

### **Museum Audiences: A Visitor-Centered Perspective**

This special issue is focused on a series of questions related to the tensions between, on the one hand, the museums' historic position as content authority and its quest for intellectual excellence and integrity and on the other hand its equally historic but increasingly important role as public educator with a mandate to reach out to the broadest possible audience in the interest of promoting literacy in art, history and/or science. The debate around this question has often been shrill with much of the discussion simplistically framed as a dichotomy between “quality/education” and “quantity/entertainment.” Proponents of the former argue that museums should hone to the highest intellectual standards and not “dumb down” the content in order to appeal to the masses. While the proponents on the other side of the argument say that creating content that is intellectually accessible and supports the interests of a broad audience does not compromise intellectual standards. I would argue that the problem with both of these perspectives is that they are framed totally from a museum-centric perspective – both are designed to insure that the museum maintains its current status; which depending upon who is speaking, might be defined as intellectual status, social status, moral status or economic status. My goal in this article is not to come down on either side of the argument but rather to add a different perspective to the debate, a visitor-centered perspective.

Taking a visitor-centered perspective sets aside, at least temporarily, the value of the museum as defined by the insiders who make their living through museums – either by working within them or through association with them as critics or contractors. Instead, the visitor-centered perspective focuses on the users of museums – both current and potential; individuals who have no enduring financial or personal stake in the museum. It asks the question what is the perceived value of the museum to these individuals, those who visit and those who do not. In taking this perspective, the question becomes more about satisfaction than “outcomes”; whether or not the museum satisfies the individual’s needs (intellectual or otherwise). Since the goal of the public presentation of objects and information within a museum only makes sense within the context of the audience for whom it is intended, better understanding what the current museum-going “public” might actually desire is relevant to the debate.

Arguably, then, if we are to take a visitor-centered perspective the first question one must ask is who does and does not currently visit museums and perhaps more importantly, what motivates these people to visit (or not)? This line of inquiry ultimately leads to an additional question: Do individuals who visit a museum find the experience satisfying, in whatever way(s) are meaningful to them? In other words, what is the relationship between the reasons someone might have for visiting a museum, the nature of the experience encountered at the museum and the sense of value someone ultimately ascribes to that experience? This is critically important since most of the “quality/education” vs. “quantity/entertainment” debate centers around the assumption that what is central to the museum experience is the content of museum exhibitions and what, why and for whom these contents should be displayed. However, as I have argued, and I and others have verified, the current museum-going public visits in order to satisfy a variety of self-related needs, only some of which depend on the specifics of exhibition content and presentation. This article will briefly review these findings and then explore how this reality might inform the current debate.

## Why People Visit Museums

It is estimated that globally, roughly a billion people visit some kind of museum every year (Author & Colleague, 2014). The question is what would motivate people to engage in this behavior; on any given day, what would motivate an individual to seek out a museum to visit as opposed to filling their time with some other form of leisure experience? Leisure motivation, according to Lapointe and Perreault (2013), is a “polysemic” concept, in other words, a concept with many meanings, making it both difficult to define and difficult to measure. So, job number one is defining what, in the current context, is meant by “motivation.” I will define “motivation” as the underlying purpose, whether initiated by internal or external forces, or both (cf., Vallerand & Thill, 1993), causing a person to believe that a visit to a museum is a good idea, something that might satisfy their or their social group’s leisure needs.

Considerable time and effort has been invested in understanding what motivates people to visit museums. As previously reviewed by Author (2009), a variety of investigators have sought to describe why people visit museums. Although the dominant framework remains demographic (e.g., Wilkening & Chung, 2009), for decades I and others (e.g., Author, 1998; Hood, 1983; Moussouri, 1997; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002) have argued for a broader, more psychographic approach. Increasingly investigators have begun to come around to this latter perspective, appreciating that although the visiting public can be classified by demographic categories, these correlations rarely yield significant insights into the real reasons the public visits. In short, the public rarely visits a museum because they are a male or a female, or because they are of the majority or minority population, but rather they visit for self-related reasons. Yes, these self-related reasons can and are influenced by lived experience, including experiences related to gender or race/ethnicity but these latter categories by themselves are too course-grained and general to actually be useful in understanding how and why specific individuals make the leisure choices they do.

Most current research designed to understand why the public visits museums is based on extensive interviews with the museum-going public. Based upon analyses of these interviews, researchers have arrived at a range of categorizations schemes. For example, based on research on visitors in the U.K., Theano Moussouri (1997) came up with six categories of motivations which she argued reflected the functions a museum is perceived to serve in the social/cultural life of visitors: 1) Education; 2) Entertainment; 3) Social event; 4) Life-cycle; 5) Place; and 6) Practical issues. Zahava Doering and her colleagues at the Smithsonian Institution became very interested in better understanding what motivated people to visit the various Smithsonian museums. They developed an empirical list of experiences that they believed captured the things that museum visitors generally found satisfying about their museum experiences (Pekarik, Doering & Karns, 1999). They separated visitor experiences into four distinct categories: 1) Object experiences – focusing on something outside the visitor, for example, seeing the “real thing” or seeing rare or valuable things; 2) Cognitive experiences –focusing on the interpretive or intellectual aspects of the experience; 3) Introspective experiences – focusing on private feelings and experiences, such as imagining, reflecting, reminiscing and connecting; and 4) Social experiences – focusing on interactions with friends, family, other visitors or museum staff. Jan Packer, working in Australia also investigated the relationship between museum visitor motivation and learning. The resulting paper that she wrote with her major professor Roy

Ballantyne (Packer & Ballantyne, 2002) described the experiences of 300 visitors, 100 each at an Australian history museum, art gallery and aquarium. Instead of merely asking visitors why they had come, Packer asked the visitors to rate the outcomes they hoped to derive from their visit. A factor analysis of the resulting responses revealed five categories of visit motivations, which she labeled as: 1) Learning and Discovery; 2) Passive Enjoyment; 3) Restoration; 4) Social interaction; and 5) Self-fulfillment. Taking again a different approach, the British marketing firm Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2004) collected data on hundreds of visitors to the Tate Museum in London. Also using factor analysis, they segmented visitors into eight categories based on a range of primarily psychographic but also demographic variables, they labeled their categories: 1) Aficionados; 2) Actualizers; 3) Sensualists; 4) Researchers; 5) Self-Improvers; 6) Social Spacers; 7) Site Seers and 8) Families. Finally, approaching the public's visit motivations from a still slightly different perspective, I proposed that people visit museums in order to satisfy a suite of self-related reasons, reasons associated with the relationship between their own roles and needs and the affordances they perceived the museum possessed. Initially based on a series of in-depth, longitudinal interviews with 50 visitors to a science center (Author & Colleague, 2006; 2010) and ultimately verified by detailed analysis of more than a thousand zoo and aquarium visitors (Author & Colleagues, 2008), the five broad self-related domains I arrived at, illustrated with some actual quotes from visitors, were:

**Explorers:** Visitors who are curiosity-driven with a generic interest in the content of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their learning.

*"I remember thinking I wanted to learn my art basics again, like Impressionism and Fauvism. . . I thought [before coming], You're not going to pick up everything, you know, but you are going to learn some things."*

**Facilitators:** Visitors who are socially motivated. Their visit is focused on primarily enabling the experience and learning of others in their accompanying social group.<sup>1</sup>

*"[I came] to give [my] kids a chance to learn to appreciate art and culture . . . it's a good way to spend time with the family in a non-commercial way. I've always appreciated that my parents did this with me and I want to pass this forward to my own children."*

**Professional/Hobbyists:** Visitors who feel a close tie between the museum content and their professional or hobbyist passions. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective.

*"We [came] to see the Edward Hopper exhibit. I've always liked Hopper. There was one of his paintings I've particularly always liked and when I saw that there was an exhibit of his at the National Gallery I wanted to go to see it."*

**Experience Seekers:** Visitors who are motivated to visit because they perceive the museum as an important destination. Their satisfaction primarily derives from the mere fact of having "been there and done that."

*“We were visiting from out-of-town, looking for something fun to do that wouldn’t take all day. This seemed like a good idea; after all, we’re in Los Angeles and someone told us this place just opened up and you really ought to see it.”*

**Rechargers:** Visitors who are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world and place where they can unwind while being surrounded by inspiring and beautiful things.

*“I like art museums. They are so very quiet and relaxing, so different than the noise and clutter of the rest of the city.”*

However, regardless of which these model is used, a few things are clear. First, despite parsing visitors into differing categories, with differing labels, striking similarities emerged across all of these investigations. Second, across all of these studies investigators determined that people visit museums for a wide variety of reasons, only some of which relate to being edified by the content of the exhibition. Specifically, there are always museum visitor’s whose visit motivations are primarily social, others motivated primarily by aesthetic or restorative reasons as well as people who utilize museums primarily for recreational, experiential purposes, e.g., a desire to be able to say “I’ve been there, done that.” These individuals are often disparagingly lumped into “quantity/entertainment” category of visitors – but such simplification totally misses the point. I’ve argued (Author, 2009) that if you dig deeply enough into what motivates individuals to visit museums some aspect of “cognitive” interest is always a part of the equation, although clearly the “learning” benefit of the museum is more pronounced in some visitors than in others.

As before, I will attempt to explain this through a metaphor. If you interviewed 100 people as they entered a restaurant and asked them why they have chosen to visit that particular restaurant on that particular day, what would they tell you? Predictably, their answers would cover topics such as the quality and friendliness of the service staff, the price of the food items, the atmosphere and ambiance, and maybe how convenient the restaurant is to their home or where they happened to find themselves on that day. What they almost certainly would not say is that they chose this restaurant “because I was hungry.” That’s because it’s assumed that the reason you go to eat out at restaurant is to satiate your hunger, hence why mention it. Similarly, unless specifically probed on the topic, many visitors to museums when asked “why are you visiting today” frequently neglect to mention learning-related reasons because they assume that it is self-evident that learning is part of their motivation. Why else would anyone go to such a place? Why mention something that is so obvious! Unfortunately, many museum researchers have missed the obvious, mistaking a lack of statement of the obvious for the absence of that motivation at all. The fact that many researchers have used closed-ended surveys that force visitors to select between choices, such as learning and social experiences, has only accentuated this misperception.

My research suggests that all visitors to museums realize that these are educational settings. Museum visitors are not confusing museums with theme parks! Some come to learn explicitly, some come to learn implicitly, but all come to learn! Although clearly museums support many leisure benefits, free-choice learning emerges as a major anticipated outcome of virtually all visitors’ museum experience.<sup>ii</sup> However by stating that learning is, at some level, always one of

the reasons people visit museums does not mean that the public equally is motivated to visit for other reasons. As the previous review suggests, not only does the public come for other reasons, but these alternative reasons represent the primary visit motivations of large percentages of the public. By way of evidence of this assertion, below are the dominant visiting motivations of visitors to a wide range of museum-like institutions from across the globe as determined by more than a dozen different investigators using my self-related classification system:

Thanksgiving Point History Museums, Lehi, Utah (Ashton, 2014)<sup>1</sup>

Explorer: 22%  
Facilitator: 90%  
Experience Seeker: 15%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 2%  
Recharger: 2%

Iolani Palace, Honolulu, Hawaii (Meluch, 2011)<sup>1</sup>

Explorer: 47%  
Facilitator: 20%  
Experience Seeker: 53%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 4%  
Recharger: 8%

Mission House Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii (Smola & Meluch, 2011)<sup>1</sup>

Explorer: 45%  
Facilitator: 20%  
Experience Seeker: 23%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 14%  
Recharger: 10%

Teylers Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands (Blokland, 2013)

Explorer: 25%  
Facilitator: 32%  
Experience Seeker: 23%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 13%  
Recharger: 7%

Papalote Children's Museum, Mexico City, Mexico (Elizando, 2014)

Explorer: 9%  
Facilitator: 55%  
Experience Seeker: 17%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 7%  
Recharger: 12%

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana (Leason & Filippini-Fantoni, 2013)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More than one response was accepted so totals exceed 100%

Falk, J.H. (2016). *Loisir et Société/Leisure and Society*, 39(3), 357-370.

Explorer: 23%  
Facilitator: 17%  
Experience Seeker: 22%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 9%  
Recharger: 22%

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario (Koke, 2010)<sup>3</sup>

Explorer: 30%  
Facilitator: 9%  
Experience Seeker: 9%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 14%  
Recharger: 33%

Thanksgiving Point Botanical Gardens, Lehi, Utah (Ashton, 2014)<sup>1</sup>

Explorer: 20%  
Facilitator: 45%  
Experience Seeker: 20%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 9%

U.S. Botanical Garden, Washington, DC (Storksdieck & Stein, 2007)<sup>1</sup>

Explorer: 29%  
Facilitator: 9%  
Experience Seeker: 21%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 32%  
Recharger: 28%

Denver Zoo, Denver, Colorado (Trainer, Steele-Inama & Christopher, 2012)<sup>4</sup>

Explorer: 7%  
Facilitator: 54%  
Experience Seeker: 15%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 2%  
Recharger: 10%

Oregon Coast Aquarium, Newport, Oregon (Huynh, 2016)

Explorer: 27%  
Facilitator: 35%  
Experience Seeker: 20%  
Professional/Hobbyist: 8%  
Recharger: 10%

The data from all these diverse museum settings strongly demonstrates that visitors are motivated to visit for a wide diversity of reasons, only some of which are content-specific. This

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<sup>2</sup> These researchers included an additional category suggested by me, "Affinity Seekers" which accounted for 3% of visitors, an additional 4% did not select any of the above categories.

<sup>3</sup> 7% did not select any of the above categories.

<sup>4</sup> 12% were undecided.

fact alone should make those exclusively focused on museum exhibition content pause, but of even greater significance to the discussion here is that there is considerable evidence that visitors' entering motivations directly influence both their in-museum behavior and their exiting meaning making (e.g., Author & Colleague, 2010; Briseno-Garzon, Anderson & Anderson, 2007; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004; Packer 2006; 2014; Rounds, 2004). This is not so surprising if, as postulated by Doering and Pekarik (1996; Pekarik, Doering and Karns 1999), one starts with the idea that visitors are likely to enter a museum with an "entry narrative" and these entry narratives are likely to be self-reinforcing, directing both learning and behavior because visitors' perceptions of satisfaction will be directly related to experiences that resonate with their entering narrative.

### How Visit Motivations Influence Visit Experience and Learning

The following interview was conducted on the front steps of a major Eastern U.S. art museum.

Q: Do you remember your last visit to an art museum?

A: Yes, it was about a year ago at least, to this very museum.

Q: Do you remember if it was a weekday or a weekend?

A: It was the Sabbath. It was Saturday.

Q: With whom did you go to the museum?

A: My boyfriend at the time, now he's my husband.

Q: Whose decision was it to come?

A: We stumbled upon it we were just wandering around, we were looking for the Natural History Museum – and we still haven't found it – we were going there [Natural History Museum] and ended up at the art museum.

Q: So it was okay for you to visit an art museum?

A: On Saturday it is the Sabbath so God said take pleasure in my creation on the Sabbath. So it didn't really matter whether it was a natural history museum or an art museum.

Q: So your purpose in visiting was spiritual?

A: Yes, to cherish God's creation, to take a part and take notice. But also to find out more for ourselves, to enrich ourselves in the process.

Q: What did you think was the most memorable thing you saw at the museum?

A: The most memorable thing was that it was interesting. That is why we came back today.

Q: Any specific exhibition stand out in memory?

A: The whole thing.

Q: What about particular works of art?

A: Yes, there was a beautiful painting that was quite abstract but reminded me of a sunrise. It had amazing shades of reds, pinks and oranges; all seeming to emanate from one source. It reminded me of the times I've sat and watched sunrises and thought about the glory of God and how much I have to be grateful for each and every day.

[Later during the interview...]

Q: What were your expectations for the visit?

A: Mainly we were looking to see what God has done. We got a lot more than we

expected.

Q: In what ways?

A: You have an idea of the things that humans are capable of creating – but you come in and see all the little details and see that we are so complicated and capable of so much. Yet when you see someone on the street and think, "oh it's just another human being." But each person is so chockfull of things and ideas and there are millions of us chockfull of all these different potentials. You walk away with a new appreciation of people.

[Later during the interview...]

Q: Would anybody be surprised to see you at an art museum?

A: Not me.

Q: Rate this sentence: "Going to an art museum is something that defines who I am."

A: I wouldn't say it defines me, but I would say that what defines me is that I have an inquisitive mind and a love of God. But just by knowing me you wouldn't say, "Oh that's where she'll be hanging out."

The above is an excerpt from an extended interview with an individual who, for the sake of anonymity, I'll call Porsche. Porsche is Jamaican American, in her early 30s, who teaches mathematics at the university level and her interview provides useful insights into the relationship between visit motivations, visit behavior and longer-term meaning-making. Even in this brief excerpt we can see evidence for why Porsche came to the museum, how she used the museum, what she remembered and what the relationship between these were. Like every interview, Porsche's is unique. Religious zeal is not the typical reason one expects someone to give for visiting an art museum, and religion was definitely not the marketed message of this particular internationally-prominent museum. But if we ignore the specifics of what Porsche said, replacing it perhaps with a passion for modern art or even something as specific as post-modern Expressionism, we can quite clearly see a pattern; a consistency of purpose that runs throughout her personal narrative. As I discovered in the course of interviewing hundreds of individuals about their visit to a museum, like a light motif in music, an individual's self-related purpose for the visit continually re-emerges as they recall their experiences (cf., Author, 2009). In Porsche's case, the purpose was spiritual, while in others it is curiosity or social, but in nearly all cases if one attends closely enough, the self-related purpose becomes clear.

Porsche's interview in particular is quite intriguing as it reveals numerous layers of complexity about her, her experience at the museum, and these in turn provide insights into her world view, personal needs and priorities. Even in these three brief excerpts, one can see the complex, personally-rich meanings that museum visits have for people – certainly this brief visit to an art museum was deeply intertwined with Porsche's sense of who she is and what she wants to be. Although it would appear that Porsche is not deeply knowledgeable about art, visiting the art museum appeared to satisfy several important self-related needs for her, including her religiously-inspired sense of how humans fit within the universe, her relationship to her now husband, as well as her sense of herself as a curious, inquisitive person. In the first interview segment Porsche says that the motivation for her previous visit to this particular art museum was quite random and accidental, however it seems there was nothing accidental about her desire to visit a museum. Porsche appeared to have a clear purpose in mind for visiting a museum, and as



it turns out, any museum would have served that purpose. Given that she and her boyfriend, now husband, were returning again to this same museum a year later, it is probably safe to infer that their earlier art museum visit experience had actually been quite satisfying. Not so satisfying as to make them go often, but satisfying enough to make them want to return a year later.

In the second segment of the interview it is possible to get some sense of what Porsche did and saw during her previous visit to the museum. Although in general her recollection is quite vague, Porsche is able to readily describe the one painting that stuck out for her. As has happened time and time again in interviews such as this (cf., Colleague & Author, 2013; Author & Colleague, 2010), Porsche's description reveals how deeply personal recalled experiences are; how deeply tied to each individual's sense of self. Also striking is how consistent are Porsche's narrative about her in-museum experience and her narrative about what, pre-visit motivated her to go in the first place. According to Porsche, prior to entering the art museum the previous year her goal was to celebrate the Sabbath, to, as she put it, "take pleasure in [God's] creation on the Sabbath." A year later, this was still not only a salient motivation for her, but also the dominant frame through which she made sense of her experience. Porsche's motivations may not be common but the consistency between her post-visit narrative and entering narratives are. Both the ways in which individuals talk about why they come to museums and the ways they talk about what they remember from the experience invariably seem to have a lot to do with what they are seeking to personally accomplish through their visit. In so doing, their pre-formed personal goals for the visit, goals related to who they thought they were, and how the museum itself supported these personal goals and needs, play out in the ways they use the museum. Entry motivations, in-museum behaviors, and long-term meanings turn out to all be inter-related, and all ultimately reflect the desire to use the museum to support some aspect of self-related need.

The visitor's understanding of their museum visitor experience is invariably self-referential and provides coherence and meaning to the experience. Visitors tend to see their in-museum behavior and post-visit outcomes as consistent with personality traits, attitudes, and/or group affiliations, as in the example above of Porsche who saw the museums as both a mechanism for reinforcing her religious views as well as herself as a curious person. Other visitors use the museum to satisfy personally relevant roles and values such as being a good parent or an intrepid cultural tourist. What I have found striking is that despite the enormous individual difference one encounters in these self-explanations, fueled by each individual's unique lived experience, they all tend to converge on just a few, i.e., five broad categories of motivation.

The reason for the convergence is due to the relationship between a visitor's expressed self-related need and their perceptions of what the museum they chose to visit affords. So regardless of how a visitor frames this relationship, e.g. through a social lens: I view myself as good father – good fathers take their children to places like museums; through an individual lens: I'm a curious person – museums have a lot of things I will find interesting to see and do; or through a restoration lens: I really need to find someplace quiet and serene today – the botanical garden has some lovely, isolated spots where I can sit on a bench and just enjoy the beauty, there is an alignment between visitor self-related need and perceived museum affordance. The bottom line is that people use their leisure to satisfy specific needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Manfredi, Driver, & Brown, 1983), and the people who visit museums perceive that the specific museum they chose to visit is capable of satisfying those needs.

As museums have become increasingly popular leisure venues, more and more people have developed working models of what museums are like and how and why they can be used as leisure venues – in other words, what a visit to a museum potentially affords. People actually only visit a museum when they perceive there is a good alignment between their needs and desires the a particular museum’s “affordances.” Together, this combination of perceived needs and affordances creates a very strong, positive, dialogic feedback loop. The loop begins with the public seeking leisure experiences that meet specific identity-related needs, such as personal fulfillment, parenting, or novelty seeking. Museums have increasingly become perceived by the public as places capable of meeting some (though not all) self-related needs. Those in the public who perceive this match, visit museums, justifying their visit based on this perceived match. Once at the museum, visitors utilize the museum in ways designed to satisfy their specific, pre-determined/expected needs. As the visitor leaves the museum they typically assess whether it was a good experience or not by judging how successfully they were able to satisfy their needs; the better the fit, the more satisfying the experience. Over time, visitors reflect back upon their museum visit and by and large remember the experience through the lens of their primary visit motivations, and if it was a satisfying experience, i.e., fulfilled their self-related needs, they tell others about the visit which helps to feed a social understanding that this and other museums like it are good for this purpose. As a consequence, these past visitors and others like them are much more likely to seek out this or another museum in the future when next they possess a similar self-related need.

Collectively, this all represents an enormous socio-cultural feedback loop with individuals visiting because they perceive the institution will satisfy their needs – using the museum to satisfy those needs – and then justifying their visit as having satisfied those needs, often in an effort to give *post-hoc* coherence and meaning to that experience (cf., Hood, 2012; Laird, 2007). Like all feedback loops, this process becomes self-reinforcing – both for the individual and for the society collectively. I perceive that museums are good for X, thus I visit them in order to satisfy X, when I visit I find that I’m able to do X which in turn leads me to be satisfied with my experience, and I tell others, e.g., friends and relatives, that the museum is good for X, which motivates them too to perceive that museums are good for X, etc. And since well over 90% of all museum visitors claim to find the experience satisfying (Author & Colleague, 2014), this circular, self-reinforcing system obviously works for most people. However, there are the 5-10% of visitors who find museums unsatisfying. These are instances where expectations are not met and these examples are informative; they are the exceptions that prove the rule.

As part of a study to better understand the short and long-term experiences of visitors to a science center, a colleague and I (2010) randomly identified, interviewed, tracked and re-interviewed dozens of individuals; one of these individual revealed that he was deeply dissatisfied with his museum visit. This individual had heard that museums were good places for learning things. His assumption was that a museum was like a school, a place where children went in order to learn specific facts and concepts. He had determined that his children were deficient in their knowledge of several specific science topics and thus he decided to visit the science center with his children so that they could learn these topics there. Thus he arrived at the science center with the expectation that his children, by virtue of their visit that day, would come away having learned these specific topics. However once at the science center he discovered that he was hard pressed to actually locate any exhibits that specifically taught the subjects he wanted

his children to learn. Even worse, even when he was able to find a few exhibits relevant to the content he wanted his children to learn he was dismayed to discover that the “pedagogy” inherent in the exhibits was not what he expected – rather than the traditional drill and practice approach he was comfortable with the exhibits seemed to support more of an open-ended inquiry approach. Meanwhile, the man’s two children became quite excited by the diversity and hands-on nature of the exhibits they encountered and were disinclined to spend large amounts of time focused on just the one or two exhibits their father wanted them to attend to. In short, the actual affordances of the science center this man encountered significantly deviated from science center affordances he had expected; as a consequence his self-related motivations for the visit – to insure that his children learned specific science facts and concepts – did not at all align with the museum experience he had. And despite his best efforts to make the museum work for his needs, the reality he encountered at the museum thwarted his desires. He was not only dissatisfied with his museum experience, he stated that he intended to share his dissatisfaction with his peers and swore that he at least, would never again visit this particular museum. As predicted by my theory, he did enter with a specific self-related motivation and did attempt to enact this motivation but the affordances of the museum he encountered did not in fact support his motivation. As predicted, his museum experience was not satisfying. Also as predicted, it did result in word-of-mouth communication about the museum. However unlike as is typical of most museum visitors, this individual’s descriptions of his visitor experience were negative rather than positive.

### Conclusions

So what does all of this have to do with the over-arching focus of this special issue? The first thing I would suggest the argument presented above clearly undermines is the premise that the nature of the museum visitor experience can be usefully understood through the overly simplistic dichotomous lens of “quality/education” vs. “quantity/entertainment.” If we accept the premise that the public visits museums, depending upon the day and personal circumstances, for multiple reasons, which I believe the data presented clearly show, then certainly all museums already, regardless of intent, appear to be serving both of these outcomes and both of these types of audience simultaneously. There are visitors currently coming to all types of museums with the goal of satisfying deep intellectual curiosities. They are seeking specific information and are hoping to learn new facts and theories about topics they find interesting; more often than not topics that they already possess considerable pre-existing knowledge and understanding of. There are also visitors currently coming to all types of museums whose visit is motivated by only the most fleeting interest in the content and intellectual rigor of the information presented. Their visit satisfaction derives primarily from sources other than labels and objects. As should be evident from the different proportions of visitors in each of the five self-related motivations at the various museums cited above, even similar types of museums attract different mixes of visitors.<sup>iii</sup> Although it would seem theoretically possible for a particular institution to purposefully tilt their affordances in one direction or another, i.e., more towards a content-oriented crowd or more towards an experience-oriented crowd, in actual fact such singularly purposeful institutions do not seem to currently exist. In no case that I am aware of, does any institution attract 100% of a particular kind of visitor. That is just not how museum visitation seems to work these days. That is because the public’s expectations are only partially molded by the particular realities of that single institution. Expectations are equally determined based on

the broader, socio-culturally defined public understanding of what it means to be a museum. Thus, each museum attracts a mix of visitors, with a mix of generic and specific expectations.

Which leads me to a second point that the argument presented here strongly suggests. In reality, these two, presumably opposite goals are never truly mutually exclusive. Since museums are typically comprised of multiple exhibitions, each with multiple individual exhibits and objects, there is always plenty of opportunity to create experiences that cater to both extended intellectual inquiry and depth and “head-line” level presentation and gestalt. Audiences seeking either of these experiences can and typically are accommodated, often within a single exhibition but certainly across multiple exhibitions. Given that the current museum visiting public already represents individuals with widely differing needs and expectations, and that the overwhelming majority of these visitors exit the museum having found the experience satisfying, strongly suggests that these seemingly opposite goals are already being satisfied by most museums; sometimes totally independent of any intent on the part of the museum.

Finally, even if a museum’s staff (or trustees) could be persuaded to come down squarely on one side or the other of this debate, I would strongly counsel them to think seriously before trying to totally tilt the museum into favor of one mode of presentation over another. The reason for this is that the particular visit motivations that catalyze an individual to visit on any given day represent NOT some hard and fast attribute of the individual but rather a fluid, often ephemeral response to the particular individual’s ever changing needs and realities. In other words, I can be motivated to visit museum X today because of social need, e.g., my grandchildren are visiting, and be motivated to visit the same museum tomorrow for an entirely different reason, e.g., I very much want to see a particular traveling exhibit currently on offer. This is not only possible but extremely common; the same museum often serves different visitor motivations, different in-museum behaviors, and different expectations for the same visitor on different days depending upon that individual’s specific needs and circumstances on the day of the visit. The best museums afford multiple types of experiences and regular visitors know this and find satisfaction in being able to avail themselves of these different affordances on different visits. Visit motivations are never fixed; they are always fluid and determined by immediate personal need and context. Sometimes these align and people visit, sometimes they do not and people choose to do other things, and for some people – the people who never visit museums – their self-related needs and their perceptions of what museums afford never align. The bottom line for the current debate though, is that museums can simultaneously strive to create exhibitions that fulfill the highest standards of excellence and integrity as well as exhibitions designed to pique interest and support generalized edification. Since museums attract visitors seeking both of these things, as well as other outcomes, museums can and should strive to be both/and rather than either/or.

Although I know that the research presented in this paper is insufficient to fully inform the debate presented in this issue, I do hope it adds some new insights to the discussion. In particular, I hope it might cause advocates on both sides of the debate to pause and reconsider how they frame their arguments. How would their particular perspective be different if they began from a visitor-centered perspective, one that appreciated that the modern museums can and typically do serve multiple audiences with multiple needs, interests, and desires?

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## End Notes

<sup>ii</sup> A number of researchers have split my Facilitator category into two, with one type of being individuals facilitating children, e.g., parents or grandparents, and a second type being individuals those supporting peers, e.g., friends or out-of-town visitors.

<sup>ii</sup> I will assume that readers at this point are sufficiently familiar with the term free-choice learning so as to obviate the need to extensively dwell on the definition of this term. However, for those unfamiliar with this term, briefly, free-choice learning is the learning an individual does over the course of their life in circumstances where they get to exercise a strong measure of choice and control – choice and control over what, why, where, when and how they will learn. The fact that free-choice learning happens for the most part outside of the imposed structure and requirements of schools, universities or workplaces, makes it at once extremely interesting and chronically under-recognized and appreciated. For those wishing more information on free-choice learning I'd refer them to Author & Colleague (2002). Book.

<sup>iii</sup> Not shown, but equally true, even the same museum attracts a different profile of visitors at different times of year (cf., Storksdieck & Stein, 2007; Trainer, Steele-Inama & Christopher, 2012)