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# The interaction between reputation and information search: evidence of information avoidance and confirmation bias

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# **The interaction between reputation and information search: evidence of information avoidance and confirmation bias**

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates how the valence of reputation affects the information search, and how the outcome of the search can result in a reevaluation of reputation. The protocol uses a digital version of the Information Display Board (IDB) to examine the dynamics of information search and reputation building. A sample of 1811 respondents was asked about their perceptions of the reputation of specific performing arts events, pre- and post-information search. The findings provide evidence of a confirmation bias (between positive information and the information search), and support information avoidance theories. Specifically, our results show that prior reputation only affected the online information search for consumers with no opinion, or with a positive opinion of a show's reputation. Furthermore, the information search only modifies reputation when consumers have no prior opinion.

**Keywords:** Reputation, reputation building, information search, information avoidance, Information Display Board,

# **The interaction between reputation and information search: evidence of information avoidance and confirmation bias**

## **1. Introduction**

When consumers are deciding whether to see a musical or a show, they often search for information on the Internet to help them to make their choice. Or do they? What happens when a show already has a good reputation? Or when consumers have no idea at all about it?

The development of the Internet has highlighted the role of information, which is increasingly easy to find while, at the same time, reputation has become a topic of great concern. This is especially true for cultural products, defined as “singularities”, and characterized by multidimensionality and uncertainty (Hutter, 2011). Advertisements, websites, search engines, social media and electronic word-of-mouth all help consumers to evaluate alternatives and form an opinion about experience goods. Reputation is one aspect of this: the reputation of an artist, a show, and a venue can be built, but also very quickly destroyed on the Internet. Artists rely upon being known and recognized, and they develop strategies to ensure that this happens. Consequently, this article, which is based on a response to a call for projects by the French Ministry of Culture, examines the dynamics of how young people construct their reputation of an artist or a show. It looks at the contribution of preexisting reputation in the search for information on web platforms. Specifically, it considers three situations (no prior reputation, negative and positive reputations), and examines their impact on the search for information, and how this new information can change prior reputation.

Over the past 15 years, many researchers have investigated the effect of reputation (Fombrun, 2012). Reputation is a complex concept that has different meanings and definitions in different disciplines (e.g. as a signal of quality, a social and individual evaluation, or an antecedent of the decision process). Some researchers focus on corporate reputation, defined as “subjective, collective assessments of the trustworthiness and reliability of firms” (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997). Others, like the study presented here, consider reputation at an individual level, defined as “a person’s perceptual representation of a company’s past actions and future prospects” (Mariconda et Lurati, 2015). However, few studies have looked at the impact of the dynamic component of reputation and its valence in the search for information.

Although there is an abundance of studies on the antecedents of information search, few have looked at the effect of reputation on search intensity. The development of electronic markets has renewed interest in the consequences of reputation. By reducing barriers to entry, electronic markets have increased the potential number of sellers, buyers, and the amount of information. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has transformed the way consumers search for information (King et al., 2014). The abundance of information has led to a reappraisal of its role in reputation. One consequence is that overload can lead consumers to filter information (Chen et al., 2009), and information avoidance is a potential cognitive and behavioral response. Information avoidance occurs when people avoid information, even when it is free and could improve decision making (Golman et al., 2017). Another filtering process, referred to as confirmation bias, makes people more willing to select information that confirms a prior belief or opinion. Confirmation bias drives consumer to look for affirmative evidence supporting a preconceived attitude (Klayman and Ha, 1989). However, the question remains: How do confirmation bias and information avoidance affect the information search in real life? Based on these two theories, this article examines the effect of reputation on information search for an

experience good, which is characterized by attributes that cannot be evaluated before the consumption or use of the product (Nelson, 1974).

Information acquisition behavior can be monitored by methodologies such as direct questioning, thinking aloud protocols, or direct observation. Given the desirability bias inherent in these methods, this experiment uses an Information Display Board (IDB) to investigate the effect of reputation on information search. The IDB method tracks information search behavior from “inside”, and under controlled conditions, thus avoiding any negative effects of direct questioning. Moreover, the new, digital version, is an update to the original method and looks very similar to material available on the Internet. Technological developments have made the design more realistic, while consumers have become familiar with its use (Aschemann-Witzel and Hamm, 2011). In our study, almost 2000 respondents were asked about their perception of the reputation of specific performing arts events, before and after a search for information.

The present paper addresses the gap in the literature regarding the effect of reputation on information search. More precisely, our findings contribute to the understanding of the effect of reputation on search intensity in a context of information abundance, and takes into account preexisting reputation. Drawing upon a robust method, this paper highlights that no reputation and positive reputation lead to the search for more information on the Internet, while this is not the case when reputation is negative. Furthermore, it shows how new pieces of information improve reputation.

The next section reviews previous research related to reputation and information search, and proposes the hypotheses to be tested. Section 3 explains the methodology and describes the research model. Section 4 reports our results. Finally, sections 5, 6 and 7 discuss the results in terms of managerial implications, highlight the limitations of our work, and put forward some suggestions for future research.

## **2. Conceptual background and hypotheses**

### *2.1. Reputation*

The information society has completely changed the way consumers make decisions. In the cultural field, shows are what Karpik (1989) called “singularities”. Characterized by uncertainty and multidimensionality, it is difficult to compare two performances before consumption. Other creative products can be categorized as singularities, such as vintage wine, and the services of lawyers or doctors (Hutter, 2010). Given a large amount of information, reputation and renown help consumers establish benchmarks before making their choice. The abundance of information available on the Internet, and the expanding offer motivated us to re-examine the construction of reputation. Individuals increasingly use social media applications. The search for information appears to be one of the main motivations to participate in social media, as it provides a huge amount of information (Shareef et al., 2018), in particular, experiential information. Experiential information refers to the experience of consumption in the form of reviews or recommendations. Compared to descriptive and factual information, it is considered to be more useful and credible in the context of experiential products (Cooper-Martin, 1992). Consumer reviews are very easy to find on social media, as people are used to sharing their opinions. But this huge quantity of information is creating issues with respect to credibility, trustworthiness and usefulness (Kapoor et al., 2018). Consequently, firms are using online interactions with their customers to facilitate the information search and help consumers make buying decisions (Alalwan et al., 2017).

Corporate reputation is a major concern, and has attracted a lot of attention in the past three decades both among scholars (in economics, sociology, management and marketing) and practitioners. The number of peer reviewed articles on the topic increased significantly in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Barnett et al., 2006). This could be explained by the fact that corporate reputation is considered as an intangible asset that creates value, and one of the most

important drivers of success (Milgrom and Roberts, 1986; Fombrun, 1996; Rindova and Martins, 2012). Despite this strong interest, there is still no consensus on its definition (Barnett et al., 2006; Walker, 2010). First, it is often confused with similar concepts such as identity and corporate image (Wei, 2002; Fillis, 2003; Rindova et al. 2005). And, second, many definitions fail to accurately capture the construct, as they encompass both its antecedents and consequences (Barnett et al., 2006; Walker, 2010).

Fombrun (2012) recommend using a construct-centered definition: “A corporate reputation is a collective assessment of a company’s attractiveness to a specific group of stakeholders relative to a reference group of companies with which the company compete for resources”. Two key points in this definition deserve particular emphasis. First, it is viewed as an integrated, holistic, collective assessment that is built on cognitive and affective information from a variety of sources: not only the company itself, but also stakeholders and intermediaries such as journalists and analysts (Weigel and Camerer, 1988; Elsbach, 1994; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999; Rindova et al., 2005). The conceptualization impacts its measurement, which is simplified and excludes all antecedents (Ponzi et al., 2011). Second, it is established within a specific group of stakeholders. As it can be assumed that distinct audiences have distinct expectations (Di Maggio, 1988), it seems necessary to consider reputation among a specific group, here the domain of the arts and culture. In the arts, reputation integrates two aspects: *recognition* and *renown*. Recognition refers to artistic talent, and esteem from peers (other artists, teachers, professional critics, etc.), whereas renown is built among a wider public (the media, “consumers”) (Lang and Lang, 1982). Thus, artistic reputation (peer recognition) is distinguished from economic reputation, which is derived from wider success (Delmestri et al., 2005; Elberse, 2007), with both contributing to the global reputation of the artist. When studying reputation in such a plural space as the arts, it seems judicious to specify the point of view.



Reputation can be considered from two perspectives, individual and collective. This research focuses on the individual view, i.e. potential consumers (Brown et al., 2006), also called *reputation judgment* (Mariconda and Lurati, 2015). Here the assessment concerns what an individual thinks about the reputation of an artist or a show. Specifically, we consider reputation in the domain of the performing arts and define it as, “What is generally said or believed about a person’s or thing’s character, the state of being credit, distinguish, respectable and good report” (Fillis, 2003).

Individual reputation judgment has several features. It is a perception that exists independently of the consumption of the product or service. Although the past performance of a firm impacts its reputation (Fombrun and Van Riel, 1997), reputation can be expressed without having direct prior experience of the product or service. Consumers can say that an organization (or an artist) has a good or bad reputation, even if they have only heard about it (or him or her). The person or thing may or may not already have established a reputation but, if it has, it can be considered as positive or negative (Herbig et al., 1994). It is a huge challenge to build and maintain a good reputation, as many factors can intervene in the process. Furthermore, reputation is not a static phenomenon, but a dynamic concept, that can be enhanced or degraded by different signals. The etymology of the word helps to clarify its dynamics—the term is derived from the Latin words *re*, which means over and over, and *putare*, which means calculating. As a result, many researchers have considered reputation as a dependent variable, corresponding to an aggregate, overall measure of value creation (Tournois, 2015).

Other researchers have considered reputation as an independent variable. Considered as a signal (Milgrom and Roberts, 1982; Shapiro, 1983), it contributes to assessments of quality. Under uncertainty, it can compensate for a lack of personal experience, give credibility to unknown organizations (Abbé-Décarroux, 1994), and help to overcome a decline in the renewal rate of

an offer. A positive reputation may enable firms to sell at a higher price (Milgrom and Roberts, 1986; Rindova et al., 2005).

Like corporate reputation, the reputation of an artist is a signal that is linked to sales. Important changes have occurred in the infrastructure of visibility, and reputation can be built far more quickly by a community of experts or amateur reviews than professional reviews. Smith, Menon and Sivakumar (2005) found that consumer preference for peer versus editorial recommendations depended on whether the shopping goal was utilitarian or hedonic. The question of the influence of reputation (from an individual perspective) on the information search remains to be investigated. This is even more important given the increased information flow provided by the Internet. In this article we consider both prior reputation (as an independent variable), and reputation as a dependent variable in the post-information search sequence.

## *2.2. The relationship between reputation and information search*

Over the past few decades, multiple studies have investigated the effect of antecedents on information search, but fewer have studied the effect of reputation. Considering a holistic definition of reputation, two points can be underlined to highlight its effect on information search. First, uncertainty, considered as a lack of confidence in the available information and alternatives, is an important antecedent of information search (Urbany, 1986). Consumers access information until their perceived choice uncertainty is sufficiently reduced to take a decision. Uncertainty increases the search, defined as the number of alternatives, attributes, or sources (Moorthy, Ratchford and Talukdar, 1997). Second, the relationship between prior experience (and knowledge) and information search is an inverted U-shape (Maity et al., 2014). Knowledge or prior experience have often been conjointly used to mean subjective knowledge, and familiarity with a specific buying situation.

Research carried out in recent decades has led to inconsistent findings. Some studies have found a positive relationship (Jacoby, Chesnut and Fisher, 1978) and argued that a lack of knowledge implies more searching. Others have found no relationship (Moore and Lehman, 1980), or a negative one (Johnson and Russo, 1984). Malhotra (1982) and Moorthy, Ratchford and Talukdar (1997) suggest that these contradictory findings can be explained by a curvilinear relationship between knowledge and information search. Both individuals who lack prior experience and knowledge, and those who are experienced and/ or knowledgeable, lack the ability or motivation to search for more information. Only the group with a moderate level of prior experience and knowledge have enough motivation and capacity to engage in a more extensive search. Given the dominant effect of uncertainty, we consider that people with no opinion will seek more information than those who have either a positive or negative reputation. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Individuals who have no prior reputation (about an artist or a show) will search for more information than others who have.

With respect to the valence of reputation, two theories address its effect on information search: confirmation bias and information avoidance. People who are searching for information do not necessarily act rationally (Golman et al., 2017). In the psychological literature, confirmation bias theory suggests that when people hold positive beliefs, they prefer to seek affirmative evidence that supports a product choice they have already made (Klayman and Ha, 1989). In marketing, studies of online reviews support the notion of consumers' confirmation bias (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). According to the theory, people with a positive opinion will search for information that confirms their prior beliefs, unlike people with a negative prior opinion.

**H2a:** Individuals with a positive reputation (about an artist or show) will seek more information.

Furthermore, there are many situations in which people avoid information – even if it can enhance their experience or knowledge. Active information avoidance describes individuals who avoid information even if they are aware that it is available, and they have free access to it, or would avoid it even if access were free (Golman et al., 2017). People can avoid particular information. In a survey of the literature, Sweeny et al. (2010) consider three reasons why people may choose to ignore relevant information. The first is that they are reluctant to change their beliefs, as this can create cognitive dissonance. People seek to remain consistent with their self-beliefs and defend their views, especially when they just have reported a belief or an attitude (Hart et al., 2009). The second implies that collecting additional contradictory information can generate undesired action. For instance, a consumer can avoid information on red meat risks as it could be costly to change eating habits (Gaspar et al., 2015). A third reason is that information can create negative emotion, which legitimates the desire to mitigate this experience. Boen et al. (2001) found that soccer fans avoid visiting the website of their favorite team when it is unsuccessful, while the number of visitors increases after a win. These results suggest that consumers are less able to accept positive information when they already hold a negative judgment regarding a particular belief. Given these three drivers for information avoidance, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2b:** Individuals with a negative reputation (about an artist or show) will not seek more information.

Considering reputation as a dependent variable (Tournois, 2015), the filtering mechanisms described above suggest that new information will not have the same effect if the consumer has already formed an opinion (or not). The Internet has transformed the amount of available

information and the way consumers search for it. Information overload theory predicts that, beyond a certain threshold, more information leads to a poorer-quality decision (Chen et al., 2009). The limits on an individual's information processing capacity were established many years ago (Simon, 1956) and these limitations mean that in reality, they adopt "satisfied" but not "optimized" decisions. Grisé and Gallupe (2000) suggest that different people exposed to the same amount of information do not perceive and comprehend it in the same way. When the information load is low (for example, when there is no reputation), the person is more motivated to engage in complex cognitive processes, using *differentiation*<sup>1</sup> and *integration*. On the other hand, individuals with a high information load (for example, when there is a pre-existing reputation about a show) are less motivated to engage in an adjustment strategy. We therefore suggest that new information will improve the reputation of an artist for consumers who have no prior knowledge, because the person is willing to engage in evaluating the reputation. On the other hand, this will not be the case for people who have already formed an opinion because individuals are unwilling to engage in a cognitive process of adjustment to the preexisting reputation. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** When an individual has no prior reputation, additional positive information improves the reputation of the artist; however, this is not the case when the person already has a positive or a negative reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> Differentiation is defined by Grisé and Gallupe (1999) as the ability of individual to generate ideas from several dimensions, and integration refers to the process of developing complex connections between those dimensions.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. The Information Display Board*

Information acquisition behavior can be evaluated by different methodologies, including direct questioning, thinking aloud protocols, or direct observation. Here, we use Information Display Boards (IDB) to overcome the bias of remembered information or desirability. Information acquisition is controlled and the technique is more precise than other methodologies. Moreover, in our digital information society, the use of a click stream analysis tool is particularly relevant. IDBs were developed in the United States by Jacoby in 1978, and they offer an understanding of how the consumer uses and processes information to reach a final decision. In line with the cognitive paradigm, the IDB is a method that helps in understanding the decision process in choice situations. It tracks the way consumers access information and process it. The disadvantage of questioning consumers directly about the information they use is that only remembered information will be reported. IDBs avoid this, and make it possible to examine ‘from the inside’ the way subjects access information under controlled conditions, without social desirability and memory bias. While the method is cited in many works, there have been very few applications (Riedl et al., 2008; Aschemann-Witzel and Hamm, 2011).

The interest of using an IDB is twofold. On the one hand, this tracing technique helps to understand the dynamics of the reputation process under controlled conditions. Typically, consumers do not access all of the available information due to search costs, information overload, prior knowledge and heuristic decisions. The IDB makes it possible to measure dynamic and conscious access with respect to the information available (Currim, Mintz and Siddarth, 2015), and is a useful way to gain a better understanding of consumer preferences. At the same time, new technology means that the computerized version (also called the Information Display Matrix) is easier to deploy and facilitates data processing. Overall, the IDB

is a realistic form of online research design that is very similar to everyday choices made using comparators provided by sellers on the Internet (Aschemann-Witzel and Hamm, 2011; Gilbride et al., 2016).

In this study, participants were asked to choose a performing arts event. In order to avoid price bias, respondents were told “Your parents have offered to buy you two tickets to attend a show”. They received a link to an online survey incorporating an IDB matrix<sup>2, 3</sup>. First, they were asked to select a genre (a musical, a one-man show, or a concert). Then, they were shown the IDB matrix, with three options regarding the selected genre. Each of the three options was characterized by six attributes (see Figure 1 for a screenshot of the IDB matrix for musicals).



















At the beginning of the information search, all of the boxes in the matrix are closed. If the participant wants to access a piece of information, they click on the box to open it (Figure 2 shows an example). If they need more information, they click on a new box and the first box closes. The participant can repeat this action as many times as needed, and can click on the same piece of information several times. The exercise finishes with a virtual purchase decision for one (or none) of the shows presented, and the survey ends with some questions about post-reputation and demographic information.

During the visit, each click generates a piece of data that is recorded in a spreadsheet. For each respondent, we tracked the number of boxes of information accessed, the nature of the information, the time spent looking at the contents of each box, and the pattern of information search (Lallement, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> The survey can be accessed at *the link will be available in the non-anonymous version*

<sup>3</sup> The IDB and the website used here were based on bespoke software, the development of which was funded by the French Ministry of Culture.

| Live performance                       | Poster  | Trailer or extract  | Description   | Amateur reviews  | Professional reviews  | Venue   |
|--|---|---|---|--|---|---|
| Mama Mia !                             | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here |
| Dracula, l'amour plus fort que la mort | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here |
| Adam et Eve, la seconde chance         | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here | <br>Click Here |

When your choice has been made, click on "I choose"

Figure 1: Screenshot of the IDB for musicals



Figure 2: An example of the contents of a box

Once the exercise is complete, the researcher can analyze the participant's information acquisition behavior to infer their cognitive processes, and the importance of each attribute. Recently, Author (2014) demonstrated the robustness of a self-administered online method.



### *3.2. Pre-testing and selection of criteria for the IDB*

Pre-testing determined the criteria that were used to evaluate the live performances proposed to respondents (Authors, 2018). Firstly, two in-depth focus groups identified and ordered the criteria used in the choice of a performance. Six main attributes were selected, namely: a description, a picture of the venue and its number of seats, three amateur reviews, three professional reviews, a video (either a trailer or an extract), and the poster. Secondly, an online survey was conducted with 203 respondents to select six shows (concerts, musicals and one-man shows) featuring either a well-known celebrity or an unknown performer. Thirdly, as it was important to avoid any variance in the display of attributes, the content of attributes for each artist or show was controlled. The length of videos and the number of words in descriptions and reviews were the same. The number of stars awarded in reviews was also the same. Pre-testing confirmed that, overall, all of the reviews were positive.

### *3.3. Dependent variables*

Reputation is defined as a global, collective assessment of the quality of an artist or show. It can be studied as a holistic representation, and thus measured by a single item. It can have cognitive, affective, and sometimes conative (prior experience) antecedents. We measured pre- and post-reputation before and after exposure to the IDB on a 7-point Likert scale ranked from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) in response to the statement, the “[Target performance/show] has a good reputation”, while the respondent could also answer “no opinion” (Ponzi et al., 2011). Responses were divided into two categories: positive (from 5 to 7) and negative (from 1 to 4). Overall, 44% of participants had a positive prior opinion, 19 % had a negative prior opinion, and 37% had no prior opinion. Following exposure to the IDB, 47% of participants changed their opinion. This change corresponds to an improved reputation, even if it remains within the range for the category (for example, a respondent with a prior

opinion of 6 and a post opinion of 7 has a reputation improvement of +1). The information search was measured by the number of clicks on the IDB, which reflected the number of pieces of information consulted by each respondent.

*3.4. Sample and procedure*

The sample consisted of young people aged 19 to 29 who had attended at least three shows in the past year. The choice of this age group was based on the desire of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication to better understand the decision-making processes of young people, who are the principal target for live venues. As young people prefer different genres, a decision was made to focus on pop/rock concerts, one-man shows and musical comedies. Participants received an email that contained a link to the IDB and the survey. The email stated that they were being asked to participate in an experiment related to the performing arts. As an incentive, they were invited to provide an email address that would give them the chance to win a voucher. A total of 1811 respondents completed the online questionnaire (Table 1). Of these, 52.5% were female. Most were aged between 21 and 25 and nearly 64% were students. Young people were over-represented, as the study explicitly explored their experience of culture.

Table 1: Sample demographics

|            |                    |       |
|------------|--------------------|-------|
| Age        | 17–20              | 30.7% |
|            | 21–25              | 46.8% |
|            | 26–32              | 22.5% |
| Sex        | Female             | 52.5% |
|            | Male               | 47.5% |
| Occupation | Seeking employment | 10.7% |
|            | Student            | 63.9% |
|            | Currently working  | 25.4% |

The questionnaire was divided into four main sections. The first provided basic information on the non-commercial nature of the research, asked participants to validate their age (18 to 30 years old), and offered them the opportunity to win a voucher. Secondly, in order to involve the respondent, they chose the type of show they preferred (a concert, a one-man show, or a

musical). Each respondent was then exposed to three, randomly chosen, known or unknown ‘products’. For each, their prior opinion of the act’s reputation was measured (*RepPrior*). In the third part of the questionnaire, the respondent interacted with the IDB. They could click on any box, stay as long as they wanted, or skip the box. Finally, reputations of the shows or artists were measured again. This post-exposure measure made it possible to determine any changes. Finally, classical variables such as age, gender, and involvement were measured. Figure 3 shows the experimental procedure.

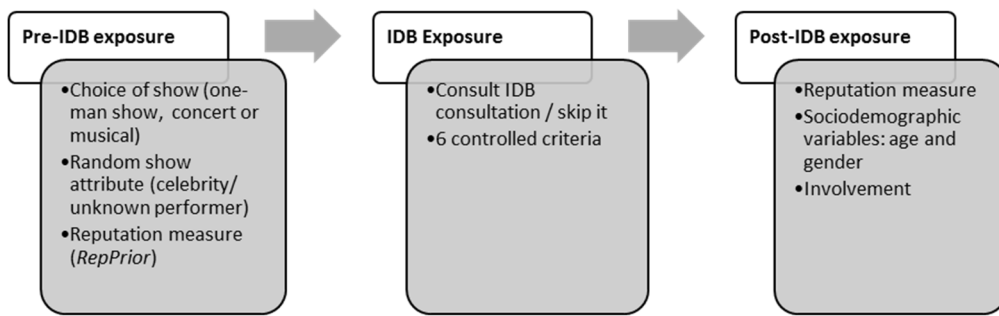


Figure 3: Experimental procedure

### 3.5. The model

We used a structural equation model to test both the impact of prior opinion on the consultation of the IDB (equation 1), and its propensity to improve the perceived reputation of the artist (equation 2). The system of two equations is as follows:

$$RepImproved = \beta_1 X_1 + \alpha_1 ClickIDB + \theta_1 RepPrior + \gamma_1 ClickIDB \times RepPrior + \varepsilon_1 \quad (eq1)$$

$$ClickIDB = \beta_2 X_2 + \theta_2 RepPrior + \mu_2 OrderIDB + \varepsilon_2 \quad (eq2)$$

The second equation estimates the number of clicks on the IDB based on the prior reputation of the artist and some control variables. *ClickIDB* is the dependent variable and represents the number of clicks made by the respondent on the IDB. *RepPrior* is a binary, generic variable that takes the value of 1 when the respondent already has an opinion regarding the reputation of the artist. We define three variables to account for the three opinions: *PosRepPrior*, *NegRepPrior* and *NoRepPrior*. A value of one indicates that the respondent has, respectively,

a positive, negative or no prior opinion of the artist.  $X_2$  is a set of control variables composed of the gender (*Gender*) and age of the respondent (*Age*), and *Involvement*. The latter is a control variable representing the preference for a certain category of entertainment. It is measured on the scale established by Strazzieri (1993), which is composed of three dimensions (relevance, interest, and affinity). The final component of  $X_2$  is *NonStar*; this dichotomous dummy variable takes the value of 1 if the artist is not considered as a top-ranked performer and was built *a priori* from the results of pretesting (see section 3.2 and Figure 3). All of these variables are described in Appendix 1.

As the number of clicks on the IDB can change the reputation of an artist, the dependent variable in equation 2 becomes an explanatory variable in equation 1.

In equation 1, the dependent variable is *RepImproved*, a binary variable that takes the value of 1 if reputation improved after the experiment and 0 otherwise. *RepPrior* is as defined in equation 2, and is examined in conjunction with the number of clicks on the IDB to disentangle the effect of information retrieval, depending on whether the respondent has or has not made a prior evaluation of the reputation of the artist or show.

$X_1$  contains the same set of variables as  $X_2$  and  $\varepsilon_1$  and  $\varepsilon_2$  are error terms, in other words, the unobserved part of the dependant variable.

To avoid potential endogeneity issues, and guarantee that an unobserved factor or measurement error does not explain improvement in reputation and clicks on the IDB, we developed an instrumental variable. This variable should be correlated with the endogenous variable (*ClickIDB*) but be independent of the dependent variable in equation 1 (*RepImproved*). Through variation in the endogenous variable, the instrument ensures that variation in *RepImproved* is only due to variation in *ClickIDB*. We therefore developed the variable *OrderIDB*, which takes the value of 1 if the information “sample” appears first on the display board. This instrument is

presumed to be correlated with the ability to click on the IDB (whatever the reason), but should not have an impact on reputation.

The two equations are simultaneously estimated using a maximum likelihood estimation. However, this system of two equations has both binary and continuous explanatory variables and requires significant computing resources. Roodman (2011) provides a method to simulate the maximum likelihood estimation in the context of a conditional mixed process regression, which is a generalization of the seemingly-unrelated regression when independent variables are discontinuous. This technique uses the Geweke-Hajivassiliou-Keane (GHK) algorithm to simulate the maximum likelihood method.

As each respondent evaluates three different artists, residuals should not be completely independent. To control for this potential bias, observations are clustered, which allows standard errors to be computed on the aggregate evaluation for each of the 1811 participants.

**4. Results**

Table 2 provides an insight into how individuals interacted with the IDB. In particular, it shows that the distribution of clicks is skewed. Respondents with no prior reputation generated the most interactions; 50% clicked on the IDB at least once, while 10% made at least four clicks. At the opposite end of the scale, those who had a prior negative reputation made little use of the IDB (30% clicked at least once).

Table 2: Centiles and mean clicks on the IDB as a function of prior reputation

|                           | 40th | 50th | 60th | 70th | 80th | 90th | Mean clicks |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------|
| No prior reputation       | 0    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 1.35        |
| Prior positive reputation | 0    | 0    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 3    | 1.1         |
| Prior negative reputation | 0    | 0    | 0    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 0.64        |

Table 3 shows the results of estimates of equations 1 and 2 for the three evaluations of prior reputation (no prior reputation, positive and negative). For each prior evaluation, table 3 shows the estimation of equation 1 (columns 1, 3 and 5) and equation 2 (columns 2, 4 and 6). The

result describes the effect of prior reputation on the number of interactions with the IDB (*RepPrior* in columns 2, 4, and 6) and the impact of these interactions on improving the participant's perception of the show's reputation as a function of prior reputation (*ClickIDB \* RepPrior* in columns 1, 3, and 5).

Table 3: Detailed results

| VARIABLE                      | (1)<br>RepImproved<br>(NoRepPrior) | (2)<br>ClickIDB         | (3)<br>RepImproved<br>(PosRepPrior) | (4)<br>ClickIDB         | (5)<br>RepImproved<br>(NegRepPrior) | (6)<br>ClickIDB         |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>ClickIDB</i>               | 0.0959<br>(0.278)                  |                         | 0.281<br>(0.263)                    |                         | 0.268<br>(0.259)                    |                         |
| <i>RepPrior</i>               | -0.457***<br>(0.0677)              | 0.182***<br>(0.0533)    | -0.337***<br>(0.0545)               | 0.103**<br>(0.0487)     | 0.920***<br>(0.0939)                | -0.475***<br>(0.0804)   |
| <i>ClickIDB*<br/>RepPrior</i> | 0.216***<br>(0.0262)               |                         | -0.127***<br>(0.0263)               |                         | -0.0644<br>(0.0561)                 |                         |
| <i>Gender</i>                 | 0.0670<br>(0.0640)                 | 0.166***<br>(0.0431)    | 0.0256<br>(0.0660)                  | 0.177***<br>(0.0432)    | 0.0500<br>(0.0664)                  | 0.171***<br>(0.0430)    |
| <i>Age</i>                    | 0.00451<br>(0.00412)               | -0.0105***<br>(0.00330) | 0.00641<br>(0.00405)                | -0.0113***<br>(0.00330) | 0.00519<br>(0.00392)                | -0.0105***<br>(0.00329) |
| <i>Involvement</i>            | 0.0342<br>(0.0271)                 | 0.0611***<br>(0.0217)   | 0.0919***<br>(0.0264)               | 0.0378*<br>(0.0218)     | 0.0623**<br>(0.0255)                | 0.0388*<br>(0.0213)     |
| <i>NonStar</i>                | 0.314***<br>(0.103)                | 0.281***<br>(0.0511)    | 0.0118<br>(0.128)                   | 0.422***<br>(0.0477)    | 0.274**<br>(0.130)                  | 0.355***<br>(0.0428)    |
| <i>OrderIDB</i>               |                                    | -0.190***<br>(0.0573)   |                                     | -0.190***<br>(0.0574)   |                                     | -0.190***<br>(0.0572)   |
| <i>Constant</i>               | -1.156***<br>(0.272)               | 1.137***<br>(0.0777)    | -1.106***<br>(0.236)                | 1.109***<br>(0.0827)    | -1.468***<br>(0.214)                | 1.205***<br>(0.0770)    |
| <i>Observations</i>           | 5,430                              | 5,430                   | 5,430                               | 5,430                   | 5,430                               | 5,430                   |
| <i>Log<br/>Likelihood</i>     | -12748.8                           |                         | -12726.3                            |                         | -12707.6                            |                         |

Standard errors in parentheses: \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**H1:** Individuals who have no prior reputation (about an artist or a show) will search for more information than others who have.

The determinants of information seeking using the IDB are described in reduced form equations (equation 2). Column 2 and the positive and significant coefficient associated with *NoRepPrior*

show that respondents who have no preexisting opinion use the IDB more than others (with a positive or negative reputation) to search for information. This result validates H1.

**H2a:** Individuals with a positive reputation (about an artist or show) will seek more information.

**H2b:** Individuals with a negative reputation (about an artist or show) will not seek more information.

The negative coefficient associated with *NegRepPrior* (column 6) suggests that those who had a prior negative reputation clicked less on the IDB than others, while at the same time those who had a preexisting positive opinion clicked more than others (column 4). These results validate H2a and H2b.

**H3:** When an individual has no prior reputation, additional positive information improves the reputation of the artist; however, this is not the case when the person already has a positive or a negative reputation.

When there is no preexisting artist's reputation, additional positive information improves it (column 1); specifically, the coefficient associated with *ClickIDB \* RepPrior* is positive and significant. When the initial reputation is negative, interacting with the IDB does not improve it (column 5). When the initial reputation is positive, the interaction does not improve it. At first sight, it may appear that the information provided by the IDB was not sufficiently attractive or meaningful to change the show's perceived reputation. However, it did have a positive impact on those who had no prior opinion, which suggests that it was able to change the mind of some participants. This suggests that the ability of the IDB to change the perceived reputation seems highly dependent on prior knowledge.

Prior reputation, before any interaction with the IDB matrix has a negative and significant effect (*RepPrior* in column 1), suggesting that it can only be associated with an improved post-experiment reputation if the respondent clicks on information in the IDB that reinforces its impact on reputation building.

These results partially validate H3. Interacting with the IDB does not improve perceived reputation when the respondent has no or a positive prior reputation regarding the artist (*NegRepPrior* or *PosRepPrior*). However, clicking on the IDB and thus being exposed to positive information does improve perceived reputation for consumers who had no opinion before they started searching for information.

The results for other control variables are as expected. Older respondents clicked less, while those who had a high level of interest in a particular category of entertainment used the IDB more intensively. Female respondents made more clicks. The appearance of an unknown artist had both direct and indirect effects on post-experiment improvements to perceived reputation. The indirect effect is that an unknown artist led to more clicks. The direct effect is that people were more willing to change their opinion of an unknown artist, independent of the quantity of information gained. We note here that the direct effect of *NonStar* differed as a function of prior perceived reputation, suggesting that there is collinearity between popularity and reputation, although they provide different information.

These results demonstrate the importance of prior reputation in how consumers acquire information and change their opinion about an experience good. A notable finding relates to the absence of reputation in the process of acquiring information, and how this information can positively affect the evaluation of reputation.

#### *4.1. Additional results*

Table 4 presents the type of information consulted as a function of prior reputation. Respondents with no opinion seemed to be particularly interested in new information,



especially the description. Amateur reviews were consulted as much by those who had no prior opinion as those who did.

Table 4: Click rate as a function of prior reputation

| Prior reputation | Venue | Amateur review | Description | Pro review | Video | Poster |
|------------------|-------|----------------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|
| None             | 21%   | 19%            | 25%         | 22%        | 21%   | 22%    |
| Positive         | 17%   | 17%            | 19%         | 17%        | 17%   | 18%    |
| Negative         | 8%    | 10%            | 11%         | 11%        | 11%   | 11%    |

We then expanded the analysis and estimated the impact of each type of information on its ability to improve reputation. We estimated a modified version of the first equation described in section 3.5. This uses *RepImproved* as the dependent variable, while *ClickIDB* is replaced by the type of information consulted. We also analyzed the interaction between each type of information and *RepPrior* in the case where individuals had no prior opinion. As previous results have shown, in this case the interaction with the IDB is associated with an improved reputation.

The results are shown in Table 5. When respondents had no prior opinion, the negative and significant coefficient associated with *NoRepPrior* suggests that there is no improvement reputation when the respondent does not click on any information. When we introduce interaction variables for each type of information (venue, amateur and professional reviews, description of the show, video and poster) the coefficient becomes positive and significant for the description of the show, professional reviews and the extract (a picture of the venue and the number of seats was also significant but only at the 10% confidence interval).

Table 5: Impact of information on reputation

| VARIABLE                  | RepImproved           |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>NoRepPrior</i>         | -0.465***<br>(0.0747) |
| <i>Venue</i>              | -0.00388<br>(0.0853)  |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Venue</i> | 0.246*                |

|                                     |                       |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
|                                     | (0.134)               |
| <i>Amateur reviews</i>              | 0.0912<br>(0.0818)    |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Amateur reviews</i> | 0.149<br>(0.136)      |
| <i>Pro reviews</i>                  | 0.0675<br>(0.0799)    |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Pro reviews</i>     | 0.305**<br>(0.130)    |
| <i>Description</i>                  | -0.0185<br>(0.0751)   |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Description</i>     | 0.308**<br>(0.122)    |
| <i>Video</i>                        | 0.0708<br>(0.0785)    |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Video</i>           | 0.267**<br>(0.129)    |
| <i>Poster</i>                       | 0.0753<br>(0.0795)    |
| <i>NoRepPrior * Poster</i>          | 0.131<br>(0.124)      |
| <i>Gender</i>                       | 0.0783<br>(0.0500)    |
| <i>NonStar</i>                      | 0.332***<br>(0.0591)  |
| <i>Age</i>                          | 0.00357<br>(0.00388)  |
| <i>Involvement</i>                  | 0.0360<br>(0.0258)    |
| Constant                            | -1.097***<br>(0.0934) |
| Observations                        | 5,430                 |

Standard errors in parentheses: \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## 5. General discussion

Our result highlights the importance of considering prior reputation when studying the search behavior of consumers, especially in a context such as online search. Our findings show that participants with no preexisting reputation seek more information. Moreover, among those who have formed an opinion, their information acquisition is related to the valence of their reputation. Our findings confirm the existence of a confirmation bias, as only positive reputation are associated with the search for more information. People with negative reputation

avoid positive information. Our findings go beyond trying to evaluate the impact of new, positive information in the evaluation of reputation. The only case that results in a positive change in the reputation of an artist is when consumers have no prior opinion – in this case they consult the IDB.

The fact that those with negative reputation do not use the IDB is consistent with the growing literature on information avoidance, and our result sheds light on the fact that this unwillingness to acquire new information has an impact on the process of reputation building. Specifically, our findings show that information is only able to change perceived reputation for those who have no prior opinion. Our main findings are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of main findings

|                                 | Effect on information seeking<br>(number of clicks) | Effect of clicks on improvement<br>of reputation (H3) |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| No prior reputation (H1)        | More clicks   | Yes   |
| Positive prior reputation (H2a) | More clicks   | No  |
| Negative prior reputation (H2b) | Less clicks   | Non-significant                                       |

Consistent with other research on the topic (Maity et al., 2014), other variables moderate this interaction. In particular, differences in involvement affect the information search, and confirm the relationship between prior opinion and search intensity. This is consistent with other studies that argue that involvement impacts the time and energy spent on the information search (Mitchell, 1981). Young consumers seek more information, and are able to find “needles in a haystack” (Kim and Ratchford, 2014; Maity et al., 2012). In addition, our findings confirm a gender difference found in earlier work (Laroche et al., 2000): females search for more information, confirmed by the number of clicks on the IDB.

From a methodical standpoint, our results show the value of using an online IDB. This, very realistic, method can provide many sources of online information, such as consumer advice, photos, posters and descriptions of shows. Our experiment showed that it is a suitable

instrument for consumer behavior studies. It makes it possible to examine the decision-making process from the inside, and identify the information that has most effect on behavior.

## **6. Managerial implications**

Our results provide further insight into the role played by information and its different attributes in a young person's search for information in the specific field of culture and the performing arts. In addition, our study suggests that the information provided by brands or shows must be precisely targeted. Our results highlight that different information strategies should be implemented according to the target, their prior level of information, and opinions. Marketing managers should consider their resource allocation in the light of these results.

For unknown artists and little-known web platforms, the main objective is to build a reputation, and gain visibility in order to sell tickets. Given the ever-more intensive informational flow, it is important to be in the right place at the right time. It is even more important to be there when the reputation is first created. Searching for information can reduce perceived risk. Strong competition from Internet advertising means that it is increasingly difficult and expensive to be seen. Our research suggests that managers should focus on consumers who have no prior knowledge or perceptions of an artist's reputation. This target is particularly interesting, as these consumers are ready to seek more information, and the information they find will shape their judgment. Search engine marketing strategies that place the product in first position in results' listings are particularly relevant for building a reputation with these consumers. Marketing managers should concentrate their efforts both on search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine advertising (SEA) strategies. There are also many techniques (cookies, fingerprinting) that can distinguish consumers with no prior reputation from others, based on browsing history or revealed preferences during the consumer's online behavior. Our results suggest that online consumers should be presented with information that varies as a function of the information they have consulted in the past.

Once established, reputation has to be maintained. In the context of choosing a form of entertainment, people who consider that a show has a good reputation, and those who are most involved in the genre are those who seek most information. For them, the information search can have two goals: recreation or reassurance. Marketing managers must develop brand content strategies that respond to these two objectives, paying particular attention to social networks such as YouTube, Facebook or Instagram, blogs, and user-generated content. By addressing the numerous informational sources that are available on the Internet, managers will meet the informational needs of young people, who are particularly experienced in new technologies and search for precise information. Our recommendations for improving reputation are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of the main managerial implications

| Level of reputation | Strategic objectives      | Information required  |           |                              | Means available                                |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---|-----------|------------------------------|--|
|                     |                           | Type  | Intensity | Strategy                     |  |
| No reputation       | Visibility                | Detailed information on the show :description and press reviews | +++       | SEM strategies (SEO and SEA) | Keywords strategies for Search engine results. |
| Prior reputation    | Reassurance Entertainment | Information about atmosphere                                    | +         | Brand content strategies     | Social media with video and UGC.               |

Finally, this research confirms how important it is for managers to consider the valence of their reputation. Depending on their prior perceptions, consumers' information-seeking behavior changes. For businesses with an established reputation, timely information is unlikely to permanently change it. Similarly, a lot of information is needed to change a negative reputation. When there is a reputation, it is difficult to reshape it, whereas in its absence, a communication

plan should be deployed to make sure that the result is good. This highlights that managers should engage in reputation monitoring, for example browsing what is said on and off the web.

## **7. Limitations and future research directions**

This study deployed an original IDB method to investigate how reputation of an artist or a show influence the search for more information, and how reputation can be modified by the obtained information; however, it has several limitations. First, the experimental procedure only lasts a few minutes, suggesting that any impact on reputation is limited. Building a reputation needs multiple interactions, not only with the goods or services concerned but also through sharing advice and experience with other consumers. Nevertheless, the IDB matrix, although simplified, is a controlled process that mimics the information search and reputation building. In this study, we only provide positive information to neutralize the effect of the valence of reputation. But, in practice, Internet users can also consult contradictory information, rich media or interactive applications, and are increasingly demanding when searching for information online, especially in a very competitive environment where it is abundant. In future experiments, the design of the IDB should take into consideration this environment in order to present the consumer with a more realistic context. The statistical analysis is also limited by the fact that many subjects did not click at all on the IDB, increasing the standard error of our estimation and lowering the explanatory power of our model.

Second, when testing our hypotheses, we consider a simple, unidimensional measure of reputation that can only be positive or negative. This measure of individual reputation is simplistic. As explained above, it refers to an individual judgment of reputation (Mariconda and Lurati, 2015). In the arts, reputation integrates two aspects: recognition (related to artistic talent) and renown among a wider public. This study is unable to distinguish between them. What is most important for young people: recognition? Or renown? What if an artist is famous among their peers, but unknown to the general public? Third, it is possible that important

variables have been neglected in the relation between individual variables and information search. An increasing number of studies insist on the importance of taking a peripheral route to attitude change (Petty and Cacioppo, 1996). Our research, based on the IDB method, can take account of the cognitive crossover effect of reputation and information search (i.e., the central route), but we know that perceptions of reputation, like other attitudes, can change in the absence of any relevant information.

Thus, this study opens up new avenues for research. First, it would be interesting to replicate the experiment with both positive and negative information. What happens if a person with a positive prior reputation is exposed to negative information? Do they stop the search to avoid cognitive dissonance? This would mean that negative information is unable to change a prior opinion. Or does the person continue to gather more positive information, thus suggesting that managers should spend more on communication? Second, in order to better understand the information process and its role on reputation, it could be relevant to consider different methodologies. The IDB can track information processing through mouse clicks, but it would also be interesting to consider eye-tracking devices (Meissner and Decker, 2010). Visual attention in the context of the amount of available information on the Internet is a highly topical subject. In an online choice environment, it is important to consider information acquisition patterns.

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## Appendix 1

### Detailed description of variables

| Variable Name      | Description   |
|--------------------|---|
| <i>NoRepPrior</i>  | Takes the value of 1 if the respondent has no prior opinion of the artist, 0 otherwise.                 |
| <i>PosRepPrior</i> | Takes the value of 1 if the respondent has a positive prior opinion of the artist, 0 otherwise.         |
| <i>NegRepPrior</i> | Takes the value of 1 if the respondent has a negative prior opinion of the artist, 0 otherwise.         |
| <i>RepImproved</i> | Takes the value of 1 if perceived reputation is higher post-experimentation (after consulting the IDB). |
| <i>ClickIDB</i>    | The number of clicks on the IDB.  |
| <i>Gender</i>      | Takes the value of 1 if the respondent is female, 0 if male.  |
| <i>Age</i>         | Age of the respondent.  |
| <i>Involvement</i> | A continuous variable between 0 and 1, with 0 representing no involvement and 1 deep involvement        |
| <i>NonStar</i>     | Takes the value of 1 if the artist is not a well-known performer, 0 otherwise.                          |



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