Cultural Consumption, Interactive Sociality, and the Museum

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Abstract

Within marketing and consumer behaviour research, museums have been generally conceptualised as public consumption spaces where visitors benefit from a variety of affective, recreational, and cognitive experiences. As such, the social context has been largely subordinated to enhancing visitors' cultural consumption experience in the physical environment of the museum. Our study takes a reverse path by highlighting how the cultural consumption experience in the museum nourishes 'interactive sociality' both inside and outside the museum. The analysis of our qualitative data (interpretive individual and group interviews and non-participatory observations) on Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow (UK) imply that by leveraging interactive sociality, managers can enhance the museum's value proposition and societal worth in contemporary society.

The paper critiques museum studies' over-reliance on (social) psychology theories and demonstrates the value of adopting alternative (socio-cultural) approaches to the advancement of theory in the field. It provides evidence for the fact that cultural consumers' interaction with(in) the organisation is not confined to the physical boundaries of a given context. People extend their varying experiences and sensibilities to other domains beyond the museum walls.

Keywords: cultural consumption, museum, socialising, sociability, interactive sociality.

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Introduction

Within marketing and consumer behaviour research there has been an upsurge of interest in studying museums. For example, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Consumption, Markets & Culture* have all dedicated special issues to museum related topics, along with other subjects in the non-profit sector. Within this growing body of knowledge, museums have been generally conceptualised as public consumption spaces where, through 'visual consumption' of exhibits (Zukin, 1998; Schroeder, 2002), visitors benefit from a variety of experiences such as aesthetic appreciation (Goulding, 1999b; Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006, 2008), escapism (Goulding, 1999b, Slater, 2007; Slater and Armstrong, 2010), education (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010; Slater and Armstrong, 2010), identity projects (Goulding, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Sandell and Janes, 2007), and recreation (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004; Slater and Armstrong, 2010), to name but a few. Such experiences, as the literature reveals, are affected by the physical environment (e.g., the layout and type of exhibits) (Falk and Dierking, 1997; Leinhardt and Crowley, 2002), visitors' personal characteristics (e.g., their motivations and tastes of the museum) (Goulding, 2000; Slater, 2007; Pattakos, 2010), and social context (e.g., with whom they visit the museum) (Falk and Dierking, 1997; McLean, 1999; Debenedetti, 2003; Black, 2009; Falk et al., 2012).

These studies, as Bennett et al. (2010) also assert, have not only contributed to wider marketing debates, but also offered important managerial implications for the museum, arts, heritage, and the non-profit sector. This latter contribution is particularly vital because as a result of decreasing state funds for museums (at least in Western societies) (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002; Sandell and Janes, 2007; Bennett et al., 2010), these institutions

have been urged to prove their overall societal worth to avoid possible risks of closure, staff redundancy, or the introduction of entrance fees. These challenges have required marketing knowledge to be carefully applied to enhance museums' value proposition (Kotler et al., 2008; Simon, 2010). As such, scholars (e.g., Rentschler, 2007; Rentschler and Hede, 2007; Kotler et al., 2008; Simon, 2010; French and Runyard, 2011; Taheri and Jafari, 2012) have called for adopting a 'change-focused' marketing approach that would embed museums in the heart of social reality of life and leverage their societal values.

Our study takes up this call to further document the societal worth of museums. Along other consumption spaces such as cafés, restaurants, theatres, and shopping malls, museums are now recognised as socio-cultural hubs that bring 'vibrancy and 'meaning' to people's life in urban spaces (Castells, 2002; Sandell, 2003; Bagnall, 2003; Zukin, 2005). Museums' importance to some people has been to an extent that scholars (e.g., Oldenburg, 1989; Slater and Koo, 2010) have referred to them as 'third places', places "that are not home or work where people gather voluntarily, informally and frequently" (Slater and Koo, 2010, p.100). In urban life, museums are social spaces where some people might even feel a sense of belonging (Goulding 1999a; Slater and Armstrong, 2010). Urban life, in Castells' (2002, p.557) words, is "a world of social interaction and meaning operating on the basis of the appropriation of a space by sociability and the society." Public places are socially constructed based on meanings, both 'personal' and 'communal' (Massey, 1995), and museums are no exception (Goulding, 1999a). Yet, as also stressed by Osborne (2012), places in general and public places in particular are shaped more by people's behaviours than by the attributes of the places themselves. For example, a museum may have certain attributes (e.g., aesthetic or nostalgic), but it is people's responses to these attributes that attach certain meanings to or detach certain others from that museum.

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The results of our qualitative study on Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow (the UK) confirm that the museum fuels such sociability and contributes to the repository of meanings in social life. We use the term 'interactive sociality' to elucidate how our informants meaningfully socialise in the context of the museum and extend their sociality to other domains outside the museum. These findings make our study additionally important as it corresponds to several calls (Falk and Dierking, 1997, 2000; vom Lehn, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Taheri and Jafari, 2012) for further research into the 'social context' of museums. To date, this social context has been analysed mainly from a cognitive social psychology lens, a stance that we critique in this paper. In doing so, we also address Ekström's (2006) call for adopting socio-cultural approaches to better analyse the concept of 'the social'. Besides, we extend this context to the world beyond the museum walls, in the heart of everyday life in society. This is yet another modest contribution because prior work has studied the social context largely within the physical boundaries of the museum.

We organise our paper as follows. First, we present a critical review of the pertinent literature. Then we discuss our research procedure. Next, in our findings section, we demonstrate how museum visitors socialise both inside and outside of the museum context. We conclude with managerial implications and areas for future research.

Literature Review

In this section, first we present a brief review of the literature on the concept of 'sociality'. Here, we use the term 'sociality' (the state of being social) denotatively to provide an overall understanding of the concept of 'the social'. Then, we discuss 'sociability' and 'socialisation', two main derivative, but conceptually different, terms that are specifically relevant to our study.

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Sociality: understanding 'the social'

With the shift of the unit of analysis from 'the individual' to 'the social' in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and following the rise of interest in understanding the communal aspects of consumption (see Cova, 1997; Holt, 1997; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), researchers have endeavoured to explore multiple dimensions of the relationship between consumption and sociality. The growth of this body of knowledge lends itself primarily to acknowledging the fact that consumption, even at an individual level, takes place in a broader environment called the social context. Our analysis of this diverse literature reveals that there is a symbiotic relationship between consumption and sociality: on the one hand, consumption nourishes sociality, and on the other hand, sociality influences consumption.

To illustrate, and regarding the former relationship, research on brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006), sub-cultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001, 2002), extraordinary sports (Celsi et al., 1993; Arnould and Price, 1993), dance (Goulding et al., 2002; Hamilton and Hewer, 2009), leisure (Gainer, 1995; Slater et al., 2010), marginal markets such as car boot sales (Crewe and Gregson, 1998), and online tribes (Kozinets, 2008; Hamilton and Hewer, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2010) confirms that through consumption people build up social ties with each other and even feel a sense of belonging to a wider social group or community. In a different study, however, Holt's (1997) examination of postmodern lifestyles shows that individuals may form a wider social (e.g., lifestyle) group without necessarily being conscious of a sense of social identity. The construction of such sociality can be generally associated with the 'linking value' (Cova, 1997; see also Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006) embedded in various consumption situations

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where individuals' sociability can flourish. This stream of research highlights the social values of consumption and contests the criticisms (e.g., Bauman, 2000, 2001) of consumption as a devastating force that cultivates extreme individualism, disbands social ties, and damages social fabric in contemporary society (see Cova, 1997; Ger, 1997; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Hamilton and Hewer, 2010).

Conversely, and in regards to the impact of sociality on consumption, research on the consumption of food (Brennan et al., 2010) and drinks (Ariely and Levav, 2000), conspicuous consumption (Childers and Rao, 1992), consumer innovativeness (Cotte and Wood, 2004), post-purchase and service satisfaction (Mooradian and Olver, 1994; Spake and Megehee, 2010), and experiential consumption (Mehmetoglu, 2012) indicates that consumers' activities and experiences can be significantly influenced by social dynamics such as group membership, peer-based referencing, and social interaction. Such social influences in the extant literature are analysed mainly in the light of two theoretical perspectives that are anchored in social psychology: a) personality traits such as 'sociability' (Mooradian and Olver, 1994; Spake and Megeheeof, 2010; Mehmetoglu, 2012) that determine the impact of being sociable on consumers' various experiences with products and services b) 'socialisation' theory (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Ekström, 2006) that explains how, through social interaction, individuals learn and develop a series of skills such as how and why consume certain products and/or services and avoid certain others. It is worth mentioning that individuals' voluntary participation in social groups and openness to change are essential to altering their attitudes and behaviours (Bagozzi, 2000).

Now that we have concisely established a relationship between consumption and sociality, we progress to extend this relationship to our research context, the museum. As we shall

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discuss in more detail in the following paragraphs, prior research on the social context in museums has focused largely on how sociality shapes consumption. Consequently, the role of consumption in generating sociality has remained understudied. This oversight seems to be associated with the fact that the consumption experience in museums has been viewed as an end in itself and everything else has been subordinated to the optimisation of this experience. In this study, we take a reverse path. We are interested in understanding how consumption experience nourishes sociality. In the next section, we discuss the literature on sociality with a focus on the museum. For the sake of clarity, we present our discussion under two sub-headings of 'sociability' and 'socialisation'.

Sociability

Sociability, as a personality trait, has been extensively discussed in the literature of social psychology. Yet, in the interest of brevity, we define this concept with reference to Spake and Megehee's (2010) work which was published in *Journal of Services Marketing*. The authors (p.315) use Cheek and Buss's (1981) definition of 'sociability' as "the tendency to affiliate with others and to prefer being with others to remaining alone". In the context of healthcare sector, Spake and Megehee demonstrate that the sociability of both service receivers and service providers significantly improves relationship building for both parties and enhances service satisfaction amongst consumers. As the authors further elaborate, people are not equally sociable; "high sociability people are commonly referred to as extraverts", those who "tend to seek friendships and opportunities to engage in relationships." "Low sociability people", on the other hand, are 'introverts' as they have "a low arousal threshold and can function without the need for high levels of external stimulation" (p.315).

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In the museum context, sociability has been valued for enhancing visitors' overall cultural experience. Research (e.g., McLean, 1999; Falk and Dierking, 2000; Debenedetti, 2003; Falk et al., 2012) in this stream has demonstrated that via involvement in social interaction (e.g., sharing ideas and developing conversation with companions and others) visitors gain an overall better experience (e.g., learning and/or enjoyment) of their visit to the museum. Studies of this kind have acknowledged the importance of collective 'sense making' (Silverman, 1995) through talk and conversation. That is, talks and conversations act as mediators for constructing meanings about the contents of a given museum (Leinhardt and Crowley, 2002). Meaning creation, on the other hand, enhances visitors' appreciation of the exhibits and consumption experience. Yet, one should not oversimplify sociability as people may show various degrees of willingness toward developing conversations with others. Some people may go to a museum with companions, but split in the museum to have private experiences of their visits; conversely, those who visit museums alone can develop social bonds with strangers in the museum (Debenedetti, 2003). Such issues could be associated with visitors' personal characteristics (e.g., motivations) as briefly mentioned in the introduction of this paper.

Socialisation

Socialisation, in general, refers to a process in which a person learns to be part of a social group (Schneider, 1986). In the context of consumer behaviour research, Ward (1974, p.2) defines socialisation as "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace." Socialisation theory, as John (1999, p.203) summarises, has informed a diversity of marketing and consumer behaviour research in the following areas: "advertising and persuasion

knowledge, transaction knowledge, decision-making skills and abilities, purchase influence and negotiation strategies, and consumption motives and values." For example, Shrum and his colleagues examined the impact of television exposure (as a socialisation agent) on consumers' lifestyle perception (O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997) and their actual change of personal values such as materialism (Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch, 2005). In a different study, Cottee and Wood (2004) demonstrated how, in their innovative involvement with new products, young consumers are influenced more by their parents than by their siblings. Grønhaug and Venkatesh (1986) highlighted the role of social class in determining consumers' choice of technology appliances. Hollenbeck et al.'s (2008) research on themed flagship brand stores in the World of Coca-Cola brand museum confirms that socialisation in the museum strengthens enthusiasts' brand attachment.

Studies that have adopted socialisation theory in the museum context have provided strong evidence for the fact that through socialisation, visitors' appreciation and understanding of exhibits significantly increase. For example, Hilke and Balling (1985) demonstrate how family members' learning is enhanced through their discussion of the museum exhibits. Similarly, Blud's (1990a) analysis of children's engagement with interactive exhibits confirms that children's learning experience is stimulated by their constructive exchange of information with their parents. In another study, Blud (1990b) investigates the role of gender-specific social interaction in individuals' learning experience; mothers interact with their sons and fathers interact with their daughters. These studies have been complemented by research (e.g., McManus, 1989) that employs audio-video recordings of visitors to explore how exhibition content resonates in visitors' talks which in turn would enhance their appreciation of exhibits. As mentioned earlier, entrenched in social psychology, these studies have subordinated the social context mainly to enhancing visitors' appreciation of

the museum exhibits and experiences in the physical context of the museum. In our study, we go beyond this cognitive approach to explore how consumption fuels sociality inside and outside the museum. In the next section, we discuss our research procedure.

Methodology

Our key objective in this study was to understand whether or not and how consumption nourishes sociality in the museum context. Given the dearth of knowledge on this subject, we embarked on an inductive qualitative methodology, triangulating interpretive individual interviews, group discussions, and non-participatory observations. Our research setting was Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Our choice of this place was determined by the fact that the venue has a wide range of exhibits such as natural history, arms and armour, arts (both historical and contemporary), and many other exhibits related to immigration, religions, poverty, and so forth. Given the exploratory nature of our study, this diversity could better expose us to the behaviours and opinions of different people who had varying interests and motivations; whereas, choosing a specifically-themed museum or art gallery (e.g., transport or modern art) would have required us to take into account the specific motivations that drove people's visits. Given the objective of our study, investigation of visitors' motivations was beyond the scope of our research.

Data were collected over a period of ten months in Glasgow, the UK. For our individual and group interviews (which were conducted by the second author), informants were recruited through snowball sampling. The logic behind this sampling method was that we were interested in those who had visited Kelvingrove during one year prior to being interviewed but still had fresh memories of their museum experience. Alternatively, we could have randomly recruited informants at the museum, but this, we thought, could

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divert our findings because people often tend to talk more about their immediate experiences. Already we knew four individuals (among our acquaintances) who had visited the place a while ago. We invited these individuals to participate in our study; they kindly accepted to do so and also spread the word to others who would be interested. Overall, 20 female and male individuals, aged between 23 and 60, were interviewed (see Table 1). Here we should emphasise that given the snowball sampling nature of our study and its potential limitations (e.g., respondents might be equally sociable), in this study, we have no intention of making general claims to knowledge. Rather, we seek to gain a deep insight into an understudied subject. Interviews were conducted in different locations based on the informants' own preference (e.g., coffee shops, the university, informants' home, etc.). In some cases, we returned to our informants for further thoughts and interviewed them again.

The first four individual interviews took the form of 'open ended' chats (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) as we wanted to see a bigger picture of the informants' visiting experience. We started these interviews with general questions such as 'how was your visit?' or 'did you enjoy it?' As ice-breaking tools, these general questions led us to more in-depth conversations which gave rise to the informants' interesting stories about their social experiences. We particularly encouraged our informants to explain their views with reference to examples. Therefore, driven by their 'narrative' (Shankar et al., 2001) recall of their experiences, informants generally reflected a high level of interest in talking about how they enjoyed the social and extended aspects of their experience, things such as getting to know other visitors, talking about their experience with other visitors in the museum and also others outside the museum. These conversations directed us towards structuring our next interviews with a focus on the concept of socialising. Given the centrality of the concept of 'social' in our study, we also conducted two group discussions.

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As Hudson and Ozanne (1988) remind us, people as individuals and in groups might hold different perceptions about a given phenomenon. As such, both of these group discussions revealed results similar to those of individual interviews. Data from both individual and group interviews provided us with interesting views on socialising inside and outside the museum. All interviews, which lasted forty-five minutes on average, were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

We also undertook non-participatory observations. The first and second authors visited the museum on several occasions. Upon these visits, which lasted two and an half hours on average, individual and group visitors were observed. We avoided participatory observation because our joining the informants would already make their visits a social experience. Therefore, it was decided that their behaviours be observed with least possible 'intrusion' (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Depending on visitor cues in the museum, observations were made either individually or in a pair (i.e., researchers together). At the end of each set of observations, the observers met at the coffee shop near the museum entrance to discuss notes and ideas. The memos produced during these observations served us as both 'data' and 'analytical means' (Goulding, 2002) to reflect on our interviews.

Insert Table 1 about here

In terms of analysis, we followed the traditions of interpretive research. Regarding our interviews, we "let the narratives inform the codes" (Slater and Armstrong, 2010, p.733). The first researcher manually coded the transcripts through 'open coding' followed by more 'abstract coding' (Goulding, 2002), where ideas were conceptually linked together based on their interrelatedness. Our analysis provided us with two major themes and four sub-themes. Driven by their cultural consumption experiences, our informants socialised

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both inside and outside the museum. Their sociality inside the museum was fuelled by the

object of consumption (i.e., exhibits) and the context of the museum (e.g., the social

environment). As such, they were able to 'strengthen their existing ties' (sub-theme 1) and

'establish new ties' (sub-theme 2). On the other hand, outside the museum, their sociality

extended to the 'online' (sub-theme 3) and 'offline' (sub-theme 4) environments.

The results of the coding process along with sample coded interview transcripts were

shared with the other two researchers. As Slater and Armstrong (2010) contend, sharing

ideas amongst researchers help to enhance the validity of a piece of study undertaken by a

number of researchers. Throughout the study, and in order to ensure consistency, at the end

of each interview, the interviewer checked interpretations with the informants. This

'member check' (Goulding, 2002) was an effective way of ensuring that researcher's

interpretations were reflective of the informants' narratives. Throughout the research

process, constant exchange of ideas (via electronic mail, telephone, and face-to face

meetings) between the three members of the research team was pivotal to consistency of

our analysis and interpretation of findings.

Discussion of findings

During the interview, some of our informants described themselves as regular museum

goers; others stated that they would normally visit museums on an *ad hoc* basis. There was

also a disparity in their visiting motivations which ranged from looking for novelty, fun,

socialising, and learning to aesthetic appreciation and escapism. Sometimes, people

described their motivations broadly. For example, Maria (25-year-old shop assistant)

indicated that she would not predetermine what she wanted to gain from her visits as she

wanted to have a 'surprising' experience. When she was asked to explain this further, she

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replied: "*I don't know, seeing something new, learning something I probably didn't know...[elm] being with friends...[elm] it's just a break from the routine.*" Such motivations resonate with Slater's (2007) work in which she summarises the extant literature on museum visitors' motivations. However, our objective in this study was not to investigate visitors' motivations; rather, we were interested in the nature of visitors' socialising. Therefore, such motivations did not inform our analysis and interpretation.

Despite these differences, there was a general consensus amongst our informants on that the museum is a social space where individuals' are fuelled with a spirit of sociability and social interaction. For instance, Mark (35-year-old teacher) views the museum atmosphere as a pleasant place for socialising: "*There is no certain pattern in [my] visiting but I like the cafe [at Kelvingrove]...you can sit and talk about stuff [the exhibit] with others; the atmosphere helps the conversation to go on.*" Our observations at the museum confirm Mark's view. For example, the coffee shop in the central hall of the museum (Figure 1) is not just a refreshment station. On several occasions, we saw that people who did not know each other started conversations whilst queuing. Some others would develop conversations with those sitting at the adjacent table. There were also those who would socialise whilst touring the main halls of the place. Other informants would even extend Mark's socialising experience to other domains outside the museum. For example, Anna (28-year-old saleswoman) would share her museum photos with her contacts on social networking sites. In her view, online sharing of the photos of exhibits would lead to not only further conversations with her existing contacts but also developing contacts with new people. In the following section, we use evidence from our interview transcripts and observations to discuss how the museum's cultural consumption experiences generate sociality amongst people.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

Socialising in the context

Some people may go to museums and art galleries with companions and some others may visit these places on their own. Even those who visit alone may come into contact with other visitors and also museum staff; therefore, their visiting experience may be influenced by other actors in the social context of the museum (McLean, 1999). This is what Debenedetti (2003) refers to as 'fusion visits'. People explore exhibitions while walking past and crossing others and often come to talk to others, both those they are with and sometimes also strangers. Such social interactions make the museum experience interesting and entertaining by "using consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers" (Holt, 1995, p.9). Similarly, the relaxed environment of the museum helps visitors to construct and reconstruct social ties with one another, both those who are familiar and those who are strangers (Taheri and Jafari, 2012).

Strengthening existing ties

Museums are not simply 'objects' oriented environments; they are also 'people' oriented social contexts (Taheri and Jafari, 2012) in which people come together around the content of the site they visit and share opportunities of gaining 'mutual benefits' from each others' presence (Simon, 2010). Such characteristics are highlighted by our informants. For instance, Lily explains how she finds the opportunity to talk to her daughter about her likes and dislikes:

> *"What I like about museums is that you walk with your family and get to know them better...I mean each other's likes and*

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> *dislikes…last time I went to Kelvingrove, I was surprised to know*
>
> *how much my daughter knew [about things]…in everyday life,*
>
> *because she is busy, I am busy, maybe we don't talk about art or*
>
> *history or you know anything like that, but when you go to a*
>
> *museum, because you are there, you talk about stuff and then you*
>
> *realise that your daughter is really knowledgeable.*"

Lily, as she revealed in her interview, is not a museum fan and pursues her own leisure activities in alternative forms of cultural consumption such as cinema or music concerts. Yet her interest in visiting museums lies in the fact that she socialises with her family and this 'accompaniment' (Debendetti, 2003) strengthens her bonds with her daughter. As family members, Lily and her daughter are already related through kinship, but the context of the museum provides the seeds of further strengthening this tie intellectually and socially because Lily starts to look at her daughter with a fresh sight. As Simon (2010) indicates, museums have this capacity to stimulate connections between people.

The same theme of connection through cultural consumption was reinforced by our informants in a group discussion:

> *"When [in the museum] you see things, you just talk about them...*
>
> *with my husband [Stephen] we talk about stuff as we are walking*
>
> *[in the museum]."* (Jan)

Stephen complemented Jan's comments by going to a deeper level of interpersonal relationships:

"Relationships don't exist by themselves. You make them happen...some people unfortunately lose interest in each other simply because they don't have anything in common...anything to talk about...Jan and I have a lot in common...as she said, we see things [in the museum] that we both like." (Stephen)

In another example, Betty, provided us with an interesting insight:

"*Sometimes it's only when you are in a crowd that you realise you need time to hang around more with your loved ones.*"

Betty continued her narrative with an example from one of her past experiences in an art gallery in Liverpool:

"*It's a shame that we're all so busy that we barely spare any time for socialising...I think part of the museum experience, and I'd say a great part of it, is to enjoy the company of other people...when you see pictures or paintings [of the past], you think well maybe those people were happier...in The Walker Art Gallery [in Liverpool] the paintings were absolutely stunning...the social life of people in those days...then there I am, standing with my sister thinking maybe we need to socialise more...we need to see each other more often.*"

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For people like Betty, who have little time for socialising in their everyday life, objects such as paintings signify important meanings that nudge them to think about the missing aspects of their life (i.e., socialising). Betty's analysis of the paintings in the museum focuses on the concept of social life. We may all sympathise with Betty in that with the intensified pace of life, we do not have enough time to socialise with others. We may try to make use of any possible opportunity (e.g., in the supermarket, bank, coffee shop, or on the train or plane) to establish conversations with others as remedy for the lack of socialising. Like all those contexts, the museum and art gallery become hubs for socialising. And for Betty, the meaning of social life, as an important part of the museum experience, is revived by the paintings of past people's social life, one that reminds her of the importance of seeing her sister more often. This account in particular resembles how the 'symbolic' meanings of consumption create connections between people (Gainer, 1995).

Establishing new ties

The museum-fostered sociality is not simply confined to those who visit the museum together (i.e., family members of friends). As evident from the below excerpts, the museum's cultural consumption experience fertilises seeds of sociability even amongst total strangers:

> "*I loved to go there [Kelvingrove] when I was little, it's part of my childhood...They used to have the T-Rex [dinosaur skeleton]...hanging heads [of animals]...I love Kelvingrove because it takes me back to my childhood...it's not only me; I see other people also come there and sometimes I feel they also have the same nostalgic feeling [about the museum]. Sometimes I*

approach them and talk about things…it's great to see people

connect through objects." (Mike)

In this particular case, Mike's developing social ties with other visitors occurs through affective stimulation. That is, the museum arouses emotional feelings of nostalgia, and those who may experience the same nostalgic sensibility feel connected to each other. As identified by prior research (e.g., Goulding 1999a; Jafari and Taheri, forthcoming), nostalgia – as a complicated emotional and psychological sensibility – has the power to connect individuals together through shared meanings and feelings. Touched by nostalgic feelings, Mike identifies others around him who might share the same feelings and then he talks to them. During his interview, Mike said that a few times he sat for a cup of coffee with 'total strangers' who were only connected through their nostalgic feelings about the objects of the museum. Some of these strangers, as Mike further explained to us, happened to be those who shared similar childhood memories and even attended the same school trips. To borrow from Cova (1997), the 'linking value' of consumption in this scenario is the emotional feelings aroused by the museum context, as a result of which visitors come to contact with each other. As Kotler et al. (2008, p.5) also contend, in museums, sometimes people simply watch one another. And Mike is one of those people watching other people and acknowledging their feelings and thoughts, hence developing conversations about how they feel and think. In other words, the museum becomes a social hub in which participants 'share' their feelings and interests and as a result of socialising with each other bring more meanings to their shared space (Simon, 2010).

Such shared meanings, as our analysis reveals, are not exclusively rooted in strong feelings such as nostalgia. Similar accounts from other informants confirm that museum's cultural

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consumption experience acts as a catalyst to develop conversations amongst people and lead to discovering one another's shared interests:

> *"It (building social ties) just happens...I think loud [laughs]...I am standing right in front of this eagle [a taxidermied eagle at Kelvingrove] and the guy next to me suddenly says: 'it's brilliant, isn't it?' I'm sure I must have said something [loud] and he had obviously heard me...here we go, we ended up chatting about hill-walking at the cafe...we both are into nature."* (Claire)

> *"...interesting because I met [for the first time] one of my best friends at Kelvingrove...we were both students at the time and were visiting the museum for our projects...after a while we met again and that was it. We've been great friends since then.*" (Abigail)

Our observations also provide interesting insights into people's socialising in the museum. For example, on one occasion, we were fascinated by the way a simple sign (Figure 2) brought so much fun to the visitors. As we were walking in the museum, a couple stopped us by pointing at the sign hanging from the ceiling above our heads. The sign read: "Creatures of the Past (indicating past wild life with an arrow); Female Toilets (with an arrow showing the direction to ladies' toilets)". In a moment, more people were attracted to the sign and the air was filled with laughter and joy.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Whilst this was a case for laughter and jokes, other visual signs of the museum created more serious and deep conversations amongst visitors who seemed to share ideas. In one part of the museum, contemporary issues such as ethnicity and migration are presented in the form of posters (Figure 3). As we were watching from a close distance, a conversation occurred between two groups of visitors who seemed to be from the same ethnic minorities. They introduced themselves to each other. When we met at the coffee shop of the museum, the same people were having coffee altogether. What we realised in such observations was that in the museum, people felt free to express their ideas freely as they were looking at exhibits. They seemed not to worry about how others would judge their comments.

<u>Insert Figure 3 about here.</u>

All of these instances indicate that the museum nourishes sociality amongst people. If we take the example of the funny signage, we can recall Castells' (2002) analysis of the importance of sociality to urban spaces. As he rightly mentions, the mere presence of people in a place is not enough to make that place 'social' and the gathering of people a 'society'. What defines a society and brings meanings to it is the integration of people through social interaction. So is the presence of people in the museum. Many individuals may be present in the museum, but the social spirit of the museum lends itself more to the level of sociability and social interaction in the place and how people make sense of the place in relation to other people.

Extending the social context beyond the museum walls

As Simon (2010, p. ii) rightly argues, museums have the capacity to influence their visitors to the extent that these people "discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they

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see and what they make during their visit." In our study, these features form part of the informants' experiences. That is, they not only socialise with others during their visits in the museum, but also continue to socialise with others outside of the museum context. This form of extended social context, as our findings allude to, appears in both offline and online environments.

The offline context

Once visitors walk out of the museum, they find themselves back in the world which is not 'museum' and does not have the same mesmerising, educational, or experiential characteristics of the museum. However, the museum's effects cross the physical borders of the museum as they continue to stimulate sociality amongst those who visited the place. For example, Maria and David respectively explain how the museum related conversations form part of their social ties outside the museum:

> *"With my friends we enjoy talking about stuff when we're back [from the museum]...we usually go for a drink or bite afterwards and talk about what we saw in the museum. Like my friends, I'm not really an arts person, but whenever time allows, I'd try to go and see things...the fun part is really more enjoyable, you can learn stuff on the Internet or in books...[elm] but then when you go with your friends, because you have all seen the same things, you can talk about them."* (Maria)

> *"They're [museums] part of our lives...just like movies, daily news, TV programmes; they are there for everybody but for some they are more there as they go to them more often ...we [he and his wife]*

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talk about our experience, not only with each other but also with our neighbours or colleagues or friends. We encourage them to go and see what we saw...these stories become subjects of our conversations whenever we get together...it's like the crowd in a pub, [they] watch a football match but still continue to talk about the match for a while even when it is over..." (David)

These instances highlight the social dimensions of cultural consumption. These social dimensions stretch beyond the museum walls as visitors draw on and refer to their experience of exhibits and exhibitions after the visit when they participate in conversations in their everyday life. Visitors' extended conversations are fuelled by the evidence, objects and ideas that are embedded within the context of the museum (Simon, 2010). These contents have the potential to glue different members of the society and keep them in their collectivities:

"The museum is not just about exhibits; people use museums to meet and interact with others...to relax, to reflect...to have coffee together...it's not only Kelvingrove, if I go to other museums, I do talk [about them] to my friends or family...it's a shame that some people think that they [museums] are just about fossils." (Jack)

The online context

The sociality of our informants is not limited to the offline environment as they extend their cultural consumption experience generated sociality to the online context as well. Anna, for example, provides an interesting plot to reflect this:

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"If allowed I usually take some photos...when you see other people

also have cameras...you smile and they smile back...they give their

camera to you to take their picture, you may do the same...it's kind

of sharing interests...you can chat with people around you who

have the same mindset...[in museums] I don't buy stuff, you know

all the postcards that they usually sell in their shops. I take my own

photographs. I show them to my friends and family...I share them

with my friends; they do the same, on Facebook we talk about

them..."

In her socialising with others in the museum, Anna's camera is the medium. The camera signals shared interests between her and those who have one. Yet, the products of the camera continue to create other conversations outside the museum. They not only create more conversations with friends and family in the real world, they also enter the virtual world to feed Anna's social context with her friends in her online chats. She and her friends share photos online through email and Facebook. Although she often attends the museum individually (as she said in her interview), her individual visit to the museum produces a series of new resources (pictures) that give rise to 'collective forms of consumption' (Cova, 1997). Even more, through sharing interests with others, she establishes new contacts: *"Oh yes, you find new friends as well...it's about sharing."*

Similar to this, Kate and Dennis, who often share their interesting experiences with their friends and relatives on their Facebook page, indicated that the photos are more than just pictures as they usually result in more conversations about they represent. Showing some of their photos of Kelvingrove to us they said:

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"We have friends and relatives all over the place...in New Zealand,

Canada, Hong Kong...we are in touch with each other and keep

each other posted on how life goes by...we share photos of the

places we visit or leave comments for each other." (Kate)

To this, Kate's husband, Dennis, added:

"I was really pleased to see that they [Kelvingrove] had something

on about mental health...once I had a long thread of conversations

with my brother-in-law [who is a psychiatrist] in Canada."

After our interview with Dennis, we found the poster on display (at Kelvingrove) which was about mental health (Figure 4). What Dennis refers to here is not simply sharing a picture, but sharing the meaning embedded in the picture that leads to conversations about a particular social issue in contemporary society.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

These accounts, as Hamilton and Hewer (2010, p.274) argue, demonstrate that "the networked world thus has the power to aggregate communities of like-minded people, overcoming traditional geo-demographic segmentation characteristics and linking consumers who share a passion for [...] an activity." Yet, the interesting point, as our findings confirm, is that these online connections are not self-sufficient. That is, they are not totally imaginative or detached from everyday reality of life. Rather, as Wittel (2001)

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also asserts, they rely on the extension of the meanings that arise from everyday life situations and contexts. And the museum, as we have discussed here, contribute to this growing world of sociality in the online world.

Conclusions and implications

In her book '*The Participatory Museum*', Simon (2010, ii) poses an important question: "How can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life?" Her question, of course, is a rhetorical one as she defines a participatory cultural institution (i.e., museum) as "a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content." Our findings in this study provide empirical evidence for such qualities. As we have discussed so far, upon their visits to museums, people draw upon different types of catalysts (e.g., different experiences of cultural consumption) to establish new, or strengthen their existing, human relationships.

These findings generally resonate with the studies we cited in our literature review (i.e., consumption nourishes sociality). However, the type of sociality and its subsequent value in our study differ from those proposed by earlier work. Our data do not indicate that the museum-based consumption experience/activity nourishes sociality amongst consumer 'tribes' (Kozinets, 2008; Hamilton and Hewer, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2010), 'subcultures' (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001, 2002), 'communities' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006), or 'lifestyle groups' (Holt, 1997). As summarised by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Wittel (2001) and Hamilton and Hewer (2010), these social constructs have their own special characteristics such as shared values, identity, history, geographic proximity, and sense of belonging. The type of sociality we discussed above does not represent community or a

sense of belonging or even 'integration' (Wittel, 2001); rather it represents 'interaction'. Interaction, as Castells (2002) posits, is the most important value of sociability in contemporary society. As Castells further elaborates, culture in our contemporary urban spaces is a market-driven one, a culture that fosters 'individuation' based on over-commercialisation of public spaces and segmentation of society. This is what Cova (1997) refers to as 'social dissolution' and Bauman (2000) views as a feature of 'liquid modernity'. Such a culture disrupts communal communication between different members of society. And individuation is "both spatial and virtual" (Castells, p.550). That is, in both physical and online spaces, people tend to live their own lives without necessarily interacting with others around them. It is based on this analysis that Castells emphasises the importance of public places to vitality in society: "In principle, support for the vitality of public space is still a major trend" (p.551) and "the spontaneous social interactions in public places are the communicative devices of our society" (p.556).

Building upon Castells' analysis, here we introduce the term 'interactive sociality' to explain our informants' sociability inside and outside the museum as they share their meanings and feelings – through experiences of cultural consumption – with one another. Interactive sociality is based on sociability and conversation with both the familiar and strangers. This kind of sociality is not necessarily enduring; it can be very temporary. It does not require shared values or beliefs; rather, it forms based on shared interests or moments of sociability. Such interactive sociality, as we discussed, is catalysed by the museum's cultural consumption experience. This potential of museums in generating interactive sociality has remained significantly understudied in the literature on museums. So far, this literature has largely focused on the cultural consumption experience as an end in itself to which the broader social context has been subordinated. Here, we should

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emphasise that by no means we intend to undermine the significance of museums' cultural consumption experiences as they avail visitors with a plethora of core benefits (cited in our introduction). On the contrary, we believe that acknowledging other potentials of the museum will further augment their value proposition in an ever-changing society.

If we take the museum as a "non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM, 2011), then we could agree that such a definition should remain dynamic. A simple reason for this dynamism is that defining is a historical act; and since society is dynamic, its needs are also in a constant process of change. So are the nature and functions of the institutions that exist in society; and the museum is one such institution. The museum, as we discussed, provides the breeding grounds for people to socialise, and experience moments of sharing, creating and recreating a variety of sensibilities not only about objects but also about themselves and others around them. Museums are, therefore, not just about '*what to see*' and '*what to relate to*'; they are also about '*who to see*' and '*who to relate to*'.

Based on these discussions, a number of implications emerge. We begin with the implications which are directly relevant to Kelvingrove. The museum managers can leverage the societal value of the museum to better enhance the overall value proposition of the museum and complement visitors' experiences. For example, organising socially interactive events (such as charity competitions, quizzes, or auctions) in the museum can provide visitors with opportunities to socialise with one another. One example of this activity is BBC2's antiques programme 'Flog It!' hosted by Kelvingrove. Social activities

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of this type can not only help to generally promote the museum, but also instigate the spirit of 'interactive sociality' in society. The art of marketing in the non-profit sector should flourish in changing less-interested people's mind and attract them to the myriad benefits they can gain from the museum. As commonly known in marketing, consumers cannot adopt the products or services which are not on offer. Almost all informants in this study stated that they did not expect museums to present such social events and socialising opportunities, but upon offer, they would 'definitely' welcome them. In our view, the fact that people do not expect such offers from the museum is because museums have been too familiarised in the eyes of society. By realising their true potentials, museums could possible de-familiarise people with their true values. Therefore, we suggest that upon research, the museum managers consider ways of utilising this tacit potential in fostering such sociality. We suspect that this may particularly benefit those who look for escapist or socialising experiences in the museum.

Building upon this suggestion, the museum should also rethink its promotional literature (both online and offline) as its current communication strategy does not seem to indicate that is room for such sociality. Its website in particular needs to employ useful social facilitators such as blogs or forums which can foster social interaction. Kelvingrove already has an active Facebook page which is mostly used as an information sharing platform. What we propose here is not simply information sharing. Information sharing, as Wittel (2001) contends, is a key feature of 'network sociality' which is focused on the instrumental use of sociality to achieve other goals such as news and information updates. Our data also reveals that space plays an important role in hosting interactive sociality. For example, the coffee shop is not simply a filling station. Given the fact that many restaurants and coffee shops, as important social hubs that elevate sociability (Zukin, 1998;

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Montgomery, 2007), nowadays have moved toward enhancing their aesthetic ambience (e.g., use of decors, statues, and artworks), it is very surprising that Kelvingrove's main coffee shop in the central hall of the museum has not embarked on this strategy. The museum should therefore make better use of space in its physical environment and recognise the extra value such social hubs as coffee shops may offer to visitors' experience of the place.

These implications have the potential to be extended to other museums and organisations (e.g., socio-cultural venues, shopping malls, and supermarkets) in both non-profit and for-profit sectors. Our study highlights the importance of consumption spaces in generating interactive sociality in contemporary society. Such sociality, as we argued earlier, is not limited to issues of identity construction, imaginative escapism, or aesthetic appreciation. It simply acknowledges the importance of sociability and communication between members of society in urban spaces because "the key challenge for the new urban civilisation is to restore communication" (Castells, 2002, p.556). For example, such sociability can occur between staff members and customers, customers and customers, staff members and staff members. Understanding the overall value of such sociability by different stakeholders (consumers/customers/employees) can enhance the culture of communication in society at large, and not within the limited boundaries of places as just 'markets'. Organisations, therefore, should incorporate issues of interactive sociality into their training programmes for their staff (both marketing and non-marketing) simply because everybody will benefit once sociability fructifies in society.

Finally, we would like to reiterate that our study was exploratory in nature and the results emerged from limited data; therefore, we do not intend to generalise our findings. Instead,

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we humbly believe that sociality, as an understudied concept, has the potential to enhance museums' societal worth and value proposition. Therefore, given the relevance of our findings to the conditions of social life in contemporary society, further research should particularly endeavour to: 1) understand whether or not the nature and possible values of interactive sociality differ in museums and other consumption contexts (e.g., cafés, shopping malls, theme parks) 2) explore if different museums (as their purposes differ) generate different types of sociality 3) employ large scale surveys to understand what other values museums visitors in general see in this kind of sociality.

Table 1: Informants' Profile

Name	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Interview Type
Mike	50	Married	Warden	Individual
Maria	25	Single	Shop Assistant	Individual
Anna	28	Single	Saleswoman	Individual
Claire	37	Single	Clerk	Individual
Jasmine	41	Single	Shop Assistant	Individual
Jan	37	Married	Teacher	Individual
David	58	Married	Lecturer	Individual
Lily	45	Married	Shop Assistant	Individual
Betty	34	Single	Nurse	Individual
Mark	35	Married	Technician	Individual
Jack	24	Single	Student	Individual
Sharon	28	Single	Teacher	Individual
Ed	56	Married	Security Guard	Individual
Jillian	25	Single	Shop Assistant	Individual
Jan	57	Married	Nurse	Group 1
Stephen	60	Married	Policeman	Group 1
Robin	53	Married	Human Resources	Group 1
Dennis	56	Married	Social work	Group 2
Kate	53	Married	Librarian	Group 2
Abigail	23	Single	Charity work	Individual

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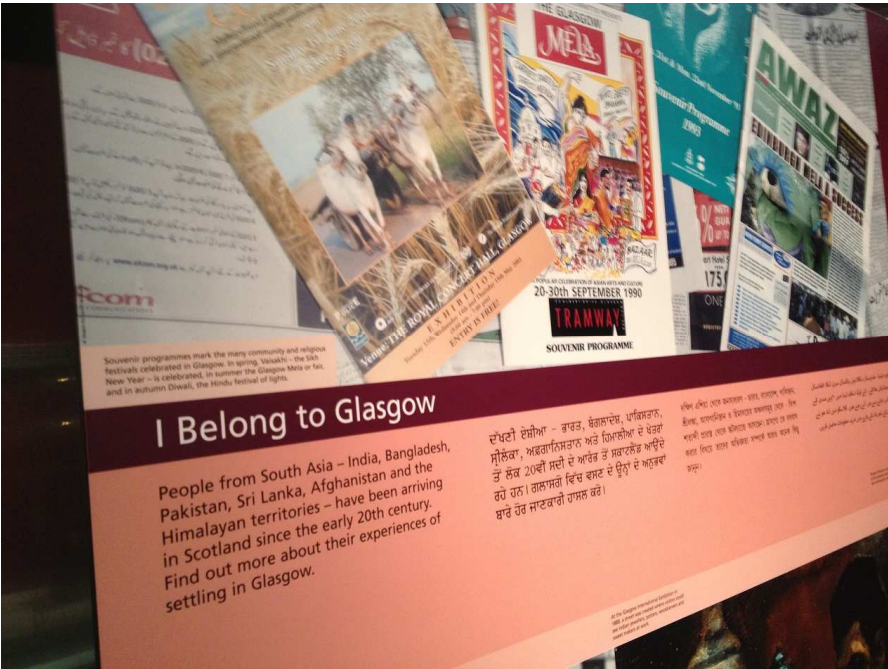
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Figure 1

Figure 2

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Figure 3

Figure 4