Socializing Through Cultural Consumption

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This study demonstrates that cultural consumers derive high levels of satisfaction from socializing in the museum and extends the social context to the world beyond the museum walls. It also emphasizes the societal dimension of museums as socio-cultural institutions that foster social bonds among different members of contemporary society.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Museums are “social constructs, and powerful ones at that, and they need to assume their place in the mainstream of contemporary life, not sit eccentrically on the margins” (Fleming 2005, 1). Throughout history, societies have endeavored to protect their museums as evidence of their dynamism. Yet, despite their crucial role in (re)generation of cultures and civilizations, currently museums are not shielded against the storms of the recent global economic recession. In the UK, for example, in response to state budget cuts, publicly-funded museums (which have traditionally been free to enter) have been reviewing their policies to save money. Under unprecedented pressure, museums are urged to prove their societal worth to avoid possible risks of closure, severe staff redundancy, or the introduction of entrance fees. Although such pressures had already been highlighted by a number of arts enthusiasts (e.g., Fleming, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill 2007; Caru and Cova 2005), the impacts of the current economic downturn seem to go beyond simply economic re-habilitation through budget cuts, and imply significant socio-cultural considerations.

The reactive strategic plans (e.g., introducing entrance fees in order to self-fund museums) signal important policy implications for cultural (re)production and consumption in society. Amongst many critics of the British government’s hasty spending review, Mark Serwotka – General Secretary of the British Public and Commercial Services Union – has expressed serious concerns over the impact of budget cuts on society: “It is essential [that] our cultural life is protected and the universal access provided by free admission is maintained to prevent the arts returning to being a privilege only the wealthy can enjoy” (Jury, 2010). Serwotka’s statement reminds us of Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of social stratification through consumption of culture that marks distinct social boundaries. If broadly established, these polarizing social distinctions may eventually widen the gap between the less-privileged strata of society and those who have the luxury of re-energizing themselves by ‘high’ culture.

Drawing upon the importance of museums to contemporary life, in this paper we address the key theme of the conference and seek to communicate our findings primarily with cultural authorities and also with our fellow scholars. Our study, we believe, can remind cultural authorities of the multifaceted role of museums in human society. Also, we modestly believe that our findings refine theory. We use Falk and Dierking’s (1997) three salient contexts affecting visitors’ experiences of museums (physical, personal, and social) as our departure point in the literature review. We echo the recent calls (Falk and Dierking 1997, 2000; Hein 1998; Hooper-Greenhill 2007; Matarasso 1997; von Lehn 2006; von Lehn and Heath 2005; von Lehn et al. 2001, 2007) for further research into the role of social context in museum visitors’ experience. We argue that the social context has not received sufficient attention is the studies of cultural consumers’ visiting experience. Addressing this research gap, we then embark to study the social context in more depth. Yet, whilst prior research (Diamond 1986; Blud 1990a and b; Hilke and Balling 1985; von Lehn et al. 2007) has analyzed the role of social context mainly in terms of fostering learning through social interaction in the physical context of the museum, we demonstrates that people derive high levels of satisfaction from socializing in the museum and extend the social context to the world beyond the museum walls.

Our analysis of interpretive in-depth interviews with seventeen female and male individuals (aged between 25 and 58, educated and from middle-class backgrounds) in Glasgow (the UK) reveals that our informants’ socializing experience is confined in neither the learning process (i.e., finding about the contents of the museum) nor the context of the visited sites. Upon their visits to cultural sites (e.g., museums and art galleries), these individuals socialize with others (e.g., family members, friends, and strangers) around the contents of the museum. Our informants draw upon different types of catalysts (e.g., nostalgic feelings, photography, exhibits, etc.) to establish new or strengthen their existing human relations in the social context of the cultural site. Yet, for them, this is not the end of the story. Our findings further reveal that these people not only socialize with others during their visits to the museum, but also continue to socialize with others outside of the museum context. They extend the social context of the museum to the outside world beyond the physical environment of the museum. They take their experience with them to create more conversations and social ties outside the museum. In some cases their individual forms of cultural consumption turn into ‘collective forms of consumption’ (Cova 1997) through socializing with others. All these instances demonstrate the great potential of museums as ‘cultural institutions’ in whose context people “can create, share, and connect with each other around content” (Simon 2010, ii).

Based on our findings, therefore, we emphasize the societal dimension of museums as socio-cultural institutions that foster social bonds among different members of contemporary society. In our study, we do not propose that these social ties exclusively rely on conversations around the museums’ contents; such socializing practices may occur in other contexts such as Disneyland, theme parks, and theatres and music concerts as well. Yet, we emphasize that in everyday life situations, museums are dynamically present in people’s socio-cultural spheres. They constitute an important part of people’s socializing agendas. Therefore, we invite our fellow scholars to take this subject further by investigating how these social contexts operate for different people with varying socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Also, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal research in order to understand how enduring the museum-embedded social ties are and if they pave the way for the emergence of new social ties and networks. We also sincerely invite policymakers and cultural authorities to rethink their policies and protect museums as significant social contexts that glue human beings together in the age of fragmentation of human relations.

REFERENCES


