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Title: The Customer Journey for the Purchase of Visual Art and The Impact of eWOM Information

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Introduction

In this study, the influence of eWOM information on consumer decision-making will be applied to the case of hedonic products and particularly visual art. Namely, even the art industry is quickly expanding into online mediated channels and attracting new markets and online art audiences (Skate's, 2014). As such, art-buying patterns are rapidly transferring to online channels where a significant growth of online art spaces is revolutionizing communication and established hierarchies in this sector with social media aiding validation and increasing buyers' confidence (Arttactic, 2014). Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are thus becoming major platforms for finding and sharing information about art, which is transforming art appreciation and collecting into a social activity with a sharing of knowledge and tastes.

Research confirms that the Internet channel has elicited a transformation in the way consumers look for information, interact with each other and undertake a purchase (King et al., 2014). Specifically, the existence of online WOM phenomena has spurred a change in the modalities of consumer decision-making and behavior (Chan and Ngai, 2011), suggesting that with the exchange of information consumers increasingly started to acknowledge the rational character of recommendations and taking into consideration the consumption choices of other customers (Blazevic et al., 2013; Berger and Schwartz, 2011). Scant research has however explored the way in which consumers process brand related information and form attitudinal judgments in the context of social media (Chen et al., 2015). As such, this paper responds to the call for more inquiry addressing how eWOM influences the decision-making of consumers and their purchase journey (Martin and Lueg, 2013; King et al., 2014), especially for affect-rich products (Kim and Gupta, 2012). Namely, research in consumer decision-making has so far explored mainly the processes associated with low-involvement decisions while lesser attention has been given to high-involvement choices which entail risk (Shaller and Malhotra, 2015). Given the significance of these developments, consumption of visual art will be formalized by placing it within the domain of consumption instances categorized as hedonic in nature. In particular, art evokes pleasurable experiences in consumers similar to the impact of 'ballet, music, novels, motion pictures, exhibitions' (Miniero et al., 2014; 628). Their distinctive trait is the affect-rich element they possess (Botti and McGill, 2011; Khan et al., 2005). Accordingly, 'these items may be spontaneously evaluated on the basis of the liking or disliking that they evoke' (Kahn et al., 2005;5). Hence, literature argues utilitarian products induce cognitively driven judgements while hedonic products are evaluated based on the affective reaction the product elicits (Kempf, 1999). Specifically, products like hedonic goods, which exhibit

high preference heterogeneity, evoke higher levels of preference uncertainty and consequently may lead consumers to search more extensively for information, such as eWOM (Broniarczyk and Griffin, 2014).

Considering that research has widely confirmed the impact of eWOM information on the decision-making for a large variety of products, this paper reports on a study that aims to identify what are its effects on the purchase decision journey for this affect-eliciting product typology. In particular, it aims to explore the changes that are occurring in the interplay between affective and cognitive elements in the formation process of attitudes with the advent of eWOM. It further investigates the effects of affective and cognitive process elements on brand attitudes as moderated by product category, consumer traits, and consumption goal. As such, it aims to make a contribution by determining the stepwise process of eWOM information influence on the affective and cognitive elements determining attitudes toward hedonic brands in the social media context.

Method

This study applies a qualitative method of data collection in order to delve into the phenomenon and acquire insight about consumer attitudes and understanding of behaviours (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007). Hence, a set of in-depth interviews was undertaken in the UK with a convenience sample of 12 owners/managers of fine art galleries with online purchasing facilities (either ‘‘click and buy’’ or an ‘‘inquire to buy’’ format), 10 end art buyers (recruited from art related online groups), 3 artists with social media presence, 2 art intermediary companies and a large art fair director. Each interview lasted 30 – 90 minutes and included a range of stakeholders in order to gather the most accurate information and broadest perspective of the customer journey. Following, the collected data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Preliminary Findings

From the preliminary interview findings it emerged that visual art has often been compared to the consumption of other aesthetic typologies such as music, fashion and wine, thus suggesting the characteristics idiosyncratic for hedonic consumption have been identified through this example. Namely, the inborn traits of the art product determine the propensity of consumers to look extensively for information and engage in online conversations about the product category (Park and Kim 2008; Floyd et al., 2014). Furthermore, a high degree of product involvement is often encountered when referring to these purchases given the products’ highly affective nature. Specifically, art is found as a highly involving category that stimulates engagement as well as a gathering of information (Troilo et al., 2014). The findings suggest that the quality of the product is generally difficult to determine as it requires expertise and the judgment about it is malleable. Based on this understanding, consumers experience a high level of risk involved in the purchase of the same (Russell, 2003). Namely, the high differentiation degree; the ambiguous quality; the high price and the visibility of the art product are all factors responsible for the high level of risk involved in this purchase, and which therefore drives individuals to rely on external cues such as artist or gallery

brand when forming an attitude towards the product. Namely, a brand logic rather than a product approach guides the decision-making of consumers as well as the development of their product preferences thus suggesting a brand evaluation strategy will take place in consumer purchase decisions. As a result, contrarily to the assumption that consumers rely on their affective response when evaluating hedonic products (Cheema and Papatla, 2010) and thus engage in impulse purchases (Wertenbroch, 1998), the decision-making process of consumers is considerably longer. Specifically in instances when the consumer faces an ambiguous quality, the available information will be high in diagnosticity. As such, eWOM will have a large effect on product judgment (Bone, 1995), shifting the basis of evaluation on cognitive aspects and rational deliberation rather than affect. It could be thus argued that eWOM assumes a higher level of diagnosticity compared to the past where affect was the only diagnostic information source able to help in evaluating the quality of the product. As the decision-process is not anymore informed merely by affective inputs, consumers are more deliberate in their product choices and engage in a more rationally based consideration of product options. Thus, with the advent of social media which represent an important new channel for information exchange, the impact of affect on decision can be suppressed by the existence of alternative informational sources such as eWOM. Accordingly, it is possible to suggest that eWOM information is able to alter consumer evaluations and purchase intentions (Lopez and Maya, 2012). Namely, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are important sources that consumers rely on when looking for information about art. Thus, eWOM may generate awareness and mitigate the effect held by affect or the brand for the purchase decision.

The level of product knowledge, as well as the product category involvement (Troilo et al., 2014) may moderate the need for guidance and validation facilitated by the adoption of eWOM. Furthermore, the impact of affect or on the other hand information in the decision-making process for this affect rich product category differs depending on the consumption motive of consumers (Alba and Williams, 2012; Botti and McGill, 2011

Conclusion

Research has so far confirmed attitudes are formed on either affective or cognitive bases, as two major evaluative dimensions (Chen et al., 2015), which are the process modalities determining attitudes (Kim et al., 2012). Given the hedonic nature of the art product, literature assumes the decision-making process for the purchase of this product category is mainly affectively driven. However, with the diffusion of knowledge spurred by the advent of various social channels, consumers have free access to information (Shaller and Malhotra, 2015), thus altering the role held by affect in brand attitude formation and purchase intention (Lopez and Maya, 2012). Based on the domain factors and definitions identified through the literature review and the qualitative study, a conceptual model of the influence of eWOM information on the purchase journey for hedonic products, and specifically art, will be developed.

The finalised findings and the developed model accounting for the decision-making process will be presented at AM2016.

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