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*Patterns of Museum Perception in Hungarian University Students*

ABSTRACT:

The institution called museum and the various particular museums have a leading role in sharing cultural heritage. This research concentrates primarily on the meaning of and experiences with museums by young people from the perspective of the psychology of art.

The study relied on the Hungarian data of a cross-cultural survey on young people's museum visiting habits, attitudes and beliefs, certain characteristics of their personalities and in general, their perception of museums.

Survey data were described and analysed as patterns of perception of museum visits. The types of museophobe and museophile were suggested as two types of personal stances towards museums: refraining from museums and avoiding museum visits on the one hand, and perception of museums as a place for gathering emotional experiences and learning on the other hand.

Furthermore, qualitative techniques, interviews were also applied for complementing survey data. We have conducted semi-structured interviews among young Hungarians on the issue of 'What does a museum mean for young adults?' After having analysed the questionnaires and processed the interviews, conclusions can be drawn regarding the motivations of youth to visit museums. It became clear that frequent museumgoers think of museums as important places both for acquiring knowledge and for obtaining emotional experiences, while those avoiding museum visits do not consider museums a valid place for neither aspect.

*'There is nothing to see there.'*

(unknown student from Rome on why avoiding museums)

Cultural heritage, no doubt, is a highly important asset for a given community. However, the value of any heritage lies in its present day's presence: in its availability, attractiveness, intelligibility, in short, functionality to the members of the respective society. Of course, there are many ways

to share and circulate cultural heritage from family conversations through school readers to mass media. However, the institution called museum and the various particular museums have a leading role in this regard. Museums have various functions (ICOM, 2016), but it seems to us that the core functions of museums can be described as four major interrelating activities. Thus, the main functions of museums are (1) acquisition, (2) conservation, (3) research, and (4) interpretation (communicating and exhibiting). In this research, we concentrate primarily on the last one, i.e. the issue of interpretation. In other terms, we focus on the perspective of the individual. We apply the perspective of the psychology of art.

What kind of interpretations or for whom are relevant regarding museums? Interpretation of museums can be divided into two wide branches: professional and expert reflections on museums are provided by various intellectuals including art historians, sociologists and psychologists; lay conceptualizations, at the same time have been given much less attention in this regard. However, in our understanding, the issue of lay interpretation of museums and a set of related questions were exactly the focus in a previous study by Mastandrea *et al.* (2012).

Mastandrea and his colleagues conducted a survey on museum visiting habits of youth and a set of related questions. Their interesting findings, as it is usual for exploratory studies, provoked several further research questions. For example, the surprisingly small amount of museum visits the respondents reported needs to be further analysed. These and similar issues were the main reasons why the large-scale international research a part of which is elaborated in the present paper has started.

As part of an international group (leader: Stefano Mastandrea, Roma Tre University), a research was developed on young people's museum visiting habits, attitudes and beliefs, certain characteristics of their personalities and in general, their perception of museums.

The Hungarian part of the research group collected data on the Hungarian sample making use of the following the uniform questionnaire (for details, see Mastandrea *et al.*, present volume). Additionally, we have articulated a hypothesis on the lack of meaning of museums for youth. The hypothesis was based on some interesting and in a certain sense provocative, though casual observations on the central meaning of museums, such as one student saying that museums have the «smell of a crypt» while another mentioned that they are full of «frightening caretakers». In order to obtain a more detailed and empirically sound view on the related issues, we wanted to have a closer look and examine the background stories and memories concerning museum visits more systematically. So, we decided to

use qualitative techniques, namely interviews for complementing survey data.

In the first paragraphs of the present paper, the Hungarian sample of the questionnaire is presented and some relevant results are drawn attention to. Following these, the settings and analysis of the interviews are described. In the conclusions, the results are contextualised in the framework of empirical aesthetics.

### *The patterns of visiting museums in Hungarian youth*

#### *The Hungarian sample*

457 students of different universities (81% female, 19% male), most of them from faculties of education, psychology and social studies.

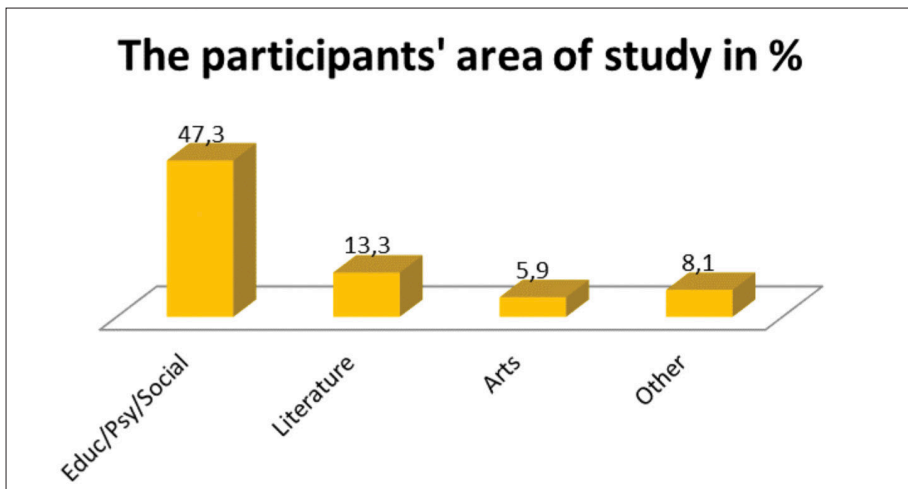


Fig. 1 – The participants' area of study in %

#### *Quantitative data analysis*

We do not undertake to present all the possible interactions of all the items on the questionnaire. For a detailed analysis of the whole database underlying the research, see Mastandrea *et al.* In the following sections, we examine the frequency of museum visits and the perceived learning and emotional effects.

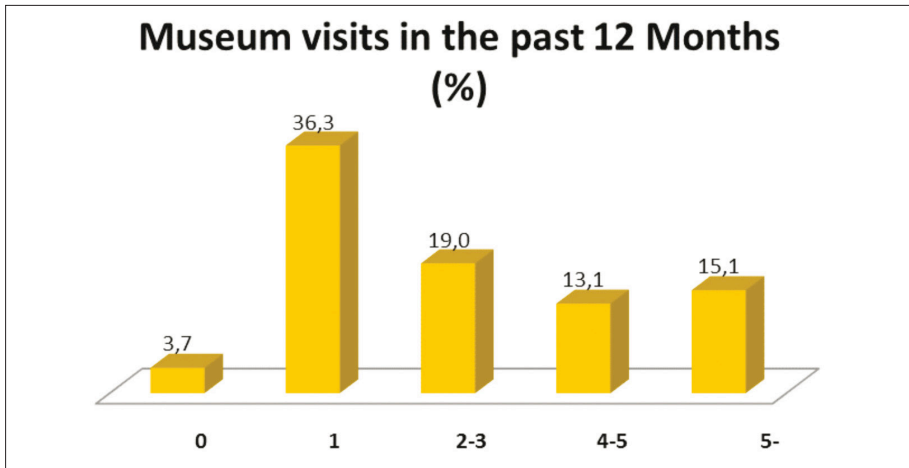


Fig. 2 – The frequency of the museum visits in the past 12 months in percentages of respondents is presented in five columns from zero visits to more than five visits

The data in the table confirm that even if it is problematic how far and in what way your memory may deceive you regarding museum visits in the past 12 months, still an interesting distribution is emerging. Most respondents (more than one third of the sample) went to a museum only once, and the least respondents belong to the group of respondents who did not go to a museum at all (less than four percent).

Similarly remarkable are the ideas about future museum visits.

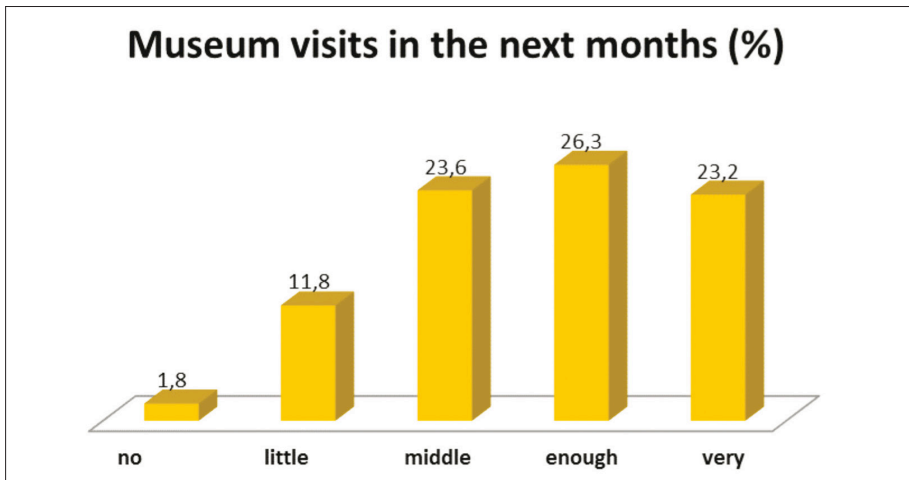


Fig. 3 – The probability of visits in the next months in percentages is presented in five columns from not at all likely to very likely

Only few people state that they will not go or are hardly likely to go to a museum (13.6 %). The majority anticipates going to a museum in the next months.

### *The perception of museum visits. Some interesting data*

#### *Correspondence with learning and emotions*

If you go to a museum, the question arises what your expectations are, or what results or rewards you get from your visit. The questionnaire tried to cover a wide range of motivations and experiences. Thus, we had the opportunity to ask about the relationship between learning and cultural learning or emotional effects, and museum visits.

In the questionnaire, we asked visitors to tell us how much he/she thinks to have learnt during the time spent in the museum. The analysis clearly shows that if you go to a museum, you learn at least a little ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Additionally, more visits correspond to more learning, probably not surprisingly.

As far as emotional factors are concerned, there are similar correlations. If you go to a museum, you experience at least some emotional impact. Additionally, more visits correspond to more emotionality. This tendency is strong for positive emotions while it is much weaker for negative emotions.

#### *Ceiling effect*

As for museum visits, we have nevertheless found that a clear ceiling effect exists. We concluded that above some 5 visits per year, neither the knowledge gain from visits, nor the strength of the emotional factors increases as a result of undertaking any more museum visits.

#### *Type of museums*

We could not find any evidence to support the hypothesis drawn up when drafting the questionnaire to the effect that learning and emotional effects also depend on the type of the museum. As far as the perceived learning or emotion is concerned, we could not find any difference between antic *vs* contemporary museums.

### *Museophobia vs museophile*

In order to get closer to the perception of museum visits, two concepts were developed based on the data related to museum visits. These concepts denote two types of personal stances towards museums. The two concepts describe two extreme stances of museum visitors: refraining from museums and avoiding museum visits on the one hand, and perception of museums as a place for gathering emotional experiences and learning on the other hand. The two prototypes look as follows.

As museophobes have been defined those respondents whose answer to question Q7\_M1 (How many times did you go to a museum, exhibition, etc. in the past 12 months?) was «not once»; 17 respondents (after data cleaning).

As museophiles have been defined those respondents whose answer to question Q7\_M1 (How many times did you go to a museum, exhibition, etc. in the past 12 months?) was «more than 5 times»; 69 respondents (after data cleaning).

#### *Museophobes*

These persons are characterised by the weakest positive attitudes and the strongest negative attitudes towards museum visits. They usually agree that they prefer other cultural activities, and that museums are not the proper place for learning, and it is more effective to learn from books.

They disagree with the statement that museums providing important knowledge museum visits making you more open-minded, and appreciation of objects in museums being a good feeling.

#### *Museophiles*

They had the second strongest positive and the second weakest negative attitudes towards museum visits. They agree that museums provide important knowledge, museum visits make you more open-minded, and that appreciation of objects in museums is a good feeling.

They disagree with preference for other cultural activities, with museums not being the proper place for learning, and that it is more effective to learn from books.

They had the highest internal motivations (among museum visitors), while they had average external motivations.

### *Meaning of museums for young adults*

The data from the questionnaire provides us with essential information regarding museum visits. Indeed, it contributed to the development of a respective typology and the examination of its psychological background. However, survey data could be complemented by some other sources of more qualitative information. It seemed to us that some more meaning-oriented, qualitative methods could be utilized as well. From previous studies (ITEMS, 2012), we have some interesting fragments on the museum visits which are less appealing. Students' remarks on school visits are like that: it was too long and «my blood sugar level went down». Or «this exhibition is for someone who comes on his or her own decision and not because it is a must».

From the possible qualitative methods, we speculated that interviews could be a useful and somewhat more meaning-sensitive method as opposed to questionnaires relying predominantly on pre-fixed alternatives. Thus, we anticipate that personal experiences of visiting museums and the meaning of museums for the young generation could be approached through interview methods as well.

For an interest in patterns of visiting museums and its perceived psychological constituents, the question of «What does a museum mean for young adults?» it seems worth proceeding to ask the question. Exploring the answers to these and related questions seems to us an important contextualization of the previously obtained and analysed data set.

### *Interviews on the meaning of museums and museum experiences*

#### *Description of interviews*

We have conducted 18 interviews among young Hungarians. In the followings, we describe certain relevant characteristics of our respondents who were predominantly in their twenties. Specifically, our interviewees were from 18 to 29 years of age. Most of them were enrolled to various universities: 14 of them were active university students, one of them already had a university degree and the remaining three of them finished secondary school. Seven of our subjects were males and eleven were females. The length of the interviews varied from 15 minutes to more than 45 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured ones, and a set of guiding questions was compiled to facilitate discussion. Following some general questions

on the respondent's age, education, etc., the questions focused on various aspects of visiting and experiencing museums. (For our actual interview guideline, see the Appendix of the present paper.) However, our interviewers were asked and trained to encourage free talk on the part of the interviewees instead of pushing them through all preconceived questions. The interviewers were students of sociology.

### *Analysis of the interviews*

Methodologically, our way of analysing the interviews was what is generally referred to as thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006; Charmaz, 2006), and it implied identifying some of the major issues our subjects talked about while discussing the topic of museums. In our analysis of the interviews, we will concentrate on four inter-related points.

1. What is the position of visiting museums for young adults within their activities? Is it a free-time occupation or a more serious one?
2. What are the main types of reasons for going to museums, and the reasons for not going there?
3. What is the role of the wider cultural and the actual social context in visiting museums?
4. Some cues of tacit and normative expectations for visiting museums and ways of grappling with these expectations.

Let's see the details of some of the major thematic nodes our interviews testified on conceptualizing the meaning of museums and museum going in our interviews!

1. Museum-going seems to belong primarily to leisure-time or free-time activities, as opposed to serious work-type activities. It is a type of activity people are occupied with mainly for the reason of having fun. These types of activities include simply socializing, doing sports, reading, going to movies, visiting theatre, attending music concerts and visiting museums.

Evaluation of visiting museums and museum experiences are presented frequently within the frame of reference of having fun. Indeed, considering within this framework, visiting museums is not a favourite activity for some of our subjects. As A's account testifies, museums are not really entertaining to him: «*doesn't entertain me as much as a conversation, or watching a film...*» (Relevant sections in the transcripts are in italics.) To the open question on what he thinks of museums he replied:



«It would be a perfectly good recreation, but the emphasis is on recreation, that it *doesn't entertain me as much as a conversation or watching a film*, what... what can be relaxing... relaxing enough after a hard day. If I study a lot and my head is full... *then such things relax me a lot more and they are a lot more relaxing than museums*» (A, engineering student, 25 years of age)

For those persons who are more positive towards visiting museums, the more intellectual attribute «*interesting*» is relevant regarding museums, rather than being «*fun*», «*relaxing*» or «*entertaining*». Thus, B replied to the questions «What do you do in your free time? Do you visit museums regularly?» in the following manner:

«er... well, in my free time, I like playing football, being with friends, or reading. Well, we do not really go to museums, but I just went there recently, with my father, to the Ginsberg exhibition, in the Ludwig Museum, well, it was good. ... well, he was a member of the Beat generation, Allan Ginsberg was an iconic figure of that generation, and the exhibition was about his life, well, it was strange, there weren't any real objects, but just such audio-visual things were pushed, and so, but it was *interesting*, just a bit too modern this way, or I don't know» (B, student of sociology, 21, female)

2. Now, let's have a look at the reasons for going and reasons for not going to museums and the perceived obstacles. What are the reasons for visiting museums not being so popular among the youth? It is a complex problem, and this complexity presents itself even within the interview discussion. As A argues, museums require (a) certain background knowledge, otherwise the visitor «*won't understand things*»; (b) they require «*interest*»; and (c) they require a certain amount money, because «*entrance tickets are rather expensive*». It seems to us, that these are the three most commonsensical factors which are referred to as perceived reasons for going to museums and as obstacles to going to museums:

«I think that it depends on what kinds of young people we speak, how young people we speak of, they can be primary school pupils, high-school pupils, all age groups have different interests, that is all age groups within the youth have *different interests*. I think that a kindergartener or a primary school pupil would rather go to a zoo, a fun park, a playground than to a museum, because he or she *won't understand* things. At the Bodies, they would only understand that, or they would be very much frightened, that would have a horrific effect on them, but I think there is an age limit... that wasn't a really

good example.

...

Well, *interest* in the first place, those who are not interested in arts or such things, they will not go by any means, those who would go, but aren't such heavy fans, they probably won't go *because of the prices*, because as I've experienced in some museums *entrance tickets are rather expensive*, and for example for this hospital in the rock, the ticket for students costs some 2 thousand forints or so, and I think that for such money, a student would rather go to the cinema or out, that is» (A, engineering student, 25 years of age, male)

Some people do not really consider visiting museums a reasonable free-time activity, especially since they are boring-characteristics of experience which is in opposition to fun and entertainment:

«K: and what do you do in your free time?

V: well, I'm with my friends if I can, that's about all, in fact, I'm always with them if I have the time. ... er, we go out, we go to a pub, or we just talk, but in fact we go out, or we go to the cinema, to play billiard and so on, and the like.

K: I see, and you mentioned cinema, what other cultural events do you take part in?

V: we don't take part in anything else, er, I think that's all the cultural thing that we do.

K: and what about museums?

V: well, it's been quite a long time that I went to a museum, I don't go too often.

...

K: and can I ask you, which museum did you visit for example last time?

V: my girlfriend insisted on going, it was about a year ago, or maybe more, it was the Cezanne exhibition, oh yes, yes, it was *very good* (*very ironic*)

...

K: and do you have any negative experiences with museums or exhibitions?

V: well, looking back, I can't remember the name of it, what exhibition or museum or whatever it was, what I know is that it was full of sculptures, but I know that it was *very boring*.

K: and you mentioned that you went with your girlfriend, do you often go with her together to such events?

V: no, *that was the first and I think the last occasion as well* that we went» (C, sport student, 19, male)

However, for some what is intellectually attractive, namely interesting, could be fun and entertaining at the same time. Learning and entertainment are not two mutually exclusive characteristics of museums. In the next transcript, D directly formulates that a function of museums is to entertain, and being interesting is a kind of entertainment:

«K: Do museum visits offer any benefit?

V: They are rather regarded as entertainment, self-learning. You learn a bit from what you see there, but their function is rather entertainment.

K: Do you think that museums are entertaining?

V: They can be interesting. They are a kind of entertainment, too or what» (D, waiter, prospective engineering student, 21, male)

3. The cultural and social context of visiting museums – the role of cultural milieu, school, family and friends – were reflected in the interview conversations as well. Visiting museums with school on an involuntary basis has a lasting and predominantly negative effect on the intention to go to museums according to our Hungarian subjects. Even if someone became fond of museums, it is thanks to the family rather than the school.

«K: And do you prefer to go to the museum with your family, is it more interesting that way, or with school?

V: Yes, absolutely, because my family's fields of interest better match mine, and well, we can better settle things, and we don't go to a place which isn't interesting for us, and the like, while such school trips can be very tiring. They are very artificial things...» (E, biology student, 22, female)

The school is perceived as part of a wider cultural milieu, where going to museums was considered a «*rather highbrow*» activity, which is not in favour of museums occasionally, either:

«K: If you look back at your time at primary school, what comes to your mind, did you go to museums?

V: No, because at Nyíregyháza, where I'm from, it was considered *rather highbrow to go to museums*. It was not fashionable. But I always wanted to go, I was always interested in arts, I always wanted to visit museums, but it was not at all part of our culture, I say, my first visit to a museum was about 4 years ago, my first such experience, but I said that maybe it is the most lasting because it was the first! I was longing for it very much» (F, 24, psychology and sociology student, female)

There is no optimal company for every museum types, apparently. Family and close relationships are apparently better companies for more contemplating museum visits than other possible persons such as a «*university class*», but for more interactive exhibitions, peers are better:

- «K: Who did you go to the Caravaggio exhibition with?  
V: With my mom (laughing), we planned to go *with my class* from the university, but well, I don't know, it would have been disturbing to watch an exhibition with some 20-30 people.  
K: Why would it have been disturbing?  
V: *I don't like it*, because in such way I can't... everybody wants to go, but if I still want to watch, everybody wants to go, they are talking and I don't know what, I wouldn't have been able to enter into the spirit that way, and so I could watch it as long as I wanted.  
K: Who do you think it's worth going with?  
V: Well, by no means with many people.  
K: Let's say with peers, or was it better with your mom?  
V: I don't know, to visit such *interactive museums is better with peers*, because you can have fun then, but to visit such exhibitions where you want to contemplate, it's better to go with older people»  
(G, art history student, 21, female)

4. It seems that visiting museums is a positively valued activity for some young Hungarians. Nevertheless, some Hungarian youth found museums utterly boring, and one of them, while talking about his last visit to a museum, claimed that «*that was the first and I think the last occasion as well*» – see C's interview excerpt above. However, some other interview subjects manifested more or less directly an unformulated expectation of being a regular museumgoer, implicating its positive evaluation. As our first example shows, the interviewee «*dare not even confess*» how rarely she visits museums – thus effectively talking about the lack of frequent museum visits as «*a sin*» since it is something which requires a person «*to confess*».

- «K: and how often do you go to such cultural events?  
V: well, to museums so rarely that I *dare not even confess* it, we mostly go when we travel abroad, and we come across some local attractions, yes, but here, in Budapest, not really often.  
Perhaps to the theatre, because my father is a culture fan as I said, and perhaps with him, a bit more often, and to the cinema we don't go, because that's expensive, and the Torrent and the like. Er, I don't know other things, perhaps such festivals, but I don't go to such places like Volt or the like, perhaps to beer festivals with my friends and team members» (B, student of sociology, 21, female)

Clear signs of the preferred version of reality, of the perceived normative expectation of regularly visiting museums appear in the following example as well. Here, the modal expression «*should*», the formulaic confession of wrongdoing «*very much sorry*» and the promise of correction «*but now I would like to make up for it*» all indicate this interpretation of the speaker.

«K: can I ask you what your first experience is in connection with museums?»

V: well, my first experience was when we were taken to the Museum of Transport at primary school, that's what I remember, I enjoyed it, then came the time when I should have gone to museums by myself, but I missed that in my life, for which I'm very sorry now, but I'd like to make up for it now» (H, sociology student, 20, female)

### *Conclusions*

After having analysed the information from the questionnaires and processed the interviews, conclusions can be drawn regarding the motivations of youth to visit museums. It became clear that frequent museumgoers think of museums as important places both for acquiring knowledge and for obtaining emotional experiences, while those avoiding museum visits do not consider museums a valid place for neither aspect.

Our data also make it clear that the ceiling effect linked to the frequency of museum visits manifests itself at the level of about 5 visits per year, i.e. if someone visits a museum at least once every season, he/she clearly has a good chance of gaining cognitive and emotional benefits from such visits.

The conclusion can be drawn chiefly in the theoretical context of psychology that works with empirical tools for measuring arts and their appreciation. Thus our results could be interpreted along some key concepts of empirical aesthetics. Here, in this context, the psychological examinations of the appreciation of arts are concerned with one wide topic.

The question of expertness (or literacy in the field of arts) has been in the focus of psychological studies of arts for decades (see for example Child, 1969, Silvia 2013). The fundamental question is where the difference lies in the esthetical judgements of people with a good or a lesser understanding of arts: is there a continuous dimension ranging from lays to experts, or is it conceivable that there is a dividing point the exceeding of which means that one can be considered an expert?

Since we noted a non-linear correlation between perception of museums and number of visits, the question arises whether there is a dimension from avoiding art to expertness.

As we identified a ceiling effect, it seems to be reasonable to interpret expertness as a binary code, i.e. after having reached a frequency or level of museum visits, there is no change in the attitudes, while the attitudes under such frequency or level are diverging. In consuming a certain quantity, one functions as an expert, while others function as lay. This trend is also shown by the examination of the two concepts «museophil» and «museophobe».

At the same time, expertness has two readings: understanding (knowledge and competences) on the one hand and a social role with its normatively prescribed role expectations on the other hand. This less exposed aspect of expertness is pointed out by our interviews. It seems to us that the concept of expertness which is traditionally interpreted as a cognitive resource might have a social psychological aspect as well.

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## APPENDIX

### OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEWS

Our research concerns the experiences of university students regarding museums. This interview is conducted for this research. We want to get to know experiences and opinions.

The interview is voluntary and anonym.

The conversation is recorded by dictaphone, if you don't mind. The sound recording won't be played publicly, and will be used solely for the purpose of preparing a transcript.

You can interrupt the interview any time and you can refuse to answer any questions.

Please, tell us a few words about yourself!

- When have you started your studies?
- Where do you study at present, and what field of study do you pursue?

How do you spend your free time? (areas of interest, hobbies)

Do you visit museums or exhibitions?

If yes:

- Museums and exhibitions with what subject do you visit?
- (e.g. modern and contemporary; antic arts; science and technology; archeologic sites; historical; folk arts; architecture, design, fashion; home museums [homes of painters, writers])
- How often do you go?
- Who do you go with?
- When did you visit a museum last time?
- Why do you visit exhibitions or museums? To relax, learn, etc.?

Is visiting a museum or an exhibition an everyday or rather an exceptional event for you?

- Are museums or exhibitions comfortable, casual or rather formal places in your opinion?

Would you change anything as regards the atmosphere of museums?



What is the benefit of visiting museums (if any)?  
Do you remember your first experience in a museum?  
Is there an exhibition that you expressly recall with pleasure?  
Do you have any expressly bad experiences at an exhibition?  
Who do you think visits museums most frequently? Are exhibitions designed to suite rather children or young adults?

Who is it best to go with (peers, family, school, etc.)?  
Have you ever been there with school? What was it like?  
Where do you hear of exhibitions?  
If you go often:

- Do you think it is easy to get information on exhibitions?

I mean do you hear of exhibitions without actively searching, e.g. on the website of museums?

Is there anything you expressly like or dislike with museums or exhibitions?

What would your dream exhibition/museum look like? Is there such a place/can you visit it? If no, please explain the reason.

Could museums or exhibitions change in a way that would make you like visiting them more?

What could change them in such a way? (if the respondent does not mention by himself/herself, ask about the price)

Do you think your peers visit museums or not? Why?

If he/she does not go:

Would you visit museums more often, if your friends went there?

