

MARKETING COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR INCREASING ATTENDANCE IN CROATIAN THEATERS

Antal Balog^{1,*}, Nikolina Pavičić Rešetar², Marina Lukić³

¹ PhD Professor, Baltazar Zaprrešić Polytechnic

² PhD student at Faculty of Economics, University Josip Juraj Strossmayer of Osijek

³ Mag. oec. student at Baltazar Zaprrešić Polytechnic

*Correspondence: antal.balog@bak.hr

<https://doi.org/10.63356/redete.2025.001>

Abstract

This article analyzes marketing communication strategies as a means to increase attendance at Croatian theatres. The study aimed to identify key communication channels and methods that effectively contribute to attracting and retaining audiences, with particular emphasis on integrating traditional and digital approaches in the marketing of cultural institutions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, comprising a theoretical literature review and an empirical survey of 125 participants from Croatia. Demographic characteristics of respondents, theatre attendance habits, audience motivations, and the use of communication channels for information about performances were analyzed. The results confirm a tripartite structure of communication channels: word-of-mouth remains the dominant information source (61.6%), while digital channels such as theatre websites (57.6%) and social media (56%) are also important. Nevertheless, 74.4% of respondents believe that Croatian theatres have underdeveloped digital marketing, indicating substantial untapped potential for digital tools in program promotion. Financial incentives were clearly identified as a strong motivator for attendance, with 83.2% of respondents valuing discounts and ticket promotions positively. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had a limited effect on interest in theatre, the adaptation to online formats was judged insufficient, revealing a need for greater digital transformation. The study confirmed the importance of combining traditional and contemporary communication channels and emphasized the need to professionalize digital marketing, including the development of specialized teams and the allocation of adequate resources. It also highlighted the importance of a flexible, segmented approach to different demographic groups, particularly the younger audience that was dominant in the sample. Despite certain sample limitations, the research offers valuable guidance for theatre managers and cultural policymakers aimed at increasing attendance and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Croatian theatre scene through contemporary marketing practices.

Keywords: Marketing Communication Strategies; Theatre Attendance; Digital Tools

1. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic environment of the twenty-first century, where cultural institutions compete for attention within an increasingly saturated media landscape, the theatre faces the challenge of redefining its role in maintaining existing audiences and attracting new ones. Traditionally regarded as a bastion of artistic expression and social reflection, theatre today must actively communicate its value and relevance in order to secure its sustainability and vitality. This need for adaptation is particularly pronounced in the Republic of Croatia, where theatres—despite a rich history and artistic tradition—must devise innovative strategies to increase attendance amid rapid digital transformation and shifts in audience habits.

Although recent data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (DZS; KUL Press Release, 2025) record a positive trend in theatre attendance, reaching almost two million visitors in the 2023/2024 season, this growth should not obscure the fundamental challenges confronting the performing arts. Even superficial analyses show that Croatian theatres have not yet fully exploited the potential of digital communication tools, revealing a significant gap between available capabilities and their practical application. This problem becomes even more evident considering that traditional marketing

approaches increasingly show limitations, particularly in attracting younger audiences who are accustomed to two-way, interactive communication via digital channels (Leko Šimić & Biloš, 2017).

Financial sustainability further complicates the situation. Given the predominantly public budget financing (Bestvina Bukvić, Mihaljević & Tokić, 2015), Croatian theatres are vulnerable to changes in public policy. This dependence necessitates the implementation of entrepreneurial management approaches, including effective marketing strategies capable of generating additional revenues and enhancing the cultural autonomy of institutions. Furthermore, the generational gap in theatre audiences represents a challenge that cannot be ignored. Research (Buljubašić, Mijoč & Jobst, 2020) indicates that Croatian theatres have not adequately adapted their promotional activities to Generation Y, despite the considerable potential of unconventional marketing, including digital platforms, to reach this demographic. Therefore, the digital transformation of marketing communication is not merely an option but an imperative for the future of Croatian theatre.

This article seeks to explore these challenges and opportunities in greater depth by identifying effective marketing communication strategies that can substantially

improve attendance at Croatian theatres. Through the integration of traditional and digital communication channels, the aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state, analyze key success factors, and offer practical guidance for theatre managers. Two principal research questions are posed: first, whether there is significant potential to increase theatre attendance in the Republic of Croatia through better-designed marketing activities, particularly those leveraging digital channels; and second, how word-of-mouth relates to digital channels in informing theatre audiences.

Methodologically, the study combines a theoretical review with an empirical approach. The theoretical component relies on general scientific methods for analyzing the existing literature on marketing communication in the performing arts, including works by Walmsley, Bernstein, Hausmann and Poellmann, as well as relevant Croatian authors. The empirical component was conducted via a quantitative, descriptive online survey of a sample of 125 respondents, with the objective of collecting data on audience attitudes, habits and preferences regarding theatres' marketing communication. This approach enables an in-depth analysis of audience perceptions and the identification of key communication channels.

The study's findings revealed a tripartite structure of communication channels: (1) word-of-mouth, (2) theatre websites and (3) social media. Although word-of-mouth retains primacy, the high representation of digital channels clearly signals their indispensable role. Particularly indicative is respondents' perception of insufficiently developed digital marketing within theatres, pointing to a significant yet underutilized potential.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional marketing approaches employed by Croatian theatres reveal their limitations, particularly in attracting younger audiences. Leko Šimić and Biloš (2017) emphasise that Croatian theatres underutilise the potential of their websites as an effective communication tool for younger age cohorts, who expect two-way online interaction rather than one-way information provision. This shortcoming is compounded by the fact that communication through traditional media is insufficient for younger audiences, who prefer virtual information search.

The problem of financial sustainability further burdens and complicates the situation of Croatian theatres. Bukvić, Mihaljević and Tokić (2015) report that Croatian theatres are predominantly financed from public budgets (62.14%), which renders them vulnerable to changes in public cultural funding policies. This dependence on public financing requires theatres to implement entrepreneurial management approaches, including effective marketing strategies capable of generating additional revenues and enhancing institutional sustainability.

The generational gap within theatre audiences constitutes another significant challenge. Buljubašić, Mijoč

Moreover, the research confirmed the importance of financial incentives, since monthly income affects the likelihood of theatre attendance, opening space for strategic consideration of pricing policies and promotional actions. Generational aspects, with a predominance of younger participants in the sample, further emphasize the need to adapt communication strategies to the digital habits and expectations of this demographic group.

The discussion chapter offers a detailed interpretation of these findings in the context of existing literature, comparing them with international studies and highlighting specificities of the Croatian context. Special attention is given to implications for the marketing communication of Croatian theatres, providing operational recommendations for implementing digital strategies and strategic guidance for balancing traditional and digital approaches. Practical implications for theatre managers are also analyzed, including the prioritization of marketing activities and budget allocation. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study provides insight into the resilience of public interest in theatre, while critically assessing theatres' weak adaptation to online formats. In conclusion, the article validates the stated hypotheses, acknowledges the study's limitations (such as the convenience sample and demographic bias), and proposes directions for future research, thereby contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical application of marketing communication in the theatre sector. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper offers a roadmap for Croatian theatres in their mission to attract and engage audiences in the digital age, thereby securing their vital role in the cultural life of society.

and Jobst (2020) stress that Croatian theatres have not adapted their promotional activities adequately to Generation Y, despite the considerable potential of unconventional marketing to reach this group. This indicates the need for a strategic approach that combines traditional and contemporary communication methods.

Nielsen (2019) presents Theatre Talks as a method that seeks to combine three domains of audience development: marketing (increasing and diversifying audience segments), cultural policy (inclusion of marginalised groups) and theatrical communication (supporting better understanding of theatrical codes and conventions). This methodology foregrounds the spectator's experience, valuing the experience itself rather than only its cognitive understanding, regardless of the type of experience. The Theatre Talks method has proven effective in lowering several barriers for non-attenders—financially, for example by providing free tickets, but perhaps more importantly culturally, by influencing public conceptions of what it means to be a theatregoer. The method is particularly significant because it enables theatres to get to know their audiences, listen to their needs, and provide what those audiences require.

Lindelof and Hansen (2015) propose a focus on the theatrical experience from the audience's perspective, a topic hitherto underdeveloped in Nordic cultural-policy debates on audience development. Through qualitative audience research, their study demonstrates how dialogue about theatre offers a method for exploring theatrical experiences from the audience's viewpoint. One merit of this method is that it affords participants a deeper understanding of the theatrical experience. Comprehension of a performance should be accessible while the performance is taking place but ought to be further complemented afterwards through dialogue with fellow participants. The Theatre Talks method can render the theatrical experience more constructive and less frustrating, since the exchange of thoughts and impressions can produce a shared framework for a fuller theatre experience; social media may serve as an appropriate platform for its application.

Shi's (2024) research on the importance of social media for European museums provides insights that are applicable to theatrical institutions as well. Facebook played a significant role in increasing visitor numbers to European museums during and after the pandemic.

The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) offers a valuable example of digital marketing used to connect with a global audience. Their strategy includes live streaming of performances, social media campaigns (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) that share rehearsal footage, actor interviews and live Q&A sessions, and the development of interactive educational content such as quizzes, discussion forums and behind-the-scenes videos. Results indicate that their online performances attracted viewers worldwide, substantially expanding their audience base. Social media campaigns yielded higher engagement rates—more likes, shares and comments—and interactive content helped educate audiences about Shakespeare's works, fostering a deeper appreciation of the theatre (Tain, 2023).

Manukonda (2013) highlights theatre as one of the oldest and most effective modes of communication globally. In a developing country such as India—where some 65 percent of the population still resides in rural areas with limited mass-media reach—the relevance of theatre for development (TfD) initiatives and programmes is particularly pronounced. Theatre for development goes beyond merely producing and performing plays: it enables representatives of target communities—who often develop and perform the pieces—to tell their stories, engage with relevant issues and address topics of import to their communities. This participatory approach is one of the most effective ways for people to engage in dialogue about significant and sometimes controversial local matters.

Ursić (2023) analyses culture as an integral aspect of everyday life and examines how culture is actualised through cultural participation. Her research shows that during the pandemic a substantial majority of respondents (72%) followed visual arts content via online platforms, indicating sustained interest in cultural and

artistic events. One quarter of respondents evaluated their online content experience as extremely positive, while 38.9% regarded it as predominantly positive. These results suggest that interactive participation was well received by participants and served as a satisfactory model for engaging in cultural activities during the pandemic. Statistically significant differences ($p < 0.01$) in the frequency of following artistic and cultural content online were recorded across age groups: older adults (65+) followed virtual events and participated in online activities significantly less often than their younger counterparts.

Cornwell (n.d.) investigates the use of artificial intelligence in audience engagement within the performing arts. Museums have taken the lead in exploring intersections between art and audience-engagement strategies with projects such as the Met and Iris+. AI continues to penetrate mainstream and industrial sectors, and the arts are no exception. Theatre for development may be understood as an evolution from less interactive theatrical forms toward a more dialogical process, in which theatre is practiced with or by people as a means of empowering groups and communities. This represents a progression toward technologically supported forms of audience engagement.

Walmsley (2013) examines core aspects of audience engagement in the theatrical context, emphasising the fundamentally observant nature of theatre that has persisted despite the rise of interactive and immersive formats. He notes that the vast majority of theatre audiences still engage with performances in a traditional, observational manner. Walmsley's insights importantly illuminate the foundational relationship between audience and theatrical experience, which underpins the selection of marketing-communication strategies: effective marketing must recognise and harness this fundamental dynamic. His findings are particularly relevant to the development of communication strategies that resonate with the intrinsic motivations of theatregoers, focusing on the unique value proposition of live performance. Such understanding helps shape messages that both attract and retain audiences by appealing to their inherent desire for the theatrical experience.

In a 2016 article, Walmsley shifts focus from traditional arts marketing to the concept of audience enrichment, particularly through digital engagement. He explores how digital platforms can deepen and democratise artistic exchange with audiences, moving beyond mere transactional marketing. Walmsley argues that digital engagement can facilitate audience context and anticipation, thereby enhancing the overall artistic experience. This work is highly pertinent to understanding the changing landscape of marketing communication in the arts in the digital age; it suggests that effective strategies should employ digital tools not only for promotion but also to foster a richer, more interactive relationship between audience and art form. The article provides a framework for how theatrical organisations can use digital engagement to build stronger audience ties, leading

to increased participation and loyalty—an imperative for Croatian theatres seeking to modernise their marketing approaches and attract digitally native audiences. Building on his earlier work, Walmsley (2019) offers a comprehensive review of audience engagement from multiple complementary perspectives, including cultural value, marketing and established theatrical etiquette. This volume delivers a critical analysis of what audience engagement truly entails in the performing arts and how it may be encouraged. Walmsley explores the complexities of audience behavior and motivation, offering a nuanced understanding that goes beyond simple attendance metrics. The book is highly relevant for devising sophisticated marketing-communication strategies, since it stresses the importance of understanding intrinsic motivations and cultural values. It suggests that effective communication should aim to create meaningful and enriching experiences for audiences rather than merely promoting a product. This holistic approach to audience engagement is crucial for theatres seeking to establish long-term relationships with patrons and secure sustained attendance. For Croatian theatres, Walmsley's work provides a valuable framework for transitioning from transactional marketing to a more relational model.

Pap, Dlačić and Ham (2017) investigate factors that contribute to audience retention in the theatre, with particular focus on the role of engagement in predicting future attendance behaviour. The authors hypothesise that audience engagement is a key predictor of whether a theatre visitor will return. They apply customer-engagement theory to the context of nonprofit marketing, especially within the performing arts. This research is highly relevant for understanding how to cultivate a loyal theatre audience. It suggests that marketing communication should not only target the acquisition of new audiences but also deepen engagement among existing ones, transforming occasional visitors into regular patrons. Findings imply that strategies encouraging strong emotional and intellectual connection to the theatrical experience are more likely to result in long-term audience relationships.

Bernstein (2011) provides an in-depth account of the challenges and strategies in marketing the performing arts. Bernstein contends that traditional marketing approaches that were effective in the past can no longer be relied upon and that performing-arts marketers face new complexities in attracting and retaining audiences. He emphasises that effective marketing communication must appeal to the core values, lifestyles and motivations of targeted consumers. This work is highly relevant to understanding the evolving landscape of arts marketing and the need for more sophisticated, audience-centered approaches. Bernstein's insights are particularly valuable for developing communication strategies that resonate with the emotional and intellectual

needs of prospective theatregoers, and for building and maintaining a loyal audience base by addressing their fundamental desires.

Hausmann and Poellmann (2013) provide a theoretical analysis and empirical insights into the use of social media for arts marketing, particularly for performing-arts organisations. They highlight the rapid increase in social-media use among these organisations and its significant role in promotion and communication. The authors examine how social media can be leveraged to build brand awareness, engage audiences in a more informal and authentic way, and generate excitement around productions. This research is highly pertinent to the practical application of digital marketing in the theatre sector. It offers a framework for integrating social media into an overall marketing-communication strategy to reach broader audiences and foster a sense of community. For Croatian theatres, this study provides useful guidance for optimising social-media presence to increase visibility and attract younger, digitally literate audiences. It stresses the importance of developing a coherent social-media strategy that goes beyond simple announcements and focuses on interactive content and community building to encourage engagement and, ultimately, attendance.

The works reviewed here underscore the multidimensional nature of marketing in the performing arts, spanning traditional marketing mixes to contemporary digital and guerrilla tactics. A central conclusion is that successful marketing communication in theatre transcends mere promotion of productions; it entails deep audience understanding, the cultivation of long-term relationships and the creation of enriching experiences. Croatian literature highlights the need to adapt marketing tools to the specificities of the cultural sector, the necessity of professionalising digital marketing, and the potential of guerrilla marketing to attract attention with limited resources. The pronounced importance of word-of-mouth and personal recommendation—especially among younger cohorts (Generation Y)—suggests that theatres should prioritise creating exceptional experiences that prompt audiences to share positive impressions.

For Croatian theatres, synthesising these insights provides a roadmap for future development: invest in the professionalisation of marketing teams, adopt contemporary digital tools and strategies, and continuously research and understand audience needs and preferences. The focus should be on community building around the theatre, fostering interaction, and creating memorable experiences that ensure long-term attendance and loyalty. Ultimately, the success of marketing communication in theatre depends on the ability to present art in a manner that resonates with audiences, inspiring not only attendance but also active participation and advocacy for the theatrical arts.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies a quantitative, descriptive approach conducted as a cross-sectional survey. Its purpose was to examine audience attitudes, habits and preferences in the context of theatre marketing communication. The interpretation of empirical findings was supported by general scientific methods, including analysis, synthesis, description, compilation and comparison.

Primary data were collected by means of an anonymous online questionnaire designed using Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised thirteen items with mixed measurement scales (nominal, ordinal and interval), covering demographic information, frequency of theatre attendance, motivations for attendance, preferred types of performances, information channels, ticket-purchase methods and attitudes toward a range of marketing activities. The survey was available to adult respondents (aged 18+) resident in the Republic of Croatia with Internet access and was conducted from 9 to 16 August 2024.

The sample was obtained via a convenience (self-selected) sampling procedure. While this sampling approach provides contextual insight for interpreting the results, it limits the generalisability of the findings to the wider population.

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentage distributions. The analysis focused on identifying trends and associations between demographic characteristics, information channels and the reported preferences and attitudes toward marketing activities. Presentation of results is primarily descriptive, accompanied by an interpretative discussion of the findings.

Respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously, with the purpose of data collection

4. RESULTS

The following section presents the results of the empirical study conducted via an online questionnaire. The aim was to collect data on audience demographics, theatre-going habits and preferences, and attitudes towards theatres' marketing activities in the Republic of Croatia. Results were analysed using descriptive statistics and are presented as frequencies and percentages, organised into the following groups: (1) demographic structure of the sample, (2) audience habits and preferences, (3) information channels and ticket purchase, and (4) attitudes towards marketing activities and attendance.

4.1. Demographic structure of the sample

The survey comprised $N = 125$ respondents resident in the Republic of Croatia. The demographic profile shows a pronounced predominance of female respondents (65.6%, $n = 82$) compared with male respondents (34.4%, $n = 43$). Age distribution is concentrated in younger adult cohorts: 25–34 years (44.8%, $n = 56$), 18–24 years (24.0%, $n = 30$), 35–44 years (12.0%, $n = 15$), 45–54 years (8.8%, $n = 11$), 55–64 years (6.4%, $n = 8$) and 65+ (4.0%, $n = 5$).

Educational attainment is relatively high: bachelor/undergraduate (32.8%, $n = 41$), secondary school (30.4%,

clearly stated; consequently, ethical risks to participants were minimal. Study limitations include the convenience sampling method, the brief data-collection period and the geographic scope limited to the Republic of Croatia.

The general objective of the research was to establish which communication channels theatre audiences use to obtain information about theatre offerings and to determine the potential of marketing communication to bring theatres closer to prospective visitors—an outcome crucial for cultural production and social wellbeing. Specific objectives included comparing theatre attendance in the Republic of Croatia, assessing public awareness of theatrical productions, identifying factors affecting attendance and uncovering the ways visitors learn about performances.

Based on these objectives, the following core research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There exists significant potential to increase theatre attendance in the Republic of Croatia through better-designed marketing activities, particularly those that exploit digital channels.

H2: Word-of-mouth remains an important information source for theatre audiences, but the growing presence on social media and active use of theatre websites significantly contribute to improved audience awareness and increased attendance.

These hypotheses frame the empirical investigation, whose results will provide deeper insight into the dynamics of marketing communication in the theatre sector and identify the most effective strategies for attracting and retaining audiences in Croatian theatres.

$n = 38$), master's degree (29.6%, $n = 37$), postgraduate (4.0%, $n = 5$) and other (3.2%, $n = 4$).

Regarding employment status, the majority of respondents are employed in the private sector (44.0%, $n = 55$), students constitute 27.2% ($n = 34$) and 16.0% ($n = 20$) work in the public sector or administration. Monthly income analysis indicates that the largest single group (26.4%, $n = 33$) reported net monthly earnings between €901 and €1,200, suggesting a substantial representation of respondents from the middle-income social stratum.

4.2. Audience habits and preferences

Responses concerning frequency of theatre attendance reveal relatively low engagement: the largest proportion of respondents (45.6%, $n = 57$) attend theatre only once a year, 24.8% ($n = 31$) attend two to three times per year, 21.6% ($n = 27$) do not attend theatre at all, and only 6.4% ($n = 8$) attend more than three times per year.

Changes in attendance over the past three years indicate that for 50.4% ($n = 63$) attendance remained unchanged, for 21.6% ($n = 27$) it declined, and for 12.0% ($n = 15$) it increased.

Motivational factors for attending theatre were dominated by social gathering and entertainment (60.0%, $n = 75$), followed by invitation or recommendation from friends/family (44.0%, $n = 55$), and the artistic experience itself (43.2%, $n = 54$). Less frequently reported motives included support for the local artistic community (8.8%, $n = 11$) and professional interest (3.2%, $n = 4$).

Genre preferences show a clear dominance of comedy (87.2%, $n = 109$). Musicals are preferred by 34.4% ($n = 43$), drama by 32.8% ($n = 41$) and ballet by 26.4% ($n = 33$), indicating a diversity of interests within the theatre audience.

4.3. Information channels and ticket purchase

Analysis of communication channels through which respondents learn about theatrical performances reveals a tripartite structure of primary information sources: (1) word-of-mouth recommendations from friends/family is the leading source (61.6%, $n = 77$), confirming the importance of personal recommendation; (2) theatre websites (57.6%, $n = 72$), indicating the significance of digital platforms; and (3) social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) (56.0%, $n = 70$), which confirms the growth of digital communication. Traditional channels such as posters, TV and radio retain moderate importance (31.2%, $n = 39$), while newspapers and magazines (15.2%, $n = 19$), newsletters (7.2%, $n = 9$) and TV advertising (7.2%, $n = 9$) are markedly less represented. Ticket sales channels are dominated by online purchases via theatre websites (59.2%, $n = 74$). Box-office purchases still maintain a substantial share (41.6%, $n = 52$), while ticketing applications (e.g., Eventim) are used by 39.2% ($n = 49$) of respondents.

4.4. Attitudes towards marketing activities and attendance

Respondents' attitudes toward the current state of theatres' marketing communication reveal several key findings: (1) insufficient advertising—83 respondents (66.4%) disagree with the statement that productions are frequently advertised, indicating inadequate promotional activity; (2) underdeveloped digital marketing—93 respondents (74.4%) believe that theatres have not sufficiently developed their digital marketing, signifying considerable room for improvement; (3) ticket-price affordability—opinions are divided: 47 respondents

(37.6%) consider ticket prices unaffordable, while 51 respondents (40.8%) consider them affordable; and (4) online sales systems—the majority (72 respondents, 57.6%) evaluate the organisation of online ticketing systems positively.

Preferences for marketing measures likely to increase attendance reveal two clear priorities. Financial incentives are the most attractive: ticket promotions and discounts received positive evaluations from 104 respondents (83.2%), and free tickets for a first performance were positively rated by 91 respondents (72.8%).

Digital communication channels also display strong potential: regular information via social media is considered useful by 95 respondents (76.0%), and the same number identify mobile applications for cultural events as having significant potential.

Traditional promotional tools remain relevant: city posters and billboards are regarded as useful by 99 respondents (79.2%), and leaflets/brochures placed in cafés and restaurants are deemed relevant by 78 respondents (62.4%).

Respondents show moderate acceptance of innovative approaches: QR codes on promotional materials are positively evaluated by 75 respondents (60.0%), and newsletters with relevant information are regarded as useful by 80 respondents (64.0%).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on interest in theatre was assessed as minimal by most respondents: 86 respondents (68.8%) indicated that the pandemic did not affect their interest in theatre. However, respondents judged theatres' adaptation to online formats during the pandemic as modest—only 21 respondents (16.8%) considered that theatres had adequately adapted their productions to online formats.

These results provide a quantitative baseline for understanding the current state, habits and perceptions of theatre audiences in Croatia and can inform further analysis and the formulation of recommendations in the field of marketing-communication strategy. The findings also indicate measurable potential to increase attendance at Croatian theatres through targeted marketing-communication strategies—particularly those that combine digital tools with traditional approaches and include financial incentives for audiences.

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the empirical findings on marketing communication in Croatian theatres in the context of the relevant domestic and international literature. It analyses the key factors affecting attendance, formulates practical implications for theatre managers, evaluates the research hypotheses, critically reflects on the study's limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

5.1. Interpretation of results in the context of existing literature

The empirical results substantially corroborate theoretical frameworks developed in the international literature on marketing communication in the performing arts. Walmsley (2019) emphasises the importance of understanding the fundamental motivations of theatre audiences, a point reflected in our findings where social gathering and entertainment are the dominant motives for attendance (60% of respondents). This supports Walmsley's argument that successful marketing communication must acknowledge the intrinsic social character of the theatrical experience rather than treating it solely as a cultural product.

The identification of a tripartite structure of communication channels — word-of-mouth (61.6%), theatre websites (57.6%) and social media (56%) — aligns with Hausmann and Poellmann's (2013) analysis of the hybrid nature of contemporary arts marketing. Their work suggests that social media do not replace traditional communication forms but complement them; our results offer empirical confirmation of that position. The continuing primacy of word-of-mouth is consistent with Bernstein's (2011) concept of the "core value of the theatrical experience," i.e., its capacity to generate strong emotional responses that audiences spontaneously share.

Perceptions of underdeveloped digital marketing (74.4% of respondents) correspond with Leko Šimić and Biloš (2017), who argue that Croatian theatres do not fully exploit digital communication tools. Our study advances this argument by quantifying that gap, providing empirical grounding for the earlier theoretical claim. Buljubašić, Mijoč and Jobst (2020) highlight the potential of unconventional marketing for Generation Y; this is reflected in our findings showing broad acceptance of innovative approaches such as QR codes (60% positive) and mobile applications (76% positive).

Some deviations from international trends were also observed. Nielsen's (2019) Theatre Talks methodology emphasises participatory audience approaches, whereas our results indicate that Croatian audiences still predominantly prefer a more traditional, observational role: only 8.8% cited support of the local artistic community as a motivation. This may reflect particularities of the Croatian cultural context or a need for gradual audience education toward more active participation.

5.2. Key factors for increasing attendance

The tripartite information-structure analysis reveals a complex information ecology that requires an integrated communications approach. The dominance of word-of-mouth (61.6%) validates Bernstein's (2011) theory of the "emotional bond" as a principal driver of theatre consumption. Nevertheless, almost equal shares for theatre websites (57.6%) and social media (56%) indicate an ongoing digital transformation that is not yet fully realised.

A particularly salient finding is the prominence of financial incentives: 83.2% of respondents positively evaluated ticket promotions and discounts, while 72.8% were favourable to free entry for a first performance. These results corroborate Nielsen's (2019) identification of financial barriers as a primary constraint on attendance and suggest that financial stimuli can function not only to remove barriers but also as active motivators that mobilise latent interest.

The generational aspect is notable: 68.8% of respondents are younger than 35. Despite this, channel preferences do not show a stark generational divide — word-of-mouth retains importance among younger cohorts — indicating that the theatrical experience's social dimension transcends simplistic "digital vs. non-digital" generational binaries. This finding challenges assumptions

about homogeneous "digital" generations and points to the need for micro-segmentation that accounts for education, income and professional status when designing communication tactics.

Genre preferences (comedy 87.2%, musical 34.4%, drama 32.8%) reveal a clear orientation toward lighter, entertainment-focused content. This aligns with the predominance of social and entertainment motives and has programmatic implications: theatres must balance artistic ambitions with market demands.

5.3. Implications for marketing communication in Croatian theatres

Operationally, the results indicate an urgent need to implement integrated digital strategies. The fact that 59.2% of respondents purchase tickets online while only 16.8% believe theatres adapted adequately to online formats during the pandemic reveals a paradox: audiences are digitally ready, but theatres' digital offerings remain inadequate.

Concrete operational recommendations include: (1) establishing professional social-media teams dedicated to interactive content designed to stimulate word-of-mouth; (2) deploying personalised e-mail campaigns that combine information with financial incentives; (3) optimising websites for mobile devices with a strong user-experience focus; and (4) developing mobile applications that integrate ticket purchase, show information and social features.

Strategically, the findings support a hybrid model that balances traditional and digital approaches. The primacy of word-of-mouth suggests that digital tools should act as catalysts for traditional communication patterns rather than substitutes. This corresponds with Walmsley's (2016) concept of "audience enrichment," whereby digital engagement deepens and democratises artistic exchange.

Regarding resources and competencies, results point to the necessity of: (1) recruiting or training marketing professionals with digital competencies, (2) ongoing staff education in digital trends, (3) forming partnerships with technology firms to implement advanced solutions, and (4) allocating a meaningful share of budgets to digital marketing (recommended minimum 15–20%).

5.4. Practical priorities for theatre managers

Prioritisation of marketing activities — informed by the empirical findings — should proceed as follows: (1) design attractive financial packages and loyalty schemes (supported by 83.2% positive attitudes), (2) professionalise social-media presence (76% find regular posts useful), (3) optimise traditional promotional materials (79.2% rate posters and billboards as useful), and (4) implement innovative technologies such as QR codes and mobile applications.

Budget allocation should reflect the tripartite communications structure: approximately 35% for digital channels (social media, web optimisation, online advertising), 25% for traditional promotion (posters, print media, PR), 25% for financial incentives and loyalty

programmes, and 15% for innovative and experimental approaches.

Organisational changes required for digital transformation include: (1) creating a digital-marketing manager role or outsourcing these functions, (2) regular staff training on digital trends, (3) implementing systems for tracking and analysing digital performance, and (4) developing procedures for rapid response to emerging digital trends.

5.5. COVID-19 context and digital transformation

Interpretation of pandemic-related findings is one of the study's most intriguing aspects. The observation that 68.8% of respondents report no decline in interest in theatre suggests a resilience of public interest in the face of external shocks, consistent with Ursić (2023). However, this should be interpreted with caution given the sample's demographic profile—namely a younger, more educated cohort that may adapt more readily to changing conditions.

The modest assessment of theatres' adaptation to online formats (only 16.8% positive) likely reflects several factors: (1) limited technical competencies and resources within theatrical institutions, (2) conservative managerial attitudes toward digital innovation, and (3) conceptual misunderstandings that treat online formats as mere substitutes rather than complementary products. This underscores the need for a mindset shift from "digital necessity" to "digital opportunity."

5.6. Hypotheses validation

H1 (significant potential to increase attendance through better-designed marketing, especially digital): partially confirmed. Although 74.4% of respondents view digital marketing as underdeveloped, 76% evaluate regular social-media postings positively and 76% value mobile applications—evidence of considerable unrealised potential and a need for higher-quality digital implementation.

H2 (word-of-mouth remains important but digital channels significantly contribute to awareness and attendance): fully confirmed. The tripartite structure demonstrates that word-of-mouth (61.6%) remains dominant but is closely paralleled by digital channels (websites 57.6%, social media 56%), suggesting a model of "amplified word-of-mouth" in which digital tools catalyse traditional information flows.

5.7. Study limitations

This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting results and generalising conclusions: (1) convenience sampling and representativeness: the self-selected sample may not be fully representative of the entire Croatian theatre-going population; online respondents are likely to be more digitally literate, which could bias results toward digital channels; (2) demographic bias: the sample comprises 65.6%

women and is dominated by younger age groups (25–34 years), limiting generalisability to older cohorts and male audiences whose behaviours may differ; (3) short data-collection period: the one-week collection window (9–16 August 2024) may restrict sample size and diversity; a longer collection period could capture seasonal variation and yield a larger, more heterogeneous sample.

It is also important to note that the results reflect perceptions and attitudes of those who already have some interest in theatre and do not capture segments of the population with no interest in theatre at all; this may lead to an optimistic assessment of the potential impact of marketing strategies.

5.8. Theoretical contribution and practical value

This study contributes to the literature on theatre marketing in several ways. First, it quantifies the "digital divide" in Croatian theatres, providing empirical evidence that complements the theoretical claims of Leko Šimić and Biloš (2017). Second, it identifies a specific tripartite communications structure that can serve as a model for comparative studies. Third, it demonstrates the significant role of financial incentives as drivers of theatre consumption, supplementing existing emphases on cultural and social motives.

The specificities of the Croatian context — notably the dominance of public funding (Bestvina Bukvić, Mihaljević & Tokić, 2015) — may partly explain the slower pace of digital transformation compared with more market-oriented systems. Nevertheless, our results suggest that Croatian audiences are not culturally averse to digital innovation; rather, adequate offerings and implementation are lacking.

Practically, the study provides concrete guidance for theatre managers: strategic investment in digital marketing, optimisation of online presence and active promotion of word-of-mouth are essential. The importance of financial incentives and a reassessment of pricing strategies are also highlighted. This research can serve as a starting point for developing more effective marketing strategies that increase attendance and build long-term audience relationships in the digital era.

Future research should focus on larger, more representative samples, qualitative studies to deepen understanding of audience motivation, and experimental designs to test the effectiveness of specific marketing interventions. Emphasis should be placed on developing hybrid communication models that combine the best elements of traditional and digital approaches tailored to diverse demographic segments. Finally, longitudinal studies are required to monitor the long-term effects of digital communication strategies on audience loyalty and the financial sustainability of theatres.

6. CONCLUSION

The empirical research partially confirmed Hypothesis H1 and fully confirmed Hypothesis H2. Hypothesis H1, which posited significant potential to increase theatre attendance in the Republic of Croatia through better-designed marketing activities, especially those that employ digital channels, was partially confirmed. Although respondents perceive digital marketing as insufficiently developed, theatre websites and social media emerged as primary information channels for audiences. This indicates an underutilised potential that requires higher-quality digital implementation and strategic investment to be fully activated. However, it must be noted that the study relied on a convenience sample, predominantly consisting of younger, digitally literate respondents. This issue with sample representativeness presents a limitation for generalizing these findings to the broader Croatian theatre-going population.

Hypothesis H2, which stated that word-of-mouth remains an important information source for theatre audiences, while the growing presence of social media and active use of theatre websites significantly contribute to improved audience awareness and increased attendance, was fully confirmed. Word-of-mouth retains its primary role, emphasising the importance of outstanding theatrical experiences that generate personal recommendations. At the same time, digital channels demonstrate complementary and increasing importance, which calls for an integrated marketing-communication approach.

The study found that the principal motives for attending theatre are social gathering and entertainment, followed by the artistic experience, with comedy identified as the most preferred genre. Monthly income was shown to affect the ability to attend theatre, suggesting that pricing strategies and financial incentives may play a significant role in attracting a broader audience. Perceptions of inadequate advertising frequency and underdeveloped digital marketing point to the need for more proactive and targeted communication efforts.

Practical implications for theatre managers are manifold. Priority should be given to optimising digital channels, including professional development and regular

updating of websites, and active, interactive use of social media. Encouraging word-of-mouth through loyalty programmes and by creating exceptional audience experiences is crucial for long-term audience development. Budget allocation should be rebalanced in favour of digital platforms, considering cost-effectiveness and reach. Organisational changes should include staff training, hiring or contracting digital-marketing specialists, and fostering a culture of continuous monitoring and analysis of digital performance.

Findings related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that, although audience interest in theatre did not decline, theatres largely failed to respond adequately by offering high-quality online alternatives. This underlines the need to develop capacities for producing and distributing online content as an integral part of future marketing strategies, not merely as a crisis response.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in providing empirical insights into the specificities of the Croatian theatre context: it corroborates global trends regarding the importance of digital marketing and audience engagement while emphasising local particularities such as the enduring primacy of word-of-mouth. The practical value is evident in the concrete guidance offered to theatre managers, which can assist in designing more effective marketing strategies to increase attendance and build long-term relationships with audiences.

While the study offers valuable findings, its limitations should be recognised — notably the use of a convenience sample, demographic bias and a short data-collection period. Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more representative samples, undertaking qualitative studies to deepen understanding of audience motivation, and conducting experimental research to test the effectiveness of specific marketing interventions. Such work would further enrich knowledge of marketing communication in the theatre sector and provide more precise guidance for practice.

REFERENCES

- Bernstein, J. S. (2011). *Arts marketing insights: The dynamics of building and retaining performing arts audiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bestvina Bukvić, I., Mihaljević, M., & Tokić, I. (2015). Financing the theatre: The role of management and the state. *Management*, 20(1), 125-142.
- Buljubašić, I., Mijoč, J., & Jobst, I. (2020). Empirical study of the effectiveness of unconventional theatre marketing activities targeting generation Y. *Management*, 25(2), 421-434.
- Cornwell, B. (bez godine). Using artificial intelligence for audience engagement in the performing arts.
- Državni zavod za statistiku. (2024). *Artistic Production and Live Performances*. KUL-2025-2-1.
- Hausmann, A., & Poellmann, L. (2013). Using social media for arts marketing: theoretical analysis and empirical insights for performing arts organizations. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 10(2), 111-129. Springer. Dostupno na:
- Janssen, S., Kuipers, G., & Verboord, M. (2024). Europeans' digital cultural participation. *International Journal of Communication*, 18, 4022-4049.
- Leko Šimić, M., & Biloš, A. (2017). Theatre marketing: Using websites to attract young target audience. *Irish Business Journal*, 10(1), 31-36.
- Lukić, M. (2024). The Potential of Marketing Communication for the Purpose of Increasing Theater Attendance in the Republic of Croatia. *Zaprešić: Veleučilište s pravom javnosti Baltazar Zaprešić*.
- Manukonda, R. (2013). Theatre: Communication that captivates and enchants. *Global Media Journal-Indian Edition*, 4(2).

11. Nielsen, D. S. (2019). Theatre Talks – Audience development in three perspectives: Marketing, cultural policy and theatrical communication. *Zarządzanie w Kulturze*, 20(4), 397-410.
12. Pap, A., Dlačić, J., & Ham, M. (2017). What makes the theatre audience return? The role of engagement in predicting future behavior. U ToSEE-Tourism in Southern and Eastern Europe. Academia.edu. Dostupno na:
13. Shi, J. (2024). Analysing the importance of social media on European museums. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 181, 01033.
14. Tian, J. (2023). A Study of New Media for Theater Brand Marketing. *Proceedings of the 2023 3rd International Conference on Social Development and Media Communication (SDMC 2023)*, *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 807,
15. Ursić, S. (2023). Motivation, attitudes and habits in cultural participation among visitors to visual arts institutions. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 18(30), 25-47.
16. Walmsley, B (2013) *Understanding Audiences and Marketing Theater*, in *The Routledge Companion to Arts Marketing*. London: Routledge
17. Walmsley, B. (2016). From arts marketing to audience enrichment: How digital engagement can deepen and democratize artistic exchange with audiences. *Poetics*, 58, 11-21. Elsevier.
18. Walmsley, B. (2019). *Audience engagement in the performing arts: A critical analysis*. Springer