Turning Tik Toks into Business Insight

How Colart learnt to engage new audiences

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Summary

Colart had a challenge. They needed to find new audiences and had a hunch that they could find them online; but where to start? Working together, we co-developed a first-of-its-kind, qualitative method of multi-source analysis (search, text and visual social) that helped landscape the world of graphic art, finding 160+ tribes of artists. This helped Colart focus its marketing, NPD and forward investment.

A blank canvas

Colart had a challenge. To meet its international expansion plans it needed more than organic growth in its core markets. It needed to find new audiences and had a hunch that these could be found online; but where to start? It seems obvious that artists would flock to visual social media to share their works, find inspiration and hone their skills. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words, so imagine what a video is worth.

However, like a lot of consumer brands, the client's use of social media was all about sharing what they thought audiences wanted, rather than listening and understanding their stories. As a result, the company had been targeting potential consumers using the usual digital and social tools; telling their story and hoping to find a receptive audience. However, it was time to make a change. So, the insights team set out to test a hypothesis: can communities of artists on social media provide the growth potential the company was looking for?

Colart is happy to admit that it had a limited understanding of the world of graphic art online, beyond its own socials efforts. It had exhausted the capabilities of its social listening vendor and found that other more AI-led tools lacked the depth and strategic context needed. Traditional research couldn't help — it simply couldn't capture art in the moment, accurately size the different online communities or reveal the different routes of influence. Thus, the company needed a new approach. It had a blank canvas titled "growth", which it needed to fill.

A summer's love?

The story of brands and their customers is an epic tale; one that plays out every minute of every day. It's a tale of need, of searching, of courtship and of romance. It can come to nothing more than a fleeting encounter — a summer's love — or it can develop into a relationship that endures.

No matter what happens, one thing is clear: in the story of brands and their customers, brands are never the hero. This is tough for most brands to hear; after all, what they do is amazing! Nevertheless, there can only be one hero in this story, and that's the customer. A brand's job is to be the guide.

Consumers are living their story, which is different from that of the brands they use. Consumers are not interested in products per se; rather, they are interested in what the product can do for them. That is, how a certain product fits into their lives and helps them achieve their goals in order to help them meet their unique challenges. The role of brands is to be the guide that helps them overcome these obstacles. It's not to sell pens; it's to help customers become better artists.

A bad way to start

Most projects don't start with a "no", but this one did. Colart's reply to the proposal was beautifully written, but the answer was still "no". They were concerned that social media data was too unstructured, unreliable and

subject to age and platform biases that would ultimately make it difficult to use for strategic decision-making. Furthermore, familiarity with traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies was how projects were always conducted at the company, and there was comfort to be had in using tried and tested approaches. However, the crucial difference in this project was that a big qual approach would be the best to explore the insights needed, and such a solution did not exist in their traditional vendor rulebook.

A walk into unfamiliar territory can be nerve-wracking. The absolute cost of getting it wrong was obvious as were the potential opportunity costs. This is where the collaboration really started. The company was determined to get the best solution to their problem, and so engaged in further discussions with Listen and Learn Research. These discussions centred around the nature of the methodology, potential outputs, how to engage stakeholders and how to minimise risk across the project. The result was a co-developed "eyes wide open" approach. It gave Colart the potential to greatly improve its understanding of art communities on social media platforms, while at the same time helping its team control risk at each stage of the process. A series of decision gates were built into the project plan enabling Colart to fully onboard the results of each stage before deciding how to proceed with the next. This gave them the ability to bring the right stakeholders along at each stage of the journey, and to use their valuable feedback to shape subsequent stages. This iterative approach enabled the client's internal teams to become familiar with new data sources and methodologies. It meant that the final results were built on solid foundations that had been laid all through the process. The "no" became a yes.

The artistic vision

Colart was looking to make some big complex decisions, decisions that would shape significant future investments. Its growth targets could not be met by organic, business-as-usual strategies. Instead, it needed to find, understand and then activate new audiences. An earlier quantitative segmentation had revealed some big themes and overarching customer types (students, hobbyists, and professionals). However, these lacked the detail the company needed in order to take action to properly engage with these segments. It had plenty of "whats", but not enough "whys".

In order to prioritise future investment, Colart needed to understand and quantitively size the needs of the different tribes of artists that sat within each broad segment. This was drawing the outline. To complete the picture, it also needed to understand these audiences qualitatively. The company needed a solution that would help them find, size and appreciate the needs of different tribes of artists online. The vision for this work was simple: to use digital and social data to reveal how consumers were trying to become better artists. By doing so, Colart would be able to see how to best engage with them and grow its market share; the challenge was to find and understand, to discover and appreciate.

What consumers look for and what they engage with leaves a digital and social trace. This trace can be followed to see where the heat is—i.e., what consumer activity is focused on and why. The discovery phase was led by this consumer activity, as their proactive engagement on social media reveals their intent. People look for what they need, which is a powerful demand signal.

For example, "how to draw..." is a common question that people use Google and social media to answer.
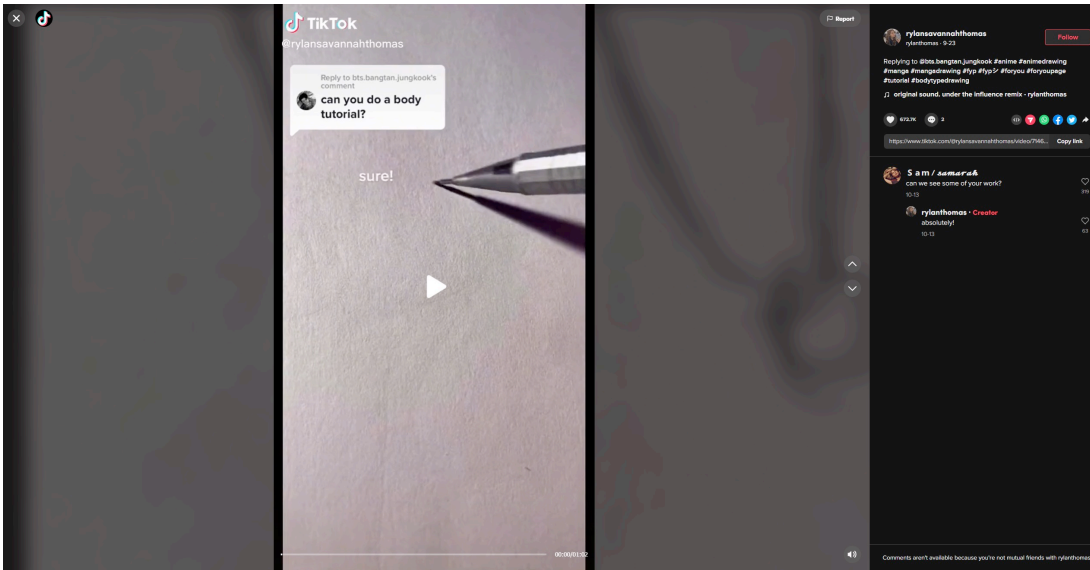
Figure 1: Can you do a body tutorial.

As Figure 1 shows, the right content can hit a nerve; this TikTok has been viewed 9.4 million times and liked by over 670k people. The first part of the project was to build a foundational landscape of graphic art online. To find, understand and size different tribes and how these differed for each of Colart's main markets. The challenge was to draw an outline of the different consumer behaviours within the world of graphic art. The next step was to fill this outline in with detail. The idea behind the second stage of the work was to find the people behind the numbers—the whys behind the whats. Content creates community, and therefore people who create great content, in the right place at the right time, can build huge communities. The relationship between creators and their audiences reveals the core dynamic; people need help and advice as they continue their quest to become better artists. These interactions drive awareness, intent and, ultimately, significant demand.

Communities create opportunity: the opportunity to understand the needs, behaviours and motivations of specific groups of people. Understanding the unique characteristics of these audiences shows how to engage with them most effectively.

Getting on the same page

The main impetus behind this project was for the client to take a different path from business as usual. They knew they needed to do something new to shift the dial. However, change can be difficult, and it can take time to engage busy people with new ideas. To ensure we all shared a common vision for the outcome, the Colart and Listen and Learn Research project teams worked closely with the company's senior leadership and brand teams to understand their needs and how this work could support them. This included discussions about the different methodological approaches, the strengths and limitations of technology, as well as how to build an approach that could tackle these challenges across languages and markets.

Drawing the outline

Having established a shared sense of purpose, the first task was to landscape graphic art on social. Art, by its very nature, is elusive and evolving. Therefore, we worked to define a set of parameters—i.e., definitions which would help us determine what was in and what was out of scope. We were then ready to start drawing our outline in order to define the broad scope of graphic art communities across the US, UK and France. We used a combination of search data, alongside text and visual social data to develop a long list of graphic art communities. We used data from one source to inspire the others in an iterative, expansive approach that cast our net as widely as possible.

We started with broad terms that related to graphic art as a launch point. The use of each term was then explored through search and social data. This then threw up alternative and new terms, which we added to our long list for investigation. Through this process of analysis, we were able to prove one of Colart's hypotheses: that artists on social media flock to visual rather than text sources. There was little relevant activity on Twitter; rather it was on Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok that the communities came to life.

Our landscaping revealed over 160 different sub-tribes. We sized each using search and social engagement activity (e.g., views and/or likes) as proxies for interest. We then compared these metrics across social platform and market to give an overall indication of size. The output was a long list of new graphic art tribes—a list that reflected genuine consumer demand in each market. That there was so much diversity of interest was the first of many surprises for the client. Examples of the sub-tribes we found were:

- Furryart (anthropomorphic animal characters);
- CryArt (eyes crying);
- UrbanDrawing (drawing on location);
- BookPageArt (drawings in books inspired by the text);
- DessInLGBT (artists associated their work with acronyms related to sexual preference and/or orientation).
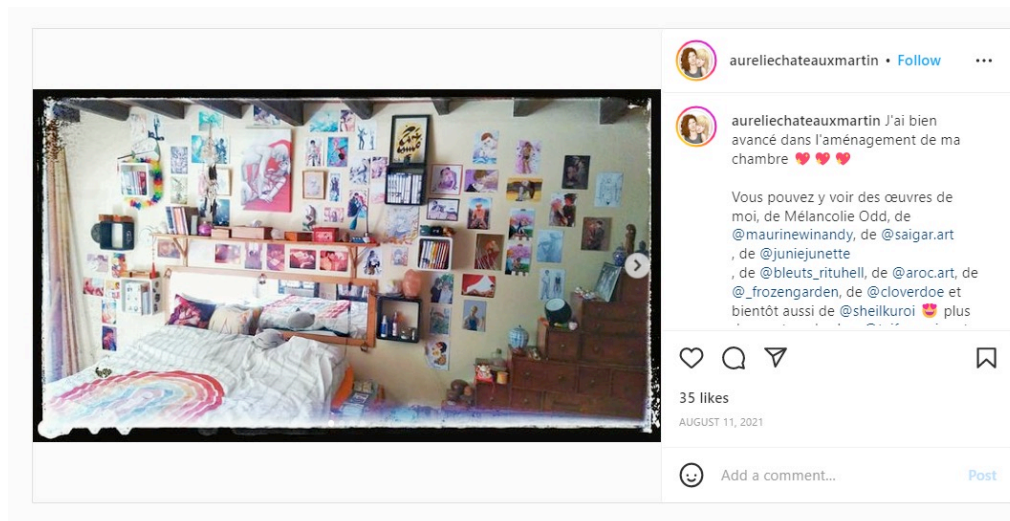

Figure 2

We then clustered these sub-tribes into broader categories such as Anime, Art on Stuff, Art and Identity, Body Art, Events and Challenges and Horror (to name a few).

Deciding where to focus

This gave Colart something new: an overview of the specific needs consumers were trying to meet to become a better landscape artist, to draw better fashion pictures, or how to make the best bullet journal. The next stage was to prioritise. We ran a workshop with the responsible brand team to help them appreciate the depth of artistic expression, where this was clustered and what the implications and opportunities were for them. It was important at this stage to go into detail about the methodology behind the long list so that everybody felt comfortable making decisions on the data. The outputs at this stage were mostly quantitative in nature— stats about reach and engagement in each market. We brought this to life a little with summary descriptions to help the Colart team understand the nature of each group and review which competitors we had seen active in each.

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MANGA

	US	UK	France
Ranking	**10th**	**13th**	**1st**
Twitter volume (last 12 months)	14k	4k	3k
Search volume* (avg monthly)	79k	17k	127k

Tribe Description
Manga-style drawings including fan art for popular series, and original characters.

Key hashtags
#kawaiiart #pokemonart
#narutodrawing #dragonballart

Segments observed
Largely hobbyists

KEY TRIBES GLOBAL

	TikTok* (views, all time)	Instagram* (posts, all time)	Brand mentions
Pokémon (series)	94.3m	1.9m	Prismacolor
Kawaii or Chibi ('cute' style)	34.5m	1.6m	Touch
Naruto (series)	33.1m	29.5m	Copic, Micron
Dragon Ball (series)	7.4m	199k	Copic
Death Note (series)	5.3m	36.5k	Twinmarkers, Posca
Bleach (series)	1m	24.6k	Micron, Posca
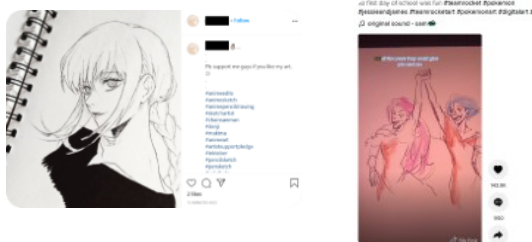
*Search volume based on combined average monthly searches in last 12 months for most popular search term for each sub
TikTok based on views of largest #, over all time; Instagram based on number of posts featuring largest #, over all time

Figure 3: Summary slide of one category sizing overview.

This helped Colart whittle down to a long list and settle on eight tribes of most interest to take forward into the next step. At this point, the internal stakeholders were starting to get excited. We had shown them what was out there with the promise of how to activate this demand around the corner.

Filling in the details

Now we had our eight tribes, it was time to understand what made them tick. Through the landscaping, we had discovered a broad range of defining keywords that each tribe used to identify with and connect. We used these to collect data for analysis. Visual social is harder to access than text, so we used a combination of links and meta data from our social listening provider with manual review and analysis to find content for each set of keywords. Once the data had been collected, we needed a way to reliably analyse them. Due to the complexity and richness of the source material we opted for a predominantly qualitative methodology.

Our overall approach was based on grounded theory with content and thematic analysis techniques, using signals in the data to help build categories before working towards hypotheses and explanation. In practice, we used a sample of the data to build a complex code frame for interpreting the different signals being expressed in each post, video or image. We then used this code frame to observe the content and systematically codify the meaning in each. This let us immerse ourselves in the interests, motivations and behaviours of each tribe. We looked to understand:

- What is the shape of the conversation?
- What are people talking about?
- How do they frame their narrative?
- What is the context?
- What are their motivations for creating content?
- What do they need?
- How do they feel?
- How do they talk about their art and how they feel about it?
- How do these signals come together to form patterns and groups of behaviour?

We then synthesised the results, looking for patterns and behaviours that helped us define the needs of each tribe. This brought to life:

- What drives the different communities of interest?

- What are the languages, practices and tribal norms?
- How are people in each tribe trying to become better artists?

Codifying the data in this manner enabled us to size behaviours and examine differences robustly. For example, Figure 4 is a view of how one tribe's social activity differed by market, demographics and platform.
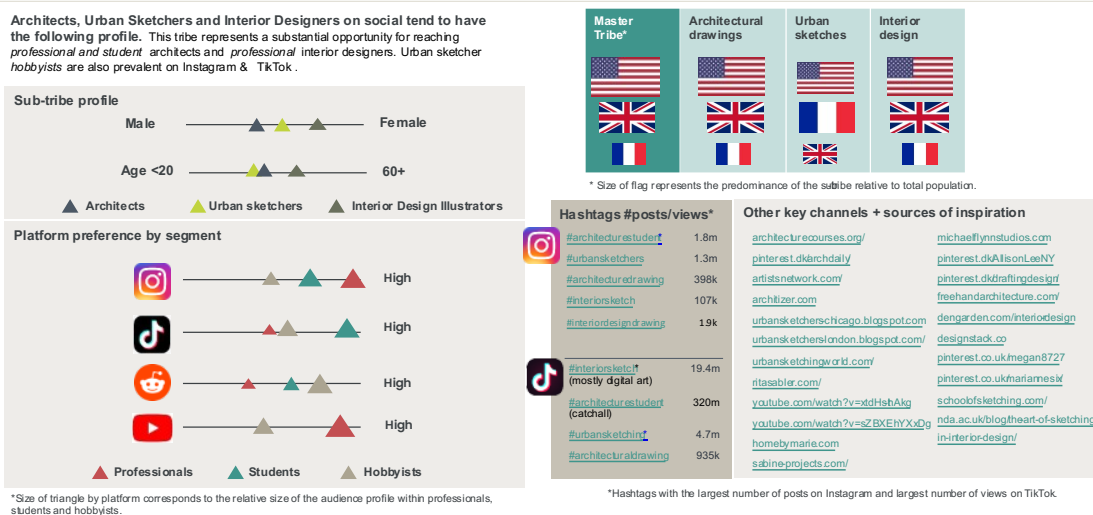

Figure 4

The coding and analysis were done manually (in local languages) as AI tools are not capable of unpacking the detail and nuances that were needed to analyse these behaviours in enough detail. Using people to understand the meaning of other people is an investment that rewards with depth and detail. The current crop of AI and social listening tools lack the capability to achieve this level of insight. We worked in stages, delivering the first handbook (see figure 6 and 7) to give Colart time to reflect and respond before refining the approach for the rest. The project team was around five to six people for most of the project, combining two research managers with a team of analysts. This let us split the eight tribes into two groups, which were worked on separately. This enabled the project to deliver new tribe insights each week, which allowed Colart's team time to digest each pack and not to become overwhelmed with opportunity.

The big reveal

The company's key strategic goal was to find and activate demand from new audience types. To do so, they needed to identify and understand the right audience groups, and the right way to talk to them. This project proved to Colart that it is possible to use social data for insight discovery, and that it can help provide clear assessments of the opportunity. It helped them appreciate that different social platforms have different characteristics and norms and that a one-size approach does not fit all. This was critical to understand before committing to a strategy and platform of activation.

- It showed that the numbers on social can be huge. We discovered over 160 audience clusters based on usage, amassing a total TikTok view count of 16.5 billion.
- It showed that identity trumps interest—it is people above product. It brought to life that graphic art is a fast-moving and ever-changing community.
- It showed the client sides of the graphic art world they had not known existed.

For example, SneakerArt is a big community on TikTok. The video below (Figure 5) has been seen roughly 2.4 million times, liked over 480k times and commented on by nearly 4,000 people.
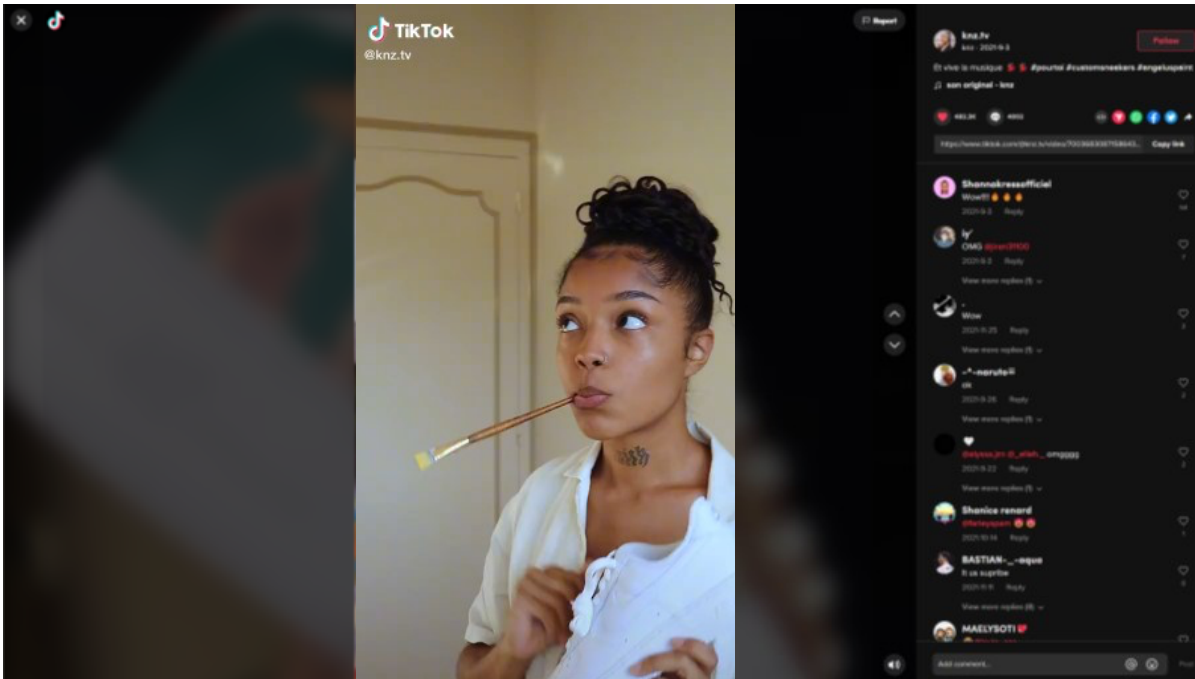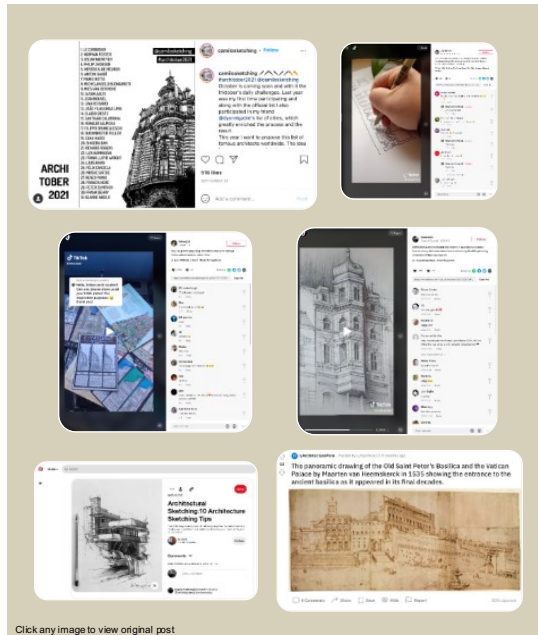
Figure 5: Et vive la musique 🎶🎶 (translated: long live music).

To clearly communicate the insights and bring the different tribes to life, we created detailed handbooks for each. The aim was to help the brand teams fully immerse themselves in the experiences of each tribe to give them initial inspiration, and as they continue to work to engage them with a valuable reference guide. Each handbook delivered:

- Executive summary: what Colart's brand teams needed to know;
- Key facts: summary of tribe motivations, sizing and competitor activity;
- Tribe profile: who, where and what drives interest;
- Motivations and interests;
- Deep dives into each sub-tribe;
- What content creates engagement;
- How to start a conversation (see Figure 6 below);
- Needs, emotions, frustrations and enablers;
- Important influencers;
- Leading competitors;
- Brand performance and engagement;
- Opportunities and recommendations.

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Figure 6: How to start the conversation.

Figure 7: How are competitors reaching this tribe?

Immediate reactions

Generating c-level support, this work has created an initial raft of actions as Colart responds to the opportunities it discovered. Longer term, it has given them a framework for exploring other categories, as well as tracking how art trends change over time. Both of these are in the research plan for the next year. As a direct result of this work the company has:

- Bet big on five tribes as a test and learn;
- Generated insight-led content for each tribe to drive interest through to conversion;
- Innovated our existing portfolio to suit artists' needs and support their growth;
- Stimulated innovation and set in place longer-term category development.

"Listen and Learn delivered beyond the project scope and our expectations, they really got under the skin of the graphic art tribes within the digital ecosystem. We now understand what makes them tick and motivates them, not just delivered through vast digital data but the true gem was the analysis and how the information was delivered to us. We have come away from this project feeling inspired, confident and with a clear understanding of various audience types. This expert insight we now have at our fingertips will inform all future communication along with NPD development, packaging and retail development encouraging consumers to consider us as a relevant brand for them".

- Jean Brooke-Sumner, Global Senior Brand Manager, Winsor & Newton, Colart.

Long-term impact

The work was, moreover, developed to not only solve the current business problem, but also to have the potential to influence longer-term business objectives. This project was about growing market share (beyond organic growth), thus, had a long-term focus baked into it. We spent time working with senior stakeholders to understand their challenges and ambitions, and to help them interpret the results, ensuring this approach has longer appeal.

In proving that there was potential for growth in the communities on social, the project helped challenge and shift internal perceptions about what Colart's purpose is. It helped them understand that people need help to become better artists, not to simply buy products. This insight is a north star, which will help them steer a path indefinitely. The work also provided a baseline; these are the client's tribes now and this is what they need. However, creativity moves on and so this baseline will allow Colart to understand how trends in graphic art are developing and changing over time.

"This project truly was ground-breaking not just for Colart as the client, but also Listen & Learn in the way they devised an approach on the go with this study to help deliver the insights at depth that no other agency we discussed the project with could. Since the brief required both quant and qual approaches to be welded but at scale, L&L helped shape a big qual approach that helped us answer our questions on the brief extremely precisely. Given social media data can be vast and unstructured, as well as the platforms differing in their appeal to different audiences, L&L were able to tailor their approach suitably to ensure we did not miss any noteworthy insights in the process, triangulating and cross-referencing multiple data points from various sources through the process to ensure the credibility and coverage of the results were meaningful and robust.

The resulting insights were also delivered to us compellingly and the data produced in the process was a gold mine in itself for not just current, but also future opportunity scoping, which was an unexpected but welcome by-product of the project. Overall, the project has enabled us to have sufficient insights to affect multiple areas of the relevant project involving branding, communication, NPD etc., but most significantly of all it generated an unprecedented understanding of the audiences we are aiming to reach through the actions inspired by the project that will hopefully result in a significant shift of the category in favour of our brands".

- Jatin Kuckreja.

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