Paper Flyers in the Age of Social Media

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Introduction and Purpose

Sharing information through printed posters, handbills, flyers and programs is a long time and well accepted practice in the promotion of entertainment and cultural events (Barr, 2005). It is no surprise then, that in a city known for its printing industry (Parnell, 2007), the annual Edinburgh Festival would include the use of printed posters and flyers as a way for performers to promote their show to potential audience members.

The Edinburgh Festival is the largest arts festival in the world and takes place over 26 days in August. Thousands of performers present daily shows throughout the city. Critical to their financial success at the festival, and throughout their career, is attracting a paying audience (Bernstein, 2011). In addition, being known at the festival has the potential to result in future engagements, and other work after the festival is finished. Performers, either work on their own to promote their show, or work with production companies who assist them with the promotion and marketing of their shows (Canada Council for the Arts, 2008).

With the advent of social media, it might have been expected that performers would forgo the use of print media, and use only digital media. Social media has the advantage over print of lower cost for distribution of content (Briggs et al., 2002). However, while most performers have adopted social media (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) for promotion, they have not given up paper flyers suggesting that cost reduction is insufficient reason to replace paper flyers with social media. Some even use the paper flyers to communicate their social media.

Anecdotal evidence from those who have performed in previous years at the festival suggests that most performers view paper flyers as essential to filling the seats in their venues. Pimlott (2011) argues for taking print flyers seriously as an important part of communication even in the age of self-created and professionally-created digital content. While these performers are likely unaware of it, research studies link print materials to positive consumer attitudes toward the brand and intention to purchase (Hampel et al., 2012). Other research has explored the effects of multi-media use (such as the use of traditional and new media) by organizations (Wakolbinger et al., 2009). However, no research has been done to explore the factors that support and explain simultaneous use of media by individual performers (O'Reilly, 2011).

The continued desire for paper documents has largely been explained as a function of the consumers' chronological age (Bielshi, 2003). Some have suggested that the current generation of adults identified as Millennials (25-42 years of age) will see little use in its application to the success of their business life (Bolton et al., 2013; Bott et al., 2011). Sago (2010) found that social media such as Twitter, Facebook, texting, email and blogs influences how information is shared among groups of consumers. While social media is used by all age cohorts, he found that millennials are significant users.

Botti (2000) put forward a framework for understanding the importance of marketing in the creative arts. He suggested that marketing was more important in the success of 'popular' culture than high culture. Venkatesh and Meamber (2006) posit that marketing should impact all aspects of the creative process, if the creative product is to achieve commercial success.

The impact of paper on the recall and recognition of events has been explored in the Arts Marketing literature. Bernemen and Kasperian (2003) confirmed that the increasing the number of posters presented to the respondent was linked to an increase in recall and recognition of the event. Sundar et al. (1999) found that participants remembered significantly more advertising material in a print newspaper than those exposed to an online newspaper. Sierra et al. (2011) found that print ads embedded with SMS copy were perceived as up to date and appropriate for the consumer's lifestyle. The authors suggests that the combination of print and digital appears to result in positive attitudes.

Communication trust theory suggests that when an outcome is uncertain, as is the case for audience members when selecting among a myriad of performers, reliance on performers communication is key

(Giffin 1967). In thinking about the use of paper flyers in 2018, performers may believe that their potential audience trusts a paper flyer over social media.

Audience members are able to receive a paper without having to give up personal information. This is not true of email and social media. In 2018, Facebook shared users' profile data with a company called Cambridge Analytica who used it for targeted political ads. The end-result is that social media users are now aware that in using social media sites their profile or self-created content will be shared with companies and government (Martinez, 2018). Alternatively, performers may be behaving pragmatically in their continued use of paper flyers, believing based on their own and others' experience that paper flyers have been effective in getting audiences to come to their shows.

Previous research explores the factors in the adoption, and use of social media. It makes suggestions for their effective use in communicating with consumers (Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman, 2015). However extant research overlooks the way in technologies that pre-date digital media (such as print media) are perceived by contemporary users, and the potential consequences to users of replacing them entirely with the new innovation (such as social media). Moreover, little research has been done to explore the factors that support the simultaneous use of paper and digital media by individual performers/entrepreneurs as part of their business development (O'Reilly, 2011). Pimlott (2011) is one who argues for taking posters and printing flyers more seriously due to their unique ability to convey a message effectively.

The characteristics that make paper flyers resilient at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival are explored and identified as part of this exploratory study. This research explores the use of paper (an existing technology) by an age cohort that has grown up with the internet. The results of this study set aside 'habit' or 'resistance to change' as facile explanations for their resistance to giving up paper flyers. It uses the multi-dimensional conceptualization previously applied to paper bills and books (McNeish, 2010; McNeish and Hazra, 2014). Based on 1) qualitative interviews with performers and audience members; 2) photographs of people handing out, receiving and using paper flyers; 3) content analysis of print flyers samples collected over seven years; and 4) online users' comments about the Edinburgh software apps, a fuller picture of how performers perceive and use print flyers and social media (e.g. website, blogs, Facebook, twitter) emerges. This study also has implications for very small business owners/managers whose opinions of media effectiveness may be formed largely on what they believe motivates their personal purchase behaviour.

Preliminary analysis of the data suggest some of the reasons for the endurance of paper flyers within the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Functionally, they are used to promote a show or performer in order to build an audience. The person handing out the flyers appears to have an additive effect, but posters in strategic location, and piles of flyers appear to have some place in awareness building of a show. One surprising result was the almost magical belief of performers in the paper flyer's effectiveness. Social media did not garner any such reaction from performers. The use of paper flyers by these performers suggests that there is meaning and function that is not duplicated in digital media, and that paper flyers will continue to co-exist alongside digital media.

Source of Data

Using qualitative analysis, this study will explore the ways in which print flyers provide a bridge between performers and audience based on data collected over a seven-year period (2012 to 2018). Paper flyers and data were collected each year at Edinburgh Fringe Festival by the researcher from roughly the same location. The only major exception due to construction in 2017 which changed the access points to certain venues. Photographs were taken to record people's interaction with flyers and other printed documents (flyers, main program, and mini programs) and smart phones (social media and apps). Along with the observed interaction with the printed and digital information, the people handing out the flyers were observed and interviewed, as were the comedians, and audience members standing in lines for the show.

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