

Leisure—A function of museums? The Taiwan perspective

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Abstract

The main factor preventing non-visitors from visiting museums is *'lack of interest'*. But the causes of this *'lack of interest'* are different in Taiwan than in western countries. Taiwanese non-visitors on low incomes are deterred by the strong association of museums with education. They want an experience that will be relaxing, enjoyable and pleasurable, and one which will not require any effort. They do not perceive museums as providing this. Non-visitors want museums to function more obviously as leisure venues that the whole family can actively enjoy. They say museums need to promote themselves as places for exploration and entertainment, as well as for education and learning. If museums wish to attract low-income non-visitors, they must consider how the needs of the non-visiting public can be met.

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1. Introduction

The museum community is committed to serving a representative audience, one in which the profile of visitors reflects that of the population as a whole. However, this is not typically easy to do in practice. Museum visiting is perceived as an elitist activity and museums themselves play on this perception in the way they seek sponsorships and portray themselves. The patron audience is seen as predominantly well-off.

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Museum visitors rank higher, on average, in terms of socio-economic status than the population as a whole, and the participation rate climbs the more elevated the income, educational background and social class—all of which are interrelated (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a).

But what turns other people away from museums? The thinking behind the decision whether or not to visit a museum is often complex. For example, Torkildsen (1999) identifies three major factors which affect people's leisure activity choices in general—personal, social and circumstantial, as well as opportunity factors. The first group of factors relates to personal circumstances such as age, gender, attitudes and interests. The second cluster of factors includes occupation and income, and the influence of friends and peer groups. The third group of factors concerns the available resources and leisure time, transport and awareness.

In addition, Prince (1983) and Merriman (1991) identify two groups of barriers specific to museums—the cultural and the practical. Cultural barriers arise from the image of museums and the public's attitude towards museum services; practical barriers are issues such as entry fees, travel and time requirements. McLean (1997) also describes psychological and structural barriers. Psychological barriers arise from people's sense of alienation from museums, while structural barriers include problems related to physical access and people's age.

The barriers which discourage people from visiting museums have been discussed extensively in the literature over the last decade (e.g. Davies, 1994; RCMG, 2002). They have also been examined in a number of large-scale research projects (e.g. Lin, 2004; MLA, 2004a; MORI, 2001). According to this research, barriers to visiting include lack of interest, lack of time, lack of understanding, and cost. Among these barriers, lack of interest is likely to be the most significant. Why are non-visitors not interested in visiting museums? Hood argues that museums may not be providing the kinds of experiences which satisfy their expectations (1983). She has identified three major psychological attributes that influence how non-visitors choose to spend their leisure time: the desire to be with people, or for social interaction; the need to feel comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings; and the desire for active participation. Museum visitors, on the other hand, rank these three attributes much lower, valuing instead '*the opportunity to learn*', '*the challenge of new experiences*', and '*the chance to do something worthwhile*' (ibid, p. 54).

What can museums do about any of this? The purpose of this study is to explore the factors deterring one of the most underrepresented groups—people with lower incomes—from visiting museums (including history museums, galleries and science centres) in Taiwan, to consider the reasons behind the phenomenon, and to propose what museum managers can do to address these issues.

2. Research design

A quantitative questionnaire survey and in-depth qualitative interviews were employed in this research. A quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted in phase one to find out who visits museums and to identify barriers keeping non-visitors away. Taipei City was chosen as the target area and a quota sample of 2447 people were surveyed to ensure the relevant people and factors were covered. All 12 administrative districts in Taipei City were used as sampling areas. Respondents, who were aged 15 and over, were selected according

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