



From arts marketing to audience enrichment: How digital engagement can deepen and democratize artistic exchange with audiences



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ABSTRACT

There remains a significant gap in the scholarly literature on the processes, benefits and challenges of digital engagement in the arts. This article presents and critically analyses the findings of one of the largest mixed-methods studies ever conducted into audience engagement with dance. Based on a rigorous mixed-methods approach comprising participant and audience surveys, discussion groups, depth interviews, netnography and content analysis of a new responsive online platform based on Liz Lerman's renowned Critical Response Process, this study investigates the potential of digital engagement to facilitate context and audience anticipation; foster a culture of constructive critical enquiry between arts organizations, artists and audiences; and break down barriers to attendance.

The study's key findings indicated that responsive digital platforms can democratize critical exchange; foster slower, more reflective critique; and positively shift perceptions of unfamiliar artforms amongst non-attenders. A sustained process of digital engagement during the creative process was revealed to facilitate contextualization and cognitive decoding and thus enhance kinaesthetic and emotional engagement during an ensuing live performance. However, confirming previous findings, it proved challenging to maintain engagement amongst online participants, particularly amongst non-attenders, which reinforced the importance of social modes of engagement.

Ultimately this kind of digital platform has the potential to encourage a deeper, richer, more relational and democratic engagement between audiences, artists and arts organizations. Beyond the arts, the platform was shown to impact positively on participants' wider feedback mechanisms, both at work and at home, indicating its potential wider educational and sociological role in enhancing interpersonal skills and encouraging empathy with others.

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1. Introduction

The digital engagement of arts audiences is in a serious state of flux. Whilst the arts sector is witnessing a notable groundswell of digital engagement projects, there remains a significant scholarly gap in theorizing the processes, benefits and challenges that these kinds of projects expose. In particular, although theories are starting to emerge regarding the positive impact that pre-performance context can exert on audiences' anticipation and ultimate enjoyment of a live artistic

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event (see Brown & Novak, 2007), these theories are lacking a robust empirical underpinning and very little research has yet been conducted into the specific role of digital technologies in facilitating such contextualization. The potential benefits of understanding how factors such as anticipation and enjoyment are related to audience development and enrichment are significant. In a world where the arts are increasingly forced to justify their shrinking public funding and counter charges of elitism (Tepper, 2008), insights into how digital communication technologies can democratize audience engagement and explicate the benefits of arts participation will inform not only scholarly debates around cultural value and policy *per se*, but also be of practical use to producers and marketers of the arts.

This article aims to highlight and address the gaps in research into digital engagement in the arts. In so doing, it will critically investigate the findings of digital engagement studies in other art forms, (e.g. Vlieghe & Rutten, 2013; Vlieghe, Muls, & Rutten, 2016), which revealed the significance of the social aspects of online participation and illustrated how online participants perceive and negotiate their role within social media environments. By presenting and discussing the findings of a large-scale qualitative study called *Respond*,¹ which took place over one year in 2014, the article will explore how established theories of co-creation and audience engagement actually work in practice. Addressing the most recurrent themes in the sparse literature on the digital engagement of arts audiences, the study will investigate whether a new interactive online platform (*Respond*) can successfully deepen and broaden audiences' engagement with contemporary dance and foster a culture of constructive critical enquiry between arts organizations, artists and audiences. A related aim is to explore whether the platform is able to expand the audience reach of new dance works. Ultimately, the study will provide new, rich insights into the benefits and challenges of artists engaging with a range of audiences throughout the creative process via digital platforms.

The article is structured as follows. First, a brief summary of the study itself is presented, which provides an insight into the conceptual development of the digital platform and illustrates its look and feel. This is followed by a critical review of the literature on audience engagement and on the roles that context and anticipation play in the audience experience. The aim of this review is to provide a robust theoretical framework within which questions pertaining to the digital engagement of arts audiences might be fruitfully explored. Following a discussion of the research design and methodology, the findings are presented and discussed in light of existing and emerging theories. Finally, the impact of the study is discussed by extrapolating a series of implications and conclusions, which aim to inform both scholarly thinking and professional practice.

1.1. Project and platform development

In March 2014 the project consortium, comprising Yorkshire Dance, the University of Leeds and Breakfast Creatives, asked for the public's help to select two new dance projects to be commissioned specifically for the *Respond* project. In the course of one week, 1600 votes were cast from around the world from a choice of six artists' video pitches shortlisted from dozens of entries by a panel constituted by Yorkshire Dance. As a result of this public vote, two artists, Hagit Yakira and Robbie Syngé, were selected to create their new pieces. In the meantime, the project team worked on developing and testing the online platform. The design and development of the *Respond* platform was heavily inspired by the American choreographer Liz Lerman's renowned Critical Response Process (CRP). The main challenges here were to translate CRP into a suitable online format that 'showed' rather than 'told'; and to make the platform appealing, interactive and 'sticky'. Fig. 1 provides a screen grab of the platform to illustrate its look and feel.

Between September and November 2014, the artists developed their work using the new *Respond* platform to engage in a creative and extended dialogue with audiences, following the highly structured process of Lerman's CRP described later in the article. During the artists' creative processes the platform went live for two separate weeks, which the project team labelled "CRP1" (19–26 September) and "CRP2" (14–21 November). The research team recruited a "closed" research group, which focussed on Hagit Yakira. Participants in this group were incentivised with a £20 payment and tickets to the live performance and asked to: attend a briefing and induction session; post at least once a day on the platform during the two CRP weeks; complete four short surveys (a baseline survey, one after each CRP week and a final survey); attend a focus group after CRP2; and be available for interviews the week following the live performances. Invitations to join the "open" group (focussed on Robbie Syngé) were promoted as widely as possible. Further details and rationale regarding the groups is provided in the methodology section. In December 2014, the two pieces, Robbie Syngé's *Douglas* and Hagit Yakira's *Air Hunger*, were publically performed at Yorkshire Dance in Leeds.

2. Theorizing digital engagement

As discussed in the introduction, the digital engagement of arts audiences is still in its infancy and empirical scholarly research in this niche field is notably scarce and sketchy. In order to map the constituent concepts behind digital engagement and to underpin the development of the *Respond* platform with existing research insights, a thorough literature review was conducted. Since extant studies focussed particularly on different modes and techniques of audience engagement and on the

¹ Full details of the project and a demonstration of the *Respond* platform can be accessed at <http://www.respondto.org>. Interviews and the final project report can be accessed at <http://artsdigitalrmd.org.uk/projects/yorkshire-dance/>

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