

# ENGAGING LOYAL CUSTOMER IN ART GALLERY: AN ENTREPRENEURIAL STRATEGY IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Exhibition engagement is a burgeoning yet still under-examined concept. Due to this fact, many small and medium enterprises in arts gallery are struggling especially during this ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This study attempts to measure the outcome of exhibition engagement in the case of digital visual arts. The research, involved 110 respondents, employed hierarchical regression as the main method of data analysis. Exhibition engagement were measured through cognitive, affective, behavioral and social whereas the outcomes were measured through loyalty towards the exhibition. The results of this study revealed that only affective and behavioral engagement effect loyalty while cognitive and social engagement found to be not significant. This finding provides art galleries owner an insight into entrepreneurial strategy focusing on customer relationship. The relationship is through managing engagement by forming a strategy that focusing on increasing customer engagement.*

**Keywords:** Exhibition Engagement, Entrepreneurship Study, Small and Medium Enterprises.

## INTRODUCTION

Creative and cultural producers, like social enterprises, operate in a complex business environment where the value proposition is difficult to define, and the organizational motivations are not always financially driven. Approaches for visual artists to reach audiences have relied upon a model whereby artists create and supply works to an intermediary such as an art gallery. Unfortunately, the gallery industry is poorly studied from the strategic marketing literature even though interesting for the changes that are affecting it. Two different high growth galleries' business models are pointed out: one is that of large size galleries with subsidiaries abroad; the other is shared by small growing galleries and differentiates them from other small galleries for an higher international orientation. An art galleries that is a SME own is struggling especially during the Covid-19 pandemics. In order to sustain, these galleries should focus strategically in gaining and maintaining loyal customer.

The art of attracting loyal customers has become severely demanding in the current globalized environment where emotive needs of consumers through cultural and aesthetic needs have become more multifaceted. All firms could benefit from marketing strategies in the form of customer loyalty as long as products, services, and consumers are involved. However, an art gallery is a unique business in a distinctive model, and hence marketing strategies ought to be excluded from traditional commercial marketing (Vivek et al., 2012). Of critical significance is that artists make art productions out of inspiration and talent, unlike in manufacturing, where companies make products that meet the consumer's direct needs. However, art also needs to meet the demands of promotion and advertising, and hence it is problematic to ignore the classic

marketing tactics as a means to reach the public. Therefore, the art gallery can benefit from strategic marketing because they are the primary method for meeting consumer expectations through interaction. By applying marketing strategies, the art galleries can endeavor to diverse market needs and different demographics. Despite its fame, little is known as to how audiences here engage with arts exhibition and its outcome. Audience engagement helps in the delivery of artistic experience. It is assumed that an engaged audience will not only develop a special bond with the exhibition but will also play the role as it advocates. Thus, there are three main objectives of this present study: (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974); it strives to understand how the digital visual arts exhibition engages with local audience, (Laurance et al., 2015) to investigate the relationship between these factors of engagement with loyalty and (Webster & Heckley, 1997) to analyse which of these engagement factors has the strongest influence on the predictors. This study focuses only on digital visual arts exhibition as it provides engaging artistic experience as well as its overwhelming growth in popularity among local arts practitioner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Originally termed as absorption in the study of personal psychology (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) cognitive engagement is one of the prominent scale to measure individual engagement. It refers to a set of dynamic mental states that a consumer experiences with respect to focal object being engaged (Laurance, 2015). In a study on distance learning (Webster & Heckley, 1997) cognitive engagement was found to have positive affect on perceived richness of the medium, the level of interactivity in the instructor's teaching style, and classmates' attitudes toward the use of technology. While cognitive engagement measures audience mental state, affective engagement focus on positive emotional experience that act as a stimulus. It includes among others, desire, interest (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000); (Ainley et al., 2002) and emotions (Pekrun et al., 2002) whereas behavioral engagement includes word-of mouth, recommendations, helping other customer, blogging, writing reviews and even engaging in legal action (Doorn, et al., 2010) Art activities also encourages social engagement. It is a heightened level of interest (Altschwager, et al., 2015) as a result of connection, creation and communication between one customer and the others (Kozinets, 2014).

While satisfaction is the better pointer to assess consumption that reflects evaluation of alternatives such as repurchase intention, engagement is better suited to reflect customer motivation to consume more, its depth and level (Calder, 2013). Value, loyalty and advocacy are among the result of engagement (Vivek, 2012). Loyal customers are also positive advocate of the brand. They provide positive word-of-mouth and generally expect value in return. According to reference (Kemp, 2015) a consumer's level of engagement may be contingent on the value he or she expects to receive from a given experience and may also start to form experience-based relationships, which manifest into a self-connectedness to the artistic offering or organization.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study took place at a Digital Visual Arts Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur. Total of 110 questionnaires collected from visitors during the exhibition. The questionnaire consists of measurements for engagement (16 items) that were modified from (Kemp, 2015) and engagement outcomes that were adapted from (Kemp & Poole, 2016); (Othman, 2012). Items for all variables were measured on a 6-point scale. Hierarchical regression was performed for data analysis and determine the relationship of each variable.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Respondents Profile

Table 1 shows summarizes the profile of respondents. Nearly 40% of the respondents were male and 60% were female. Most respondents were below 20 years old (56.4%), followed by 30% respondents from the age group of 21-30 years old. Almost half of the respondents (49%) were currently in secondary level while 32 respondents (29.1%) were pursuing their bachelor degree. The largest income group is below RM1000 (65.5%) followed by 20.9% in the next category of RM1000-RM3000.

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Gender	Male	41	37.3
	Female	69	62.7
	Total	110	100.0
Age	20 and below	62	56.4
	21-30	33	30.0
	31-40	8	7.3
	41-50	4	3.6
	51-60	2	1.8
	Above 60	1	.9
	Total	110	100.0
Education Level	Primary Education	6	5.5
	Secondary Education	54	49.1
	Diploma/higher diploma	10	9.1
	Degree	32	29.1
	Post graduate and higher	8	7.3
	Total	110	100.0
Income	RM1000 and below	72	65.5
	RM1001 - RM3000	23	20.9
	RM3001 - RM6000	9	8.2
	More than RM6000	6	5.5
	Total	110	100.0

### Exhibition Engagement and Loyalty Model using hierarchical regression

Hierarchical Regression was performed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software to analysed the relationship between exhibition engagement dimensions namely cognitive, affective, behavioral and social on customer loyalty. The finding stated that only two engagement dimension found to have significant impact on loyalty. There are affective dimension and behavioral dimension. Between these two dimension, affective showed to be the most important dimension with the highest beta coefficient value. These results means that for customer to become loyal towards arts exhibition in art galleries, the emotional element plays an important role. Exhibitor or arts galleries owner should ensure that the customer experiences excitement or joyful feeling during their visit shows in Table 2.

	<b>COEFFICIENT</b>	<b>P VALUE</b>
<b>Engagement Dimension</b>	<b>Loyalty</b>	
Cognitive	0.089	0.417
Affective	0.417	0.001
Behavioral	0.226	0.029
Social	0.081	0.437

## **DISCUSSION**

Making exhibition attractive and competitive should be a major priority for exhibition managers and planners. The idea of going to an art exhibition is delightful and life affirming for some people and confronting, confusing, uncomfortable or irrelevant for others. The unpleasantly experience expectation leads to a low audience participation in art exhibition. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century artist is exploring digital opportunities. New types of activity have appeared alongside new devices for virtualization, a new communication environment and new forms of art and exhibitions to capture audience interest.

Considering visiting an art exhibition is only one of many leisure activities that a person can choose to spend their time, a visual artist or curator must produce or exhibit engaging work of art. They need to take advantage of the nation's direction towards digital economy and the interactive nature of digital arts to develop a special connection and turn them into advocate. The results of this study revealed that in order to achieve this, the exhibition needs to be affectively, behaviorally and socially engaging. This is important especially if the objective of the exhibition is to increase consumption among audiences.

While the study of audience and branding in arts continues to gain popularity in other countries, very little is known in Malaysian context. How audience here engage with different art forms or their reaction towards a certain brand of arts exhibition or events are still unclear to local arts practitioners and scholars. This is true not only in the context of visual arts but also across the performing arts, creative technology, fashion design and others. Arts in all its form is a medium of communication between the artist and the audiences. Simply blaming local arts for being dead or that locals do not appreciate arts is not helping the industry. Instead, artist and curators need to understand the complexity of how audience engage with arts before being able to facilitate the bond between the two. Once a special bond is created, the audience would not only value the arts but also become loyal and advocated to it.

This study has proven that while both affective in engagement dimension and behavioural dimension are important predictor of loyalty. Based on this finding, it would be strategic of SME arts galleries owner to focus on both of them which are important variables in ensuring the customer to revisit the exhibition and recommend to others. Accordingly, exhibition authorities should focus more on affective components of exhibition such as and examine customers' personal preferences or subjective inclinations toward an exhibition. Other than that, behavioural element such as interaction between the customer and exhibition should be the focus to increase loyalty when activities being performed at exhibitions are the dominant characteristic of event experience; exhibition may be valued more in terms of its functionality and become the medium to maintain the relationship between customer and exhibition. Exhibitor can integrate social media marketing where customer can participate in sharing pictures of their visit, tagging friend, posting comment and many more.

The sample size of this study is considerably small and therefore should not be generalized to the larger population of audience in Malaysia. An extension of this study to a larger scale would help ascertain the significant influence of audience engagement and connection to digital visual arts exhibition on engagement outcomes. This study should be viewed as a preliminary study to understand the impact of audience loyalty on the level of engagement in a digital visual arts exhibition. Comparative analyses between different types of visual exhibition and categories of art such as performing or traditional and culture as well as between local and international audience would be a great addition to local literature.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that in order for an audience of a digital visual arts exhibition to become loyal, the exhibition should be affectively and behaviorally engaging. It also reveals that audiences may develop a special connection with it if the exhibition appeals to their emotion. It suggests that a greater extent of efforts is put up by either the artist, the curator or the exhibition organizer to facilitate these engagements as it could potentially bridge bond and turn audiences into advocates of the art. Notably, younger audience seems to be more interested in a fun and engaging work of art. With the ever-increasing number of people and duration of time spent on social media in Malaysia, the objective of an exhibition should not only be to display and sell. Instead, it should aim to develop special bond with audiences thus producing art advocates. These advocates will share their experience and subsequently recommend for others to attend.

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