

How We Make Meaning: Observations from Contemporary Research

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts released *Learning Audiences*, a report on adult arts participation. Within the *learning consciousness* framework of the report, the authors discussed three value systems as they relate to arts programming. For arts presenters, one or more of these systems will likely sound familiar. Individuals and organizations may make and justify decisions based on one of these value systems, or some blend of them.⁴ This paper will refer to them as Value Systems A, B, and C.

- ◆ **Value System A** emphasizes programming art of the highest quality. The audience's understanding and connection to the art is secondary to the presenter's emphasis on aesthetic and creative excellence.
- ◆ **Value System B** emphasizes the needs and interests of the audience. In this approach, presenters program to patron tastes, through surveys and feedback.
- ◆ **Value System C** believes that art should be part of everyone's life and that a presenter's ultimate role is to *connect* arts and people.

While Value Systems A and B clearly suggest action steps for the presenter, the path to Value System C is more elusive. How can we guide and justify decisions rooted in the connection of art and audiences? How can we predict what an individual will connect with? When everyone seems to get a different meaning from the same art, how can we possibly bring meaning to many? How do people even come up with these different meanings, anyway?

This paper will explore ideas that might inform an understanding of how individuals make meaning from their experiences, and specifically how that process might work for arts experiences. Drawing from a range of academic disciplines, the authors consulted studies, journals, and academic websites to

⁴ McDaniel, Nello and George Thorn. *Learning Audiences: Adult Arts Participation and the Learning Consciousness*. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and The Association of Performing Arts Presenters. 1997, p. 28-31.

locate and compile relevant insights and findings in the research and academic communities. Links to relevant resources, and additional information on this and other reports supported by the Dawson Research Internship Fund are available on the web at www.bolzcenter.org/dawson/.

Starting with a brief overview of some of the recent arts studies published, this paper reviews key concepts from each study as they relate to making meaning. Next, it expands into research from other disciplines – specifically social psychology, neuroscience, and consumer research. Researchers in each of these fields have been exploring how meaning is made – how it’s constructed, how it’s encoded in the brain, and how humans make sense of the many inputs we receive. Finally, this paper discusses a few of the methods that researchers are using to get a handle on all this diversity of meaning, including some ideas about clustering individuals, and about listening to individuals and engaging them in dialogue, all in the context of understanding audiences better.

RESEARCH IN THE ARTS

In the past several years, several studies in the nonprofit arts have sought to better understand audiences. They have included various types of research, including surveys and interviews of patrons and non-patrons, and of arts organizations’ staff and board members. The most relevant research reports to the topic of making meaning are the *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study*, *The Values Study*, and *The Diversity of Cultural Participation*.

Among other things, the researchers explored the different values and motivations that individuals associate with their participation in the arts. Although each of the studies is quite distinct, there are some interesting commonalities.

The *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation* study was commissioned by the Knight Foundation and sought to help orchestras better understand their audiences.⁵ The study was based on a substantial body of data from current and potential orchestra patrons in 15 different geographic regions. Drawing from surveys and interviews, the study defined a set of *intrinsic* values that respondents gained from listening to classical music in any setting, as well as a group of *extrinsic* values that were specific to the live concert experience. As defined by the researchers, intrinsic values include artistic/educational, spiritual/self enrichment, and therapeutic/healing, while extrinsic values include occasion, relationship enhancement, social interaction/social reference, and ritual/ambiance.⁶

⁵ Brown, Alan S. (Audience Insight LLC). *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study*. John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, October, 2002, p. 21

⁶ “Intrinsic values can be derived from listening to classical music in any setting, and extrinsic values are particular to the live concert experience and do not relate specifically to the music.” Brown, Alan S. (Audience Insight LLC) p. 124

The *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation* study reported that current classical music ticket-buyers value intrinsic benefits more than extrinsic benefits, although extrinsic benefits do still hold value. Furthermore, researchers observed that younger ticket-buyers are more likely to value extrinsic benefits than their older counterparts.⁷

The stated purpose of the **Values Study**, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, was to reach a new level of understanding of why people participate in arts activities. This research was conducted among 20 Connecticut arts organizations. Instead of using a consultant or research team to gather information, the *Values Study* trained staff and board members to gather the feedback themselves through extended interviews with key constituents. Drawing from these interviews, the study's author interpolated five different types of arts activities, based upon an individual's amount of creative control⁸:

- ◆ **Inventive** – the creation of new, unique art, regardless of skill level.
- ◆ **Interpretive** – the act of either bringing to life or bringing value to a pre-existing work of art. Interpretive arts experiences can be individual or collaborative.
- ◆ **Curatorial** – the act of purposefully selecting, organizing, and collecting art to satisfy the individual's own artistic sensibility.
- ◆ **Observational** – any more passive arts experiences that an individual selects or consents to.
- ◆ **Ambient** – experiencing art, consciously or even unconsciously, that is not purposefully selected. This is art that “happens to you.”

The study suggested that arts groups could identify where their current activities fall in this framework in an effort to drive conversations about the meaning of current and potential activities to existing and prospective audiences.⁹

The Diversity of Cultural Participation, a study by the Urban Institute also commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, was published in November 2005. In this study, researchers hoped to determine “what people wanted from a particular kind of arts event and whether they felt the event actually delivered.”¹⁰

The study looked at both the visual and performing arts. In the researchers' analysis, the most frequently-named major motivation for attending cultural events was the desire to socialize with friends. Also, researchers noted that

⁷ Brown, Alan S. (Audience Insight LLC) p. 128

⁸ Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. *The Values Study – Rediscovering the Meaning and Value of Arts Participation*. The Wallace Foundation's State Arts Partnerships for Cultural Participation, July, 2004, p. 12

⁹ Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism p. 13

¹⁰ Ostrower, Francie. *The Diversity of Cultural Participation*. The Urban Institute and The Wallace Foundation, November, 2005, p. 2

African-Americans and Hispanics were much more likely than whites to cite the celebration of cultural heritage as a major motivation.¹¹

The study also asked consumers about what negative experiences would discourage them from attending an event or venue again. The two top responses were not having an enjoyable social occasion, and not liking the venue.¹²

As different as these studies are, each one names a set of observed value or motivation clusters. The idea of an *artistic* or *aesthetic* value is named in each, paralleled by the motivation to experience *high-quality art*. *Thinking and learning* is a theme, as is the value of *spiritual, therapeutic, or emotional rewards*. The theme of social value emerges in all three, but in several different forms: *interacting with others in our social group, celebrating our heritage, supporting our community*, perhaps even through political motivations.

The arts studies point to an incredible amount of diversity in what people seek and find meaningful and valuable in their arts experiences.

Value/Motivation Clusters		
Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study, The Knight Foundation, 2002 <i>(values in ranked order)</i>	The Values Study, The Wallace Foundation, 2004 <i>(values in random order)</i>	The Diversity of Cultural Participation, The Urban Institute and The Wallace Foundation, 2005 <i>(motivations in ranked order)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Artistic/Educational (Intrinsic) ◆ Spiritual/Self Enrichment (Intrinsic) ◆ Healing/Therapeutic (Intrinsic) ◆ Ritual/Ambiance (Extrinsic) ◆ Social Interaction/ Reference ◆ Relationship Enhancement (Extrinsic) ◆ Occasion (Extrinsic) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Aesthetic ◆ Cognitive ◆ Spiritual ◆ Emotional ◆ Socio-Cultural ◆ Physical ◆ Political ◆ Identity Formation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Socialize ◆ Emotionally Rewarding ◆ Gain Knowledge ◆ High Quality Art ◆ Support Community Organization ◆ Low Cost ◆ Celebrate Heritage

While these arts studies address what motivates individuals through their behavior, they do not seek to explain the origin of such a range of values. How do individuals construct meaning in order to establish what they value? How do individuals find such different meanings in what seem to be shared experiences?

¹¹ Ostrower, Francie p. 10

¹² Ostrower, Francie p. 19

To help understand how individuals find and construct meaning, this paper looks to three research disciplines: sociology & social psychology, neuroscience, and consumer behavior. Following are some of the concepts and findings from these fields that might inform the answers to these questions.

CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

Mechanics & Blending

Social psychologists have suggested *conceptual blending* as a useful model to describe the creation of new thoughts. This model can be a helpful foundation for understanding how meaning is made.

*Does bumping into
your third grade
piano teacher
beforehand change
the experience of an
orchestra concert?*

Conceptual blending suggests that new thoughts are not altogether new, but rather the unique result of a blend between old knowledge and new inputs. In effect, everyone has a storeroom of knowledge, understanding, and memory. These packets include everything from math formulas and scientific concepts to specific memories of childhood or adult experiences, and the emotions that go along with them. As we move through our experiences, we call pieces of knowledge to the forefront of our mental space – our ‘worktable’ – and blend them together with new inputs from the

environment. This results in a new thought, or a new understanding of the current situation.¹³

What’s especially interesting about this concept is its suggestion that meaning is made at the forefront of our thought, rather than in the far reaches of our consciousness. Different individuals will construct different meaning based on what’s available to their “mental worktable.” And even the same individual can construct a different meaning if specific elements from their storeroom are called forward.

Of course, time doesn’t stand still when we’re processing information. The meaning that you are constructing while reading this paper will be stored away as a new mental packet in your mind, available for later use.

Peripheral Factors During Encoding

As we think about how these mental packets of memory are recorded, we can gain some insight from neuroscience research on encoding and perception. For example, a study was done to explore encoding as it related to simultaneous video and audio stimuli. Specifically, this study looked at the mental encoding of films, and how the musical soundtrack affected encoding and recall of the films.

¹³ Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and The Mind's Hidden Complexities*. Basic Books, New York, NY, 2002. 39-50.

The researchers discovered that when the music and the video images seemed congruent to the subject, the subject's brain would encode them together. But when the audio/video pairing didn't make sense – where the pair was *incongruent* – the subjects actually encoded each input separately. It's as if they made one packet for audio and one packet for video, and then they filed each packet away separately.¹⁴

In a second brain science study involving audio and video pairing in films, the subjects watched films of wolves engaged in either friendly or aggressive behavior. The researchers then paired each video with music – music that sounded either friendly or aggressive. After watching these films, the subjects were asked to rate the wolves' behavior – how aggressive or friendly it was.

The researchers found that the ratings were greatly affected by the choice of music. For example, subjects who watched clearly aggressive footage but heard playful music rated the wolves as less aggressive than subjects who watched the exact same footage but instead heard aggressive, menacing music. Their perception of the wolves was clearly affected by the music. The way they mentally encoded the wolves' behavior was significantly affected by the soundtrack.¹⁵

Both of these findings suggest that memory is imperfect since it is dependent not only on the way information is encoded, but also on peripheral factors that can influence the emotional impact of a situation.

Art as Pleasure/Emotional Responses

Researchers have also been interested in understanding the sensation of “shivers down the spine” that can result from listening to music. Neuroscience studies show that when someone is experiencing this unique sensation, there are changes in that person's heart rate, breathing rate, and in the nerve activity in their muscles.¹⁶

There are also changes in blood flow to the regions of the brain associated with pleasure and reward, which happen to be the same areas activated by food, sex, and drugs. When

fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging)

Allows neuroscientists to see a real-time map of the human brain. The scan measures blood flow to regions of the brain, and produces a video output showing which areas of the brain are activated when subjects are presented with stimuli.

¹⁴ Boltz, Marilyn. 2004. “The cognitive processing of film and musical soundtracks.” *Memory & Cognition*, 32 (7): 1194-1205.

¹⁵ Bolivar, V. J., Cohen, A. J., & Fentress, J. C. 1994. “Semantic and formal congruency in music and motion pictures: Effects on the interpretation of visual action.” *Psychomusicology*, 13:28-59.

¹⁶ Blood, A.J. & R.J. Zatorre. 2001. “Intensely pleasurable responses to music correlate with activity in brain regions implicated by reward and emotion.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 98(20): 11818-11823.

this happens, the brain is registering deeply pleasurable sensations from the music. It actually *feels* good. This suggests listening to music can be hedonistic – a pleasure-seeking behavior.¹⁷

Individuals can receive similar pleasurable rewards from humor. Another neuroscience study looked at brain responses to comedic cartoons. Researchers observed that the participants' rewards center (the mesolimbic brain region) was lighting up on the fMRI scan, as blood flow increased to this area in response to humor.¹⁸

All of this research suggests that personal meaning may be impacted by the brain's emotional response, as well as by the individual's expectation or goals. In turn, receiving these kinds of rewards can also affect our expectations for *future* experiences.

The Impact of Expectation and Goals

Expectations and goals play a significant role in most experiences. In a loud and busy world, people can only process so many things at once. Goals affect what we allow ourselves to pay attention to – what even makes it into our consciousness.

For example, consumer researchers have conducted studies to examine how a consumer's goals and expectations affect the way they gather and process information related to a purchase. One study found that, when confronted with an overwhelming amount of information, consumers will focus on the information that relates to their goals for the purchase, and filter out information they don't believe to be relevant. Furthermore, they are much more likely to remember the information that relates to their goal. This filtering bias is observable for basic purchases as well as more complex ones. If a consumer wants to buy organic spinach, for example, she is likely to ignore other information in the produce section while looking for the word "organic." Our expectations filter our experience, leading us to skip over or ignore information that doesn't relate to our goals.¹⁹

In another example of expectation influencing experience, a brain science study found that men and women have different expectations – and therefore different experiences – related to comic strips. Specifically, women in the study had lower expectations for the comic strips. When they read the comics and actually found them funny, their reward regions lit up on the fMRI scan. The study suggested that the women didn't *expect* to be amused by the comics, so finding them funny

¹⁷ Blood & Zatorre p. 11818

¹⁸ Berns, Gregory S. 2004. "Something funny happened to reward." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8(5): 193-194.

¹⁹ Huffman, Cynthia and Michael J. Houston. 1993. "Goal-oriented Experiences and the Development of Knowledge." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol 20

was literally a pleasant surprise. Conversely, the men observed in the study had higher expectations for the comics, and were more easily disappointed.²⁰

Memory as Narrative

After discussing the many ways in which information is encoded and processed, it becomes clear that our minds are working with vast amounts of data (or packets of information). In the huge filing system of the brain, we need some way of organizing all these individual experiences into a more cohesive whole.

Many fields of study have discovered that the narrative form works as an essential mental organizer in this process. When we want to explain an experience, we tell a story to ourselves or to others.

When we want to remember an experience, we organize and encode it as a story in our minds.

When we want to *remember* an experience, we organize and encode it as a story in our minds.

Researchers in psychology, sociology, and education theory have all written about the importance of narrative. Consumer researchers have discussed this idea especially as it relates to how consumers think about products. The theory is that each individual consumer constructs a unique narrative surrounding a product or experience. For quite a while, the common thinking among

marketers was that the story starts when you open the product, and the plot is all about using the product. If the product works, marketers assumed, the narrative has a happy ending.

More recent research suggests that the consumer's product narrative is a more extended story that includes other details surrounding the experience – seemingly unrelated events before or after use of the product.²¹ For example, if the product in question were a Swiffer cleaning system, the narrative could begin as a day at home, with some of the frustrations of parenthood – like a child having a meltdown and throwing food on the floor. The consumer wants to get some cleaning done, but doesn't have much time between toddler crises. He manages to quickly Swiffer the bathroom floor, only to discover that his *other* son has decided to start an unsupervised mural project. This consumer's Swiffer narrative is likely to include *all* of these experience fragments, similar to a storyboard.

²⁰ Azim, Eiman, Mobbs, Dean, Jo, Booil, Menon, Vinod, and Reiss, Allan L. 2005. "Sex differences in brain activation elicited by humor." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 102(45): 16496-16501.

²¹ Deighton, John. 1992. "The Consumption of Performance." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 19: 362-372.



In this way, a single product experience takes place and is remembered in the context of all these other experiences. Understanding this, the makers of Swiffer recognize that although they can't control a consumer's environment, they can try to design a product that fits into the consumer's life.

Medical research provides another example of the power of narrative, with a slightly different take. A study examined the effect of how the final moments of an experience can affect the recollection of the entire experience.

Researchers studied patients who were undergoing an uncomfortable medical procedure that usually ends painfully. When asked about the experience, patients recalled the procedure as very uncomfortable. In the test group, the researchers performed the same procedure, but extended it with a brief period of minimal discomfort at the end. Because of the new ending, these patients recalled their entire procedure in more favorable terms.²²

This likely makes some intuitive sense to arts presenters, who have long known the importance of "going out with a bang." Alter the ending of the experience, and we might just alter a person's overall memory of that experience – for better or for worse. However, given what we know about the extended quality of narrative, the ending of a performing arts experience may take place well after our curtain goes down...in the exit from the building, or the walk to parking, or the travel home.

The Power of Personal Connections

Research in several disciplines suggests that a personal connection to an art form or a particular work can provide meaning and relevance. As narrative has been found to be a particularly effective means of memory formation, it has also been found to affect preference.

²² Redelmeier, D. A., Katz, J. and Kahneman, D. 2003. "Memories of colonoscopy: A randomized trial." *Pain*, 104: 187-194.

In a consumer research study, participants were asked to interact with a painting in one of several ways. They were assigned to write about the painting either in story form, or in an art-criticism style, from their own perspective or the perspective of someone they knew. The study found that writing a story about oneself in the painting created the greatest preference for the painting.²³

Supporting the significance of a personal connection, in his 2004 *Values Study*, Alan Brown found that, for many people, knowing an artist or having a childhood experience with an art form can make it more meaningful.²⁴

Having previous experience with an art form, or special knowledge of it, can also affect the way our brain processes it. Neuroscientists have discovered that when watching others dance, expert dancers' brains are operating very much as if they were dancing themselves. Specifically, the brain regions responsible for motor skills are activated – almost as if they were actually dancing.²⁵

These are further examples that suggest each person encodes performances differently, and thus the personal meaning they create is dependent upon their own skills and previous experiences.

Life Themes and Life Projects

Sometimes it can be shocking to learn what meaning someone received from a performance, particularly if it was not intended by the artist, or seen by others in the audience. A consumer research study can shed some light upon this peculiar occurrence. Researchers were interested in understanding why individuals found so many different meanings in advertising. Based on a series of in-depth interviews, the researchers came up with two concepts: Life Themes and Life Projects.²⁶

As the researchers see it, each of us has a Life Theme, an issue that holds great significance. This issue probably came from a formative childhood or adolescent experience. An example in the study was a man who as a child watched his immigrant father treated unfairly in the justice system. The man became an attorney, and his Life Theme became the issue of standing up for justice versus being ambivalent about justice. He sees this theme in many places where others might not – including advertisements, plays, or novels. A Life Theme does not necessarily relate to one's chosen profession, though it could. Once formed, a Life Theme is thought to be fairly unchanging.

²³ West, Patricia M., Joel Huber, and Kyeong Sam Min. 2004. "Altering Experienced Utility: The Impact of Story Writing and Self-Referencing on Preferences." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol 31: 623-630.

²⁴ Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism p. 4.

²⁵ B. Calvo-Merino, D.E. Glaser, J. Grezes, R.E. Passingham and P. Haggard. 2005. "Action observation and acquired motor skills: an fMRI study with expert dancers." *Cerebral Cortex*, 15:1243-1249.

²⁶ Mick, David Glen, and Claus Buhl. 1992. "A Meaning-Based Model of Advertising Experiences." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19: 317-338.

In the same model are Life Projects, which can be numerous and can evolve over time. A Life Project is an ongoing interpretation of a major social concept, like parenthood, or Americanism, and we are thought to be constantly updating them based on what we see and experience. Life Projects can exist at many levels, from the private self to the larger social structure.

Summary

The research from other fields can be thought of broadly as perception, emotion, memory, and connecting. Research suggests that each of these processes is fallible – that they are not precise sciences, but rather messy, involved amalgamations of numerous influencing factors. We can only make meaning with the information and memories we have readily available. Memory can be influenced by such factors as length of experience, or final moments. Peripheral factors and goals and expectations can effect our perception and memory of events. Narrative serves as a mental organizer and shapes the form of our memories of experiences. We gravitate toward stories, and we develop greater liking for art when we can put ourselves or those we know into a story about it. Finally, our experiences shape Life Themes and Life Projects, which also serve as filters on how we perceive, evaluate, and remember our surroundings.

HOW DO WE APPROACH AN AUDIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS?

Considering the multiplicity of ways in which people perceive, encode, evaluate, and remember experiences, it may be overwhelming for any cultural manager to craft a message or event that will meet many people's needs. With all of these different processes and variables – some we can control, others we cannot control, but must acknowledge – how do we, as cultural managers and creative professionals, move forward?

Luckily, we're not the only industry or discipline with these issues. Again, neuroscience, consumer behavior, sociology – and many other areas of thought – are working on useful methods to perceive and respond to these complex dynamics.

Clustering

While we can't understand and address every individual's filters, expectations, and value systems, we *can* cluster individuals into useful groups based on shared characteristics -- by their behavior, their values, or some combination of both.

By Behaviors

Because we have access to evidence of behavior – ticket sales, purchase patterns, and

EXAMPLE:

Behavior clusters for an orchestra season

- ◆ *Buyers versus non-buyers.*
- ◆ *Single-show buyers versus multi-show buyers.*
- ◆ *Buyers who bought 4 or more seats to any individual performance.*

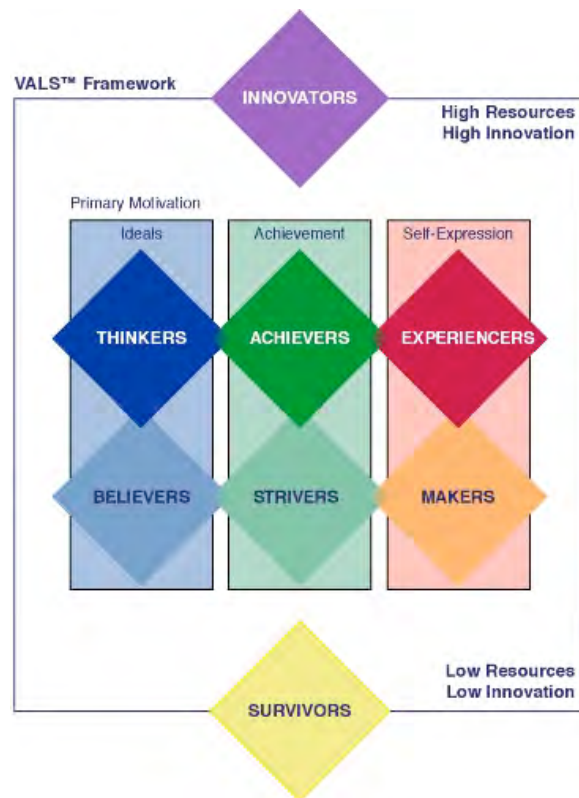
so on – we can cluster individuals by that behavior. Because we have so much evidence, we can cluster individuals in various ways, based on the challenge or opportunity at hand – as single-ticket buyers or subscribers, country or Broadway buyers, frequent or infrequent buyers, donors or non-donors, and so on.

Consumer product companies often use highly complex behavioral clustering in crafting targeted marketing campaigns, or testing new products or services.

By Values

Individuals can also be clustered by the larger values that drive their behavior. Many social psychologists have come up with such clusters to explain how different individuals interact with the world around them. In consumer research, for example, former Arts Presenters president Bill Dawson was closely involved in the creation of the first VALS™ study in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁷ Initially, VALS was an acronym for Values and Lifestyles, and the study produced a typology grouping consumers by value type. Today's VALS tool describes the primary motivations that drive consumption. VALS differs from personality grouping. Instead of describing a whole personality, VALS seeks only to describe the primary motivation that is driving a person's purchasing behavior. This primary motivation incorporates the source of one's main motivation (ideals, achievement, self-expression) and their level of resources and innovation (high, low).

For example, if a consumer's purchases are motivated mainly by self-expression, and she has a relatively high level of resources, VALS would categorize her as an Experiencer. A person who is motivated by self-expression, but who has a lower amount of resources, is a Maker. The VALS framework includes deep information about each segment but is limited in that it is a representation of individual measures while most buying decisions are household decisions. Furthermore, very few individuals have just a single motivation. VALS is just one example of the many value typologies that have been created in consumer research. Several arts studies have also created value typologies, as discussed earlier.



²⁷ SRI Consulting Business Intelligence (SRIC-BI); www.sric-bi.com/VALS

By Behavior and Values

A third method of clustering individuals into useful groups combines behavior *and* values. Instead of 8 or 10 big groupings, this approach produces many smaller but more focused groupings. The individuals within these groupings are much more homogenous – more similar to one another. One example of this approach is the PRIZM segmentation system from Claritas. PRIZM groups individuals by demographic, behavior and preferences into clusters known as lifestyle types. The PRIZM NE system has 66 distinct segmentations with names such as Boomtown Singles, Upper Crust, Shotguns and Pickups, Bohemian Mix, and Kids & Cul-de-sacs. As the names suggest, these segments are specific and descriptive and include detailed profiles, including average income, automobile preferences, magazines read, number of children, type of housing, and ethnicities.²⁸

Different Ways of Listening

Understanding that we can cluster or segment the individuals in our communities in different and meaningful ways, how do we then learn what is important to each? Researchers in the fields of neuroscience, consumer behavior, and the arts have developed innovative methods of listening that can provide greater insight into an individual's thought processes and perceptions.

Neuromarketing

Neuromarketing is an emerging field of marketing that utilizes neuroscience research to better understand consumer behavior.²⁹ Brain science researchers are utilizing fMRI scans to figure out what is going on inside peoples' heads. Recently, neuromarketing researchers have been using this tool to evaluate consumer's responses to different products. This is a way of "listening" directly to the brain, and researchers are seeing things that an individual might not be aware of, or might not be able to articulate.

Brand Override

One team of researchers studied the effects of brands on the brain. They conducted different versions of a Coke/Pepsi taste test, while the participants were hooked up to an fMRI scan. Before conducting any experiments, neuroscientists asked subjects which product they preferred. Some participants were given a blind taste test, while others tasted the products after viewing images of a can of Coke, a can of Pepsi, or a neutral flash of colored light. Those participating in the blind taste test consistently chose the product preferred by the region of their brain that registers basic appetitive aspects of reward (ventromedial prefrontal cortex). However, when the Coke brand information was present, researchers observed the activation of different areas of the brain (the hippocampus, dorsolateral region of the prefrontal cortex and midbrain) than

²⁸ Claritas, PRIZM-NE Segmentation, <<http://www.claritas.com/claritas/Default.jsp?ci=3&si=4&pn=prizmne>>

²⁹ "Neuromarketing." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 22 Dec 2005, 13:55 UTC. 12 Jan 2006, 01:35 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neuromarketing&oldid=32358823>>.

those activated during the blind taste test. The presence of the Pepsi brand did not have the same effect. It was as though upon seeing the Coke logo, a brand override button was hit in the brain, overriding the region of the brain associated with taste rewards.³⁰ This suggests that brand can play a large role in our preferences, which may impact our purchases.

The Cool Factor

Neuromarketing researchers are also using fMRIs to evaluate the response of consumers to different products. In one study, researchers observed a strong negative reaction in the brain when subjects were presented with “uncool” items.³¹ Conversely, “cool” products activated parts of the brain that are thought to be associated with self-reflection and also how others view you (a region known as Brodmann area 10).³² This research reinforces the idea that purchasing is a social act. Buyers’ decisions are influenced in part by a concern about their image, and how their purchases reflect upon that image.

Shopper Cams

Another interviewing and observation technique comes to us from consumer research. In this process, a subject wears a small video camera while shopping, which records the subject’s view of their shopping trip. Soon after the trip (within 72 hours) the subject sits down with a researcher and views the tape. The subject narrates the video with their thoughts at the time. An example might be:

Subject: Here I am looking at cottage cheese. I think the store brand looks sketchy, so I pick up the Breakstone’s. I pick up 2% because I always get 2%.

Researcher: Why did the store brand look “sketchy?”

Subject: Oh, I don’t know – I don’t know if it’s really the way it looked – for some reason I don’t like to buy store-brand dairy – it is lower quality, and what if it were bad? I’d get sick, just to save 15 cents. So I go with the brand name.

The rich information received about the consumer’s preferences and methods of processing information in this example can then be used to strengthen the communication strategies of the brand in question, perhaps even the product itself.

Engaging the Right Listeners

Arts research is also suggesting new ways of listening. In the *Values Study*, researchers used a different way of thinking about in-depth interviews. Instead of hiring external people to come in and do research, the consultants involved

³⁰ McClure, SM, Li, J, Tomlin, D, Cypert, KS, Montague, LM, Montague, RM. 2004. “Neural correlates of behavioral preference for culturally familiar drinks.” *Neuron*, 44:379-387.

³¹ CBS (September 29, 2004) *CBS Evening News’ Eye on America*: “Neuromarketers Inside Your Head.”

³² PBS (March 1, 2005) *Alan Alda in Scientific American Frontiers*: “Marketing to Your Mind.”

trained arts organization leaders, staff, and board members to conduct these kinds of interviews themselves. As the final report states, “It is one thing for arts managers and board members to read research reports and attend presentations on arts participation, and another thing entirely for them to hear their own constituents speak directly about how arts activities fit into their lives and what they value about arts participation.”³³ This more involved approach to listening to audiences aims to yield better understanding, and, like sense-making, provides a direct path for consumer input to shape the organization’s efforts.

CONCLUSION

How do individuals find divergent meanings in what seem to be shared experiences?

The authors have compiled this report in an effort to better inform an understanding of how individuals make meaning from arts experiences. Drawing on research in the arts, social psychology, neuroscience, and consumer behavior, this paper presents findings and techniques that may spark questions or illuminate new ideas in the minds of arts managers.

The findings presented may help cultural managers understand some aspects of variance among individual audience members, and between groups of individuals within an audience. Existing arts research provides insight into the diversity of arts activities, and describes many of the values and motivations associated with arts attendance. The psychological theory of conceptual blending supplies a framework for understanding the construction of meaning, suggesting that an individual processes new inputs by blending them with old memories and stored information. Peripheral factors, such as audio input, can have a significant effect on perception of visual stimuli. Brain science researchers have observed deeply pleasurable neurophysiological responses to music and humor, responses often associated with food, sex, or drugs. Expectations and goals, often rooted in past experience, can act as a filter on new experience, affecting what is processed and what is later remembered. The narrative form is a powerful organizational tool for the mind, and consumers may include seemingly unrelated details in a mental storyboard summarizing their experience with a product, with extra psychological weight given to events that take place at the end of an experience.

A personal connection to a work of art can provide added meaning and relevance, and the brain of an expert may process an art form much differently than the brain of a non-expert. Individual consumers may utilize a Life Theme and Life Projects to filter and process stories, advertisements, and art works, seeing a particular theme in places others do not.

³³ Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism p. 3.

It can be overwhelming to consider the multiplicity of meanings derived by audience members. Refined techniques for clustering and listening may provide additional information and understanding for cultural managers. Leaders can study and target clusters of audience members based on observable behavior, or values and motivations, or a combination of all these. Researchers are also developing new methods for listening to individuals, including the use of fMRI scans to monitor the brain's response to products and experiences, and "shopper cams" in which an individual narrates video footage of a recent shopping trip and attempts to explain decisions to researchers. Arts research also points to the importance of engaging the right listeners, training arts leaders to conduct interviews with their own constituents in lieu of engaging outsiders to conduct the interviews.

In the end, performing arts professionals are in the business of connecting artists and audiences in ways that create meaning and value for both. Emerging research on how individuals and groups construct meaning, and determine or remember value, can provide essential insights to make those connections more effective and more frequent. This paper explores just a few of the many productive paths through related research on the subject. We hope it helps provide the spark and the initial connections to form a more extended conversation among academics, arts presenters, and the larger field of cultural management.

About the Dawson Research Internship Fund

The Dawson Research Internship Fund was established by the leadership and membership of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters to remember and honor Bill Dawson, the association's former president and a formative force in the field of arts presenting. By supporting annual research, and by connecting current graduate students in Arts Administration with performing arts professionals, the fund seeks to inform and advance professional practice while engaging a new generation of arts leaders in applied research.

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