't the same. You spot slow parts and mistakes... and get tempted to fast forward.'

Some respondents suggest that if they are going to watch something online, they would rather watch a different media that is designed for the screen, such as film or television programs (43%).

'It's not live, I may as well just watch TV.'

Approximately one in six report that they do not enjoy watching performances in an informal setting, such as their own home (17%).

⁹ Creative Australia 2023, *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

Lack of awareness

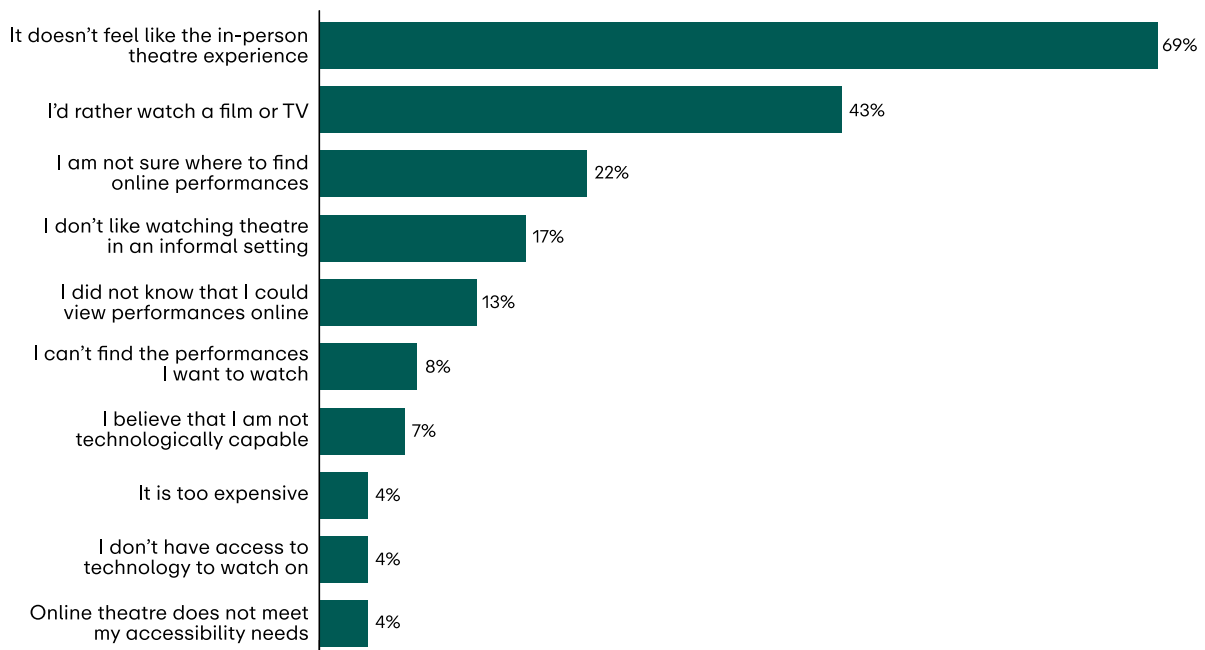
One in five respondents who had not engaged with online theatre in the previous 12 months report they are unsure where to find online performances (22%), and a smaller percentage are not aware that they could view performances online (13%). Less than 10% are aware of dedicated online theatre platforms such as National Theatre at Home and Australian Theatre Live.

Lack of accessibility

A small percentage of respondents who had not engaged with online theatre in the previous 12 months (8%) have difficulty finding online performances they want to watch. Others indicate that they do not feel technologically capable to view online theatre (7%) or do not have access to technology on which they can watch online theatre (4%). Despite increasing accessibility in some ways, online theatre does not meet the accessibility needs of a small subset of those who have not yet engaged (4%).

Figure 9:

Barriers to engagement with online theatre



Q. What do you most enjoy about viewing theatre performances online? / Q. Although you might have already told us, for which of the below reasons do you enjoy viewing online theatre performances? / Base: Online theatre viewers n=250.

Digital theatre

Digital theatre is defined as a live theatre performance that incorporates digital technology as an essential part of the performance itself.¹⁰

Digital theatre can be interactive or non-interactive. Digital elements have been used in theatre for some time, but the technical requirements and cost of these elements can limit the availability of this type of performance. This in turn can limit engagement rates. In addition, audiences may not realise they have attended a digital theatre performance if it is not always advertised as such, and audiences may not consciously notice the inclusion of digital technology in a performance.

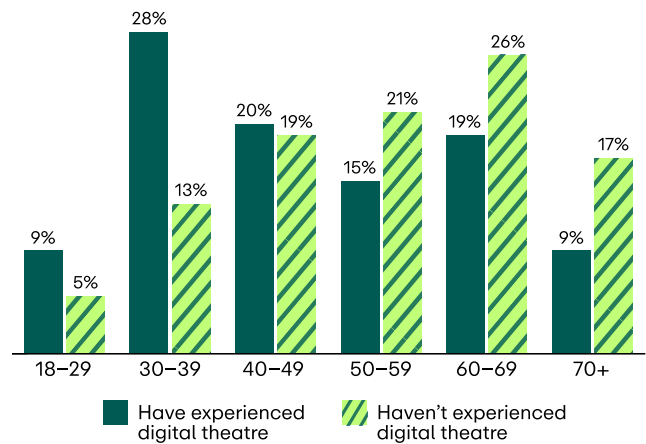
Digital theatre engagement

Digital theatregoers are also likely to view theatre online and attend in-person.

- Nearly all theatregoers who experience digital theatre at least once a year also attend traditional live performances (98%) and/or view theatre online (93%).
- The majority of digital theatre audiences are under the age of 50 (57%). Younger theatregoers are more likely to have experienced digital theatre than older theatregoers (Figure 10).
- Digital theatre audiences are more committed and frequent theatregoers than those who have not experienced digital theatre (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 10:

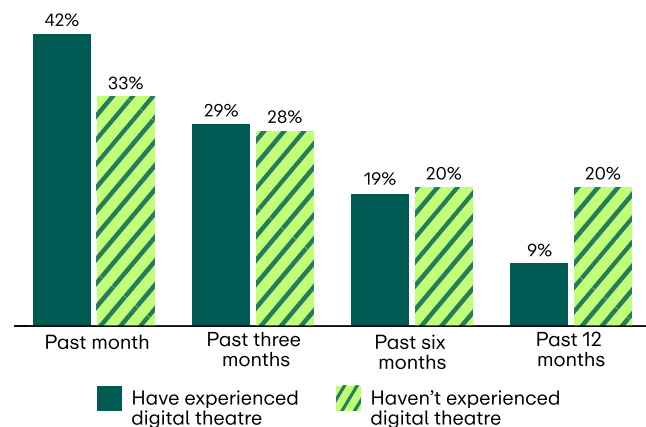
Digital theatre experience by age



Q. And please tell us your age... / Base: Digital theatre viewers n=204, Haven't experienced digital theatre n=296.

Figure 11:

Theatre experience by last theatre occasion



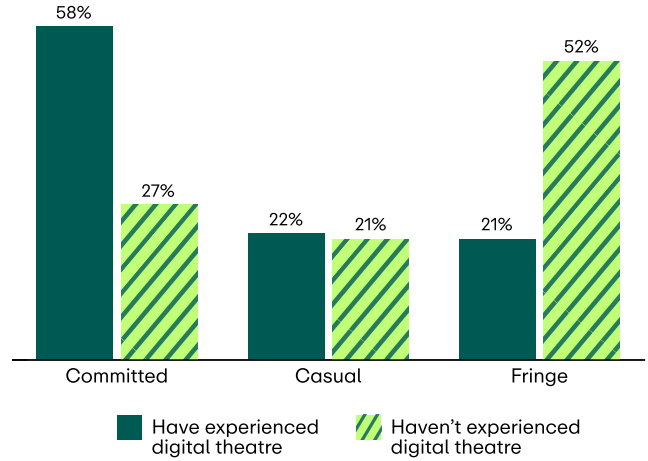
Q. On average, how often do you view or attend each of the below types of theatre performances? / Base: Digital theatre viewers n=204, Haven't experienced digital theatre n=296.

10 Masura, N 2020, *Digital Theatre: The making and meaning of live mediated performance, US & UK 1990-2020*.

- 36% of all theatregoers, including those who have not yet experienced a digital theatre performance, indicate that they would be comfortable or very comfortable attending a digital theatre performance. 27% indicate that they would be uncomfortable or very uncomfortable, with the remaining 37% feeling neutral.
- Theatregoers who have experienced online theatre are more likely to be comfortable engaging with digital theatre (Figure 13).
- Audiences are more likely to feel comfortable attending digital theatre if they have full control over their level of active interaction with a performance.

Figure 12:

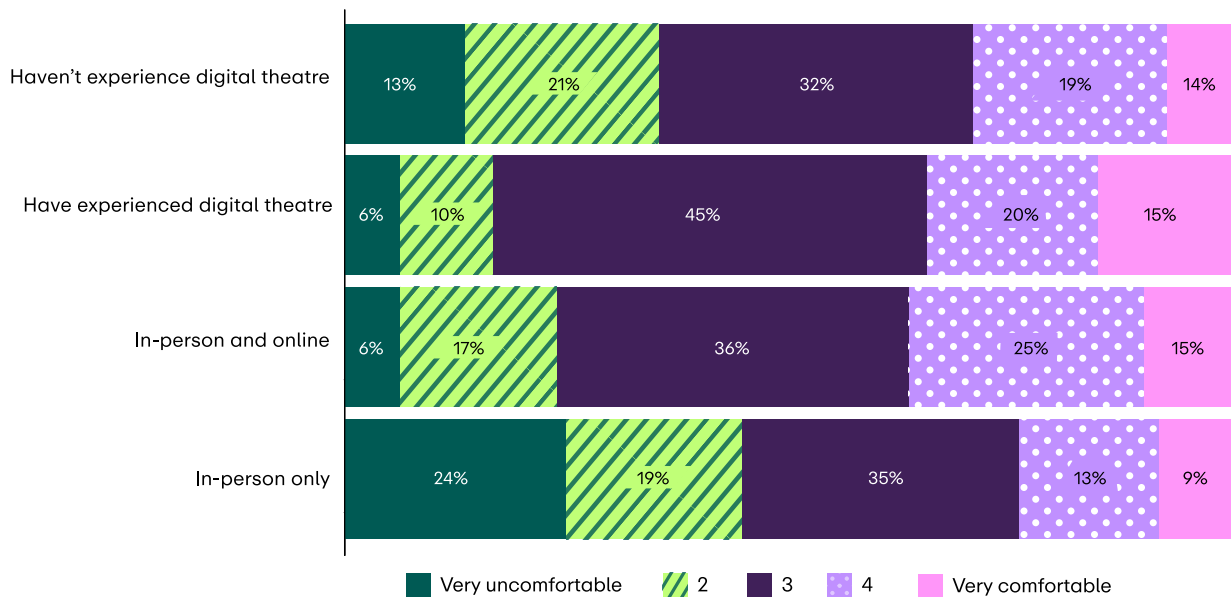
Digital theatre experience by theatre attendance frequency



Q. On average, how often do you view or attend each of the below types of theatre performances? | Base: Digital theatre viewers n=204, Haven't experienced digital theatre n=296. Note: Theatregoers were categorised according to their reported frequency of theatre attendance. Committed: Attend at least once a month or every three months // Casual: Attend at least once every six months // Fringe: Attend once or twice a year or less than once a year.

Figure 13:

Level of comfort with digital theatre



Q. To what extent would you feel comfortable attending theatre performances that use technology or digital mediums? | Base: Digital theatre viewers n=204, Haven't experienced digital theatre n=296, | Base: In-person only n=205; In-person & online n=247.

Interaction in active digital theatre performances is facilitated primarily through the use of personal electronic devices.

- In the preceding 12 months, digital theatre audiences most commonly used a smartphone, tablet or laptop to access or participate in a performance (31%).
- Other types of technology digital theatre attendees experienced include QR codes (22%), hologram technology (21%), virtual reality (20%), audiobooks or headphones (18%), and voting via a remote control or smartphone (13%; Figure 14).

How do audiences understand digital theatre?

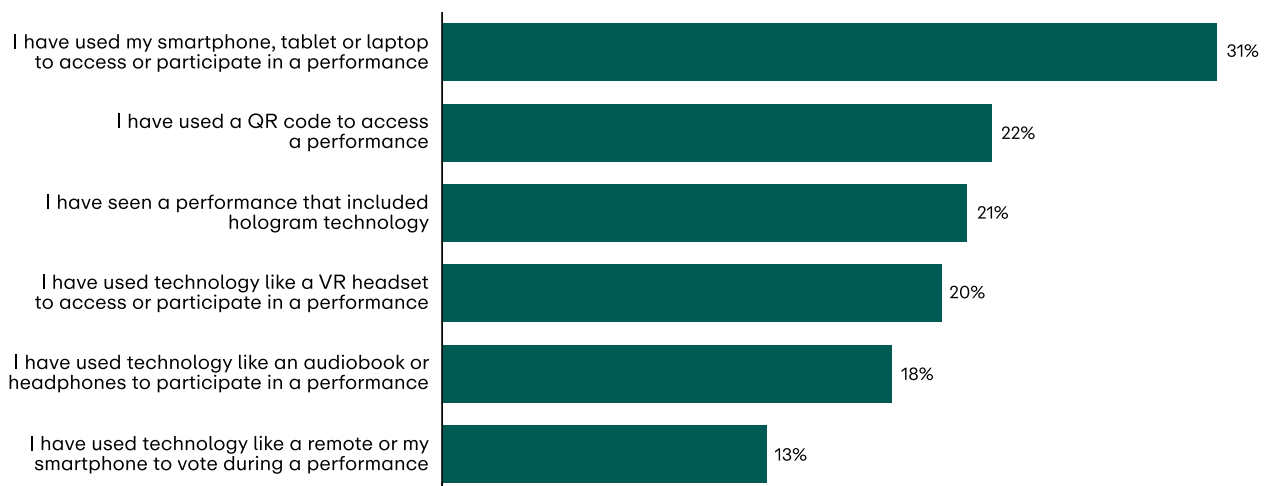
Audiences typically view digital technology as a tool to enhance traditional live theatre performances rather than creating a new type of theatre (that is, digital theatre).

Focus group participant feedback provided four key insights into how audiences currently understand and perceive digital theatre:

- **Inclusion of digital elements in a performance is not always noticed.** When a performance is live, audiences typically do not differentiate between digital and non-digital theatre. Digital elements are perceived as a tool used to enhance the live theatrical experience rather than a form of theatre in itself.
- **Digital elements are largely not a driver of performance choice.** Audiences are more likely to select performances based on the subject matter, performers or the location and type of the theatre, rather than the inclusion of digital elements.
- **The specific type of technology is not relevant to audiences.** Instead, the appeal for audiences is the way in which the technology facilitates audience interaction with the performance.
- **Technology is perceived as a tool to complement storytelling and enhance experiences.** Audiences see the role of technology in theatre as an enhancement to the current experience rather than a completely new experience, allowing them to connect in new ways and making the overall experience more seamless.

Figure 14:

Technologies used to interact with digital theatre



Q. You said that you have attended a theatre performance where there has been use of technology or digital mediums. Which of the below types of technology have you experienced and/or used during a performance? | Base: Digital theatre viewers n=204. Note: Respondents selected from a list of options. Some additional technologies that are used in digital theatre (eg, video projection screens) were not included in this list.

Connected

By Lawrence Leung

Independent, Black Swan Theatre Company, Melbourne International Comedy Festival Digital Season, Soho Theatre London Digital Season

Interactive Digital Theatre

Connected is an interactive theatrical work devised by Australian comedian Lawrence Leung and presented as part of digital seasons for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and Soho Theatre London, as well as Black Swan Theatre Company's 2022 season.

Originally performed and conceived during the COVID-19 lockdowns and delivered entirely on Zoom, *Connected* embraces the online environment to simultaneously connect audiences across the globe in a shared theatrical experience. Leung performed the show in his Melbourne home with audiences interacting with him and each other from their residences across Australia and as far away as Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States.

Drawing on personal storytelling, magic and psychological tricks, Leung guided his audience through a series of mini experiences exploring the idea of connection. The show explored mind-reading, the nature of coincidences, and the question of how people can connect during difficult times.



Lawrence Leung performs his interactive online show "CONNECTED" over Zoom with audience members participating in their own homes. Credit: Maja Brydevall.

What are the barriers to engaging with digital theatre?

Many theatregoers feel that technology is disruptive to a live performance and can hinder engagement.

Theatregoers identified three key barriers that hinder their ability and enthusiasm to engage with digital theatre:

Feeling that technology disrupts the live performance

Focus group participants felt that the use of digital technology during a performance, particularly personal devices, would be a distraction and spoil the experience of a live theatre performance.

‘Tends to detract from the enjoyment of attending a live performance, especially if other audience members are struggling with participation.’

‘I like to concentrate on the performers and performances and follow the thoughts of the creative team – I don’t want to be distracted by my own or other people’s devices.’

Others stated that they attend live theatre specifically to be engaged in something other than looking at a screen, and the use of technology during a performance detracts from this goal.

‘Don’t care for interactivity and I find the use of devices ruins the immersion aspect of theatre.’

‘I want to be ENGAGED in the performance. Watching a show is an escape from digital distractions. People use their phones too much!’

Lack of technological capability and/or accessibility

Some participants expressed concern that their lack of technological expertise may prevent them from participating in an active digital theatre performance.

'I would not know how to use the technology and would have to be shown. I would not feel comfortable using it.'

Others described restrictions that may prevent them from accessing the technological aspects of the performance, such as low data limits on personal devices.

Fewer than half of survey respondents feel that digital theatre is accessible to them (47%). Theatregoers living with a disability are open to attending digital theatre and believe it is accessible to them (55%) but find it challenging to determine if a digital theatre performance meets their accessibility needs (Figure 15).

'Vision impacted by strobe lighting. Sound issues too.'

'Added layer of things to stress and be anxious about with no guarantee that it will be worth it.'

'They rarely are [accessible], so I make the best of it. Often, I get stuck away somewhere because I have my guide dog. Imagine putting a blind person in the second last row. It happens a lot. (...)'

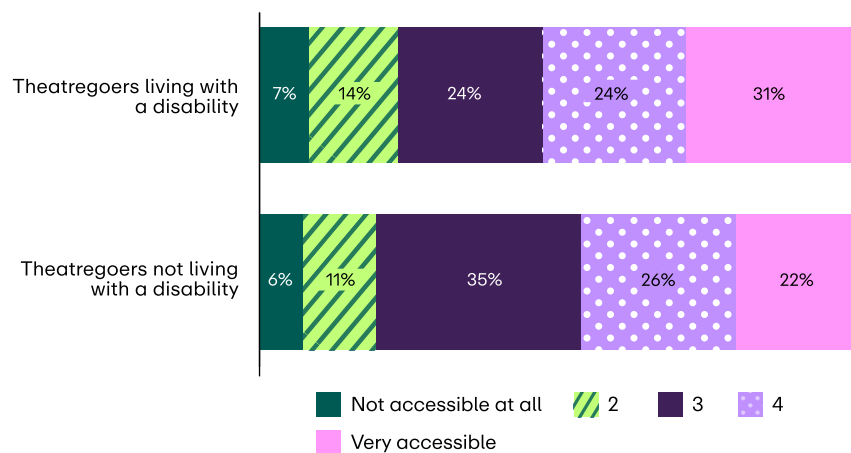
Lack of understanding and awareness

Theatregoers largely know what to expect from more traditional theatre and feel confident to determine whether they will like a performance beforehand. This expectation creates the excited anticipation in the lead up to the event. When attending traditional theatre, audiences experience the performance passively with little effort and are in control of their engagement.

On the other hand, those considering digital theatre often feel uncertain about the content of digital theatre performances and therefore feel less confident in determining whether they, and their companions, will enjoy it. They also perceive digital theatre as generally less passive, potentially requiring more effort either in participation or in using technology. They therefore feel less in control of how and when they engage with the performance, which can create hesitation in attendance.

Figure 15:

Digital theatre accessibility for theatregoers living with a disability



Q. To what extent do you feel theatre performances that use technology or digital mediums would be accessible for you? Base: Theatregoers living with a disability n=42, Theatregoers not living with a disability n=452.

Information for audiences engaging with online and digital theatre

For both online viewers and digital theatre audiences, the storyline/synopsis of the show is the most important information when choosing to engage.

- For **online theatre viewers**, the most important information to know before viewing a theatre performance online is the storyline/synopsis of the show, followed by the theatre company and performers involved.
- Similarly, for **digital theatre audiences**, the most important information for audiences when engaging with digital theatre is the storyline and synopsis of the show. This is followed by the view from their seat and the theatre company and performers involved.
- Running time is more important for **online theatre viewers** than for digital theatre audiences.
- **Online theatre viewers** consider information about the level of interactivity, whether there is an audience in the recording, and online chat/communication functionality less important than other information.
- **Digital theatre audiences** consider information about the type of technology used and the level of interactivity less important than other information, despite the fact that uncertainty about these aspects of the performance cause some audience members to feel hesitant about engaging with digital theatre.

Table 1:

Audience ranking of the importance of online and digital theatre information

Rank of importance to audiences	Online theatre	Digital theatre
1	Storyline/synopsis	Storyline/synopsis
2	Theatre company/performer names	The view from my seat
3	Running time	Theatre company/performer names
4	Whether it is live or on-demand	Location
5	The streaming platform	Running time



The Picture of Dorian Gray

By Oscar Wilde

Adapted and directed by Kip Williams
Sydney Theatre Company

Non-Interactive Digital Theatre

Kip Williams' production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* premiered at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) in 2020. The groundbreaking production incorporated live and pre-recorded video elements with a live performer, creating an innovative 'cine-theatre' experience. This innovative use of cinematic technology allowed one performer, Eryn Jean Norvill, to play all 26 characters in the show.

Following sold out seasons in Melbourne, Adelaide and a return season at STC, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will hit London's West End in 2024.

Following the success of *Dorian Gray*, Williams utilised this combination of video and live performance again in the 2022 STC production of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.



Eryn Jean Norvill performing in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Adapted and directed by Kip Williams. Credit: Daniel Boud.

Areas for potential audience development

Digital and online theatre offer many avenues for audience development and growth of theatre programs into the future.

Below are some areas of potential future development for theatres to consider.

Enable interaction and connection

- Digital and online theatre can be used to increase audience interaction and participation, creating a more interactive experience than traditional theatre. This is of interest to some theatregoers and has the potential to bring in new audiences who prefer greater interactivity.
'Playable theatre is really interesting...I'd like to see how it would play out.'
'You vote for answers on your phone...it's a fun and interesting way to get involved.'
- Online groups and discussion boards provide an opportunity to expand communities of like-minded individuals, providing additional sources of information and ways to connect audiences. Such communities can be used to create connectedness and build audiences.
'I like to ask my community online for their opinions.'
- New technologies, particularly social media, are a potential channel through which to connect performers and audience members. Some theatregoers expressed a desire to communicate their appreciation for the production and the performers.
'When you see something good it's nice to share it...they deserve the recognition.'
'Being able to shoot them a message to say how wonderful they were or loved that part.'

Enhance the current experience for audiences

- Technology can be used during the marketing and booking processes to attract audiences and encourage people to book tickets to the show. Examples include:
 - Providing information online to make it easier for patrons to organise the event: finding nearby hotels, restaurants, bars and being able to book tickets online.
 - Allowing patrons to select their preferred seats online while booking, with ability to see the view from each seat.
'My big thing is where I'm going to sit... something where you can see the seat view you choose.'
 - Providing detailed accessibility information for audience members with a disability or other special needs.
 - Providing audiences with information about First Nations performers, companies and productions – including connections to country.
'I will go out of my way to watch Indigenous works digitally so it supports our community.'
 - Communicating accessible information about the performance, trailers, and clear details about what it will entail. This can help establish a digital theatre audience member's expectation of interactivity, removing a potential barrier to booking.

- Developing and enhancing digital audience development activities including targeted updates to different audience cohorts.¹¹

'Digital can help me with my ticketing, booking, information and how I access it.'

Create new and innovative audience experiences

- Digital and online theatre technology could be used to provide innovative new experiences for theatre audiences.
'Choosing where you zoom in on digital performance instead of the cameraman, its more engaging and like you're there, you look around and things are happening in the background.'
- When curating active digital theatre experiences, consider ways to provide audiences with a sense of control over their level of interaction with the performance. Contemporary audiences prefer it when technological elements do not detract or distract from the overall experience.
- New and innovative digital theatre experiences could create additional income for theatres; 68% of survey respondents indicated that they would be willing to pay more for theatre performances using digital media compared to traditional live theatre performances.

Increase accessibility and awareness

- There is an opportunity to build greater awareness of online and digital theatre amongst existing theatre audiences, and to reach new audiences through marketing and education programs for audiences and artists.
- When marketing productions, positioning digital theatre as a medium enhancing human connection during in-person performances may help address current perceptual barriers.
- To reach new audiences with active digital theatre, the prioritisation of simple forms of engagement (eg, voting) and commonly used devices (eg, smartphones) could be effective.
- Online theatre could be used to reach new audiences, including:
 - those unable to attend because of location
 - those unable to afford an in-person ticket
 - public access to archival performances of previous productions.
- Online theatre may assist people from particular communities, such as First Nations audiences, to find creators and like-minded people from their community.

¹¹ Further suggestions and tools are available in the Audience Outlook Monitor. See Creative Australia 2023, *Audience Outlook Monitor: Audiences 2023+*, Patternmakers.

Appendix A:

Sample and methodology

This study collected data through two main methods:

- Six 90-minute **online focus groups** with diverse theatre attendees, which aimed to:
 - understand current theatre audience expectations and experiences
 - determine potential opportunities for new experiences and audience interactions in the digital theatre space.

A total of 32 people participated in the focus groups, including:

- people living in regional areas ($n=6$)
 - people living with a disability ($n=5$)
 - people identifying as first nations ($n=4$)
 - people identifying as LGBTQI+ or gender diverse ($n=6$).
- A 10-minute **online survey** distributed in December 2022. The sample size for the survey was 500 Australians aged 18 or older who had attended or watched a theatre performance during the preceding 12 months.

Participants were recruited via two external panel providers using a brief screening survey to determine eligibility to participate. Focus group participants were also phoned to be further screened for suitability.

Table 2:

Participant demographics

Question	Item	#	%
Gender	Male	197	39%
	Female	300	60%
	Non-binary	3	1%
Age	18–29 years	33	7%
	30–39 years	96	19%
	40–49 years	96	19%
	50–59 years	91	18%
	60–69 years	116	23%
	70+ years	68	14%
State	ACT	17	3%
	NSW	156	31%
	NT	1	<1%
	QLD	88	18%
	SA	41	8%
	TAS	9	1%
	VIC	145	29%
	WA	43	9%
Location	Metro	402	80%
	Regional	98	20%



Australian Government



creative.gov.au