



VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT THE NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM: CONSIDERING EMERGING VALUES AND RENEWED AGENDAS

Despina Kalessopoulou

National Archaeological Museum, Athens, Greece, Tositsa 1, 106 82, Athens, Greece
Current position: Assistant Professor, University of West Attica, Email: deskal@uniwa.gr

ABSTRACT

Next to their long-revered function of preserving and presenting cultural heritage, national museums need to take a closer look to the needs and aspirations of their visitors, in order to increase their impact and create memorable and life-changing experiences. The present study is based on a large survey conducted at the National Archaeological Museum of Greece, and revisits the data so as to better understand visitors' motivations and preferences and offer insights into what they find of value in their museum experience. Visitors prioritized eminently their object experiences, referring frequently to beauty and quality, but valued as well the knowledge, understanding and sense of connectedness gained by the direct viewing of the antiquities and the accompanying information. The ambience of the museum was also found to have an enabling and soothing character that enhanced the feeling of comfort and restoration. Findings led to recommendations that could benefit the institutional agenda towards a more value-based approach.

Keywords: national museums, visitors' experiences, motivations, values, archaeology

INTRODUCTION

National museums today face a set of pressing challenges in order to uphold their high status and usefulness in contemporary societies. Once revered as 'treasuries' of a glorious material past and 'shrines' of a nation's core values and ideological premises, they nowadays have to prove their relevance in an increasingly competitive environment. Hence, they are not only expected to maintain a high overall visitation, but they also need to democratise their audience base and demonstrate visitors' commitment for repeated visits, by combining effectively a well-defined niche in the leisure market with traditional institutional goals such as scholarship and education (Brown, 2014; Davidson and Sibley, 2011; Gareizou and Keramidas, 2017; Lawton and Daniels, 2009; Nowacki, 2007). Apart from the intrinsic values connected with the self-evident worth of preserving cultural heritage and their legitimizing role in promoting an informed narrative of a country's heritage, a number of extrinsic or instrumental values is forming the renewed agenda of national museums in the 21st century (Bounia, 2012; Bunting, 2008; Gibson, 2008; Gray, 2008; Scott, 2006). National museums are ever more asked to show their contribution in income generation, economic development, cultural diplomacy, and cultural integration in an era in which the notion of 'national identity' is put under question and societies become more diverse.

Previous research on national museums and their public value has mainly focused on the reasons that have led to their formation, their socio-political role, as well as on issues of

representation, identity construction and production of authoritative narratives (Boswell and Evans, 1999; Kaplan, 1994; Kennedy, 1996; McIntyre and Wehner, 2001; Simpson, 1996). Gradually, next to the studies that have focused on the various uses of the past, the creation of 'national' heritage and the effect of colonialism in museum narratives, researchers explored more intensely how national museums respond to the multiculturalism and diversity of their surrounding communities, the representation of 'difficult heritage', the formation of transnational identities, as well as the perspective of the visitors on what they expect and cherish in national museums (Anderson, 2018; Basso Peressout and Pozzi, 2012; Bounia et al., 2012; Knell et al., 2011; Schmidt, 2013). This increased focus on visitors' expectations, experiences and levels of satisfaction has strong parallels in the broader museum community, as the new museological agenda that has been put forward since the 1970s requires a turn towards a more visitor-orientated ethos and a value-based estimation of the cultural and social impact of the museum sector (McCall and Gray, 2014; Scott et al., 2014; Stam, 1993). National museums are striving today to stop being considered as static, rigid and purely academic; rather they feel the necessity to accommodate a more diverse range of needs and corresponding experiences, empower visitors to create personal narratives and meaningful encounters with the material past, and care for their well-being.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This article aims to present findings from a recent research on visitors' experience at the National Archaeological Museum (NAM) in Athens, Greece, and contribute to the discussion that is currently taking place in the museum, leisure and tourism field, for the possible values underlying visitors' preferences and reasons for visiting.

The NAM is the oldest museum in the country. After various relocations, its purpose-built edifice was completed in 1889, holding the richest collection of ancient Greek art in the world. It is also home to a vast range of prehistoric artefacts that date from the 6th millennium BC. The exhibition spaces cover approximately 8000 square metres, while annual visitation is around 600.000 visitors, rendering it the most frequented museum in Athens after the Acropolis Museum.

Nevertheless, visitor research has been scarce. The major part of museological studies focus mainly on exhibition practices and interpretative strategies, and discuss the national museums' ideopolitical role in forging a national identity that connects the ancient past, especially that of Classical Greece, to the modern Greek state (Catapoti, 2012; Gazi, 1993; Mouliou, 2008). The first visitors' studies that included the NAM, aimed either to examine how visitors perceived the past, or to evaluate the public's appreciation of the arts in relation to socio-cultural factors that influence museum visitation (Toundassaki and Caftantzoglou, 2005; Vidali, 2008). A mixed method research investigated the ways visitors interact with the epistemological discourse of the NAM to make meaning of emblematic exhibits, revealing their need for alternative interpretative approaches that build on a culturally enriched seam of knowledge (Mouliou and Kalessopoulou, 2012). In 2014, an evaluation of the visitors' use of smart phones with NFC system to guide them through the blockbuster temporary exhibition about the Antikythera ship wreck was organized (Kalessopoulou, 2014). The evaluation revealed that the local population was the major user of the multimedia guide, although locals are underrepresented in the general museum visitation, suggesting that complementary interpretative media may offer extra incentives for visiting.

The need to acquire a bigger amount of systematic data, both of quantitative and qualitative nature, on visitation patterns and visitors' agendas was more than obvious. Doxanaki's study

in 2008, offered additional support, as it provided some interesting insights on what Greek visitors and non-visitors think of Archaeology, its interrelation with museums and the way this relation affects the visiting pattern in the Athenian archaeological museums. Although the NAM is widely recognisable, 37,5% of the 434 respondents have never visited it. In addition, participants believed that most archeological museums have nothing to do with contemporary life, a belief that certainly reduces their incentive to visit, and justifies the small to moderate interest rate for archaeology (Doxanaki, 2017). A more recent survey confirmed that Athenians may be extremely proud of their idealised past with half of the respondents identifying with ancient Greek rather than contemporary Greek culture, however they rarely visit archaeological museums -only 17% of a total of 1004 respondents have visited the NAM in the past 12 months (Public Issue,2017).

Researching visitors' experience and values formation: an overview of models and trends

The aforementioned studies underline the importance of investigating not only the socio-cultural characteristics of visitors, but also their beliefs and values for certain aspects of the museum experience. Thyne, actually, suggested in 2001 that museums need to move away from demographic segmentation and factual recall, to psychographic segmentation and values. Moreover, a growing number of research articles are concerned with the essence of what a visitor's experience is, and propose different conceptual schemes and techniques to better define and evaluate it. In this section, we will look at a selection of these studies and suggested frameworks that will later inform the analysis and discussion of our findings.

Packer and Ballantyne (2016) conducted a thorough literature review on the various facets of visitor experience and proposed a conceptual scheme of key factors associated with it. The scheme acknowledges the transactional nature of visitor experience that involves the external elements of what the museum provides (experience as offering) and the internal responses of what the visitor brings (the experience essence). In order for an experience to have an impact on visitors' life and become memorable, visitors should be facilitated to actively combine internal and external elements and produce their own interpretations, narratives and transformations (experience as product). They, then, examine different classifications of experience components and propose their own model that incorporates ten facets of the visitor experience: physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, hedonic, relational, spiritual, transformative, introspective, and restorative. Based on this model, Packer et al. further developed a checklist of 15 different dimensions of visitor experience that could be useful both in researching visitor experiences and in improving the process of exhibit design and evaluation (Packer et al. 2018).

Pekarik et al. (1999) offer a less-comprehensive, but cohesive conceptual scheme that has derived from visitors' comments of what they valued as satisfying experiences in a museum. Satisfying experiences are grouped into four clusters which comprise *object experiences*, such as seeing the real thing, seeing rare things, being moved by beauty; *cognitive experiences*, such as gaining information or knowledge, and enriching understanding; *introspective experiences*, such as imagining other times or places, reflecting on meaning, recalling other experiences, feeling a spiritual connection, and a sense of belonging or connectedness; and *social experiences*, such as spending time with friends or family, and seeing children learn new things. Preference over one type of experience or the other is influenced by the type of museum, exhibition design, visitor traits and familiarity with the museum. Interesting was the fact that in some exhibitions the most anticipated experiences upon entering were cognitive and object experiences, while the most satisfying experiences, when exiting, were object and

introspective experiences. Therefore, catering for a wider range of often neglected types of experiences might expand the audience base and visitors' memorable experiences.

Kotler and Kotler (2000, 280) outline three dimensions of a designed museum-going experience in an illustrative manner. The cyclical diagram includes a horizontal axis that indicates a range of visitor experiences associated with the sensory, aesthetic, sociable, recreational, enchanting and learning aspects of the museum visit. The vertical axis identifies the level and depth of the experience, ranging from the passive viewing of collections to active immersion and applied learning. Finally, the outer circle indicates the degree of design and orchestration of visitor experience through the mediation of architectural design, seating and comforts, information, hospitality, way finding, dining and shopping etc.

Packer (2008) also stresses the importance of the so-called servicescape, a term introduced by Bitner (1992), referring to the ambient conditions, the spatial layout and functionality, as well as the signs and symbols used in the museum setting that influence visitors' responses. She endorses the importance of the museum experience *per se*, however she underlines the importance of figuring out the benefits that visitors anticipate and value, in order to have a more complete understanding of the museum experience. Among the beneficial outcomes identified are those connected with psychological well-being, such as autonomy, personal growth, positive relations and self-acceptance, as well as mental restoration, associated with fascination, escapism, and the unharried nature of the experience.

In a recent study in Italy, which focused on cultural tourists and aimed to explore the meaning, value and benefits of museum experiences, seven core elements of visitor experiences were identified, including experiences that provide historical and/or cultural reminiscence and awareness, learning and self-development, exposure to tangible evidences, sensory stimulation related to sensory and spiritual feelings and emotions, such as amazement, excitement, or reflection, wonder and discovery, entertainment and socializing (Gurel and Nielsen, 2018).

Turning now to the bibliography that investigates motivational factors which impact on visitors' experience, Packer and Ballantyne's study (2002) revealed through factor analysis five reasons for visiting museums, art galleries and aquariums: learning and discovery; passive enjoyment (that is the desire to enjoy oneself, feel happy and satisfied); restoration (mental and physical relaxation, change from routine); social interaction; and self-fulfillment (e.g. challenge abilities, feel a sense of achievement and develop self-knowledge and self-worth).

Slater's study (2007) identified three main motivational factors, similar to the above: learning, social/family interaction and escapism. Escapism was recognised as the core motivation, a fact that brings out the significance of this element for the museum field next to the predominant so far discussion about the importance of learning. The study confirmed, as shown elsewhere, that people come with a set of multiple motivations, combining cognitive, emotional and social motives.

Similarly, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2007) identified four key drivers that urged people to visit museums and galleries in the UK: social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. Individuals with social drivers see museums as an enjoyable place to spend time with friends and family, seek ease of access and orientation, good facilities and services, and welcoming staff. Individuals with intellectual drivers are keen to foster their children's or their own interest and

knowledge, may have professional interest in the subject, and enjoy the discovery of new things. Individuals with emotional drivers may have a personal connection to the subject matter, want to see fascinating objects in an inspiring setting and value ambience and a deep sensory and intellectual experience. Finally, individuals with spiritual drivers search for creative stimulation and quiet contemplation, and they view museums as an opportunity to escape and recharge their batteries. These motivational drivers are listed in hierarchy with social drivers located at the bottom and spiritual drivers at the top, considering that the further up, the more fulfilling visitors find their visit.

Multiple motivations were also highlighted by Thyne (2001), whose main research goal was to infer the values of the visitors from their motivations for visiting the museum by means of the laddering technique. A set of individualistic values, such as education and knowledge, or more socially oriented values, such as fun and excitement and being with friends and family, were identified. Both Thyne and Slater in the discussion of their findings underline the importance of understanding the core needs, values and expectations of visitors in order to develop appropriate programmes, marketing plans and communicative strategies.

Individualistic values as the ones we have already delineated in the aforementioned studies form part of the increasingly discussed in the recent years concept of the public value of the museums, along with societal and economic types of value (Holden, 2004; Scott, 2009; Yocco et al., 2009). Each one of them may have instrumental, intrinsic, institutional and use dimensions that correspond to different elements of the visitors' experience. The public's perception of the all-around value of museums is a powerful framework for articulating the significance of museums today and can be used to inform the institutional agenda.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study drew on the literature discussed above to investigate what the motives, thoughts and experiences of the NAM's visitors reveal about the values they may associate with their visit to the largest national museum of Greece.

Data derives from a quantitative study conducted at the NAM in 2018 with 1004 visitors. The survey used non-proportional stratified random sampling in order to include visitors from periods of high and low visitation on an equal basis. A questionnaire in Greek and English was administered at the exit of the museum during four selected months of the year, at a standard two hours' time slot period on various days of the week. It was suggested to every third visitor from 12 years old and above, upon parental/educator's consent for minors. The 27 questions were mainly multiple-choice, but the questionnaire also included a few open-ended ones, and required approximately seven minutes to complete. The survey, apart from demographics, collected evidence about visitors' motivations, the social profile of the visit, visitors' choices once inside the museum, duration of and satisfaction with the overall museum experience, frequency of visits, ways of getting to know about and accessing the museum, as well as the general cultural profile of the participants. Since the survey was the first of this kind in the museum, its major aim was to provide as much data as possible on the visitors' profile and their level of satisfaction with museum services, so as to obtain reliable and valid statistics on the characteristics of the visitors and their basic choices. Findings would provide the baseline for future quantitative and qualitative researches.

The present study affords a secondary line of analysis that was particularly influenced by the 'Satisfying Experiences' framework (Pekarik et al., 1999) and Packer's (2008) synthetic theoretical framework. The data derives from the open-ended questions concerning visitors'

experiences and views, and the motivations' question, which had a multiple-choice format, but also included an open response field. The multiple-choice options were based on the existing literature and they were further refined after a pilot study with 119 visitors in 2017. Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of motivations. As for the open-response questions, categorical aggregation was implemented, after a word frequency query that identified key themes, subsequently followed by tagging and coding, and the emergence of descriptive categories from the data. Qualitative research software named Atlas.ti 9 was used for this purpose. These categories were then associated with the categories of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks to check their consistency. At a final stage, tentative conclusions were drawn on underlying values.

Considering the scarcity of large surveys in Greek museums, the study contributes a southern European perspective to the current literature that could be of use for international comparison. However, limitations of the sampling procedure should be taken in mind when considering the findings. Visitors, especially minors, who were part of a large family, educational, or tour group, or those with very limited time to spare, were more reluctant to participate in the survey and they are underrepresented. In addition, as the survey was undertaken in Greek and English only, visitors with limited or no understanding of these languages could not participate.

RESULTS

Visitor Demographics

As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants were from abroad, mainly from Europe and the USA, which is a common pattern for big national European museums that form part of cultural itineraries.¹

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants [N=1004]

Characteristic		Percent
Residence	Greece	17%
	Abroad	83%
Gender	Male	48%
	Female	52%
Age	Under 35	42%
	Over 35	58%
Educational level	Up to secondary/tertiary non-university education	15%
	University education (BA to PhD)	85%
Previous visits	First time	76%
	Repeat	24%
Social profile of the visit	Came alone	16%
	With one companion	47%
	More than 3 companions	37%

¹ For example the Louvre Museum received 75% of its visitors from abroad in 2019 (<https://presse.louvre.fr/96-millions-de-visiteurs-br-au-louvre-en-2019/>), while the British Museum and the National Gallery in London 64% and 66% respectively in 2018-19 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/421692/museums-England-overseas-and-uk-visitor-distribution/>).

They were very highly educated (52% had a post-graduate degree). Sixty nine percent of the visitors that had Greece as permanent residence were locals. The biggest age segment was that of 25-34 years old (21%), however those over 35 accounted for 58% of the visitors. Visitors from abroad were younger in age (almost half of them under 35 years). Seventy six percent are first-time visitors. More frequent visitors tend to be older (more than 45 years old) and living in Greece.

Visits last usually 90-120 minutes (59% of the total visitors). Visitors preferred to come with the company of one person, usually their partner. When accompanying children, visitors from abroad came with older children (49% with children 12-17 years old), while visitors from Greece accompany mainly children of 7-11 years old. Their total impression was very good (46%) to excellent (34%), that is why most of them would recommend the visit to someone else (98%).

Reasons for Visiting

As shown in Table 2, most visitors state that they visit the museum out of interest in Archeology, History and Art (24%), because it is something they ‘must’ see in Athens (23%), because it is a nice outing with family, friends and relatives, and because they are looking for aesthetic pleasure and for an authentic experience of the past (13%, 12% and 11% respectively). Among other reasons, the majority is related to the fact that the visit to the museum was part of a group tourist visit or that visitors were prompted by information in tourist guidebooks and websites. Also, of interest are the emotional reasons mentioned (mom archaeologist, old resident of the museum area, love of the specific museum).

**Table 2. Visitors Motivations
(Domestic vs. Overseas, First time vs. Repeat visitors)**

Motivations	Total	Visitors from abroad	Domestic Visitors	First visit	Repeat visit
Interest in archaeology/history/art	24%	25%	20%	25%	22%
A must-see venue	23%	26%	8%	25%	15%
Outing with family/friends/relatives	13%	12%	15%	13%	11%
Aesthetic pleasure	12%	12%	11%	12%	14%
Authentic experience of the past	11%	12%	8%	12%	9%
Restoration, relaxation, spiritual uplift	5%	4%	14%	4%	9%
Attend an educational activity or event	5%	4%	10%	4%	6%
Temporary exhibition	3%	2%	8%	2%	7%
Information for school/university/personal project	3%	2%	5%	2%	6%
Other reasons	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%

Comparing the choices of domestic and overseas visitors, we find that both groups prioritize interest in Archaeology/History/Art and the sharing of a social experience, however, for

domestic visitors, restoration, spiritual uplift and relaxation play a much bigger role (14% vs. 4%). Respectively, for those living abroad, the principal motivation is the attraction of the museum as an important tourist destination in the city of Athens (26% vs. 8%). Regarding the choice of participation in an educational activity or event, the difference between domestic and foreign visitors is also noticeable (10% vs. 4%), which makes sense since most activities and events are usually aimed at the Greek public. The same is observed, however, for the selection of temporary exhibitions (8% vs. 2%), which clearly shows a tendency of the Greek public to visit the museum when it offers something new and is confirmed in other surveys as a difference between domestic and overseas visitors (Davidson and Sibley, 2011). Personal study also emerges as a more important motivation for the Greek public (5% vs. 1%).

Interesting conclusions derive from the comparison of the motivations of first time and repeat visitors. The interest in Archaeology/History/Art and the sharing of a social experience remain constant in both categories. In first visits, the NAM also appears as an important pole of attraction in the cultural and especially the tourist choices of the city (25% vs. 15%). However, aesthetic pleasure (14% vs. 12%) and the factor of relaxation/spiritual uplift/restoration (9% vs. 4%) increases in repeat visitors. Equally interesting and reasonably expected is the rise of attendance to an educational activity or event (6% vs. 4%), visiting the temporary exhibition (7% vs. 2%), but also for reasons of personal study (6% vs. 2%).

When correlating motivations with age, ‘interest in Archaeology/History/Art’, ‘going out with friends and relatives’ and ‘visiting in the context of cultural tourism’ are the main reasons mentioned for all age groups, but with a different hierarchical classification e.g. adolescents seem to cherish most the social outing, elders prioritize the must-see option, while all other groups are primarily urged by their interest in the subject.

Interestingly, intrinsic motivations associated with psychological qualities such as aesthetic pleasure, authentic experience of the past, and relaxation/spiritual uplift/ restoration tend to increase with age. However, the highest value in the latter category was recorded by visitors aged 18-24, indicating that this dimension has a very interesting dynamic in attracting young people and creating a dedicated public, which could be utilized by the NAM to promote the institution and the way its identity is perceived. It should also be noted that the majority of visitors who noted these motivations stayed at the museum for more than two hours.

Closing the commentary on age, educational activities are more often found as a motivation in the age group of 18-24 years, but they rather reflect that visitors came to the museum as part of a study visit with an educational institution, than because they participated in an organized educational activity of the museum. The next age categories in relation to this motivation are the visitors 35-54 years old, who, in addition to the personal participation in a museum educational activity or in a private guided tour, they also accompany their children to take part in the educational activities of the museum. Furthermore, the search for information for personal study is a more popular reason for visiting at a young age and declines as visitors get older. However, older people are more likely to come to visit the temporary exhibition.

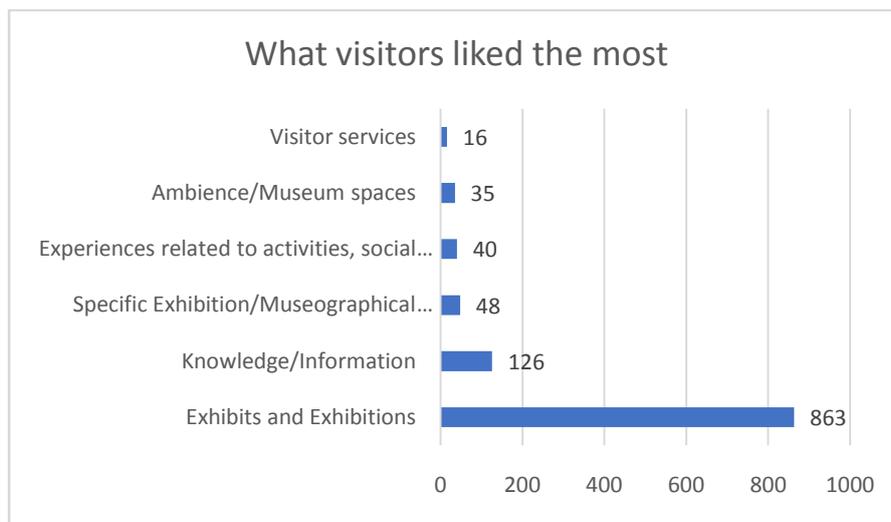
In conclusion, intrinsic motivations, such as personal interest, aesthetic pleasure, psychological well-being, or shared time with beloved ones tend to be more at the top of the list, in comparison with extrinsic ones, such as participation in special museum offerings. In addition, according to the categorization of Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (2007), emotional drivers (e.g. personal interest, cultural tourism experience, authenticity) are mostly at the top, social and spiritual drivers (e.g. aesthetic pleasure, relaxation) in the top-five options, while

intellectual drivers are at the end of the list (attendance of educational events, temporary exhibitions or personal study).

Visitor preferences

Visitors were asked to identify what they liked the most in their museum experience. The question was completed by 78% of the participants (782 entries). Many comments fell into more than one category. Forty-six of the visitors indicated that they liked everything. Twenty thematic categories emerged that were subsequently allocated to six wider groups (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Visitors' preferences listed according to the number of comments.



The majority of the comments fell under the category of 'Exhibits and Exhibitions' (863 entries). Visitors referred mainly to specific exhibits and collections of the museum (568 entries), choosing frequently those found in history/art books and tourist guides as emblematic (e.g. Poseidon/Zeus bronze statue, the so-called Mask of 'Agamemnon', the Antikythera Mechanism, the Varvakeion Athena), and commenting on the opportunity to follow the evolution of sculpture, or to see famous works of arts, 'whole', 'big', 'authentic'. A few of them mentioned a strong emotional appeal, feeling amazed and overwhelmed (16 entries). Temporary exhibitions (174 entries) were particularly praised for the originality of their subject, the new narrative they offered and the museographic design. A distinct category of comments concerns qualities of the exhibitions/exhibits (121 entries), such as the plethora, the chronological range and the variety of the exhibits. A large number of comments in this category referred to the beauty of the exhibits, the uniqueness, the importance and the quality that distinguishes them (82 entries). Special mention is made of their good state of preservation, a comment often found in the museum visitors' books, along with that of beauty. Almost one-quarter of the comments refer to the overall quality of the exhibitions and their excellent curation.

As regards the category of 'Knowledge/Information', comments refer either to the educational experience, the experiential learning of the past ('*feel the life in the past*', '*be connected*' and '*travel*' back) and the aesthetic delight provided (65 entries) or to the information available in the captions and text panels, that are considered well-written and abundant (61 entries). Most of them appreciated the knowledge gained about ancient history and culture, and were fascinated with the craftsmanship and the subtlety of ancient Greek art. There was also a

personal cultural insight: *'Normally in Australia is HIS story, I am glad to see women represented and celebrated'*.

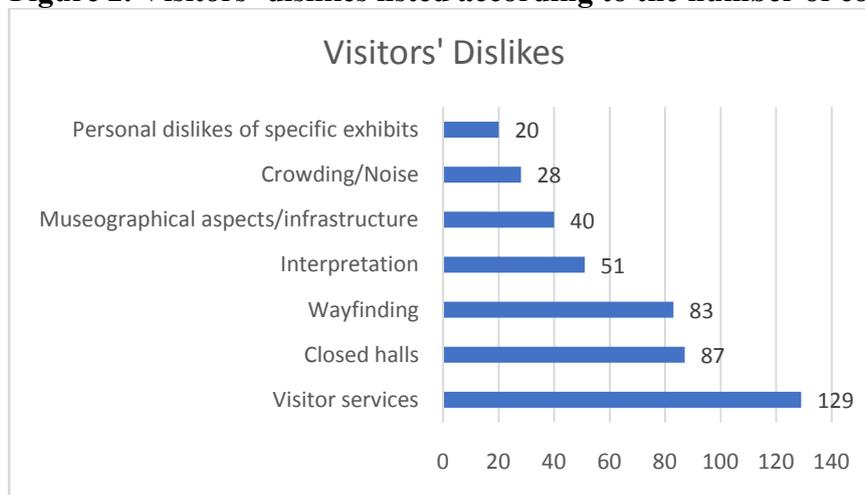
The category of 'Specific Exhibition/Museographical Characteristics' includes comments related to the organization of the exhibition space, such as ease of orientation, the spaciousness that facilitates the unobstructed view of the exhibits and the movement of visitors, or the ability to see objects up close and out of the showcases. A few entries were about the use of digital technologies in exhibitions and the utilization of sensory experiences (e.g.reproduction of Mycenaean aroma).

Comments on 'Experiences related to activities, social and individual experiences' were mostly about the thematic tours provided by archaeologists of the museum and the shared experience of the museum with children, thus emphasizing different aspects of social experiences. Visitors also commented on the musical event they have encountered and the fact that they could tour the museum at their own pace and photograph whatever they wanted, indicating different ways for personal meaning-making.

The category of 'Ambience/Museum Spaces' included comments on the atmosphere of the museum, the pleasure offered by the garden and the Cafe and the impression made by the majestic building with its neoclassical architecture. Most comments refer to the calmness, quietness, peace and relaxation that prevail both in the museum and the Cafe (18 comments). Finally, 'Visitor services' stressed principally the inexpensive or free entrance, the helpfulness of museum guards and the lack of queuing.

As regards visitors' dislikes, there were 352 entries (35% of the participants), that were organized around seven thematic categories (Figure 2). Most of the comments had to do with museum offerings such as the lack of guide books in various languages, the limited assortment of books in the museum shop, some closed halls of the museum, and the unhelpful signage and handouts for way finding. As regards interpretation, a few visitors were overwhelmed by the number of exhibits, while others needed more information on the historical context and a more experiential approach with sounds, music and interactives. Finally, font size and the low position of captions in some halls as well as the need for a general renovation of the building are aspects that a few visitors indicated. Crowding and noise, when encountered, was also a negative experience.

Figure 2. Visitors' dislikes listed according to the number of comments.

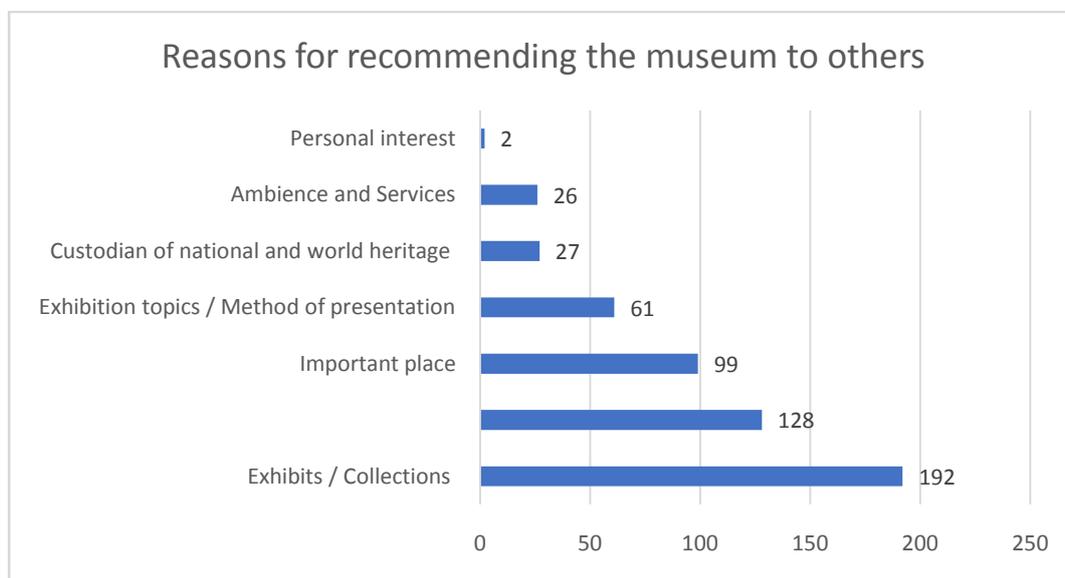


Why is it worth the visit?

The open response field where visitors opted to provide reasons for recommending the museum to others had 432 entries (43% of the visitors), allocated to seven thematic categories, with some of them falling under more than one (Figure 3).

As we have seen already in their preferences, the most important advantage that visitors single out is NAM's collections and the uniqueness of the works on display (192 entries). The exhibits are characterized as *'wonderful'*, *'quality'*, *'impressive'*, while there are also comments for individual exhibits or collections, e.g. *'The first prehistoric art is a human experience'*, *'The statue of Poseidon alone is worth the ticket'*. The abundance and variety of the exhibits, the completeness of the collections, the chronological range, the authenticity, the good state of preservation and especially beauty are also highlighted. e.g. *'it is beautiful - it is more interesting [so]'*, *'beauty allows you to experience the ancient world'*.

Figure 3. Visitors' reasons for recommendation listed by number of comments.



The contribution of the museum to cultural awareness, understanding of history, and learning, is the second highest group of comments (128 entries). The complementary relationship of the museum with the visits to archeological sites and the opportunity to offer feedback on existing knowledge and to *'relive'* what has been studied in school was particularly highlighted. A few comments focused on the importance of the museum for cultural development and aesthetic pleasure e.g. *'It is a good way to understand Greek culture and to "open" your mind'*, *'Priceless revelations and putting history into context'*, are verbatim expressions that fall into this category.

In correspondence with one of the most important motivations for the visit, ninety-nine visitors commented that the NAM is an impressive must-see museum, as it is *'an extraordinary museum with world-class objects and it is amazing to finally see them'* and *'a must see for everybody who is at least interested a little into archaeology'*.

Sixty-one visitors praised the ease of orientation, its ideal size and spaciousness, the detailed explanations and good information provided the high level of exhibitions, particularly the

temporary, and the fact that the museum trusts visitors and allows them to get very close to the exhibits.

The function of the NAM as custodian of the national and/or world cultural heritage was proposed by twenty-seven visitors. Two thirds of the comments came from Greek visitors, who stressed that it is the obligation of all Greeks to visit in order to ‘*get to know the past of our country*’, and because ‘*in this country we talk so much about ancient Greece that it is an omission not to go*’. Contact with the national cultural heritage is considered a vehicle of self-knowledge and pride, and a visit to the NAM is something that ‘*Everyone, of course*’ must do. Visitors from abroad noted that ‘*every human being should visit this museum*’, because the contact with history at the NAM is essentially contact with ‘*the wealth of human civilization*’, considering also the fact that these historical collections ‘*come from a period that is at the foundation of the modern world more than any other region or country*’. Some also acknowledge that this is part of their own heritage and history and they should know about it.

The relaxing and quiet atmosphere of the museum, with the good flow of visitors and the affordable ticket price was particularly stressed by twenty-six visitors. Finally, two visitors commented that this visit is worth it only ‘*to people who like to visit museums*’ and ‘*share the same interest in history and archaeology*’.

DISCUSSION

With the goal of identifying the underlying values associated with visitors’ experiences, findings were examined in the light of the ‘Satisfying Experiences Framework’ (SEF) and Packer’s framework, that were found to be more consistent with the type of data that was gathered in this case-study. Table 3 summarizes the allocation of all comments related to preferences and reasons for recommendations to the different categories of the SEF. As expected, visitors cherish the Object dimension to a significantly higher degree in relation to the other dimensions.

Table 3. Visitors Experiences in relation to the Satisfying Experiences Framework

Satisfying Experiences Framework	Types of satisfying experiences	Number of comments (What they liked most?)	Number of comments (Reasons for recommendation)
Object Experiences	Specific exhibits/collections	568	101
	Exhibitions	174	
	Exhibitions	121	91
	Specific exhibit qualities (e.g. beauty, authenticity, quality, variety etc.)		
Total		863	192
	1055		
Cognitive Experiences	Knowledge/Learning	57	104
	Information (captions & digitals)	65	14
	Important place for		81

Total	cultural awareness	16	
	Guided tour		199
		138	
337			
Introspective Experiences	Travel to/Feeling the past	7	13
	Sensory experiences	5	1
	Recollections from archaeological sites/books	3	7
	Personal insights	1	
	Belonging/Connectedness with national/world heritage	16	27
			48
Total	64		
Social Experiences	Enjoy the company of other people while learning	6	
	Enjoy the impression my children had	4	
		10	
Total	10		

The new clustering combined comments from different thematic categories. In particular, cognitive experiences included not only experiences related to knowledge and understanding gained from direct contact with the antiquities or through written information and digital media, but also experiences related with the attendance of a guided tour and the significance of the museum as a place that people must see for their cultural development. Those experiences that emphasized the function of the exhibitions as a way to feel the life in the past and the sensorial approach to it though smelling a reproduction of an ancient aroma, were transferred to the Introspective Experiences cluster, as they helped visitors imagine other times and places. Associations with what they encountered at archaeological sites and schoolbooks, and the personal insight of an Australian visitor on the role of women in ancient Greek culture were also considered introspective experiences, as well as the thematic category of ‘Custodian of national/world heritage’, as it contributes to the self-identity and feeling of connectedness of the visitors.

Experiences related to the peaceful and relaxing ambience of the museum (n=35), sometimes because of a musical event (n=12), to the museum as an important place that ‘rewards’ internally those that visit (n=18), and to aesthetic pleasure (n=8), are related to the restorative elements of Packer’s study (2008), contributing to relaxation and spiritual uplift. The feelings of fascination also mentioned by a number of visitors, the fact that a quarter of them stayed for more than two hours at the museum and that the majority of this group mentioned restoration, relaxation, and spiritual uplift as an important motivation for coming, advocate, along with the 73 aforementioned comments, for the importance of this dimension for visitors.

In addition, the ‘services cape’, as delineated by Packer, was highlighted in 132 comments, most of them related with the spaciousness and the good organization of the exhibition spaces. However, the majority of the comments related with what visitors disliked at the museum, fall

into this category, signifying that this is the most problematic area of the visitors' experience at the NAM.

The analysis confirmed the importance of the SEF for interpreting what visitors value in museums. Interestingly, the hierarchy of the four experiences follows the same pattern as found in the original research (Pekarik et al., 1999, 168), however object experiences are highly accentuated in the NAM, due to the emblematic significance of the artworks presented in relation to art history, and the museographical design that emphasizes the object. Cognitive experiences are much less mentioned; however, they form an important part of what visitors search and value in the museum, if motivations are taken into account. Although explicitly learning objectives are at the bottom of the list, as seen in Table 2, visitors' high interest in the subject matter of the museum and the acknowledgement that it is an indispensable stop in the city, regarding cultural awareness and enrichment, indicate that cognitive pursuits may be associated with the fascination visitors experience from museum objects. However, the tangible and authentic evidence of ancient cultures and the strong aesthetic appeal objects exert with their beauty, prevail in what they value the most. Moreover, ninety comments of what visitors disliked at the museum, are associated with their need to find more help on a cognitive level, such as guidebooks, brochures, digital media, and experiential methods of presentation, that would help them focus and find more historical contextualization.

Social experiences, although being a significant aspect of the museum experience, indicated in visitors' motivations and the fact that 84% of them are accompanied at the museum, do not seem to have importance for visitors in this type of museum. On the contrary, experiences related with the influence of a quiet environment that inspires concentration and reflection, and leads to feelings of spiritual uplift and restoration, are more central to what they find worthwhile. The ease of access and way finding enhances also the feeling of comfort for the visitors and it is highly appreciated.

The limitations of this study should be kept in mind when considering emerging visitors' values. The questionnaire format prompted visitors to rather delineate and assess their experience in relation to museum offerings than reflect on what personal benefits and values the particular museum experience could be associated with. This could explain the fact that values and thoughts associated with psychological well-being are very scarce, loosely connected with personal growth and the autonomy of the visitors.

CONCLUSION

The insights into visitors' experiences and underlying values gained from this analysis, lead to a number of conclusions that could inform the institutional agenda of the NAM with a more visitor-orientated perspective. The study confirmed the well-established role of the NAM in the cultural landscape of Greece, but it has also revealed the need to diversify its offerings so as to attract more domestic and repeat visitors. Enchantment by the sheer beauty of the objects and their significance for cultural self-development and aesthetic pleasure is the stronger asset of the museum that can be further enhanced by interpretative media offering rich contextual information and more sensorial modes of immersing in the past. Visitors seem to appreciate deeply the expert information the museum is able to offer, however narratives in different formats, events, thematic exhibitions and participatory activities could attract their attention repeatedly and fulfill different needs and aspirations. Finally, the branding of the museum not only as a treasure house of ancient Greek civilization, but also as a place for peaceful meditation and rejuvenating experiences, may well be an alternative identity that could speak to the heart and mind of visitors of all ages and lead to repeat visits that satisfy this need.

Taking it a step further, marketing strategies for national museums could benefit from what the results of this particular case-study imply. As data eloquently showed, the public generally acknowledges the national museum as a place for accessing a rich cultural depository that is valuable for *cultural awareness*. Most of the national museums contain artworks that have an emblematic status for the national or world heritage, and visitors feel thrilled to be able to see them up close. Marketing material usually stresses this opportunity, yet this is only one of the multiple experiences visitors found of value in this study, albeit very strong. Considering the findings, three additional lines of actions are suggested, that could be found of relevance to a wider range of museums: a) *The emotional power of the objects*: Visitors enchantment by the beauty and quality of exhibits could be further capitalized by promoting images of the museum collections which can generate feelings of wonder, amazement and fascination. User-generated content that associates with this kind of responses can act as a great incentive for extra visits, as people tend to have more memorable and cherished experiences when they get emotionally involved. Museographical features that enhance the objects, create a multi-sensory ambience or offer different or unexpected points of view on a physical or interpretative level, are among the elements much appreciated by the visitors, and contribute towards this direction. b) *The worth of connecting with the past*: acknowledged as places of deep and tangible historical knowledge, archaeological museums can enhance and promote all the complementary media and services they develop for presenting information, narrating stories, and explaining the context, in order to create a better understanding of how life was in the past and bring out the links with relevant experience in the present. The sense of travel back in time, mentioned by a number of visitors, is a strong emotional driver that can have considerable impact on intellectual pursuits, yet visitors expect to find scaffoldings of different media provided by the museum to enjoy a deeper feeling of connectedness that enriches their self-identity, personal learning aspirations and cultural understanding. c) *Easiness and relaxation*. A well-organised environment with easy access to its galleries and exhibits, along with a peaceful and relaxed atmosphere, that permits restoration, meditation and the sharing of this spiritual endeavour in an intimate way, were particularly valued by visitors and should inform the branding of analogous museum environments.

In conclusion, repositioning the museum in order to make a positive difference in the communities it serves, can definitely benefit from a close examination of visitors' experience and motivation-based values. The present study offers a baseline that could instigate additional research in the NAM of more qualitative nature, to capture the subtle nuances museum experiences may have for different visitors. The empirical material presented here already highlights strengths and weaknesses that could also be of help to other museums sharing similar characteristics, and shows the way for creating more meaningful, memorable and elevating museum experiences which could increase visitation, but most importantly contribute to visitors' well-being.

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