The Nature and Measurement of Engagement: The Case of Museums

The concept of engagement can be identified throughout a number of literatures spanning the disciplines of consumer psychology, marketing, education, leisure, tourism and the arts, with multiple, though related, definitions. Meaning is construed as, variously, the involvement (Higgins, 2006), commitment (Mollen & Wilson, 2010) or emotional connection (Marci, 2006; Rappaport, 2007), brand engagement (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Clark, 2011; Hollebeek, 2010), student engagement in educational psychology (Bryson & Hand, 2007), employee engagement (Greenwood, 2007), meaningful interaction resulting in learning (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998), consumer engagement (Bowden, 2009), the interchange and exchange between art exhibits and consumers (Bilda, Edmonds, & Candy, 2008; Cornock & Edmonds, 1973; Edmonds, Muller, & Connell, 2006) and the ways in which consumers use museums to create images of themselves (Welsh, 2005).

Besides, Hollebeek (2010) explains the dynamic engagement facets model (see Figure 1). In the marketing literature, it is a two-way interaction between relevant engagement subjects e.g. consumers and customers (Barnatt, 2001; Bowden, 2009) and engagement objects e.g. brands and products (Hollebeek, 2010; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). The left-hand side of the model influences specific engagement levels representing relevant engagement states and dimensionality of engagement. This dimensionality is observed in the literature with unidimensional i.e. cognitive (Guthrie & Cox, 2001; Resnick, 2001) and multidimensional i.e. emotional and behavioural (Catteeuw, Flynn, & Vonderhorst, 2007; Frank, Finnegan, & Taylor, 2004) proposed perspectives.

![Figure 1: Dynamic Model-Key Engagement Facets (Hollebeek, 2010, p. 4)](image)

Engagement can be described as a sense of initiative, involvement and adequate response to stimuli, participating in social activities and interacting with others or alone (Achterberg et al., 2003; Hollebeek, 2010). Higgins and Scholer (2009, p. 102) also define engagement as “... a state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed, or engrossed in something sustained attention”. Abdul-Ghani, Hyde and Marshall (2011, p. 1061) also describe the differences between involvement and engagement as “involvement describes consumer interest in a product category, whereas engagement describes consumer commitment to an active relationship with a specific market offering”. In addition, engagement requires more than the use of cognition and it requires the satisfying of both experiential value and instrumental
value (i.e. involvement) (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Zaichkowsky, 1985). The engagement concept is in harmony with other concepts describing consumer interest, including involvement, flow and interactivity (Abdul-Ghani, et al., 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Mollen & Wilson, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the concept of engagement is defined as the level and type of interaction and involvement that visitors willingly undertake in consuming the museum product.

Writing on creative tourism, Pattakos (2010) highlights the salient role of meaningful engagement in tourists’ satisfaction with their experiences. Similarly, museums strive to retain visitor attention and increase satisfaction levels by engaging visitors with innovative presentation and interpretation techniques. Moreover, research illustrates that some family visits to museums are included with the engagement of both adults and children, which indicates the possibility of making a joint decision with the inclusion of children (Sterry & Beaumont, 2005; Wu, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). It is also arguable that extensive literature suggests children have shown active engagement in the planning of family leisure choices and a better understanding of pre-planning activities can assist marketing for family groups and the design of visitor experiences (Wu, et al., 2010).

A substantial body of literature has resulted, examining supply side influences on museum visitors’ consumption patterns and stressing the importance of the museum environment, in particular the physical environment (design and layout of exhibits) on visitors’ willingness to engage and interact with the same (inter alia Falk & Storksdeick, 2005; Falk & Dierking, 1997; Leinhardt & Crowley, 2002; Leinhardt & Gregg, 2002; Piscitelli & Weier, 2002; Slater & Armstrong, 2010). Within this context, Edmonds et al. (2006, p. 316) identify three salient categories of engagement: attractors draw attention to an exhibit, sustainers lengthen the duration of visitors’ engagement and relaters foster a deeper relationship between visitor and exhibit, thus encouraging future visits. The latter, Edmonds et al. (2006, p. 316) note, “meet the highest approval in the world of museums and art galleries”.

A number of authors have proposed the case for different types and levels of visitor engagement, associated with particular, personal preferences, and subject to visitor characteristics. The earliest tourist typologies distinguished between psychocentric and allocentric tourists, the former preferring the familiar, the latter being at least partially motivated by the challenge of engaging with an unfamiliar host environment (Plog, 1974). Pattakos (2010), meanwhile, contends that tourist levels of engagement can be considered to lie on a continuum with those at the highest level being pro-actively engaged in the co-creation of their tourism experience. Within the museum sector, level of engagement has also been classified, with particular reference to art works.

According to Edmonds and his colleagues (Bilda, et al., 2008; Edmonds, et al., 2006), four core categories of interaction between art exhibits and the viewer can be identified, namely static, dynamic-passive, dynamic-interactive and varying. These effectively represent a hierarchy of level of engagement which can be drawn on to identify skills and knowledge that visitors may require in engaging with the different types of exhibit. The list below illustrates Edmonds et al.’s classification that museum visitors might require in order to achieve a high engagement with that type of exhibit:

- **Static** refers to unchangeable art objects and the art consumer may be experiencing emotional reactions with artefacts.
Dynamic-passive refers to visitors with a passive observation of art activity in response to the physical environment such as sound or light.

Dynamic-interactive refers to visitors who are experiencing dynamic-passive characteristics as well as interacting and playing with technological engagement facilities such as installed screens in museums.

Varying refers to a mixture of both dynamic-passive and dynamic-interactive engagement as well as a history of interactions with the place or technology.

At the highest level of interaction, dynamic-interactive relationships between the visitor and the artwork occur when the experience is influenced by both players and changes over time as a direct result of the history of interactions. Thus, general agreement appears to exist within the literature that the level of visitor engagement varies and that higher levels of engagement bring superior rewards but that not all consumers aspire to these. Besides, greater levels of interactivity are not correlated with superior results for all visitor segments.

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990, p. 7) also highlight that most of the leisure activities e.g. visiting a museum that people engage in “not because they expected a result or reward after the activity is concluded, but because they enjoy what they are doing to the extent that experiencing the activity becomes its own reward”. A traditional museum visit is often structurally defined by the museum as a series of architectural and exhibition features (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). A modern museum’s mission statements stress the diversity, often containing desires for engagement or inspiration for their visitors, rather than basically a learning or pleasurable experience. As museums evolve and adopt more engagement-based methods of delivering information to their visitors, it is important to focus on how the measures are used to test visitor engagement with these new methods and, therefore, learning and pleasure, are also changing with these new methods (Kotler, Kotler, & Kotler, 2008).

In addition, museums serve increasingly complex institutional missions and diverse visitors through their programs and engaging them with all the different facilities (Chhabra, 2008; Hein & Alexander, 1998; McDonald, 2011). Nevertheless, minor attention has been given to level of engagement during consumption and how cultural consumers engage with a cultural place, such as an interactive exhibition/show; interacting with actors playing e.g. roles of historical figures, guided to a certain extent by actors in period costumes and taking on the role of who may have lived in part of history; hiring a tour guide for being taken through the visit experience; audio guide; computerised game or any other technology interactions e.g. installed screens as well as factors that influence the level of engagement. Goulding (2001, p. 579) argues that “the level of engagement and the nature of self-actualization gained through activities helps to keep alienation buried”.

Welsh (2005) argues that the main mission of cultural places, particularly museums, is evoking activities around three main domains: materiality, engagement and representation. Materiality includes the human capacity to physically, emotionally and cognitively modify their surroundings to suit their purposes (i.e. objective conditions of cultural place). Representation investigates the scope of information that emerges from the museum institution and also the processes by which museums create their subject. Engagement refers to the multiple ways that cultural consumers use museums to create images of them. Falk and Dierking (1997, p.67) also highlight that “most visitors come to museums specifically to see the objects on display and to read the labels in exhibits. Visitors spend most of their time looking at, and presumably thinking about, the objects and labels in exhibits, and leave with images of them”. As museums recognise the greater involvedness of their relationships with
consumers, they have developed new mechanisms for enhancing the degree of engagement (Welsh, 2005). Chhabra (2008, p. 441) notes that the museum role is extended between “past digging such as collection, verification, and preservation and providing a place for a variety of experiences such as learning, engagement and enjoyment”. Black (2009) argues museums should learn to engage visitors more effectively and to encourage them to revisit frequently through the range of services they provide. According to Simon (2010), serving visitors custom content requires two things: a rich content base of different sorts of interpretation for any given exhibit and an understandable and meaningful mechanism by which visitors can retrieve content of interest. Finally, the dynamic engagement facets model (see Figure 1) can be modified in the museum context (Hollebeek, 2010). It is a two-way interaction between visitors (engagement subjects) and museum exhibits (engagement objects). The model influences specific engagement levels signifying relevant engagement states and dimensionality of museum engagement. This dimensionality is both cognitive and behavioural in the museum context because it deals with mental processes and characteristics of the museum.

Thus, general agreement appears to exist within the literature that the level of visitor engagement varies and that higher levels of engagement bring superior rewards, but that not all consumers aspire to this. At the same time, greater levels of interactivity are not necessarily correlated with enhanced outcomes for all visitor segments. However, there is a distinct lack of empirical work, and therefore clarity, surrounding the demand side drivers of engagement, which would allow researchers and managers to predict the level and nature of engagement associated with different visitor types. Also, there is not a visitors’ engagement measure/scale in the museum marketing context, therefore, one of the objectives of this study is to develop such a scale. Test construction and scale development literature suggests that human psychology (e.g. consumer behaviour) is adequately complex that there is no limit to the number of constructs that can be operationalised as scales (Clark & Watson, 1995; DeVellis, 2003). For the purpose of this study, an engagement scale can be developed to assess the ‘level of engagement’ at each of many levels of abstraction. Thus, a key issue to be resolved in the early developmental stage is the scope of the target construct, here engagement, as well as employing different stages of data collection including both qualitative and quantitative methods (Caracelli & Greene, 1993; DeVellis, 2003). For instance, researchers should pay more attention to whether the items share a common cause (i.e. constituting a scale) and consequence (i.e. constituting an index) (DeVellis, 2003). Yet, the researcher emphasizes that in everyday life situations, museums are present in people’s socio-cultural spheres. They constitute an important part of people’s interaction agendas. Therefore, the researcher invites his fellow scholars to take this subject further by empirically investigating how engagement concept operates for different people with varying socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. The study highlights the engagement value of museums in (re)shaping museum offerings. Therefore, the researcher invites policymakers and cultural authorities to rethink their policies and protect museums as significant playful and engaging contexts that glue human beings together in the age of fragmentation of human relations and interaction.
References


