

# **A Typology Consumption Practices in Museums: Implications for Market Communications of Museums**

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To be the last speaker, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the MPR committee, especially Mr. Mork, and Dr. Wachter, for arranging such a remarkable program for us, and the other speakers for sharing the outstanding and inspiring insights with us.

As an experienced museum worker and a junior scholar, this paper is of the purpose on getting a deeper understanding of how, why, and what people consume in museums by proposing a museum consumption framework as the basis and theoretical foundation of museum marketing. This presentation is not focused on a specific museum or a solid case, but more from the academic point of view. However, by using the qualitative research and taking the National Museum of History in Taipei, which I work for over 10 years, as the research context, it is also a kind of case study. This is only a pilot study, and the research is still working on. Therefore, the most important purpose of this presentation is to get the feedback and insights from colleagues.

I'll begin with a short introduction to address the theoretical perspectives and the methodology of the research. More attention will be focused on the framework of consumption practices in museums in terms of the conceptual framework, the typology and its related constructs. Based on this framework, what implications could be for museum practices, especially on marketing, is also a very important intention of this research. Of course, limited by the research time and the context, the research still need to be improved and modified in the future.

## **INTRODUCTION**

How consumers consume? Consumer research has viewed this question from various perspectives in terms of economic, symbolic, sociocultural, experiential, ideological, or other different aspects of consumption. Consumer

culture theory (CCT) termed by Arnould & Thompson (2005) is one example, which refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.

According to Arnould and Thompson's definition, consumer culture theory is organized around a core set of theoretical questions related to the relationships among consumers' personal and collective identities; underlying experiences, processes and structures; and the nature and dynamics of the sociological categories through and across which these consumer culture dynamics are enacted and inflected. (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 870) They synthesize the related consumer studies of CCT research contexts, which illuminate four research programs in terms of consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. Joy & Sherry (2003) take aesthetic experience of museum patrons as the context, for instance, to study embodied consumer experiences. Holt (1995) creates a typology of consumption practices underlying the context of baseball spectatorship is another.

Museums are about objects and all the ramifications associated with objects. Museums are also about people who respectively possess, collect, interpret and appreciate the objects. (Edson and Dean 1994) Influences and changes affecting the way museums operate and serve society have been profound over the last thirty years. One of the main philosophies of museums for changing is from object-oriented to audience-oriented, which makes museums pay more attention on people rather than focus on material culture of objects in the past. Increasingly, subjects such as who museum visitors are, why they visit museums, what they do in museums, or how they react and interact in museums are studied by various audience researches or visitor studies mostly from museum studies or museological perspective. This paper is of the perspective of consumer research on what consumption means to museum visitors, and what perception do they have of museum consumption in general.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

This paper is of the purpose on getting a deeper understanding of how, why, and what people consume, and consider its application to a relatively narrow slice of the world, the world of museums. Taking Holt's (1995) research on a typology of consumption practices as a research foundation,

who used the context of baseball spectatorship as the methodology to describe four distinct metaphors for consuming which are consuming as experience, consuming as integration, consuming as classification, and consuming as play within two basic conceptual distinctions - the structure of action (i.e. autotelic & instrumental) and purpose of action (i.e. object actions & interpersonal actions). In this paper, I use museums as the context to synthesize these four perspectives and add a fifth dimension - consuming as learning - to discuss in relation to consumption from museums.

Based on Holt's research, the consuming-as-experience metaphor examines consumers' subjective, emotional reactions to consumption objects. Three constructs including accounting, evaluating, and appreciation are proposed through iterative analysis from Holt's deep observations. Accounting refers to typify consumption action and objects. Evaluating involves three comparisons of norms, history, and convention. Appreciating refers to consumers' emotional responses.

Holt describes the consuming-as-integration metaphor as how consumers acquire and manipulate object meanings. Assimilating, producing, and personalizing are the main constructs of it, which mean consumers are able to integrate self and object in order to access to the object's symbolic properties. (Belk 1988; McCracken 1986; Belk et al. 1989) Taking baseball spectators as examples, they think, feel, act, and look like a baseball world participants as assimilating; they try to manage the team, predict the result of the game, and even bonding the players as producing; and they also personalize themselves as baseball participants by dressing, sign, or comments.

The consuming-as-classification metaphor undergirded by Holt's research views consuming as a process in which objects - viewed as vessels of cultural and personal meaning - act to classify their consumers. The classifications by consumers are either through objects or actions. The consuming-as-play metaphor which received little attention is a fourth dimension of consuming. Holt constructs it with communing which consumers share mutually felt experiences with each other, and socializing that consumers make use of experiential practices to entertain each other.

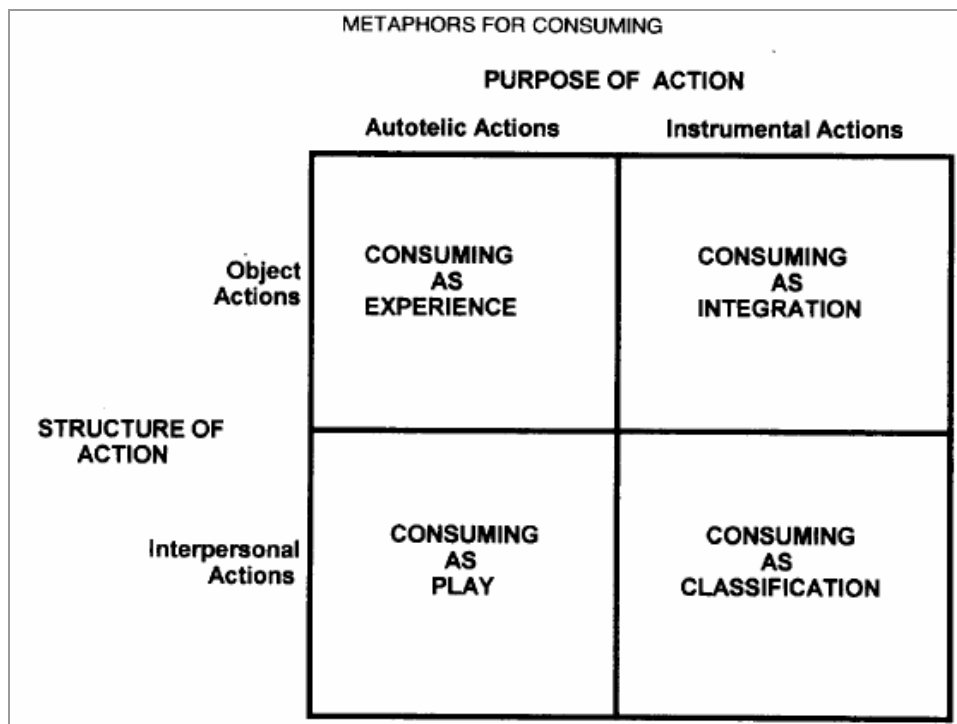


Figure 1. Metaphors for consuming (Holt 1995)

Holt applies the typology of consumption practices and indicates materialism as a style of consuming, which means value inheres in consumption objects rather than in experiences or in people, emphasizes integrating practices over experiential practices, classifies through objects over through actions, and deemphasizes playing practices in general.

Comparing to Holt's baseball consumption, a museum is a totally different context with similarities in terms of purpose and structure of consumption. For instance, both baseball spectators and museum visitors consume in a fixed space to watch (or see) the consuming objects, interact with people, and have fun within their consumption. However, museum consumption seems to be more likely individual rather than collective, even though they come to visit museums not only alone but also with families or groups. It is very different from watching a game with a bunch of people together in baseball stadium.

As institutions for learning, museums characterize the consumption in different ways. Four distinct metaphors for consuming have also emerged in this study, but the constructs of each dimension might not be the same in a museum context and it might have different dimension of how people consume in a museum, for example, a metaphor as learning. Meanwhile, just as Edson and Dean (1994) indicated that museums are about objects and all the ramifications associated with objects. Materialism is inevitably a style of consuming for museums. However, museums are also about people who respectively possess, collect, interpret and appreciate the objects. Is

materialism the only style of consuming for museums?

## RESAERCH METHODS

Of the purpose on getting a clear picture and the typology of museum consumption, I take the NMH as the context.

The museum located in the central of Taipei was built in 1955 as a museum of history that would also serve as a national art gallery. With its collection of 60,000 artifacts, illustrating the richness and beauty of China's cultural heritage, the museum also emphasizes and interprets local Taiwan history and art; and introduces international culture and history such as India, Maya, Africa, Impressionists and so on by organizing special exhibitions.

The typology of museum consumption here is constructed through long term observations and analysis of deep interviews. Museum consumers with homogeneity and heterogeneity in backgrounds and museum experiences are interviewed to compare, refine, and extend Holt's consumption practices in the museum context. The table shows the example of the interviewees. More interviews are still undertaken by now.

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Knowledge of art & history	Frequency of visits per year
Amy	Female	50	High school	Housewife/volunteer	High	> 50
Yen	Male	19	B.A.	Student	High	> 12
Ting	Female	22	B.A.	Student	Lower	2-3
Eddie	Male	51	B.A.	Business man	Medium	6-7
Jean	Female	20	B.A.	Student	Medium	> 10

## METAPHORS FOR MUSEUM CONSUMING

Based on the purpose of consumption which is hedonic and utilitarian and the component of consumption with objects and people, the metaphors for museum consuming are proposed as following:

### Consuming as experience

Referring to consumers' subjective, emotional reactions, museum audiences make sense (or account), evaluate and appreciate consumption objects. Consumers' experiences in museums are especially different from the experience in unordinary of daily life. For instance, the objects displayed in museums are mostly rarely seen or used in people's daily life. Like Yen described when he visited museums it seems to pass into a time machine or

out of to another space to “taste” different life or culture. However, like Falk & Dierking (1992) introduce the Interactive Experience Model that emphasizes the importance of audience’s physical, social, and personal contexts for experience and learning in museums. Transferring the consumer’s physical, social, and personal contexts between outside and inside of museums is also a very important activity when consumers experience the museum.

Being a self-learning oriented person, Amy visits museum mainly for learning - a utilitarian approach. When we discussed about hedonic consumption, she agreed that museum experiences are both utilitarian and hedonic. However, from her observation, because of the clear image of museums for learning, it sometime depends on the planning and designs for audiences to have hedonic results in a passive way.

### **Consuming as integration**

Museum consumption as integration focuses on meaning making by consumers. In contrast with experience, integrating is an instrumental act pursued to facilitate the symbolic use of the object. Meaning making especially on objects is an important activity for museum consumers, and it based on the consumer’s recalling his or her prior knowledge, experience and memories.

Yen mentioned his first trip to the Louvre in France when he was in junior high. He was full of surprise and astonished what he saw in the museum. “The Louvre is a fantasy for me since I was a kid. When I stand inside and face the originals first time. It is absolutely a dream coming true!” Yen describes his feeling about the Louvre and the museum visit means to him.

Being a strong museum advocator, Amy emphasized the importance of prior knowledge for her each visit. “When I see an object on display in museum exhibition, I always recall my prior knowledge and memory related to it, and then read the label to get the information.”

Eddie talked about his business trip to Italy and visited the Sistine Chapel which just completed its restoration. When he saw the encounter between Adam and the God in the painting, he was touched so much and recalled lots of pictures from the movies in his mind such as ‘Ben Hurt’ and ‘The Ten Commandments’. Similar condition happened in the British Museum, when he saw the skeleton of dinosaurs: “So many years, I saw dinosaurs in books and movies. I was really shocked by the power of real objects.” He describes.

It is similar to Holt’s perspectives on consumption as integration with this research. Because of the professional world of museums, integration practices are methods applied by audiences to break down the institutional

distance through assimilating such as developing requisite knowledge and specialized tastes, and through producing to enhance their perception and to participate in the production of consumption.

### **Consuming as classification**

The museum is an agency of cultural classification, Fyfe (1995) states museums *select* and *combine* artifacts which they exhibit to a public(s). Fyfe's (1995) cultural classification is proposed in three dimensions: classification as distinction, classification as the projection of group, and classification as control. The dialogue with Ting is an example of the concept, who usually visits museums on her own or with her one best friend. Most of her other friends think that museums are not their kind of "stuffs" and do not belong to them. In doing so, museum consumption is classified by sub-culture of youth as the projection of group.

Museums are definitely not the first choice to most of students who go to museums mostly with schooling or families. However, the museum sometimes is a symbol of most "in" stuff because of blockbuster exhibitions. Amy memorized the 'Terra Cotta Worriers' exhibition organized by the NMH in 2000 and attracted more than 1.5 million attendants in eighty-three days; the exhibition part II which showed the new excavation just finished two weeks ago also attracted 300,000 visitors in two months. These two exhibitions were one of the hottest issues at that time; people classify themselves by visiting the exhibition for distinction from the others.

Referring to classification as control, the results of interviews show an alternative concept. Eddie points out that there is relatively less classification in social, economic or cultural statuses nowadays comparing to the past, the museum consumers are classified by two categories based on the involvement of the contents offered by museums. He quotes a Chinese slang for explanation which means the laity sees the fancy part of exhibits but the professional sees the inside story.

### **Consuming as play**

Consuming not only involves directly engaging consumption objects but also includes using consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers. (Holt 1995) Playing practices in museums capture the hedonic dimension and interact with people. People share their mutually felt experiences and insights with each other through communing, and make use of experiential practices to enjoy and entertain each other through socializing. Moreover, consuming as play in museum consumption practices emphasizes

enjoyment, leisure, and spiritual improvement in particular. Yen mentioned and said: "My friends and I would like to "sink" in a place which can really relax and get knowledge at the same time on weekends. Museums offer this kind of atmosphere and make us feel easy and take spiritual feast." He also described theme parks and museums as two different kinds of friends and said: "For me, a museum likes the friend you would like to get close to him/her and to know him/her better. A theme park is more likely a playing companion. You feel so happy with him/her at that moment, but do not really want to be together afterwards."

The concept of enhancing knowledge or something else from play or leisure was also mentioned by Eddie. Eddie planed museum visit in his business trip overseas every time. "It is not only an itinerary or a break among business schedule for me. To visit a museum is more than to relax, entertain, and leisure, it will make you feel yourself better." he says. Jean described her leisure time spending in museum which could take a concentrated rest in a very quite environment, "the rest of your mind in particular."

### **Consuming as learning**

Falk & Dierking (2000) indicate that all learning is contextual; one cannot talk about learning except in relationship to some place and situation. They propose the Contextual Model Learning and approach learning from an evolutionary perspective. In this view, learning is the product of hundreds of millions of years of survival-oriented evolution, a continually refining capacity for humans and other animals to intelligently navigate an ever changing social, cultural, and physical world.

Increasingly museums can be described as public institutions for personal learning places; people seek out to satisfy their learning needs, which is also one of the needs for consumption.

The way to characterize the unique and special nature of learning that occurs in museums is to emphasize the learning form objects and particularly free-choice nature of that learning. (Falk & Dierking 2000) Object learning assist learners transferring abstract concepts into reification. Free-choice learning tends to be non-linear, is personally motivated, and involves considerable choice on the part of the learner as to what to learn, as well as where and when to participate in learning.

Amy prepares each visit beforehand in terms of reading books and accessing the internet. No matter how much information she gets priorly, she always sees, studies, and interacts with the object first than read labels.



Free-choice to go and to see is also one of the reason she loves museums so much. Jean takes communications as her major in the university. She is not really a frequent user of museum. She indicated whenever she visited a museum and saw the real object, it always inspired her to think something new.

Accordingly, learning in museums as consumption refers to learning in a variety of ways, and a range of learning styles with different motivations and purposes. It relates to consumers' experience and integration of meaning making about objects; it is also about spiritual improvement for hedonic enjoyment and interacting with distinct people.

### **Framework of museum consumption practices**

Based on the research, I try to figure out the museum consumption from the nature of the museum, which includes the purpose of consumption and the component of consumption. In terms of purpose, museum consumption could be hedonic and utilitarian. In terms of component, museum consumption includes objects and people.

By comparing, extending, and refining Holt's metaphors for consumption practice, learning is added as a fifth dimension for museum consuming. Learning in museums is the interaction between objects and people. Learning in museum could be hedonic, appreciating art work for example, and it could be utilitarian as well, field trip by school for instance. Learning in museum involves consumers' experience, integration, enjoyment, and classification and overlaps the four distinct metaphors. The framework of metaphors for museum consuming is therefore proposed as Figure 2. These consumption practices could be useful facts and information to museum people whenever they take their marketing approach, strategy and actions.

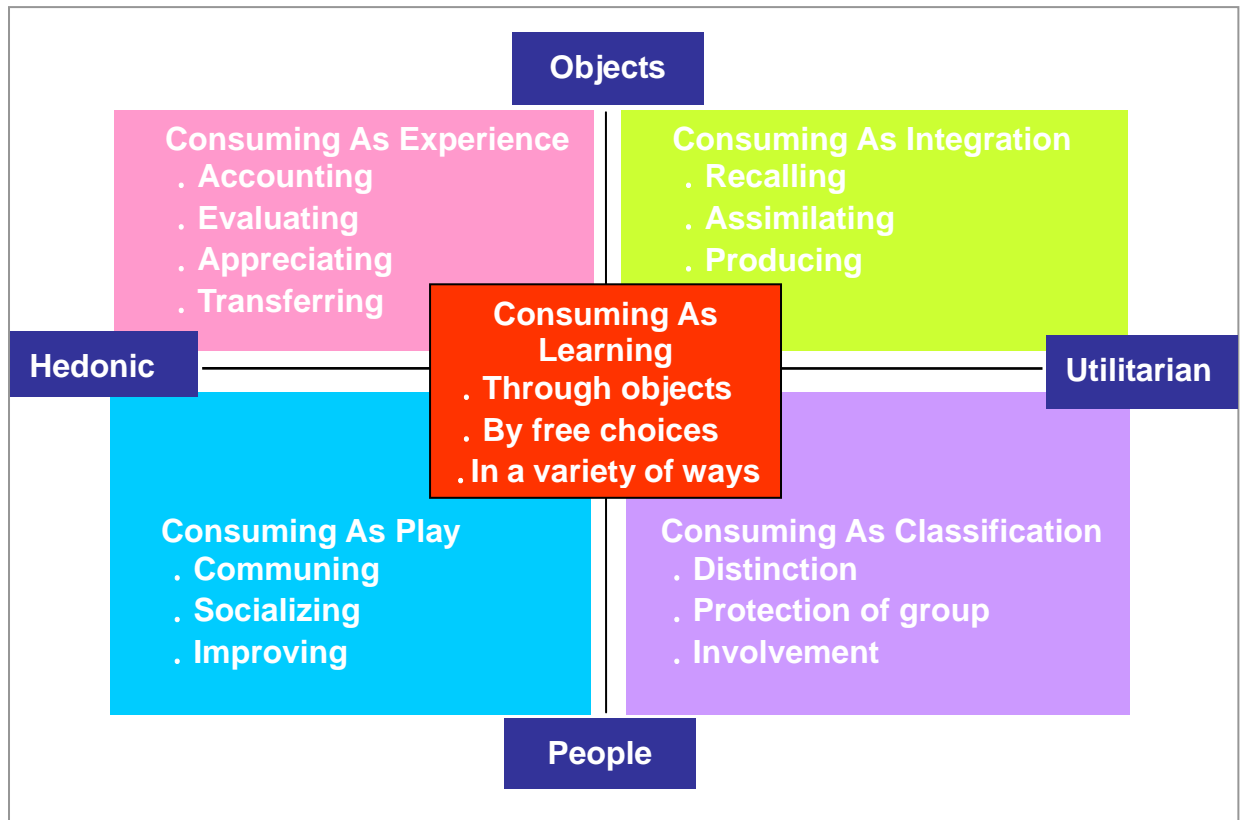


Figure 2. Metaphors for museum consuming

## CULTURAL ISSUES ON MUSEUM CONSUMPTION

Beside universal principles of consumption, cultural factors among consumers and audiences' personal and collective identities are very strong influences on consumer behaviors. The result of this research shows very good examples of it.

Museums in Taiwan could be illustrated this concept. The first museum in Taiwan was established in 1908 during the Japanese occupation period. However, the development of museum industry in Taiwan started from 1950s and flourished in 1980s mainly by the public museums of government policy, and some private museums because of vast economic growth. People in Taiwan start visiting museums only since these two decades.

On the other hand, comparing to the western society, Chinese are more relational-oriented than individual, which means traditionally and culturally we think about families, friends, and social relationships instead of ourselves first as we act.

Under these social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances, visiting museums is not always a usual activity and life style for people in Taiwan. The purposes they choose museums to consume and what they act

and interact in museums have characteristics on their own.

According to the research, the audiences in Taiwan as museum consumers are more utilitarian than hedonic, tend to be people-oriented than focused-on objects. Learning is the most driven factor for different ages and levels of the audiences.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSEUM PRACTICES**

The typology of museum consumption practices makes a clear picture of audience's style and value of consuming in museums, and provides a framework describing linkages between isolated metaphors for consuming in museums.

Past studies of consumer research viewed materialism as a value of measuring the importance of possessions. Holt's typology of consumption practices was more productive to define materialism in terms of how people use their possessions. However, from the museum consumption point of view, museum consumption practices not merely emphasize the possession, and experiential, play and learning consumption as well. Therefore, not only materialism, should humanism take into account as a style and value of museum consuming.

Aside from the universal principles, there should be cultural specific and sensitive on museum visitors' behavior. It is significant to museum marketing and its effectiveness, especially it is much more common that the same museum product (like exhibitions) with global travel to different country or areas; and a museum serve visitors who come from different places, countries with various culture all over the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

A museum is a professional institution. However, it is definitely not a standardized production. Getting more and deeper understanding of the consumer's behavior universally and indigenously makes museums have better communication with appropriate marketing strategies and actions with our audiences. In doing so, museums can be more suitable for people and their lives.

Because this is still a working paper, constructs of the five dimensions of the framework need to be clarified for further research, more data need to be added, and the generalizability of the research should be considered. Moreover, related consumer literatures and visitor studies should be reviewed in breadth and depth as well.

Please do give me your comments and insights, and thank you very much indeed for your attention.

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