

‘Tell me now, how should I feel?’: Letting go or holding in emotions arising through art consumption experiences

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Abstract:

This study approaches emotion regulation as an interplay between emotions and identity to investigate how consumers regulate their emotions during an experience of contemporary art. Adopting a dialogical approach to emotion regulation, we provide insights into how emotions develop and are experienced in such a highly emotional consumption field. Following a qualitative diary approach, this study unravels the role of the primary and secondary emotions in accessing and making sense of an aesthetic experience. Particularly, our evidence illustrates how the interaction of primary and secondary emotions can either disrupt consumers’ emotional immersion, thus disconnecting them from the experience, or allow consumers to access the inner realm of their experiences, thus becoming the basis for transforming themselves. The findings extend prior research on (aesthetic) consumption experiences and emotion regulation.

Keywords: aesthetic experiences, emotion regulation, qualitative diary research

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Aesthetic experiences are subjective episodes that often encompass emotional importance and view consumers' responses to aesthetic objects as the main source of personal value that enriches life experiences (Bradshaw, 2010). In this experiential perspective, consumers immerse themselves into enchanted and multifaceted experiential moments to pursue personal emotional ends and related identity practices. Although this perspective stresses the need "to stimulate and emotionally affect consumers through the consumption experience" (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009, p. 503), current research has mainly concentrated on the role of emotions as an outcome of an aesthetic experience (e.g. positive emotions enabled within an art context contribute to visitor satisfaction, e.g. Leder et al., 2004). As such, current studies by overlooking the various emotions that consumers experience in art contexts, pay insufficient attention to emotions as an 'energy-laden' value source and side of action (Illouz, 2009). This phenomenological perspective of emotions refers to the interplay of emotions, which by allowing consumers to enact themselves in an aesthetic context contributes to the formation of the experience.

This study considers an aesthetic experience as a dialogical encounter between the consumer and the artwork, within which consumers use their cognitive and emotional skills to co-create the meaning of the experience (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2009). Within such highly emotional contexts, like the arts, consumers regulate their emotions to harmonize their inner states and actions in order to achieve balance, hedonism or personal goals (Greenberg, 2004). Thus, emotions, thoughts and actions evolving during aesthetic encounters are expected to interact within an emotion regulation act, which enables consumers to flesh out aspects of their identities in order to position themselves in the experience and interpret its meaning (Joy & Sherry, 2003).

This conception of emotions as expressions of the self, underscores a dialogical approach to the process of emotion regulation (Greenberg, 2004). We approach emotion regulation as an interplay between emotions and identity which discloses the role of consumers' emotions in shaping their interactions with artworks and interpretation of an aesthetic experience. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the interplay of emotions and identity shapes consumers' emotional involvement in the consumption process. This provides an understanding of how consumers access and relate to an aesthetic experience and to their identities. The study unpacks the interaction of primary and secondary emotions in emotion regulation process in experiential consumption. We also provide practical implications regarding the role of emotions in enhancing audience engagement.

2. Aesthetic Experiences and Emotion Regulation

Emotions are a central part of aesthetic experiences shaping consumers interactions with artworks and meaning making activities, and as such, playing a key role in accessing an aesthetic episode (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2009). Art contexts are emotionally ‘unexpected’ spaces, within which visitors’ a priori emotions and thoughts may be disrupted due to unanticipated emotional responses arising from visitors’ interactions with new conditions produced and promoted within the context. Given that emotion regulation is a dynamic process through which consumers manage their emotions to respond to ongoing demands of an experience (Gross, 1998), understanding these processes provides valuable insights into the way emotions develop and are experienced in such consumption fields.

Emotion regulation has evolved into a prevailing stream of research explaining emotions and the processes associated with their management (Gross, 2013). However, no matter the widespread acceptance of the strong connection between the self and the emotions we experience, previous studies underlining a cognitive perspective on emotion regulation (e.g. Gross, 1998) have not emphasised the central role of the self in this process (Koole & Coenen, 2007). Most importantly, although sequence-process models of emotion regulation are offered (Gross, 1998), these do not explain the process by which change in emotion or meaning takes place. In order to advance our understanding of such regulation processes, we approach emotion regulation from a dialogical perspective. This dialogical approach, by focusing on the creation of meaning arising from the interplay of emotions and identity positions unfolding during an experience, allows us to capture the multiple and even contradictory emotions that consumers experience during lived-through moments (Greenberg, 2004; 2012). In this approach, the self functions as a ‘society of mind’ consisting of multiple identities, labelled as I-positions, with each one of these positions to have its own emotions and thoughts. In this context, emotional processes are conceived as foundational in the (re)construction of the self and as an integral element in lived experiences.

According to this perspective, consumers in emotional experiences react with initial responses that can be different from their secondary emotional responses. The primary emotional response relates to consumers’ raw and unregulated reaction to experiences. The secondary response relates to consumers’ responses to or defences of primary emotions (regulation). Thus, the primary response is succeeded by a secondary emotional response, which is driven by emotion regulation. The shift from primary to secondary emotional responding may occur consciously or unconsciously (Greenberg, 2004). Secondary emotions are important in the sense that they can obscure what consumers experience at a deeper, raw

affective level (primary emotions). Regulation takes place both at the interaction between primary and secondary processing and/or dealing mainly with secondary emotions. In case consumers do not become aware of the primary emotion in relation to the secondary emotion, this can disconnect consumers from the experience.

Thus, emotion regulation can be seen as an interplay between emotions and identity that results in connection to the experience, meaning, and transformation. In this way, congruence (between the experience and the self) has been described as the ability to be aware of one's internal, raw experience (Greenberg, 2004). Based on this, we explore how consumers regulate emotions within an art context through the interplay of identities and emotions to reveal the role of emotions in shaping consumers' interactions with artworks and interpretations of the experience.

3. Qualitative Diary Research

The data for this research were collected from two contemporary art exhibitions, i.e. the Damien Hirst and the Biennale of Contemporary art exhibitions. These exhibitions were chosen as the consumption milieus because of the intense and uncanny feelings and sensations that contemporary art elicits which allow for an understanding of the various emotions that visitors experience to enter the world of symbolic and ascribe meaning to their experiences (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008). Indeed, the metaphorical and shady nature of Hirst's exhibition invited visitors 'to do a lot of work and feel uncomfortable' (Bartram, 2005, p.12) whereas the aesthetically revolutionary features of the Biennale exhibition aimed to create a mindscape that invited visitors to experience a variety of emotions (e.g. hope and despair, loss and memory) in order to (re)discover solutions and experience dynamic transitions (Colombo et al., 2011).

A Qualitative Diary Research (QDR) design employed for the collection of data. The diary approach selected because of its power to capture rich insights into 'processes, relationships, settings, products, and consumers' as they happen (Patterson, 2005, p. 142) in an unobtrusive way. Consumer diaries, by unfolding thoughts, emotions and actions as they are experienced within particular contexts, provide revelatory consumer narratives (Gould, 2010). This narrative power of diaries by disclosing emotions and viewpoints of the narrator/consumer reveals 'how thoughts and emotions arise and how they apply them to their self-perspectives' (Gould 2010, p. 210). The evidence emerged from qualitative diaries of 10 visitors to Hirst's exhibition and 20 visitors to the Biennale exhibition, who kept the diary for up to one week (Patterson, 2005). Informants were approached within the research fields.

They were invited to keep a diary about the feelings and thoughts they had during their interactions with the artworks, to describe any possible agreements and/or disagreements between themselves and the exhibited artworks, and what the exhibition as a whole meant to them. This semi-structured diary design allowed informants to narrate their experiences in their own terms and expressions thus, fleshing out the emotional processes and personal perspectives involved in their experiences (Maguire & Geiger, 2015). The data were analysed by using narrative analysis, to reveal tacit meanings, actions, emotions and identity perspectives disclosed during the experience (Cassell & Bishop, 2018).

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

4.1. Disconnecting from the experience and feeling connected to the self

Our findings demonstrated that artworks influence consumers' emotional states and accordingly their interpretive standpoints (e.g. Chen, 2008). However, when consumers cannot identify with the arising emotional states, the process of emotion regulation begins through consumers' fluctuation to familiar identity positions. Through this process, emotions that do not help consumers to connect to the exhibition are disregarded and the process brings to the foreground emotional states with which they relate to:

“In my visit I heard Hirst murmur to me the words “mystery, gothic, pharmacy” and this created dark feelings, such as mystery and unhappiness, I started feeling like a Goth! A Goth who admired the skull and the butterfly on the black background... But afterwards I heard myself answering back: “hey, this is not me...I’m a sociable, talkative, lively and active person” and just like that I returned to my sociable self, who concluded that this exhibition is more dedicated to people with a melancholic personality” (Female, 24 years old)

The diary extract above shows a visitor who experiences a multitude of feelings when she encountered Hirst's artworks. The dark atmosphere of Hirst's exhibition generated feelings of sadness and mystery which temporarily immersed this visitor in Hirst's universe. Yet, this immersive experience is regulated by her fluctuation to different emotional states arising from other than the Goth identity, i.e. sociable, lively and active identities of herself. Interestingly, while these identity positions and their corresponding emotional states disconnect this visitor from the experience (Gao & Kerstetter, 2018), served as the basis through which the visitor reassesses her experience and feels that she stays true to herself (i.e. *‘this exhibition is more dedicated to people with a melancholic personality’*).

This revelation of primary emotions that are inconsistent with visitors' identities illustrate the importance of emotions in consumers' interactions with aesthetic experiences

and themselves (Illouz, 2009). Within these emotionscapes, arising emotions shaped by consumers' interactions with artworks challenge visitors' interpretive standpoints and by doing so, they are replaced by episodic/familiar ones. Despite this, all of the experienced emotions participate in the experience, thus helping in its shaping and interpretation. Beneath this emotional fluctuation, there are consumers' attempts to regulate what they feel and position themselves in the experience to overcome puzzling encounters with artworks. The narrative below shows this fluctuation between different identity and emotional states, through which this visitor regulated her expected emotions and accessed the experience (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). While she could not identify with the gloomy feelings arising from some Biennale artworks, these feelings called a new identity and emotional states to take action:

“The ‘Make it New’ concept of the Biennale exhibition conveyed an optimistic message. However, during the experience the optimism that I expected to feel and see was mixed up with various feelings and blurry meanings. While some of the artworks triggered my curiosity, their gloomy and disturbing content, confused me as I could feel their interesting content, yet I couldn’t find any optimism in these artworks. While I was seeing more of the exhibition, some of the exhibits helped me to put aside the curiosity and the negative feelings that some artworks invoked to me and rediscover pleasant meanings in the exhibition. . . Art is hard, but I tried to see it from the optimistic aspect” (Female, 26 years old)

This study contributes to the interface of emotions and experiential consumption by showing that consumption is the outcome of complex emotion regulation processes between primary and secondary emotions, through which consumers are disconnected from an experience in an idiosyncratically disruptive way (i.e. dis-identifying with a particular mode of experiencing, Illouz, 2009). Although extant studies on experiential consumption discuss the importance of personalized connections in emotional immersion (Minkiewicz et al., 2014), they examine it mainly in relation to the context instead of relating it to consumers' emotions and identities (Carù & Cova, 2007). Our evidence, by investigating emotional immersion in light of primary and secondary emotions, provides a more dynamic understanding of emotional immersion as a mode of access to an experience. It shows that emotional immersion can be disrupted by the interaction between primary and secondary emotions and how this disruption leads consumers to immerse themselves in specific identity and emotional states that disconnect them from the context and connect them to their selves.

4.2 Connecting with the experience and transforming the self

The analysis of diaries indicated that consumers' acceptance of primary emotions arising through their interactions with artworks enabled them to alter their existing perspectives on themselves. This acceptance of primary emotions was accompanied by secondary emotional responses, which conflicted with the primary emotions. Consumers in their attempts to regulate these conflicting emotions, engaged themselves in a dialogical interaction with the artworks and themselves. This engagement surrendered consumers 'to the power of the artwork and subsequent reflection on that experience' (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2009, p. 184):

"During my visit to Hirst's exhibition I was wondering if art is necessary to our lives and if I could understand this kind of art. And then it crossed my mind to ask him (Hirst): "Why do you relate pills with Apostles and a butterfly with a coffin?" While I was standing in front of the Crucifixion that he translated it into a series of medically explicit photographs of bloody wounds and surgical procedures, I received an answer to my question: "I relate my artworks with the most basic insecurities and fears of human existence". After that I started to ask myself "do you think that faith is just a drug?", "do you think that art is the new religion?" That time I realized that I had never associated science with religion and I told myself "art makes strong statements and expands your horizons...you should follow these horizons to become an innovative person" (female, 25 years old)

The narrative above shows the primary ('*I was wondering*') and secondary emotions ('*can I understand this kind of art?*' – i.e. a feeling of awkwardness) that this consumer experiences through her interaction with Hirst's art. The primary emotion of wonder, which encourages consumers to pause and admire the artworks, is regulated by the secondary emotion, i.e. her emotional response to the primary emotion. This reflection on the primary and secondary emotions arising from her experience discloses a dialogical process through which this visitor not only regulates but also experiences the opposing arising emotions (i.e. wonder and awkwardness). This dialogue, developed with the artworks and herself, not only puts this visitor in a closer contact with herself and the experience, but also leads to the creation of a new perspective through which she transforms herself. As such, emotions, by referring back to the self, are subjected to dialogical interactions, within which the regulation process, by negotiating and exchanging viewpoints and emotions, opens a window of possibilities for the emergence of new meanings within the self:

"The 'Rock and a Hard Place' theme of the Biennale made me think that it would showcase landscapes and greatest views of the world. When I entered the museum, I saw artworks that had nothing to do with landscapes. Even though that I am not visiting museums

very often, this sparked my curiosity. I continued my tour inside the museum to answer the question, what is this exhibition about?... While I was standing in front of an artwork the meaning of the exhibition emerged: borders, lines and restrictions. At that moment I started asking myself that this is our reality, isn't it? There are borders that define our existence, personal, economic and social borders... I felt that the exhibition tried to make me see all these artistic stimuli through myself. It was a journey from the unknown to known parts of myself...I discovered the poetic and political aspects of myself" (male, 27 years old)

This extract demonstrates how this visitor plays with the emotions and identity positions arising during his experience. The primary emotion of curiosity calls this consumer to explore the experience. Then his statement that he is a novice art consumer, reveals an identity and emotional state (i.e. novice visitor feeling surprised) through which he responds to the corresponding emotion of another identity position of himself (i.e. curious). The opposing emotional content of these positions, namely surprise and curiosity for the experience, instead of generating negative emotions, is being regulated through their co-existence. In other words, both identity positions and their corresponding emotions are voiced positions (i.e. *what is this exhibition about? This is our reality, isn't it?*) characterized by an active expression and exploration of new potentials of the self in this relationship. This dialogical regulation of conflicting emotions acts as a fertile ground for transforming himself.

Our research illustrates the dialogical process of emotion regulation which unpacks the significance of consumers' engagement and interaction with their primary emotions in order for them to experience an aesthetic experience as a transformative one. While prior research on (aesthetic) consumption experiences stresses the importance of emotions in accessing the 'value of otherness' (Chen, 2008) and achieving self-transformation (Illouz, 2009; Leder et al., 2004), it does not account for the interaction of primary and secondary emotions through which consumers access their felt emotions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Our study demonstrates how the interaction of primary and secondary emotions, by initiating internal dialogical processes, gives access to the inner realm of the experience (i.e. different identity positions; access to primary emotions) and as such it becomes the basis for discovering and transforming one's self.

4. Conclusions

This study, by disclosing the interaction between primary and secondary emotions in the emotion regulation process, explains how consumers share similar lived emotional experiences despite the processual and transient nature of consumers' identities and emotions

(Illouz, 2009). From a theoretical viewpoint, the study illuminates aspects of the emotion regulation process in experiential consumption not previously discussed in the literature. First, it illustrates that consumers' access or immersion to an aesthetic experience also relates to consumers' immersion to their felt emotions and identities through which they position themselves in an experience. This challenges previous conceptions regarding the connection between immersion and authenticity (e.g. is the context or the connection with a 'true' self that creates authentic experiences? Minkiewicz et al., 2014). Second, it sheds light into the role of dialogue in the emotion regulation process which unpacks the role of the interaction between primary and secondary emotions in the process of discovering and transforming one's self (Gao & Kerstetter, 2018). From a managerial viewpoint, performative curatorial practices that enable visitors to simultaneously zoom in (e.g. individual context) and out (e.g. understanding the broader art context) on the art field can engage visitors in richer and deeper ways (Dudley, 2013). In that way, curators and museum managers by facilitating emotional access to an experience can create experiences that are memorable in terms of accessing the 'value of otherness' rather than of being satisfied by the 'value otherness'.

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