

The Role of Visual Education and Social Perception in Shaping the Art Photography Market: A Qualitative Analysis

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Citation: Fusu, G. (2026). The role of visual education and social perception in shaping the art photography market: a qualitative analysis. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, 28(1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.70147/c286374>

Received: 26 April 2026

Revised: 7 June 2026

Accepted: 9 June 2026

Published: 10 June 2026



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Abstract: This paper asks how visual education and the consumer's social perception of art photography combine to shape demand in Romania. It focuses on the consumer's side of the market, picking up where two earlier studies left off: the first looked at photographers themselves, the second at the macroeconomic footprint of the field. Thirteen Romanian consumers of art photography were interviewed in depth by telephone. Coding was manual and emergent. Eleven thematic categories surfaced from the transcripts. Schools in Romania teach virtually no photography, and the consequence is observable in the interview data. Content drives purchasing decisions; the photographer's name comes second, or sometimes nowhere at all. Therapeutic, mnemonic, and patronage motives kept appearing where we had not expected them. Willingness to pay was substantially higher than we had assumed before going into the field, with the average minimum standing at 520 RON and the average maximum at 1,460 RON. This is the first qualitative study of the Romanian art photography market built from the consumer's perspective. It also serves as the empirical scaffolding for a forthcoming quantitative survey

Keywords: Visual education; social perception of art; art photography consumption; consumer motivation; Romanian art market; thematic analysis

JEL Classification: M31; Z11

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INTRODUCTION

For three years the Romanian art photography market has been the focus of this research. One question keeps returning: why do Romanians not buy photographs? Is there a cultural specificity in the consumption of art?

There is no shortage of photographs. A 2022 paper, which drew on three in-depth interviews, a small sample even by the standards of qualitative work, but enough to establish the basic point, showed a healthy supply: talented artists, serious work, exhibition-ready output. The macroeconomic ledger from a 2024 paper showed something marginal but real: the photographic sector contributes around 0.02% of national turnover. The piece that does not add up is the consumer. The supply side and the field's economic weight are documented, but the consumer remains under-studied.

Berger opened *Ways of Seeing* with a sentence that has shaped the framing of this research: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak." There is a quiet provocation in that line. If sight is the older skill, why is it the one no longer taught? In Romania it is not taught at all. The curriculum has space for drawing and for music; it has none for photography or photographic literacy. Sontag (1977) wrote that the camera reorganises how the world is known. She was right, in a way that reads differently in the smartphone era than it did when she wrote: photographs surround the contemporary consumer in volumes that were unimaginable in the 1970s. And yet the volume of images and the practice of consuming images as objects of art are not the same thing. The two have separated, and the gap between them is roughly the territory this paper tries to map.

The present article is the third in a sequence. The first instalment (2022) examined the supply side. The second (2024) addressed the numbers. This one looks at the consumer. Immediately following this analysis, a fourth study was conducted in the form of a representative quantitative survey of Romanian art consumers, operationalising the insights reported here.

Two things, this paper argues, matter most for the Romanian consumer of art photography. The first is whether they have been taught to see, by which is meant whether their formal education gave them anything like a working vocabulary for engaging with photographic art. The second is what they socially perceive when they look at a photograph: whose name they trust, whose subject matter they recognise, and what kind of emotional or aesthetic register they expect to be invited into. Both, as this paper will try to show, run downstream of the same structural absence. Photography is not taught in

Romanian schools, has not been taught at any point in the formal education of any of the twelve people interviewed for this study, and the consequences of that absence appear in everything from how respondents define art photography to how much they would pay for it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The primacy of visual language

Seeing, Berger insists in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), is not an instinct that humans simply possess. It is a practice shaped by the historical moment, by what the seer has been taught to look for, by the conventions the seer is not even aware of carrying. The line "seeing comes before words" is most often quoted as a celebration of the visual; read in context it is closer to an instruction. The visual has a grammar. Like any grammar, it has to be learned. Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) take this seriously. Their attempt to formalise a cognitive theory of visual literacy treats visual competence as something built through exposure and instruction, structurally analogous to reading. The analogy is useful, even if not entirely exact. Reading is a code in which symbols stand for sounds and sounds stand for meanings, and learning to read is learning to invert that chain, whereas looking at art does not obviously work that way. The looser version of their claim survives the wobble. Visual literacy is a learned competence rather than a given, and the data reported below is broadly consistent with that proposition.

Arts education and cognitive development

Eisner (2002), in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, builds a long defence of arts education against the productivity logic that has dominated educational policy since the 1980s. His argument is that the arts train capacities: perceptual discrimination, tolerance for ambiguity, the reading of complex symbol systems with no clean translation into discursive prose, that transfer to many other domains of judgement. Whether those transfers are as large as Eisner argued is something the meta-analytic literature has been picking at for two decades. Eisner argued for large; later quantitative work tends to suggest smaller and more domain-specific effects.

If even the moderate version of Eisner's claim is correct, the Romanian situation is not difficult to characterise. Romanian schools devote relatively little time to the arts in general, and within the arts they devote essentially no time to photography. The loose version of Eisner's argument, that the absence of arts education produces a population with thin visual vocabularies, is consistent with what the respondents in this study report about themselves.

Working Hypothesis 3 takes that observation as a starting point and asks: would the introduction of photography teaching in Romanian schools change consumption patterns later in life? The answers, reported in section on visual education as a structural antecedent, are mostly affirmative. Several came with qualifications that had not been anticipated.

Photography as a socially situated practice

So far the argument is cognitive: people learn to see, or they do not. There is a parallel literature, sociological in temper, which argues that even when people do learn to see, what they learn to see is shaped by their social position. Bourdieu's *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* (1990 in the English edition, originally 1965 in French) is a study of how French families used photography in the 1960s. The conclusion has aged well: photography is among the most class-revealing of cultural practices, precisely because it is accessible across classes.

Sontag (1977) sits in adjacent territory but writes in a different register. Where Bourdieu is sociological and a little dry, Sontag is essayistic and at times wilfully provocative. Both arrive at a related conclusion. A photograph is not a transparent window on reality; it is an event in the social field. A consumer who has been trained to look at photographs in a particular way will see particular things, value particular qualities, and discount others. The "social perception" in this paper's title is shorthand for that conditioning.

Experiential and hedonic consumption

If the cognitive and sociological literatures explain how consumers come to see photographs at all, a third literature is needed to explain why they would buy one. The standard economic account, with its calculating buyer and its instrumental valuations, does not fit. Holbrook and Hirschman wrote, in 1982, about a class of consumption practices they called experiential. The subtitle of their paper, *"Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun,"* captures the flavour, and was deliberately provocative against an economic literature that had built itself on calculations of utility. Art photography is, on their argument, an experiential good. What is bought is not the photograph as object but the photograph as carrier of a state, a feeling, a memory.

Pelowski et al. (2017) sharpen the picture for the specific case of art. Their Vienna Integrated Model of Art Perception (VIMAP) frames the encounter with a work of art as a layered process. Perception comes first, then emotional response, then cognitive appraisal, and in some cases the process culminates in what the authors call self-transformation: a moment in which the viewer's relationship to the

world is reorganised by what they have just looked at. One detail of the model is particularly useful for this study. VIMAP predicts that respondents will frequently struggle to label the emotion that accompanies an aesthetic episode. The findings section below shows this prediction confirmed almost too neatly.

Cultural economics and the art market

Throsby (2001) makes a distinction that has come to organise how this material is conceptualised. A work of art has a cultural value: aesthetic, symbolic, historical, and an economic value, the price it commands. The two are linked but not reducible to one another. The disjunction between them is what cultural economics, on Throsby's account, exists to study.

Velthuis (2005), in *Talking Prices*, takes this insight down to the level of the gallery floor. His argument is that prices in art markets are not the simple residue of supply meeting demand. They are signals, sometimes loud ones, about the cultural standing of buyer and seller alike. For the present study, this matters because the willingness-to-pay figures reported in the findings section should not be read as straightforward consumer-behaviour data. They are, more accurately, statements about what a respondent thinks a photograph ought to cost, which is not always the same thing as what they would in fact spend on a given day.

Methodological foundation

On method, the analysis follows Braun and Clarke (2006), whose six-phase thematic-analysis procedure has become something of a default in qualitative research. There is reason for some ambivalence about default methodologies. They can encourage a procedural tidiness that the actual data does not deserve, but the procedure is genuinely useful when the sample is small and the coding is manual, both of which apply here. The eleven thematic categories reported below were not specified in advance. They emerged from successive readings of the transcripts, and a few of them only stabilised after the transcripts had been read three or four times.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The doctoral programme of which this paper is a part has the working title *"Art photography consumption motivations: influencing factors and consequences at the macroeconomic and social levels."* That is a wide brief. The present article narrows it to the consumer's side. The two earlier papers in this research programme (Fusu, G., 2022; 2024) addressed photographers and the macroeconomic

numbers respectively. What follows here is the methodological account of the consumer interviews. Thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, and twelve of them were analysed. The thirteenth interview was considered irrelevant for several reasons related to recording quality.

Purpose of research

The aim was to build an explanatory model of Romanian art photography consumer behaviour, one that could inform a representative quantitative survey to follow.

Decision problem

To explore the territory of art photography consumption widely enough that the forthcoming quantitative questionnaire would not miss obvious dimensions.

Research problem

What does the Romanian art photography consumer actually do, why do they do it, and what prevents them from doing more of it?

Research objectives

O1: Identify what consumers understand by the term "art photography";
 O2: Identify whether art photography consumers studied subjects covering art photography in high school or university;
 O3: Verify what consumers think about the effects of studying art photography in schools;
 O4: Identify the particularities of demand for art photography;
 O5: Identify the types of photography preferred by consumers;
 O6: Verify what consumers think about investing in art photography;
 O7: Identify how much money consumers would be willing to pay for an artistic photograph;
 O8: Identify how frequently art photography is consumed;
 O9: Identify whether consumers have easy access to products in the art photography category;
 O10: Identify the motivational factors underlying the consumption of art photography;
 O11: Identify what consumers think about the social effects of art photography consumption;
 O12: Identify what consumers think about the economic effects of art photography consumption;
 O13: Draft a questionnaire for the upcoming quantitative research.

Fundamental hypothesis

Solving the objectives listed above requires interviewing consumers of art photography in order

to capture both the particularities of demand and the motivational factors that lie beneath it.

In close connection with the research objectives, the following fundamental hypothesis was established: *The motivational factors underlying art photography consumption are endogenous in nature and anchored in aesthetic pleasure, relaxation, and art-as-therapy.*

Working hypotheses

WH1: The term "art photography" is ambiguous and interpreted differently by each respondent;
 WH2: In Romanian schools there are no subjects that address photography or art photography;
 WH3: Studying art photography in schools would produce beneficial effects on pupils and students, such as increased interest in art photography;
 WH4: When Romanians have purchased art photography in the past, their decision was driven by the content of the photograph rather than by the identity of the photographer who created it;
 WH5: Romanians prefer a range of photographic genres, with a particular orientation towards abstract photography;
 WH6: Romanians do not consider investing in art photography as a viable option;
 WH7: Consumers would pay between 200 and 500 RON for a single piece of art photography;
 WH8: Consumers of art photography engage with such products or services at least twice a year;
 WH9: Consumers do not have easy access to art-photography products or to galleries that exhibit art photography;
 WH10: Consumers have difficulty recalling the name of a Romanian art photographer;
 WH11: Consumers buy art photography for both aesthetic and therapeutic reasons;
 WH12: When considering future purchases of art photography, consumers prefer to choose photographs based on their content rather than on the artist behind them;
 WH13: Consumers consider that art photography has a significant social impact;
 WH14: Consumers consider that art photography has an insignificant economic impact.

Method

The interviews were conducted by telephone between 22 February and 15 March 2024. The interview guide ran to seven discussion themes and eighteen semi-structured questions. Recordings ranged from sixteen minutes at the shortest to thirty-five at the longest; the median was approximately twenty-four. Each recording was transcribed verbatim into a separate Word document and then loaded into a single Excel master file for coding. Telephone interviewing was a pragmatic choice

rather than a principled one. The original plan involved face-to-face interviews, but the geographic spread of the eventual sample, across six cities, made that impractical. It should be noted (because it later became a methodological concern not entirely resolved) that telephone interviewing almost certainly flattened the emotional texture of some of the responses about therapeutic motives, since several of those responses came at moments where a face-to-face interviewer would have been able to slow the conversation down.

Sampling

Recruitment was purposive: the study required respondents who had consumed art photography in some form at least once. Some had bought photographs outright. Others had visited gallery exhibitions. A few had commissioned artistic family portraits. The final twelve interviews drew from six Romanian counties: Iași, Cluj, București, Dâmbovița, Suceava, Brașov; with ages ranging from 23 to 55, and a gender distribution of seven men to five women. Educational backgrounds were deliberately mixed: economics, the arts, geography, engineering, communication studies, sociology. Occupations ranged from PE teacher and engineer at one end of the sample to entrepreneur, designer, and content creator at the other. It should be noted that the sample over-represents the urban population, by virtue of how recruitment was conducted. Rural consumers are not in this study at all, a point returned to in the limitations.

Data operationalisation

Names were coded by the scheme: interview number, first-name initial, last-name initial, age, sex. A 48-year-old male sports teacher whose initials are I.Ș., and who happened to be the first interview, becomes 1-IȘ-48-M. The Word transcripts allowed close textual reading. The Excel master file allowed comparison across respondents on a question-by-question basis. The analysis worked between the two throughout. Table 1 (in the appendix of tables at the end of this manuscript) presents the encoding of participant names.

Coding

Coding was manual and emergent. The sample is too small to justify automated coding, and besides, in a study of this sort the analytical work is mostly done in the reading rather than in the count. Themes were identified across four readings of the transcripts, with the first reading deliberately impressionistic: noticing what surprised before letting the literature filter what counted as data. Eleven categories surfaced. They are reported in Table 2 in descending order of frequency.

FINDINGS

Based on the twelve interview transcripts, eight of the fourteen working hypotheses were confirmed, four were partially supported, and two were rejected. Table 3 summarises the verdicts. The three sub-sections that follow develop in greater depth the hypotheses judged most worth developing: WH3 on the role of school-level photography teaching, WH11 on the aesthetic-therapeutic register of motivation, and WH12 on the consumer's content-over-author orientation. The remaining findings are reported, more briefly and in a different register, in the supporting findings sub-section.

Visual education as a structural antecedent (WH3)

Formal education matters. Whether it matters more than the other variables in this study is less certain, but the data on its absence is harder to argue with than the data on most other things here. Two-thirds of the sample, eight out of twelve respondents, had no school exposure to photography or photographic art at any level. Of the four respondents who had encountered the subject in formal study, none had encountered it at the lyceum stage; their exposure came at university, in the arts or journalism faculties. Working Hypothesis 2, which predicted the absence, is confirmed.

The more interesting question is what consumers themselves thought should be done about it. Eleven of the twelve agreed that introducing photography in Romanian schools would have a positive effect on later consumption of art photography. The respondents gave a wide range of reasons. One spoke of "the personal development of the individual." Another offered a more mechanical claim: *"people tend to seek out what they have been exposed to. And as long as you do not expose a person to photography, they will not be drawn towards photography."* A third pointed to creativity; a fourth to "visual pollution," a phrase that has stayed with this research as a way of describing something real about contemporary visual culture.

Avgerinou and Pettersson (2011) define visual literacy as a learned competence: perception, interpretation, creation of visual messages, that has to be built through systematic exposure. The gap described in this study is what their definition predicts when the systematic exposure does not happen. Eisner is more polemical: in the closing chapter of *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, he argues that societies failing to teach the arts do not become more efficient but less perceptive. Whether perceptiveness in his strong sense is something that can be measured at all is a question worth raising. The loose version of his claim, that the absence of

arts education produces a population with thin visual vocabularies, is consistent with what the respondents in this study reported about themselves. But the agreement was not as unanimous as the count suggests. The two respondents with the strongest arts background were among the more cautious. One of them, respondent 10-FA-30-M, the designer, argued that *"school is not where you learn to look. You learn to look by looking."* On his account, formal photography teaching would risk producing a generation of consumers who knew the technical vocabulary but lacked the patient attention that art actually requires. There is reason to take this objection seriously, and the empirical literature on arts-in-schools transfer effects is, as noted in the literature review, mixed.

One respondent stood further outside the consensus, arguing that the present moment is not one of under-exposure to images but of over-exposure: *"I think we are consuming more art and more images now than at any point in history."* The internet, on this reading, is doing the work that schools used to do. Whether it is doing the work well is a separate question. The texture of the qualitative material suggests it is not people who spend hours scrolling through Instagram still struggled, when asked to, to describe what they had been looking at.

This is taken, provisionally, and with the limitations of a twelve-respondent sample firmly in mind, as the upstream link in the causal chain that closes the paper.

Aesthetic and therapeutic motivations of purchase (WH11)

What kept surprising in the interviews was how hard the buyers found it to say why they had bought what they had bought. Holbrook and Hirschman wrote, in 1982, that the standard economic vocabulary: utility, optimisation, marginal benefit, was inadequate for what they called experiential consumption, where the value of a purchase lies in the feeling, fantasy, and memory it carries rather than in any straightforward use-value. Art photography fits inside the category they were describing. What buyers in this study described was a relation to the photograph more than a transaction with it.

Several spoke in what could be called therapeutic registers. One respondent described a purchased photograph as *"an anchor of memory."* Another said she wanted *"something that would lift you up in the morning or calm you in the evening or give you a particular state that you needed."* These do not sound like decorative purchases. They sound like attempts to regulate one's own emotional life, with the photograph as the instrument.

A second cluster of motives was unexpected. Three of the nine buyers had purchased photographs as

gifts. A surprising number of the others described the act of buying itself in patronage terms: *"I wanted, quite simply, to support the idea behind it"; "I wanted to support the moment, the artist, and the initiative"; "you feel that you are part of the destiny of the person whose work you bought."* These framings do not fit cleanly inside Holbrook and Hirschman's hedonic frame. They sit closer to what Pelowski et al. (2017) describe in the upper layers of VIMAP and it should be noted, before going further, that VIMAP was developed for laboratory studies of art viewing and is being applied here to a different kind of evidence, so the alignment that follows is impressionistic rather than tested, where aesthetic experience tips over into a transformation of the viewer's relation to the world.

The piece of evidence that aligned most closely with VIMAP was, if anything, a negative one. Respondents repeatedly struggled to name the emotion that accompanied their purchase. The vocabulary they reached for: "satisfaction," "wonder," "pleasure," "emotion", "joy," "pride", is diffuse to the point of being almost interchangeable. The word *frumos* (beautiful, but in Romanian with a softer, more domestic register than the English equivalent suggests) recurred more often than any of these. It was used as a closing word by several respondents, the thing they reached for when no more specific word would come. One simply said, *"it gives me a state. A vibe. I don't know how else to say it."* The diffuseness is what VIMAP predicts in the aftermath of an aesthetic episode, and it suggests that one of the structural problems facing Romanian art photographers is that their consumers lack a vocabulary commensurate with what they actually feel. Giving consumers that vocabulary: through criticism, through writing, through the kinds of frames that Sontag was writing for, would partially close the distance between supply and demand.

One note of caution. The respondents who articulated the therapeutic motives most fluently were also the respondents with the most prior interest in photography. The two consumers who came to art photography through commissioned family portraits, respondents 1-IS-48-M and 3-AM-40-F, did not use therapeutic language at all. They talked about memory and family, certainly, but in a register closer to ritual than to emotional regulation. The motivational story in this paper risks privileging the more articulate respondents over the less articulate ones, and a future quantitative instrument should be designed to capture both.

The content-over-author pattern and the puzzle of name recognition (WH12)

The third deep-dive concerns how consumers choose. The headline finding is straightforward.

When asked what would orient a future purchase of art photography, seven of the nine buyers in the sample said content would drive the decision: what the photograph shows, what it evokes. Only two named the artist's identity as a primary factor. *"I chose for the content,"* one said. *"I admit I did not know the artist when I went to his exhibition."* Another framed the rule by its exception: *"I have bought photographs only from people I know."* Bourdieu (1990) called photography a middle-brow art, middlebrow because it sits accessible across class lines, and because its conventional appeal organises itself around what the photograph shows rather than around the high-cultural prestige of the producer. The Romanian data fits the framing well enough. The two consumers who did buy on the basis of the artist's name happened to be the two with the most formal arts training in the sample, which is what one would expect if Bourdieu's class-aesthetic gradient were operating here. The sample is not large enough to test the gradient seriously, but it is the right place for a future quantitative study to look. Velthuis (2005) makes a complementary observation: in high-art markets, the artist's name carries accumulated symbolic capital, and the price tracks the name. The Romanian consumer of photography does not appear to be participating in that economy. The signal travels through the image. The puzzle, and it is genuinely a puzzle, is what the consumers know about the artists themselves. Eight of the twelve respondents could name a Romanian art photographer without prompting. Two named Sorin Onișor; two named Cosmin Bumbut; the longer list extended to Botofei, Dușa, Maior, Grozescu, Gâlmeanu, Pandeli, Tamaș, Corbu, and Bofan. Working Hypothesis 10 had predicted that consumers would struggle to recall any Romanian photographer at all. They did not struggle. They simply do not factor this knowledge into their purchasing decisions.

The analysis suggests the decoupling between recognition and purchase is the part of the data that matters most for whoever might want to act on this paper: photographers, gallery owners, anyone trying to sell. Not necessarily the most analytically interesting finding (the visual-education argument may be that), but the one with the clearest implications for practice. The marketing reflex of the field: promote the artist, build the personal brand, place the name in front of the consumer, is addressing a structure of decision-making that Romanian consumers, on the evidence here, are not actually using. The reflex that would fit the evidence is the opposite.

Two cases run against the dominant pattern, and they should not be buried. Respondent 7-AP-30-M, an arts graduate, explicitly bought because of the

artist: *"I follow his work. I know what he is doing."* Respondent 11-CG-40-F, a marketer, also reported buying with the artist in mind. Both were among the most arts-fluent respondents in the sample. Both used the artist's name as a kind of guarantee, a way of trusting that the work would be worth what they paid for it. They may be a glimpse of how the Romanian market could evolve as visual literacy spreads.

Supporting findings

A few briefer points on the remaining hypotheses follow.

WH1, the term itself. Four positions surfaced: art photography as communication, as expression, as therapy, as hybrid of the three. Many respondents shifted between positions inside a single interview. This is taken as evidence that the question had not been thought through in advance, which is itself a finding.

WH7, willingness to pay. Mean minimum 520 RON, mean maximum 1,460 RON. Individual ceilings reaching 5,000 RON for the right work. The figures were sensitive: to perceived quality, to framing, to dimensions, to sentimental fit. Prices in art markets are signals as well as transactions, as Velthuis (2005) showed at length, and the respondent who said her price would *"depend on dimensions, on framing, on who the photographer is, on whether I felt it would fit"* was making Velthuis's argument from the buyer's side. One additional observation about the willingness-to-pay numbers kept surfacing in the interviews: several respondents framed their answers in terms of embarrassment. *"I would be embarrassed to make an offer,"* one said. Another: *"because I can't afford it."* The arithmetic mean is silent about this. The interviews were about ambivalence and class-shame as much as about quantity.

WH8 and WH9, frequency and access. Online access is easy, daily for some, almost the only channel. Offline access is poor. Galleries concentrated in Bucharest, Cluj, Iași. Outside those cities the encounter with art photography in person is intermittent at best. Several respondents named the absence of a dedicated Romanian platform for selling Romanian art photography. One asked, half-rhetorically, *"Where am I supposed to go?"*

WH13, social impact. Unanimous agreement that art photography has one. But with a qualification: several respondents distinguished documentary photography (socially powerful in a public sense) from art photography (socially powerful in a more private sense). The distinction may or may not hold up.

WH14, economic impact. Consistent with Throsby's (2001) framework. The field is small as a direct

generator of turnover. Its economic activity radiates outward: event photography, equipment markets, the broader ecology of visual production sitting adjacent to art photography in ways that cannot be cleanly measured from interview data.

CONCLUSIONS

First, the Romanian market is constrained on the demand side, not the supply side. There are photographers. There are even names photographers can be called by. What is missing is the consumer who knows what to do with them.

Second, *"school is not where you learn to look. You learn to look by looking."* That was respondent 10-FA-30-M's objection to the line of argument this paper builds, and it should be taken seriously. But the eleven respondents on the other side of the question, including respondents who had themselves received no school-level photography teaching, were almost unanimous that they wished they had. If photography teaching were introduced into Romanian schools, even modestly, even integrated into existing arts curricula, the effect would not be quick. It might take ten or fifteen years to register in consumption data.

Third, if the paper has one finding worth acting on, it is the decoupling between recognising a photographer's name and buying their work. Both happen. They simply do not happen together. Romanian art photographers who lead with their name are leading with what the consumer values least. Lead with the photograph, though it should be added, given the size of this sample, that this is offered as a hypothesis worth testing in the quantitative follow-up rather than as a finished marketing recommendation.

Fourth, therapeutic and gift motives are systematically present in the data, and they are systematically under-served by how the market currently presents itself. Partly, the photographers interviewed for the 2022 study did not themselves describe their work in such terms. They spoke of aesthetic ambition, of formal qualities, of communicative intent, almost never of what a viewer might come to need a photograph for. Partly the gallery and exhibition formats that organise the offline part of the market in Romania were inherited from a modernist tradition that discouraged the language of comfort and emotional regulation as somehow vulgar. And partly, no one has bothered to ask Romanian consumers what they want from a photograph hanging in their home, because no one expected the answer to be *something that makes the room calmer at the end of a difficult day*. Whether respondents would describe their purchases that way

in a structured questionnaire, where a researcher is no longer leaning forward to listen, is a separate question, and one that the next study of this research will have to address.

Fifth, willingness to pay is higher than the field's working assumption, but conditional. One respondent said she would pay nothing because she felt ashamed of how little she could afford. Another, on the same set of questions, named a figure close to a thousand euros. The mean (520 RON minimum, 1,460 RON maximum) sits well above the prices most Romanian photographers actually charge for individual prints. What does this mean? Either Romanian photographers are systematically undercharging, or Romanian consumers are overstating what they would pay in a non-binding interview setting. A follow-up study with actual photographs at posted prices would clarify which.

Sixth, online channels work; offline channels do not. The construction of a Romanian-language platform dedicated to the sale of work by Romanian art photographers would, on the evidence here, find an audience. Whether it would also find sufficient buyers to be commercially viable is a different question.

Seventh, the field's macroeconomic footprint, reported in detail in a 2024 paper, is small. This study adds a mechanism rather than a measurement. The footprint is small because demand is thin, demand is thin because consumers have not been taught to look, and consumers have not been taught to look because the school system has, for as long as anyone interviewed in this study can remember, treated photography as something that happens elsewhere. Throsby (2001) describes cases where cultural value is held back from economic realisation because intermediary institutions: schools, galleries, criticism, infrastructure, have failed to do their part. Romania appears to be one of those cases.

Cause-and-effect chain

The causal chain that emerges from this study is straightforward in outline, even if the empirical evidence supporting it is qualitative rather than quantitative:

No photography in schools → little visual education → thin demand for art photography → an underdeveloped market.

One source of caution should be flagged. The first link, that the absence of photography in schools is the cause rather than merely a correlate of the absence of visual education, cannot be established from this study. It is consistent with the data, and with the wider theoretical literature, but the causal

claim properly requires a counterfactual that interview data cannot supply. The forthcoming quantitative survey will not supply the counterfactual either, though it should be able to test whether the correlations hold at population scale.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Three limitations are worth flagging beyond the obvious one, which is that a sample of twelve cannot be generalised to a national population. First, the sample is urban; what rural Romanian consumers do, or do not do, with art photography is not in this study. Second, recruitment over-sampled consumers who had pre-existing interest in photography. The consumer who has never opened a photograph as art remains under-documented, and the next instrument should make a deliberate effort to reach them. Third, some interview questions, particularly on consumption frequency, were too broad: "*How often do you consume art photography?*" elicits very different answers depending on what the respondent counts as consumption, and the next round should disaggregate by channel.

The fourth study of this research programme, a representative quantitative survey of Romanian consumers, was subsequently conducted to test the central claims of this paper on a sample large enough for inferential statistics and segment-level estimation.

Acknowledgements

This article was written within the doctoral programme of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, supported by a doctoral scholarship from the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research. The research also benefited from the support of the Iași Photographers' Club and of several Romanian art photographers, whose insights and conversations informed the work.

Biographical sketch

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access underlying the present line of work. E-mail: grigore.fusu@gmail.com.

REFERENCE LIST

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.

Encoding of participant names

Respondent ID	Respondent profile	Age
1-IŞ-48-M	Education: BA in Sports; Occupation: PE teacher; Sex: Male	48
2-RL-55-M	Education: BA in Engineering; Occupation: Engineer; Sex: Male	55
3-AM-40-F	Education: BA in Economics; Occupation: Credit officer; Sex: Female	40
4-DG-34-F	Education: BA in Finance and Banking; Occupation: Branch manager; Sex: Female	34
5-AM-40-M	Education: BA in Computer Science; Occupation: Entrepreneur, branding specialist; Sex: Male	40
6-EG-23-M	Education: BA in Management; Occupation: Content creator; Sex: Male	23
7-AP-30-M	Education: BA in Arts; Occupation: Water-treatment equipment technician; Sex: Male	30
8-CP-38-M	Education: BA in Geography; Occupation: Airport attendant; Sex: Male	38
9-AŞ-29-F	Education: BA in Communication; Occupation: Teacher; Sex: Female	29
10-FA-30-M	Education: BA in Arts; Occupation: Entrepreneur, designer; Sex: Male	30
11-CG-40-F	Education: BA in Human Resources; Occupation: Marketer; Sex: Female	40
12-CN-48-F	Education: BA in Sociology; Occupation: Researcher; Sex: Female	48

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the interviews conducted.

Table 2.

Thematic categories and frequency of occurrence

Category	Themes	Frequency
Types of photography and preferences	photographic albums; studio art photography	24
Education	visual noise and visual pollution from the surroundings (caused by the absence of visual education); the occasion of first contact with art photography; initiatives for introducing art photography in schools; the neglect of art photography in schools; consumer education	11
Gift	art photography as souvenir; art photography as gift	10
Industry development	underdeveloped market; demand for art photography; sales venues for art photography; communication (advertising); promotion; exhibition spaces	9
Social	social impact; art photography and war; art photography as a vehicle of awareness	9

Category	Themes	Frequency
Therapy	art photography as therapy; appreciation of beauty; connection with nature	8
Economic	economic impact; financial aspects; investment in photography	8
Access	online access to photography; limited physical access	5
The artist-photographer	self-expression; the artist's personality; differentiating elements	5
Awareness	art photography as a vehicle of awareness	4
Industry support	support of the field by consumers; encouragement of artist-photographers	4

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the coding of the interviews.

Table 3.
Working hypotheses and findings

Hypothesis	Result
WH1: The term "art photography" is ambiguous and interpreted differently by each respondent	Confirmed. Four interpretive positions surfaced: communication, artistic expression, therapy/relaxation, and a hybrid combining the others. Several respondents shifted positions during their interview, suggesting they had not previously thought the question through.
WH2: In Romanian schools there are no subjects that address photography or art photography	Confirmed. Eight of twelve respondents had no formal exposure. The remaining four encountered photography only within arts faculties or schools of journalism.
WH3: Studying art photography in schools would produce beneficial effects	Confirmed, with qualifications. Eleven of twelve respondents agreed.
WH4: Past purchases were driven by content rather than by author	Confirmed. Seven of the nine buyers chose for content; only two named the artist as a factor.
WH5: Romanians prefer a range of genres, with a particular orientation towards abstract photography	Partially confirmed. Genres mentioned: street (5), landscape (5), portrait (4), documentary (2), family (2). Abstract was named by only two respondents.
WH6: Romanians do not consider investing in art photography as a viable option	Confirmed. Seven of twelve reject investment framing outright; four expressed conditional interest.
WH7: Consumers would pay between 200 and 500 RON for a single piece of art photography	Not confirmed. The actual range was 100–5,000 RON; the mean minimum was 520 RON and the mean maximum was 1,460 RON.
WH8: Consumers engage with art photography at least twice a year	Partially confirmed. Online consumption dominates frequency; offline acquisition is rare and irregular.
WH9: Consumers do not have easy access to art-photography products or galleries	Partially confirmed. Online access is reported as easy; offline access is reported as poor, particularly outside the largest cities.

Hypothesis	Result
WH10: Consumers have difficulty recalling the name of a Romanian art photographer	Not confirmed. Eight of twelve named one or more photographers, among them Sorin Onișor, Cosmin Bumbuț, Bogdan Botofei, Ozolin Dușa, Ieno Maior, Radu Grozescu, Alex Gâlmeanu, Andrei Pandeli, Haidu Tamaș, Elena Corbu, and Dorin Bofan.
WH11: Consumers buy art photography for both aesthetic and therapeutic reasons	Partially confirmed. Therapeutic motives are present alongside three further drivers: artist support, gift-giving, and memory anchoring.
WH12: Consumers prefer to choose future photographs based on content rather than on artist	Confirmed. Reasons named were curiosity, artist support, message resonance, and emotional state.
WH13: Art photography has a significant social impact	Confirmed. All twelve respondents endorsed this in some form, though several distinguished documentary photography from art photography in this respect.
WH14: Art photography has an insignificant economic impact	Partially confirmed. Respondents recognise the niche character of the field but acknowledge a tangential economic footprint via event photography and adjacent services.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the analysis of the interview transcripts.