Consumer Satisfaction and Post-purchase Intentions: An Exploratory Study of Museum Visitors

Paul Harrison, Robin Shaw

Introduction

The museum environment offers the researcher an unusual context for exploring the antecedents and outcomes of satisfaction with services. In the museum setting, unlike in the vast majority of settings, reaching and satisfying the most profitable or viable segment has not been management’s primary objective. Traditionally, museums have placed the emphasis on the care of their collections, giving little prominence to serving the needs of their customers or the public. Over the past 20 years, however, many museum marketers have modified their view of customers, concluding that customers are a principal factor in the success of their organizations (McLean, 1994). Along with a focus on customers, and particularly visitor satisfaction, has come a concentrated effort by funding bodies such as governments to ensure that visitors to museums represent the broad community. Therefore, museum marketers have been obliged to develop strategies in order to appeal to all members of their community, not just those who are the most profitable or the most likely to visit (Parliament of Victoria, 1983).

Satisfaction with the Museum Experience

As museum managers have come to view customers as an essential element in their success, and as they have incorporated marketing into their strategy, they have also adopted the concept of customer or visitor satisfaction as a component of the museum experience (Kawashima, 1998; McLean, 1994). In particular, museum marketers are interested in how factors such as satisfaction influence repeat visiting and recommending the experience to others (Harrison and Shaw, 2001). The importance of satisfaction in the services sector is illustrated by the emphasis on word-of-mouth communication, as opposed to more traditional means of promotion such as advertising, as an efficient means of attracting consumers to cultural facilities such as museums and art galleries (Young, 1981).

Word-of-mouth advocacy has been cited as a key promotional tool for museums and other cultural institutions (DiMaggio, 1985), because in many cases word-of-mouth opinions are solicited from trustworthy sources such as friends and family members. Furthermore, post-purchase behaviours such as intention to return and word-of-mouth reco...
ommendation are dependent on a satisfactory experience (McLean, 1994).

Many museums and art galleries consider visitor satisfaction to be a primary organizational goal. For example, the strategic plan of Museum Victoria, which operates three museums in Victoria, Australia, as well as an interactive Internet site, states that “95% audience satisfaction is the number one goal” (Museum Victoria, 2000, p. 7). In addition, one of the key commitments of the National Museum of Australia, based in the national capital, Canberra, is a focus on high levels of customer satisfaction and continuing evaluation of the visitor experience (National Museum of Australia, 1997), while the National Gallery of Australia aims for “85% satisfaction” in relation to visitor access to the national collection of artworks (Australian National Gallery, 1999/2000, p. 19).

This focus seems appropriate since customer satisfaction is an integral factor in marketing theory, research and practice (Yi, 1991). Satisfied customers are believed to affect the long-term viability of organizations through repeat purchase, brand loyalty and word-of-mouth communication (Cina, 1989; Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Walker, 1995). A concern with customer satisfaction can have a bearing on an organization’s financial position (Fornell, 1992). Changes in satisfaction can alert managers to the need to alter their marketing strategies. If marketing is “the art of getting and keeping customers” (Kotler, 1992, p. 50), then satisfying customers is integral to this process.

The most widely accepted definition of consumer satisfaction characterizes it as the state of a consumer who has purchased a product after weighing the costs and benefits. Oliver’s (1981) alternative definition incorporates the concept of a gap between the consumption experience and prior expectations, describing satisfaction as “the emotional reaction following a disconfirmation experience” (p. 42), which is incorporated with the “consumer’s prior feelings about the consumption experience” (p. 27). Oliver further defines satisfaction as the fulfillment of a need. However, recent definitions of satisfaction in the consumer behavior field move away from the fulfillment of a need, as this implies that consumers are aware of their particular needs prior to purchase, which is not always the case (Halttunen, Hartman, and Schmidt, 1994).

Satisfaction is an evaluative state. When the product is predominantly tangible (as in goods marketing), it is said to occur subsequent to the purchase and use of the product. In services such as museums, however, satisfaction may be evaluated continually throughout the service delivery or consumption process, rather than exclusively or mainly post-purchase and post-consumption (Gabbott and Hogg, 1998). This means that the researcher should evaluate both overall satisfaction and satisfaction with the various key elements of the experience (Danaher and Mattson, 1994).

Furthermore, satisfaction should be evaluated as a cumulative experience rather than as transaction- or incident-specific (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990; Gabbott and Hendry, 1999; Wilton and Nicosia, 1986; Yi, 1991; Youngdahl and Kellogg, 1994). With regard to relationship development and loyalty, satisfaction with a particular aspect of a service experience is unlikely to lead to long-term loyalty, whereas an overall judgement based on several aspects of the service experience may leave the consumer with the...
intention to return or the intention to recommend it to others.

**Measuring Satisfaction**

The preliminary research for this paper included data-collection on the ways in which satisfaction is actually measured at Australian museums. This was a way of guiding the development of the research design, in conjunction with a review of the academic approaches reported in the literature. Informal telephone interviews with marketing researchers and marketing managers at 10 Australian museums and galleries indicated consistently that satisfaction levels were reported as condensed measures rather than as frequency distributions of all scaled responses. For example, satisfaction was reported as a combined or aggregated response, such as the sum of the positive satisfaction responses, viz., high satisfaction and satisfaction. In other words, where five-point Likert scales were used, with 1 indicating that the visitor was highly dissatisfied with the experience and 5 indicating that the visitor was highly satisfied with the experience, marketing managers and researchers were condensing a five-point scale into a three-tiered scale presented as dissatisfaction, neutral and satisfaction: 1 and 2 became dissatisfaction, 3 became neutral, and 4 and 5 were reported as satisfaction.

However, Jones and Sasser (1995) observed a large difference between satisfied and highly satisfied customers in terms of loyalty. Further, Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997) found that respondents who reported high levels of satisfaction were more likely to translate their intentions into actual behaviours such as loyalty than those who reported mere satisfaction. Loyalty is traditionally measured through behaviours such as repeat purchase, intention to repurchase or advocacy of the organization's products. Those customers who were highly satisfied were also more likely to intend to repurchase the firm's products than those who were merely satisfied. Further, the relationship between satisfaction often appeared to be non-linear — that is, people at the extremities of the scales tended to have powerful feelings about the company and its products, whether positive or negative. Those in the middle of the scale tended to be indifferent towards the company and its products; consequently, there was little association between their satisfaction score and loyalty behaviours. Further, the authors argue that those customers at the highly satisfied end of the scale become "unpaid salespeople" for the organization, "talking up" and recommending the product and generally becoming strong advocates for the organization. These findings have ramifications for museum marketers. Knowledge about how users evaluate their museum experience, particularly in relation to high and low levels of satisfaction, can help marketers to manage intention to return and intention to recommend the visit to others.

**Hypothesized Relationships among Service Elements, Consumer Characteristics, Satisfaction and Future Intentions**

An initial conceptual model (Figure 1) was developed based on hypothesized relationships among the constructs discussed above. This model can be tested via structural
equation modelling (using, for example, AMOS, a frequently used program) for overall “goodness of fit,” as well as the statistical significance of the hypothesized relationships described in the diagram, once suitable measured variables have been included. In addition, AMOS can provide coefficients or weights to help determine the strength of relationships among variables. The model is based on three key hypotheses (which are noted below). A further hypothesis is suggested to explore the Jones and Sasser (1995) assertion that there is a difference in the subsequent behaviour of those consumers who report high levels of satisfaction and those who report lower levels of satisfaction.

A substantial amount of research in the area of museum marketing focuses on visitor profiling, including demographics such as age, education, place of residence and nationality, to help managers determine who is visiting their museums. For example, Kawashima (1998, p. 25) argues that “the socio-economic class of a visitor, and the level of educational attainment in particular, strongly correlates with the habit of museum visiting.” Museums have been particularly prolific at collecting demographic data, but very few relate those data to factors such as satisfaction or, more importantly, behavioural factors such as intentions (see, for example, Meehan, 2002). We therefore include additional hypotheses to clarify the relationship between demographic moderators such as age, gender and education and satisfaction and intentions.

As discussed above, increased levels of satisfaction are likely to lead to higher levels of loyalty behaviours, frequently measured through intention to return and intention to recommend (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991). Based on the results of previous research (Boulding et al., 1993; Fornell, 1992), it is hypothesized that satisfaction is related to consumer loyalty, expressed as intention to return and intention to recommend.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is a relationship between satisfaction and intention to return.

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a relationship between satisfaction and intention to recommend.

In addition, based on the argument in services research that satisfaction in the service environment should be evaluated using a range of elements encountered during the service experience (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990; Gabbott and Hendry, 1999; Wilton...
and Nicosia, 1986; Yi, 1991; Youngdahl and Kellogg, 1994), and more specifically the museum environment (Burton and Scott, 2003), it is hypothesized that satisfaction with museum “components,” such as facilities, staff services and the exhibition itself, influences overall satisfaction, intention to return and intention to recommend.

Hypothesis 3: There is a relationship between satisfaction and elements of the museum experience, namely the Exhibition Experience, Staff Services and Venue Attributes.

Figure 2 elucidates the preceding hypotheses through the use of an AMOS graphic model.

In the light of the findings of Jones and Sasser (1995) and others (e.g., Heskett et al., 1997), the reported condensing of satisfaction scales, while helpful when describing general visitor responses to the museum experience, may not be appropriate when seeking to ascertain how satisfaction leads to behavioural intentions. Therefore, it is hypothesized that high levels of satisfaction – that is, as manifested in extremely satisfied visitors – are more likely than low levels to be related to favourable behaviour such as intention to return and intention to recommend.

Hypothesis 4: There is a relationship between high levels of satisfaction and subsequent intentions such as intention to return and intention to recommend.

Demographic variables appear to be a factor in satisfaction and subsequent behaviour. It is often reported that well-educated consumers are more likely than others to participate in arts and cultural activities (Kawashima, 1998). It is therefore interesting to observe the relationship between education level and evaluation of the museum experience. Westbrook
(1980), for example, reports an association between higher education and lower satisfaction. Age was included in the present study because research indicates that dissatisfaction can be partly explained by age in the service setting (Zinkhan and Wallendorf, 1985). In addition, it has been shown that consumers’ information-processing abilities deteriorate with age (Gilly and Zeithaml, 1985). This could indicate that young people are more finely attuned to changes in quality during the museum experience and therefore have more intense reactions to particular aspects of the visit, such as poor service. Finally, gender was included because satisfaction with service, particularly in relation to interpersonal communication, has been found to influence loyalty behaviours among women more than men (Homburg and Giering, 2001) and men have been found more likely to be satisfied with the service experience than women (Westbrook, 1980).

**Hypothesis 5: Demographics such as age, education and gender act as moderators in relation to satisfaction and subsequent behaviour such as intention to return and intention to recommend.**

While demographic data such as gender, age and education are relatively "blunt" measures of segmentation, a large number of arts and cultural organizations continue to use these easily collectible segmentation bases to build their strategy (McDonald and Harrison, 2002). These data were included in the present study because they could contribute to a general understanding of the responses of particular segments to the museum's offerings.

The intentions of museum visitors are one indicator that managers can use when considering future trends. In addition, intentions can be related to attitudes: a positive attitude about museum attendance may lead to other loyalty behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth and other forms of advocacy (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991).

**Method**

The purpose of this research was to identify visitors' experience of satisfaction with and loyalty intentions regarding their museum visit. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with visitors to a small metropolitan museum in Australia during one week in April 2001. Average weekly attendance was calculated by the museum to be 1,900 visitors. Subjects were chosen using systematic sampling, with approximately every eighth visitor being approached as they were leaving the venue. Overall, 280 visitors were approached during the research period and 184 agreed to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted during opening hours – that is, 11am to 5pm Monday to Sunday. Participants were informed that the questionnaire would take approximately seven minutes to complete. They were provided with a comfortable place to sit and offered a free refreshment from the museum café, such as coffee, tea or a soft drink, in return for their time.

The questionnaire was designed to collect data on visitors’ demographic, social and behavioural background as well as attitudes towards the exhibits and the services, overall satisfaction with the experience, intention to return and intention to recommend. Multi-item questionnaire components were developed through a review of the extant literature and qualitative interviews conducted previously at the venue regarding consumer attitudes on a wide range of elements in the museum experience. Performance elements such as staff behaviour, the experience of the exhibitions and information provided with the exhibitions, and venue elements such as the design and comfort of the facility, were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale. These elements were consistent with variables considered to be antecedents of satisfaction and loyalty within both the general services marketing literature and previous museum studies (Burton and Scott, 2003; Meehan, 2002; Yucelt, 2000).

**Results**

Demographic data indicated that the sample was 60% female; the median age was between 40 and 49 years with 60% between the ages of 25 and 54; 63% of the respondents possessed a university degree (either undergraduate or postgraduate); 54%
resided within 30 kilometres of the venue, 2% resided elsewhere in the state, 16% came from another state or overseas, and 28% declined to provide details about their residence. In general, this sample could be considered reasonably representative of the typical museum visitor in “first world, western democracies” (Kawashima, 1998; Kotler and Kotler, 1998).

Some initial statistics for the core elements in the model are summarized in Table 1. It should be noted that the means for perception of satisfaction and intention to recommend were very high, while intention to return was relatively low.

Structural equation modelling (AMOS) was used to analyze the data, mainly because it allows the researcher to consider overall tests of model fit, regression weights, correlation coefficients, means and variances simultaneously. Figure 2 shows the basic AMOS structural equation model used for investigating the process or path model proposed for the consumer process discussed. The multiple questionnaire items relating to the latent variables Facilities, Services, and Experience offered by the museum show acceptable fit, and these latent variables are, in turn, linked to the measured variables of Satisfaction, Intention to Return and Intention to Recommend. The fitted model indicates that Experience is the major contributing variable to Satisfaction, with some contribution from Services but virtually nil from Facilities. Satisfaction is related only weakly (and negatively) to Intention to Return (standardized regression weights of -0.07) but slightly more strongly (and positively) to Intention to Recommend (standardized coefficient of 0.25). However, these results suggest that factors other than satisfaction mediate the relationship between the service experience and loyalty. Experience is a stronger predictor of recommending to others (standardized coefficient of 0.38) than is Satisfaction. Similarly, Services (standardized coefficient of 0.34) and Experience (standardized coefficient of 0.33) are stronger predictors of Intention to Return than is Satisfaction.

No single statistic is accepted universally as the index of model adequacy, so several measures of model fit (of the many available through AMOS) are presented (Arbuckle, 1997). Those statistics that are within acceptable (or marginally acceptable) limits are shown in boldface. On the basis of the results presented in Table 2, the model is deemed to be a marginally acceptable model of the structure underlying the observed data.

To test the Jones and Sasser (1995) assertion regarding the relationship between high levels of satisfaction and other variables, only those respondents who rated their museum visit either 4 or 5 on the five-point scale were considered. A t-test was conducted using the two groups ($N_1 = 73; N_2 = 99$) against Intention to Return and Intention to Recommend. The “highly” satisfied group—that is, those who indicated a 5 rating on the scale—had a statistically significantly higher mean score than the “merely” satisfied group (4 rating) for Intention to Return and Intention to Recommend. Thus, those who were highly satisfied also reported higher mean intentions to return and recommend.

Analyses were conducted on the relationships between the three demographic variables of Gender (using a t-test), Age and Education (both using Spearman correlations) and the three key variables of Satisfaction, Intention
to Return within 12 Months and Intention to Recommend to Others. For Gender, the only statistically significant difference was that women had a higher mean Intention to Return. However, Satisfaction was close to statistical significance, so further investigation into this phenomenon is warranted (see above).

We found a weak positive association between Age and Satisfaction (rho = 0.21) and a weak negative association between Education and Satisfaction (-0.20) and between Education and Intention to Recommend (-0.24). T-testing uncovered no statistically significant differences between women and men for those respondents who were “merely” satisfied. However, t-testing identified a statistically significant gender difference for those respondents who were highly satisfied, favouring women on Intention to Return.

**Discussion and Managerial Implications**

This study was designed to clarify the relationship between certain elements in the museum experience, evaluation of the museum experience and subsequent intentions. As discussed, the measurement of satisfaction among visitors is considered a useful and relatively straightforward way to measure visitor response to the museum experience.

After reviewing the literature, we hypothesized that there are a number of relationships between satisfaction and subsequent intentions among visitors to a museum. The hypotheses are repeated below, annotated with the findings from the study.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is a relationship between satisfaction and intention to return. While a statistically significant relationship was found between satisfaction and intention to return, it was very weak, and inverse, according to the AMOS modelling. A variety of factors could account for this finding, but the most probable relates to the nature of the product not lending itself to repeat purchase in the short term. That is, while the mean satisfaction score was high, consumers may not see a need to return to a museum in the near future unless the product changes substantially. Just as most people who read a book or see a play do not repeat the experience shortly afterwards – even if pleased with the initial experience – most people who visit a museum may regard the experience favourably without repeating it immediately. Products of this type may be characterized as “infrequently purchased products.” However, extremely satisfied visitors may indeed intend to return in the near future. Sub-segmentation can serve to identify the characteristics of these visitors.

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a [low-moderate, positive] relationship between satisfaction and intention to recommend. The structural equation model indicated that the Exhibition Experience is the major contributing variable to Satisfaction, with some contribution from Services but virtually nil from Facilities.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is a relationship between satisfaction and elements of the museum experience, namely the Exhibition Experience, Staff Services and Venue Attributes.

**Hypothesis 4:** There is a relationship between high levels of satisfaction and subsequent intentions such as intention to return and intention to recommend.

**Hypothesis 5:** Demographics such as age, education and gender act as moderators in relation to satisfaction and subsequent behaviour such as intention to return and intention to recommend.

The results indicate some low-to-moderate relationships between consumer demographics and the core variables. The fact that satisfaction levels were relatively high and revealed few differences among the segmentation variables suggests that there is a good match between the museum and its visitors. While there is some support for the widespread assumption that “culture” appeals predominantly to well-educated, high-income, older women (Burton and Scott, 2003; Bourdieu, 1991; Colbert, 2002), the present findings suggest that the mass-marketing approach required by government – whereby the museum is compelled to attract broad and often incompatible segments – is a viable one. However, the present study was limited in that the subjects were already visitors to the museum. It therefore could not identify those who do not attend nor the many reasons why they stay away.

Visitor satisfaction is not the only means of measuring loyalty intentions. Other, more
complex, issues need to be investigated as well. In particular, despite the tendency of museum practitioners to use satisfaction as a means of demonstrating that a given museum is reaching its target market, this measure can only partially predict the loyalty behaviours sought by services marketers.

Highly satisfied customers have a unique response to the museum experience, as demonstrated by their higher mean scores for both intention to return and intention to recommend. This is an important issue for museum marketers. While it is expedient to condense satisfaction scores when reporting to boards and governments, it may not be appropriate to merge these scores when developing strategies. Determining how to move more visitors into the highly satisfied group may be a desirable strategy.

The issue of highly satisfied as opposed to merely satisfied visitors requires broader investigation. The demographic analysis described here examined only a small subset of the likely moderators of satisfaction levels. This suggests that a multifaceted strategic approach should be adopted by museum marketers. At a fundamental level, museum marketers need to regularly monitor visitor satisfaction, using methods similar to those presented here. However, the use of these data should be considered beyond basic descriptive analysis.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Although some statistically significant results are reported here, the positive linkage may be minimal in some instances and a simple relationship may mask underlying factors. Correlations may be significant but low, necessitating an examination of the multivariate context in order to determine the relative contribution of variables. Clearly, there is a need to determine the particular drivers of satisfaction regarding the total museum product, and to explore the characteristics of the consumers who demonstrate superior satisfaction (perhaps even delight). Further, managers need to define their intended visitation segments more precisely, so that the "chain of recommendation" may be deliberately "reverse engineered" in order to isolate the drivers of an improved total-relationship marketing system. Future research could also explore the behaviour that results from intention to return and intention to recommend.

**References**


