

**How to Market Your Curator Team:
The Role of Entitativity in Curation Subscriptions**

by
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Abstract

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Curation subscription is an emerging e-commerce business model which provides recurring deliveries of products selected by curators from companies but tailored to subscribers' individual preferences. Focusing on the essential role of curators in curation subscriptions, the current research explores how subscription companies promote their curation services by managing the entitativity of their curator teams. Results from one study indicate that increasing the entitativity of a curator team can increase the perceived competence of the team, which in turn promotes consumers' subscription intention. The positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention only presents for consumers with utilitarian purchase motivations. As consumers' purchase motivations shift from utilitarian to hedonic, the effect attenuates to disappears. Findings of the study provide theoretical implications for future marketing research as well as managerial inspirations for subscription service providers.

Keywords: Subscription e-commerce; Curation subscription; Curator; Entitativity; Subscription intention; Competence; Purchase motivation

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1 INTRODUCTION

Subscription retailing is a business model that enables subscribers to receive recurring deliveries of consumer goods (Bischof et al., 2020). It has been widely applied in some industries for decades, such as newspapers (Saavedra & González, 2015) and dairy (Sharp et al., 2002). Notably, Columbia Record Club, a mail-order record subscription service created by Columbia House, recruited over 100,000 members in the 1950s (Schifrin, 2016). Nevertheless, gaining traction from the development of e-commerce and innovation in the retailing industry, this old-age model has started its new life and is gradually becoming a hot “track”. Birchbox, a beauty subscription start-up, is deemed to have kicked off the modernized subscription trend in 2010 by monthly delivering tailored cosmetics samples to its customers (Jayakumar, 2014). Other pioneering subscription services include Ipsy (beauty, 2011), Dollar Shave Club (men's care, 2011), and Blue Apron (food, 2012) (Noorda, 2019). Unilever's acquisition of Dollar Shave Club, a razor blades subscription service provider, is regarded as another landmark that signaled the entry of traditional retailing giants such as Amazon (Amazon Subscribe & Save), Procter & Gamble (Venus Club), and Walmart (Beauty Box) (Andonova et al., 2021; Isaac & de la Merced, 2016). In the past decade, the subscription e-commerce market witnessed a proliferation, especially during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (Andonova et al., 2021). It has grown by more than 100% a year, according to a study conducted by McKinsey (Chen et al., 2018). Over 15% of the research participants have signed up for one or more subscriptions, and the subscription retailers collectively generated more than \$2.6 billion in annual sales by 2016, up from a mere \$57 million

in 2011. In addition to the explosive growth, subscription retailing has broken away from the traditional paper media and fresh food industries, and expanded to a wider range of product categories, including beauty and fashion (e.g., Stitch Fix), food and grocery (e.g., Hello Fresh), and hobby and lifestyle (e.g., Kiwi Eco Box). This can be evidenced by the over 1300 subscription box offerings featured on Cratejoy, an online marketplace for subscriptions (Noorda, 2019). Moreover, it is conceivable that the pandemic will permanently affect any products and services involving close contact with others (Zwanka & Buff, 2021). Subscription e-commerce, as a contactless shopping model, still has huge potential beyond the current market size (Tan & Chen, 2021).

Subscription e-commerce services have evolved and diverged into various forms, which can be classified into three basic types: replenishment, access and curation (Tan & Chen, 2021). Replenishment subscriptions automate the recurring purchase and delivery process of the products selected by the subscribers. Amazon Subscribe & Save, for example, allows customers to enter a subscription for certain products, mostly daily necessities. By doing so, subscribers will receive recurring deliveries of those products from Amazon, with no need to make an effort to buy them every time. Access subscribers pay a subscription fee to obtain lower prices or members-only perks. JustFab is an illustrative example of this type of subscription, where subscribers pay up to 30% off the retail price for the products, while non-subscribers pay the retail price.

Curation service, accounting for 55% of total subscriptions, is the most popular among the three types (Chen et al., 2018). It provides collections of products selected by curators based on

subscribers' individual preferences. Curators refer to employees who help consumers make product choices. They could be stylists, nutritionists, home designers, etc., depending on the product categories. As a specific example, the subscribers of IPSY receive boxes containing several beauty products with a certain frequency, usually every month. Beauty experts, the curator in this context, work with IPSY to select products for each customer, who knows nothing about the selected items in the box until receiving them.

The nature of curation subscription, what differentiates it from traditional shopping, is the handover of product selection from customers to curators. The popularity of curation subscription can be largely attributed to its nature since it meets the needs of consumers on both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions (Ramkumar & Woo, 2018). On one hand, joining curation subscriptions can mitigate consumers' efforts in search, evaluation and choice (Bray et al., 2021; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018), offering a respite from “decision fatigue” that easily occurs to consumers when they face massive choices in today's marketplace (Polman & Vohs, 2016). Consumers are averse to frequent decision-making (Yoon et al., 2012) and increasingly rely on decision shortcuts such as default options when facing multiple choices (Levav et al., 2010). The curation subscription provides consumers with a decision shortcut, and consumers do appreciate the convenience it brings (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018). On the other hand, given that consumers lack information about the products in the boxes, “surprise” is an inherent attribute of curation subscriptions (Bischof et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018). Research has shown that surprise can generate positive moods in consumers (Kurtz et al., 2007) and meet their

variety-seeking motivation (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982), namely, seeking a change to reduce boredom or increase stimulation. Some consumers join curation subscriptions mainly for “surprise” (Bray et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018).

Nevertheless, delegating product selection to curators can make curation service attractive to customers but also vulnerable, due to the unknown nature of the products. Findings from the McKinsey report revealed a weak conversion rate of curation services — only 52% of those who consider a curation service ultimately subscribe (Chen et al., 2018). Compared to traditional shopping, the unknown product selection in curation subscriptions could exacerbate consumers’ concerns about product quality and value, as well as the likelihood of getting products that do not match personal needs or preferences (Bray et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020), which stops consumers from subscribing (Bischof et al., 2020). In current practices, companies generally compensate for the vulnerability of curation subscriptions by offering unconditional returns (Bischof et al., 2020) and no-commitment subscriptions, such as allowing consumers to unsubscribe at any time (Becker et al., 2015).

As curators play an essential role in the curation subscription business, more research needs to examine how the curators influence consumers’ subscription intentions. In traditional shopping, consumers focus on product evaluation. However, in curation subscriptions, curators evaluate and select products on behalf of consumers. Therefore, consumers’ evaluation focus shifts from products to the curators and the services they provide (Bischof et al., 2020). As such, subscription companies often showcase the knowledge and dedication of their curator teams on their websites,

e.g., displaying photos, credentials, and titles of their curators along with a brief description. A notable difference is that on one hand, the curator teams of some companies are uniformly dressed, consist of members with similar personalities and backgrounds, and follow a consistent workflow. These companies may also feature photos of their curators working together and holding team-building events to emphasize that they have a tight-knit team. On the other hand, the curator teams of some other companies seem more diverse and have freer work styles. They are encouraged to maintain their respective personality and the ability to think and complete tasks independently, exhibiting a high degree of individuality. In other words, the two types of curator teams embody different levels of entitativity, which refers to the extent to which a group is viewed as a single, coherent unit rather than a collection of loose-knit individuals (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996).

Entitativity is a fundamental group characteristic which plays a central role in laypeople's classification and judgment of groups (Denson et al., 2006; Hamilton, 2007; Svirydzenka et al., 2010). Researchers in social psychology have done extensive research on entitativity and found that people perceive groups with high and low entitativity differently. Members of a high-entitativity group are perceived as more likely to act on plans (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018) and make fewer mistakes (Kugler et al., 2012), while members of a low-entitativity group are perceived as more of independent thinkers (Morewedge et al., 2013; Waytz & Young, 2012) and may generate more different solutions (Proudfoot & Fath, 2021). In the business field, entitativity is still under-discussed. The current research explores an important but not much-researched question in the

context of curation subscriptions: In order to get more favorable evaluations from consumers, should a company market its curator team as a tight-knit team (i.e., high entitativity) or a network of highly individualistic members (i.e., low entitativity)?

Previous research has shown that increasing the entitativity of a business organization increases its perceived competence and in turn, makes it more attractive to the public (Efron et al., 2022). Perceptions of competence reflect judgments of one's ability to achieve a certain goal or fulfill a certain duty (Cuddy et al., 2008). The current research seeks to test the above effect in the subscription business context, i.e., whether increasing the entitativity of a curator team promotes consumers' subscription intention through the increase in the perceived competence of the curator team. Furthermore, I suggest that consumers' purchasing motivations may moderate the above effect. Consumers' shopping behaviors can be driven by utilitarian and/or hedonic motivations (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). As mentioned earlier, when choosing curation subscriptions, consumers with more focus on the utilitarian side may look for convenient access to cost-effective and consistent quality products, while those who focus more on the hedonic side may seek adventurous, exciting, surprising, and unique experiences (Ramkumar & Woo, 2018). Given the difference in the focal points between the two types of consumers, I argue that higher entitativity of a curator team leads to higher subscription intention, and this effect is stronger for consumers with utilitarian motivations than for consumers with hedonic motivations.

Take together, the current research seeks to enrich the literature on subscription retailing by highlighting the role of the curator team and examining the effect of curator team entitativity in

the subscription business. In the following section, I will review the relevant literature, develop the hypotheses, and report a study to test the hypotheses.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, AND HYPOTHESIS

DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Subscription E-commerce and Curator Teams in Curation Subscriptions

The subscription model has been discussed by scholars for over a decade. From the consumer perspective, a number of studies explored subscriptions in intangible product offerings such as telecommunications, entertainment and software licensing (Dover & Murthi, 2006; Pauwels & Weiss, 2008; Zhang & Seidmann, 2010). However, except for some studies on print media subscriptions (Saavedra & González, 2015), early research provides limited insight into the subscription retailing market of tangible consumer goods.

E-commerce subscription services for tangible consumer goods have grown rapidly in recent years. Despite the prosperity of subscription services in practices, related studies remain nascent, and the vast majority of them remain in the exploratory stage. These exploratory studies demonstrated consumer demographics and motivations that affect their participations in subscriptions, as well as the barriers that prevent them from joining in (Bray et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2020; Noorda, 2019; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018).

These results provide preliminary insights and lay the groundwork for further research. Extending the foundational work, Bischof et al. (2020) set their sights on consumers' preferences regarding subscription delivery intervals. Delivery intervals refer to the frequencies with which customers receive the products from subscription service providers. It can vary from weekly/biweekly to quarterly and even annually. The researchers compared replenishment and curation subscriptions, finding that consumers prefer shorter delivery intervals for replenishment subscriptions and longer delivery intervals for curation subscriptions. This is because consumers perceive higher risks in curation subscriptions and try to avoid frequent exposure to the potential for loss brought by the unknown of products. From another perspective, Tan & Chen (2021)'s research studied and showed the positive effect of a promotion tactic, namely GPD (Gambled Price Discount), on consumers' subscription intention. With GPD, the discount levels and winning probabilities are contingent on the outcomes of probabilistic gambles (Alavi et al., 2015). The researchers argued that the surprise and uncertainty brought by GPD can increase consumers' enjoyment and distract them from concerns associated with subscriptions.

The research discussed above all involves the role of uncertainty and risk in consumers' subscription decisions. Take one step back, the current research, however, focuses on the root cause of perceived uncertainty and risk among potential subscribers – the fact that product choices are not made by consumers themselves but by curators. By delegating product selection to curators, consumers take risks while benefitting from values such as convenience and professional knowledge (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018). The role of curators is crucial. In practice,

subscription companies introduce their curator teams in a variety of forms to highlight positive attributes such as professionalism, passion, caring and creativity. One example is that Hum, a subscription company that delivers health supplements, chooses to showcase the professional titles of its nutritionists along with their profile photos to enhance perceived professionalism. The nutritionists in the photos are all female, dressed in the same style, and with the same curved smiles, leaving a coordinated and professional team impression. Another example is that fashion subscription company Stitch Fix emphasizes the sheer size (“thousands of”) of their stylist team in the description, shows the diversity of the team members with a group photo of different races, and highlights the individual distinctiveness in curator descriptions. The attributes highlighted in team descriptions create positive perceptions among target consumers, e.g., quality assurance, professional guarantee, novelty experience, and unique choice, increase consumers' belief that the products will meet their expectations, and in turn, encourage them to subscribe.

As a vital element of curation subscriptions, the curator team, however, has rarely been discussed in any academic work. To address this critical gap, the current research suggests a marketing communication tactic for companies to increase consumers' subscription intention by changing the descriptions of their curator teams. While many different features can be discussed for the curator team, this research will focus on a key attribute underlying people's perception of a group: entitativity (Hamilton, 2007; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Lickel et al., 2000).

2.2 Entitativity of Curator Teams and Subscription Intention

Entitativity is conceptualized as the extent to which a collection of individuals is perceived as a single, coherent unit (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). For example, 1,000 marchers parading in a street wearing identical slogan T-shirts, chanting in unison, and displaying intense common belief would appear to be having higher entitativity than 1,000 pedestrians who happen to be walking in the street (Lickel et al., 2000). Similar judgments are also drawn on business organizations. A business organization can be perceived as more of a loose-knit group of independent individuals, or more of a single, unified whole (Effron et al., 2022). For example, although both are in the hospitality business, Holiday Inn Express is more entitative than Airbnb (Effron et al., 2022). This is because Holiday Inn Express emphasizes standardized processes across branches to provide consistent service and gives all branches a similar look, while Airbnb emphasizes unique experiences provided by localized, independent hosts, providing a wide variety of properties. If this example is more about brand impression, then at the employee level, a typical instance is that, within the same company, some employee group, like the legal department, might be perceived as being more entitative as they are required to wear similar suits and have the similar educational background, as opposed to the design department, where no dressing code is enforced and diversity is encouraged.

The intuitive judgment of a group's entitativity mainly depends on two dimensions: similarity and interactivity (Dang & Liu, 2022). The similarity cue involves common static attributes shared among members, e.g., common dispositions, history, and appearance. For

example, groups consisting of members that are of similar age, come from the same region or family, or share a common symbol, are seen as being more entitative than those that do not share these similarities (Callahan & Ledgerwood, 2016; R. W. Smith et al., 2013; Waytz & Young, 2012). The interactivity dimension refers to dynamic interactivity and interdependence among members, e.g., common goals, coordinated actions, and frequent interactions. That is, if the members of a group share common goals, coordinate with each other, interact frequently, and follow common rules and norms, then the group is perceived as being higher on entitativity. What needs to be noted is that similarity and interactivity cues are intrinsically linked and jointly determine a group's entitativity (Lickel et al., 2000). Therefore, previous researchers operationalized entitativity by manipulating similarity and/or interactivity among members based on their research contexts and yielded some interesting findings.

High entitativity can sometimes lead to positive outcomes. Compared to low-entitativity groups, early research found that high-entitativity groups are deemed to provide more convincing information (Clark & Thiem, 2015; Clark & Wegener, 2009). Subsequent research reached a relatively consistent result that increasing entitativity enhances the perceived competence of a group since high-entitativity groups coordinate their actions, which is considered more conducive to achieving their common goals according to their plans (Callahan & Ledgerwood, 2016; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018; Dang & Liu, 2022). Applying the positive relationship between entitativity and competence to the business realm, business organizations with high entitativity were found to be more attractive to the public than those with low entitativity

(Effron et al., 2022). Consumers have better impressions of high-entitativity organizations and expect them to perform better in the future. Furthermore, R. W. Smith et al. (2013)'s research demonstrated entitativity's positive role in charitable giving, finding that increasing the entitativity of a victim group with positive traits increases donation amount.

However, high entitativity does not always play a positive role. Entitativity has a polarizing effect on the perceived warmth of a group (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018; Dang & Liu, 2022). In other words, increasing entitativity makes a warm group perceived as being even warmer but makes a cold group perceived as being much colder. In addition, if a group has negative traits or is at fault, high entitativity is often associated with more negative outcomes (Effron et al., 2022; Newheiser et al., 2012; R. W. Smith et al., 2013). Specifically, compared to low-entitativity business organizations, the misconduct of members from high-entitativity business organizations leads to more blame and more severe punishments from the public, since the public perceived the high-entitativity group as having a higher moral responsibility (Effron et al., 2022; Newheiser et al., 2012). Similarly, high-entitativity victim groups with negative traits receive a smaller donation amount than those low-entitativity victim groups with negative traits (R. W. Smith et al., 2013). High entitativity may also have a negative impact on people's perceptions of the group members. Members of a high-entitativity group were found to be perceived as having relatively few individual thoughts (Morewedge et al., 2013).

Despite the positive or negative outcomes it may lead to, entitativity is neither inherently positive nor negative (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018). It is subjective and malleable that different

people perceive the same group's entitativity differently, and the same group can be presented as more or less entitative (Effron et al., 2022). This provides marketers with opportunities to change their team description in order to influence consumers' perception of their teams' entitativity and consequently their judgment of the company. However, entitativity has received little attention outside of the social psychology field. At the company level, Effron et al. (2022) have found that increasing a business organization's entitativity increases its attractiveness to the public. Apart from their research, few studies have addressed the role of entitativity in the business realm. Therefore, the current research seeks to apply previous findings on entitativity to the context of curation subscriptions and provide insights into the marketing of curation services.

As mentioned earlier, the curator teams are essential to the curation services, while customers generally cannot designate a specific curator to serve them. They need to evaluate the curator team in order to make the subscription decision. When evaluating a curator team, consumers are likely to use team characteristics such as entitativity to judge whether the team will be able to choose and deliver the products that they like, since entitativity is a fundamental perception of a group (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Based on the previous research on entitativity in social psychology and business, I argue that a curator team's entitativity will have a positive effect on the team evaluation, which leads to higher subscription intention. As such, I propose:

H1: *Increasing the entitativity of a curator team will increase consumers' subscription intention.*

In the following sections, I will discuss the reasoning and mechanism behind this hypothesis, and explore the potential boundaries of the proposed effect.

2.3 The Mediation Role of Competence Perception

As discussed earlier in the introduction section, subscription services can be attractive yet risky to consumers due to the delegation of product choice. When perceived risk is high, research shows that consumers are likely to focus more on the competence judgment because competence can increase their confidence belief that the marketer will deliver the desirable outcome (Z. Wang et al., 2017). Competence is one of the fundamental dimensions when individuals make interpersonal judgments and construct perceptions of others (Fiske et al., 2007). It captures traits that indicate one's capacity to pursue goals and intentions, such as intelligence, skill and efficacy (Cuddy et al., 2008). In this section, I argue that competence mediates the effect of entitativity on subscription intention.

It is well established that people associate entitativity with competence (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018; Dang & Liu, 2022; Effron et al., 2022). The reason is that people believe high-entitativity groups are more able to carry out their intentions than low-entitativity groups (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018), and the capability of a group to carry out its intentions determines competence judgments about the group (Fiske et al., 2002). In other words, since members of high-entitativity groups are more internally organized and interact with each

other more frequently, they are expected to be more efficient at coordinating their efforts and more capable of acting upon their plans to achieve their goals (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018). Therefore, customers may believe that a high-entitativity curator team is competent at providing good service. On the other hand, previous research on services marketing has shown that the perceived competence of employees positively influences customers' attitudes and behaviors such as their satisfaction and purchase intention (Li et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2013; X. Wang et al., 2020; Z. Wang et al., 2017). Given this, a curator team perceived as high in competence may attract customers to subscribe. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

H2: *The perceived competence of the curator team will mediate the effect of entitativity on subscription intention. That is, increasing entitativity will lead to higher competence perception, which will in turn promote subscription intention.*

In the next section, I will discuss whether the above effects will be different for consumers with different purchase motivations.

2.4 The Moderation Role of Purchase Motivation: Utilitarian versus Hedonic

Consumers' purchase decisions can be driven by utilitarian motivations and/or hedonic motivations (Batra & Ahtola, 1991; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Mano & Oliver, 1993; To et al., 2007). Utilitarian motivation refers to the desire to fulfill a need or accomplish a task, so they are mission-critical, rational, decision-effective, and goal-oriented; hedonic motivation refers to

the pursuit of affective experiences which can generate happiness, fantasy, awakening, sensuality, and enjoyment, going beyond basic needs (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). As subscription is a specific purchase form (Ramkumar & Woo, 2018), consumers joining curation subscriptions can also be driven by their utilitarian and/or hedonic purchase motivations. Based on the findings of several exploratory studies on subscription services, convenience and value for money are commonly identified as utilitarian motivations in curation subscriptions, while trying new things, seeking variety, and experiencing fun, excitement and surprise are highlighted as key hedonic motivations (Bray et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018). For example, for the same clothing curation service, some customers appreciate its discounts and the time savings in clothing selection, while others enjoy the excitement and joy of opening blind boxes and trying new styles. The differences between the focal points of utilitarian and hedonic motivations raise a research question: Are the effects of entitativity on subscription intention consistent across consumers with different purchase motivations?

As mentioned earlier, in curation subscriptions, consumers with utilitarian motivations often focus on convenience and value for money. Therefore, they may tend to consider safe options to avoid potential undesired outcomes. Trying new styles may be perceived as riskier and adversely affect their goal of saving time and money. Therefore, they may expect that the curator teams can consistently deliver products that closely follow their stated preferences and needs without any mistakes. In people's perception, high-entitativity curator teams do have some advantages in meeting the above expectations. They are believed to be able to act upon plans and make rational

decisions (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018). In addition, as customers driven by utilitarian motivations tend to minimize the perceived risks in order to save time and money, they may focus more on the competence judgment when evaluating the curator team (Z. Wang et al., 2017). Thus, they may feel that high-entitativity curator teams are more competent in meeting their needs and thus are more likely to sign up for the subscription.

On the other hand, customers with hedonic motivations usually seek variety, adventure and excitement in curation subscriptions, expecting the products and services to be more creative and novel (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018). They also want products that meet their basic needs, but they subscribe for reasons beyond that. The highly personal nature of the above expectation makes it difficult for teams to develop measurable common goals and take coordinated actions accordingly (Babin et al., 1994; Batra & Ahtola, 1991). The advantages of high-entitativity teams seem to do little with enhancing entertainment elements in subscription experiences. On the contrary, the tendency to "stick to plans" may make customers with hedonic motivations feel a bit rigid and boring. Consumers may also believe that the frequent coordination among group members may reduce the uniqueness of the curated products for each individual customer. For example, previous research has found that the more entitativity a group is perceived to be, the less its members are perceived to have their independent thoughts (Morewedge et al., 2013; Waytz & Young, 2012), which could be associated with curators' product choices. Thus, relative to customers with utilitarian motivations, customers with hedonic motivations may think that higher entitativity plays a limited role in improving the curator team's competence to meet their hedonic

expectations, such as creating surprises and introducing refreshing elements. In addition, different from consumers with utilitarian motivations who put more emphasis on competence judgment, consumers with hedonic motivations may consider other factors such as excitement during the experience and unique product choice, and thus put less emphasis on competence judgment. Given the above, I formally propose:

H3: *The entitativity of a curator team will interact with consumers' subscription motivations to affect consumers' subscription intention. That is, compared to consumers with utilitarian motivations, the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention will attenuate for consumers with hedonic motivations.*

H4: *The perceived competence of the curator team will mediate the interaction effect of entitativity and purchase motivation on subscription intention. That is, compared to consumers with utilitarian motivations, the positive effect of entitativity on the perceived competence of the curator team will attenuate for consumers with hedonic motivations, and in turn, attenuate the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention.*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the proposed hypotheses.

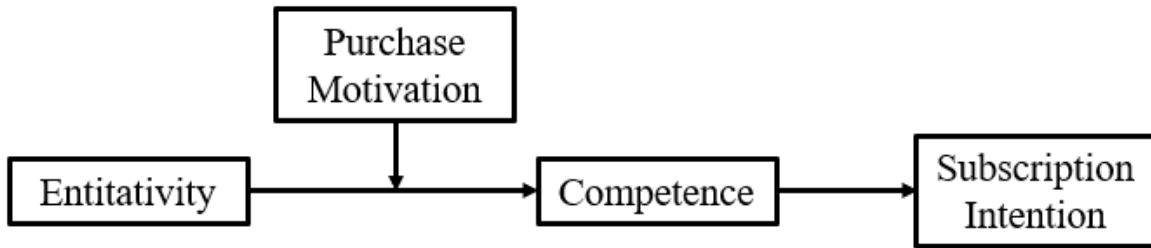


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3 METHOD

3.1 Overview of the study

A study was conducted to test the hypotheses. It tested the main effect of entitativity on subscription intention (H1) and the mediating effect of perceived competence in this process (H2). It also explored how the effects differ for consumers with utilitarian versus hedonic purchase motivations (H3 and H4).

The scenario of evaluating an apparel subscription was used in the experiment. The use of the apparel category was motivated by the fact that e-commerce subscription services started with apparel, and apparel subscriptions remain popular to this day (Tan & Chen, 2021). In addition, apparel is relatively balanced in terms of utilitarian attributes and hedonic attributes (Crowley et al., 1992). It provided the opportunity to manipulate consumers' purchase motivations by varying their consumption goals for the same subscription service (Botti & McGill, 2011; Das et al., 2018) without using two different product categories to represent utilitarian and hedonic purchases

respectively. In this way, I could avoid any potential confound variables related with different product categories.

3.2 Design and Participants

The study used a 2 (entitativity: high, low) \times 2 (motivation: utilitarian, hedonic) between-subjects factorial design. 128 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk). They were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. 8 participants failed the attention check and were excluded from the analyses, leading to a final sample of 120.

3.3 Procedure

Participants were first told to imagine that they had specific motivations when buying clothes. Purchase motivation was manipulated by varying their primary considerations when buying clothes. Those in the utilitarian conditions were presented with the following description:

You work in the office and often need to buy new clothes that are appropriate for your job and workplace. When choosing these clothes, your primary considerations are their durability and their suitability for the office environment. Given your busy schedule, you hope to conserve time and energy while getting the clothes you need.

Those in the hedonic conditions were presented with the following description:

You love fashion and often want to buy new clothes to try new styles and experience the joy and excitement. When choosing clothes, your primary considerations are the design uniqueness and styles. Given the product homogeneity of today's mass market, you treat discovering interesting clothing as a pleasure.

All participants were then introduced to a subscription company called DressUp as shown below. The introduction allowed participants to understand what the subscription service is and how it works.

We are an apparel subscription company that delivers a monthly box of curated clothing to your doorstep. Based on your body shape, skin tone, personal preferences, and wearing occasions, our stylists handpick the apparel pieces included in your boxes. A fixed monthly fee will be charged after each delivery, and you can skip a delivery or cancel the subscription at any time. You may also return any item that you don't like.

After that, participants encountered one of the two stimuli, a description of the high-entitativity curator team or the low-entitativity curator team. The descriptions manipulated entitativity by characterizing the teams as either exhibiting or not exhibiting similarity and interactivity: common traits, shared rules and norms, information sharing, and interpersonal bonds (Effron et al., 2022). In the high-entitativity condition, the curator team was described as follows:

At DressUp, we embrace a corporate culture that highly esteems team cohesion. When recruiting our stylists, we seek individuals with common backgrounds and experiences.

During the product selection process, we ask our stylists to adhere rigorously to the company regulations and follow a standardized workflow. To enhance communication and knowledge sharing among our stylists, we strongly encourage collaborative work and hold daily team meetings. We are committed to unlocking the full potential of our stylist team in order to deliver the perfect apparel selection to our customers.

In the low-entitativity condition, the curator team was described as follows:

At DressUp, we embrace a corporate culture that highly esteems individuality. When recruiting our stylists, we seek individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. During the product selection process, we ask our stylists to contribute their own perspectives and make independent decisions within our product selection guidelines. To enhance their concentration on their respective work and preserve each stylist's originality, we provide each stylist with a private workspace and respect their preferred work styles. We are committed to unlocking the full potential of every stylist in order to deliver the perfect apparel selection to our customers.

Next, participants completed the following measures in the order listed.

3.4 Measures

Subscription Intention. Participants completed a three-item measure of subscription

intention (seven-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), indicating the likelihood of them subscribing to the service, the likelihood of them considering subscribing to the service, and their interest in the service (adapted from Tan & Chen, 2021; $\alpha = .78$).

Competence. Participants completed a five-item measure of competence perceptions toward the curator team (seven-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree): competent, capable, effective, efficient and skilled (adapted from Effron et al., 2022). Factor analysis showed that “capable” did not load together with other items, so the other 4 items were used in the analysis ($\alpha = .80$).

Manipulation Checks. To test whether the descriptions successfully manipulated entitativity, a seven-item measure was established (seven-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), indicating how much participants think that members of the team (a) have characteristics in common, (b) have similar background, (c) work in the same way, (d) share knowledge and thoughts, (e) coordinate well, (f) connect tightly, and (g) interact with each other (adapted from Denson et al., 2006; $\alpha = .90$).

To test whether the descriptions successfully manipulated purchase motivation, a seven-item measure was established (seven-point bipolar scale): 1 = Rational, 7 = Emotional; 1 = Functional, 7 = Unfunctional; 1 = Necessary, 7 = Unnecessary; 1 = Practical, 7 = Impractical; 1 = Not fun, 7 = Fun; 1 = Unpleasant, 7 = Pleasant; 1 = Unenjoyable, 7 = Enjoyable (adapted from To et al., 2007). After the factor analysis, 3 items were retained for analysis ($\alpha = .71$).

Table 1 presents the test items for all the constructs above.

Table 1. Constructs and Test Items

Construct	Items	Sources
Subscription Intention ($\alpha = .78$)	I will sign up for this subscription service. I will consider signing up for this subscription service. I am interested in this subscription service.	Tan & Chen, 2021
Competence ($\alpha = .80$)	The stylists are competent with apparel selection. The stylists will be effective in preparing apparel selections. The stylists will be efficient in selecting apparel. The stylists are skilled with apparel selection.	Effron et al., 2022
Entitativity ($\alpha = .90$)	They have many characteristics in common. They have similar backgrounds. They work in the same way. They share similar knowledge and thoughts. They are well coordinated. They are tightly connected. They interact often with each other.	Denson et al., 2006
Purchase Motivation ($\alpha = .71$)	Functional : Unfunctional Necessary : Unnecessary Practical : Impractical	To et al., 2007

3.5 Results

Manipulation Checks. Results of ANOVA showed that there were no significant differences in entitativity between the high-entitativity ($M = 5.68, SD = .80$) and low-entitativity conditions ($M = 5.64, SD = .97; F(1, 118) = 0.56, p = .81$), suggesting a failed manipulation. There were only marginal differences in purchase motivation between the utilitarian ($M = 2.10, SD = .45$) and hedonic conditions ($M = 2.25, SD = .36; F(1, 118) = 2.95, p = .09$). Therefore, different from our expectation, the participants did not consider entitativity to be significantly higher in the high (vs. low entitativity) conditions and they only rated their purchase motivation to be marginally more hedonic in the hedonic (vs. utilitarian) conditions. This might be due to the fact that participants needed to remember all the information about the curator team members and how they worked together in order to answer all the entitativity questions, which requires substantial cognitive effort. In this case, the participants might process the stimuli information quickly, form a quick impression about the team with partial team information, and go with an acceptable alternative rather than the optimal answer to the problem, or even answer randomly (Krosnick, 1991). In addition, individuals may also have very strong personal motivations when buying clothes. It is possible that the participants might not adjust enough from their personal motivations after reading the instructions to be either hedonic or utilitarian when considering buying clothes online. With mere text instructions, it might be difficult for them to generate a more real and immersive imagination about purchasing clothes for certain (utilitarian/hedonic) reasons (Morales et al., 2017). As this

manipulation was not effective, I used the measures of entitativity and purchase motivation to indicate a participant's actual perceived entitativity of a subscription team and his or her purchase motivation for an apparel subscription service for the following analyses. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the following analyses: entitativity, purchase motivation, subscription intention and competence.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Entitativity	1.14	7.00	5.6560	.88713	-1.569
Purchase Motivation	1.00	4.33	2.1667	.77904	.631
Subscription Intention	1.67	7.00	5.9278	.85360	-2.161
Competence	3.75	7.00	5.7729	.76353	-.535

Main effect of entitativity on subscription intention. H1 predicts a positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention. The results of regression analysis indicated a positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention ($\beta = .39, t(118) = 4.55, p < .001$). When participants perceived the team had higher entitativity, their subscription intention increased. The result supported H1 as expected.

Mediation analysis. H2 predicts that the perceived competence of the curator team mediates the effect of entitativity on subscription intention. To test the mediating role of perceived

competence, a mediation analysis was performed using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013). The results indicated that the indirect effect of entitativity on subscription intention through competence was significant ($b = .41, SE = .13, 95\% CI: .21, .71$). Meanwhile, the direct effect of entitativity was not significant ($b = -.04, se = .08, 95\% CI: -.20, .12$), suggesting a full mediation effect of entitativity on subscription intention through competence (Figure 2). Thus, H2 was supported.

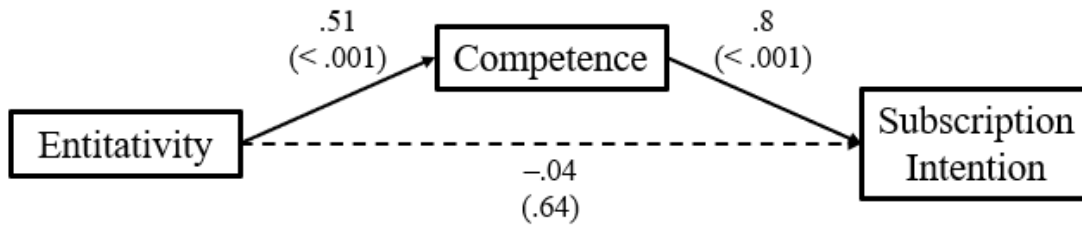


Figure 2. Mediation

Moderation analysis. H3 states that the entitativity of a curator team interacts with consumers' purchase motivations to affect consumers' subscription intention. To test whether the effect of entitativity on subscription intention varies for consumers with different purchase motivations, a moderation analysis was performed using Hayes PROCESS Model 1 with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013). The results revealed that the interaction between entitativity and purchase motivation on subscription intention was significant ($b = -.19, se = .07, t(116) = -2.72, p < .05$). The spotlight analysis (Figure 3) showed that the effect was significant when the purchase motivation index was at the value of -1 SD ($1.39, b = .36, se = .12, t(116) = 2.96, p < .05$) and not significant when purchase motivation is at $+1$ SD ($2.95, b = .07, se = .09, t(116) = 0.72, p$

= .47). It indicated that for participants with high utilitarian purchase motivations, a curator team with a higher level of entitativity increased their subscription intention, while this effect was eliminated for participants with low utilitarian purchase motivations. The Johnson-Neyman analysis further showed that the purchase motivation index at a value of 2.34 ($b = .18$, $se = .09$, $t(116) = 1.98$, $p = .05$) was the turning point from significance to non-significance of the effect of entitativity. When the purchase motivation index was lower than 2.34, suggesting high utilitarian motivation, entitativity had a significant effect on subscription intention and such an effect became much stronger as the purchase motivation became more utilitarian. Thus, H3 was supported that the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention attenuates when consumers' purchase motivation is less utilitarian.

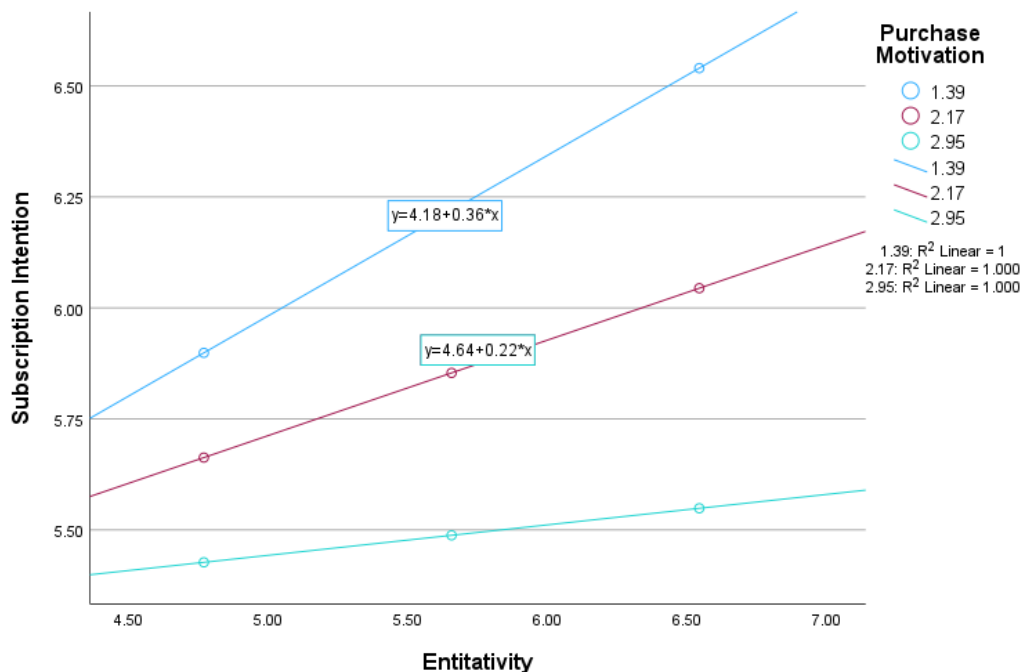


Figure 3. Moderation

Moderated mediation analysis. I further tested whether competence also mediated the interaction effect of purchase motivation and entitativity on subscription intention (H4). A regression analysis showed that both entitativity ($\beta = .60, t(118) = 8.05, p < .001$) and purchase motivation ($\beta = -.48, t(118) = -6.00, p < .001$) had a significant effect on competence perception, so I used Hayes PROCESS Model 8 with 5,000 bootstrap samples for moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013). The results showed that no moderated mediation appeared (moderated mediation index = $-.19, SE = .10, 95\% CI: -.34, .05$).

The effect of the interaction between entitativity and purchase motivation on subscription intention was non-significant ($b = -.002, se = .06, t(115) = 0.03, p = .97$), indicating that the interaction did not have a direct effect on subscription intention. The interaction between entitativity and purchase motivation on competence perception was significant ($b = -.26, se = .05, t(116) = -4.89, p < .001$). The spotlight analysis showed that the effect was both significant when the purchase motivation index was at the value of -1 SD ($1.39, b = .71, se = .09, t(116) = 7.62, p < .001$) and $+1$ SD ($2.95, b = .31, se = .07, t(116) = 4.23, p < .001$), and the effect was stronger when the index value was smaller. The Johnson-Neyman analysis further showed that the purchase motivation index at a value of 3.48 ($b = .17, se = .09, t(116) = 1.98, p = .05$) was the turning point from significance to non-significance of the effect of entitativity. When the purchase motivation index was lower than 3.48 , suggesting utilitarian motivation, entitativity had a significant effect on perceived competence and such an effect became much stronger as the purchase motivation became more utilitarian. When the purchase motivation index was higher than 3.48 , entitativity

did not significantly increase competence perception. It indicated that for participants with utilitarian purchase motivations, a curator team with a higher level of entitativity increased its perceived competence, while this effect was eliminated for participants with hedonic purchase motivations (purchase motivation index higher than 4).

Both entitativity ($b = 1.07, se = .15, t(116) = 7.02, p < .001$) and purchase motivation ($b = 1.24, se = .31, t(116) = 4.06, p < .001$) had a positive significant effect on competence perception. Entitativity ($b = -.16, se = .20, t(115) = -.82, p = .41$) and purchase motivation ($b = -.31, se = .35, t(115) = -.89, p = .38$) had no direct effect on subscription intention, while the positive significant effect of competence on subscription intention presented ($b = .73, se = .10, t(115) = 7.28, p < .001$). Given the above analyses, since the moderated mediation was not significant, H4 was not supported. Nevertheless, purchase motivation was found to be able to interact with entitativity to affect competence perception.

Notably, the non-significant moderated mediation could be partially explained by the flaws in the original data. The range of the purchase motivation index was skewed ($M = 2.17, SD = .78, Skewness = .63, Min = 1.00, Max = 4.33$). This indicated that most participants considered the purchase of clothing more utilitarian than hedonic and few considered the purchase of clothing very hedonic. Those participants rated the purchase motivation 1SD above the mean at about 3 on a 7-point scale, which was still below the middle of the scale. The values might be too concentrated, which probably caused the effect size not big enough for the moderated mediation to be present in the analysis.

Although the moderated mediation was not significant, I conducted further analysis to examine whether competence mediated the effect of entitativity in the high utilitarian sample and the low utilitarian sample respectively. I used the purchase motivation index of 2.34 as the boundary between the two conditions since the results of the Johnson-Neyman analysis had identified that 2.34 was the boundary of purchase motivation's moderating effect (H3). The use of Johnson-Neyman technique enabled me to identify the transition point to separate the two conditions, instead of an arbitrarily selected point (Montoya, 2019). 85 samples were in the "high utilitarian" condition and 35 samples were in the "low utilitarian" condition. I ran the Hayes PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013) to test the mediation under the two conditions respectively. The indirect effect of entitativity on subscription intention through competence was shown to be significant when the purchase motivation index was lower than 2.34 ($b = .28, SE = .08, 95\% CI: .13, .44$) and not significant when the purchase motivation index was higher than 2.34 ($b = .14, SE = .22, 95\% CI: -.12, .72$). It indicated that the mediation only presented when purchase motivation was high utilitarian. For consumers with high utilitarian motivation, curator teams with higher entitativity led to higher subscription intention, which could be explained by their higher perceived competence. Entitativity did not influence perceived competence or subscription intention for consumers with less utilitarian motivation. Although the moderated mediation was not significant, the further analysis to some extent supported the hypothesis that perceived competence mediated the effect of entitativity on subscription intention when consumers held high utilitarian motivation.

3.6 Discussion

The study demonstrated the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention (H1) and the mediating role of competence perception in this process (H2): Increasing the entitativity of a curator team made people perceive it as more competent, and in turn promoted consumers' subscription intention toward the service. In addition, the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention had a boundary. It was moderated by consumers' purchase intention (H3). Specifically, as purchase motivation became less utilitarian, the effect attenuated until disappeared. Although the moderated mediation effect was not significant and H4 was not supported, the study revealed the trend that purchase motivations could interact with entitativity to affect subscription intention through competence perception. In this study, purchase motivation was manipulated by changing consumers' consumption goals toward the same product category. Participants' original personal motivations for clothing purchases may have been too strong, causing the manipulation to fail, as well as the rating of purchase motivation to be biased toward the utilitarian end. Changing the way of manipulation by using two different product categories that are truly hedonic or utilitarian or conducting a pretest to choose more suitable stimuli may help test the moderated mediation.

4 GENERAL DISCUSSION

The market potential for curation subscription services is enormous (Tan & Chen, 2021). Curators, as agents who select products on behalf of customers, play a crucial role in this business. However, apart from some exploratory research that provided general insights regarding the online subscription model (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018), few studies specifically addressed curation subscriptions (Bischof et al., 2020; Tan & Chen, 2021). Moreover, of the few studies, none captured and investigated how different types of curator teams affect consumers' perceptions. In the current research, by introducing the theory of group entitativity into the context of curation subscription, I explore the impact of curator teams with different levels of entitativity on consumers' perceptions and subscription intentions.

The research showed that consumers were more willing to subscribe to curation services when facing curator teams with relatively high entitativity. This is because they believed that high-entitativity curator teams were more competent in delivering curation services than low-entitativity teams. The research further demonstrated that the effect of team entitativity on subscription intention may vary with consumers with different purchase motivations: As consumers' purchase motivation became less utilitarian, the impact of high versus low-entitativity curator teams on subscription intentions attenuated until disappeared.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

The current research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it adds to the body of knowledge regarding online subscription services. From a macro perspective, previous research identified the demographics of consumers signing up for subscription services, and the factors attracting them or discouraging them from subscribing (Bray et al., 2021; Ramkumar & Woo, 2018; Tao & Xu, 2018; Woo & Ramkumar, 2018). Focusing on more specific details, Bischof et al. (2020) and Tan & Chen (2021) discussed consumers' preferences towards different delivery intervals and promotions for subscription services. Unlike the previous research, I look at the function of curators in subscription services and explore consumers' attitudes towards different types of curator teams. This is the first time that academic research has focused on the employees who provide subscription services and how curation service companies present their curator teams.

Second, the current research expands the discussion of the entitativity construct in the business realm. In social psychology, entitativity research is relatively mature that people's perception of groups with different levels of entitativity has been widely discussed (Clark & Wegener, 2009; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018; Dang & Liu, 2022). However, little research has explored the impact of entitativity in the business context, apart from Effron et al. (2022)'s research. At the company level, they found that high-entitativity business organizations were more attractive to consumers than low-entitativity ones that consumers have better impressions of high-entitativity organizations and expect them to perform better in the future. My research applies the entitativity construct to a new context, subscription services, and focuses

on entitativity as a team trait. I not only examined consumers' perceptions of service teams with different levels of entitativity but also examined their impact on purchase intention.

Furthermore, while Effron et al. (2022) established a relationship between high-entitativity business organizations and positive public evaluations, they did not address how the positive effect might vary depending on the type of customer motivations. In my research, purchase motivations were found to influence the positive effect of a curator team's entitativity on consumers' subscription intention: The effect was stronger when a consumer held a utilitarian purchase motivation, and such an effect gradually attenuated until disappeared when the motivation became less utilitarian. While most of the previous research demonstrated a positive relationship between entitativity and perceived competence (Dang, Liu, Ren, & Gu, 2018; Dang, Liu, Ren, & Su, 2018; Dang & Liu, 2022), the current research suggests that it is not always the case: Entitativity has been found to have no effect on perceived competence when consumers held less utilitarian motivation. As such, my research demonstrates a boundary of the effect of entitativity.

Lastly, the current research contributes to the discussion on the competence of service employees in service marketing research. Previous research has identified several traits, e.g., gender, appearance and expression, that could influence the perceived competence of a service employee and lead to different customers' responses (Min & Hu, 2022; Ozanne et al., 2019; N. A. Smith et al., 2016; Soderlund & Berg, 2019; Z. Wang et al., 2017). Some specific behaviors of employees, such as signaling wealth and status (e.g., driving a luxury car and wearing a luxury watch) and providing additional beyond their expected role were also shown positively related to

their perceived competence (Li et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2013; X. Wang et al., 2020). The majority of these studies were conducted in the context of traditional service encounters in which service employees interact face-to-face with customers in real-time (Bitner et al., 1990), and they all focused on the traits of an individual employee. Curation subscription, on the other hand, is an occasion of the contemporary service encounter, providing opportunities for consumers to interact with firms without engaging in direct encounters with employees (Larivière et al., 2017). Customers in curation subscriptions have no direct contact with curators and generally cannot identify a specific curator. Therefore, they use the team description provided by the companies to make the competence judgment and hence their purchase decision. The current research has found that entitativity can work as a team trait to influence consumers' competence perception. The link between the traits of a service team and their perceived competence has not been well-established in previous service marketing research. I enrich the literature in this field by shifting the research focus from individual service employees to service teams, expanding the exploration of employees' perceived competence in contemporary service encounters.

4.2 Managerial Implications

Improving the conversion rate for curation subscriptions has always been a challenge due to the risks associated with delegating product selection to others (Chen et al., 2018). The current research makes specific and feasible recommendations for subscription companies to encourage

consumers to sign up for their curation services, by strategically managing the entitativity of their curator teams. According to the findings of the research, increasing a curator team's entitativity can increase its perceived competence and in turn, attract more consumers to subscribe. Therefore, if companies want consumers to believe that they have a competent curator team, they can emphasize the high entitativity of the team, e.g., by presenting a group photo of employees wearing T-shirts with the company logo, a video of employees in uniform having a meeting or a description that highlights frequent collaboration between employees with similar professional backgrounds. Notably, displaying a high-entitativity curator team is more likely to benefit those product categories that are more utilitarian, such as health supplements and personal care products. It may also work better for companies with a more utilitarian market positioning, for example, a subscription company dedicated to providing customers with a strict weight management diet.

More broadly, the current research has implications for how companies communicate the external images of their teams with different functions (Dutton, 1991). Showcasing service teams is commonplace in the service industry, not only in subscriptions. To draw in customers, a restaurant might showcase its culinary team, and a barbershop might showcase its stylist team. Moreover, any functional team could be displayed in a certain circumstance. For example, if an R&D team is hiring, the company may make an introduction to the team to attract talents. My findings raise the possibility that managing the team entitativity is broadly applicable in different business contexts.

4.3 Limitations and Future Research

Although the current research has generated some interesting findings, there are a few limitations that need to be addressed by future research. First, the manipulations in the experiment did not work as expected. The attempt to manipulate high versus low entitativity conditions was unsuccessful. This may be because the introduction to the curator team was relatively long, while participants in the online survey might tend to form a quick impression of the team based on only partial information. Therefore, the current results were based on measured entitativity perception instead of manipulation. To create a more vivid impression on participants, future manipulations could shorten the description of entitativity, use more extreme wording or use more intuitive forms such as pictures and videos to display entitativity.

The manipulation of purchase intention was also ineffective, so measured purchase motivation was used in the analysis. However, participants' ratings of the apparel purchasing scenarios were skewed towards the utilitarian end. As a result, although I was able to observe the difference between the patterns of consumers with relatively strong versus weak utilitarian motivation, the analysis on the hedonic side was absent. I was unable to examine when facing curator teams with different levels of entitativity, how consumers with high hedonic motivations would behave differently compared to consumers with high utilitarian motivations. In addition, the concentration of ratings on the utilitarian side resulted in a relatively small effect size for the moderation of purchase motivation (H3), which prevented the expected moderated mediation through competence (H4).

In my study, I manipulated participants' purchase motivation by altering their consumption goals towards the same product category, apparel. However, participants' original personal motivations for apparel purchases may have been too strong, and most participants considered apparel purchases to be utilitarian, causing the manipulation to fail. Subsequent studies could use two distinct product categories, one proven to be primarily utilitarian and the other primarily hedonic, to manipulate the two purchase motivations respectively (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). This may help the valid manipulation and the test of the moderated mediation. Conducting a pretest to choose more suitable stimuli could be another potential solution.

Furthermore, since I only conducted one experiment with a relatively small sample size (120) and did not collect the demographics of the participants, subsequent studies can use a larger sample size to replicate the experiment in different business contexts and explore any potential differences among consumers with different demographics such as gender, age and region. It is also possible to carry out a field study to see if changing the entitativity presentation of a team will have any actual impact on the company's performance. This can mitigate some drawbacks of simulating scenarios through online surveys.

The current research points out some interesting directions for future research. As I mentioned earlier, most of the participants considered purchasing clothes as more utilitarian than hedonic, which resulted in a small sample of participants with highly hedonic purchase motivation. This research found that the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention attenuated as consumers' purchase motivation became less utilitarian. In light of this, as consumers' purchase

motivation becomes more hedonic, will the effect of entitativity on subscription intention reverse and become negative? Waytz & Young (2012) and Morewedge et al. (2013) demonstrated a group-member mind trade-off that the more entitativity a group is perceived to be, the less its members are perceived to have their independent thoughts. Consumers with hedonic motivations subscribe to curation services for adventurous and exploratory shopping experiences, and they expect to receive diverse and unique products (Ramkumar & Woo, 2018). They may appreciate each curator's individual ideas and feel that close collaboration in high-entitativity teams may diminish the uniqueness of product selections. Therefore, the effect of entitativity may reverse when consumers hold hedonic motivations. By testing this assumption, future research may find evidence that increasing the entitativity of a service team does not always lead to more favorable consumer attitudes.

Apart from purchase motivation, future research could explore more individual differences that may influence the effect of entitativity, i.e., consumers' regulatory focus (Higgins, 1998) and need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001). Notably, the focus of my research is how to entice consumers to subscribe for the first time. One feature of the subscription model is that it is not a single purchase, but involves regular and continuous purchases. Therefore, future research can examine whether team entitativity influenced new versus existing customers' perception of the team, evaluation of the products curated, and their intention to continue the subscription.

Moreover, the current research suggests that the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention is achieved through the increase of the team's perceived competence. Future

research could look at the impact of entitativity on other team perceptions. For example, people believe that high-entitativity teams may provide services that meet their stated preferences. Will it reduce consumers' perceived risk in shopping? Members in a relatively low (vs. high) entitativity team are perceived to have more independent thoughts (Morewedge et al., 2013; Waytz & Young, 2012). Will it make consumers believe that the services offered by low-entitativity teams are more unique? By digging deeper into the downstream effects of entitativity, future research could further explore the interaction between service teams with different levels of entitativity and different types of consumers.

Lastly, future research could investigate other curator team attributes that may affect subscription intention. The current research focuses on entitativity and the discussion is based on the context that the curators are human beings. Incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) into the curation process is now a trend among subscription companies, and those companies use AI in different ways. In some companies, curation is still primarily carried out by employees, while some other companies use "completely curated by AI" as a selling point. It would be an interesting research question to see how people view the different levels of collaboration between humans and AI in the curation process.

5 CONCLUSION

Attracting new customers has always been a challenge for curation subscription companies.

The current research proposes an innovative strategy to promote curation subscriptions by managing the entitativity of curator teams. The empirical findings indicate that increasing a curator team's entitativity can increase consumers' subscription intention by enhancing the team's perceived competence. Furthermore, the positive effect of entitativity on subscription intention may vary depending on different purchase motivations. It attenuates as consumers' purchase motivation becomes less utilitarian.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. REB Certificate



RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS

*Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research
Involving Human Participants*

APPROVAL PERIOD: June 19, 2023
EXPIRY DATE: June 18, 2024
REB: G
REB NUMBER: 23-04-014
TYPE OF REVIEW: Delegated
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Wang, Juan (jwang25@uoguelph.ca)
DEPARTMENT: Marketing & Consumer Studies
SPONSOR(S): OMAFRA
TITLE OF PROJECT: How to Market Your Service Team to Attract Your Target Consumers: The Role of Entitativity in Curation Subscriptions

CHANGES:

Type	Date
Amendment	

The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:

- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and **approved** by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any **modifications** before they can be implemented.
- Report any **change in the source of funding**.
- Report **unexpected events or incidental findings** to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for **ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements** with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:

- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit an **Annual Renewal** to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the **EXPIRY DATE**, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature:

Date: June 19, 2023

Dave Guydeen
Co-Chair, Research Ethics Board-General