

# Cultural consumption and social identities (a study of the museum's image through the eyes of visitors)

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**Abstract.** This article describes the study of the relationship between the practices of cultural consumption and the processes of constructing territorial, professional and other social identities. The study explores materials of an empirical sociological study conducted in the summer and autumn of 2022 "The image of the historical and architectural museum" Stroganov's Chambers" in Usolye through the eyes of visitors." The study found that pensioners are more likely to demonstrate a behavior model that fits into the formulas of "status high consumption" and "heritage tourism", while young people are mainly driven by the values of the "culture of curiosity", and middle-aged persons feature both motives. The article interprets the results obtained through the theory of social identities and concludes that the motivation for visiting museums and the choice of cultural consumption practices are directly related to the professional, territorial and generational identities of the informants. This conclusion allows us to see new promising formats for working with museum visitors.

## 1 Research purpose

The study was carried out in collaboration with the research team of Perm State National Research University and the project team of the Usolye Historical and Architectural Museum "the Stroganov Chambers" located 180 km away from Perm on a picturesque island near the right bank of the Kama river opposite the second largest city in the region Berezniki. The study solved two tasks: to study the image of the museum created in the perception of different categories of visitors. This task was crucial for the museum itself aimed at updating and developing; to study the relationship between the practices of consumption of culture that have developed in different social groups of Russian society and social identities, primarily professional and territorial ones. The second task arose in the context of a broader research program aimed to study regional cultural policies and their impact on local (urban, regional) communities.

For a general understanding of all the circumstances, it is necessary to make some explanations. The Museum is one of the attractions of Perm region. Usolye was founded in 1606, and until the end of the 18th century it remained the main settlement of the Stroganovs on the Kama River and the center of the salt industry. A large architectural ensemble of historical Usolye has been preserved. Its central buildings are the Stroganov Chambers – an administrative building built in the early 18th century, and the Transfiguration Cathedral. In addition, there are more than 80 other architectural objects, most of which are now in ruins. The municipal historical and architectural museum has been operating on the territory of the historical part of Usolye since 2002. Its main visitors are either residents of neighboring Berezniki or tourists from Perm and other

Russian cities. The "Stroganov Chambers" can be attributed to typical objects of museum tourism.

The study was conducted in August-September 2022 using the group focused unstructured interview method (focus groups). A total of seven focus groups were participated:

- Middle-aged residents of Perm (35–55 years old) with school children;
- schoolchildren aged 14–18 living in Perm,
- residents of Perm aged 25–35, working youth,
- students of Perm universities.
- pensioners, residents of Perm,
- middle- and retirement-aged residents of Berezniki;
- representatives of Perm tourism companies.

A total of 71 people took part in the focus groups. High school students went on a trip accompanied by their parents; the focus group with them was held in a separate room. The meeting with Perm tour operators organizing tourist trips to this museum was held once. This method of research and selection of participants has its drawbacks, as people with a penchant for domestic tourism were involved, and does not allow us to quantify the degree of interest in museums among the population of Perm or the region. However, the method ensured the representation of the opinions of all the main socio-demographic categories of museum visitors.

In recruiting focus group participants, they were offered to go on a free excursion to the Museum under the obligatory condition to take part in two group interviews: the first one was held on the way to Usolye and aimed to identify expectations and motives; the second one was held after the tour, on the way back in order to find the general impressions of the tour, to assess the museum, its

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expositions, and the staff and identify possible proposals for improving the work of the museum. This unusual research format allowed us to achieve the goal and shed light on the practices of cultural leisure of a modern city dweller.

## 2 Methodology

The theoretical basis of the current study is two concepts: "cultural consumption" and "social identities", borrowed from the theoretical apparatus of interpretive sociology and constructivism. The term "cultural consumption" has been used in sociology for a long time, starting with the works by Weber [1]. It is associated with the theory of cultural capital by Bourdieu [2]. It is interpreted as a special type of resource created in the socialization and determined by a social origin, a level of education, a social position and habitus of the social agent [3]. Like other capitals, cultural capital, as Bourdieu put it, is both a condition for entering a particular social field and a stake in the social game for higher positions. From a practical perspective, cultural capital is manifested in the declared taste and practices of consuming cultural goods. Being prone to the class interpretation of society, Bourdieu focused on the hierarchical measurement of the repertoires of preferences, highlighting the "high-legitimate", "middle-philistine" and "low-mass" segments of cultural production. He attributed museums to the first segment ("... the owners of elegant speech are more likely to be seen in the museum than those who do not own it" [4]).

The theory of social identity as the basis of any real social community was developed at the same time as Bourdieu's socioanalysis, although its origins can be traced back to the works by theorists of the 19-early 20th centuries («*klasse-in-sich*» K. Marx [5] or in works by W. Sumner [6]). It is assumed that each individual in modern society has many social identities related to different systems of social coordinates: gender, generational-age, national, professional, territorial, etc. [7; 8]. Being an integral part of the habitus, social identities are closely related to the practices of cultural consumption acting both as a factor in the choice of cultural products and a derivative of their consumption [9–11].

The museum as one of the institutions that produce cultural products plays a special role in the construction of social identities. On the one hand, they, using the terminology of Landry and Moterasso, are today the conductors of the policy of "democratization of culture" [12], making generally accepted masterpieces and values available to the general population. So, Historical museums act as "production machines" of the historical memory of communities [13], primarily national and territorial, but also corporate (e.g., museums of enterprises and institutions), professional (scientific museums and museums of individual crafts and industries) and even generational (museums of Soviet childhood). On the one hand, if we consider museums from this perspective, they are no longer attributes of elite culture, they perform more complex functions in the social interaction. The current study is intended to test this hypothesis at the empirical level.

## 3 Motivation for visiting tourism museums and preferred practices for consuming museum products

Initially the research involved those informants who have an interest in museum tourism. Therefore, we cannot draw a correct conclusion about the prevalence of museum visiting practices in different strata of society. But we can understand differences in motivations and forms of visiting museums, due to age, occupation, and even place of residence of the informants. We can also reveal the relationship between the motivation for museum tourism and the preferred practices of cultural consumption.

For example, for residents of Berezniki, the Stroganov Chambers are more of an interesting recreation park than a place of high-status consumption. They often visit the territory of the museum with their families, attend events (festivals, master classes), or spend time outdoors. It is interesting that none of the participants in this focus group had ever used the services of guides, except for one girl who attended organized excursions with her school, and many participants had not even visited the expositions in the Chambers building.

The motivation for visiting the "Chambers" in Perm pensioners can be described as a mixture of status consumption of "elite culture" and "heritage tourism", where there is a desire to receive an educational product in the most traditional sense (narrative, knowledge), and reinforce their own regional patriotism: "*it is interesting see, we travel a lot with my husband*", "*I would like to see my native Perm*", "*there are old houses there*", "*to see the old times*". This kind of motivation predetermines the preferred practices of consuming culture: group organized tourism, passive perception of information, maintaining a distance between the visitor and the museum objects. Even the leisure and sports facilities (Nordic walking paths) are perceived as something undesirable, violating the lofty atmosphere of the museum.

The motivation for visiting museums in different categories of young people is different. Here it is appropriate to talk about the "culture of curiosity" in the context of the experience economy. Both students and schoolchildren want to get aesthetic pleasure ("*to see beauty*"), new impressions and knowledge ("*I'm in a good mood, my mother suggested that I go, I agreed, I think it will be interesting, exciting, you can do a lot learn something new*", "*learn more about the Stroganovs, they told me about them at school*"). In the system of youth motivation, the desire to communicate with friends, loved ones and relatives is crucial. Although for some schoolchildren this trip turned out to be forced, most of them turned out to be already conscious consumers of museum products. "Adult youth", that is, informants aged 25–35, share the motives of curiosity and the search for new experiences, but their curiosity is more directed, determined by professional and aesthetic interests. Young professionals, especially those involved in history, advertising or project activities, are more likely to evaluate this place in terms of branding, museum work, and even independent tourist trips (e.g., organizing a trip for friends, family, etc.).

This proactive motivation also requires similar interactive practices of interaction with the museum space. First of all, young people expect actions: master classes, tactile sensations (to see ancient objects, to hold a bag of salt, dress up in old clothes), old food, etc. It is important for young people to be able to visually record their own experience (photo zones, beautiful angles for photos) and

share photos on social networks. Finally, young people are not always ready for typical excursions preferring something exclusive (the ability to get into hard-to-reach places and storage facilities) or self-acquaintance with museum objects according to their individual plan with the help of audio guides, understandable signs, brochures, etc. The latter is caused precisely by the desire to get new impressions: “to enjoy the place and the atmosphere.”

Parents' motivation combines attitudes of both heritage tourism and curiosity culture, with some shift into the latter. On the one hand, history, past, new knowledge about famous people – symbols of the region – are important; on the other hand, some professional questions are interesting (“I am interested how they heated houses”, “it is possible to will see elements of the history of law ... some letters, mortgages, something else, it would be interesting for me”). In addition, museum tourism is perceived as an occasion to spend time and know something new (“to talk with my daughter, I am pleased that she likes to travel with me ... I want to show her something beautiful, pleasant, unique”, a male teacher said). In choosing preferred practices, parents turned out to be closer to their children – they also often advocate interactivity, visibility, an individual approach and independence in building their routes.

## 4 Museums and social identities

The analysis of motives for visiting a museum and preferences of cultural consumption shows that museums play a more complex role in the social life of a modern city dweller not being an attribute of status consumption. The analysis of focus group transcripts shows that the motivation and choice of practices are directly related to the dominant social identities of the informants.

The first observation indicates a direct link between active professional identities and motives for visiting museums. For parents and working youth, the link is pronounced, while for pensioners or students it is weaker; in schoolchildren, the link is absent. Thus, even non-specialized museums have a real chance to use this motivation to create new museum products.

The second observation reveals the relationship of motivation and practices with family roles. Both parents and pensioners perceive the museum as an occasion for communication and presentation of their “adult” life world to the younger generation. For parents, the presentation of their cultural capital and habitus is more typical, while for pensioners – the presentation of their personal and family past (“let them see how people lived in the old days, how we lived”), and for both – all-Russian and local history and historical memory, that is, territorial and national identity. Schoolchildren are symmetrically motivated to spend time together with their parents (sometimes under duress, sometimes voluntarily, it is a manifestation of the child’s social role). This awareness will allow museums to develop new formats of family leisure – family history clubs or thematic lectures that present the life of older generations.

Finally, the third observation concerns the relationship between the motivation for visiting museums and territorial identities of visitors. The latter can be defined as a feeling of belonging to social communities formed on a territorial basis, such as a city or any other settlement, region, cultural and geographical areas (e.g., the Volga region or the Far

East) and a country. National communities can be also included in this range. They are not purely territorial, but often associated with one or another national territorial unit. In individual consciousness, different territorial identities line up in a hierarchy by their significance: someone is primarily inclined to consider himself a Permian (the dominant local identity is more common for older people, residents of medium and small cities, people with an average education and income level [14]), someone is a Russian (the dominant common civic identity is more characteristic of residents of megacities, people with higher education, with an income above the average, representatives of the middle and younger age cohorts). Territorial identities are often the subject of construction by federal, regional and city authorities, seeking to minimize migration losses or to intensify civic activity through Russian and local patriotism, and museums are involved in these processes.

The research shows how differently the message of territorial identity sent by museums is perceived by different categories of visitors. For the residents of Berezniki, who are most inclined to perceive themselves as residents of their city, the “Stroganov Chambers” are one of the symbols of the city, a reason for local pride and an obligatory item in the “cultural program”. The same can be observed in the perception of the museum by Perm pensioners. For them, the Ussolye Museum is also a source of pride for the region. Here we should look for reasons for museum's high ratings in these focus groups.

On the contrary, participants in other focus groups perceived the Stroganov Chambers more critically, often through the prism of comparison with other museums. Considering that almost all of them have extensive experience of visiting other cities in Russia and abroad, it is easy to see the dominance of a common civic identity, which makes local museums be perceived as one of the elements of Russia's large and diverse cultural landscape. Speaking metaphorically, if for pensioners the museum is a “temple of common memory”, for young people and middle-aged people it is a polyphonic interlocutor, helping to reflect on own «I».

## 5 Conclusions

The constructivist approach to the study of practices of consumption of museum products allowed us to conclude that the modern city dweller is less and less ready to see the museum as an attribute of the high repertoire of cultural consumption, looking for new impressions, knowledge, experience and communication. This is facilitated by factors such as the formation of a new urban “culture of curiosity” and an experience economy, increasing social mobility, and the formation of a new social demand from various urban communities for help in finding and constructing professional, family, territorial and other social identities.

And it's not about changing moods or fashion. We are facing one of the episodes of the paradigm shift in the perception of the culture of modern Russian society. The study shows that in modern society, especially in its most urbanized part, instead of the general idea (doxes in the terminology of P. Bourdieu [15]) of museums as institutions operating within the framework of the “democratization of culture” paradigm, a desire is gradually formed to see in

their platforms of "cultural democracy", where each social group and local community can find tools to maintain group (including territorial) identity.

The traditional format of the museum as a "custodian of the highest values" is not a thing of the past. This format still has a fairly large audience, especially in the provincial environment, but it is gradually leaning towards participatory practices. The museum seen through the double optics of cultural consumption and social identification processes has every chance to find worthy answers to new requests.

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