

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION. EDUTAINMENT IS BORN!

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the impact of new technologies on the value which the consumer obtains from edutainment consumption. **Edutainment** is the convergence of education and entertainment. An experiential approach to consumer behaviour has been adopted to analyse the experience of edutainment consumption. The use of new technologies strengthens the interaction between the consumer and the message, and gives rise to a **Virtual Edutainment Environment**. The author analyses the characteristics of this new environment and the consumer's reactions to it (**edutainment immersion experience**). Conclusions and managerial implications are also discussed to suggest that educational institutions should choose new ways of relating to the consumer.*

Key words

Edutainment; consumer behaviour; experience; new technologies; cultural consumption

JEL Codes : M31; Z10; I20

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1. Introduction

Amongst the numerous phenomena of sector convergence, *edutainment*, the convergence of education and entertainment, is especially interesting given its recent diffusion and also the importance of the two convergent sectors (King, 1993; Wolf, 1999).

Along with the rise of edutainment, the application of new technologies to the world of art and culture in general is quickly spreading. Consistently to what has been theorized on the general effects of the application of new technologies (Rheingold, 1993; Pine, Gilmore, 1999; Kotler, 1999), it is reasonable to presume that emerging applications in the artistic world have, amongst others, the effect of emphasizing the convergence between education and entertainment. The consumption of art seems therefore subject to considerable evolution, and this requires a new analysis of the moment in which the individual and the work of art interact through the mediation of technological applications.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the characteristics of edutainment consumption and to analyse how new technologies influence it. It discusses a new theme, both with reference to the selected context (the phenomenon of edutainment itself and its consumption have not been studied in depth so far), and to the object itself (artistic consumption mediated by technological applications).

For this purpose, reference is made to the literature on the experiential interpretation of consumer behavior (Hirschman, Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, Hirschman, 1982), as education and entertainment are contexts based on experience, on the intense involvement of the individual and his emotions. The decision to apply this interpretation of consumer behavior to edutainment is justified by previous studies on entertainment (Pine, Gilmore, 1999; Valdani, Guenzi, 1998) and education (Kolb, 1984; Walter, Marks, 1981; Merriam, Caffarella, 1991).

An in-depth analysis of the main object of the research and an original model of analysis of cultural experience are provided.

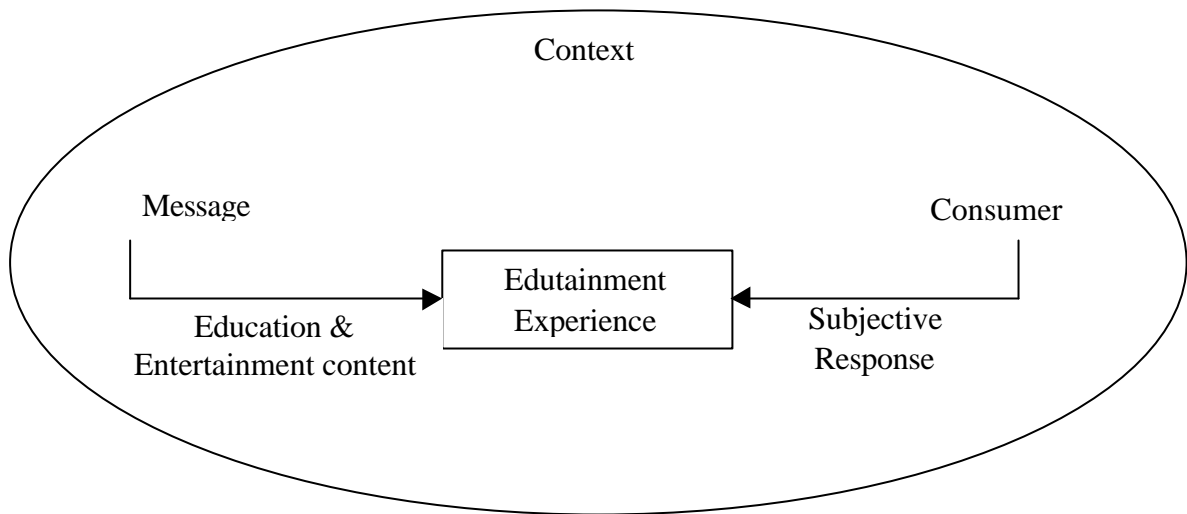
2. The Edutainment Experience

According to the experiential interpretation, consumption is the experience derived from the interaction between a subject (the consumer), and an object (i.e. a product, an event, an idea, a person), within a given context. It is only from the interaction of these two entities that experience, nourished by the subject and the object, can originate. Such recognition undermines the validity of the so-called ‘main function of the product’, a very popular modern concept, as this theory indicates that what the consumer actually draws from

consumption is a variety of personal meanings (Firat, et. al., 1995). The interpretation of consumption as an interactive event between a subject and an object allows an innovative interpretation of cultural consumption. In this sense, the consumption of art and culture is interactive and therefore experiential. The holistic vision of experience cannot be related to an elite vision of art and culture, founded exclusively on educational assumptions. The concept of experience, in fact, is based on the involvement of the individual, and in the case of art and culture it refers as much to his education as to his entertainment. The consumption of art and culture may therefore be interpreted as a form of edutainment, as the specific objective of such activity, education or entertainment, is totally forgotten and the individual, is enjoying himself and learning at the same time.

The experiential interpretation applied to edutainment highlights the interaction between the subject and the object, in particular owing to the distinctive features of the object. The object of the edutainment experience, unlike the subject, is different from any other form of consumption: a message has replaced the object in the general interactive scheme, and this message has both an educational and an entertaining content.. In other words, the message gives the experience a content that is in itself partly entertaining and partly educational. The two types of content intermingle with each other until the distinction between the two becomes difficult and arbitrary to determine. The subject, i.e. the consumer, expresses his own personality adding, there and then, his subjective responses to the experience. On the other hand the consumer does not passively absorb the message, but actively contributes to the creation of the edutainment experience by his subjective responses, which vary both in time and space. The message contribution (the entertainment and education content) and the consumer's contribution (his subjective responses) together give rise to the individual's edutainment experience. Such interpretation highlights the active roles played by the subject and the object at the moment of consumption, as both bring different and fundamental contributions to the complex experience of the consumer: the individual's activity is expressed by his subjective interpretation of the object, while the activity of the latter is expressed by its contribution to the experience in terms of content. The value which the consumer obtains from this consumption experience is indeed created by the interaction between the product and the consumer and the combination of their contributions, respectively its attributes and his subjective responses (Figure 1). Suffice it to point out that the message is interpreted within the interaction, and is therefore modified by the individual's personal response.

Figure 1. *Edutainment as Interaction*



Source: Original elaboration

3. The Use of New Technologies

The consumption of edutainment here described is enriched and transformed by the use of new interactive technologies, i.e. interactive multimedia systems (Kinney, 1995), based primarily on CD-ROMs and the Internet, which create virtual reality, or real time three-dimensional interactive graphic systems. The effects of these technological applications depend on their characteristics. In particular, new technologies possess two important characteristics. The first and most frequently emphasized is interactivity, the ability to respond to the user's inputs: the user can choose the topics of interest and the way to find them, and can obtain almost immediate responses to his queries (Shih, 1998). The second characteristic is what can be defined as the ability to 'virtually' realize the content of the message transmitted to the consumer, the ability to deliver the message content in a virtual environment. This ability is strictly dependent on the multimedia technology used, on the possibility to integrate different modes of communication. Multimedia technology accesses different information – facts, texts, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional graphics, images, animation, video and sound – without changing the means of support, and concepts can therefore be expressed in a more effective way than through the use of traditional methods of communication.

However, the interpretation of new technologies and their characteristics is not unanimous.

While some appreciate the advantages related to the new applications, some argue that the experience mediated by technology loses its fascination and the involvement which characterizes direct experience. Although new technologies facilitate the diffusion of

information, they are at times considered intermediation variables. Their effects diminish the value of direct experience, which possesses by itself a rich, social, multisensorial, endless, undetermined, interactive, and even transcendent nature (Sullivan, 1998). The real risks and negative effects are however connected to the incorrect application of technology and not to technology itself. Multimedia applications, connectivity, and interactivity make technology a variable (not a means) whose effects enrich the experience and its value. Technology in itself is interactive, so it can but emphasize the interaction of the experience (Witcomb, 1997). The application of the new technologies to edutainment, in fact, reinforces the convergence between education and entertainment, as Rheingold (1993) theorized in his global analysis of the phenomena of sector convergence. In conclusion, the application of new technologies to the experience of edutainment enriches and transforms it as these applications emphasize flexibility and interactivity and create previously unexplored opportunities. Only the most modern technological developments make it possible to achieve speed, interactivity, graphical resolution, interconnectivity, which are only some of the aspects of technological evolution.

By interpreting the experience in terms of interactivity it is possible to say that the effects of technology develop in connection with the message, the consumer and the context. With reference to the message, new technologies have a double effect: on one hand, their multimedia applications can re-create the education content of the message in a totally new virtual environment, and on the other hand, they enrich it with new details, at the same time increasing the entertainment content. In order to re-create the event, technologies can use details and other explanations that were not part of the traditional educational process, and the result is that the recreational aspect of the event is increased. This also implies that the user has now become responsible for what he chooses to learn (Buchen, 2000). The user's new responsibility approaches this learning experience to adulthood learning, which is characterized by *learning on one's own* (Merriam, Caffarella, 1991). Additionally, the possibility of new choices helps the user to discover synergies and interrelations between the disciplines connected to the subject matter. This constitutes the real difference between exhaustive and superficial knowledge, as new technologies provide the links between heterogeneous contents and different disciplines.

The use of technologies transforms the message in two ways, first, because the message, thanks to multimedia technology, is contemporarily perceived by the individual with more than one sense (Kinney, 1995) and second because the applications of technology can give a new form to the content and can easily enrich it without making it too heavy and

difficult to learn, thus combining education and entertainment. It is therefore possible to transfer more than just basic knowledge to the user, and in a new way (Cargile Cook, 2000).

The contribution which the object brings to the consumption experience is not limited to the stimuli that can be simply described verbally, but it involves also the senses, like in experiential consumption.

On the other hand, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of the present post-modern phase, where *high-culture* and *low-culture* converge (Holbrook, 1995; Goulding, 1999).

The effects of the application of new technologies are not limited to the consumer and the message, they also involve the environmental context – spatial, temporal and social – in which the individual finds himself. These technologies, in fact, intersect with the external environment as a variable that has an impact on the emotional structure of the individual and, consequently, on his behavior. If the PAD model of environment psychology (Donovan, Rossiter, 1982; Donovan *et. al.*, 1994) is here applied, the use of the new technologies can be interpreted as an environmental stimulus which has a direct impact on both *Arousal* and *Dominance*.

Suffice it to say that the argument assumption is valid if the individual can interact with the technology. This condition has a double meaning: on one hand the individual must be able to use the technology, and must also have the intellectual and physical ability to interact with the technological application. Making reference to some studies on the Web and its users' abilities, it is reasonable to suppose that, even though a wider definition of new technologies is used, the individual must have the skills to interact with the technology (Hammond, McWilliam, Narholz Diaz, 1998). On the other hand, the individual must be put in the position to be able to take advantage of the technological applications, and this is an element related to the environment and not to the individual; this sub-condition is here defined as the opportunity of using new technologies. The use of technology enriches the edutainment experience, and makes it potentially more complex and more attractive¹.

4. The Virtual Edutainment Environment

The re-creation of the content in a virtual environment has previously been mentioned in the discussion concerning the effects of the application of technologies to the message. In this section this concept will be expanded. At the same time, the inadequacy of

the simple subject-object interaction scheme will be pointed out in order to propose an alternative model illustrating the complexity and multidimensionality of the edutainment experience.

The use of new technologies, particularly of the multimedia dimension, which stimulates all the senses of the individual, allows the re-creation of the content of the message, both in terms of education and entertainment. In other words, multimediality and sensoriality are the two sides of the question. A new form is given to the message, which is set in a new virtual environment, a '*Virtual Edutainment Environment*' (VEE), where the interaction with the customer takes place. A VEE is the environment in which one or more consumers experience the re-created message. In this context, the users may interact amongst each other, but what is essential is that the information be elaborated in one, complex way, utilizing multimedial tools in order to affect the consumer's senses.

The development of virtual reality is a phenomenon of a postmodern nature: it is undoubtedly a form of simulation making the boundary between what is real and what is unreal ambiguous, to the point of becoming an additional fragment in an individual's life. The ability of technology to create a virtual message is post-modern, but it seems paradoxical in the light of an outdated modern interpretation of the world. Moreover, virtual reality allows to live experiences with all the advantages, but without the corresponding disadvantages and limitations (Firat, Venkatesh, 1993; Firat, Schultz II, 1997).

The need to utilize a new definition, never before employed in literature, in order to indicate this virtual environment of education and entertainment, is justified by the characteristics of the concept. Although some analogies exist between a VEE and other concepts outlined in literature, the differences are so important that a new concept had to be found. The concept of *Virtual Edutainment Environment* takes the *Computer-Mediated Environment* (CME) theorized by Hoffman and Novak (1996) as a starting point. The Computer-Mediated Environment proposed by the two authors is defined as a dynamic distributed network. As this characteristic is a peculiarity of the Internet, it is evident that the concept of Computer-Mediated Environment cannot be extended to the other technologies employed in edutainment. The VEE is therefore proposed as an environment concept wider than Hoffman and Novak's CME.

Similar argumentations can also be applied to the concept of the *Computer-Mediated Environment* proposed by Winer *et. al.* (1997), which is the link between a sponsor and one

¹ Individuals who are not used to interacting with technology might interpret this increased complexity as a

or more users characterized by information technology, interactivity and personalization (p. 288). The definition clearly indicates the elements of differentiation with a VEE. First, in a VEE interactivity and personalization are not essential characters, but only possibilities. What is really necessary is technology multimedia, which has not been given any prominence by the above authors. Second, while Winer *et al.* focus their attention on the link between the sponsor and the users, in a VEE attention is focused on the interaction between the message and the consumer.

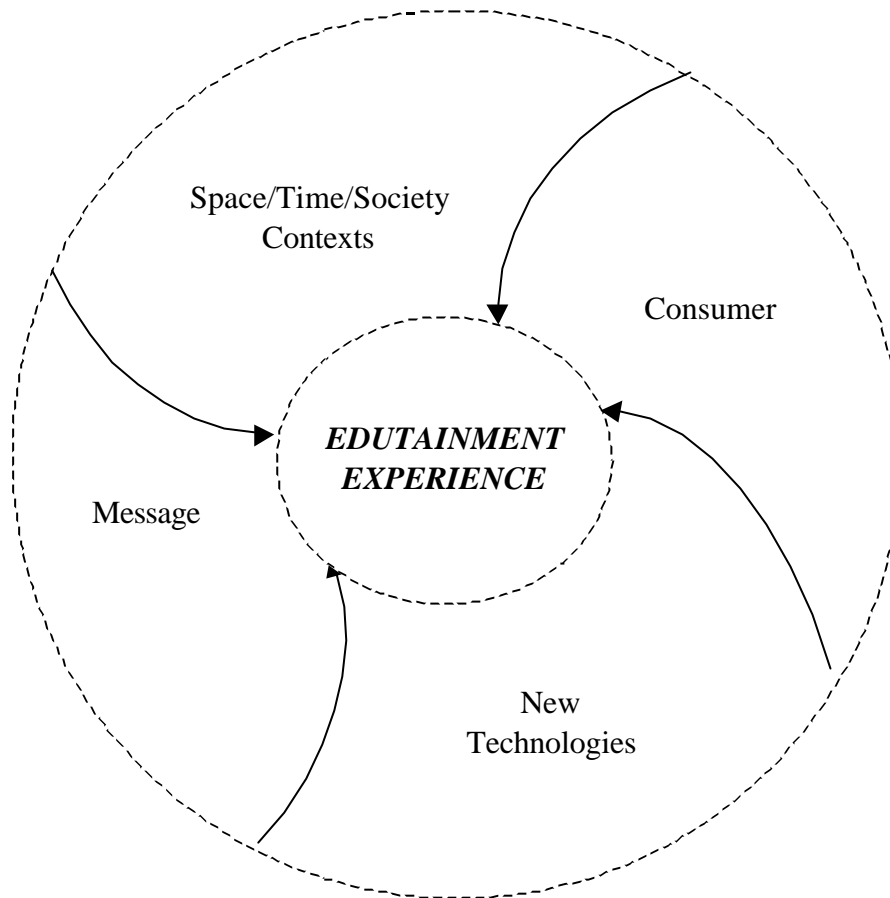
A *Virtual Edutainment Environment* can be considered a particular case of *cyberspace*. This concept was brilliantly analysed by Venkatesh, Meamber and Firat (1997), and can be defined as a world parallel to the real world. Moreover, cyberspace, unlike the real world, can be manipulated thanks to the use of new technologies. Cyberspace cannot replace the real world, both because it possesses different characteristics, and because it does not exist in opposition to anything else. This dimension does not represent the contrast between what is real and what is simulated, it is simply a different reality.

The effects of new technologies on the message and on the consumer are therefore identified: the content of the message is enriched by the information provided in the context, and the consumer's senses are also affected by multimediality. However, the impact of new technologies goes beyond the ones just mentioned: owing to their influence the previously proposed interaction scheme between subject and object becomes inadequate. These new technologies, in fact, represent the fourth variable of the scheme: although one can identify specific effects on the message, the consumer and the context, technology has such a strong impact on the whole experience of edutainment in general that each precise definition of this effect can be arbitrary and subjective. If it is carefully investigated, the simple subject-object interaction scheme shows its inadequacy. An alternative model illustrating the complexity and multidimensionality of the edutainment experience is therefore required. Figure 2 shows the four components of the *Virtual Edutainment Environment*.

The contribution of each single component cannot be ascertained., as the experience is the result of the joined and dynamic action of all of the four variables.

barrier and an obstacle, and this factor should also be taken into consideration.

Figure 2. *The Virtual Edutainment Environment*



Source: Original elaboration

5. Edutainment Immersion Experience

The experience acquired through a VEE has the characters of an '*immersive experience*', as Kinney (1995) defined the entertainment experience of the user of multimedia systems. The consumer's reaction to this experience is here defined as *edutainment immersion experience*, the particular sensation which results from the joint interaction of the four elements identified above, as the individual feels it when he is actively participating in the experience. The edutainment experience which results from the application of new technologies is, therefore, enriched and expanded by an immersion experience. On the other hand, Rheingold (1993) had previously identified *immersion*, along with *navigation*, as one of the two key components of virtual reality.

A new definition, never before used in marketing literature, has been used in this paper in order to make explicit reference to edutainment. However, some analogies between this concept and other terms commonly used in marketing literature are possible. And it is

from those analogies that the definition of *edutainment immersion experience* has derived. Both the concept of *involvement* and *flow* were, indeed, used in studies about experiences similar to edutainment, or experiences, such as sportsmen's experiences, which require the consumer's most active participation, to the point that he can be identified as a *producer* instead of as a *consumer* (Celsi, *et al.*, 1993; Hopkinson, Pujari, 1999).

In particular, involvement is a central concept in the theory of consumer behavior, and the subject of numerous definitions and analyses (Rajaniemi, 1992; Bloch, 1981; Finn, 1983). Both *involvement* and *immersion* are related to a short-lived or to a more enduring state which can only be modified in the course of time, and they are both defined with reference to a single individual. However, there are profound differences between them. First, while involvement has been mainly studied within the research of information at the decision-making moment of the purchase, immersion is analysed from a perspective based on experience, and therefore it refers to the consumer's experience as a whole. Second, while involvement is generally considered a cognitive concept (Rajaniemi, 1992), the term immersion highlights both the cognitive component and the 'arousal' component (Holbrook, Hirschman, 1982). Third, unlike involvement, immersion links an individual to an experience, and not to an object. Last, the concept of immersion is more general than the concept of involvement as it represents the condition felt by the individual in the interaction experience inside a virtual environment.

The second concept where analogies and differences can be found is *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1977; Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Novak *et al.*, 2000). This state of involvement has also been called optimal; unlike its two opposites, boredom and anxiety, it is totally enjoyable. In marketing the concept of flow has been used and put into practice in different ways (Celsi *et al.*, 1993). The experience of flow is intrinsically satisfying: living such an experience is in itself a motive and a source of personal satisfaction. In this state, the individual loses the sense of time and identity as he is completely absorbed in the experience he is living.

Even though the concept of flow is very close to that of edutainment immersion experience, this last definition is more appropriate in order to indicate a possible difference of intensity. The individual is unlikely to lose contact with everything else when he is using new technologies: unlike flow, immersion is not a transcending experience (Hopkinson, Pujari, 1999). If it were, the educational purpose of the experience as a whole could be annihilated by technology. In other words, the use of technology, and more generally the benefits of edutainment, should be used in the learning process and be complementary to it.

Although this is the difference which makes the term immersion more appropriate than the term flow, the two concepts share the idea of the individual's total involvement, which is apparent in the intrinsic enjoyment of the experience: enjoyment makes the experience gratifying by itself. The individual and the context constantly interact and the individual's attention is constantly attracted both in the state of flow and in the state of immersion, and this is what these experiences have in common.

6. Managerial Implications and Final Observations

The phenomena analysed in this work show the rapid evolution of reality. Even though this trend has been clearly identified, the management of many artistic and cultural Italian institutions seems, unfortunately, unable to react and intervene accordingly. In such discordance, the most instinctive, and also most detrimental reaction, is looking at edutainment with distrust, or even trying to deny its existence. The convergence of education and entertainment, favoured by the diffusion of technology and its use, involves a very high risk for the institutions which are trying to cling to their past history and their traditional managerial behaviour. It is in these institutions that the concepts introduced in this paper could be usefully employed. The concepts here highlighted will allow a better investigation of the characteristics of edutainment consumption, and above all of the impact of new technologies. The managerial advantages of the Virtual Edutainment Environment and of immersion are evident in the technological applications already used in the world of art and culture and above all with reference to new projects. The technological euphoria which has also spread in the world of culture will not leave reality unaltered, in fact it is bound to modify the consumer's experience radically. Institutions should therefore intervene by planning and realizing technological applications to increase the value of what they can offer to the consumer. To achieve this result, however, a new approach to management, free of elitist ideas about art and culture, is required. For example, the learning process of the visitors of a museum will not be impaired by the entertaining use of new technologies, instead the memory of their experience will be reinforced and reinvigorated. The real danger for the community is neither from edutainment or consumers, but from short-sighted management.

For marketing researchers, the challenges here raised on the theoretical level are as ambitious as the management's practical challenges. The experiential interpretation of consumer behavior has been one of the most innovative fields of study in these last twenty years, and it is even more promising for the future of marketing, as it is spreading into product categories that are far from being hedonistic. The real world is evolving so rapidly

that it imposes on researchers a continuous redefinition of principles and models. The application of new technologies on the world of art and culture is one of the numerous aspects of reality which this research has tried to analyse, while contributing to the expansion of research fields in marketing.

The research questions raised in this study are numerous, and only for very few of them a solution has been proposed, but these will create future areas of investigation. At least one conclusion, however, acquires characteristics of certainty for the marketing researcher: the need to constantly interrogate oneself on the opportunity of applying to specific contexts words, principles and models consolidated at a general level, in order not to lose the opportunity to learn from other disciplines and to take advantage of existing synergies.

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