An empirical experiment: „Culture to be“ - Ideas of a generation for itself

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The methodological background of the study

It can often be observed that just a single methodological perspective is employed when collecting social and cultural data in the practice of empirical research, including research on culture and the arts. The exceptions to this rule very rarely cross the boundary between quantitative and qualitative methods.¹ A special case concerning theory construction involves studies using “grounded theory,” which was developed in Chicago in the early 1960s and which joins deductive and inductive methods in a bidirectional process.² The goal was to develop a realistic theory in order to make it applicable in practice, thereby reducing the gap between theory and practice. Even if “grounded theory” was developed primarily in the context of qualitative research, it is not a single method, but a series of methods interlocked with one another. Their focus is not on subjective observation or testing the validity of the theory, but rather on continuous, appropriate research on the topic in question by developing, testing and refining theories. This approach was the model for the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept. It attempted to identify appropriate concepts and basic insights for designing opportunities in “classic” cultural institutions targeted toward young people in their free time, using a complementary bidirectional process combining inductive and deductive thinking and employing different methods.

On the object of study: Recreational opportunities for young people in “classic” cultural institutions

When the Centre for Cultural Research (ZfKf, CCR) presented the Youth Culture Barometer,³ the first comprehensive, representative study on the relationship between young people and culture, in 2004, the Thüringer Allgemeine newspaper and others ran
headlines reading “Opera is uncool,” responding to the remarkable lack of interest in classical concerts and opera productions displayed by the 14- to 24-year-olds surveyed. For example, a mere 4% mentioned in the Youth Culture Barometer that they were interested in opera. While in the past, individual classic event organizers drew comfort from the prospect that young people would (re)discover an interest in classical culture in old age, current temporal comparisons prepared by the Centre for Cultural Research provide evidence for the fact that by now, it is not only the young generation that has been lost. The Culture Barometer 50+, another Germany-wide survey prepared by the Centre for Cultural Research, confirms that this trend has now arrived in the groups aged 50 and older as well. The current musical interests of the young generation 50+ are oriented toward 1970s rock and pop music and no longer primarily toward classical music. This fact permits us to assume that a person’s young years are particularly formative.

In addition, a survey of visitors of classic cultural institutions in the context of the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept provides grounds for the assumption that binding young people and young adults to the arts and culture is most successful as a recreational activity: in the survey, the young visitors were asked with whom they were visiting the cultural institution or attending the cultural event that day. In the following overview, those young visitors who visit the cultural institution on their own or with friends their age are called “self-motivated.” They are contrasted with the group of visitors “motivated by others” which consists of young people who visited the cultural institution with their schools, their families or a club. Self-motivated young visitors agree with the statement “I enjoy being in this cultural institution” significantly more often than do visitors who are motivated by others. While only about half of the young visitors coming with their schools enjoy being in the cultural institution, it is above all the self-motivated visitors and those young visitors attending with family members – in other words, in their free time – who like spending time at the cultural institution. This emphasizes both the high significance of the family in terms of conveying cultural understanding and the correctness of the approach of gaining basic insights about suitable recreational cultural opportunities for young people.
Figure 1: “Sense of well-being” of young Düsseldorf residents in classic cultural institutions, differentiated according to who is accompanying them (n=946)

On the study design

The empirical-dialogical research approach devised for the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept by the CCR breaks away from the classic pattern of empirical knowledge production which is then followed by concept development. Instead, the order was reversed – first concept development, then analysis – and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was selected in place of an empirical methodology.

Ten cultural institutions in Düsseldorf and 34 young people between 16 and 21 years of age, who formed the youth team, were partners in realizing the study. The following institutions were involved: Aquazoo Löbbecke Museum, Deutsche Oper am Rhein, Heinrich-Heine-Institut, museum kunst palast, Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, Junges Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorfer Stadtbüchereien, Stiftung Schloss und Park Benrath, tanzhaus nrw, Theaterrmuseum Düsseldorf and Tonhalle Düsseldorf.

The CCR was responsible for the design, implementation, moderation and evaluation of the study and its building blocks. The city of Düsseldorf took over fieldwork as well as selecting and working with the young people.
Building block 1 for theory construction: Program analysis and expert interviews

First, the past and present recreational opportunities for young target groups were analyzed in qualitative interviews with the educational and marketing divisions of the cultural institutions involved. The CCR systematically analyzed the information gained from the expert interviews and the program analysis for the youth team as an aid for orientation when preparing their own youth concepts.

Building block 2 for theory construction: Visitor survey and observation

In order to properly assess the current situation of youth participation in the cultural institutions in question, we carried out a visitor survey of their visitors aged 16 to 21. The survey included 946 young visitors. In parallel, the youth team carried out an observation including a visitor count which determined the proportion of young visitors aged 16 to 21 in relation to the total number of visitors in the participating institutions on selected days. It became clear that some cultural institutions in Düsseldorf were already fairly successful in reaching young people, while other institutions had very substantial difficulties doing so. Correlations with the size of the institution and the artistic genres were identified. Smaller cultural institutions had significantly more difficulties than larger ones in reaching out to young people. Institutions focusing on contemporary dance and the visual arts were significantly more successful than the classic music and theater institutions. The results of the visitor survey were also made available to the young people for further concept development.

Building block 3 for theory construction: The experiment: A youth team develops...

At the center of the experiment were 34 young people aged 16 to 21 who formed the youth team of the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept. Active participation in the youth team was secured in contractual form. In the further course of the project, youth team participants formed groups, each of which were to perform conceptual work for one of the participating cultural institutions. The young people had been selected in advance in schools, youth clubs and other places by the project’s youth coordinator.

The tasks of the groups encompassed taking part in the cultural opportunities that “their” cultural institution offered for young people, reading their advertising and informational materials, and finding new creative solutions on that basis for which cultural opportunities they personally wanted to see realized in the institutions in question and in which form
they, as the young target group, would like to be approached by educational programs and marketing. It was hoped that they would develop concepts that the cultural institutions in question could implement on their own as well as proposals to be realized in cooperation with several cultural institutions.

Building block 4 for theory construction: Content analysis

As sketched above, a total of 11 groups within the youth team were occupied with developing concepts for educational and marketing models. This work resulted in 50 different concepts developed by young people for young people, for example the concepts “Music meets art,” an art competition embedded in a music concert, “Nick of time,” a last-minute ticket sales model, and “Button 446,” a guerilla marketing concept, which will be presented briefly here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept examples for education</th>
<th>Concept examples for marketing</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Youth Culture Concept “ART FANS”</strong>&lt;br&gt;Young Friends Club of the museum kunst palais (mkp)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;- Monthly meetings of young people: older youths, university students, vocational trainees as well as young employees&lt;br&gt;- All participants are involved in preparing the contents of the meetings&lt;br&gt;- Annual membership fee of 15 € incl. free admission to the museum, openings and museum events&lt;br&gt;Activities:&lt;br&gt;- Visits to other museums, exhibitions, art fairs, galleries and art academies&lt;br&gt;- Conversations/discussions about museum/art&lt;br&gt;- Film screenings during the meetings (films about art/artists)&lt;br&gt;- Look behind the scenes of mkp</td>
<td><strong>Nick of time ticket</strong>&lt;br&gt;A youth culture concept spanning institutions&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;- Sale of remaining tickets for cultural events at the last minute&lt;br&gt;- Registration via an online Düsseldorf culture portal&lt;br&gt;- Development of an Internet “culture profile”&lt;br&gt;Information by text message about last-minute ticket availability (at deep discounts) for events one lives&lt;br&gt;- “Nick of time” button as compensation if event is sold out after all. Participants receive a free ticket for 5 “nick of time” buttons&lt;br&gt;- Advantages: at short notice, spontaneous, cheap</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>“MUSIC MEETS ART”</strong>&lt;br&gt;A youth culture concept in the Tonhalle Düsseldorf&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;- Competition within the contest of a youth concert; young participants creatively translate the music of the concert into images&lt;br&gt;- Concert music can be downloaded from the Internet prior to the concert&lt;br&gt;- To give the young artists free rein, neither a special theme nor particular media are specified&lt;br&gt;Activities:&lt;br&gt;- Selection of the best images by a professional jury&lt;br&gt;- Presentation of the prizewinning artworks on a screen during a live concert&lt;br&gt;- Young audience votes on favorite works&lt;br&gt;- After-show party with the musicians</td>
<td><strong>“Button 446” (guerilla marketing)</strong>&lt;br&gt;Youth culture concept for the Junges Schauspielhaus&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;- Buttons in different colors with the number 446 are handed out to theatergoers of the Junges Schauspielhaus&lt;br&gt;- The color of the buttons is related to the frequency of attendance&lt;br&gt;Desired effect:&lt;br&gt;- Competition to attain particular colors increases the proportion of frequent attenders&lt;br&gt;- Participants are easily recognized as theatergoers&lt;br&gt;- Feeling of belonging to a group is strengthened&lt;br&gt;- Speculation about the meaning of 446 (house number of the theater; arouses curiosity)</td>
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Figure 2: Four of the 50 youth culture concepts developed by the Düsseldorf Youth Team

As we had hypothesized, it turned out during the course of the conceptual work that individual building blocks were used time and again, despite the diversity of the cultural institutions for which the individual groups had developed their concepts. This recurrence
of individual modules, which will be mentioned briefly in the following, reflects fundamental interests, needs and expectations that young people have of culture in general:

- Participation of young people in concept development and implementation of cultural opportunities
- Networking of cultural institutions with youth scenes and young multipliers
- Taking up topics from young people’s life-worlds
- Creating fora for young people’s artistic achievements
- More support of young artists and contemporary genres
- Development of cultural institutions to become meeting places whose atmosphere is attractive to young people
- Promoting exchange among young people about cultural opportunities
- Adapting and expanding communications to young people
- Including celebrities in art presentations
- Emphasizing artists’ cult status
- Selecting venues for events outside of cultural institutions as well
- Establishing opportunities for buying tickets at short notice
- Establishing low-cost dining options in cultural institutions
- Taking up art from young migrants’ typical countries of origin
- Offering open cultural educational opportunities without requiring a commitment
- Integrating new media and everyday technologies in art presentation
- More crossing over of classical and popular artistic genres
- Staging events (parties) in cultural institutions
- Emphasizing the fun and entertainment value of culture in public relations
- Using youth media, establishing chatrooms and rankings of cultural opportunities

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<th>Building block 5 for theory construction and testing: A representative youth survey</th>
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The representative survey of non-users covered 1,019 young Düsseldorf residents aged 16 to 21, with the following goals:

a) to test the acceptance of the building blocks used repeatedly in the concepts prepared by the youth team and presented above and
b) to assess their relevance for various young target groups.
In the following, I will present some examples of the results of the non-user survey concerning the modules just mentioned whose relevance was indeed confirmed, with just a few qualifications relating to individual subgroups of young people.

**Module “Young life-worlds”**

One module that was elaborated very frequently in the Düsseldorf youth culture concepts was creating links to young people's life-worlds. The importance of this module was also confirmed in the survey of non-users. Taking up familiar topics from everyday and family life, in other words, themes that youths know about and that are easy to comprehend, enables young people, especially those from non-academic backgrounds, to overcome reservations they have about the cultural scene alien to them. A higher presence of art from other cultural spheres also provides the opportunity to build bridges and to address the target group of young people with immigrant backgrounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>(School) education</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>DÜSSEL DORF</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect of youth culture and youth scene</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics from everyday and family life</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background information on artists</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current political topics</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other cultures/People who migrated to Germany</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movers and shakers/People responsible behind the scenes</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics relating to school/vocational training</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3: Relevance of topics concerning cultural opportunities among the 16- to 21-year-old Düsseldorf residents, differentiated according to socio-demographic characteristics (n = 1,019; multiple answers possible)**

Promoting young artists has also proven to be a suitable concept for improving outreach to a young target audience. When the artist and the audience are the same age, the potential for identification is increased, and this factor supports connections to young people's life-worlds.
The desire for more background information about artists has become part of some youth concepts. The artist as a person and his/her biographical characteristics are of great interest to young people as a target group. For instance, in the survey of young people, as many as 28% of the non-users of cultural opportunities mentioned that they were interested specifically in the artists as individuals. In this vein, 51% of Düsseldorf youths consider the participation of celebrities to be a (very) useful means of making classical cultural opportunities more interesting. Such a measure helps young population groups with non-academic backgrounds (62%) in particular.

Modules “opinions,” “Internet” and “means of outreach”

It became clear in the youth culture concepts that young people use very specific and unusual public relations distribution channels, and their acceptance of these unusual distribution channels was confirmed in the survey of young people. Central aspects of these varying strategies include word-of-mouth recommendation integrated in opinion-forming measures.

All young people agree that peers and Internet forums are essential multipliers. For example, rankings on a fictitious youth culture Internet site where young people can rate Düsseldorfer cultural offers online are considered the second-most important element that an Internet site for young people about Düsseldorf culture should include.

The importance of young people’s word-of-mouth recommendation by unusual means is also expressed in the outstanding importance of guerilla marketing concepts developed by
the youth teams, for example the youth concept “Button 446” for the *Junges Schauspielhaus*. A button with the number 446 is supposed to attract attention, make people curious and have them guess what it might mean, thereby becoming a topic of discussion among young people.

**Conclusions regarding the study and an empirical-dialogical experiment**

The empirical-dialogical research approach as applied in the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept has proved successful in light of the results achieved. The method is labor-intensive, but it pays off for complex research topics for which practical experience is lacking.

The issue of audience retention of young adults in particular confronts us with a balancing act between young people’s desire to distance themselves and create their own, new worlds, and the goal of including this group in cultural opportunities featuring the existing cultural heritage and contemporary, mature artists. For this reason, from the outset, the research approach of the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept opened up spaces of their own for young people for cooperating with classic cultural institutions. In addition to generating many new and innovative ideas for cultural opportunities for young people, the collaboration showed that the established notions of the responsible “grown-ups” in the cultural institutions about who young people are and especially about how to reach and mobilize them are at times only partly accurate. The concepts elaborated by the youth team, too, suggest that the participatory approach and the creation of young people’s own spaces within the study design was correct. After all, the desire to participate actively is a common thread running through all the concepts that the young groups elaborated in the context of the Düsseldorf Youth Culture Concept.

To conclude, I would like to quote a member of the youth team commenting on his first visit of a performance in the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus, to demonstrate how different young people’s perspectives and perceptions of the classic cultural scene are:

“And when I was watching the performance, I suddenly realized that it did have something to offer that could be interesting for young people. I might not have had that idea at first. Rather: “Oops, maybe I don’t really belong here,” because the rest of the audience was old people, and the place was kind of like that, too, and during the performance, this first impression was pretty much turned on its head.”

*Member of the youth team of the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus*
Olson, Wendy K.: Triangulation in social research: Qualitative and quantitative methods can really be mixed. In: Developments in Sociology. 20. 2004. pp. 103-121


Thüringer Allgemeine Zeitung, November 18, 2004


http://www.duesseldorf.de/kultur/kulturamt/pdf/d_jugendkult.pdf