

Identifying Strategies for Positioning Theatre in the Media Consumption Portfolio of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and prioritize strategies for effectively positioning theatre within the media consumption portfolio of Generation Z (Gen Z). Having grown up in the digital age and the realm of social media, Gen Z exhibits a strong preference for instant, interactive, and multi-platform content, demonstrating distinct behaviors in cultural consumption. The study's findings suggest that the evolution in Gen Z's media access and interactive experience significantly impacts their cultural and artistic engagement. This necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of the traditional theatre format to reclaim its desired position. Key challenges identified include limitations related to time, location, cost, and a perceived mismatch between current theatrical content and the concerns of this generation. However, the inherent advantages of the live experience, such as being present in the moment, direct interaction, and the in-depth analysis of topics, remain core strengths of theatre that can effectively attract Gen Z. Essential strategies for successful positioning include leveraging new digital technologies, offering online streaming, integrating hybrid arts, and creating a safe space for the expression of diverse identities. This research proposes that through innovation in content, narrative structure, and audience engagement, theatre can strengthen its educational, social, and cultural role in the lives of Gen Z. This revitalization will foster cultural growth, enhance social participation, and improve the mental well-being of this generation, thus ensuring a dynamic future for the art of theatre in the digital landscape.

Keywords: Theatre Positioning, Generation Z (Gen Z), Interactive Experience, Digital Media

1. Introduction

Art and culture have always formed the essential foundation of human civilization, reflecting shared values, identities, and emotions across generations. Among artistic media, theatre has historically held a distinctive place

as a live, symbolic form of communication that unites performer and audience in a shared experience of empathy and reflection. Beyond its aesthetic purpose, theatre serves an educational and ethical function, shaping social understanding and collective identity. It has long been regarded not merely as entertainment but as a mirror that

reflects cultural realities, stimulates thought, and promotes the cultivation of human values and emotions (Mirfakhraie & Rajabiefard, 2013). As a communicative art, theatre depends on mutual understanding, participation, and social exchange, which give rise to meaning and continuity in culture. Through this interactional structure, theatre transmits cultural messages, reinforces identity, and nurtures the emotional and moral development of its audience (Mohammadi Dehcheshmeh & Karbasi, 2021).

However, the transformative influence of digital technologies and new media has profoundly reshaped the landscape of cultural consumption. The emergence of social networks, streaming platforms, and algorithmic personalization has redefined how individuals engage with art and culture. Traditional performing arts, particularly theatre, now face declining audience attendance, weakened cultural visibility, and increasing competition from digital forms of entertainment (Panagiotou et al., 2022). This shift is most evident among Generation Z (Gen Z), the first generation to grow up entirely within a digital ecosystem, where immediacy, interactivity, and multi-platform access define cultural experience. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z's engagement with media is fluid, participatory, and fragmented across numerous digital environments, from streaming platforms to social networks (Bhagat & Sharma, 2021). Their behavior illustrates a preference for dynamic, short, and interactive content rather than fixed, linear narratives. This reality poses a complex question for cultural policy and practice: how can theatre reinvent itself as a meaningful and attractive experience for audiences whose habits and cognitive structures have been shaped by the digital revolution?

The decline of theatre audiences is not only a cultural concern but also a sociological one. The mass media dependency model, developed during the expansion of broadcast and electronic media, explains how audiences form reliance relationships with media systems for information, orientation, and identity construction (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). As digital media have grown, theatre has lost much of its social visibility and symbolic power. In Tehran, for instance, research has shown that weak promotional systems, insufficient audience development, and the high costs of production have contributed to the decreasing presence of theatre in the cultural life of citizens (Karimvand & Ahmadi, 2013). Similarly, Essien emphasized that theatre's sustainability depends on structured strategies for audience development, including greater accessibility and outreach initiatives (Essien, 2020).

In many contexts, theatre remains a marginal and elite art form rather than a widespread medium of social participation. The disengagement of Gen Z from theatre thus results from both structural limitations—such as time, cost, and spatial constraints—and perceptual gaps, as the themes of theatre often appear distant from the lived realities of the digital generation (Litwak, 2019).

To address this gap, it is essential to understand the specific sociocultural characteristics of Generation Z. This generation embodies a dual identity, combining global digital culture with local traditions and expectations. As Prestianta and colleagues note, Gen Z's media habits center on continuous digital connectivity, multi-screen interaction, and a preference for visual and participatory forms of content consumption (Prestianta et al., 2023). Their cultural behavior reflects a constant negotiation between individuality and collectivity, autonomy and belonging. In the Iranian context, Parsakia and collaborators emphasize that Gen Z experiences a form of generation disjunction, defined by contrasts between inherited cultural norms and emerging digital sensibilities (Parsakia, Rostami, Darbani, et al., 2023; Parsakia, Rostami, Saadati, et al., 2023). This generation values authenticity, diversity, and social justice, while maintaining strong sensitivity toward representation and inclusion. Understanding this identity structure is crucial for theatre to design relevant and resonant content that aligns with Gen Z's cognitive and emotional worlds.

Analyzing the relationship between theatre and Gen Z requires a theoretical framework that accounts for audience agency and motivational diversity. The Uses and Gratifications Theory provides such a lens by shifting the focus from what media do to people toward what people do with media (Katz et al., 1973). According to this perspective, audiences actively select and use media to fulfill psychological, cognitive, and social needs (Rubin, 1983). These needs range from information and personal identity to social integration and entertainment (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). The model thus rejects the idea of a passive audience and emphasizes conscious, goal-oriented media behavior. In today's context, where Gen Z continuously navigates multiple media streams, this framework remains essential for explaining how and why individuals choose certain forms of cultural engagement over others. The theory's relevance has been reaffirmed in digital media studies, where interactivity, personalization, and participatory culture shape audience satisfaction (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Ruggiero, 2000).

For theatre, adopting a Uses and Gratifications perspective means acknowledging that young audiences

seek not only entertainment but also relevance, interactivity, and identity reinforcement. Theatre must therefore redefine its gratifications by integrating social dialogue, digital participation, and emotional authenticity into its structure. This approach distinguishes theatre from passive screen-based media by emphasizing the irreplaceable value of live, co-present experience. Katz's earlier reflection on mass communication suggested that media survive not through technological advancement alone but through their ability to fulfill evolving human needs (Katz, 1959). In this sense, theatre's vitality depends on its capacity to offer unique gratifications—presence, empathy, immediacy, and human connection—that digital technologies cannot replicate.

Recent transformations in the performing arts reveal that technological integration can enrich rather than diminish theatrical experience. Carmona and Torres-Toukoudidis documented how digital marketing and streaming strategies adopted during the pandemic allowed artists to maintain visibility and interaction with audiences despite spatial restrictions (Carmona & Torres-Toukoudidis, 2021). This hybridization of performance demonstrates that digital tools can extend theatre's reach without eroding its live essence. Similarly, Mannin highlighted how young audiences value reciprocal communication and interactive participation as essential elements of cultural engagement (Mannin, 2025). Augmented and virtual reality technologies, digital storytelling, and live online participation are examples of tools that can align theatre with the habits and expectations of Gen Z. Yet innovation in technology must be accompanied by innovation in narrative. Golden and colleagues found that arts-based practices significantly enhance young people's psychological well-being, empathy, and social connection (Golden et al., 2024). Theatre's future success therefore lies in linking its educational and therapeutic dimensions with the aesthetic and participatory preferences of Gen Z.

From a policy perspective, theatre's reintegration into the cultural life of youth requires strategic repositioning. Essien's concept of audience development stresses the necessity of establishing participatory frameworks and equitable access to cultural events (Essien, 2020). Reduced ticket prices, youth-oriented programs, and digital outreach initiatives can lower economic and social barriers to participation. Valenzuela and his colleagues argued that networked interaction can generate digital social capital—relationships of trust and cooperation that sustain collective identity (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Theatre can play a similar role in the physical world by serving as a communal arena

that fosters communication, collaboration, and civic engagement. To achieve this, institutions must adopt multidimensional strategies that combine cultural management, media communication, and educational programming. In contexts such as Iran, where theatre's institutional position remains fragile, Mirfakhraie and Rajabiefard emphasized the need for integrated policy reforms that strengthen cooperation between the performing arts and the media system (Mirfakhraie & Rajabiefard, 2013). This requires long-term planning, creative investment, and the mobilization of cultural resources to ensure theatre's sustainability.

The reconceptualization of theatre for Gen Z must ultimately be grounded in human-centered communication. Rubin's early research on viewing motivations demonstrated that emotional and social gratifications are central to sustained audience engagement (Rubin, 1983). Theatre's potential lies precisely in offering deep emotional resonance and authentic interpersonal connection. Mannin's findings suggest that interactive storytelling and audience feedback mechanisms can strengthen the sense of co-creation and shared authorship between artists and spectators (Mannin, 2025). By combining live performance with digital interactivity, theatre can transform from a unidirectional spectacle into a participatory medium where the audience becomes part of the creative process. This approach not only aligns with Gen Z's participatory culture but also revitalizes theatre's role as a public space for dialogue and empathy.

The sociocultural implications of this transformation extend beyond the arts. The involvement of youth in participatory cultural experiences has been linked to increased empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Golden et al., 2024). In a world where digital alienation and social fragmentation threaten collective well-being, theatre offers an embodied, relational, and reflective counterbalance. It provides a space for understanding difference, negotiating meaning, and cultivating social responsibility. Litwak's analysis of theatre for social change illustrates how performance can operate as a catalyst for reflection and transformation within communities (Litwak, 2019). As such, revitalizing theatre for Gen Z is not merely a cultural goal but a broader social necessity, contributing to the development of emotional intelligence and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. The economic sustainability of theatre remains fragile due to limited funding, insufficient institutional support, and competition from digital entertainment (Essien, 2020). In

many cases, theatre lacks the marketing sophistication and technological integration required to reach young audiences (Karimvand & Ahmadi, 2013). Furthermore, content misalignment—failure to address the social, political, and environmental concerns that matter to Gen Z—continues to alienate potential spectators (Litwak, 2019). To overcome these barriers, theatre institutions must adopt comprehensive strategies involving digital innovation, content renewal, and participatory education. This demands collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, artists, and media professionals to build a sustainable ecosystem of cultural participation. Methodologically, qualitative research offers powerful tools for understanding these complex cultural phenomena. Patton's approach to qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of interpretive depth, contextual understanding, and participant perspective in exploring human experience (Patton, 2015). Through interviews, focus groups, and content analysis, researchers can identify the psychological and social gratifications that draw young audiences to particular forms of media, thereby informing strategies for theatre revitalization (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

In conclusion, the convergence of theatre, digital technology, and generational change defines a new stage in the evolution of cultural communication. Theatre's survival and growth depend on its capacity to harmonize tradition with innovation, emotion with technology, and human connection with digital interactivity. It must transform from a static institution into a flexible and participatory ecosystem that responds to the cognitive, emotional, and social needs of Generation Z. The theoretical principles of Uses and Gratifications and Media Dependency provide the conceptual foundation for understanding this transformation, while empirical research on Gen Z's media habits highlights the pathways for practical adaptation. Theatre's unique ability to provide live, interactive, and emotionally resonant experiences positions it to fulfill needs that digital media cannot fully satisfy. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify and prioritize effective strategies for positioning theatre within the media consumption portfolio of Generation Z, ensuring its cultural relevance, educational impact, and social sustainability in the digital era.

2. Methods and Materials

This research employed an inductive and qualitative approach. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and

analyzed through qualitative content analysis. According to Van Manen, qualitative research is a broad term encompassing a set of interpretive techniques aimed at describing, decoding, translating, and understanding meaning, rather than merely counting the frequency of phenomena occurring in the social environment (Van Manen, 1983). Qualitative methods are often utilized for a deeper, more interpretive understanding of communications and phenomena, emphasizing aspects of reality that are observed and observable within the research setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This approach enabled the researcher to delve deeply into the subject matter, uncovering and reconstructing the complex and meaningful dimensions of the phenomenon that are inaccessible through quantitative methods.

Given the unique, innovative, and exploratory nature of the research topic, defined within the domains of media and Generation Z, the study necessitated a methodology that allows for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives and interpretations of both audiences and experts. Therefore, the in-depth interview tool was selected as an efficient means to extract rich and detailed data, allowing direct access to the required data through open dialogue with the interviewees (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

The research execution began with a documentary review stage, which involved gathering and reviewing relevant theoretical sources and prior research concerning media, Gen Z, and theatre positioning. Subsequently, interview questions were designed, and participants who possessed the greatest knowledge of the subject were selected using purposive sampling (Table 1). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to ensure data quality by consciously selecting participants most capable of providing relevant and deep data (Palinkas et al., 2015). Ultimately, after approximately 20 interviews and reaching theoretical saturation, the data were recorded, transcribed, and prepared for analysis.

Interview questions covered the following areas: strategies for positioning theatre in Gen Z's media consumption, theatre content within Gen Z's media consumption portfolio, strategies and approaches for theatre positioning, challenges and opportunities for theatre positioning, cultural impacts of theatre positioning, and the future of theatre's position in Gen Z's media consumption portfolio.

Table 1

List of Participants

No.	Name	Area of Expertise
1	Bahareh Bakhshi	University Professor in Media Studies
2	Bahareh Nasiri	University Professor in Media Studies
3	Maryam Taherian	University Professor in Media Studies
4	Amir Abtahi	University Professor in Media Studies
5	Simin Aminlou	University Professor in Media Studies
6	Amir Jahani	University Professor in Media Studies
7	Mehdi Momeni	University Professor in Media Studies
8	Anahita Mirzakhani	University Professor in Media Studies
9	Parisa Moghtadi	Writer, Director, and Actor
10	Jalal Tajanaki	Writer, Director, and Actor
11	Atabak Naderi	Writer, Director, and Actor
12	Shokrollah Goodarzi	Writer, Director, and Actor
13	Kherollah Taghianipour	Writer, Director, and Actor
14	Jacqueline Avareh	Writer, Director, and Actor
15	Asghar Hassas	Writer, Director, and Actor
16	Majid Amraei	Writer, Director, and Actor
17	Davood Fathalibeigi	Writer, Director, and Actor
18	Nasser Avizheh	Writer, Director, and Actor
19	Mehrdad Rayani Makhsous	Writer, Director, and Actor
20	Sepideh Nazaripour	Writer, Director, and Actor

For the data analysis phase, qualitative content analysis was utilized, which is a systematic process for identifying, classifying, and interpreting textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Content analysis allows the researcher to extract macro and micro structures and concepts within the data, providing a window into a deeper understanding of individuals' lived world. In this research, the analysis began with open coding, involving an initial, unrestricted coding of the data to identify all notable points. The initial codes were then converted into sub-categories, and redundant information was eliminated. Finally, through the analysis of relationships among the sub-categories, overarching and meaningful categories were formed. This process facilitated the organization and interpretation of data in a structured format, ensuring that the extracted findings could align with the research theories and concepts.

To enhance the study's credibility, methodological and theoretical triangulation was employed. Triangulation refers to using multiple perspectives and methods to examine a phenomenon, thereby reducing bias stemming from individual viewpoints (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Consequently, the perspectives of experts from media, theatre, sociology, and even individuals from outside the artistic field were incorporated. Furthermore, participant validation was conducted, whereby the analysis outputs were returned to some interviewees, and their accuracy and precision were evaluated and confirmed.

3. Findings and Results

Based on the data presented in Table 2, the Evolution in Gen Z's Media Consumption Portfolio emerges as a key and overarching concept in this research. This concept points to a new perspective on access and interactive experience in this generation's media consumption. Accustomed to instant content, Gen Z seeks access to their desired content anytime and anywhere. This habit of consuming digital and virtual content has made their media experiences increasingly interactive, to the extent that direct engagement between spectators and artists has become an integral part of their cultural experience. The desire for relevant and meaningful content—content that is not only entertaining but also carries cultural and social messages—is highlighted as one of the essential needs of Gen Z. Furthermore, the preference for textual and visual experiences, particularly through new media such as social networks and digital platforms, has led this generation to pursue the majority of its media consumption in multimedia and visual formats.

Conversely, Traditional Barriers to Theatre Access constitute another fundamental and important concept addressed in the research. Tangible challenges identified include time constraints due to the length of performances or inconvenient scheduling, spatial limitations in accessing theatre venues, high ticket costs, and issues related to digital

technologies. These limitations make the theatre experience less accessible and appealing for Gen Z, a generation predominantly active in the short-term digital space.

The Unique Advantages of the Live Theatre Experience are also highlighted in this study. The live, in-the-moment experience, the potential for direct audience interaction, in-

depth analysis of topics, and creativity in staging are factors that can serve as positive and distinguishing features of theatre compared to other media. If properly introduced to Gen Z, these characteristics can become a powerful attraction to strengthen theatre's position among this cohort.

Table 2

Concepts and Categories Extracted from the Interviews

Global Concepts	Organizing Concepts	Basic Concepts
Evolution in Gen Z's Media Consumption Portfolio	Changes in Access and Interactive Experience	1. Habit of instant and immediate content 2. Virtual experiences 3. Interaction between spectators and artists 4. Desire for relevant and meaningful content 5. Textual and visual experiences
	Traditional Barriers to Theatre Access	6. Time constraints 7. Spatial constraints 8. Cost constraints 9. Digital constraints
	Unique Advantages of the Live Experience Effectiveness of Digital Platforms	10. Live, in-the-moment experience 11. Interaction with the audience 12. In-depth analysis of topics 13. Creativity in staging 14. Online streaming 15. Live digital theatre 16. No time/spatial constraints 17. Global access
Appropriate and Engaging Content for Gen Z	Focus on Contemporary and Social Content	18. Social issues, identity, global crises 19. Gender issues, social justice 20. Environment, cultural diversity
	Innovation in Form and Content	21. Multimedia content 22. Innovative formats 23. New storytelling methods 24. Feedback collection
	Challenges of Content Adaptation	25. Mismatch with concerns 26. Lack of diversity 27. Lack of relevance to contemporary issues
	Active Audience Interaction and Participation	28. Creating interactive experiences 29. Utilizing new technology 30. Organizing collective events
Foresight and Sustainable Innovation in Digital Theatre	Integration of Emerging Technologies	31. Use of Augmented and Virtual Reality 32. Interactive apps and voting tools 33. Interactive experiences with spectators in the digital space
	Expanding Access and Economic Sustainability	34. Lower price and easier access 35. Discounts for the youth generation 36. Digital revenue models (online streaming, subscription)
	Integration of Arts and Creation of a Safe Space	37. Integration with music, dance, cinema 38. Safe space for expressing opinions and emotions
		39. Strengthening cultural and local identity 40. Consumer behavior analysis and preference identification

The Effectiveness of Digital Platforms is another component contributing to the transformation of Gen Z's media consumption portfolio, playing a vital role in the access, presentation, and promotion of theatre. Features such as online streaming, the emergence of live digital theatre, the elimination of time and spatial constraints, and global access to content are shaping a new experience in the theatrical realm. These capabilities can bridge existing gaps in access and consumption, thereby attracting a larger audience.

Appropriate and Engaging Content for Gen Z, particularly focusing on contemporary and social issues, is another core finding of this research. Given Gen Z's keen interest in social topics such as identity, global crises, gender issues, social justice, the environment, and cultural diversity, theatre must be capable of offering profound and multifaceted content in these areas to capture the audience's emotional and intellectual connection.

Innovation in Form and Content is highly important for encouraging Gen Z audiences. Utilizing multimedia content,

employing innovative formats and new storytelling methods, and enabling feedback collection allow this art form to align with new media conditions and the diverse tastes of the new generation, thereby increasing its attractiveness and appeal.

However, Challenges of Content Adaptation are significant obstacles in this path. The mismatch between theatrical content and Gen Z's actual concerns, lack of diversity in themes and formats, and insufficient connection to contemporary issues are factors preventing widespread engagement with theatre by this generation, necessitating a fundamental revision of content policy.

Active Audience Interaction and Participation play a major role in creating a distinct and valuable experience for Gen Z. Creating interactive experiences, intelligently utilizing new technology, and organizing audience-centric collective events enable theatre to transform from merely a performance art into a participatory and social arena that addresses the interpersonal and collective needs of the new generation.

Foresight and Sustainable Innovation in Digital Theatre is another concept that points to the integration of emerging technologies. Technologies such as Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR/VR), interactive applications, and digital voting tools can enhance the interactive experiences of theatre in the digital space, helping to expand Gen Z's presence and participation in this art form.

Expanding Access and Economic Sustainability are other important topics mentioned in the table. Lower prices, easier access, offering discounts for the youth generation, and digital revenue models (such as online streaming and subscription) are strategies that can reduce the economic barriers and financial constraints for audiences, thus aiding in the regeneration of interest and engagement with theatre among this generation.

Integration of Arts and Creation of Safe Space highlights the cultural and social dimensions of this process. Merging theatre with music, dance, and cinema, creating a safe and free space for the expression of opinions and emotions, strengthening cultural and local identity, and analyzing consumer behavior to identify audience preferences are all factors that can add to theatre's credibility and appeal among Gen Z, establishing a deeper connection between the audience and this art form.

Overall, these concepts indicate that positioning theatre in Gen Z's media consumption portfolio requires a profound understanding of the shifts that have occurred in content access, production, and consumption, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by new technologies. Only through innovation in content, form, and audience interaction can sustainable development be achieved and a meaningful connection with Gen Z be established, transforming this medium into an influential and popular cultural and educational medium. This comprehensiveness, merging technology with art and culture, will pave the way for a dynamic future for theatre in the digital world of Gen Z.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed a complex and multi-layered understanding of how Generation Z (Gen Z) interacts with theatre as a form of media and cultural expression in the digital era. The results demonstrated that Gen Z's media consumption behavior is dominated by habits of immediacy, interactivity, and preference for on-demand access, shaping their expectations of cultural experiences. The central finding, the evolution of Gen Z's media

consumption portfolio, indicates that this generation seeks experiences that combine convenience with meaning and engagement. Their cultural habits are guided by accessibility and personalization—values shaped by growing up amid the expansion of digital technology and social networks (Bhagat & Sharma, 2021; Panagiotou et al., 2022). Consequently, theatre, as a live and temporally bound art form, must compete with the limitless digital environment by redefining how it provides value to the audience. The study found that Gen Z values relevance, immediacy, and the ability to interact directly with artistic content. This shift in audience expectation requires theatre to reconfigure its communicative structure, using digital tools and participatory mechanisms to remain relevant in the hierarchy of modern media consumption.

The findings showed that traditional barriers to theatre attendance, such as time, cost, and location, continue to play a major role in discouraging Gen Z participation. These barriers reflect both structural limitations and a mismatch between theatre's traditional formats and the lifestyles of the younger generation. Unlike older audiences, Gen Z prefers flexible, mobile, and interactive engagement that allows them to consume content at their own pace and through accessible platforms. This supports Essien's argument that audience development strategies must prioritize accessibility and affordability to revitalize theatre's appeal (Essien, 2020). Furthermore, the study revealed that economic and temporal constraints reinforce Gen Z's inclination toward digital forms of cultural participation. However, these constraints are not merely logistical but symbolic, representing the perceived distance between theatre and contemporary youth culture (Karimvand & Ahmadi, 2013). Theatre's institutional structures often fail to communicate cultural inclusivity or digital fluency, making it appear outdated in comparison to social media or streaming entertainment.

At the same time, the study highlighted that theatre possesses unique strengths that can attract Gen Z audiences if presented in a modernized form. These strengths include its live, immersive, and emotionally rich nature; its ability to provide collective experiences in an increasingly fragmented digital world; and its capacity to address complex social and psychological themes through direct performance. These findings are consistent with Mannin's observation that young audiences seek two-way communication with cultural institutions and value interactivity and emotional resonance (Mannin, 2025). The study found that Gen Z perceives theatre as authentic and meaningful when it mirrors their

lived realities and encourages active participation. Live performance, unlike mediated content, satisfies the psychological needs for social connection, shared emotion, and belonging that are increasingly unmet in digital communication environments (Golden et al., 2024). Thus, while theatre may no longer dominate mass culture, its ability to create shared presence positions it as an antidote to the emotional alienation often associated with digital consumption.

Another significant finding concerned the effectiveness of digital platforms in enhancing theatre's accessibility and visibility. Participants emphasized the transformative role of streaming, online engagement, and hybrid performances in expanding theatre's audience base. This aligns with Carmona and Torres-Toukoudidis's study, which demonstrated that digital marketing and online distribution strategies during the pandemic successfully sustained audience engagement for artists (Carmona & Torres-Toukoudidis, 2021). The use of online streaming and social media has allowed theatre institutions to bypass traditional spatial and economic limitations, making content available to geographically dispersed audiences. In particular, the combination of physical and virtual participation—the so-called “hybrid theatre” model—emerged as a promising solution to reconnect Gen Z with live art. However, the results also indicated that the use of technology must go beyond mere transmission; it must be integrated into the creative process to create interactive, multisensory, and participatory experiences. This resonates with the Uses and Gratifications approach, which emphasizes that audiences actively seek media that satisfy both cognitive and affective needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 1983).

In connection with this, the study revealed that innovation in content and form is critical to attracting Gen Z. Participants argued that theatre content should focus on issues that reflect the concerns and aspirations of young audiences, such as identity, mental health, gender equality, social justice, environmental challenges, and digital life. These topics resonate with Gen Z's sense of social responsibility and their desire for cultural products that reflect diversity and inclusion (Panagiotou et al., 2022). The finding is supported by Prestianta and colleagues, who observed that Gen Z is motivated by meaningful content that combines creativity with social value (Prestianta et al., 2023). Therefore, updating theatrical narratives to include contemporary concerns can reestablish theatre as a relevant platform for discourse. This also aligns with Golden and collaborators' evidence that arts-based engagement can

positively influence youth mental health and social participation by providing outlets for expression and empathy (Golden et al., 2024). The findings reinforce that theatre can serve not only as an entertainment medium but also as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool for this generation.

Furthermore, the results identified active audience participation and interactivity as essential mechanisms for re-engaging Gen Z. Participants described the need for performances that break the fourth wall, encourage real-time feedback, and employ digital interfaces for audience input. This echoes Whiting and Williams's findings that social media participation is driven by gratifications of expression, interaction, and community (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Similarly, Papacharissi and Rubin emphasized that interactivity is a central gratification that drives online engagement (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). By integrating such interactive structures into performance design—through digital voting systems, immersive staging, or audience co-creation—theatre can adapt to the participatory expectations of Gen Z. The findings confirm that the most successful theatrical experiences for this generation are those that treat the audience not as passive spectators but as collaborators in the creation of meaning.

The study also identified foresight and technological integration as strategic imperatives for the future of theatre. Participants noted that technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) can enrich live performance, enabling mixed-reality experiences that combine the authenticity of theatre with the dynamism of digital interactivity. These tools can create immersive experiences where audience members interact with characters, environments, and storylines, thereby satisfying Gen Z's demand for experiential engagement. This perspective supports Ruggiero's reformulation of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which recognized that new media users value interactivity, asynchronicity, and demassification (Ruggiero, 2000). The findings further corroborate Palmgreen and Rayburn's argument that satisfaction arises from the degree to which media experiences meet users' multidimensional needs (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985). The integration of emerging technologies, therefore, represents not only an adaptation to digital trends but also a natural evolution of theatre as an interactive cultural form.

Beyond technology, participants emphasized the integration of arts and the creation of safe spaces as vital to theatre's renewed social function. This dimension highlights theatre's role as a collective and inclusive environment

where youth can express identity, debate social issues, and engage with diverse perspectives. This finding resonates with the work of Valenzuela and colleagues, who argued that interactive participation in digital and social networks builds trust, solidarity, and social capital (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Similarly, theatre can generate a form of embodied social capital by fostering real-world dialogue and empathy. In this respect, the findings are consistent with Mirfakhraie and Rajabiefard's assertion that theatre, despite being marginalized by mass media, retains unparalleled potential as a platform for social reflection and communication (Mirfakhraie & Rajabiefard, 2013). When framed within the dependency model of media influence, theatre's declining cultural role can be understood as a result of weakened interdependence between cultural institutions and the audience (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Restoring this dependency requires redefining theatre as an interactive, accessible, and socially embedded medium.

The results further suggest that expanding access and ensuring economic sustainability are fundamental to theatre's survival. High costs and limited availability have long constrained youth participation in live performances. Participants proposed strategies such as youth discounts, flexible pricing, and subscription-based digital models to lower barriers to entry. These proposals echo Essien's emphasis on building sustainable audience relationships through affordability and accessibility (Essien, 2020). By implementing inclusive economic policies and digital outreach, theatre institutions can align with Gen Z's expectations for equitable cultural participation. Additionally, integrating digital distribution channels can diversify theatre's revenue streams, contributing to long-term resilience.

Interpreting the findings through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory reinforces the understanding that Gen Z's engagement with theatre is driven by the same motivational dimensions that guide their use of digital media: information-seeking, identity formation, social integration, and entertainment. Katz and colleagues conceptualized media use as an active process in which individuals consciously select content that fulfills specific psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). The study's findings confirm that theatre can satisfy these needs if it evolves to reflect Gen Z's social realities and preferences. Rubin's framework of motivation further explains that the cognitive and affective gratifications associated with media use can be extended to theatre when it incorporates interactivity and personalization (Rubin,

1983). Moreover, as Papacharissi and Rubin observed, the sense of community and self-expression enabled by interactive platforms can also be achieved through participatory theatre (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). The results thus position theatre not as a relic of traditional culture but as a living, adaptive medium capable of fulfilling the same psychological functions that drive engagement with social media.

The findings also resonate with Golden and colleagues' research on the intersection of art, youth, and mental health, which emphasizes that engagement in creative activities supports emotional regulation, social awareness, and psychological well-being (Golden et al., 2024). This confirms that revitalizing theatre participation among Gen Z can yield not only cultural but also psychological and social benefits. By offering spaces for collective expression and critical dialogue, theatre contributes to building resilience and a sense of belonging among youth. Additionally, the emphasis on content innovation and technological integration aligns with Carmona and Torres-Toukoudidis's work, which highlighted the necessity of digital adaptation for artistic survival during periods of crisis (Carmona & Torres-Toukoudidis, 2021). In this regard, theatre can transform from an exclusive cultural product into an inclusive, interactive, and hybrid platform that meets both artistic and social needs.

In summary, the results of this study reinforce the argument that the future of theatre depends on its ability to respond to the transformations in media behavior, technological innovation, and social values among Generation Z. The findings suggest that successful theatre positioning strategies must address three primary areas: (1) technological integration and digital interactivity; (2) content innovation that reflects the diverse realities of youth; and (3) audience participation models that transform spectators into collaborators. Theatre's enduring strengths—its live authenticity, emotional depth, and capacity for collective experience—should be leveraged alongside digital affordances to form a hybrid model of artistic communication. This approach fulfills the conditions outlined in the Uses and Gratifications and Media Dependency theories, in which media survival depends on adaptability to evolving user needs and reciprocal audience relationships (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Katz, 1959).

The discussion ultimately highlights that theatre remains a vital cultural instrument with the potential to strengthen social cohesion and youth well-being, provided it is reconstructed in alignment with the expectations of a

generation that thrives on digital interactivity, social relevance, and emotional authenticity. The art of theatre, when revitalized through innovation and inclusivity, can reclaim its historical role as a bridge between art, society, and technology.

This study was conducted with a qualitative and interpretive design, which, while allowing for deep exploration of subjective meanings, limits the generalizability of its findings. The sample was drawn from a specific cultural context, focusing primarily on Iranian theatre professionals and experts, and thus the conclusions may not fully represent the diversity of Generation Z's media habits across different cultures or socio-economic environments. Furthermore, the reliance on interviews may have introduced bias through participants' personal experiences or professional affiliations. The study also did not empirically test audience reactions to the proposed digital and hybrid strategies, leaving the practical implementation outcomes to future investigation. Finally, the rapid evolution of digital technologies means that audience behaviors and preferences may continue to shift, potentially altering the applicability of current findings over time.

Future studies should employ mixed-methods or quantitative designs to measure audience perceptions, behavioral patterns, and psychological outcomes of theatre engagement among Generation Z. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could illuminate how local values and infrastructures influence the adoption of digital and participatory theatre models. Researchers may also explore the long-term effects of digital theatre on audience loyalty, empathy development, and civic engagement. Experimental studies testing AR/VR integration or interactive audience tools could offer empirical validation for the proposed strategies. Additionally, cross-generational research could reveal how theatre can act as an intergenerational bridge, connecting digital-native youth with older, traditional audiences in shared cultural spaces.

Cultural policymakers and theatre practitioners should prioritize digital transformation by integrating online streaming, social media promotion, and audience co-creation into standard theatrical practice. Theatre institutions must also design educational initiatives that familiarize youth with live performance while addressing their cultural and technological sensibilities. Strategic collaborations with technology developers, educators, and youth organizations can foster innovation in both form and content. Furthermore, adopting inclusive pricing models and participatory outreach

programs will expand access and audience diversity. Ultimately, theatre must evolve into a hybrid art form—technologically adaptive, socially inclusive, and psychologically engaging—to reclaim its role as a vital component of cultural life for the Generation Z audience.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were considered.

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