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# A hefty dose of lemons: the importance of rituals for audiences and performers at the online Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2020

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## ABSTRACT

When the pandemic began to affect the performance world, both festival artists and producers started to adopt creative approaches to moving their work online. In the study presented here, we focus on the 2020 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which offered a unique opportunity to understand how performers coped with the enforced switch to digital. Underpinning the Fringe Festival ethos is the attitude of experimentation, and we propose that there is much to learn from the response of performers and producers to this unprecedented situation. As one interviewee put it; 'we got given a hefty dose of lemons, and the point of all of this was, just go and make lemonade and see what happens' (Yvette). In this article, we focus on the challenge of managing the audience experience in the digital space, particularly before and after a performance. We note that familiar rituals play a key role for physical audiences and we position this idea within the Trajectories Framework, identifying coherent journeys through a user experience (Benford and Giannachi 2011. *Performing Mixed Reality*. The MIT Press. ISBN:978-0-262-01576-9), in order to frame it with digital audiences in mind. We provide recommendations regarding aspects for performers and producers to address as online and digital becomes an increasingly accepted part of the festival landscape.

## KEYWORDS

Online festivals; rituals;  
Trajectories Framework;  
Edinburgh Festival Fringe

## 1. Introduction

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe, (often simply known as 'the Fringe'), is a cultural and arts festival, taking place annually in August in Edinburgh since 1947 (Fringe Society 2021b). Edinburgh is the worldwide festival city (Prentice and Andersen 2003) and for many international performers the Fringe is a stage to showcase their work, and to establish commissions. For many, the Fringe acts as a springboard, and is an unrivalled opportunity to immerse and network within a global performance community. The festival period lasts for three weeks, during which the whole city transforms itself; in 2019 250,000 attendees were welcomed, with over 3,800 shows (Fringe Society 2019). For many, making a

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financial profit is not the main aim, and for some producers simply breaking even is a success. Instead, simply being there, being seen, and honing their craft in front of live audiences is crucial.

In April 2020, in their 73rd year, the five summer Edinburgh Festivals (Edinburgh Art Festival,<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh Festival Fringe,<sup>2</sup> Edinburgh International Book Festival,<sup>3</sup> Edinburgh International Festival<sup>4</sup> and the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo<sup>5</sup>) made a joint statement that the festivals would not go ahead as planned due to Covid19 pandemic uncertainty, and the social distancing imposed by the Government (Fringe Society 2020b). It was only later in July that the Fringe made an announcement that some online Fringe 2020 activities would happen.<sup>6</sup> The Fringe already offers online services, such as marketing, ticket booking, and a smartphone app, for getting information about the city and the shows, but 2020 was the first year that the Fringe had an extensive – although much reduced – online programme, and the Fringe Society unusually took steps to curate a series of ‘Fringe on Friday’ events.

The unique situation of an online Edinburgh Festival Fringe attracted our research interest. Our aims were twofold: first, to understand how audiences would respond to an online festival, in what ways they would attend and take part in the events, and what they would miss from a physical, in-person Fringe; and second, how performers and producers would adapt to work digitally, would interact with the audience using online platforms as venues, and what skills and support they would need. In both cases, we identified the role that various rituals of performance played in recreating a festival experience, and the challenges for translating or maintaining these in digital contexts. These included challenges and tactics in facilitating rituals online; managing the before and after of performance; the recognition of the journey participants are taken on by artists; how trajectories interweave; the importance of establishing a sense of presence; how different online infrastructure can be navigated, and the importance of social interactions in the online performance space.

Our findings suggest that performers and producers should consider attending to these long-established and well-understood audience rituals in the development of their fully or partly online performance experiences. For a highly creative and adaptable group of practitioners, the challenge of designing new forms of digital audience engagement can be seen as an opportunity to reach new audiences in new ways, and not only as a difficulty to be overcome. In addition, we argue that considering the trajectory and rituals surrounding online events will be of value in mitigating the distributed and fragmented nature of online content and experiences.

## 2. Literature review

We briefly discuss prior research on trajectories, rituals and festivals that frame our analysis of our participants experiences of online performances.

### 2.1. Trajectories

The Trajectories Framework (Benford and Giannachi 2011) blends knowledge from the fields of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and performance studies, and was devised as an approach to support the design and management of the audience experience

when engaging with mixed reality performances. The key aspect of these types of performance is their hybridity, blending multiple real and online spaces, layering different timeframes, employing diverse interfaces, and breaking down conventional performance roles (Benford and Giannachi 2011, 229). The framework was developed through work with performance companies such as Blast Theory,<sup>7</sup> who make interactive dramatic work that is often location based, drawing on performance, technology and games. These experiences are both extended in time and complex to manage in order to ensure that audiences experience full immersion in the narrative and the unfolding action often in a very participatory way.

In our study of the turn to the digital in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe context, the audience journeys are not as complex as this within individual events, but nevertheless we propose that some of the key elements of the Trajectories Framework are particularly relevant to draw upon as structuring devices for understanding the responses from our interviews and social media content. Our two datasets of interviews and social media data correspond to two of the elements of Temporal Trajectories and the potential gap between them (Velt, Benford, and Reeves 2017). These two elements are; Canonical Trajectories – as envisioned by the designers of experiences, and Participant Trajectories – as actually experienced by audiences. We note that in our discussion of rituals within festival performance experience and participation, we are extending the idea of the experience further into the before and after phase of the performance event itself. This is one of the factors that distinguishes the series nature of the festival experience from that of other individual events; the Temporal Trajectory can be conceptually extended to describe a longer period before and after each performance itself.

During 2020, performers went through a process of experimentation regarding what could be achieved practically with limited resources and very little preparation time. Looking forward, the learning gained during this, hopefully unusual, year may inform new work. In this way, conceptual models such as the Trajectories Framework are useful to understand technology-mediated audience experiences in a holistic way, especially when we consider the potential for audience engagement with performing arts as extending beyond watching a single show.

## 2.2. Rituals

The study of rituals and ritualised behaviours has a long history in social science, with sociologists such as Émile Durkheim noting the connection between ritual and dramatic spectacle (Schechner 2020). Ritual behaviours abound in everyday life, both reinforcing the day to day roles that people undertake and also supporting temporary transformations (Schechner 2020). Relating this to the concept of festivals or performance, people use rituals – expected and defined, phased, activities – to switch from daily roles such as ‘worker’ or ‘carer’, to the short term role of ‘audience member and participant in a theatrical experience’. It is through the enactment of many small rituals that we construct meaningful experiences and reinforce connections with our companions. In the theatre context this could include; buying tickets, arranging to meet friends, getting drinks at the bar, putting coats under the seat, speaking in hushed whispers as the lights dim and the curtain goes up, and so on. These ritualised activities are structured, sequential and specific to the time and place; in this case attending a theatre performance. The

audience member is familiar with the form of these rituals from experience, and is complying with implicitly, collectively agreed conventions. The audience is co-creating the theatrical experience along with the performers and the supporting staff. According to Schechner (2020, 122), 'ritual and play underlie all performances and performance-making processes': in the context of this study, it is important for us to understand how the sudden switch to digital disrupts or changes these. We focus, below, on the literature about festivals that relates particularly to the rituals embedded within them.

### 2.3. Festivals

There are many definitions for festivals meant as a *series of performances*, some of which go back to the nineteenth century (Cudny 2014). The definition provided by Falassi in 1987 has a cultural-anthropological perspective, and describes festivals as a sacred or profane moment of celebrations, where specific behaviours are observed. Festival spaces have also been defined as where the liminal and the carnivalesque take place. These two terms refer to experiences that sit outside of the everyday structures of life and where there is an abandonment, festivity, and changes in what is the norm (Pielichaty 2015). Indeed, the origins of festivals are to be seen in religious and spiritual rituals and gatherings of people in occasions which were characterised by celebrations, food, drink, excess and fancy dress (Pielichaty 2015). Getz (2018) underlines festivals as public celebrations where the community plays a primary role. In cultural festivals people come together, sharing a sense of belonging and social inclusion (Laing and Mair 2015).

This element of creating connections and networks is one of the prominent features of physical festivals (Derrett 2003). This can be found at the Fringe, where attendees and performers go every August, partly knowing and expecting already certain Fringe rituals. They know where to go to gather with people, and they share behaviours: they eat take-aways and drink warm beers, they run from venues to venues, buy last minute tickets, and they go to a show just because it was suggested by the performers themselves on the street. On the surface the event is highly distributed across the city and appears chaotic, but underlying this apparent confusion there is actually a highly structured set of rituals that support knowledge sharing and behavioural conventions. These rituals, continuously shaped through annual, collective practice, become important guiding principles that (mostly) work to keep events and activities organised (Jamieson 2004).

Moving a festival online challenges all of these notions and the rituals that are traditional characteristics of a festival: the sense and essence of liveness; the consumption of the experience of people watching it together; the meaning of attendance and the idea of the event itself (Mueser and Vlachos 2018). This is especially difficult for the Fringe, which is characterised by a multitude of varied live events.

Live events can also be described by their liminality. This term brings back the notion of ritual, something sacred, that does not happen every day. Rituals can encompass a wide range of activities related to the performance, both before and after the event itself. They can include reading reviews, watching previews online, asking for suggestions online or chatting with someone while queuing, deciding when and how to buy tickets, thinking of what to wear, what to drink before and after the show, clapping and so on. As Szokolczai (2009) argued, liminality requires structured but transitory situations in which participants

experience transformative events. A festival such the Fringe, which takes place not only in traditional theatres and concert halls, but also in venues that in everyday life are seen as ordinary spaces, such as universities buildings, cafés, parks and squares, provokes a blurrier distinction between liminal and ordinary (Mueser and Vlachos 2018). Some of these elements are difficult to achieve online, lacking the possibility of having genuine social interaction with the festival staff, asking for information once arrived at a venue, meeting with the performers and the other members of the audience afterwards, and the possibility of serendipitous encounters.

The very nature of a live performance makes the experience of attending such an event a social, situational, and experiential phenomenon (Walmsley 2011). This is seen not only in terms of the performance itself, but also by post-show behaviour: keeping tickets, brochures, or programmes. These actions can be connected to the ritualistic aspect of going to a performance and specifically the pre-theatre ritual (Turner 1982): getting tickets, finding the seat, hushing the conversation, choosing the right outfit. Something which is always the same and it repeats itself every time. Another aspect of the ritual emerges as the unanimous delight in applause, the interactive tribute to the cast (Walmsley 2011). The element of interaction is not to be underestimated; there is an immediate and tangible chemistry between the audience and the actors on stage. Finally, part of this ritual to go to a show can be seen in the after performance. The post-show discussions play an important role in the whole experience. This is a place where to share and discuss ideas. It is here that a connection with the actor and the creative teams is created (Pitts 2005).

### 3. Methodology and data collection

The unique situation of 2020 offered an opportunity for us to research how performers would adapt to an enforced reliance on digital technologies to connect with audiences. Our interest as interdisciplinary researchers is situated across disciplines of business studies, digital culture, and technology use. Via the Creative Informatics<sup>8</sup> research and development creative cluster, we already had a partnership with the Fringe Society,<sup>9</sup> who were very supportive, in particular helping us promote and recruit participants for our study.

Our data collection commenced on 27th of July and lasted until 13th of September 2020. The study used a mixed-methods, Action Research approach (Stringer 2014) comprising of 20 qualitative interviews with Fringe participants; and data collection of 15,332 public posts on Twitter and 217 news items, and their subsequent synthesis. We conducted one-hour interviews with performers and producers, via the online video-conferencing Zoom. Full transcripts of the interviews were produced. The thematic analysis was undertaken using Content Analysis, where emerging themes were identified using line by line coding that produces label variables from within the data itself, allowing varied qualitative data to be synthesised (Krippendorff 2018). Discussions with the research team, and involving our research partner, the Fringe Participant Services team, helped further understand emergent topics.

In addition, we collected Twitter data using specific 12 hashtags, along with press articles and commentary. The data was then shared between the researchers and analysed collectively. Researchers first took individual notes on the data they collected;

then they shared these with each other to validate the themes that were constructed from the data using Content Analysis (Krippendorff 2018). The social media tweets were grouped into these 7 dominant topics on Nvivo: what audiences missed from the Fringe; the roles of the online Fringe; developing new performance practices; making a show a social event; opportunities and advantages of a digital show; strategic uses of recorded content; and money and ticketing. Close reading of the data through these topics then informed our findings.

While in-depth interviews and social media posts are two very different data sources, comparing the impressions of performers with others, including audience members, allowed us to consider the research question holistically, drawing on constructed themes with impact on the festival experience. Our focus in this paper is primarily on the data from the performer/producer interviews, but nevertheless the short-form social media posts made by a wider audience provide important contextual information around the topics that were of interest. The goal was to capture a broad understanding of activity that occurred during the 2020 Fringe and how the participants and the performers engaged, participated and felt about the turn to the technology-mediated, online Fringe. This research was undertaken with ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh, in accordance with Creative Informatics research ethics framework.<sup>10</sup> We met frequently with the Participant Services team at Fringe Society who helped scope, promote and reflect on our findings from the perspective of a festival organiser.

### 3.1. Context: 2020 Edinburgh Festival Fringe

Despite the change of plans and the short time-frames involved, the Fringe Society curated a variety of offers throughout the month of August<sup>11</sup> (Fringe Society 2020a):

- *FringeMakers fundraising campaign*: the Fringe Society and Crowdfunder organised the FringeMakers for artists and venues to run crowdfunding campaigns, with no fees and promotion from the Fringe. Moreover, artists could sell tickets to the 'Fringe on Friday' livestream to raise additional funds.
- *Fringe on Friday live streamed shows*: Fringe on Friday was a 60-minute live-streamed variety show on a bespoke platform with four unique shows each Friday in August. The stream was ticketed, and could be viewed on demand until the following Monday, with tickets only available to purchase via the FringeMakers' crowdfunding campaign.
- *The Fringe Pick'n'Mix short video platform*: Based on the Fringe's 'Inspiration Machine', this video platform allowed artists to upload 60-second films 2020 Fringe artwork and merchandise: With no 2020 Fringe Programme, the Fringe Society produced unique merchandise, showcasing the planned illustrations for the 2020 through limited-edition merchandise.
- *Events for artists via virtual Fringe Central*: In 2020, the Fringe Society offered a virtual online Fringe Central Hub, with numerous digital events and talks, as well as opportunities to meet other artists and members of the Fringe Society team.
- *Fringe Marketplace, a platform for arts producers, commissioners and buyers*: This marketplace offered 'a dedicated showcase platform to connect arts industry delegates all



over the world with tour-ready artists', in an effort to create and develop new opportunities for struggling artists.

- *Penguin Random House audiobook, Edinburgh Unlocked*: This collaboration with Penguin Random House released *Edinburgh Unlocked*<sup>12</sup> a multi-genre comedy festival in audiobook festival, with a host of well-known comedians.
- *Emerging stand-up showcase from Comedy Central*: Partnering with Comedy Central<sup>13</sup> this programme spotlighted 10 up and coming comedians through a series of seven-minute stand-up episodes across their social media channels, and in a final 22-minute show aired on Comedy Central UK.
- *Working with communities across Edinburgh*: In partnership with Edinburgh Art Festival the Fringe sent out 456 art packs to more than a dozen Fringe Days Out community partners; held a series of digital Fringe in Communities workshops in West Edinburgh where young people worked with a Fringe artist to create a digital cabaret extravaganza; and worked with partners, North Edinburgh Arts, to pilot a socially distanced performance

Other producers' companies also organised online shows for the Fringe Festival: She-dinburgh,<sup>14</sup> The Space, Stand on Demand,<sup>15</sup> Free Festival Fringe,<sup>16</sup> Gilded Balloon,<sup>17</sup> ZooTV,<sup>18</sup> Fringe of Colour<sup>19</sup> to mention only some. Moreover, some performers decided to put on shows individually, either on their own website, or using social media channels such as Facebook, and YouTube. Multiple platforms were used for live streams, including: Zoom,<sup>20</sup> Vimeo,<sup>21</sup> FB,<sup>22</sup> YouTube,<sup>23</sup> Podcast, Radio, Twitch,<sup>24</sup> Dice.<sup>25</sup> There was a mixture of recorded and live stream events, daily shows, courses, marathons and charity events. These had different payment options, including: free, paid-ticketed or donations. In total, the online Edinburgh Fringe Festival had 300 performances listed online and the live stream Fringe on Friday at £9 a ticket, was booked by 4,500 people and made £360,000 from crowdfunding for artists and venues (Fringe Society 2021a).

### 3.2. Data collection: social media and public news

We wished to understand the point of view of the audience as well as of the performer, therefore two different types of data were collected via a mixed-methods approach. We analysed the use of 12 hashtags from the last week of July 2020 to the second week of September 2020. The hashtags chosen included the official hashtags used by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Twitter account, and additional keywords, such as 'Edi', 'Fringe', '2020' (see Table 1). In total 15,332 posts were analysed.

Data collection was done via TAGS v6.1.9.1<sup>26</sup> with the goal of checking the locations from which users were tweeting as well as to have a broad base for the qualitative analysis of Twitter Post contents. In addition, various Google Alerts<sup>27</sup> were set up to capture news reports based on the following keywords: Edinburgh Festival City; Edinburgh Fringe 2020; Edinburgh International Festival; Edinburgh Virtual Fringe Festival; Future Fringe; Make your Fringe; Online Fringe Festival; Edinburgh Art Festival; Edinburgh Book Festival.

This resulted in a collection of 217 articles from the following press: All Edinburgh Theatre<sup>28</sup>; BBC News<sup>29</sup>; Bella Caledonia<sup>30</sup>; Beyond the Joke<sup>31</sup>; Broadway World<sup>32</sup>; Chortle<sup>33</sup>; Easy Voyage<sup>34</sup>; Edinburgh Evening News<sup>35</sup>; Edinburgh Live<sup>36</sup>; Evening Standard.<sup>37</sup>; Forbes<sup>38</sup>; i news<sup>39</sup>; ITV News<sup>40</sup>; Morning Updates<sup>41</sup>; New York Theatre<sup>42</sup>; STV



**Table 1.** Hashtags searched and number of tweet gathered.

#makeyourfringe	623 tweets
#fringepicknmix	169 tweets
#fringeonfriday	563 tweets
#fringemakers	3018 tweets
#fortheLoveofAJBellfringe	31 tweets
#EdinburghFringe	548 tweets
#EdFests	299 tweets
#edfringe	9291 tweets
#Edfringe20	29 tweets
#edfringe2020	601 tweets
#virtualfringe	148 tweets

News<sup>43</sup>; TechTheLead<sup>44</sup>; The Courier<sup>45</sup>; The Edinburgh Reporter<sup>46</sup>; The Focus<sup>47</sup>; The Guardian<sup>48</sup>; The Impact Magazine<sup>49</sup>; The Independent<sup>50</sup>; The Journal.ie<sup>51</sup>; The List<sup>52</sup>; The National<sup>53</sup>; The New York Times<sup>54</sup>; The Press and Journals<sup>55</sup>; The Scotsman<sup>56</sup>; The Skinny<sup>57</sup>; The Spectator<sup>58</sup>; The Stage<sup>59</sup>; The Star<sup>60</sup>; The Upcoming<sup>61</sup>; Time Out<sup>62</sup>; The Times<sup>63</sup> and The Guardian comments section.

### 3.3. Performers and participant interviews<sup>64</sup>

We sought to understand the experiences and practices of those who had planned Fringe shows for 2020 that were subsequently cancelled, aiming to speak to Fringe participants with a range of experience and roles, involved in shows of various genres. We recruited participants online through several networks. Primarily, we advertised through the Virtual Fringe Central Hub,<sup>65</sup> a space for artists to attend online talks and events provided by the Fringe. We also invited participation through university mailing lists and social media posts, including an active Fringe performer Facebook group. Table 2 details our participants pseudonymously.

All interviews took place over video-conferencing, throughout August & September 2020, and were led by one of the authors. Participants provided informed consent for recording and transcription of the interview. Interviews lasted between 50 and 75 min and consisted of two parts. Firstly, they were asked about their performance practice, the kind of work they did, their past experiences with Fringe and if they had planned to perform or to be involved in the 2020 Fringe. Questions about how they engaged with the online Fringe were also asked and what challenges they had faced in moving their performances online. Secondly, ideas about the future online landscape and practice of the Fringe were discussed, with various 'questionable concepts' (Vines et al. 2012) offered as a conversation starter.

## 4. Findings and discussion

One specific aspect stood out during the data analysis: the importance of familiar, small ritualised behaviours and how these were used instinctively by people in constructing their own performance experiences. This activity occurred on both sides, by the performers and the audience. A total of 70 members of the audience underlined on Twitter how they missed those specific moments that characterise the participation in a festival, for example, the rituals of queueing before an event, running from one venue to the other one, or trying to get the last ticket before the event was sold out, and then experiencing the particular physical and sensory discomforts of temporary venues. Here we discuss

**Table 2.** Participants (pseudonymous) taking part in the interviews.

Participant	Genre	Primary role	First fringe performance
Martha	Theatre	Writer	2020
Kelly	Theatre	Director	2009
Pam	Children's Music / Clowning	Producer	1985
Jake	Improv Comedy	Performer	2018
Cerys	Performance Art	Producer	1986
Alice	Theatre	Performer	2014
Carlos	Theatre	Writer / Producer	2020
Arthur	Theatre	Director / Producer	2018
Anton	Comedy	Performer / Producer	2012
Kat	Theatre	Producer / Marketer	2007
Paul	Comedy Theater	Writer/Performer/Producer	2010
Aiden	Theatre	Writer	2010
Abigail	Theatre	Writer / Production Manager	2011
Caitlin	Theatre and Improv	Performer	1989
Simone	Theatre	Producer	2014
Kyle	Comedy	Writer, performer, producer	2001
Emma	Theatre	Performer, Writer, Director, Stage Manager.	2011
Holly	Theatre	Performer, Writer, Production Assistant	2015
Catherine	Theatre	Producer & Creative Lead	2004
Yvette	Theatre and Dance	Producer	2016

how these types of behaviours translate into the digital sphere, and consider some of the tactics employed by performers to recreate these experience journey touchpoints.

#### **4.1. Moving rituals online: challenges and tactics**

There are recurrent behaviours at the Fringe, and similar festivals, that audience and performers expect to experience especially given the temporal and geographical nature of the city-based festival. In a conventional year, formal organisational structures as well as informal, social structures support the navigation of these time-and-place issues. Our data showed that established rituals and experiences, such as running from one show to the other to keep to time, or seeing as many shows as possible, were difficult to put in place online, and the audience and the performers realised how much they missed them at the 2020 online Fringe. It could be said that the audience members and the performers became more aware, in August 2020, of how important those Fringe rituals are, and how they give so much meaningful value to their festival experience. Moreover, the performers had to consider how to make up for those missing rituals themselves, being responsible not only for presenting their own performance, but also for explaining how the digital platform worked, how to get tickets or give donations, and creating engagement with an audience that was joining from around the world, in different time zones and with limited possible interaction with one another. Lacking the usual physical infrastructure of the city, the venues and the supporting staff, has made this difficult for some to achieve online, and it presented several challenges, caused by limited time and lack of IT skills.

#### **4.2. Managing the before and after: the full experience journey**

The Twitter posts and the interviews underline the importance of Fringe rituals that have always characterised the physical festival. In particular, the before phase of the performance, how the attendees prepare, get excited and in the Fringe mood for the show, but

also how the festival staff and artists interact with the attendees creating the atmosphere and welcoming the participants to the show that is about to start. The after show also plays an important role in the ritual of a live festival. The feelings that the attendees have once the show is over will be one of the stronger memories of how much they liked the performance. For performers, hanging out at the bar, meeting with other performers, talking to the audience, getting advice on other events, and communicating that you are an active part of the festival by being there are all incredibly strong elements of the ritual of the festival.

We consider the Trajectories Framework (Benford and Giannachi 2011) as an especially useful device for structuring the findings emerging from our data, and offer some recommendations for future online festival performances. The framework draws on the metaphor of an audience journey through an experience, and we can see from our data that in the festival context this experience journey extends into the phases before and after the performance itself, including periods of both preparation and reflection.

“I would be out practically every night at fringe shows, instead I’m watching a new weekly Fringe on Friday. Love the intro with street sounds & even Waverly station announcements which are normal for my ear! #fringeonfriday” (Twitter user, August 2020)

#### 4.2.1. *Artists take participants into a journey*

Attending a festival does not only mean seeing a show. There is much more than that. At a festival like the Fringe, the shows take place in different locations around the city, on the streets and in buildings that are not the traditional theatre venues. Rituals such as searching for very hidden venues, running from one venue to the other one, making sure to arrive on time or catching the last tickets are elements that were definitely missed by the audience taking part in the online Fringe. The audience experiences a festival journey which is supported by other members, with whom they share their excitement, the laughter and the memories. The event staff are also important accompaniments to the audience. They advise on shows, give directions, help find seats, etc. Finally, the performers are an active part on this journey, setting the atmosphere, understanding audience mood, and directing shows, especially comedy, engaging with the attendees. Those rituals were difficult to achieve online. On one side, the audience realised how much they missed them:

“Already a bit emotional during the first #fringeonfriday. You can’t beat a mad day of running around venues, beating your personal ‘shows in a day’ record (8 for the record)” (Twitter user, August 2020)

“The running in the rain, in between shows, to make sure you arrive on time to the next great piece of theatre; Getting a good seat and as you catch your breathe, the lights start going down, and you whisper ‘worth it’. @edfringe #FringeonFriday #ForTheLoveOfAJBellFringe @AJBell” (Twitter user, August 2020)

Performers rapidly became aware of how challenging it was to create both a successful, engaging performance, but also to take care of the whole experience from start (ticketing, welcoming, access to platform) to the end (exiting the platform, creating the social after show drinks). In a conventional venue many of these tasks are undertaken by dedicated staff; ticket collectors, bar staff and so on. In the switch to

online, performers often had to make decisions about how to manage the digital equivalents of these before and after experiences themselves, or create new technical support roles. Taking the participants on a journey was even more difficult, because audiences came from different parts of the world, in different time zones, injecting aspects of temporality:

“... the thing that I want to watch before I go to bed is not the same thing I want to watch when I wake up in the morning. [...] If I’m having dinner, I might have a glass of wine, but I don’t want to be doing that at 08:00 in the morning, so probably don’t want to watch someone’s live stand up special at 08:30. So, I don’t know, I think there is still for some reason the rules about when people want to watch things.” (Anton)

Taking participants along on a journey was difficult to achieve online. The experience of finding a performance of interest, registering to attend, setting up a screen and getting access to view the show were all less structured and well understood than what is typically facilitated in person, by festival or production staff. The trajectory is hence fragmented, and often difficult for artists to control or anticipate, as their audience joins remotely, in different time zones, on different devices, and so on. The lack of time, IT/technical skills and the urgent need for the artists to have a show at the online Fringe did not let them consider all the other aspects needed to create the journey for the attendees. Participants noticed that something was missing, and performers expressed the difficulties they encountered to properly engage with the audience and to be responsible for tasks usually carried out by other members of festival staff. To address this, some of our interviewees did explore ways to support audiences to take time before the event to recreate some of the atmosphere of attending a show in person:

“I think we’d be encouraging people to grab a drink, encouraging people to dim the lights. I think this kind of thing is exactly what we’d be interested in doing. One of the things I know (...) has been doing is encouraging people to dress up themed around the show. They’ll have a cocktail each week that’s yellow stockings cocktail for £12 or something. So they’ve been saying to people grab a drink, dress up, get involved.” (Emma)

#### *4.2.2. Interweaving trajectories*

Participants interweave their own trajectories through a collective experience, meaning that they share and cross paths constantly. They can be aware of this, by stopping, talking and being physically in the same room. Online, this serendipitous social connection breaks down as participants may be attending the same show as other people and not know about their presence. Shared experiences are difficult when the performance is online. It can be especially awkward when many different platforms are used and it seems that there are only three people viewing from YouTube, to then find out that there are many others watching from other platforms, such as Facebook or Twitch. Many attendees are not yet used to online performance platforms as a place that they can share with others without being physically together. Many tweets were showing how they are there, enjoying a specific show and asking who else was also watching, in an attempt to share paths and to recreate their familiar festival rituals at home.

“Can’t be at the fringe this year so I’ve made myself a gin and tonic, and I’m watching @suziruffell and amazing card tricks #FringeOnFriday” (Twitter User, August 2020)

"We're sitting on a mini-sofa and an office chair in my uncle's spare room, watching @edfringe's final #FringeOnFriday on a tiny iPad screen as a shower loudly runs in the adjacent room and it's STILL not the worst venue we've enjoyed a show from! Oh, how I miss the Fringe "(Twitter User, August 2020)

It was also difficult for the performers using digital platforms they had never used before. It was challenging to adapt their performances online, but many also took on additional roles in helping the audience feel as if they were all in one online space, regardless of where they were geographically. Moreover, attendees could come and go whenever they like, or even switch off, making it even more challenging for artists to manage the collective audience experience.

Fringe participants reflected on successes, and their implications, experienced in the run up to the Fringe itself:

"We watched (...), and it was brilliant. (...). And, yes, it was great, and I did ... you know, I did create a bit of a ritual around it, and I did sit and watch it, but, I think, that was perhaps aided by the fact that several of my friends had seen it live, so I then could talk ... that's another thing I really miss about individually watching things, and we've, actually, started watching things together, both films and theatre, because it then allows you to talk about them afterwards, which is another great thing about theatre going in groups." (Kelly)

There were some really good attempts at playing with online and offline/physical and combining different activities. Some performers successfully introduced physical and sensory aspects to an online performance that helped elevate watching a digital stream into a special occasion:

"And I think one of the best examples I've heard about other theatre companies' response to COVID has been (...) and they have sent out boxes with things you smell, things you put on, to basically ... they've made the show completely digital. And they have a member of front of house staff that's there as the screen happens to guide you through and tell you what to do if you need it and you can pause the show at any point. But that's one of the best examples I've seen 'cause they've literally ... they've designed ... they've redesigned the show to be digital, but had that live element by sending people these, like, beautiful little shoeboxes with all these things for them to do that they unwrap and that ... so it feels like an occasion." (Kat)

Attendees need to know who else is watching the shows, or at least gain a sense of the presence of others, they enjoy sharing this experience with other members of the audience. Performers, on the other hand, need to adjust their show to make the audience feel in one space and as a community. Interweaving trajectories becomes more difficult online when multiple platforms are used, when these do not give the opportunity to know who else is online, and when the show only takes place online without any physical/tangible elements included.

#### *4.2.3. Establishing a sense of presence*

The rituals of festivals are also characterised by how people immerse themselves into the festival environment with multiple attractions, including shows, food and beverages stalls, street performances and crowds of festival goers all around. The Fringe takes place in many areas of the city of Edinburgh. It is not linked to a single venue, but to multiple: from theatres and churches to pubs and community centres. The shows also flood outdoor areas such as gardens, and streets, with improvisation throughout the city:

"We are missing seeing the weird and wonderful, and taking a chance on a friendly actor plugging their show in the street" (Twitter user, August 2020)

"Remember the days when you could meet en masse, possibly outside

@Gildedballoon, have a drink and someone towers over you and tries to tempt you to see their circus/dance/solo/silent disco show? #edfringe #edfringe2020 #makeyourfringe #throwback" (Twitter user, August 2020)

"Missing #EdFringe so gonna pretend I'm in Pleasance Courtyard by rushing from somewhere else, marvelling at the number of people admitted in 5 mins before FOH open & start, and psyching my socially-anxious self into cheering the best suggestions. Alone in flat. It'll be great!" (Twitter User, August 2020)

Performers expressed in interviews that building a sense of presence and place is more difficult online. They cannot connect with the audience or other performers after their shows, to see what their response was. It is even more difficult for emergent artists to recreate this connection because nobody knows them and they cannot simply stop people on the street and convince them to attend. The laughter, the clapping, the taking pictures with the artists, the pub together afterwards were all absent from an online Fringe:

"It's going to be a little different in this platform because most people laughing are alone, and in a theatre, laughter is contagious so you can keep going. So what we kind of learned is, okay, let's say insert joke that kills every time, you have to fill that space with something, so have a sip, or clean your lens, whatever it is you find these little tricks to keep it engaging and they can feel like it's alive and in the moment." (Paul)

"I think you have to connect with the audience in some way, whether that's through a screen or whether that's live, and I think the ones that haven't worked so well have not made that connection. They've been doing a performance almost to themselves, but they haven't made the connection with the audience on the other side of that screen. Now the difficulty is you don't know what the audience on the other side of that screen are doing, because when you see them sitting, you see them in a theatre, you see them fidgeting, you see them going into their bags for their tissues or getting their sweeties out, you know whether or not you've got them with you." (Abigail)

Establishing a presence is challenging to achieve online. Connecting with the audience, understanding their reactions and answering to them, and recreating the festival spirit of the Fringe is not easy when performers and participants are at home alone, watching the show from a screen.

#### *4.2.4. Transition across seams in the infrastructure*

The transition across seams in the infrastructures can be also problematic. When the audience is in Edinburgh they expect: bad weather as part of the experience; technical issues that make a performance even more entertaining; and an atmosphere that compensates, providing, another place to go, another show, or just a bar to stop by while the rain stops. This is very different when it is online. If the audience has issues in getting tickets, they do not have a physical person to contact. If the internet connection does not work, they might miss parts of the performance, causing frustration:

"Please @AJBell #Fringeonfriday pre-record your compères because it's not the fault of artists that not everyone has a fast internet connection" (Twitter user, August 2020).

"Lol - I love the idea of Fringe On Friday, but oh man you need to sort out the sound quality - next week I'm expecting no sound at all! #FringeOnFriday " (Twitter user, August 2020)

For the performers it is even more challenging. They need to learn how to best navigate platforms, and provide an excellent internet connection. They might even need to be able to support the audience from a technical perspective. It can be frustrating for them as well, to see their shows undermined because of lack of coverage or internet issues:

"If I'm a pioneer in the world of a live storytelling show that feels like theatre, even though it's in my living room, it has to be good, because how else can it survive? You know, people will be like, oh, yeah, I tried some of those online shows and they don't work, they're not good; technically they're not good, the sound's not good, the lighting's not good, or people are interrupting, you get Zoom bombed." (Paul)

Transition across seams in the infrastructure becomes difficult when both artists and audience need to rely on good internet connection, possibly high quality devices to both record the show and watch it, and need to be able to use the online platforms. Tweets and interviews show how questions arise on who is responsible for these transitions and who should be blamed when they fail and make the experience poor.

#### 4.2.5. *Social interactions*

Social interactions lie at the heart of Fringe live performance. Being there together, sharing the same place and time, and making sure that people know that you are there attending that specific performance are important aspects:

"Oh man! We miss Edinburgh! We miss fringe madness! We miss doing shows then drinking afterwards! We miss getting quote badges made & seeing who picks what!" (Twitter user, August 2020)

Social interactions are as important for performers as they are for the audience. With an online Fringe, the task of recreating a social atmosphere is the performer's responsibility. The audience usually only has access to limited interactions: video and audio are often off, and sometimes the only way to communicate is through a text chat. How performers handle this may also influence how the audience feels after the show:

"I think that, like, the sort of concept of I get with a gaming platform is for streaming or whatever, a game effectively could be a really, really interesting way of getting over a lot of these problems I think about community and socialness [...]. You know, the biggest problem is how do you actually create it to feel like it's a bit more of an organic social interaction. How do you approach somebody and have a chat to somebody?" (Simone)

You know, something I found, that I think the Fringe Society is doing a pretty good job of, with the other fringes that I've done, [...] they created a sense of community, which is at its heart that is what Fringe is, it's a bunch of weirdos all in the same place at the same time, and feeling invincible, feeling like they belong, feeling like they've found their tribe. (Paul)

Some performers tried to recreate online that feeling of being there in the same place, sharing the same experience, inviting the audience to stay after the show for some drinks. Understanding that the audience is not there just for the show, but for the whole experience is an important step when hosting an online Fringe event:



“... after we’ve been doing our Zoom shows, I offer to stick around in the bar afterwards basically. I go away for a little gap, five-minute gap, basically to the fridge to get a drink. And then I come back as me instead of [...]. And usually 20–30 people have been staying behind and we all have a drink and a chat.” (Kyle)

Social interactions are the core of every festival. Shows, events and performances are just part of the reasons why people attend festivals. Meeting with other like-minded festival goers, drinking with them and with the artists, and socialising are elements at the heart of the Fringe and, apart from a few attempts by some artists, they were very difficult to replicate online.

#### 4.2.6. Recommendations: the role of ritual

In this section, we synthesise the results of our thematic analysis into a set of recommendations aimed at supporting performers and producers in developing online events within a festival context. Although we hope that 2020 was an exceptional year, it seems possible that online and hybrid performance formats will continue to exist to some degree due to benefits such as the widening of geographical access and issues of inclusion. As authors, we look forward to seeing how this difficult period has inspired festival creatives to build on the learnings gained during this time.

We encourage readers to also relate the following recommendations to the four facets of audience experience as described by Benford et al. (2009, 712): ‘journeys may pass through different places, times, roles and interfaces ... they maintain an overall sense of coherence; of being part of a connected whole.’ While each participant follows their own trajectory, it can be shaped and steered. These four factors (space, time, role, interface) are very briefly summarised here, in the context of our study:

*Space:* This is the spatial ‘stage’ upon which the experience takes place. In a festival setting this stage takes on an extended geographical aspect as the audience experience trajectory moves between the physical venue and the surrounding city streets. In the online situation the space becomes more hybrid and interwoven between multiple distributed physical and virtual spaces.

*Time:* This is the temporal structure of the experience which extends both before and after the event itself. It may begin as early as planning to attend festival events, weeks before they take place. Closer to the scheduled event the audience becomes more immersed in the time structure of the performance itself, including the preparation for attending and the reflection upon the event afterwards. The potential for audiences to join from multiple timezones presents clear challenges for a performer to manage – especially for shows which are temporally located (e.g. a ‘late night comedy show’).

*Roles:* Participating in or presenting performances involves many types of role that define how individuals engage, eg, audience, spectator, actor, orchestrator. Individuals may switch roles for example, as a welcoming host as audiences enter a digital space, to actor once the performance is underway.

*Interfaces:* In both online and physical events experiences increasingly involve collections of digital platforms and their interfaces. These may be integral to the delivery of the event, such as online event platforms like Zoom or Twitch, or they may play supporting roles for activities including ticket purchasing or social media reviewing.

Acknowledging these factors, and recognising how they interplay via performance rituals, can provide a framework for others to conceptualise the change wrought by online experiences and in particular address their fragmentary nature.

#### *4.2.7. Recommendations: managing the audience trajectories*

In moving to an online format, performers and producers need to consider ways to recreate or establish new 'before' and 'after' rituals of attending a performance. Audience engagement with performance extends before and after the allotted time for the event, and production teams should consider creative ways to address this. Tactics could include communication of ways to recreate and perform familiar Fringe show rituals at home, e.g. dressing up, organising drinks and seating arrangements. Enough time should be allocated to these activities and guidance given so that the audience is ready and prepared for when the show begins. For example, concerning the entrance and exit of audiences in digital spaces, in physical venues, these actions are managed by the venue staff and/or volunteers. Online, however, it requires performers to learn how audiences can connect and disconnect to a show in such a way that does not result in awkward or abrupt experiences for both sides. If this welcoming phase is integrated within the online phase of the show, enough time and resources should be allocated within the programmed online slot. Alternatively, or additionally, the phase may be longer and begin before the online event if there is sufficient time to support audience members in preparations such as dressing up or engaging in themed activities.

#### *4.2.8. Recommendations: interactivity and social presence*

A major reason for attending festival events is for the audience to feel social connection, partaking in a collective experience of participation. In our study, the needs that both the performers and the audience expressed in the interviews and on social media underline that providing a certain level of interactivity within social interactions represents one of the most important festival rituals. This interactivity can be seen at different phases within an event experience, considering the whole audience event journey from buying the ticket through to sharing reviews after the event. Consideration could be given to the ability to create a sense of online participation for the audience, of being present, being there and not just a passive observer. The audience may need a way to interact with other members of the audience as well as to respond, engage and connect with the performers. This could be achieved by having smaller audiences or simply using the text chat to allow the audience participate in the moment. Such interactions are already common-place on live-streaming platforms such as Twitch where 'the chat' can become a very live, co-director of the action (Taylor 2018; Ford et al. 2017). Alternatively, subtle anonymous visual signals of audience presence and feedback may be integrated into interfaces. Developing new digital formats could bring the audiences and the artists closer together, such as having a virtual drink or social interaction after the show. Artists should engage with the audience with the goal of making them feel the moment, the being there together. Platforms that allow a closer connection between artists and audience should therefore be preferred.

#### **4.2.9. Recommendations: tangibility and physicality**

Performers should consider ways to achieve a good balance between online and physical or tangible content, giving the possibility to the audience to share something that is more than the online show. For many, the collection of keepsake artifacts such as tickets and wristbands is an important memory ritual of festival attendance. Consider ways to fill this gap when the event is wholly digitally mediated.

#### **4.2.10. Recommendations: managing seams**

In festival and Fringe contexts seamless perfection is rarely achieved or even expected. A critical element of the excitement of attending a live event is the frisson of knowing that this is a one-off event performed in real-time (and that things can also go wrong!). Part of the performer's skill of stage craft is to manage unexpected or unplanned occurrences, and this is indeed an integral part of formats such as comedy or improvisation. In the shift to online it is less clear who is in control in the moment, and who can fix things when something does not go as planned. Producers should consider backup plans and alternative channels to keep audiences connected and engaged in the event of technical breakdowns. Festivals and venue organisers also need to support performers in moderating and managing audiences, but also to help them navigate the platforms by providing clear and precise information on types of performances (recorded, live, online, in-person etc), where to find and access these, both in the scheduled time-frame of the event, and afterwards, raising further questions of ongoing digital preservation and access as performance becomes a form of digital content (Elsden et al. 2021).

### **5. Limitations of the study**

While the data that was collected was comprehensive, there were some limitations that should be noted. One of the first limitations of this project is related to the data collected on Twitter. Some hashtags appear to be widely used, but in the end, the content was not as rich as it first seemed, with a group of users tweeting and retweeting the same words in a very short period of time. This would make the hashtags appear prolific, but for the purpose of this research, it offers little (Stewart 2016). Secondly, Twitter provides only a limited picture of an audiences' views. Twitter users should not be seen either as a representation of the whole Fringe audience or as representatives of Internet users. The dataset gathered through the Twitter API is limited and researching other social media (e.g. for example Facebook groups) or having follow-up interviews with members of the audience would have provided a more complete insight. There are also issues with reliability of users' accounts (Buchel and Pennington 2016; Stewart 2016), and it is difficult to know if all searches were returned via Twitter's API (Didier 2021).

Lastly, for the reasons mentioned above, another limitation is the difference in format between the two data sets. The data concerning producers and performers gathered with the methodically conducted interviews offer a more comprehensive overview, which is not achievable with the data set collected with the Twitter posts. However, given that the social media postings do give us an insight into the thoughts of a distributed audience, it is necessary to balance the affordances these two different types of data offer in a study of this nature. In addition, we anticipate that further research on these topics could benefit from directly engaging audience members in more in-depth,

thorough qualitative studies of their experiences of engaging in online festivals and performance.

## 6. Conclusions and future work

In approaching this study, we had two main aims. Firstly, we wanted to understand how audiences would respond to an online festival, in what ways they would attend and take part in the events, and what they would miss from a physical Fringe. Secondly, we were interested in how performers and producers would adapt to working digitally, would interact with the audience using online platforms as venues, and what skills and support they would need. We found the Trajectories Framework (Benford and Giannachi 2011) to be useful to understand and analyse our Twitter data and the interviews. We could note how familiar Fringe rituals have a key role for audiences and performers. In particular, by using the metaphor of a journey for our data, it can be seen how this audience journey is not limited to the performance itself, but extends into the phases before and after the show, in the feeling of sociality and being present at the performance and in the transitions across the infrastructures.

This study is essentially a snapshot of a particular time and place. In August 2020, the UK had a lot of restrictions and rules in place due to the pandemic of Covid19. This implied that very limited physical interactions among artists were possible, venues were closed and international performers and attendees did not fly to Edinburgh. They were unusual and unprecedented times for the Fringe. On one side, they gave a very valuable data collection with the impressions, the reactions, thoughts and behaviours of artists, producers, attendees who found themselves for the first time in such a situation. On the other side, however, it is important to remember that the restrictions provoked by the pandemic were temporary and already, at the time of writing in summer 2021 some outdoor events for the summer festivals are returning (Edinburgh Festival City 2021). It is essential that researchers continue to work with partners in the performing arts to chart how digital offerings develop and evolve as audiences are able to return to in-person events to understand how these issues translate across the new online/hybrid festival offerings, or if the pre-pandemic Edinburgh Fringe culture fully returns, as well as documenting the rapidly changing nature of live performance in the post-covid environment.

## Notes

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