CultureCase

A museum's identity shapes its audiences' behaviour

This research was conducted by **Shinwon Noh** and **Pamela S. Tolbert** at **Pace University** and **Cornell University, USA**

Summary

This paper examined the effects of a museum’s identity on audience behaviour. The study divided audiences into critics, connoisseurs and casual consumers. It charted the way that different US museums classified themselves, the exhibitions they put on, their reviews and attendance figures. The research discovered that art critics are less likely to review exhibitions at ‘complex-identity art museums’, that casual consumers prefer museums with complex identities ‘because they are better able to satisfy diverse interests and tastes’, and that reviews can affect attendance figures but that ‘this effect differs for museums with a focused identity and those with a complex identity’.

The research divided museums into ‘focused’ and ‘complex’ identity art museums

In general, ‘most typologies of museums treat art museums as constituting a coherent category, distinguished from natural history, science and technology, history, children’s and other museum types’ and the paper defined art-only museums as ‘focused’ and those which bridge categories, such as art and science museums, as ‘complex’.

It divided audiences into ‘elite professional critics, art connoisseurs, and casual consumers’

Professional art critics review museum exhibitions for high status art publications and act as formal ‘market mediators’. Art connoisseurs tend to

self-identify as being relatively knowledgeable and see museum-going as part of their identity. Casual consumers do not consider themselves as having specialised knowledge and view museum-going as one of many possible ways to spend their leisure time.

The study tracked activity at 324 art museums between 1999 and 2010, using data from three main sources

The Official Museum Directory provided data on the classification of the museums and their activity. The National Center for Charitable Statistics provided financial data for each museum. Two major art periodicals, ARTnews and Artforum, provided expert reviews of the exhibitions.

Keywords

USA **audience** **museum** **reviews**

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