The Elusive Young Adult Audience
An Ethnographic Study for Museums in the Park, Chicago

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Audience research and planning for the mission-driven world.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW:
Sponsoring organization
PROJECT OVERVIEW:
Background

- Understanding how younger generations want to experience the arts has become critically important for the sustainability of the sector.
- “Millennials,” the generation born during the 1980s and ’90s, have been the focus of much recent research on arts engagement.
- But conventional research methods — surveys and focus groups — reveal only part of the picture, because they look at what young adults say about the arts rather than what they actually do.
- To round out the picture of Millennials and the arts, Slover Linett Strategies conducted ethnographic research among young-adult cultural consumers for the Chicago-based Museums in the Park consortium.
- The study examined young consumers’ current patterns of social and cultural activity and explored how museum visitation fits — or could fit better — into their lives.
- As previous studies have found, the changing expectations and assumptions of this generation (particularly around technology, communication, and learning) suggest that museums may need to make bold changes in their programming and marketing in order to remain relevant to younger adults.
- Because we defined cultural participation broadly in this study, the findings paint a general picture of young adults’ values and preferences that are applicable to all kinds of arts categories and organizations.
PROJECT OVERVIEW:
What is ethnography?

- Ethnographic research is a set of methods developed by anthropologists to understand human cultures and subcultures.

- Ethnographic methods examine what people *do* in as much detail as what they *say* to researchers, so it provides more natural, realistic insight into what really matters to them.

- In this study, we wanted to understand young people who may not visit museums very often, so we observed them where they currently choose to spend their leisure time; that helped us see how various kinds of activities engage them, and why.

- We let the young people themselves define cultural participation, meeting them on their own terms instead of those of the arts & culture sector.

- In its observational, flexible approach, ethnography is an exploratory process that enables the researchers to adapt and respond to new findings and changing hypotheses.
During the summer of 2011, our team of cultural anthropologists conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a wide variety of locations in Chicago:

- Six fielding sessions
- A mix of neighborhoods in terms of demographic composition, geography, and cultural amenities
- Events and settings where we expected to find concentrations of our target audience segment: young people who
  - are approximately 25-32 years old
  - participate in at least some cultural activities, broadly defined, during their leisure time
  - have ethnically diverse social networks and/or self-identify as ethnically mixed
- A range of formal and informal activities that attract these young decision makers:
  - Art gallery walk
  - Farmers’ market
  - Coffeehouses
  - Music concert
  - Arts festival

Participants in a neighborhood gallery walk seamlessly continue their conversation and “people-watching” on the sidewalk.

Attendees at a Monday evening concert downtown bring their own food and drink and socialize with friends during the event.
PROJECT OVERVIEW:
Methodology (cont.)

- During each session, we used two ethnographic methods:
  
  - **Participant observation:**
    We methodically observed young decision-makers’ behaviors, interactions, and reactions to social and cultural environments and activities, while taking part in those activities ourselves
    
    → Mixed into and traveled with participant groups while listening to conversations and noting behaviors and attitudes
    
    → Took note of the total environments in which these activities took place, including sights, sounds, and smells
  
  - **In-context interviewing:**
    In each of the sites, we conducted brief, “in situ” interviews as well as longer, in-depth interviews with young-adult participants, both individually and in groups
    
    → When beginning an interview, we guessed at the participant’s age; we then confirmed it during the interview

- We also took a collaborative, iterative approach to the data analysis
  
  - During each day of fieldwork, the research team met to review and analyze findings and discuss new questions to pursue in subsequent sessions

*Sloer Linett researchers conduct a standing debrief immediately following in-context interviewing with visitors to a local farmers’ market*
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:
Cultural participation values

This study reveals five key elements that young decision makers value about the cultural and leisure-time experiences they engage in. The settings in which we conducted ethnographic fieldwork often featured several of these elements, but young people also describe many other engaging cultural and leisure-time activities that effectively provide these elements. The activities, events, or locations that appeal most to young adults typically offer all of these elements. In some ways, it is the combination of these elements that makes any particular setting stand out.

1. Flexibility and fluidity
   Young people place a premium on activities that impose minimal structure and few limitations in terms of pre-planning, start and stop times, and financial barriers.
   → “This is event good, it feels spontaneous. You can walk in for a while, leave, it’s low pressure.” – Outdoor arts festival, female

2. “Vibe”
   Young decision-makers look for settings that deliver a rich, multi-sensory, energetic — yet laid-back — atmosphere.
   → “I get a good vibe from this whole thing. It comes from the people here who like art, who like listening to music. People who come together and take part in something bigger than just themselves. It’s a good feeling.” – Gallery walk, male

3. Stimulation and learning
   Young people genuinely desire learning, growth, and enrichment from their leisure-time activity.
   → “I think it would really cool if they [museums] did something interactive. If it’s art, you can do art. If it’s science, you can do an experiment with what you just learned.” – Outdoor arts festival, female
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:
Cultural participation values (cont.)

4. "Local"-ness

Young adults highly value activities with a “local” focus. They seek evidence of “local”-ness in two distinct senses: a geographic connection to the specific locality in which an activity or event takes place, and a commitment to small-scale, non-corporate, non-touristy, and neighborhood-centered objects and activities.

→ “This thing is very local. A lot of the food comes from restaurants a few block from here. The booze is from right around here. The artists are craftspeople from this very neighborhood.” – Outdoor arts festival, male

5. “Community”

Young people want to take part in and contribute to a taste-based “community”: a group of others with whom they already share or are likely to share interests and commitments.

→ “Anybody can come and anybody’s welcome, but if you look at the big picture, you know who mostly goes to that kind of stuff. It brings ‘us’ together. I look at that as a big thing with our generation.” – North Side coffee shop, female
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:
Information-gathering and communication

Gathering information and communicating about cultural activities is a three-step process for many young adults—and they use different types of media for each step of this process.

1. Social media and postcard ads pique young people’s interest in certain leisure activities

Those who use social media for leisure information tend to do so primarily to gather *general information* on leisure options. Most find such leisure-activity information through links posted on other people’s Facebook walls, while others scan friends’ “status updates” to check on their plans.

→ “People that post on Facebook say, ‘I’m going to this concert today, it’s free.’ They just say what it is and then I Google it. I’m not that internet savvy.” – Millennium Park, female

“Local” postcards found in coffee shops and community message boards are another means by which young people find grassroots *general information* on leisure activities. As with a Facebook post or status update, finding an interesting postcard or print ad is typically followed by more detailed information-gathering on the web.

2. Online sources provide detailed information to inform leisure activity decision-making

For more *specific information* on leisure activities, young adults tend to consult trusted websites with a Chicago focus.

3. Text messaging acts as the preferred platform for communicating and coordinating leisure activities

Text messaging is the primary means by which young adults receive and communicate specific leisure-time activity information as well as coordinate the details of attending with friends.
NEXT STEPS:
Dissemination to the field

- Museums in the Park plans to distribute full findings from this research in early 2012
- To receive a copy of the full report when it is available, subscribe to Re:search, our monthly e-newsletter:

  http://www.sloverlinett.com/newsletter/subscribe

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