Active Consumption: How the Architecture of the Experience Activates Consumer Engagement and Enjoyment

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior work has established the benefits of experiential over material consumption on consumer wellbeing (Nicolao, Irwin and Goodman 2009; Gilovich, Kumar and Jampol 2014), however, little attention has been devoted to the factors that enhance the very same experience. For instance, two individuals may attend the same art show or listen to the same song, but one might enjoy these experiences immensely, while the other feels disengaged. Holding constant the experience, what factors influence the extent to which consumers more or less enjoy it?

In this article, we focus on the role of providing the architecture of the experience on subsequent consumer engagement and enjoyment. Past research suggests two competing intuitions about the influence of prior information more generally on consumer enjoyment of an experience. On the one hand, revealing information could attenuate the enjoyment by both disrupting flow and reducing potential for surprise (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). On the other hand, other work has suggested that prior knowledge can increase enjoyment by enhancing consumer involvement (Bloom 2010; Humphrey, Thomas, and Joshua Gutwill 2005).

To reconcile these competing hypotheses, we propose that certain kinds of knowledge (as opposed to knowledge more generally) can enhance experiences. Specifically, we propose that information about the architecture of an experience uniquely enhances enjoyment relative to other forms of knowledge. Architectural information is defined as knowledge about the structure, arrangement, and/or framework of the experience (adapted from Fischer, Winter and Aier 2010; Winter, Buckl, Matthes, and Schweda 2010). For instance, in a song, the architectural information would be the arrangement of the chords and verses, but not the actual lyrics. In this way, architectural information is not about the content per se of the experience, but specifically about the organization or outline of it. Further, architectural information is embedded within the experience itself.

We propose that this combination of features leads architectural information to enhance experience in contrast to other kinds of knowledge. Because architectural information is embedded within the experience itself, consumers are cued to seek it as the experience unfolds, at the same time, because only architectural information, and not content, has been revealed, the potential for surprise is maintained. In some sense, architectural information is in a “sweet spot” where it is just enough information to induce engagement but not enough to induce boredom.

In the following studies, we test the basic hypothesis that architectural information enhances an experience relative to the same experience without prior architectural information. We then test people’s intuitions about the influence of architectural information on their experience. The last two studies employ a mediation and a moderation approach respectively in order to test our proposed process. Specifically, we test whether exposure to architectural information increases active participation and subsequent enjoyment of the experience. Finally, we contrast the effect of architectural information to other forms of knowledge about the experience.

Empirical Evidence

Study 1

Study 1 examined the basic effect by varying whether architectural, neutral, or no information was provided prior to the same experience. We predicted that the same experience would be enhanced by the architectural information relative to the other two conditions. Specifically, in all three conditions, participants read that they would listen to the song “Don’t Forget Me” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. In the architecture condition, before listening to the song, participants read about the structure of the song (i.e., the chords). To control for cognitive load, participants in the neutral information condition, prior to listening to the song, read a paragraph of equivalent length on a neutral topic. Finally, in the control condition, participants proceeded to listen to the song with no further information provided. Participants in all three conditions then listened to the song and reported how much they had enjoyed listening to it. As predicted, planned contrasts revealed that participants enjoyed the song more when they were given information about the architecture of the song ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.41$) compared to when they were given unrelated information ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.85$) and when they were given no additional information ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.75$), $t(300) = -2.86, p = .004, d = 0.38$. Further, the neutral information and control condition not differ from each other, $t(300) = 1.38, p = .17$. Of note, the effect of condition on enjoyment did not interact with prior familiarity with the song ($p = .23$).

Study 2

In Study 2, we were interested in examining whether people intuit that information about the architecture of the experience will enhance their consumption experience. To test this, we asked participants to predict how information about the architecture of a song would influence how others would enjoy the song. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate whether people who were provided with information about the structure of a song would enjoy it more relative to those who were given no information about the structure. Consistent with our hypothesis, most participants (68%) predicted that the song would be enjoyed more in the no information condition compared to the architecture information condition ($\chi^2(1) = 29.42, p < .001$). In addition, this pattern of results did not vary as a function of familiarity with the song ($\chi^2(1) = .86, p = .355$). Thus, we find that people do not intuit that architectural information will enhance enjoyment.

Study 3

Study 3 had two aims. The first was to test our proposed process. Specifically, we proposed that information about architecture enhances enjoyment because it prompts consumers to actively seek it within the experience itself. This “structure-seeking” increases active participation in the experience and subsequently enhances enjoyment. The second aim was to test whether this active participation is uniquely related to architectural information as opposed to general knowledge about the experience. To do so, we also manipulated the type of knowledge about the experience (structure vs. general knowledge).
Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: architecture, general song information and control. As in Study 1, in all conditions participants read that they would listen to the song “Don’t Forget Me” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. In the architecture condition, participants were provided with the same structure information as in Study 1. In the general song information condition, participants read information about the band. In the control condition participants listened to the song with no further information provided. Next, participants listened to the song and reported how much they enjoyed it using the same measure as in Study 1. To directly test our proposed process, participants then completed three randomized items. To capture structure-seeking, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they looked for structure when listening to the song (on a scale from 1: Not at all; 7: Very much). To assess active engagement, participants responded to the following two items: “When you were listening to the song, to what extent did you feel you were an active participant?” (1: Passive - 7: Active); “When you were listening to the song, to what extent did you feel you were an active listener?” (1: Not at all - 7: Very much). These two items were then combined into an active engagement composite (α = .69).

Consistent with our theorizing, planned contrasts revealed that participants enjoyed the song more in the architecture condition (M = 5.67, SD = 1.43) compared to both the general information (M = 4.82, SD = 1.64) and the control (M = 4.98, SD = 1.63) conditions, t(167) = -3.04, p = .003, d = .51, which did not differ from each other, t(167) = .54, p = .59. Further, in line with our proposed mechanism, participants in the architecture condition reported seeking structure more (M = 5.24, SD = 1.54) compared to both the general information (M = 4.18, SD = 1.69) and the control (M = 4.24, SD = 1.69) conditions, t(167) = -3.89, p < .001, d = .64, which did not differ from each other, t(167) = .18, p = .86. Further, active engagement paralleled the structure-seeking pattern, with participants in the architecture condition indicating higher active engagement with the song (M = 5.71, SD = 1.33) compared to both the general information (M = 5.03, SD = 1.39) and the control (M = 4.72, SD = 1.66) conditions, t(167) = -3.70, p < .001, d = .62, which did not differ from each other, t(167) = -1.17, p = .25.

Finally, we conducted a serial mediation model with bootstrapping (Hayes 2013), to test whether structure seeking and subsequent active engagement mediate the relationship between condition and enjoyment. The model revealed that indeed, participants in the architecture before song condition sought structure more, which led them to be more actively engaged with the song, resulting in greater enjoyment (95% CI for the indirect effect: [.0236, .2895]).

**General Discussion**

Across four studies, we find that the very same experience is enjoyed differently depending on what information people are exposed to prior to consumption. Specifically, we find that architectural information (as opposed to general knowledge or no knowledge) enhances enjoyment. Because this information is embedded within the experience itself, consumers are prompted to seek the structure of the experience as it unfolds. This, in turn, increases active participation in the experience and subsequent enjoyment.

Our work has several theoretical and practical implications. While prior research has focused on the contrast between experiential versus material consumption or on comparing different kinds of experiences (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2013; Nicolao, Irwin and Goodman 2009; Gilovich, Kumar and Jampol 2014), little attention has been devoted to what factors differentially enhance the very same experience. While experiences maybe more enjoyable relative to material goods, consumers do not always find experiences engaging. Our work explores a novel antecedent to enhancing experiential consumption—prior information about the architecture of the experience. Future work could further unpack other antecedents of active engagement in experiences.

Companies and marketers can use this work to be more cognizant of what kinds of information to reveal to consumers prior to consumption. Our work suggests that consumers do not always have the most accurate intuitions about what information or knowledge will enhance their experiences. Understanding what facilitates consumers to move from passive to more active consumption is a fruitful area for researchers and practitioners alike.

**REFERENCES**


