

## **Instinctive Influence: An Exploration of the Influences of Opinion Leaders on Buyers of Original Fine Art**

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***Abstract:** Forty-eight emerging buyers of fine art sorted a forty-seven statement Q sample representing motivations for purchasing contemporary, original, two-dimensional art. The Q sample was developed from the academic literature and from 17 in-depth interviews with opinion leaders. Two factors emerged from the factor analysis of the 48 Q sorts. Factor A participants look for meaning in art as it relates to them. Emerging Factor A buyers embrace opportunities to meet an artist. Knowledge of the artist's perspective broadens their understanding of the meaning of the piece. These less-experienced buyers rely on trusted friends, family, and colleagues to help them work through the process of making a purchasing decision. Factor B is defined by emotional buyers of art, who purchase more spontaneously. Factor B sorters are more interested in context of the art in their environment and in the larger arts scene. Factor B members tend to go outside their peer group when making a purchase decision. Merely connecting with an interior designer, architect, gallery representative, or source of aesthetic confidence, Factor B individuals find the emotional support needed to help validate their choice of art to be purchased.*

Judgments about fine art are especially complicated when one transitions from passive observer to active fine art consumer. Decision making in a high-involvement purchase, such as an original piece of contemporary fine art valued over \$500, is likely to be fraught with great emotion and require considerable thought. This paper examines the influences of opinion leaders in the art world on emerging buyers of fine art. Opinion leaders are individuals to whom others are likely to turn for advice when an unclear situation requires action (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Black 1982). In this study, opinion leaders are gallery owner/dealers, institutional art world leaders, art consultants, art critics/reviewers, artists, collectors, and interior designers. Our objective is to gain greater clarity about the extent to which such opinion leaders in the art world influence the buying decisions of emerging fine art purchasers.

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## Buyer Motivation

### *What motivates an individual to purchase an original work of fine art?*

Individuals are drawn to art for a variety of reasons: personal pleasure and self-enhancement, connections, status, social pressures, collection, or investment. Directly or indirectly, art may boost morale, help create a sense of unity, social solidarity and awareness of social issues, and provide rallying cries for action and for social change (Albrecht 1968). As diverse participants in the art world, our needs vary.

Stephenson, in his *play theory*, asserts that we enter the world for self-development and communications pleasure with a goal of responding to our whims and predilections without concern “rather than yielding to social pressures” (Stephenson 1967; 1994). Individuals may also turn to the art world to make connections with one another. Fine art appreciation and consumption give strangers something to talk about and facilitate the sociable interchange necessary for relationships to develop. Because artworks also lend themselves to multiple interpretations, their intended meanings may be sociologically less important than the ways in which they signify group affiliation (DiMaggio 1987).

Another important reason why potential art buyers might be attracted to the fine art world is to enjoy the privilege and cultural capital that come with participation (Anheier, Gehards, and Romo 1995). The term, *cultural capital*, describes the intangible assets of knowledge and sophistication one can acquire through education and exposure to the arts. Cultural capital may permit formal or informal admittance into a select group of people. Cultural capital also tends to develop or reinforce relations with high-status people (also called *elites*), and can lead to individual status mobility within and between social classes (Moore 1979). With increased cultural capital and the proper experience, competence, and connections, an inexperienced art buyer can change from a hanger-on at the periphery of the art world into an opinion leader.

## Art as Communication

### *How do ideas and innovations flow within the art world?*

Many scholars link the culture of a society with the nature of communication prevalent within it (Sriramesh and White 1992). Art flows within and throughout the art world in a series of multi-directional pathways forged through the development and expansion of relationships among individuals, groups, and social circles. Communications theories abound with ideas about how people communicate within interconnected cultures and subcultures.

## Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is “a process whereby information is transferred by whatever observable or reportable means, between individuals or groups”

(Rubenstein 1953). Interpersonal relations influence decision making by serving as networks or channels of communication and acting as sources of social pressure and social support (Katz 1987). Though interpersonal communication is often assumed to be face-to-face between at least a sender and receiver, it can also occur between person and an audience, over the phone or in writing (Kotler 2000). Both parties bring their own experience to the discussion, but there is a requirement for some shared knowledge for effective communication to take place.

Researchers often emphasize the importance of the characteristics of those who transmit information within interpersonal networks. Katz (1957) offers that strategic social location leads to an essential communications role within a group. Sometimes the more significant communicator is at the center of the group — in terms of beliefs and positions — and at other times, a person having a peripheral role in the group may exert more significant influence.

One of the most obvious and fundamental principles of human communication is that the exchange of messages most frequently occurs between a source and receiver who are similar. *Homophily* refers to the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, and social status (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). Communication partners tend to be homophilous in a free choice situation, because similarity leads to more effective communication and greater homophily in knowledge. Shared knowledge may also serve as the basis for more confident action.

### **Balance Theory**

The decision to acquire original fine art requires a high degree of involvement of the purchaser. The level of involvement refers to the extent to which the purchase or innovation makes one think or feel. For example, the less experienced a buyer of fine art is, the more likely he is to invest a great degree of effort or solicit assistance in the evaluation stage to avoid making an under-confident decision and the potential remorse that often follows.

Balance theory states that if a person is exposed to new observations or beliefs that he perceives to be inconsistent with his present belief, he is thrown into a condition of *imbalance*. The psychological stress induced by the imbalanced state motivates him to do something that will bring his cognitive structure back into balance (Osgood 1960; Troidahl 1966). As it relates to fine art purchasing behavior, an art buyer may consult others to re-establish equilibrium, when outside the comfort zone.

### **Social Network Theory**

The social network theory provides that a vast network of subcultures exists within the art world, which serves as fertile ground for active dialogue between people and among groups of people. The concept of opinion leaders

is more tangible if one thinks of the network as a series of circles. Within social networks, the transfer of information is highly dependent on the availability and utilization of channels of interpersonal communication. Without such channels, communications can be highly ineffective (Rubenstein, 1953).

If we accept the premise of social network theory that this web is interconnected, it matters less who influences the art consumer (these circles inevitably overlap), but it becomes more important to explore how and why local networks influence art purchasing behaviors. It is crucial to understand the ways communication relationships directly and indirectly facilitate development of a group of leaders from a wide variety of institutions into a network capable of discussing and resolving issues of national concern (Moore 1979).

### **Opinion Leadership**

#### ***Who are the opinion leaders in the art world and how do they function?***

Access to art is relatively limited. In order to purchase art, an emerging collector must be exposed to the work. By its nature, access to original (non-reproduced), two dimensional works of art is restricted to a handful of venues: a gallery or museum, retail establishment, archive, or the home or office of a friend or acquaintance. At each of these points of access, human contact is inevitable, and contact with an opinion leader likely to directly or indirectly influence the decision to buy a piece of art is probable.

Numerous researchers have examined mass communications and its influence on opinion leaders. Information on the topic has grown exponentially since Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) pioneered research on opinion leadership. Before making decisions, individuals may seek to reinforce their opinions through validation with others (Rogers and Cartano 1962). Opinion leaders are individuals to whom others are more likely to turn for advice when faced with an unclear situation requiring a reaction (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Black 1982). Opinion leaders do not necessarily drive communications influences; sometimes individuals solicit their advice. The same leaders may play many different roles and be seen as authorities in a variety of focus areas. The opinion leader brings about contact with some "related part of the world outside" of a group or individual sphere of understanding or knowledge (Katz 1957).

Opinion leaders may be institutional gatekeepers, such as museum curators, key gallery directors, critics, or important collectors who define the current trends through their own exhibitions and purchases (Rosenblum 1978). The nature of their relationships and their effects on persons they influence may be more important than the position or power possessed by individual opinion leaders. Weimann (1991) describes the vertical flow of influence

within a social network occurring largely within the group, with highly influential persons centrally positioned in service roles, such as “opinion leaders,” advisors, and guiding docents. Opinion leaders and the people they influence tend to be homophilous, and typically belong to the same primary group of family, friends, and colleagues (Katz 1957). Active opinion leaders (those who offer opinions on a regular basis) may be influential in several domains. However, the influence of occasional opinion leaders (those who offer infrequent advice) tends not to span multiple focus areas (Booth and Babchuk 1972). Applying these concepts to the area of art, we conclude that while someone central to the art world, (a gallery owner, artist, artist’s representative, or art critic) may also be influential in domains outside of art, a more peripheral (or marginal) member of a social circle, may have a less extensive influence on an art buyer.

Whether seeking value consensus or intending to persuade, an opinion leader needs to build trust, familiarity, and extensive connections within and across circles (Moore 1979). A major effect of persuasive communication lies in “stimulating the individual to think both of his initial opinion and of the new opinion recommended in the communication” (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953).

In relation to art buying, it is unclear whether the purchaser will require a great deal of input before finalizing the transaction. The quality of the information, the effectiveness of the communication, and the relationship between the parties determine whether the flow of opinions has an impact in a particular situation. In addition, the art purchaser is influenced by both direct and indirect input from opinion leaders. One might derive input through verbal contact within one’s social circle (friends, relatives, colleagues, significant others), from the media (trade publications, daily periodicals, radio, TV, and general media), and from the context in which the art is presented. (An example of context would be a well-respected gallery offering a reason or meaning for buying a particular piece of art, because of its presentation and the reputation of the gallery.) Influence can also come in the form of a recommendation or in response to a solicitation. Buyer motivation determines the communications context in which art buying decisions are made, and thus conditions the influence of opinion leaders on the purchaser. The purpose of this work is to gather and analyze subjective information from buyers of fine art about the influences of opinion leaders.

### **Method**

A review of the literature indicated that a person’s subjective opinion, as formed through cultural, social, and communications experiences forms the basis for judgement. Stephenson developed Q technique and its methodology (1953) as a way for investigating a situation focusing on subjectivity rather

than facts, “e.g., in aesthetic judgment, poetic interpretation, perceptions of organizational roles, political attitudes...perspectives on life...”(Brown 1996). Q technique was the most suitable research approach for this study, because it offered the best possibility of revealing the subjective opinions of the participants by enabling them to construct models of their beliefs.

Fundamentally, Q methodology involves participants rank ordering stimulus items (Q sample) in response to a condition of instruction (e.g., from *most characteristic* to *most uncharacteristic*). The resulting Q sorts are correlated and factor analyzed. People who have sorted the items in a similar fashion will cluster together forming a *factor* that represents an attitude or point of view shared by the sorters associated with it.<sup>1</sup>

### Concourse

The concourse for this Q study was developed from multiple sources — interviews with opinion leaders of the art world, participant observation, and the literature. Seventeen in-depth interviews were conducted focusing on how opinion leaders saw their influence on inexperienced art buyers. Interviewees included 5 gallery owners or dealers, 3 institutional art world leaders, 3 art consultants, 2 art critics, 2 artists, 1 established collector, and 1 interior designer.

Statements specifically focusing on the impact of peers on art buying in social, casual, or experiential settings were gathered for the concourse by participant observation. Most of the observation took place in fine art galleries in a public setting during gallery openings or monthly gallery walks. The statements were derived from overheard comments and through informal conversations with attendees. The academic literature was also used as source for concourse statements.

### Q sample

A 47-item Q sample was drawn from the concourse and structured with eight opinion leader groups in mind — artists, peers, art organizations, collectors, interior designers, art consultants, galleries/dealers, and media. Approximately six statements from each category were selected for the final Q sample. An example of an artist type statement is number 3, “I like to talk with an artist when narrowing the choices between works by other artists; artists seem to understand what is important.” Number 10 is an example of a peer-type statement; “I always like to run my art purchases by a friend who shares my

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of Q methodology, see Brown, S.R., 1980, *Political subjectivity: Applications of Q Methodology in political science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Brown, S.R 1986, Q technique and method: Principles and procedures, pp 57-76, in W.D. Berry and M.S. Lewis-Beck (Eds.) *New tools for social scientists: Advances and applications in research methods*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications; and McKeown, B. and Thomas, D. 1988, *Q Methodology*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

aesthetic sense and can steer me clear of pitfalls.” Number 13 illustrates an art organization statement, “Artists who receive grants are the good ones. They have passed the muster with a board of respected art world leaders.” The Q sample and factor arrays are presented in the Appendix.

### **P sample**

Forty-eight subjects were recruited for the Q study, utilizing a *snowball* sampling method. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability technique used when you can only identify a few members of a target public directly. Interviews are conducted with known members who, in turn, are asked to name other people they know to be members of the target public (Broom and Dozier 1990). Subjects were identified through the following channels:

- verbal requests for referrals posed to opinion leaders who took part in this study (including gallery owners, art association leaders, artists and their customers, and members of their primary and secondary groups),
- verbal requests to individuals or groups with the lead author’s primary and secondary groups,
- a recruitment posting on [www.artdish.com](http://www.artdish.com), a local art gossip Internet site, and
- referrals by participants in the Q study.

Eighty percent of the P sample were persons between the ages of 35 and 50. Approximately 70% of the participants were female (33 of 48). All participants were college graduates, half of whom held at least one graduate degree. One third had some formal exposure to art in college or continuing education classes, while one half said they had no formal or professional exposure to fine arts. Virtually all of the Q study participants resided in the Puget Sound Area of Washington State, with only 2 living outside the area. One Q sort was administered in person while the remaining 47 were administered by mail.

### **Condition of Instruction**

Subjects sorted the statements in response to the instruction, “Which statements are most characteristic to most uncharacteristic of your motivations for purchasing contemporary, original, two-dimensional art?” The sorted statements were distributed according to the pattern:

	<i>most uncharacteristic</i>						<i>most characteristic</i>				
<i>Score</i>	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Frequency</i>	2	3	4	5	6	7	6	5	4	3	2

**Analysis**

The 48 Q sorts were subjected to correlation and factor analysis. Centroid extraction with varimax rotation was performed through the PCQ3 software program (Stricklin 1987-96).

**Results**

Two factors accounting for 43% of the variance emerged from the analysis of the Q sorts. Twenty-eight subjects loaded significantly on Factor A, nine on Factor B. Six Q sorts were confounded (loaded on both factors), and five did not load on either factor. The factors were correlated at  $r = 0.45$ .

**Factor A**

Twenty-eight participants (11 males, 17 females) loaded purely on Factor A. They ranged in age from 30 to 70 and included the youngest and oldest participants in the study. The mean age was 44. Sixty-four percent (18 of 28) had graduate degrees. Twelve participants had purchased four to eight pieces of two-dimensional, contemporary art valued at \$500-\$10,000 in the last five years. Ten participants had purchased two or three pieces, and the remaining six only one piece.

Factor A is a highly educated, professional group of self-made individuals. These people are practical, inquisitive and analytical, and they thrive on learning and the pursuit of knowledge — especially as it relates to a specific fine art purchase. When making a decision about purchasing fine art, this group frequently looked at a variety of sources for indirect input, but found that their primary peer group was the ultimate source of support and affirmation rather than art consultants or interior designers (statements 40, 47).

Loaders on Factor A search for meaning in art. They have an established aesthetic sense, but are not satisfied by aesthetics alone. They seek a connection to the work through the artist's background (previous exhibitions, exposure, genre, technique), motivations, or other input. An emerging Factor A buyer would embrace an opportunity to meet an artist, feeling that is a way to bring a work of art to life. Knowledge of the artist's perspective would broaden the purchaser's understanding of the meaning of art. Artists are important opinion leaders for this group (2, 5, 6).

These emerging collectors rely on trusted friends, family, and colleagues to help them unlock the meaning a piece of art has for them in working through their decision-making process. Peer input, recommendations, and sounding boards are important to them. They consult significant others before making a purchase. They also embrace the adventure of buying art, eager to learn what friends and colleagues have purchased and where. Important as well, Factor A individuals are likely to seek advice from colleagues with a respected aesthetic. Theirs is a serious, as opposed to social, relationship with primary and secondary groups (7, 8).



*Salient Statements for Factor A*

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
2	Meeting the artist brings a work of art to life.	+5	+4
5	I need to understand the artists' motivations to get the full meaning of the art.	+3	-3
6	I like to know as much about the artist, genre and process as possible when I buy an original work of art (such as previous exhibitions and exposure, genre, techniques, etc.).	+4	+1
7	My partner and I consult one another whenever we make a fine art purchase. By merging our independent opinions, we can typically come to an informed and aesthetically pleasing decision.	+5	+3
8	If someone I know with a respected aesthetic sense has purchased a piece by a specific artist, I am more likely to seek out the artist's work or go to the gallery or source where he/she made the purchase.	+3	+4
23	I like to have my interior designer or architect design around my originals. If a piece generally meets the size and textural specs of my living spaces, I have license to buy what I like.	-4	+1
24	My interior designer helps me to identify my aesthetic sense by feeding my sense of curiosity with an array of colors, shapes, genres and textures.	-3	+2
25	My interior designer can identify work that looks expensive or precious, even if its price tag is reasonable.	-4	-1
26	I buy art that contrasts with my interior environment. My interior designer is sometimes appalled with what I buy.	-3	-2
27	My interior designer helps me to create my personal, visual brand identity. I buy art as an extension of that brand.	-5	+2
28	My art consultant offers an ability to preview a wide variety of artwork in one sitting.	-2	0
29	I look to art consultants to help me assess all that is current in the art world and pertinent to my tastes.	-3	-3
30	Art consultants do the research for me about the artist, education, genre, experience—or whatever interests me. This gives me the knowledge I need to make impulse buys, when needed.	-2	-1
31	Art consultants can expose me to work beyond regional and national borders. I like to discover work that has a place in the international scheme.	-2	0
32	My art consultant has helped me to learn how to collect.	-3	-2
40	Art buying is an adventure. I like to sample art by learning about what friends and colleagues have purchased and where.	+4	+2
47	I like to have an interior designer confirm that a work I like "fits" the environmental scheme of my living space.	-5	+2

Finally, Factor A individuals are not consultant-dependent. An overwhelmingly consistent negative emphasis was placed on the role of interior designers in the art-buying process. This verifies the fiercely independent nature of this factor. They do not need an interior designer or an

architect to create a visual brand/identity to “confirm” that their choice of art fits in with the overall environmental scheme of the living space. They do not care whether an interior designer is appalled by choices they make, and they do not need interior design consultants to reinforce their already mature curiosity. Loaders on Factor A hold a similar disdain for art consultants. They do not want to wade through a lot of images to find out what works for them. They do not need someone to help them “learn” how to do anything — especially not to collect. They already are motivated to collect, and want to do it all on their own terms (40, 47).

### **Factor B**

Nine participants loaded purely on Factor B, a group with only one male. Ages ranged from 39-47 years (mean = 42). Only one had an advanced degree. Seven purchased two to three original art pieces in the last five years, one purchased one piece and the other purchased four to eight.

Factor B loaders are emotional collectors of art. In their spontaneous purchasing decisions, they are relatively more art-aware, status conscious, and social than Factor A. Unlike Factor A members who need to understand the meaning behind the art as it relates to them, Factor B individuals are more interested in the context of the art in their environments and in the larger arts scene (5). These buyers seek out art in public places, like restaurants or stores because they are predisposed toward art (9, 35, 36, 37).

The Factor B individual is a visually and aesthetically aware person who enjoys shopping for art, is relatively acquisitive, enjoys travel, and is open to exploring ways to add value to the surrounding aesthetic environment. Factor B loaders are not as fiercely independent about working with consultants. In fact, they have worked and are willing to work with a designer, should the need arise (24, 27, 47).

Factor B collectors enjoy participating in the events of the art world, but on their own terms. They want to talk with other collectors or meet with an artist (2, 5). They do not use the tastes of professional art critics and journalists to guide their own selections (43, 44). These collectors are not highly influenced by trend-setters, although they tend to be more willing to participate in the art world than Factor A. Factor B loaders appear to be always open to visual art. They may make a mental note about a piece in a restaurant or high-end retail store and save this for the future when they are ready to buy (9). Factor B individuals like galleries, as they enjoy viewing art in such environments (35, 36, 37, 39). One explanation is that a Factor B person feels more comfortable going to galleries and is less likely to be intimidated by the environment than perhaps might be a Factor A individual, who internalizes art as something is important that requires an appointment, or at least a methodical approach, to purchase. While the Factor A loader looks for meaning in art (5), those on Factor B find that art conveys its own personal meaning for them (46).

**Salient Statements for Factor B**

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
2	Meeting the artist brings a work of art to life.	+5	+4
5	I need to understand the artists' motivations to get the full meaning of the art.	+3	-3
9	When I see an interesting work of art in a public setting — like a restaurant or store — I make a mental note, then catalog the details for the next time I am ready to buy art.	+2	+5
18	It is exciting to see what established collectors buy at art auctions. If I can aspire to make similar investments, I will.	-1	-3
19	I am acquisitive by nature. Original fine art is collectible. After buying my first few pieces, I find I am addicted to the feeling of owning more original works of art.	+1	+2
20	When I am invited to a private showing or an exclusive arts event, where other collectors are present, I tend to make more purchases than when participating in the monthly gallery walk.	+2	0
21	When I am on the fence about a piece's potential, I sometimes ask a collector friend to act as a sounding board for me to voice my impressions of the pros and cons of a particular purchase.	0	+1
22	I buy to create a portfolio that offers collective value.	0	-5
24	My interior designer helps me to identify my aesthetic sense by feeding my sense of curiosity with an array of colors, shapes, genres and textures.	-3	+2
27	My interior designer helps me to create my personal, visual brand identity. I buy art as an extension of that brand.	-5	+2
35	Galleries are particularly useful when one is "sampling" art during the first couple purchases. The range of prices offers something for everybody.	+2	+3
36	The monthly gallery walk offers me the ability to get a sense about how a piece contrasts to other available artwork.	+1	+3
37	Galleries provide focus and an excellent opportunity to get educated on a specific genre of work.	+3	+4
39	If a gallery takes the time to print an art catalog or prepare information that I can refer to in the future, I see that as extra value.	+2	+3
43	I like to buy artists who have been profiled in a major art publication or regional newspaper; an artist's history of publication is important.	0	-4
44	I read what the art critics say as background about what is going on in the arts scene. This is an important foundation for my purchase(s).	-1	-4
46	I read what the critics say about an artist or show to get me out the door, but no matter how much an artist or body of work is acclaimed, I must truly connect with the art before I will make a purchase.	+4	+5
47	I like to have an interior designer confirm that a work I like "fits" the environmental scheme of my living space.	-5	+2

In this study, the Factor B individual is emotional about buying decisions (18, 19, 22). These collectors buy to love a piece for the long term. For assurance, they enjoy a human connection (7, 8, 21), but may look for this relationship outside their peer circles of influence. Factor B loaders tend to widen their peer group when making the decision to purchase art. Merely connecting with an interior designer, architect, gallery representative, or source of aesthetic confidence, Factor B individuals find the emotional support needed to help validate their choice of art to be purchased.

### Consensus Items

Strong positive consensus statements reflect the desires of persons on both factors to meet the artist and to “connect” with the art they contemplate for purchase. Additionally, participants on both factors appreciate art galleries, because they are convenient ways to allow emerging collectors to sample and become more aware of art, as well as develop a more educated sense of personal preference (35, 37, 39). Word-of-mouth recommendation from an acquaintance with a respected aesthetic sense is valued by members of both factors.

### Consensus Statements

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
2	Meeting the artist brings a work of art to life.	+5	+4
8	If someone I know with a respected aesthetic sense has purchased a piece by a specific artist, I am more likely to seek out the artist's work or go to the gallery or source where he/she made the purchase.	+3	+4
35	Galleries are particularly useful when one is “sampling” art during the first couple purchases. The range of prices offers something for everybody.	+2	+3
37	Galleries provide focus and an excellent opportunity to get educated on a specific genre of work.	+3	+4
39	If a gallery takes the time to print an art catalog or prepare information that I can refer to in the future, I see that as extra value.	+2	+3
45	If an artist does not have an Internet presence, he/she is not worth more than \$500.	-4	-5
46	I read what the critics say about an artist or show to get me out the door, but no matter how much an artist or body of work is acclaimed, I must truly connect with the art before I will make a purchase	+4	+5

The strongest negative consensus item concerned perceived value of an artist's work based on whether or not the artist has an “internet presence.” At least for emerging art buyers in this study, having an internet presence does not correlate with value. Another negative consensus topic is the implication that art buying is a social thing, requiring permissions from peers (11). Neither

Factor A nor Factor B buys art for the sole purpose of supporting a good cause. The shared negative emphasis (12, 14) suggests that the impetus to purchase art must go beyond charity. Because money is always a consideration, buying art is not typically a frivolous or benevolent undertaking.

The research further implies that the call to purchase a piece of art requires a personal connection with someone in a position of trust. Rather than relying on institutional credentialing — by art juries, grant panels, arts organizations, recognized art publications, critics or established collectors — as a basis for their art buying decisions (13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 43, 44), both Factor A and Factor B consider the individual judgments of influential others. A partner, a friend with a respected aesthetic, a colleague with an art collection, a reputable art gallery or another peer is likely to provide the support and reinforcement needed to make individual judgments regarding quality and worth and, ultimately, to inspire these relatively new collectors of art to buy.

### **Limitations of this Study**

- **Recruiting.** A “snowball” method was used to allow participants to recruit other participants for this Q study. The result was that many of the participants in this study knew each other and may have come from similar social circles. Viewed differently, the recruitment process used here would have increased the possibility of demonstrating the impacts of any social networking, a key feature of local peer influences on fine art buyers. A random sampling method may have offered a greater number of buyer perspectives, and could have reduced any peer competition effects noted in these results.
- **The participants.** The participants in the study were predominantly female.
- **Demographic Profile.** The survey used was informal and did not collect additional personal data beyond asking participants to identify any additional input from buyers. Upon analysis, it was clear that a more thorough demographic profile could be helpful in offering supplemental information for the Q study. A more carefully designed demographic
- **Profile might have addressed issues such as income and added more depth in other areas as well.**
- **The scope.** In this study, relationships were explored among local participants from only the Puget Sound geographic area.

### **Future Studies**

- The present study suggests possibilities for several future communications studies. Following are a few follow-up research recommendations:

- Explore the role of emergent buyers in progressive five-year increments to determine whether time and exposure to art would change the extent to which opinion leaders influence the art buying process of emergent buyers. Do emergent buyers become collectors over time?
- Replicate the study with more experienced buyers or buyers who have broader demographic diversity. This might reveal additional or different opinion leader influences.
- Examine the relationships, if any, between income and financial ability to make discretionary fine art purchases as these relate to emergent buyers and their relationships with art world opinion leaders.
- Explore the link between education and opinion leader influences in the art world.
- Extend this study to different art markets such as New York, Los Angeles, or Santa Fe.

## Conclusion

The objective of this work was to gain greater clarity about the extent to which opinion leaders influence the buying decisions of emerging fine art purchasers. Analysis of Q sorts from participants in this research revealed that emerging buyers of art *do* rely on art world opinion leaders. Because art is a high-involvement purchase with a high degree of complexity, a less-experienced art buyer is likely to solicit external opinions.

### *The art network*

The degree to which opinion leaders in the art world shape the buyer's exposure to art, and therefore, purchasing decisions, is determined by a variety of influences. This study revealed that some influences may be direct, as in the case of a Factor A buyer who seeks answers to questions about art from peers, artists, and dealers. However, influences can also be indirect, as demonstrated in Factor B for the less cerebral buying approach.

### *Communication theory*

The essence of this paper is its exploration of communication flows within and around the local art world. The work examines popular communications theories: interpersonal communications, balance, social network and opinion leadership. Through the one-on-one interviews with opinion leaders of the art world and the exploration of emergent buyer opinions in this Q study, this research illuminated impacts of the social network of the art world on a local community and supported the notion that information also flows locally throughout that network via a combination of interpersonal communication processes. The amount of information an emergent buyer needs or the degree of influence that an opinion leader will have on that buyer will depend on the buyer's willingness to engage the local art world and established relationships.

A gallery owner or art consultant must be aware of many buyer motivations and use motivations appropriately to build positive relationships among local collectors.

**Peers**

The reference groups identified by art collectors are likely to impact both the manner in which one enters and engages the art world and the criteria by which purchase decisions are made. Peers were very influential in the art buying process among the participants, and played a role that, at times, was most important, even transcending the local art world opinion leaders.

Both Factor A and Factor B found peer influences to be important in shaping art purchasing decisions. For the participants in this study, a peer with less centralized authority within the art world may be just as influential as a more widely acknowledged opinion leader. This research suggests that the peers of these participants serve a functional elite role and are likely to represent for buyers of fine art something more than sounding boards or conduits of information. This research raises the possibility of future studies to explore the role of peers functioning as an effective local opinion leader group, significant and distinct from other art world influences.

**Artists**

Among the participants in this study, artists also serve as art world influences on emerging buyers. Both the factors suggested that emergent buyers may want a connection with the artist, perhaps by knowing the artist personally, or at least through attempts to understand the artist's creative inspiration or career achievements, biography, etc. This finding contrasts with results from the more general research about opinion leaders, which suggests artists do not play an important role with respect to art buying, although some collectors of multiple pieces from one artist sometimes may indeed want to meet the artist.

**Other findings**

In general, this study demonstrated that specific local opinion leaders were influential for the participants even though they did not rely on the institutional art world leaders or interior designers. Galleries functioned as important opinion leaders for Factor B, and nearly all participants appeared to want to make a human connection with one or more opinion leaders at the local point of purchase.

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## APPENDIX

## Factor Arrays

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
1	An artist's education and travel experiences are important indicators of his/her commitment to the work.	0	+1
2	Meeting the artist brings a work of art to life.	+5	+4
3	I like to talk with an artist when narrowing the choices between works by other artists; artists seem to understand what is important.	+2	-1
4	The piece and the artist are interchangeable. When I buy an original work by an artist, I have bought the artist.	+1	-1
5	I need to understand the artists' motivations to get the full meaning of the art.	+3	-3
6	I like to know as much about the artist, genre and process as possible when I buy an original work of art (such as previous exhibitions and exposure, genre, techniques, etc.).	+4	+1
7	My partner and I consult one another whenever we make a fine art purchase. By merging our independent opinions, we can typically come to an informed and aesthetically pleasing decision.	+5	+3
8	If someone I know with a respected aesthetic sense has purchased a piece by a specific artist, I am more likely to seek out the artist's work or go to the gallery or source where he/she made the purchase.	+3	+4
9	When I see an interesting work of art in a public setting — like a restaurant or store — I make a mental note, then catalog the details for the next time I am ready to buy art.	+2	+5
10	I always like to run my art purchases by a friend who shares my aesthetic sense and can steer me clear of pitfalls.	+1	-2
11	Buying art is a social outlet for me. I to do "the gallery thing" or go to an art fair with friends/family. If I like something on one of these outings, I will typically buy it, with "permission" from my colleague(s).	-1	-3
12	I buy art exclusively at benefit auctions. If the cause is a good one, I will support it by buying work.	-2	-2
13	Artists who receive grants are the good ones. They have passed the muster with a board of respected art world leaders.	-2	-4
14	Art associations and groups like Artist's Trust and Poncho feed the arts community. They elevate the status of artists and promote the viability of art in our community. I buy work that supports such organizations and their missions.	+1	0
15	Juried art shows and exhibitions are a tremendous opportunity to view art that has been pre-screened. It helps to be able to tell someone that something I like came from a particular fair or art venue.	0	0
16	Arts-related groups keep their eyes on the rising stars. Their acknowledgement of an artist serves as validation that a work of art has potential investment value.	0	0

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
17	It is important to look at an artist's CV or resume to learn about the private and corporate collections to which an artist's work belongs.	-1	-2
18	It is exciting to see what established collectors buy at art auctions. If I can aspire to make similar investments, I will.	-1	-3
19	I am acquisitive by nature. Original fine art is collectible. After buying my first few pieces, I find I am addicted to the feeling of owning more original works of art.	+1	+2
20	When I am invited to a private showing or an exclusive arts event, where other collectors are present, I tend to make more purchases than when participating in the monthly gallery walk.	+2	0
21	When I am on the fence about a piece's potential, I sometimes ask a collector friend to act as a sounding board for me to voice my impressions of the pros and cons of a particular purchase.	0	+1
22	I buy to create a portfolio that offers collective value.	0	-5
23	I like to have my interior designer or architect design around my originals. If a piece generally meets the size and textural specs of my living spaces, I have license to buy what I like.	-4	+1
24	My interior designer helps me to identify my aesthetic sense by feeding my sense of curiosity with an array of colors, shapes, genres and textures.	-3	+2
25	My interior designer can identify work that looks expensive or precious, even if its price tag is reasonable.	-4	-1
26	I buy art that contrasts with my interior environment. My interior designer is sometimes appalled with what I buy.	-3	-2
27	My interior designer helps me to create my personal, visual brand identity. I buy art as an extension of that brand.	-5	+2
28	My art consultant offers an ability to preview a wide variety of artwork in one sitting.	-2	0
29	I look to art consultants to help me assess all that is current in the art world and pertinent to my tastes.	-3	-3
30	Art consultants do the research for me about the artist, education, genre, experience—or whatever interests me. This gives me the knowledge I need to make impulse buys, when needed.	-2	-1
31	Art consultants can expose me to work beyond regional and national borders. I like to discover work that has a place in the international scheme.	-2	0
32	My art consultant has helped me to learn how to collect.	-3	-2
33	I like to buy work from a reputable gallery or dealer.	+3	+1
34	The way I am approached at a gallery has a lot to do with whether I buy work or not. There are some galleries that I will no longer patronize.	+1	0
35	Galleries are particularly useful when one is "sampling" art during the first couple purchases. The range of prices offers something for everybody.	+2	+3

	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor</i>	
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>
36	The monthly gallery walk offers me the ability to get a sense about how a piece contrasts to other available artwork.	+1	+3
37	Galleries provide focus and an excellent opportunity to get educated on a specific genre of work.	+3	+4
38	I prefer to rent a piece from a gallery before making a decision – the “try before you buy” approach. This way, I know that what I buy will work for me for the long term.	-1	-1
39	If a gallery takes the time to print an art catalog or prepare information that I can refer to in the future, I see that as extra value.	+2	+3
40	Art buying is an adventure. I like to sample art by learning about what friends and colleagues have purchased and where.	+4	+2
41	The printed and online art exhibition publications provide critical information about what is worth seeing.	0	+1
42	The size and prominence of an art publication says a lot about the reputation and success of the gallery or venue in which the art is shown.	-1	-1
43	I like to buy artists who have been profiled in a major art publication or regional newspaper; an artist’s history of publication is important.	0	-4
44	I read what the art critics say as background about what is going on in the arts scene. This is an important foundation for my purchase(s).	-1	-4
45	If an artist does not have an Internet presence, he/she is not worth more than \$500.	-4	-5
46	I read what the critics say about an artist or show to get me out the door, but no matter how much an artist or body of work is acclaimed, I must truly connect with the art before I will make a purchase	+4	+5
47	I like to have an interior designer confirm that a work I like “fits” the environmental scheme of my living space.	-5	+2