

Brianna Jones

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Barbara Mathé

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Consumerism & Museums

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s museums begin to gain traction in popularity and expansion, resulting in an increase in attendance. Unfortunately, in the mid/late 1990s museums began to see a considerable drop-off in visitor attendance. This was a result of the increase in competition from other leisure activities becoming more widely available, thus forcing visitors to make decisions on how they rather spend their time and money [Scott, C. (2000)]. People began wanting to experience more individualized centered activities, technology was making rapid advancements, and increasing pressures to work long hours to gain mobility in one's career to build the "American Dream" all contributed to this decline.

Instead, people began to seek out activities and experiences that were more entertainment focused, new, fun, relaxing and exciting. Places such as movie theaters, theme parks, zoos, beaches, live sports games, concerts, and festivals began to come competition for museums and other cultural institutions. According to a survey conducted by [Prideaux, B. R., & Kininmont, L. (1999)] most people do not view places like museums as entertainment, fun or relaxing. Instead when asked to give word associations to museums and other similar cultural institutions most of the survey participants associated museum visits as thought-provoking, challenging, educational, fostering of discovery and curiosity and historical, to name a few. Which is almost the exact

opposite of what people were beginning to look for in recreational outings and activities. The Association of Art Museum Directors reported that one-third of art museums had a huge drop in attendance in the 2002-2003 season.

This resulted in museums being forced to think about their branding, how they are marketing themselves to the public, and their place among the increasing competition. This, in turn, resulted in a change of how museums view their visitors; turning them from visitors into consumers in order to strategically attract more people and remain open for years to come.

For my final paper, I will be exploring how the theory of consumerism is tied to programming, marketing, and exhibition within museums and the effects that have on the audience/visitors the institution attracts and methods used to do so.

According to the Merriam Webster's Dictionary consumerism is the theory that increasing the consumption of goods is economically desirable: a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods. The theory focuses on the promotion of the consumer's interests; it looks to empower the consumers as buyers.

The connection between consumerism and museums might not be evident at a first glance, but with the increasing amount of entertainment and learning options that have become available to people over the last 10 - 5 years, thanks to various technological advancements [smart phones, laptops, VR, television, etc.], museums were forced to rethink how the way they view and attract their visitors. This shift in thinking is what people in museum studies coin as the “New Museology”.

The new museology is according to [Rodney, Gouimenou, Mathey (n.d.)]

, a shift in the museum profession towards that puts the needs, views, and wants of the visitor first when thinking of curating exhibitions, programming, and educational experience, as opposed to letting the collection and collecting practices dictate curating goals. The embracing of this new view of visitors is perhaps best represented through a quote from Glenn Lowry, the president of the Museum of Modern Art, on announcing the museum's latest expansion plans:

“Our goal is to provide visitors with the pleasure of finding their own meaning within a singularly inclusive constellation of 20th- and 21st-century artistic practices.” [Rodney, S., ElGenaidi, D., Bishara, H (2016, January 24)]

Museums are looking to accomplish this in three different ways:

1. Recognize the visitors capacity to make meaning for themselves
2. Partner with them to discover what they personally want from the museum
3. Use the museum's resources to meet these needs.

These can be achieved by implementing new curatorial and exhibition strategies and practices through which museums partner with visitors to develop activities and events: co-curation projects, and crowdsourcing exhibition content.

I believe this is part of the reason why many museums are now looking to add interactive technology, such as A/V and touchscreens to their exhibitions and educational initiatives as a way to market to and attract a younger demographic and hold visitors attention.

According to a survey conducted by [Ruiz-Alba, et al.,(2019)] , they found that in order to attract a younger demographic more focus should be placed on the design and communicative properties of an exhibit or event, and to make exhibitions a co-creative experience for the visitor in which the visitor takes the form of a participant or contributor to the exhibit. In doing so,

museums are creating more personalized, content specific, theme-based and/or specialized temporary exhibitions that museums could then use as a selling point to gain new or repeat visitors. The study also showed that by doing so visitors associated positive emotions, satisfactory and consumer loyalty¹ with the museum. In terms of marketing, the researchers suggested that museums use apps or websites based advertisements and activities to target this particular demographic audience.

A great example of this is children museums, like the Long Island Children's Museum, which I wrote about in my cultural institution observation assignment at the beginning of the semester. Everything in this museum was touch-friendly and even had a few activities that were designed to encourage learning through using the other senses, such as smell, sight, and hearing. A few other examples of museums creating participatory, visitor-centered experiences or technology is the Smithsonian's Sackler Museum of Asian Art and National Gallery of Art. During the Sackler Museum exhibit on calligraphy, a part of the exhibition included instructed teaching on how to do calligraphy. On the other end of the spectrum, the National Gallery decided to invest in creating a more digital, individualized experience for visitors to their website by creating the Micro Gallery². [Kotler, N. (2001)]

The shift towards a more hands-on participatory cultural experience has spread beyond museums and seeped into other cultural institutions. Performing art events now have special showings or performances where audiences can meet and engage in discussions and Q&As with performers, cast, directors, writers, composers, and musicians. The last two off-broadway plays attended invited audiences to stay and discuss the themes of the play with the playwrights.

¹ Consumer loyalty in the form of repeat visits, and word of mouth recommendation to friends and family.

² The Micro Gallery is the National Gallery's digital information gallery repository.

This has led to visitors seeking a more well rounded social experience rather than an isolated one with the primary focus being placed on solely educating visitors. Museums are now creating more social, lounging, and dining areas and facilities for visitors and members. Some spaces are even designed for a specific demographic like the Discovery Room at the American Museum of Natural History that is just for infants and toddlers to play and learn. Another great example of this is the grandparent rooms at the Oregon Museum of Science, which are game rooms designed for grandparents to kill time while their families or grandchildren explore the museum galleries and exhibits.

In trying to create a more social experience for the young-adult demographic, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago hosts a monthly concert showcasing local artist. In the same vein, MoMa Ps21 host a music festival every summer that included a day filled with live music, street food, local artist and small business vendors, and art installations. I had the chance to attend last summer's festival at which rapper and singer Cardi B headlined. Other social based events that museums are usually creating also incorporate things such as performances, films, and curator lectures.

I do not consider this to be a bad thing, but I do believe this new focus on marketing to visitors could become problematic and in some cases already has. In an effort to draw in more people through the doors, museums have to compete with “trend worthy” programs and exhibits, and in trying to do so I believe sometimes they forget that one of the major functions of a cultural institution is to educate and inspire, not only entertain. This strive to stay “current” is causing most museums to put more emphasis on exploring contemporary culture rather than the historical one. In the context of consumerist society and growing competition, a museum visit is

essentially viewed as a purchase option which has led to a lot of the entertainment and trend pandering mentioned above start seeping into the museums' exhibitions.

A perfect example of this is the Eckhaus Latta exhibit that was on view at The Whitney in 2018. According to [Bauck, W. (2018, August 08)], who wrote about her experience visiting the exhibit space was divided into three rooms, the first was a room full of advertisements displaying Eckhaus Latta clothing. The second space contained the Eckhaus Latta clothing itself displayed alongside art objects; all the clothes featured in this space were for sale, and visitors [consumers] could buy them. The third and last space was surveillance screens that broadcasted live footage from retailers that sell Eckhaus Latta clothing, including the buying space within the exhibit itself. The above does not sound so problematic until you read further in the article and find out that the bulk of the exhibition was the clothing for sale and that the prices ranged from \$24 to \$7,200.

This exhibition essentially turns museums into “malls of culture” rather than institutions of learning. Another interesting example that perhaps also contributes to the idea of museums turning into “malls of culture” comes from the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. During our visit yesterday I was surprised to learn that one of the first huge renovations they did within the museum was their gift shop. Upon peaking inside I noticed a luxurious jewelry display counter, that would rival those of department stores like Nordstroms or Neiman Marcus. They even had specialized saleswomen behind the counter. This idea was further propelled by learning that their temporary Fall 2018 exhibition included a space where everything was for sale, just like the Eckhaus Latta exhibit at the Whitney.

Although I am aware that a percentage of the sales to go back to the Native American community that helped craft the jewelry, I still personally felt those funds it took to redesign the gift shop could have been better used elsewhere. More closely aligned with the Eckhaus Latta exhibit, a few weeks ago I received a Tisch wide email highlighting an upcoming art museum exhibit with the theme of futuristic sci-fi jewelry, and as part of the exhibit some the jewelry will be available for purchase.

If this seemingly new trend continues, and the emphasis become on the experience and ticket selling rather than the education than museums are closely tying themselves to pop-up experiences such as The Museum of Pizza or The Museum of Ice Cream. Both who state they are a multi-sensory immersive art installation based museum, that creates an experience that that fosters an environment that encourages social interactions and tech/internet-based connections to provide a fun, multi-sensorial experience across generations.

If this is the case, then what is to differ museums from theme parks and/or corporate entities. In fact, some museums already tip-toe that line by offering immersive experience based exhibits. Some examples of this are:

- In 2018 The Museum of New Zealand located in Te Papa Tongarewa, New Zealand that has incorporated simulation that takes visitors on a journey to explore a prehistoric New Zealand. [2018 past exhibitions. (2018, April 04)]
- The War Museum located in Sicily that puts visitors in a small, dark wartime bunker that vibrates and shakes to experience the feel of what it was like to be bombed during bombing raids of World War II. [TripAdvisor. (n.d.)]

Other museums have incorporated this on a slightly smaller scale by building IMAX, 3D-viewing theaters and offering audio and digital visual guides.

I believe that all the above translates to visitors wanting a holistic experience from museums. In today's society, people who go to museums want to go in order to experience multiple cultural, educating and entertaining elements. My observation is supported by [Brida, Meleddu, & Pulina (2012)] who states that there are two current trends that are taking place in the museum world today:

1. "Investing in creating social, recreational and participatory experiences that often redirects the traditional and singular focus on collections and exhibitions.
2. A movement away from museums as walled enclaves towards museums as parts of a cultural mosaic (architecture and design elements, programs outside museums, and a museum's relationship to its community). A fusion, of elements of popular (informal) and elite (formal) culture, form a wide-ranging cultural experience."

As museums continue to compete in this consumer, multicultural based landscape, it is important to take note of how funding and the size and/or reputation of a museum factors into this. Securing funding for any non-profit, cultural, or memory based organization/institution can be very difficult. Add on the new shift in the field to continually create new exhibits, programs and events that draw on the addition of participation activities, education, technology, and visual entertainment generates high costs and risk without a guaranteed return on investment.

For larger museums like AMNH, MoMa, The MET, etc. these risk and financial strain is mitigated on account of these institutions world-renowned status, high membership rate, and a constant cycle of donations and grant-based funding. Therefore, these larger institutions are more readily available to adapt to the new museology model than small or medium-sized museums. I think of museums like The American Folk Art, The New York City Fire Museum or The Tenant Museum, where for these institutions investing in some of the technology, festivals, and programs/exhibits mentioned above is not feasible which automatically places their future at risk. In order to compete these smaller museums need to consistently rely on social media, grant funding (national & state-based), and word of mouth.

Overall I believe museums play an important role as places that foster cultural diversity, education, sociability, discovery and curiosity, personal development, and preservation. I also believe that every individual's experience is different and subjective when it comes to what they get out of visiting the museum. This is important to keep in mind because no one museum can satisfy or meet every visitor's expectations. This is especially true in our consumerism based society where, as I have mentioned throughout this paper, traditionally museums were viewed as places for education, history and fine art, and not for social, fun and entertaining. However, I believe these two things do not have to be mutually exclusive; instead, museums can combine the two.

I know that the exhibits I have mentioned in this paper attempted to do so, but they missed the mark. These exhibits sacrificed the educational element in exchange for trendy, entertainment, and sociability. Focusing more on what is going to garner social media attention rather than the quality or level of new knowledge people will be able to engage with and learn.

Thankfully, I believe museums are starting to find ways to balance the two. A perfect example of this is the imagiNATIONS Activity Center at the National Museum of American Indian. This is a space created not only to entertain, encourage sociability, and promote a good time but also to educate and show visitors that the Native people were the original innovators of the Americas³. Every interactive activity within the space has an educational component to it that drives that message. Another example is the new Richard Gilder Center for Education that is currently being built at the American Museum of Natural History. This space will feature many of the elements incorporated into the imagiNATIONS Activity Center, that will allow visitors to learn in an interactive and fun setting.

Going forward I am curious as to how these new type of exhibits and centers will affect visitor demographics in terms of race. Through all of my research that is one data point that has yet to be taken into account or studied, and as cultural institutions I believe it is essential to not only worry about diversity in terms of international vs. domestic, age, and gender but race as well.

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