Exploiting the Cultural Consumption Experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of the consumption experience on cultural management. Although arts and cultural industries have served as the cradle for the initial conceptualization of this new paradigm, the managerial processes for designing and managing engaging consumption experiences in these industries have ample room for improvement. Our conceptual paper focuses on the revision of cultural management based on consumption experiences. Therefore, it presents five managerial pillars that require a thorough revision by cultural organizations aiming to offer compelling consumption experiences: (1) adopting well-being as their ultimate goal; (2) implementing customer-centricity in their processes; (3) expanding the scope of organizations to encompass the cultural ecosystems; (4) extending the timeline of the consumption experience according to the customer journey; and (5) integrating online and offline channels through omnichannel strategies. Finally, this paper concludes by presenting the innovative solutions that emerge for each of the aforementioned managerial pillars.

Keywords: Consumption Experience; Arts and Culture; Cultural management; Innovation

Introduction

Consumption experiences lie at the heart of every positioning strategy, both for for-profit companies and non-profit organizations to achieve success in the short and the long term. Anyone involved in marketing and consumer research knows that this is a well-established truth, a truth that was also

revealed thanks to the immense and pioneering range of publications carried out by Morris B. Holbrook and Elizabeth C. Hirschman over decades and decades of research.

It was 1982 when the two contributions to designing the consumption experience manifesto were published (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). If at that time consumption experience was an emerging stream of research, today everything has turned into an experience (Arici, Köseoglu, & Sökmen, 2022; Silva et al., 2021). In forty years, the impact of fantasy, feeling, and fun has been deep and broad, everywhere. Arts and cultural industries are no exception.

No matter the industry, the goal, or the range of activities, anyone nowadays designs and manages consumption experiences. However, by reviewing Morris and Elizabeth's work a particularly interesting element emerges: arts and culture are the cradle of the consumption experience; they are its starting point. Indeed, Morris and Elizabeth have highlighted the inadequacy of the Information-Cognition-Affect-Behavior-Satisfaction (the so-called ICABS) model by analyzing arts and cultural consumption. In highly creative industries, the rational and typical decision-making process fails to grasp the core consumption value. Over time, the new paradigm has widely spread to very heterogenous and distant industries. Although organizations in these industries have been affected by the consumption experiences trend more recently, they have quickly learned to manage successfully their consumption experiences. These organizations put consumption experiences at the core of their managerial processes with general great care and attention, while cultural organizations only rarely present similarly advanced processes and skills. Although cultural organizations' success depends on their ability to engage visitors in compelling, customized, and open-ended experiences (Addis & Rurale, 2020), the adoption of the consumption experience paradigm is still challenging for arts organizations, asking them to innovate extensively. And generally speaking, there is still much room for them to innovate.

The recent Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated this situation, making the adoption of the experiential paradigm a priority. Although the experiential view is naturally embedded in cultural consumption, its management cannot be taken for granted (Carù & Cuadrado-García, 2020). This study presents

the impact of the adoption of consumption experience for cultural organizations and the required innovations that must be introduced. Specifically, after presenting the cultural experience management, our study presents five managerial pillars that ask for a deep revision by cultural organizations willing to offer consumption experiences: (1) adopting well-being as their ultimate goal; (2) applying customer-centricity in their processes; (3) expanding the view of organizations to include the cultural ecosystems; (4) extending the timeline of consumption experience according to the customer journey; and (5) integrating online and offline by way of omnichannel. Finally, this paper concludes by presenting the innovative solutions that emerge for each of the above managerial pillars.

1. Cultural experience management

The management of cultural experiences poses important challenges for organizations. To present them, the 5Ws scheme (Why, What, Who, When, and Where) is used here (Table 1) and discussed below concerning the pillar and the impact of consumption experiences on cultural management for each dimension.

Table 1. Cultural experience management

Dimensions	**Pillars**	**Cultural management of consumption experiences**
Why	Well-being	Well-being is the ultimate goal of the design and management of consumption experience
What	Customer-centricity	Customer-centricity is applied in each and every managerial process of a cultural organization
Who	Cultural Ecosystems	Cultural organizations have to expand their view to embrace the cultural ecosystems, which include all the organizations that contribute in creating the consumption experiences
When	Customer journey	Cultural organizations need to extend the timeline of consumption experience according to the customer journey
Where	Omnichannel	Omnichannel integrates online and offline touchpoints in a seamless consumption experience regardless of their location, nature, and any other apparent difference

1.1. Why: Well-being

The existence of a link between cultural consumption and well-being is a key driver of experiential consumption since its first conceptualization (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Such a link is especially relevant in current times since the improvement of well-being has been declared a top priority worldwide. In 2015 the United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015), establishing well-being as the ultimate goal. That was a milestone in a journey that started a long time ago. Eight years before the general call for action to promote peace and prosperity worldwide, the Government of Bhutan developed the concept of gross national happiness replacing the more traditional, but less comprehensive GNP. Also in 2007, the European Commission launched the (still going on) "Beyond GDP" initiative to develop innovative and inclusive measures of environmental and social dimensions of progress. These efforts aim at better addressing the current global challenges such as food, climate change, poverty, health, and so forth. They all concern individual and collective well-being.

The cultural experience is one of the drivers of well-being, featuring consumers as whole persons with emotional and cognitive dimensions. Individuals' participation in arts and culture leads to

individual development which results in higher levels of individual and collective well-being (Hanna et al., 2011). Several studies have explored this link's nature and power by adopting multiple approaches, metrics, and domains. Traditionally, psychologists have highlighted the beneficial effects of art therapy: arts and cultural education and training increase well-being via improved cognitive abilities. Such an effect has been found concerning children as well as adults and the elderly. Over time, the beneficial effects of art therapy have been found to extend to other outcomes such as positive emotions, communal and social behaviors, personal initiative, subjective experiences, physical and mental health, quality of life, and functional mobility. Another extension gathering scholars' attention refers to cultural consumption: several studies have empirically found that the consumption of cultural experiences drives well-being (Addis, 2020; Hetland & Winner, 2004).

Well-being strongly depends on subjective experiences (Frank, 1997, 2005; Layard, 2005), while objective factors such as high income, good health, supportive marriage, good social relationships, freedom, democracy, lack of tragedy, and so forth account only for 15% of the variance in happiness and life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Diener, 1984; Diener & Seligman, 2004).

1.2. What: Customer-centricity

By emphasizing feeling, fantasy, and fun, the consumption experience puts every single individual at the center of any strategy. And artistic organizations need a customer-based strategy (Falk, 2009; Falk & Dierking, 2016). The latter starts with a deep understanding and analysis of the overall customer experiences, which leverage customers and visitors, making them a key strategic source of knowledge for anyone willing to develop and reinforce competitive advantage. This is the starting point of a process that has to be innovated and re-engineered. An organization that concretely designs and offers consumption experiences has to be customer-centric. The latter dissolves all boundaries, inside and outside the organization (Terho et al., 2022). No matter whether people work in front- or back-office roles, they all contribute to creating engaging customer experiences and developing relationships with the market. Customer centricity adopts a proactive and customer-involving attitude

by everyone working in the organization in any channel and role they play **(**Gahler, Klein, & Paul, 2023). Further, it leverages customer knowledge and allows for their tracking, outlining even the personality variables and the most intimate ones.

Like market orientation, customer centricity attributes a central role to customers in defining the offer, but unlike the previous orientation, it regards them as active players, same-level interlocutors for organizations. Indeed, individuals participate in the co-creation of the value of arts, playing an active role in the learning environment (Venäläinen, 2012), with high cognitive, emotional, and imaginative investment. Cultural experiences require a great deal of energy and motivation from the customers. To this end, the company will have to establish real 'conversations' and offer them personalized content and solutions over time, capable of promoting continuous interaction and an exchange of value. Therefore, the innovative value of customer centricity lies precisely in the recognition of equal power: customers and organizations present similar levels of power so that fairness inspires their interactions. This is a key innovation because it recognizes the consumers' ability to intervene in company processes hitherto neglected. In customer-centric organizations, customers and their needs are taken into account in every single business process, no matter whether the marketing department is involved. In that sense, a crucial role is played by customer service support (Sheth, Jain, & Ambika, 2023).

1.3. Who: Cultural ecosystem

The creation of an ecosystem is an almost obligatory choice for those companies that adopt a customer-centric approach (Manral & Harrigan, 2018).

Customer-centricity stimulates organizations to diversify and turn to other companies that specialize in specific parts of the value chain. Indeed, customer-centric organizations guarantee the overall consumption experience by supporting the network approach (Senn, Thoma, & Yip, 2013). If the customer-centricity approach support organizations in integrating customers into their internal processes, the ecosystem business models support them in integrating external partners (Maslowska,

Malthouse, & Collinger, 2016). Thus, these organizations integrate both customers and partners into their business processes. All those who actively contribute to creating cultural experiences should play a seamless role in the business model. Ecosystems represent the customer-centric approach outside the organizations (Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016).

In ecosystems organizations interact in time and space with great flexibility and adaptability, to preserve and improve the brand identity which is more rooted in the network of intermediaries, employees, neighbors, and society in general than in every single individual organization (Wagner, Eggert, & Lindemann, 2010).

Ecosystems represent an extension of co-creation, which are often called "service ecosystems" (Lusch & Vargo, 2014; Lusch, Vargo, & Gustafsson, 2016; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). However, the transversality of the experience in all industries overcomes any boundaries among industries. Such a feature is especially relevant in recent times, with the great spread of the use of digital and emerging technologies (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). The digital realm greatly affects customer experiences (Bolton et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2021) In particular, the efforts of the EU in the creation of digital innovation hubs should be mentioned. These centers adopt the theoretical perspective of ecosystems and aim to integrate the resources of a territory by taking advantage of the digital opportunities provided by emerging technologies to enhance its global competitiveness. Culture is one of the privileged domains in which this investment could improve organizations' processes and offerings. One of the best examples of the emerging cultural ecosystem concerns tourism, which integrates offerings from different players to deliver superior experiential and emotional value, and put the tourist experience at the center of any market strategy.

1.4. When: Customer journeys

Individuals engage in a demanding dialogue with the piece of art, and such a relationship is greatly extended. The design of the consumption experience extends the timeline to include all the

touchpoints that allow the meeting between the consumer and the brand before and after the core moment (Voorhees et al., 2017).

Since success depends on the extent to which companies "make the journey a compelling, customized, and open-ended experience" (Edelman & Singer, 2015, p. 91), cultural organizations have to develop strong and interactive relationships with visitors prior, during, and after the visit. Towards that end, the managerial approach to consumption experiences is greatly needed (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The customer journey map is the most promising operative tool (Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2011), generating new market insights and knowledge for the design and enrichment of engaging customer experiences (Patrício et al., 2011; Venkatesan, 2017). The customer journey map identifies and analyzes the sequence of touchpoints before, during, and after an experience through which customers interact with the organizations (Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008). Any direct or indirect interaction with the brand or the company acts as a touchpoint and constitutes the basis of customer experience (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Schmitt, 2010).

Its adoption allows managers to adopt the customer's perspective (Maklan, Antonetti, & Whitty, 2017). Thus, the extended perspective enlarges the range of possible determinants and consequences of cultural experiences, and consequently, the managerial opportunities to increase customer value. Well-analyzed and well-organized customer journey maps provide managers with a useful and clear roadmap with sequential steps, presenting interesting opportunities to innovate and differentiate their offerings (Bolton et al., 2014) and to obtain the highest financial returns (Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013). As a result, the customer journey map typically reports multiple touchpoints and complex consumer behaviors (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). When value co-creation is an intrinsic part of the consumption experience as in the case of culture and arts, the customer journey map is especially useful because it visually describes the process that customers go through.

1.5. Where: Omnichannel

Consumption experiences comprehend a large range of channels, which has recently expanded because of the proliferation for consumers of easy-to-use and convenient opportunities to interact with brands, especially digital technologies (Edelman & Singer, 2015).

Although both omnichannel and multi-channel strategies share a wide range of possible interactive channels, the former adds special care to creating consistency of touchpoints and channels. Indeed, different from multi-channel, omnichannel marketing asks for the adoption of a broad and integrated approach to the consumption experience to ensure harmony and consistency across channels and their touchpoints (Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013). Omnichannel strategies integrate online and offline channels to offer consumers seamless experiences, using every touchpoint as an opportunity to create customer value regardless of whether they are physical or digital, internal or external, owned, paid, or earned (Cui et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). The goal of omnichannel strategies is to manage and optimize the performance of the full range of channels, by adopting the customers' point of view. This is a challenge for every organization since omnichannel environments feature several heterogeneous partners, touchpoints, and customer journeys (Gahler, Klein, & Paul, 2023). Brands adopting an omnichannel approach do not focus on each single channel, but rather on the unified experience. In such a view, the relevance of the environment in which the experience takes place depends on its integration with the rest of the touchpoints, regardless of whether they are physical or digital.

The link between consumption experience and omnichannel marketing is therefore quite evident: the former designs and manages the environments aiming at putting into practice the consumption experiences. New technological solutions greatly expand the opportunities for investing in omnichannel marketing. Thanks to emerging technologies organizations can better integrate their channels and learn how to understand customers by gathering data or predicting the missing data. For instance, machine learning and blockchains greatly advance the opportunities to track customers and to depict their profiles in a much more detailed way and in real time (Barsoux, Wade, & Bouquet, 2022; Govindarajan & Venkatraman, 2022).

Since customers are the leading driver of the current and future value of a company (McCarthy & Fader, 2020), cultural organizations have to manage properly the processes for exploiting customer experiences.

Towards that end, a few innovations are urgent.

2. Innovations for cultural experience management

The above examination describes the impact of the experiential view of consumer behaviors on cultural experiences. The successful adoption of a managerial approach to cultural experiences is challenging for every cultural organization and policy-maker because of the presence of a few obstacles. The latter could be overcome only through innovation.

Table 2 presents the key enabling preliminary innovations for each of the five dimensions.

Table 2. Innovations for cultural experience management

Managerial innovation	**Enabling preliminary innovative solutions** **Cultural organizations should preliminarily …**
Well-being	Identify a set of KPIs related to well-being that at the same time is easy, comprehensive, and rigorous that they could adopt and use
Customer-centricity	Develop the resources that they will need in the next future to interact with technologies, mainly concerning knowledge – i.e. digital marketing skills and competencies – and financial capital for maintenance
Cultural Ecosystems	Adopt an interactive, open, and collaborative approach toward the full range of players included in the network that generate customer value, even with different languages and goals
Customer journey	Revise and assess their touchpoints according to the extent of participation and co-creation that they desire for their customers in the consumption experience
Omnichannel	Reorganize their managerial processes and the coordinative organizational mechanisms to create seamless and consistent consumption experiences

- Well-being. Although well-being represents the highest value generated by cultural experiences (Addis & Rurale, 2020), its management is difficult because of a confused

measurement framework. The current operationalization of well-being, as well as its analytical methods, is still far from a comprehensive understanding (Fujiwara, Kudrna, & Dolan, 2014). Indeed, common terms such as well-being, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness are used quite interchangeably leading to higher levels of confusion. Furthermore, several scholars debate whether objective or subjective measures allow the assessment of well-being: while many believe that self-report measures are the only proper operative tools to evaluate well-being (OECD, 2013) others consider objective proxies as more suitable such as social inequalities (Lelo, Monni, & Tommassi 2019; Weng et al., 2019). In such a confusing scenario, first of all, a dashboard to monitor and assess well-being is urgently needed. This operative tool should be comprehensive and rigorous (both reliable and valid), but still easy to share for quick communication.

- Customer centricity. Cultural organizations face a key obstacle while adopting customer-centricity, which represents the dark side of an important opportunity. To put customers at the center of the processes cultural organizations rely on technologies that easily enrich touchpoints increasing their level of interactivity. However, technological advancement is a fast trend, often too fast to keep under control: its fast pace might turn into a dangerous limit for organizations investing in technological solutions. The continuous evolution might lead to concrete difficulties in cultural organizations, especially if they are small and medium-sized organizations, with limited skills in the field and reduced amounts of money. Advanced technological solutions need investment both for acquisition and maintenance. To turn into customer-centric organizations, a preliminary investment in the acquisition and development of digital marketing competencies and skills appears to be an essential pre-condition for cultural experience management, as well as the acquisition of additional funds for future maintenance.
- Cultural ecosystem. Learning how to interact in an ecosystem is a key challenge for cultural organizations. Indeed, it requires a global vision of their role in the territory, interacting with

players belonging to other industries. Ecosystems advance the value chain of each organization: the network becomes the key concept for value creation because every organization differently contributes in generating customer value. Although the ecosystem vision might appear as easy and simple, putting it into practice is much more complex. It requires the identification of players based on their input in generating customer value, abandoning any traditional reference to the industry. Once players are identified, those who are part of the networks need to interact and cooperate. These activities require proper skills and competencies that might be rare for cultural organizations. The latter not always are ready to understand and adopt other languages: for instance, companies design their processes according to their business models, which are typically oriented towards goals with which cultural organizations might not be familiar. In cultural ecosystems, interaction, openness, and collaboration are the keywords for any player. Cultural organizations are no exception.

- Customer journey. Mapping the customer journey is challenging for any manager: many areas of this concept still need further investigation (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and more empirical research is needed (Trischler, Zehrer, & Westman, 2018). Specifically, the customer journey has only rarely been adopted in museums (Chen & Chen, 2010). Indeed, when mapping the customer journey to design engaging consumption experiences cultural organizations have to face three key distinctive features. First, museums deeply engage visitors and stimulate a wide spectrum of individual reactions. The latter include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that all together might provide relevant inputs to understand the consumers' cultural experiences. Thus, such a feature asks for comprehensive data gathering. Second, cultural consumption experiences are highly participative and co-creative, maybe to a greater extent than the experiences in other industries. Such a relevant interaction makes it difficult for cultural organizations to design consumption experiences in advance. They must be ready to face a wide range of possible interactions with a limited opportunity to define them preliminarily. Finally, cultural organizations are inspired by a mission that is, by definition,

ambitious: every organization playing in this industry has to balance educational and commercial goals, solving the typical tension between market success and artistic excellence. As a consequence, they need to deal with the role of customers with great care and attention. Towards that end, cultural organizations should start this adoption by revising and assessing their processes according to the level of interactions they want to provide their customers. If this aspect is preliminarily addressed, then the touchpoints can be designed and managed accordingly in every step of the cultural experience.

- Omnichannel. Finally, adopting an omnichannel strategy is a difficult task for cultural organizations. Every kind of company has its difficulties when it tries to deliver its promises and create a consistent consumption experience. However, the challenges for cultural organizations are even greater because of the needed investment for aligning strategically the internal departments. The intention to put the customer experience at the center of every interactive channel asks for a global revision of the entire cultural organization according to advanced managerial principles and coordinative mechanisms. Logistics, production, marketing, and any other department have to be linked together across all the available channels through revised processes. This preliminary activity is demanding because it asks to reexamine the entire cultural organization, promising full, consistent, and highly customized cultural experiences. Towards that end, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for internal processes and external results needed to be identified and monitored constantly.

Forty years have passed since the manifesto of the experiential view of consumer behavior appeared. Since then, several tools and technologies have emerged to design and manage consumption experiences effectively and efficiently for the benefit of individuals and companies. However, one thing has remained stable since then: success comes always from innovation. Morris and Elizabeth have the merit to show the way, without prejudice and fear. In addition to the

consumption experience for which they are worldwide honored, their courage is probably their most important lesson for the benefit of the scientific and professional community, certainly, it is for me.

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