

The Democratisation of Expertise

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As individuals engage in new activities and social collectives they begin the journey from novice to expert (Leder et al: 2004). In pursuits such as wine, gourmet food, and art it has been argued that the oenophile, gourmand, and aficionado can more fully appreciate their respective experiences (Clarkson et al: 2013). However such experiences have historically been regarded as high threshold and as such expertise has been available to few, guarded by gatekeepers and as such difficult for the lay individual to achieve. Based upon a qualitative study with art buyers and gallery owners this paper suggests that the contemporary art buyer challenges these assumption. It argues that, with the increase in a 'social media savvy society', individuals can develop their expertise using a new range of tools which speed their advancement to expert status and indeed alter the meaning of expertise. No longer is expertise the preserve of the critic or art seller with vested interests in desirable taste rather it becomes democratised as novices use online resources to quickly increase the breadth of their consumption knowledge; develop requisite vocabulary to differentiate stimulus properties, finely tune preferences and explore their refinement; and build relationships with artists directly enhancing their in-group status. Online art communities therefore come to represent a distributed form of cultural authority. One can now demonstrate taste without acquisition but rather by association and simultaneously claim of authority and expertise about what constitutes good taste.