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# DEVELOPING EMOTIONS: PERCEPTIONS OF EMOTIONAL RESPONSES IN MUSEUM VISITORS

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## ABSTRACT

The role of museums and heritage venues is a multifaceted one; they have (or are expected to have) a certain amount of social responsibility, in the context of communicating information to the visiting public. The manner of presentation and interpretation of their objects, spaces or history can have a significant impact on the visitor. This extends to how the visitor engages, both physically, mentally, and emotionally with the items on display, or the venue / location itself, and the interpretative tools and systems. This paper seeks to explore the role that emotions can play within museum and heritage interpretative and interactive tools and systems, considering the expectations of both visitors and professionals in relation to emotional engagement. The study drew on surveys to create a picture of the expectations and perceptions of both the visitors and the professionals. By assessing this data, with reference to the extant literature, it was possible to determine the similarities in the expectations from visitors, and museum and heritage professionals. At the same time, the study provided insight into some of the potential issues regarding interpretation and interpretative tools within these contexts.

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**KEYWORDS:** Interpretation, Museum, Emotions, Customer Satisfaction, Learning, Experience, Affect

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

From recent studies within the cultural and heritage sector, it is apparent that the role of emotion in terms of learning, experience and customer satisfaction is strongly represented (Alelis et al. 2013). Emotions are key to understanding customer satisfaction (del Chiappa et al. 2014). The growing trend towards customer orientation means that museums need to address their features and objects directly to the individual. However, the question arises as to whether both sides of this exchange are operating on the same assumptions and expectations.

In theory, by engaging in this dialogue, the visitor is presented with a more personalised experience, and an experience that is ultimately more satisfying (Gadsby 2011). Passive reception of information is no longer viewed in the same light, and there is a desire to avoid such situations wherever possible (Falk and Dierking 2000).

The idea that museums are in the “experience business” is well established (Gadsby 2011). By improving such experiences, the museum adds value for the visitor. The interest between visitors and museums indicates that audiences want to feel connections between themselves and the environment they are experiencing. These connections take the form of both intellectual and emotional experiences. Emphasis is placed more heavily on positive emotions and emotional experiences (Bigné and Andreu 2004). However, initial observations based on survey data suggest that certain emotional responses are common regardless of visitor context.

By determining if there is correlation between the emotional approaches of the museum and the visitor, we can develop models that offer more personalised experiences. By doing so the risks of indifference and overstimulation could be reduced, instead offering improvements the visitors’ overall experience.

## 2. THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS

Emotions have been recognised as a core aspect of human evolution, behaviour and learning, especially in relation to development of memories (Turner 2011). More recently, it is apparent that the studies of emotions, especially in relation to the leisure and tourism industries, are increasingly important. Emotions are studied in relation to marketing and other such areas (Bigné and Andreu 2004). Within the specific museum and heritage context, it is demonstrable that social factors influence emotions, i.e. exploring as a group (Camarero-Izquierdo et al. 2009). The importance of integrated approaches is also stressed, by combining elements from a variety of systems that emphasis on emotional and cognitive approaches (Bigné and Andreu 2004: 683; Camarero-Izquierdo et al. 2009).

### 2.1 Defining Emotions

Defining emotions is complicated by the use of alternative terms, such as feeling, mood, temperament, desire and affect, which are sometimes used interchangeably across different studies.

Emotions can be defined as intentional actions, ambiguous, of high intensity, and of brief duration (de Rojas and Camarero 2008). Synonymous terms are frequently used in different studies, distinguishing between anger or rage, or happiness, joy or elation means it is difficult to untangle precise meanings and determine if they are equivalent (Ortony and Turner 1990).

In contrast, feelings, though similar differ somewhat, they are longer lasting and repeatable (Plutchik 1980). Moods again are related yet longer lasting than emotions, but can impact greatly on our memories of situations (de Rojas and Camarero 2008). Temperament indicates personal predispositions to specific feelings, for example consider optimists versus pessimists (Plutchik 1980). Questions over aspects such as desire do appear in the studies. For example, Ortony and Turner (1990) discuss whether interest should be excluded from lists of emotions due to its nature as a cognitive state, and therefore a desire rather than a true emotion. Other studies offer very different interpretations (see Damasio 2000). According to Munro (2014), whilst emotions are mental experiences, affect can influence both physical and mental aspects, combining to form a greater experience.

### 2.2 Museums and emotions

Museums (and other cultural heritage organisations) can be viewed as being stable, safe, pleasant spaces with a certain amount of social responsibility (Janes 2007: 139). The differences in attitudes, expectations and responses mean that museums and heritage locations need to be able to cater to a broad range of visitors (Munro 2014: 54). However, visitors will have very different needs and expectations, and may react to objects and locations in unique, and sometimes unexpected, ways (Antoniou and Lepouras 2010). Their reasons for visiting a location may be very different (Gadsby 2011: 2-3, Table 1). Visitor methods in moving around museum and heritage spaces also differs (Veron and Lévassieur 1989; Tam 2008). Such studies can be used to inform developments in interaction in museum and heritage contexts. Personalisation, with the emphasis on giving control to the visitor, is seen as a primary method of improving interaction opportunities (Bandelli 2010: 150). The extent and complexity of personalisation options is discussed by Antoniou and Lepouras (2010). Technology can offer greater opportunities for personal engagement, through the use of systems

such as audio guides, multimedia kiosks, podcasts, mobile apps, etc. (Marty 2009: 134; Pallud and Monod 2010: 562).

### 2.3 Issues

However, most responses within the contexts discussed here are described as “natural, unprompted and unexpected” (Gadsby 2011). There is a fear that visitor experiences can become artificially scripted, with the organisation guiding and shaping how audiences view and respond to the scenarios and material presented at an unnatural level. Manipulation, indifference and overstimulation are recognised as potential problems when developing new spaces (Alelis et al. 2013; Gadsby 2011).

*Dumbing Down:* It is based on the assumption that if it is entertaining, it is dumbing down the material from the perspective of the audience, in what could be described as a patronising manner, and that it does not offer the same educational opportunities (Kelly 2007: 277-278).

*Manipulation:* That museum and heritage displays are shaped and scripted to tell a story. Narratives are not uncommon within the historically focused sector. However, this idea of manipulating visitors to have prescribed and encouraged responses both intellectually and emotionally is something which is viewed with trepidation by many (Gadsby 2011: 4). The line between encouraging and shaping emotions is very fine (Munro 2014: 52). The principal concern relates to visitor engagement, making them a passive audience, rather than a reactive one (Gadsby 2011: 4-5).

*Indifference:* Alelis et al. (2013: 436) discussed the results from their study that addressed the indifferent observations noted when viewing some objects, in that the visitors felt no emotional response to the item on display. It is important to note that these observations appear to have originated in instances where similar items appeared many times, or was one previously seen by the participant (both during study or on an earlier occasion (Alelis et al. 2013)) This issue of repetition is important to address. The implications, that visitors need constant new stimuli to continue feeling emotional responses, is something that could perhaps be addressed through the growing trend towards personalisation of viewing experiences (Antoniou and Lepouras, 2010).

*Overstimulation / Museum Fatigue:* Fears concerning the overstimulation of visitors are present. In this instance, the visitor can be overwhelmed by the environment or the material on display (object satiation), so that they no longer recognise what is important (Falk and Dierking 2011: 61; Gadsby 2011: 9). According to Allen (2007: 44-45) this is a particular problem for those institutions with involved exhibits or displays – where

the level of engagement is high; concentration span in these cases is only around 30 minutes.

## 3. THE STUDY

Questions arise when we consider how emotions relate to exhibition and display development. Do emotions play a significant role in how these are created? Are museums specifically targeting certain emotional responses?

The study was conducted in July 2015 (for 10 days), and was targeted at both visitors and professionals via an online survey (Qualtrics), and this was supplemented with interviews with museum and heritage staff. It was distributed via mailing lists, social media and trusted proxies. The key function for the survey was to supply data that could be used to explore the core research questions concerning the expectations and perceptions of emotions within museum and heritage environments. In addition, data was also sought concerning *how* visitors engaged with their surroundings in terms of the type and usefulness of the interpretation methods offered. Respondents were invited to comment on a variety of organisations relating to museums and heritage: museums, galleries, historic buildings, historic gardens and landscapes, archaeological sites and monuments, and archives.

It is clear from the current research that emotions and emotional responses are a personal experience. Yet at the same time, they are a necessary part in the development of memories and in learning.

The survey data consisted of two main strands of questions; one for those currently working within the museum and heritage field (137 responses), and one for visitors (190) to these types of organisation. These two reports comprise the basis of the survey analysis. No restrictions were placed upon participants. Participants were logged in all age categories, though perhaps not unexpectedly responses from individuals in the “75 or Over” option were minimal (1); those in the “24 and Under” were similarly low (6). All other categories were well represented, the 25-34 age group providing the most participants (108). Biases were also seen in the representation of gender. Only 12% (39) of the participants were male. There was a broad geographical spread, with sixteen countries across three continents represented. There was some bias shown here, with over half of the participants originating in North America (USA and Canada).

For the purposes of clarity, the partial responses (106) are not included in the discussion presented here. A summary of the survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

### 3.1 Hypotheses

The study sought to address the following research questions and hypotheses.

1. Do visitors and professionals have the same expectations regarding emotions and emotional engagement within museum and heritage environments?
  - a. That professionals and visitors have the same expectations regarding emotions, engagement and interactions during museum and heritage experiences.
  - b. That there is a dissonance between the expectations and actual experiences of museum and heritage visitors.
2. To what extent do emotions contribute, or are perceived to contribute, to visitor satisfaction, engagement and education?
  - a. That emotional engagement is viewed as a positive asset to museum and heritage experiences.

By exploring the avenues and issues relating to the role of emotions and emotional engagement within museum and heritage contexts it should be possible to determine the value in such endeavours, and consider the relationship between engagement, and interpretation tools and systems to a certain extent. The differences in the presentation of content can have a significant impact on a visitor's understanding and enjoyment of an experience; and this can be demonstrated through the current research available on this subject. The question as to whether it can have an impact on a visitor's emotional engagement is less certain; as determining how people will connect emotionally is a difficult aspect to measure (Franks 2013: 10).

### 3.2 Analysis

The survey, as stated, was run through Qualtrics. Initial compilation of the results was run through this software. Incomplete surveys were removed from the summaries of the data, through the use and application of appropriate filters. The filter options were also used to subdivide the results into professional and visitor responses. The results were then downloaded for analysis; responses were assessed to determine the primary trends / proportions in terms of the answers provided. Due to the format of the questions this was felt to be an appropriate approach. The comments were exported to nVivo for thematic analysis. Responses were coded based on the focus, nature and key words within the comments and subdivided into categories.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From an emotional perspective, these expectations extend to the types of emotion anticipated by both professionals and visitors. From the surveys, data

was gathered on these and trends were clearly identifiable (see Table I). The emphasis was firmly placed upon interest, curiosity and inspiration in the first instance. However, the proportions of these differed.

Curiosity was given equal weight by both groups; there was a difference in opinion over interest and inspiration. Visitors gave precedence to interest over inspiration, whilst the professional responses reversed this opinion. The following discussion includes extracts from the surveys; these are presented as originally written.

### 4.1 Hypothesis 1: Do visitors and professionals have the same expectations regarding emotions, engagement and interactions during museum and heritage experiences?

It is clear from the current research that emotions and emotional responses are an extremely personal experience (Hamilakis 2014: 6). Yet at the same time, they are a necessary part in the development of memories and in learning (Panksepp and Biven 2012; Hamilakis 2014:106).

The importance of social connotations is apparent from the responses to the survey; spending time with families was noted by one of the participants. The social aspect is referenced by others, emphasising that social groups can dictate to some extent our interaction and experience (Ellenbogen et al. 2007: 17). This group learning behaviour marries with observations made by Gammon (2010) that in some cases visitors need to learn to use systems or technology via observation of others. Gammon (2010: 284) also notes that systems need to be able to cater for groups is a valid and pertinent point.

Both of these aspects concerning visitor engagement are recognised by Falk and Dierking (2011: 5), whose model of the museum visit is extremely relevant to the discussion here. A museum (or indeed, a heritage venue) is presumed by the visitor to abide by the "unspoken contract of expectations" (Falk and Dierking 2011: 11-12); they are meant to fulfil specific contexts that the visitor will expect and anticipate. These expectations mean that there are certain conventions that should be incorporated into the presentation and interpretation within an organisation.

#### 4.1.1 Hypothesis 1a: That professionals have the same expectations regarding emotions, engagement and interactions during museum and heritage experiences

From an emotional perspective, these expectations extend to the types of emotion anticipated by both professionals and visitors. From the surveys, trends were clearly identifiable (see Table I). The emphasis was firmly placed upon interest, curiosity and inspi-

ration in the first instance. However, the proportions of these differed.

Curiosity was given equal weight by both groups; there was a difference in opinion over interest and inspiration. Visitors gave precedence to interest over inspiration, whilst the professional responses reversed this opinion.

Pleasure was also viewed as important, to a more limited extent than perhaps anticipated. This is interesting as research emphasised the need for positive experiences. The idea of challenging visitors was also briefly mentioned, and this corresponds with some of the ideas and concepts referenced in articles relating to the 2015 UK Museum of the Year competition (Cook, 2015).

*Table 1. Total of responses for professionals and visitors in relation to the most important emotions expected to be felt during a visit to museum or heritage location.*

Emotion	Professional Total	Professional %	Visitor Total	Visitor %
Interest	58	15%	167	30%
Curiosity	101	26%	139	25%
Concern / Empathy	33	8%	13	2%
Excitement	36	9%	21	2%
Satisfaction	12	3%	16	3%
Motivation	15	4%	9	2%
Certainty	2	1%	0	0%
Happiness	9	2%	22	4%
Sense of Control	4	1%	0	0%
Inspiration	83	21%	87	16%
Pleasure	37	9%	74	13%
Other	3	1%	3	1%

From the accompanying comments made by visitor respondents, of which there were relatively few, other emotions or emotional reasons were referenced. A sense of feeling informed was mentioned briefly but connectivity, and sense of place and time was emphasised by the others.

"A sense of peace and contentment. A connection with a less harried time. A reminder of the beauty possible in the world. As a child who grew up in a small village on the west coast of Scotland (Caol), I look for that sense of contentment that time in a quiet garden/building can bring."

"Spiritual connection with the past."

Although the majority of professionals felt that emotions were important to museum visits, there were a small number of responses (5) that answered "No" or "Not Sure" to the initial question as to the usefulness of emotions in museum visits. In the case

of the single no, the following comment was included:

"It might be fun for children, and there may be events that the museum covers that elicit emotion, but otherwise, not sure why it should be expected to be an emotional experience."

It does seem slightly dismissive of the role that emotion can play in learning and experience, perhaps reducing it to an aspect that is only applicable for children. Though Gammon (2010) noted that some interpretative methods could appear child-like in the functions and appearance, even if they were aimed at a broader range of visitors. If we compare this comment to those accompanying the "Not Sure" category, only three of the respondents who answered this way left comments.

"I'm not sure whether it is "useful". Visitors often enjoy engaging emotional[ly] with a site or object but is that actually useful? It depends on your view of use. It may mean they are less open to alternate interpretations in which case it may be actively not useful."

"I hope that visitors are delighted, puzzled, or moved by specimens - as I am (in general - there are a lot of things museums sometimes do that bore me!) Emotional responses are very personal though, and I don't think it's up to me to try to control or manipulate the emotions of visitors. If there is a strong story involving suffering, for example, I'd try to tell it in a way that let the objects add impact, but not deliberately try to create particular emotions."

"I'm not liking the term "emotional". Educational, YES."

If we consider these perspectives it is clear that they relate to some of the issues discussed in 2.3, especially in relation to manipulation of visitors. Again, we see queries being raised over the validity and relevance of the role of emotions within museum and heritage contexts. What is clear is that engagement with the visitor should take place, albeit in a more objective fashion.

#### **4.1.2 Hypothesis 1b: That there is a dissonance between the expectations and actual experiences of museum and heritage visitors**

Whilst these expectations of emotions to be felt before the visit accord with one another, there is a vari-

ation between the emotions felt before, and following a visit. This also marries with Falk's (2007, p.13-14) observations that there are three distinct periods to a museum visit: pre-museum, in the museum and post museum. The survey data indicated that the primary motives for visiting museum and heritage venues lay within the general interest and education/learning.

*Table II. Total of responses for primary reasons for visiting museum and heritage venues by visitors.*

	Responses Total	Responses %
Education/Learning	157	21%
Entertainment	139	18%
Relaxation	84	11%
Recreation	101	13%
General Interest	163	22%
Satisfaction	40	5%
Shop/Bookstore	33	4%
Café/Restaurant	22	3%
Other	18	3%

Following the visit however, the experiences described by the visitors in the comments had a substantially different focus, with emphasis being firmly placed upon more personal experiences (such as honouring the dead). These were heavily focused on aspects such as empathy and sadness (especially with sites or displays pertaining to negative aspects of human history), with specific references being made to particular exhibits, photographs or audio recordings. This included a small number of comments that made reference to personal or familial associations with the displays (a family member exhibiting in the gallery for instance). This personal connection is recognised as being important to the learning process (Alelis *et al.*, 2013, p.429).

## **4.2 Hypothesis: To what extent do emotions contribute, or are perceived to contribute, to visitor satisfaction, engagement and education?**

### **4.2.1 Hypothesis 2a: That emotional engagement is viewed as a positive asset to museum and heritage experiences**

The responses from the professionals from surveys emphasised the view that emotions were important for visitor satisfaction. There was a small proportion of dissenting views, but these tended to focus on the need to allow for personal interpretation to take precedence. There was also recognition that the content matter may affect emotions. Positivity in approach is a necessity

The inclusion of first-person stories into museums appears to offer the opportunity to introduce opportunities for empathic responses by the visitor. This is perhaps seen at an extreme level in examples such as

the Museum of Innocence in Istanbul. This artificially created museum, to accompany a novel of the same name by Orhan Pamuk (2009), was designed to illustrate the atmosphere and details of the plot and of Istanbul during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the Museum of Innocence). The aim was to bring the personal aspects together to make a museum showing the story *and* the person (Gardels and Keating, 2014). Poignancy too can be used to great effect. Beard (2015) discusses a recently re-opened museum in Baalbek, Lebanon where antiquities destroyed during the war are exhibited alongside extant archaeological objects.

At the same time, this recognition of the benefits of emotional engagement means that caution has to be taken to not overload visitors. We cannot predict how people will react emotionally (Franks 2013). Munro (2014) discusses the problem caused by trying to "control" visitors, in the sense that specific emotions can be encouraged or discouraged, effectively shaping a visitor's response to their surroundings. This is clearly not a sensible approach, and this is an avenue that professionals seek to avoid. The information provided by the surveys emphasise the need for a light touch. Encouragement of personal connections is the preferable approach, and this was referenced in all the interviews.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The importance of previous studies on customer satisfaction should not be underestimated. The increased need for preference or personalisation, with the customisation performed by the user, provides the opportunity to create more carefully nuanced and multi-layered interpretations. That emotions can play a significant role within this is tied closely to the role and function that these play in an individual's approach to learning and engagement. Emotions have a role in the formation of memories; regardless as to whether they are positive or negative experiences.

Museum and heritage venues should address these areas, as Gadsby (2011) and others all suggest – these types of organisation have a clear role in education and can offer different experiences to visitors. The need for positive experiences, as a means of not only encouraging improved learning environments but also in terms of visitor satisfaction, is documented in the extant literature. Yet positivity is not always a suitable approach. The number of museum and heritage organisations that deal with culturally sensitive subjects means that care has to be taken (see Richards 2005; Smith 2010, 2011). Does an organisation opt for an emotionally charged subjective assessment, or aim for an objective neutral stance? It is apparent that there is a mix of approaches, and none of these are inappropriate. It is important that

regardless of approach used, the material is presented in a suitable and justifiable manner.

From the concerns over interpretation approaches, it is apparent that there are several problem areas mostly focusing on the interaction of visitors with interpretation. There is much to be done in relation to interactivity and the need for balance in terms of the material offered to the visitor.

## 6. APPENDIX

The following provides an abbreviated summary of the survey questions presented to visitors, and museum and heritage staff. The questions were primarily based on multiple choice options, with space for comments to be added at each stage of the survey.

### Section 1: General Questions

- Gender, Age, Country of Residence
- Do you work within the museum and heritage sector? (answer determines subsequent questions)

### Section 2: If *no* (visitors only)

- Types of venue visited (options: \*museum, gallery, historic building, historic garden/landscape, archaeological site /monument, archive)
- Main reasons for visiting these venues (options: education/learning, entertainment, relaxation, recreation, general interest, satisfaction, shop/bookstore, café/restaurant, other).
- What do you expect, or want, to feel whilst visiting these venues? (options: \*\*interest, curiosity, concern/empathy, excitement, sat-

isfaction, motivation, certainty, happiness, inspiration, sense of control, pleasure, other)

- Preferred methods of interpretive tools to use whilst visiting. (options: \*\*\*display posters/labels/captions, video installations/screens, audio, mobile multimedia guides/apps, guidebooks/leaflets/booklets, maps/plans, interactive hands-on/play activities, interactive technology-based displays, social media, other)
- Extent to which these types of interpretive tools can impact engagement with venue (options as \*\*\*).
- Extent to which these types of interpretive tools can impact upon emotions whilst visiting (options as \*\*\*).
- Usefulness of interpretive tools whilst visiting (options as \*\*\*).

### Section 3: If *yes* (museum and heritage staff only)

- Type of museum or heritage organisation that respondent works for (options as \*).
- Types of interpretative tools used by organisation (options as \*\*\*).
- Perceived usefulness of interpretative tools.
- Usefulness of emotional engagement by visitors whilst visiting (options: yes, no, not sure).
  - Clarification of above response, including identification of the most important emotional responses if yes (options as \*\*).
- Influence of interpretative tools on visitors (options as \*\*\*).

### Section 4: Additional Comments

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