Re-evaluating the Strategy of Visitors to Art Museums: A New Approach to the Who, Why and When Questions

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Abstract-- While the art world is more dynamic than ever, art museums move through various states of success in the consumer market as well as in market for sponsorship, philanthropy, and government support. International growth of those three sources of revenue has come to an end but the increase in the number of organizations competing for such support has not stopped. It is said in marketing terms that the life cycle of the sector has not only reached maturity, but is totally saturated, with supply exceeding demand by a large margin. It is to say that art museums more than ever have to focus on the development of their visitors, particularly in the era of budget cut and it becomes more difficult to inquire financial supports. If art museums aim to maintain or even to increase their current attendance rate, they will need to measurably understand and serve their visitors. That is to say, identifying who go to art museums, what motivate them and what meanings they acquire from such experience will help us to gain critical insights of how the public derives value and benefits from visiting art museums.

Keywords-- Art museums; categorization; experience; motivations; self-aspect; self-identity; visitors

I. INTRODUCTION

Although technically art museums have assessed who their visitors are and their motivations, more than ever art museums feel economically, socially and politically compelled to do so¹. By assessing the motivation of museum visitors and the meaning of their experience, it would be possible to understand the role that art museums play in society as well as reasons why others chose not to visit art museums. This would also allow us to better understand individual perception of art museums and to thus identify the very value of art museums – how art museums make a difference within society, and how they support the public’s understandings of the world as well as themselves. These are all important issues that are vital for the museum professionals to comprehend the museum visitor experience and indeed require a deeper, more synthetic explanation. Motivation has been proven to be a critical variable to understand visitor’s online experience and also helpful to segment the audience².

II. THE CHANGE OF ART MUSEUMS AND EFFECTS ON VISITOR EXPERIENCES

To clearly define their visitors and strive to make meaningful connections with them requires constant research. Driven in part by policy concerns to expand their visitors, the image of art museums has been saturated by a commercialized interest in consumption and entertainment. As McClellan put it: Perhaps no development in the art museum of the last half-century has been more dramatic or controversial than the increase in commercialism, by which I mean the expansion of museum shops, the rise of the blockbuster exhibition and corporate sponsorship, and the influx of marketing and fund-raising personnel³.

Nowadays art museums have increasingly embraced a ‘museum experience’, seeking to elicit feelings, sensations, and imagination. Visitors to art museums also increasingly expect to be actively involved in the exhibitions, to learn as well as to be entertained, rather than simply gazing at displays. This means that museums can no longer exist solely as warehouse for artifacts and places of scholarly researches. In response to this, considerable expansion of museums in the later decades of the 20th century have been pursuing for more inclusive forms of experience. Several ideas were developed at this time, and among these the most important concept was the championing of the ‘spectacular’. Having progressively absorbed a market logic paired with public concerns, the spectacle-museum relies on new relationships with visitors, which are more sensational, more intimate and more accessible. As such, the museum aims to position itself as a part of a cultural melting pot that could have wider appeal. Such focus on visitors becomes mandatory that museums are expected to draw in visitors from a wider social background. They are now expected to integrate entertainment in their functions if they want to be viable in the leisure field⁴. Consequently, art museums have undertaken many changes-shops, blockbuster shows, new architectures, new way to display artifacts- that might affect the way visitors conceive them.

As the boundaries which once separated art museums from other recreational and educational organizations are blurred, art museums have started to acknowledge that much contemporary visiting to an art museum takes place during

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time which may be described as leisure time. Such visitation therefore draws upon discretionary income and often occurs with an expectation of a pleasant experience. The questions are, with these changes taken placed at art museums, what perception do visitors now have toward art museums, what is visitors’ motivation for attending art museums, and what inspires visitors to continuously engage in a long-term relationship with art museums today?

III. APPROACHES TO MUSEUM VISITOR’S MOTIVATION

For decades researchers have worked at understanding the museum visitor experience, which is often referred by the term “audience development”5. However, the quality of information from these researches often varies from one report to another, as does the statistical validity. Numerous studies have also examined elements such as demographics, psychographics, and the attendance behaviours of visitors attending permanent exhibitions. Little research is available on visitors who specifically attend special events at art museums. In addition, research about these visitors is often conducted as part of an institution’s general research agenda, thus such visitors are not recognized as a distinct category of visitor. It is thus difficult to imagine how art museums can truly claim to serve the public if they make little attempt to understand their visitors.

There are two major problems that limit the validity and reliability of these earlier researches. First, virtually all of museum visitor research has been conducted inside the museum. Why is this a problem? Indeed, it is logical to study visitors while they are visiting the museum to understand their motivations and behaviours, however, only a fraction of the museum experience actually occurs inside the museum6. The motivation of going to the museum actually occurs outside the museum, and this has significant impacts on what would happen afterwards. Some research has revealed that what visitors bring with them to the museum experience in the way of prior experience, knowledge and interest profoundly influences what they actually do and think about once they are physically inside the museum2. Mostly all museum visitors arrive as part of a social group, which dramatically influences the course and content of the visit experience8. Same research in this area also has shown that much of the social interaction occurring within a museum is actually directly related to the visitors behaviours started before they entered the museum9. In other words, it is not possible to fully understand a visitor’s behaviour inside the museum and their motivation unless we know this person’s life before he or she entered the museum.

The meanings people acquire with their museum experience also extend beyond the sequential and latitudinal boundaries of the museum. It is only relatively recent to discover how long it takes for memories to form in the brain10. It can take days, sometimes even weeks for a memory to form, and during that time other intervening experiences and events can influence those memories. Ironically, what happens after a person leaves the museum may be very critical to the nature and durability of that person’s memories of what actually happened within the museums. This quality of the museum experience raises questions about much of the learning research previously done in museums, since nearly all museum research has involved data collected within minutes after the experience, as the time frame appears to be too short for most people to thoroughly and accurately reflect on the true nature of their experiences and the mental processing that occurred after a visit. Consequently, visitors are literally incapable of fully describing what they actually acquired inside the museum. In order to more accurately understand visitors’ experience in the museums, it is crucial to include aspects of visitors’ perception of museums before the visit, and their experiences afterward.

The second problem is that most researchers tend to focus on permanent qualities of either the art museum, such as its content or style of exhibits, or the visitors, such as demographic characteristics including age, ethnicity, visit frequency, even social arrangement. To the majority of museum community, the first and most obvious answer of why the public visits museums is the content. For example, more than 90% of the American say that they find science and technology interesting but nowhere near that number of people do visit science and technology museums on a regular basis, even occasionally11. It is said that having an interest in the content of the museum is indeed significant to determine who will visit, but interest in this subject does not necessarily explain why someone will visit museums and neither predict when would the visit to made. Market researchers demonstrate that, using the United States as an example, most museum-goers are aware of the content of the museum they visit but rarely view the content as the most important factor affecting their decision to visit12. Indeed, the exhibitions of artifacts inside museums represent a major focus of a visitor’s time and attention, but it is not the only reason that visitors attend museums. The content the visitor chooses to focus on may not bear much resemblance to the content the museum professionals who designed the exhibitions have expected they would attend to. This leads to the issue of how much of a visitor’s long-term memories of a museum experience are actually determined by the quality of the design of a exhibition. In some cases, visitors who saw more high quality exhibitions (defined as those exhibits that clearly and compellingly communicated their intended content) learned more. For others, however, learning experiences seemed to be irrelevant of the quality of exhibitions. In short, contrary to the common belief, visitors’ experience of museum is not exclusively influenced by the nature of the museum and its exhibitions13.

The majority of studies of museum visitors conducted over the past decades have utilized traditional demographic categories like age, education, gender and ethnicity, as well as
between visitors’ entering motivations and their exiting motivations. Several investigators have begun to document the connections between visitors from various socio-demographic backgrounds and the museums, resulting in a range of descriptive categorizations. In addition to social class, the other demographic variable that has been intensively studied is ethnicity. In recent years, considerable attention has been focused upon the issue of whether visitors to the museums are under-utilized by a good variety of ethnicity. In the United States, the attention has been focused on African Americans and more recently Asian Americans and Hispanic populations. In an intensive multi-year investigation of the use of museums by African Americans concluded that ethnicity provided only limited insights into why did African Americans visit museums.

As museums have tirelessly attempted to count and sort their visitors based upon demographic categories, these categorizations would yield a false sense of explanation. As summarized above, we think we “know” that who visit museums based on their social, economical, and ethical facts. Museum visiting is far too complex to be understood merely on the basis of concrete variables such as demographics or for tangible qualities like “type of museum” or “exhibition style” (e.g., hands-on, didactic, interactive, etc.). In fact, the museum visitor experience is not readily formed with tangible, immutable categories. The museum visitor experience is much too ephemeral and dynamic; it is a uniquely constructed relationship that occurs each time a person visits a museum.

IV. EFFECTS OF IDENTITY ON VISITOR MOTIVATION

Considerable time and effort has been invested in understanding the motivations of museum visitors. A variety of investigators have sought to explain why people visit museums, resulting in a range of descriptive categorizations. Several investigators have begun to document the connections between visitors’ entering motivations and their exiting meaning making. Most recently, studies have demonstrated that the idea of art museum as a form of educational leisure is shared by visitors from various socio-demographic background and is affected by other dimensions of the visitor’s profiles.

It is not surprising that if visitors are prospectively entering an art museum with an entry narrative that is more self-reinforcing, directing both learning behavior and perceptions of satisfaction. Interestingly, these entry narratives appeared to converge upon a relatively small subset of categories that could best be understood by thinking of them as describing an individual’s motivations for visiting art museums. These motivational categories could best be understood as designed to satisfy one or more personal identity-related needs.

For years the constructs of self-identity have been used by a wide range of social science investigators from a variety of disciplines. Although there are a number of useful reviews of these various perspectives, there is no single definition of self-identity is yet agreed upon. Perhaps most pointedly, Simon (2004, p. 3) states that:

Even if identity turns out to be an “analytical fiction,” it will prove to be a highly useful analytical fiction in the search for a better understanding of human experiences and behaviors. If used as a shorthand expression or placeholder for social psychological processes revolving around self-definition or self-interpretation, including the variable but systematic instantiations thereof, the notion of identity will serve the function of a powerful conceptual tool.

It is a useful concept to better understand the nature of the art museum experience. From this perspective, identity emerges as continually constructed and as a quality that is always situated in the realities of the physical and socio-cultural world—both the immediate social and physical world an individual may be immersed in as well as the broader social and physical world of an individual’s family, culture, and personal history. A key understanding of identity is that each of us possesses, and acts upon, not a single identity but rather maintains multiple identities, which are expressed solely or collectively at different time, depending on necessity and circumstance. Examples of “I” identities might be one’s sense of gender, nationality, political views or religion, which are identities we carry with us throughout our lives and though they unquestionably evolve, they would most likely remain fairly the same throughout our lives. These are the types of identity that have been most frequently studied by social scientists. However, it is arguable that much of our lives are spent enacting a series of other, more situated identities that represent responses to the needs and realities of the specific moment and circumstances. Examples of such “I” identity might be the “good niece/nephew” identity we enact, or the “host/hostess” identity we enact when someone visits our house for the first time. If we are acknowledged by wider ranges of the society, such kinds of “I” identities may not be likely to top our list of characteristics. These types of identities play a critical role in defining who we are and how we behave much of the time. In my observation, for most people who visit an art museum tend to elicit predominantly “I” identities. Even with all the changes museums have
Visitors of museums typically possess a working model of what to expect with a museum entails, as well as a sense of what benefits they would acquire by visiting. Visitors would attribute a series of self-aspects to their museum experiences mounted around their perceived ideas of what those museum experiences would offer them. Visitor’s self-aspects would therefore be corresponding to both their understanding of what the museum offered and their own perceived identity-related roles, as they utilize their pre-visit self-aspects to both prospectively justify why they should visit the museum and then again retrospectively in order to make sense of how their visit was worthwhile.

The visitor’s understanding of the museum experience is invariably self-referential and provides coherence and meaning to the experience. Despite the commonalities in these self-aspects across groups of visitors, individual visitors experience these self-aspects as expressions of their own unique personal identity. It is possible to divide visitors into subgroups such as those who only visit museums, those who find an equal interest in other events, “curious” people who only visit museums, “creative” visitors who consume diverse experiences, etc. All these visitors’ subgroups connote the meaning of museums differently. This is to say, how does one see him or herself as a museum visitor depends greatly upon how the visitor conceptualizes the museum. For visitors who are engaged in creative activities appear to invest slightly different values in the museums and to look for a more self-centred, more surrounding dimension into arts and imagine museums in a slightly less conventional way. For them, a more developed experiential and entertaining dimension (with workshops, interactive art works, discussions with artist, etc.) might make a difference in the choice of art museums to visit.

As art museums are generally perceived as places capable of meeting adequate amount of identity-related needs, the public prospectively justifies reasons for making a museum visit. Over time, visitors reflect upon their museum visit and determine whether the experience was a good way to fulfill their needs, and, if it was, they tell others about the visit, which helps to contribute the social understanding of what kind of art museums is preferred. Consequently, these past visitors and others like them are much more likely to seek this or another art museum in the future should possess a similar identity-related need. Numerous studies in a variety of museum settings have provides evidence is beginning to support the existence of these identity-related loops. How did individuals describe their museum experiences appear to reflect visitors’ situation-specific, identity-related self-aspects. Although, in theory, museum visitors could possess an infinite number of identity-related “self-aspects,” this does not appear to be the case. Both the reasons people give for visiting museums and their post-visit descriptions of the experience...
tended to cluster around a few basic categories, which appeared to reflect how the public perceives the outcomes of an art museum visit.

Based upon the well-conducted research by Falk and Storksdieck, art museum visitors use museums to satisfy identity-related needs, such as the person who sees themselves as first and foremost an “art person,” along with more commonly important but more ephemeral identities, such as an appropriate way to spend an afternoon in a city they are visiting. Perhaps most important, though, is that there are sufficient amount of strong evidences that categorizing individuals within a category behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories. Thus, unlike traditional segmentation strategies based upon demographic categories such as age, ethnicity, gender, or even education, separating visitors according to their entering identity-related motivations resulted in descriptive data predictive of visitors’ museum experience—both prior to arriving, during the experience and later as they reflect back upon the visit. In the most detailed study to date, the majority of visitors could not only be categorized as falling into one of these seven categories, but individuals within a category behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories. Specifically, individuals in some of the categories showed significant changes in their understanding and affect, while individuals in other categories did not. Thus, unlike traditional segmentation strategies that only segment visitors as a function of their perceived identity-related visit motivations can be used as a conceptual tool for capturing important insights into how visitors perceive of their museum experience—both prior to arriving, during the experience and later as they reflect back upon the visit. In the most detailed study to date, the majority of visitors could not only be categorized as falling into one of these seven categories, but individuals within a category behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories. Specifically, individuals in some of the categories showed significant changes in their understanding and affect, while individuals in other categories did not. Thus, unlike traditional segmentation strategies based upon demographic categories like age, ethnicity, gender, or even education, separating visitors according to their entering identity-related motivations resulted in descriptive data predictive of visitors’ museum experience.

V. Possible Implications of Self-Identity Based Categorization

Not only is research revealing that the majority of visitors to most types of museums arrive with one of seven general motivations for visiting, it appears that these identity-related motivations directly relate to key outcomes in the museum setting, such as how visitors behave and interact with the setting and importantly, how they make meaning of the experience once they leave. In other words, being able to segment visitors this way gives museum practitioners key insights into the needs and interests of their visitors. This is very different from the one-size-fits-all perspective that has historically dominated our interactions with museum visitors. These categories can be but not limited to: visitors belong to a category would be focused on what they see and find interesting, along with their self-centered agenda regardless of whether they are part of a social group like a family with children or not. Another type of visitors would concentrate on what their significant others see and find interesting, and they act out this agenda by perhaps allowing their significant others to direct the visit and focusing primarily their significant others’ interests. By acknowledging this kind of categorization, it would be possible for museum professionals to develop efficient curatorial methods for the museum exhibition in order to provide a fulfilled experience to the visitors, thus to create more satisfied, loyal visitors.

The identity-related profile of visitors influences such a perception of art museums. Consequently, art museums have to take in to account the individual diversity of their publics. Specifically in nowadays, more and more people are involved in self-expression and creativity, that they expect from museums a more sensational and inclusive experiences, given the emphasis they put on self-development and self-fulfillment. The closer the relationship between visitors perception of their actual museum experience and their perceived identity-related needs, the more likely they will perceive their museum visit was remarkable and enjoyable. This would also help reduce the sacred and constraining dimension that seems to prevent museums truly being leisure for a substantial part of the visitors.

VI. Conclusion

Most visitors arrive at art museums with preconceived expectations. They use the museum to satisfy those expectations and then remember the visit as an experience that did just that. Therefore, being able to access visitors’ identity-related motivations will provide some measurement of predictability about what visitors’ experiences will be. Each visitor’s experience is for sure unique, as is of each museum. Both are likely to be framed within the socially and culturally defined boundaries of how that specific museum visit offers a unique experience for each visitor.

Although much of what have been discussed here remains a theory, there now appears to be sufficient evidence to justify efforts to use these ideas for improved practice. The hope is that this approach will enable museum professionals to optimistically manage and predict their visitors and develop more stimulating, participative and inclusive experience for them while propose a multidimensional offer to visitors without falling into an empty event promotion. Museum policies should lead to more sufficient ways to enhance the experience of current museum visitors, to increase the possibility of occasional museum visitors becoming regular visitors, and to provide new and improved ways to attract groups of individuals who have yet thought of museums as places that meet their needs.
REFERENCES


[27] Simon, B., 46.
