

TERÉZ KLEISZ

Understanding non-participation in museums. What works for young adults?

Abstract: Over the last decades the broader museum-field has put a lot of effort into developing itself into an attractive environment providing meaningful entertainment and learning opportunities for visitor groups of various kinds. Museums are capable of delivering high quality educational programs – exploiting partnerships with schools and community organizations offering interactivity and constructive roles for enhancing visitor experience. Blockbuster exhibitions seem to generate huge attention and big queues. Hungarian museums are responding to this trend with finding ways to harness new participatory forms to support learning, however the empirical studies researching leisure time activities and cultural participation have found worrying results especially in the case of Facebook-generation. Participation has decreased and taste preferences seem not to favour museums compared to other attractions. The renewed focus in the programming hasn't encouraged substantial engagement practices. There is room for improvement in the field of audience development. This presentation aims at stimulating reflection on this issue. **Keywords:** participation, attendance rates, museums, Generation Z.

Focus on agency, mood for increased active participation

Big social transformations are taking place in the world. Contemporary social theorists have been trying to capture relevant transformations within societies and addressing key challenges. They have introduced labels such as late modern, postmodern, postindustrial society, knowledge society, information society, network society, creative society, consumer society. It is being felt we are entering a new era, new societal forms are in the making, new discourses shape people's minds and perceptions. The novelty of the recent conceptual frameworks is the renewed focus on human actors' agency, the increased importance on their subjectivity, the belief both in their rights and capacities. Agents are seen as active rather than passive subjects. People are not seen as victims of the social constraints but rather as empowered citizens who construct and shape meanings, not being completely dominated by the forces of social structures as the mid-20th century theories used to imply. Choices, options and growing freedoms are the terms frequently used in these perspective.

In Zygmunt Bauman's writings on the present nature of consumerism (the principal propelling and operating force in society)¹ the attraction to pleasure-driven lifestyles and to intensive, interesting experiences is emphasized as a dominant subjective motivation versus accepting very limited choices and routinized life filled with boredom. Nico Stehr stresses the significance of knowledge in its expanding forms as an aid to a tremendous increase in the capacity of humans to act. George Ritzer sees the accelerating trend of prosumption (production + consumption, the acceptance of self-service by customers) as increasingly central. The border between active creation and passive reception is evaporating in these conceptual frameworks. Media research has shifted from studying short-term or long-term media effects on passive viewers to researching active audience theories. (actively interpreting audience).

¹ Bauman 2007: 28

In tune with the recent social theories and sensing the mood for increased active participation the mediation practices of museum practitioners have changed considerably too. Involving the public has become a key principle. Participatory approaches are favoured all across the board. Technological tools employed are expected to contribute to an enhanced and more meaningful participation and to the active learning by the users. Game-based learning has been introduced by cultural professionals in museums in order to attract new audiences and engage visitors by generating complex memorable learning experiences, involving all sorts of contextual knowledge and emotions. Creating quizzes, narrative or role-played games in competitive and/or collaborative fashions are offered for exploring museum collections. The proliferation of mobile technologies and social media has also supported the creation of user generated content, such as offering opinions, tagging, commenting and recording subjective experiences and interpretations, especially in the case of the hyper-connected Generation Y and Z.

Responding to a generational culture

The issue of shifting generational cultures has returned to the spotlight. The notion of generation is widely used nowadays, describing the new attitudes and practices of the so called „digital natives” or the „Millennials”, the „Facebook generation”, „Google generation”, „Generation Z” and many other labels used for the cohorts born around 2000. It has been well publicized that they seem to differ from prior generations.

Mannheim in his seminal essay on „The Problem of Generation” written in the 1920s stated that chronological cohorts usually are socially stratified within their society splitting into generational units. A generation is not a concrete group in the sense of a community. There is a chance of developing certain distinctive common cultural frames of mind and modes of behaviour only if the formative period of an age group coincides with some big social changes radically affecting their lived experiences and acquired collective memories. The same exposure to the given historical-social context may bind them together and the potentialities of a generation can actually be achieved. Same cultural patterns emerge, similarities occur in identity formation. Naturally the generational approach can't evade the systematic analysis of broader social conditions impacting on young people. Transition to adulthood takes much longer than before according to the postadolescence thesis and even symptoms of a refusal to grow up seem to be spreading.

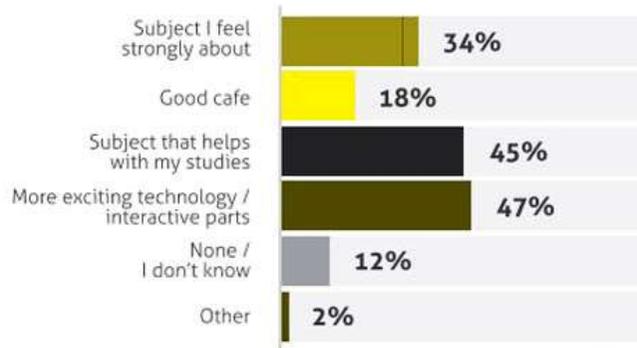
The discourse on the Z generation is used as a magnifying glass for analysing social and cultural changes that are emerging alongside technological transformations. New ways of relating to technology and media, new ways of interacting together and new sensibilities are mapped through grouping contemporary youth phenomena under this conceptual umbrella.

What are the stereotypical features of the digital natives' generation? Naturally, digital technology proficiency is one of their characteristics, they are big users of the social media. Web 2.0 means they are uploading their contents. A lot of observers mention 24/7 connectivity, the mentality of being „always on” the net out of fear of missing out something. The desire for instant gratification is also an attribute mentioned alongside the strong dependence on others' perceptions and acceptance. Psychologists and teachers complain of their shorter attention span, their increased hunger for visuality.² To capture their imagination and inspire them tech-enhanced learning environment is a must. They need to be challenged with immediate

² Tari 2011

interactive learning, the opportunities for collaborate and creative problem-solving. „Museums need to move fast and ensure their future is digital technology” was one of the the messages surveying Z generation’s relationship to museums in the UK.³ Here are some of the items found capable of motivating the teens.

6. What would make you more likely to go to a museum? (tick all that apply)



Both the content-element (what) and the ways of mediation (how) are chosen by the respondents as relevant.

Surveys and data on cultural attendance and participation

In spite of all the concerns and the transformation towards innovative mediation and user-friendly displays, the visitor surveys recently published in Europe or in Hungary don’t really show a positive picture, quite the contrary, major proportions of youth groups don’t belong to a cultivated and motivated museum-going public, a lot of them are ignorant. It is a growing concern for cultural practitioners.

A new Eurobarometer Survey on young people reveals decreasing involvement in out-of-school activities. Over 13,000 young people between 15 and 30 were interviewed in the 28 Member States of the EU as part of the Flash Eurobarometer Survey carried out in December 2014.⁴ Compared to the earlier survey of 2011 in all questioned items (visiting cinema, theatre, museum, concerts, dance performances, participation in amateur activities) attendance has decreased. (by 5 percent)

A Hungarian national research survey studying Z generation youth (15-24 year olds)⁵ found the following unexpected data:

- Never or very rarely visits museums: 83,5%
- Never or very rarely visits theater: 74,9%
- Never or very rarely visits art exhibitions: 81,4%
- Never or very rarely visits concerts 89,9%
- Never or very visits libraries: 63, 5%

Another national youth survey in 2012⁶ 56% of the age group 15-19 stated they never visit museums or exhibitions The corresponding number was much better in earlier years: 35% in 2004, 41% in 2008.

³ SMACK 2005.

⁴ European Youth. Flash Barometer 408. 2015

⁵ Szücs et al 2013. 26-27.

⁶ Magyar Ifjúság 2012. 2013 220.

A key finding of a Fanta Trend Research on youngsters' cultural activities and media use was that specific artistic genres like opera, operetta, classical music, ballet and painting are completely rejected.⁷

Based on the data collected for the „Hungarian Youth 2012” national survey a cultural stratification model was applied to the sample. 44% of the respondents was categorized into „culturally poor”, 36% into the „light entertainment-oriented”, 17% ended up in the „omnivore” group (crossing the boundary between popular and high culture forms) and 3% was grouped into the „cultural elite” judged by the nature and extent of cultural participation.⁸ The questionnaire covered mostly the visiting pattern of key cultural institutions. The members of the culturally poor group don't prefer high culture settings and genres at all, from the point of socio-economic background they are deprived of economic capital and social capital as well. Family culture (measuring with school attainment and occupations of parents, financial livelihood, the type of housing) comes out a very important determinant of cultural engagement. Other surveys also reinforce this worrying picture in Hungary. PISA surveys highlighted that Hungarian students rank below OECD average in tests and there are huge gaps in students performances according to low and high level socio-economic backgrounds.

Not all of the countries have shown the same tendencies. In England the Taking Part surveys since 2005 have been collecting data on many aspects of culture (arts, museums and galleries, archives, libraries, heritage, sport) as well as an in-depth range of socio-demographic information on respondents. Taking Part is a household survey of adults aged 16 and over in England and children aged 5 to 15 years old. Between July 2013 and June 2014, over half of adults (52%) had visited a museum or gallery in the last year. This was a similar proportion to 2012/13. But there has been an upward movement in the statistical figures since 2005. (From 42.3, 41.5, 43.5, 43.4, 46.0, 46.3, 48.9, 52.8, 53.1 to 52.0 per cent).

If we break down the newest data, the youngest group has got one of the lowest figures with its 45,1 percentage. In the period of 2013/14 23.5% of English children aged 11-15 years old had visited a museum during school time, in comparison to 46.9 that had visited in their own time.

Eurobarometer has released its latest survey on cultural access and participation in 2013.⁹ One of the main findings is that there has been a small overall decline in participation in cultural activities since the previous survey. The cultural practice index reveals some interesting differences in levels of cultural engagement between member states. The northern European countries stand out as having the highest levels of cultural engagement. (very high” and “high” scores: 43% in Sweden, 36% in Denmark, 34% in the Netherlands, 30% in Estonia and 29% in Finland, 26% in the UK and 25% in France. compared with an European average of 18%. The corresponding lower-end figure is 5% in Greece, 6% in Portugal and Cyprus and 7% in Romania and Hungary. For these countries, participation in cultural activities has decreased since 2007, with increases of “low” scores, most strikingly in Hungary (+26), Romania (+14) and Greece (+8). Respondents answered a general question about the main barriers for them to access culture. “Lack of time” was the first answer given (42%), followed by “too expensive” (29%) and “lack of interest” (27%).

⁷ Fanta Trend Report VI. 2009. 12.

⁸ Fekete – Prazsák 2014. 199.

⁹ Cultural Access and Participation Report 2013.

Having seen the growing number of surveys and available data on participation it is obvious there is a gap between quantitative measurement of participation and the many, evolving ways in which young people participate in cultural activities. It is true, more qualitative methodologies have been introduced but there are still room for deeper exploration. Culturally active and creative youngsters may end up as “non-users” as well.

Studying participation and non-participation- Barrier research findings

Issues like why and how people participate in culture (including creating it) is a researched theme and area of interest, especially in our time when cultural participation is seen fostering active citizenship and promoting social cohesion in addition to a rich and expressive individual life.

Where does demand come from? What generates and sustains cultural needs, what motivates museum goers?

Sociological studies demonstrate that primary and secondary socialization group norms and values, social ties and the influences of relevant others or reference groups, in sociological terms, the „status” is a determining factor to acquiring tastes and preferences that affect cultural practices. Distinctive cultural consumption is a means of establishing and maintaining status. Cultural consumption patterns are expressions of lifestyles. The coherence of cultural preferences and distastes manifest individual and group identities. Age has been proven to be of fundamental importance in shaping cultural practices.

Surveys usually are not data rich enough, especially those which only focus on mere attendance rates and ask some simple questions about motives for participation or reasons for non-participation. Reasons for non-participation are numerous. When people are asked, we constantly hear answers like: „that’s not my interest”, „it doesn’t appeal to me” expressing dispreference, negative dispositions that could arise from a variety of factors: lack of competence, bad prior experiences, socialization in group habitus and taste orientations that don’t appreciate high culture worlds, negative perceptions and aversions towards cultural forms and institutions. Practical elements, like availability of time, inconvenient location, opening hours, transport and parking, safety issues, lack of relevant information, quality of service provision are another marked cluster. Cost awareness is an important aspect as well. The social interaction-side should also be counted upon: not finding partners to go with, refusing to follow norms like a dress-code or fashion, not encouraged by social approval. Limited cultural offers and availability of opportunities are frequently identified as barriers. Personal factors like the level of disposable income, the given life-cycle position, work and family commitments, physical and mental capabilities can’t be omitted from the explanations.

Barrier research usually comes up with physical, financial, psychological and social social barriers.¹⁰

The researchers of Taking Part Surveys data in the UK who analysed factors of participation and non-participation presented them under three headings: intra-personal factors, interpersonal factors and external factors.¹¹ Regarding the museum-field an interesting finding was highlighted for non-attendance: *„There was a perception that if a museum has been visited once or a few times over a long period there was no need to go again, as little*

¹⁰ Measuring cultural participation. 2009. 36

¹¹ Charlton et al 2010. 13-14.

would have changed. Museums and galleries were also often linked to education or school and this further worked to reduce interest across all age groups.”¹²

The added value of participation in arts and cultural activities

Since the 90s public policies promote culture as a means for achieving other ends. Impacts are expected to accrue in the domain of individual health, well-being and personal development, community cohesion and community identity, crime prevention, increased innovation, creativity and economic outputs, development of tourism and local image, local development, social inclusion, multicultural integration, active citizenship, growing social capital, – a really broad spectrum. Studying this wide variety of impacts and their relationships to participation in the arts and cultural activities has been a new monitoring and research focus. Robust evidence is missing, at least not proved by research data. „Impact evaluation by its very nature requires clear intentions about what is to be achieved and through which means and about the criteria for assessment. The absence of clear social objectives was pointed out by several experts.”¹³

The Budapest Observatory researchers’ scheme highlights the micro-meso-macrosocial level impacts.¹⁴

Table 1. Elements of the impact of culture on society and democracy

WHO	THROUGH WHAT	ON WHAT (positive outcome)			
		Individual level		Community level	Societal level
		Direct effect	Indirect effect		
Individuals	Participation in cultural activities.	Developing skills, creativity, connectivity, cohesion, self-expression, self-esteem, self-assurance.	Employment opportunities, career security, social capital, physical and psychological well-being, tolerance, co-operation skills, innovation, openness, way of living.	Stronger communities, increased activeness, civic responsibility, empowerment, co-operation in other fields, strong local identity, shared responsibility in planning and strategy making.	Spiritual / psychological effect: more happiness, solidarity, greater social inclusion, less cultural poverty, more fraternity, equality, freedom; more soft power; Declining social anomie: fewer suicides, drugs, alcohol; Economic effect: decreasing social welfare costs.
Community	Running or jointly attending events, festivities, festivals.				

Conclusion

The paper aimed to shed light on the gap between young visitor rates and the increased efforts of museums to raise this generation’s cultural participation.

It is a fight to capture the Google generation’s mind and imagination and to find innovative ways of mediation in museum settings to enable them use the artifacts of collective cultural memory pools residing there.

Cultural professionals and policy makers are aware of the importance of educating the next generation of museum goers and understand the need to alter the former one-way transmission of meanings transforming themselves from being a mere repository of objects to a dynamic

¹² Charlton et al 2010. 31.

¹³ AEGIS 2004. 29

¹⁴ Governance of Culture – Promoting Access to Culture. 2013. 12.

institution that offers co-creation to user groups and fun in exploring many facets of the diverse world embedded there. Better knowledge about youth participation and fostering involvement in cultural activities at a young age will have an impact in this direction. Making young visitors feel both challenged and supported by the museum experience, hopefully ends in generating progressive results.

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