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## **Testing the Uses and Gratifications Approach to Museum Visiting: Adopting a Mediated Perspective in the Cultural Domain**

Lydia Ntamkarelou,<sup>1</sup> Philemon Bantimaroudis,<sup>1</sup> and Maria Economou<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece

<sup>2</sup>University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

### **About the Authors**

Lydia Ntamkarelou (M.A.) completed her postgraduate studies in Cultural Informatics at the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication of the University of the Aegean. She specializes in media and culture and has carried out research as well as planning for museum displays and digital applications. She has held posts in marketing strategy and communication.

Philemon Bantimaroudis is a Professor in the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication at the University of the Aegean. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, USA (1999). His research interests include media and culture, and political and international communication. Address correspondence to: Philemon Bantimaroudis,

Department of Cultural Technology and Communication, University of the Aegean,  
University Hill, Mytilene, 81100, Greece. Email: pbantima@aegean.gr.

**Maria Economou** is Lecturer in Museum Studies at the University of Glasgow, where she holds a joint appointment in the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII), School of Humanities, and the Hunterian Museum. Her research interests include digital heritage and museology, evaluation, and visitor studies.

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the motivations of museum visitors and some of the primary needs they seek to satisfy in their contact with museums. The authors used a survey conducted in three regional museums of the island of Lesbos in Greece to establish a hierarchy of visitor gratifications. The survey included questions about demographic information and asked visitors to rank their motives when visiting the museums. It was filled in by 416 visitors and was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The results showed that cultural and educational gratifications were significant motivations for visitation and were ranked higher than entertainment or escape motivations. Having a “cultural experience” was the primary reason visitors stated for visiting the museums. The study used a regression model to understand how the concept of cultural experience relates to demographic, educational, and motivational elements.

*Keywords:* uses and gratifications, cultural experience, museum visiting, visitor studies, visitor motivation, audience research

### **Testing the Uses and Gratifications Approach to Museum Visiting:**

#### **Adopting a Mediated Perspective in the Cultural Domain**

In the course of the past three decades, museums have been transformed at different levels. Museum missions have been reconsidered and redefined; museum experiences have been redesigned and multiplied to meet a variety of visitor needs. Museums have changed from being institutions that have safeguarded different perceptions of cultural heritage to progressively becoming educational, informational, and entertainment centers while providing multiple types of experiences to different segments of the public (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Black, 2012; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Macdonald & Alsford, 1991; Weil, 1990).

Although they now have to compete with popular culture industries with their vast resources and are under increasing pressure to offer entertaining experiences, their visitors also value their unique capacity to offer educational and information-oriented experiences. Education and information-related offerings are often described as “worthy” or “valuable” experiences, especially complementing formal education for children (Kotler, Kotler, & Kotler, 2008).

Museums experimented with educational and entertainment provisions two centuries ago, when the American museum pioneer Charles Willson Peale promoted the public museum he opened in Philadelphia in the 1780s as a place for “rational” amusement in contrast to other forms of popular entertainment (Miller, 1991, p. 422). He wanted to define his museum as a place of edifying diversion rather than raucous partying or idle entertainment (Miller, 1991). Although the definition of entertainment has changed drastically since then, Kotler and Kotler (2004) argue that the contemporary concept, *edutainment*, sets out to capture the same idea: attractive and entertaining presentation and design to facilitate educational goals.

Striking the right balance and remaining true to their mission is increasingly difficult for museums at times of socio-economic pressure when public funding is reduced and sustainability becomes crucial (Lowry, 2004). To answer increasing pressures to compete for visitors' free time and be more responsive to their needs, museums have started examining more systematically the motivations of their visitors and the reasons that bring them to their doors (or keep them away). Influenced by marketing practices, they were led to experiment with segmentation techniques for understanding their audiences and attempting to predict their behavior, which was usually based on demographic characteristics or observed behaviors (Rentschler, 1998).

Going deeper, beyond demographic categorization of visitors, several researchers (e.g., Doering & Pekarik, 1999; Falk, 2009; Falk & Dierking, 2012; Hood, 1988; Moussouri, 1997; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002) over the last two decades have independently studied aspects of visitors' motivation from various disciplinary perspectives adopting different theoretical frameworks and methods. These have emphasized and illuminated different facets, whether it was looking at particular subgroups, like families and their motivations for visiting (Moussouri, 1997) or reasons for staying away (Hood, 1998); the importance of informal and free-choice learning that museums can support (Packer & Ballantyne, 2002); the differences between the way museums view their visitors and the experiences that individuals find most satisfying in museums (Doering & Pekarik, 1999); the influence of the personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts on the museum experience (Falk & Dierking, 1992; 2012); or identity-related motivations (Falk, 2009; Falk & Dierking, 2012). However, what has not been explored so far in this field is an integration of media perspectives, in recognition of the increasingly mediated nature of both the museum experiences provided and the museum identities themselves. This is the area investigated by the study presented in this paper to examine whether a theory originally developed in media studies, uses and

gratifications, could be adapted to illuminate museum visitors' motivations in a way that would complement previous approaches.

### **The Mediated Museum**

As museums have become subject to the various transformations of the last decades, we contend that the experiences they provide and their overall identity have become more mediated in nature. That is, museums increasingly rely on different types of media to convey their stories while employing various digital platforms and multimedia in their exhibits, narratives, and interactions with visitors. Museums not only rely on digital media—from websites, audiovisuals, and virtual reality—to design and disseminate cultural experiences, but they have become media entities themselves as they engage in information gathering, generate content, and provide news of a segmented nature to cultural consumers. After some early studies (e.g., Hodge, D'Souza, & Riviere, 1979; Strong, 1983), the idea of examining the museum as a communicator has now become quite widespread in the cultural world (Henning, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 1995). This notion is further amplified by the way contemporary museums have incorporated digital technologies and spectacle in their exhibitions and other forms of communication (Kidd, 2014). As they explore their capacities for communication, museums discover that they can influence the content of news organizations, political stakeholders, and members of the public. For example, in a recent study, the authors assessed the ability of the Acropolis museum in Athens to influence the content of Greek and international newspapers with the intent of building its public image and esteem (Zakakis, Bantimaroudis, & Zyglidopoulos, 2015).

### **Aims and Context of the Project**

It is the changing identity of museums toward mediated experiences that prompts the current investigation. In this context, it is important to examine how people's motivations for visiting might be affected and reshaped by the new digital transformations. How are

motivations for visiting reconfigured and renegotiated in the new mediated museum? How is the relationship between the virtual and the real that visitors increasingly encounter in their museum experiences today affecting their reasons for visiting and the needs they seek to fulfill? To address complex questions of this kind effectively and illuminate areas of museum experiences interlocking with media experiences, it is important to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and to combine varied methods, as has been frequently argued in the visitor studies literature (Goulding, 2000). This is why it is useful to investigate the potential of media theory.

Through this study, we intend to accomplish two main goals:

(a) First, we intend to examine the potential of the uses and gratifications theory for studying the motivations of museum visitors by ranking museum uses and gratifications according to visitors' preferences, and;

(b) Second, we will identify and analyze the fundamental needs that visitors seek to satisfy in their contact with today's evolving cultural organizations.

We attempt to understand better what particular gratifications are sought by modern museum visitors and consider the implications of how museums respond to those needs while unfolding their strategies for cultural communication. Consider for example how museums disseminate audiovisual content through social media platforms for audiences visiting a virtual exhibition online; what particular needs are satisfied by these kinds of activities? And how is the nature of visitation evolving? What gratifications does the user of museum content acquire from such experiences?

The uses and gratifications theory emerged in the 1940s and was refined in the 1970s to explain basic needs and motivations for interaction with media content. The theory has received new attention in the digital media field. Reconsidering it in the context of museum and visitor studies seems a logical step. The uses and gratifications theory assumes that



audience members are not passive consumers of media; rather, the audience has power over their media consumption and assumes an active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). It views audiences as goal-oriented and free to use the media (or in this case, to visit the museum or use the media it produces) to satisfy certain wants and needs. This would translate well to constructivist approaches to museum visiting that stress the active construction of meaning by visitors.

Individuals have different expectations of their visits to museum settings. Some of the key questions we wanted to ask deal with what can we learn about the needs they seek to satisfy if we use the uses and gratifications theory: Does this help us synthesize the usually polarized dichotomy between educational and entertainment needs? Are there clear needs that are closely associated with museum visiting? Does this add to our understanding of visitor motivations? And how can museum professionals make sense of the related evidence in a constantly shifting environment, both socially and technologically, and extract useful lessons that they can apply in practice? Those practical lessons may be useful for museum managers as they seek to design their strategies for offering experiences that will generate visitors' attention without compromising their mission. We first examine the basic concepts of the uses and gratifications theory, relating these to the relevant literature on museum visitors' motivation, before outlining how we tested this in practice.

### **Motivations of Museum Visitors and the Uses and Gratifications Approach**

People visit museums for different reasons. Several researchers have tried to examine these and understand visitors' motivations (Doering & Pekarik, 1999; Hood, 1988; Merriman, 1991; Moussouri, 1997; Moussouri & Roussos, 2013; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 2011; Prentice, Davies, & Beeho, 1997).

Doering and Pekarik (1999) discussed four major categories of experiences that individuals find most satisfying in museums: (1) Social experiences, which center on one or

more other people, besides the visitor; (2) Object experiences, which give prominence to the artifact or the real thing; (3) Cognitive experiences, emphasizing the interpretive or intellectual aspects of the experience; and (4) Introspective experiences, which focus on the visitor's personal reflections, usually triggered by an object or a setting in the museum. The cognitive and social ones have similarities in the uses and gratification model, but the latter model covers several more experiences, like the affective ones not included in the Doering and Pekarik proposal.

Packer and Ballantyne (2002) grouped visitors' motivations in five categories: learning and discovery, passive enjoyment, restoration, social interaction, and self-fulfillment. When comparing three sites in Australia—a museum, an art gallery, and an aquarium—they found that respondents at the museum and art gallery rated learning and discovery goals as their most important reason for visiting.

Pine and Gilmore (2011) also proposed four experience-related realms that address needs related to the museum environment. The entertainment, educational, aesthetic, and escapist realms of experiences encompass a range of gratifications, from passive to active, and from immersion to absorption-oriented choices. The ability of the museum not only to educate but also entertain and offer escapism is recognized here. Their experiential approach partially converges with the uses and gratifications theory.

Falk (2013), noting the limitations of using visitor surveys to categorize visitors on the basis of demographics or psychographic tools, suggested that building and supporting personal identity is the primary driving motivation behind all museum visits. He proposed a model using identity as one of the main components in understanding visitors' motivations (Falk, 2009). Falk identified five categories of visitors reflecting one or more personal identity-related needs: explorers, facilitators, professional/hobbyists, experience seekers, and spiritual pilgrims (which he later renamed rechargers) (Falk, 2009), and later added another

two, affinity seekers and respectful pilgrims (Bond & Falk, 2012). Falk based his model mainly on extensive post-visit interviews which showed that these identity-related reasons for visiting museums are “a direct reflection on how the public currently perceives the attributes and affordances of museums; in other words, what the public perceives as the *right* reasons for visiting museums” (Falk, 2013, p. 118, original emphasis). The model was criticized for its consistency with identity theory, but also about the adequacy of the empirical evidence supporting it (Bickford, 2010; Dawson & Jensen, 2011; Rowe & Nickels, 2011).

Despite their limitations, these studies provide sound evidence for what drives visitation but do not effectively address the gradual transformation of museums toward media-oriented providers and recognition that museums’ redefined missions involve the design and dissemination of experiences. This experiential approach to museums’ missions generates media content for various audiences, even those who are not consistent museum visitors.

The way identities are confirmed and re-enacted during a museum visit was also examined by Stylianou-Lambert (2010). She used the three main paradigms identified by sociologists Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) to examine how museum audiences have been conceptualized in the past decades: (a) behavioral, (b) incorporation/resistance, and (c) spectacle/performance. Those three conceptualizations represent schools of thought that incorporate theories, models, and paradigms with additional explanatory power. They represent a holistic map that presents visitors’ motivational, identity, and performance traits while taking into account their varied capacities for cultural consumption.

The behavioral approach represents a school of thought with a primary focus on what influences human behavior. Behaviorism is interconnected with the development of media theory, as scholars have generated evidence of media influences on their audiences. In this context, the uses and gratifications approach was proposed in the 1970s reversing its central

question—not what the media do to people but what people do with the media (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The incorporation/resistance paradigm is linked to a prolific cultural studies tradition and is primarily represented by Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980), which describes a process of message encoding by dominant institutions while supporting the core idea of an established cultural hierarchy before the messages are subject to decoding processes by various public segments (Smith & Riley, 2008). In other words, people interpret messages differently as they try to acquire meaning that serves their personal needs and aesthetics. As a result, only members of the dominant culture have the necessary codes (or cultural capital, according to Bourdieu [Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991]) to be able to decode these messages.

The spectacle/performance paradigm proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) involves the notion that audiences are socially constructed and reconstructed and that individuals assume different roles in a world of spectacle and performance. The ideas of identity construction and of a diffused audience that actively selects from endless messages what to accept and modify to fit their sense of identity have become increasingly popular in museum-related literature. “People are able to use the symbolic power of these visual signs in order to perform their identities. In this way, they are simultaneously members of an audience (*cultural consumers*) and performers (*cultural producers*)” (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010, p. 135, original emphasis).

We chose to examine visitation through the empirical approach while borrowing key elements from the major schools of thought we have described. Although we recognize the value of established perspectives, like, for example, Falk’s identity conceptualization, we have stressed that modern visitors treat certain museum experiences as media experiences. In this respect, we wanted to evaluate the potential of using a tool originally developed for media-oriented assessments.

The pioneers of the uses and gratifications theory, media theorists Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973, pp. 166-167) examined 35 needs satisfied by the media, which they classified in five categories: (1) cognitive, (2) affective, (3) personal integrative, (4) social integrative, and (5) tension release. The different uses and gratifications associated with each category of needs are briefly described as follows:

**Cognitive needs.** People satisfy their need for information and news seeking with a wider appetite for education. Certain segments of the public display a life-long need for knowledge as they are intellectually curious about different topics. For example, in this category belongs a person visiting a museum with the intent of satisfying a learning need by, for instance, seeking new knowledge in the form of archeological tours, or art or history seminars.

**Affective needs.** People satisfy a wide range of emotional needs. They become exposed to different types of content to acquire emotional satisfaction. For example, a person might seek stories or narratives that have an emotional appeal. Although affective gratifications have been linked primarily to popular culture—such as television and cinema—museums have also been investing in these types of experiences because they are sought after by large segments of the public as people report a need to feel something or to experience a strong emotion.

**Personal integrative needs.** This category of needs is linked to self-understanding and self-reassurance. People use media content to confirm their well-being, to seek self-improvement, and for self-validation. For example, people read personal improvement books as they seek to understand their character and personality. Even reading literature fulfills a personal integrative need as we follow the development of the book's characters and make connections with ourselves.

**Social integrative needs.** People are by nature social beings. Their socialization at different levels is extremely important for the well-being of individuals. Understanding different roles in various social settings, such as family, work environment, and society, often satisfies a socialization process. For example, watching a movie or a game helps a person to be a part of a team because of a common interest. People share content in such a way that allows them to forge relationships. Furthermore, museums have evolved as meeting places. Their coffee places are often promoted as the ideal environment for people to have their meetings as they create networks of friendships and collaboration.

**Tension-free needs.** Very often individuals need just to relax and escape from daily routines and burdens accumulated from daily responsibilities. They may resort to media to relax and relieve tension. Popular television is often described as a medium that helps people to escape from the daily burdens of life.

The uses and gratifications approach constitutes a useful catalogue of human behaviors. Does it provide additional explanatory power in the museum context? Stylianou-Lambert (2010) points in that direction while examining museums as modern communicators. Furthermore, the widespread use of the internet and digital media has revitalized the active audience tradition—the notion that consumers interact with media messages not just as passive recipients but as users, gamers, producers, and promoters of content. The development of scholarly interest with regards to internet and digital media and the needs they satisfy reorient our explorations in terms of digital cultures and digital representation. As modern museums engage in new forms of communication, including social media, blogs, audiovisual production, and visitation from a distance through digital tools, uses and gratifications of museum content is expected to generate not just new catalogues of needs but different forms of interaction and satisfaction.

### **Research Questions**

Based on this analysis, we posed three primary research questions in order to test the applicability of the uses and gratifications approach in practice:

**Research Question 1:** How do museum visitors rank different experiences as they evaluate the uses and gratifications they derive from their visit?

**Research Question 2:** What is the relative importance of entertainment in relation to information and knowledge acquisition?

**Research Question 3:** What particular traits and attributes are related to the “cultural experience” construct described by visitors?

Packer and Ballantyne (2016) acknowledge the difficulty in defining and measuring the visitor experience and proposed a model that offers a way of characterizing both its content and intensity. Cultural experience, in this instance, refers to how visitors experience “the activities, physical surroundings, service providers, other customers, companions, and other elements they engage with” (Chang & Horng, 2010). Using Packer and Ballantyne’s (2016) model, we try to define here the cultural experience concept. Although not clearly stated by visitors how this was understood, it is likely that their interpretation of it was both as a point in time (when they carried out the specific visit to the particular museum), and an accumulation of events over time; additionally, this was an experience that was distinguishable from the everyday flow of consciousness. As the exact conceptualization of cultural experience by visitors was not clear, we tried to unpack this construct and understand the variables that affect it.

## **Method**

### **Museums Included in the Survey**

A survey was conducted on the premises of three regional museums of Lesbos, the third largest island of Greece, located in the northeastern part of the Aegean Sea: The Archaeological Museum of Mytilene, the Natural History Museum of the Lesbos Petrified

Forest, and the Municipal Gallery of Mytilene. These cultural organizations were chosen as they represent the most recognizable cultural organizations on the island. Furthermore, they are peripheral organizations, deprived of the advantages displayed by similar organizations located in large metropolitan areas. In terms of the location, Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos, represents a semi-urban setting of about 35,000 people, and the island has a total population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants. The museums we examined have fewer than 30 employees each, a yearly visitation that does not exceed 30,000 visitors, and are subject to seasonality factors as their visitation peaks during the summer months.

Most of the museum visitation takes place during the summer months as tourists, both from continental Greece and abroad, arrive in Lesvos for their summer vacation. The island has a rich history spanning a period of more than 3,000 years with various cultural sites displaying findings of prehistoric, classical antiquity, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern Greek interests. Furthermore, Lesvos is the home of a unique, globally-recognized petrified forest, located in the western part of the island. The archaeological museum is located in the city center, housing significant artifacts, especially from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Arguably, the three cultural organizations included in the survey manage some of the most significant collections of the island's cultural heritage, covering diverse subject areas and addressing the diverse nature of visitors' segmented interests. They also represent three different types of museum governance, with the Archaeological Museum of Mytilene being state-run and part of the central government's network of museums managed by the Greek Ministry of Culture, the Municipal Gallery of Mytilene being run by the local authority, and the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest managed as an independent non-profit organization.



### **Questionnaire Design**

After defining specific uses and gratifications derived from the literature, a questionnaire was designed and pre-tested on the premises of the three museums (Appendix). Visitors' comments were taken into account in the revised version of the instrument. The questionnaire identified uses and gratifications related with the visit itself while visitors were on the premises of the three museums. Data were gathered and variables were constructed based on evaluative assessments provided by museum visitors. The questionnaire included categorical items and ordinal and interval variables designed using a Likert-type scale, a standard measurement device in the context of uses and gratifications analyses. The scale included five levels ranging from minimum to maximum agreement or satisfaction. To assess the overall reliability of questionnaire items, we measured Cronbach's Alpha, which registered at acceptable levels (0.805).

### **Sample Selection**

The questionnaires were distributed on the premises of the three organizations during the tourist season, July - September of 2012. A sample of 416 of visitors filled out the questionnaire. The interviewer used the method of sampling described by Miles, Alt, Gosling, Lewis, and Tout (1988). This "yields a representative and unbiased sample of a defined target population" (p. 155) and involves arranging the interviewer to count people as they enter the museum or cross a specific point and then selecting the  $k$ th visitor to be interviewed, starting with a random number between 1 and  $k$ . Although strictly speaking "the sampling procedure is not random, since it does not give all possible samples of size  $n$  from the survey population of size  $N$  an equal chance of being selected ... we can regard the method as approximately equivalent to simple random sampling if we assume there is no 'order' in which people visit an exhibition" (Miles et al., 1988, p. 155).

Because in strict statistical terms, the sample is not randomly selected and derives from small-scale regional museums in Greece, caution is required before generalizing the results to other museum settings or populations. Nevertheless, the sample is relatively large and diverse, allowing us to draw some meaningful preliminary conclusions, which can be followed up in future studies. Among the participants, 355 (85.3%) were first time visitors and 61 had visited more than once (14.7%). Based on visitors' availability to participate in this survey, 304 (73.1%) questionnaires were distributed on the premises of the Archeological Museum, 67 (16.1%) in the Municipal Gallery, and 45 questionnaires (10.8%) in the Natural History Museum.

### **Analysis of the Data**

To analyze the data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. For statistical purposes, data were checked for the independence of observations and multicollinearity. For the regression analysis, highly correlated variables were dropped from the model to eliminate potential sources of multicollinearity and improve the model's overall goodness-of-fit.

### **Visitor Profile**

The questions that visitors answered provided evidence for the following characteristics of the sample. These were used to assess differences in relation to museum uses and gratifications:

**Gender:** A nominal scale, demographic variable.

**Age:** An ordinal scale, demographic variable.

**Level of Education:** An ordinal scale, demographic variable.

**Previous Visitation:** A control, interval scale variable used to investigate patterns of repeated visitation at the three museums.

**Personal needs variables.** Four variables represent types of personal needs derived from the uses and gratification literature that we assumed were primary factors under investigation in the context of museum visitation: **Escape/Entertainment**, **Personal Relationships/Socialization**, **Personal Identity**, and **News/Information** seeking. An additional variable, **Education**, represents a use and gratification related to the museum's role as provider of informal education. **Cultural Experience** encompasses perceived uses and gratifications, identity, and cultural capital as different visitors assign value to their visitation experience. It describes a generic type of experience often cited by visitors as something they try to satisfy. Although we tried to define this using Packer and Ballantyne's (2016) model, visitors did not define this as clearly. This seems to be a construct encompassing multiple traits that we tried to identify. We assumed that it is related both to the uses and gratifications tradition and to concepts emerging from other theoretical fields.

Uses and gratifications, including education and cultural experience, were measured through a five-point scale as respondents were asked to evaluate their experiences during their visit at the museums (see Appendix). In other words, they were asked to rate the value of each gratification according to what they perceived as significant.

## Results

### Visitor Profile

From a total of 416 visitors who filled out a questionnaire, there were 169 (40.6%) men and 247 (59.4%) women. The largest age group was in the 45-54 age bracket (24.8%), followed by the 35-44 bracket (17.8%). The sample is not equally divided among men and women but is consistent with other visitor surveys from around the world, which show that the majority of museum visitors are usually female and favor the 45-54 age bracket (Falk, 2013). Of the 416 visitors, 229 were of Greek origin (55.0%) and 187 were foreign visitors (44.7%); the high percentage of foreign visitors is not surprising given that the data collection

was undertaken during the tourist season. This might also reflect anecdotal evidence that the museums on the island are not visited frequently by the locals nor are there high numbers of repeat visits. In terms of education, most visitors interviewed were highly educated, a finding that reflects other visitor studies that show that museum visitors are better educated than the average population (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978; DiMaggio, Useem, & Brown, 1977; Falk, 2013; Kirchberg, 1996; Merriman, 1991).

### **Visitors' Uses and Gratifications**

We used two descriptive indices to rank participants' uses and gratifications. First, since respondents rated their uses and gratifications on a scale from 1 (*minimum satisfaction*) to 5 (*maximum satisfaction*), we ranked uses and gratifications based on average responses.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Second, we ranked participants' responses using a different descriptive index. We recorded the percentage of visitors who gave a 5 (*maximum satisfaction*)—the highest evaluation—to each of the uses and gratifications. This scheme gave the following results: 53.6% of the respondents gave the highest mark to cultural experience, followed by 36.5% and 27.4% for news/information seeking and education.

Insert Figure 2 about here

As Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, cultural experience, news/information seeking, and education were the most prominently ranked uses and gratifications by the museum visitors surveyed. Arguably, these traits belong primarily in the rational dimension of gratifications. Our data demonstrate that rational entertainment, namely education, news/information seeking, and cultural experience, are ranked as most important compared to popular entertainment uses and gratifications, such as escape/entertainment and personal relationships. We conducted a *t* test between the most representative uses—escape/entertainment and news/information seeking—to assess a mean difference. The need

to escape or to be entertained corresponds with the primary gratification sought by popular media—especially television. It is fundamentally different from seeking news, knowledge, or information in general. The former is related to more passive users or viewers while the latter represents active seekers of information. We chose to compare those two primary uses and gratifications that are linked to fundamentally different needs and arguably very different segments of consumers and visitors. Average responses differ for the two constructs (3.55 for escape/entertainment vs. 4.09 for news/information seeking). The data indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in mean responses between the two uses and gratifications, as visitors on average reported that they visit museums primarily for news/information seeking purposes rather than for escape or entertainment experiences. On the other hand, despite lower ranks than rational gratifications, diversion- and escape-related gratifications are not of marginal significance. Escape ranks slightly higher than personal relationships, which indicates that some visitors seek popular experiences in museum settings.

Finally, we explored the cultural experience construct. The uses and gratifications paradigm does not refer to such a notion. Our survey showed that cultural experience registered as the most prominent need that museum visitors seek to satisfy. To assess the cultural experience construct, we designed a regression model to analyze some of the factors related to it. The model included both demographic characteristics—gender, age, and level of education—and uses and gratifications—news/information seeking, education, personal identity, personal relationships, and escape/entertainment.

Insert Table 1 about here

Although the  $R^2$  is low (0.156), indicating that the model does not include other independent variables that would increase its explanatory power, the following variables registered as statistically significant: age, education, personal identity, and news/information

seeking. This result indicates that the cultural experience construct seems to be related to several traits such as demographic factors (age seems to be related with this particular gratification) and personal needs variables, such as education, news/information seeking, and personal identity.

### **Discussion**

In this paper we employed a media theory perspective while asking people to evaluate and rank different types of experiences to draw evidence about people's motives when visiting museum environments. In the introduction and literature review we explained that museums are currently undergoing processes of transformation while increasingly becoming education and entertainment centers. Furthermore, they communicate with their audience by providing many experiences, some of which are increasingly mediated.

The uses and gratifications paradigm outlines several types of needs satisfied by modern museums. Some of those experiences can be described as "rational" (using Peale's terminology) or "cognitive" (drawing from the uses and gratifications perspective). The latter category includes primarily education and news/information seeking as visitors' needs satisfied by museums. On the other hand, the popular entertainment category pertains primarily to a culture of spectacle, involving people's need for escape and entertainment.

In the current study we ranked visitors' uses and gratifications based on their perceived importance as they were rated by visitors to three regional museum on the island of Lesbos, Greece. Our results indicate that first people seek cultural experiences followed by news/information seeking and education. Escape/entertainment and personal relationships were ranked as the least significant uses and gratifications derived from a museum visit. Those constructs merit additional scrutiny because of the changing nature of modern museums. The current findings indicate that these regional museums in Greece primarily appeal to audience segments seeking cultural/educational experiences rather than

entertainment/escape gratifications. Perhaps this is related to the nature of regional organizations, which often lack the resources to design and offer multiple experiences of different kinds. Comparing two fundamentally different needs—escape/entertainment and news/information seeking—demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the two constructs. However, it is noteworthy that despite the mean differences in the importance visitors assigned to each function, both components of rational and popular choices registered as important. This picture might change and visitors' needs might shift as organizations keep adapting in terms of the experiences they provide.

These findings merit additional attention in the context of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital as visitors seek particular experiences to acquire additional symbolic assets. If this is the case, the uses and gratifications perspective can be scrutinized in conjunction with Bourdieu's (1984) analysis providing interesting insights into visitors' motivations as well as gratifications. Bourdieu documents that sometimes investing in a particular experience—especially one that requires previous knowledge and familiarization—is perceived as accumulating more cultural capital versus widely accessible experiences from the popular entertainment categories.

What can cultural managers learn from this exercise? Arguably, the first noteworthy lesson deals with the value of rational or cognitive experiences. Museums retain a strategic advantage as experience providers, maintaining a loyal following of visitors seeking knowledge, news, and various types of new information. Enhancing the value of rational experiences will keep attracting to their premises people with higher education, people who are older, and those seeking information and education-related cultural products.

The same findings are perhaps also an indication that these museums do not do enough in terms of providing experiences closer to popular entertainment that would attract larger segments with different demographic characteristics. One of the major future

challenges for museums in general, not just regional ones, is re-defining their mission and seeking strategies for opening up to new communities, including non-traditional museum goers. Along with generating the resources for designing different types of content and organizing events aimed at segments of the population that do not traditionally identify themselves as museum visitors, the biggest challenge is finding the right balance between entertainment and education without losing their character. This has been a long-standing debate in the museum field (already from Peale's time) which followed the gradual shift of the museum from content authority and keeper of valuable collections to a more open and participatory model stressing its public education and outreach role and acknowledging that entertainment is a vital part of the social experience of the visit (Anderson, 2004; Cameron, 1971; Hein, 2000; Weil, 2002).

Exploring sustainable and appropriate ways of placing themselves as edutainment providers seems to be a strategy for museums that merits careful consideration. The greatest challenge of all would be retaining a dominant rational component while adding a secondary entertainment dimension, as most authors agree that this is a polarizing dichotomy and that museums should strive to "meet a diversity of visitor needs, creating both exhibitions that attain the highest standards of intellectual excellence and integrity, and exhibitions that seek to pique the interest and generalized understandings of diverse audiences" (Falk, 2016).

Finally, we explored cultural experiences as a construct sought after and highly rated by museum visitors. Cultural experiences seem to correlate to four parameters: age, education, personal identity, and news/information seeking. The four variables that emerged as significant from our regression analysis indicate they are factors that influence perceived cultural experiences sought in a regional museum environment. In other words, the regional museums included in the survey provide cultural experiences sought by people who, as they get older, seek supplementary forms of education and more information and strive to



understand themselves through the experiences they choose to expose themselves to. Understanding oneself is a key concept in the uses and gratifications tradition described as personal integrative or personal identity needs. This particular construct seems to converge with Falk's work on visitors' motivations (Falk, 2009, 2013). The regression results indicate that cultural experiences were not linked to other demographic characteristics or popular forms of experience—such as escape/entertainment and personal relationships. It seems that cultural experience is a complex construct involving traits primarily of the rational experience category. In addition, personal identity may be linked to both the rational and popular types of experiences. The uses and gratifications tradition points toward the direction that understanding ourselves is a lifelong human endeavor pursued through all types of experiences, activities, and possible gratifications. As people use various forms of media content to understand themselves, a museum visit is seen to contribute not only in terms of cultural knowledge but also at a personal level, as visitors seek an understanding of themselves. Cultural managers and especially curators and exhibition teams designing both rational and popular experiences should be continuously addressing this question: How do they help visitors to better understand themselves? From an organizational perspective, this might become implemented through collecting information about visitors' perceived identities in an effort to subsequently satisfy personal integrative needs.

### **Limitations**

This research was carried out on the premises of three small regional museums, relying primarily on seasonal visitors during the summer months. For these reasons, we are hesitant to generalize any of our findings to other cultural settings. Our findings serve as an initial discussion of museum uses and gratifications. Future studies should further explore visitors' ranking of museum uses and gratifications, drawing conclusions about divergent ranking results, while explaining segmented perceptions of valuable museum gratifications.

Furthermore, notions of cultural experience may be defined differently in local, national, or international contexts. Such findings might be useful for the implementation of museum strategies in a constantly changing museum environment that offers a variety of new museum experiences. Our findings will, we hope, help practitioners better visualize and reflect on visitors' gratifications. Providing a map or a typology of motivations can enhance planning and implementation. As more case studies are tested using this approach from a variety of museum contexts (such as type of collections and subject matter, size and location of museum, and interpretation approach) and a larger body of evidence is built, it would be possible to expand further on these initial maps of gratifications and provide useful tools for both theorists and practitioners.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

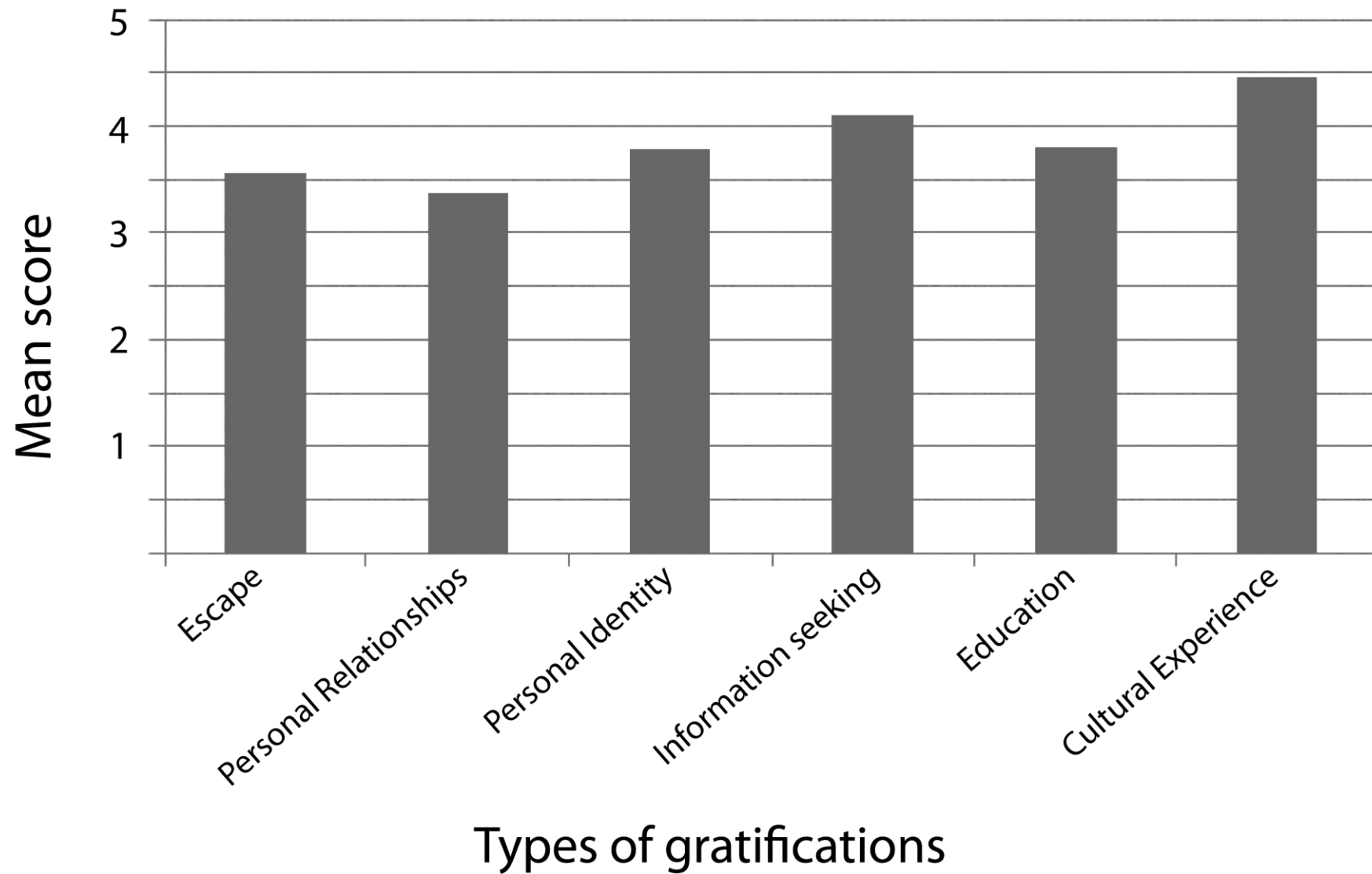
The objective of this project is to evaluate the type and the quality of visitors' museum experiences. Please take a few minutes to answer the questions below. I appreciate your help.

- 1) Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
- 2) Age: ☐ 15-17 years ☐ 18-24 years ☐ 25-34 years ☐ 35-44 years  
☐ 45-54 years ☐ 55-64 years ☐ 65 and more
- 3) Visitor from abroad ☐  
 Visitor from Greece ☐
- 4) Education: No schooling ☐  
 Primary schooling ☐  
 High school ☐  
 University/Technical Education ☐  
 Masters degree or higher ☐
- 5) How many times have you visited this museum? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Evaluate your experience during your visit at the museum using the the scale below. Use a checkmark  for every item below. [For the following items, participants were asked to rate their agreement using a scale that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).]

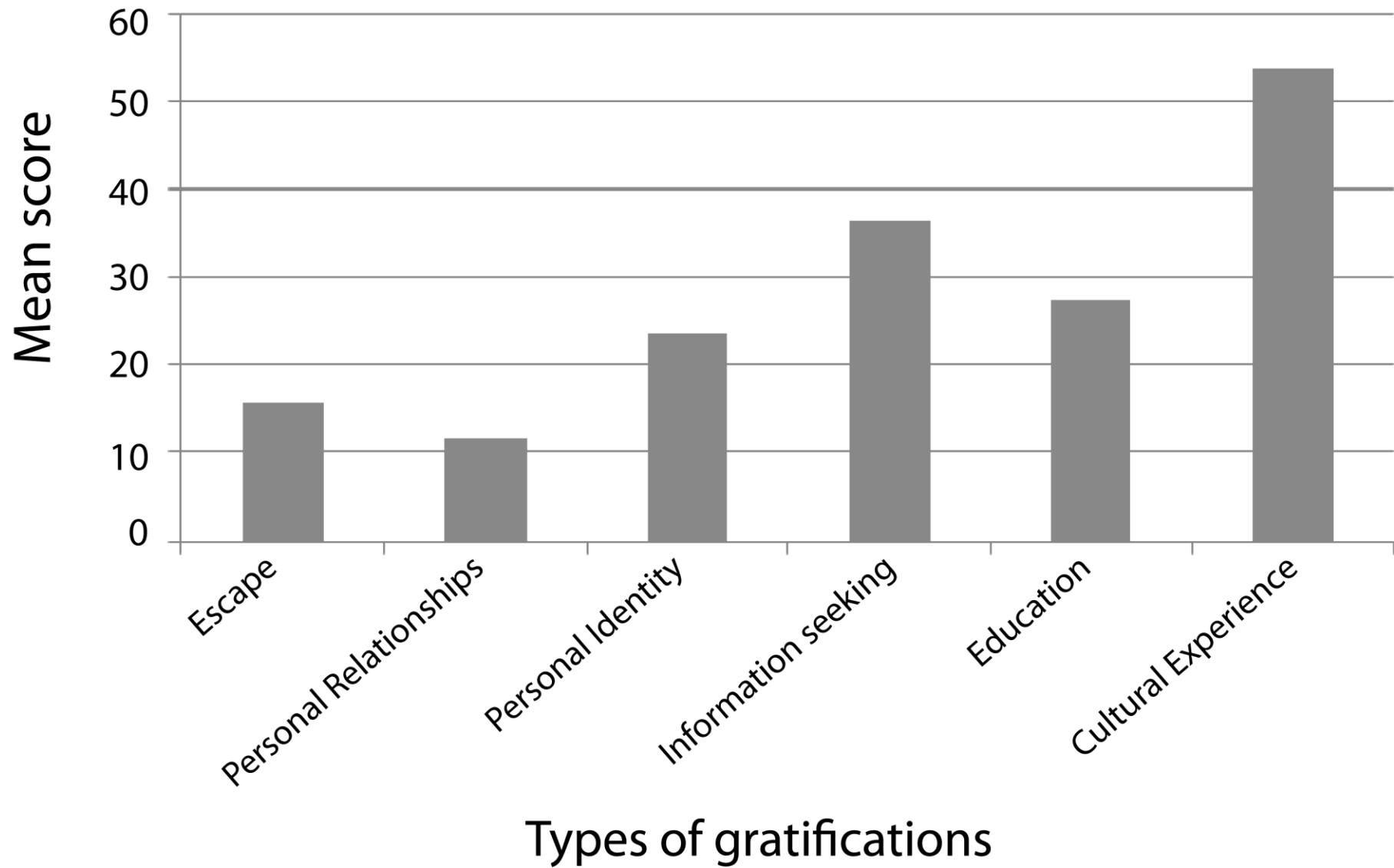
*Basic visitor's experience:*

- **Escape/Entertainment** (escape from everyday life, going out with friends or family members)
- **Personal relations /Socialize** (strengthening interpersonal relations through museum activities, interacting with other people and museum personnel)

- **Personal identity** (Because of my cultural experience I understand myself better)
- **News/Information seeking** (I find information about the exhibits, or news and information about the museum -- organized events, etc. )
- **Education** (Educational programs organized by an educational institution in collaboration with the museum)
- **Cultural experience** (expand my knowledge on cultural matters – e.g. I learn to appreciate art)



**Figure 1.** Average ranking of museum uses and gratifications by participants ( $N = 416$ ). Scores ranged from 1 (*minimal agreement*) to 5 (*maximum agreement*).



**Figure 2.** Percentage of visitors with the highest ranking of museum uses and gratifications ( $N = 416$ ).

**Table 1****Results of Regression Model Analyzing Factors Related to the Cultural Experience Construct ( $N = 416$ )**

| Variable                 | Coefficient | SE   | Beta  | <i>t</i> | Sig. |
|--------------------------|-------------|------|-------|----------|------|
| Constant                 | 2.200       | .280 |       | 7.854    | .000 |
| Gender                   | .085        | .064 | .062  | 1.340    | .181 |
| Age                      | .040        | .021 | .089  | 1.899    | .058 |
| Level of Education       | .150        | .038 | .186  | 3.975    | .000 |
| Escape                   | -.008       | .033 | -.013 | -.250    | .803 |
| Personal Relationships   | .045        | .035 | .068  | 1.283    | .200 |
| Personal Identity        | .085        | .035 | .123  | 2.418    | .016 |
| News/Information Seeking | .172        | .040 | .218  | 4.257    | .000 |
| Education                | .047        | .036 | .067  | 1.303    | .193 |
| R Square = .156          |             |      |       |          |      |
| Adjusted R Square = .140 |             |      |       |          |      |