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Understanding Barriers to Attendance and Non-Attendance at Arts and Cultural Institutions: A Conceptual Framework

Pandora Kay and Emma Wong, Victoria University
Michael Polonsky, Deakin University

Abstract
This paper draws together themes from within the leisure, arts and other literature related to why people might not attend cultural institutions and identifies eight barriers: 1) Physical; 2) Personal Access; 3) Cost; 4) Time and Timing; 5) Product; 6) Personal Interest; 7) Socialisation/Understanding; and 8) Information. Many of these barriers appear to be interrelated and as such strategies to address non-visitation will most likely need to be complex to allow the full range of barriers to be addressed.

Introduction
Many arts and cultural institutions internationally are grappling with the issue of how to address low attendance and visitation rates by some sectors of the community. It has been identified by cultural institutions, funding bodies and governments that there would be a range of social benefits associated with increasing visitation to cultural institutions (ACA, 1999; Rentschler, 2006). The high degree of public financial support for these institutions also places increased pressure on these institutions to ensure they are servicing a diverse cross-section of society.

There is no simple answer as to why some citizens do not actively attend these institutions (Samdahl and Jekubovich, 1997). The objective of this research is to explore the previous academic and industry research on non-attendance focusing on the barriers, constraints and inhibitors, to draw together commonly identified themes and issues. This type of approach has been undertaken in other areas of marketing (for example, Cornwell and Maignan, 1998). The past work on non-attendance covers a range of research areas including arts and cultural studies, leisure studies and other disciplines such as marketing, tourism and events.

The research has identified that there may in fact be a range of real and perceived barriers covering eight broad barriers: 1) Physical; 2) Personal Access; 3) Cost; 4) Time and Timing; 5) Product; 6) Personal Interest; 7) Socialisation/Understanding; and 8) Information. Each of the eight barriers is discussed within its own section. Implications of these findings are then provided for exploring the issue in more detail.

Physical Barriers
The research has identified that the physical location of institutions results in access being difficult or inconvenient. This theme was explored by a number of researchers and included three broad issues. Firstly, there was the idea that cultural institutions are physically difficult to get to (Prentice et al, 1997; Tian et al, 1996; ACA, 1999; OMRG, 2006). The second, related issue revolved around public transportation (Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998; Prentice et al, 1997; Rentschler, 2006). Thirdly, it was felt that institutions were not readily accessible by public transportation (Rentschler, 2006). Several studies include other issues related to physical barriers. For example, it was suggested that it was too difficult to organise a visit or travel (Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998) or an unwillingness to travel/use public-transportation (Prentice et al, 1997).
Personal Access Barriers
These issues focused on the individual and there were two broad themes. Firstly, individuals did not feel comfortable attending (ACA, 1999; Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998), were not entertained (OMRG, 2006), or felt it would not be fun (ACA, 1999; Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998). These issues all appear to broadly relate to personal perceptions of the experience. In the context of non-attendees, it is unclear as to how these perceptions were developed. In the case of those who have attended in the past, it might be that a bad experience negatively affected their perceptions (Davies and Prentice, 1995).

The second issue in this area related to personal factors such as family circumstances that precluded attendance (Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Henderson et al, 1988; Milner et al, 2004; Prentice et al, 1997) or the individuals had disabilities or health issues that precluded them from attending (ACA, 1999; Milner et al, 2004; Samdahl and Jebubovich, 1997). Other research found that activities were not scheduled when the potential visitors were able to attend (Bennett 1994; Rentschler, 2006) or people felt that organising a visit needed too much planning (ACA, 1999; OMRG, 2006). Other components of this personal issue related to the fact that some people felt they could not attend alone and did not have family or friends with whom they could go (ACA, 1999; Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Rentschler, 2006; Samdahl and Jebubovich, 1997). These issues for the most part focus on the perceptions that cultural institutions are not seen to be inclusive or accessible to the widest community.

Cost Barriers
Financial costs arose as an issue in three ways. Firstly, several authors identified that individuals and families had limited incomes, thus they felt they could not attend (ACA, 1999; Henderson et al, 1988; Milner et al, 2004; OMRG, 2006; Prentice et al, 1997; Rentschler, 2006; Samdahl and Jebubovich, 1997; Tian et al, 1996). The OMRG (2006) further found that a lack of concession pricing inhibits some potential visitors to cultural institutions. Secondly, studies found that consumers consider the full range of costs when evaluating attendance and non-attendance, not just the entrance fee. Supplementary costs; such as babysitting (Rentschler, 2006), food (Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998; Rentschler, 2006), and transportation and parking (Davies and Prentice, 1995; Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998), were considered too high. Thirdly, several studies highlight concerns with the issue of whether an experience is value for money (Tian et al, 1996). Others found a view that the institutions were simply too expensive (ACA, 1999; Prentice et al, 1997; Tian et al, 1996), which indirectly suggests that the benefits are not justified by the costs. However, there is also research that suggests that consumers overestimate the cost of attendance (OMRG, 2006) and thus non-attendees may have incorrect information/perceptions about the institutions.

Time and Timing Barriers
Most researchers identified that visitors and non-visitors view time constraints a critical visitation barrier, with consumers and potential consumers reporting that they are time poor (ACA, 1999; Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Davies and Prentice, 1995; Henderson et al, 1988; Milner et al, 2004; Rentschler, 2006; Tian et al, 1996). The theme of inconvenience is also identified in regards to limited opening hours or schedules (Davies and Prentice, 1995; Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998; Rentschler, 2006; Samdahl and Jebubovich, 1997). For some consumers, there is not a pressing time need to attend these institutions and some feel they could attend such institutions when they are on holidays (Davies and Prentice, 1995). Others view attending cultural institutions as a low priority, that is, they have better
things to do with their limited time (Davies and Prentice, 1995; Tian et al, 1996) or in other words, the value proposition: if attendance is not seen as valuable, then visitations might be perceived as ‘wasted time’.

**Product Barriers**
The research identified several issues associated with the cultural products provided that might inhibit visitation. Researchers have identified concerns regarding the quality of the cultural institutions. Tian et al (1996) found a perception that offerings are of poor quality and that some cultural institutions are too serious, too confronting, and too intellectual. The idea that cultural products represent a class distinction, i.e. they are “not for me” is also raised (ACA, 1999; Davies and Prentice, 1995). This suggests some inconsistency with the stated goal of many public cultural institutions to bring cultural activities to their constituent populations (residents and tourists).

Several studies also suggest that some respondents feel that once they have visited the cultural institution there is no need to re-visit (Tian et al, 1996; OMRGB, 2006) and some visitors feel materials are recycled and thus there is no need to revisit (ACA, 1999). However a more traditional service view also provided, is that a previous encounter was not satisfactory and thus the individuals would then not re-visit in the future (Davies and Prentice, 1995). The broader service perspective also relates to comments that staff are not friendly, welcoming and are unable to assist in the experience (Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998). This supports the idea that the product is not simply viewed as ‘art on display’, but is seen as a broader experience (Geissler et al, 2006). Some of these product supply related barriers directly relate to personal interest or understanding barriers as discussed in the next sections.

**Personal Interest and Peer Group Barriers**
That people do not feel cultural institutions offer products that are relevant or of interest to them is widely identified (Bennett, 1994; Prentice et al, 1997; Tian et al, 1996; ACA, 1999). Of relevance to this, people indicate that they have different interests (ACA, 1999; Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Davies and Prentice, 1995; Milner et al, 2004; Rentschler, 2006) or feel that attendance does not reflect their identity (Bennett, 1994; Davies and Prentice, 1995; Swanson and Davis, 2006). Individuals’ perception of self also relates to how they perceive attending cultural institutions would be seen by their peers. A strong view in several studies is that people within the respondent’s peer group would not attend (ACA, 1999; Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Henderson et al, 1988; Prentice et al, 1997) or would not think it is “the in thing to do” (Tian et al, 1996). Given that some respondents had not attended; how these perceptions were developed is unclear. However, these factors may be very individualist (i.e. in regards to visitors and non-visitors) and might also vary by specific institution or exhibition. The factors also appear to be closely related to other issues such as personal access barriers, where it was felt that institutions are too challenging to attend (Migliorino and Cultural Perspectives, 1998), and the barrier of socialisation/understanding.

**Socialisation/Understanding Barriers**
This barrier focuses on people perceiving that cultural institutions are not for them and/or they do not understand them (Bennett, 1994; Davies and Prentice, 1995; Prentice et al, 1997; Tian et al, 1996). These are closely related to personal barriers, as in both instances there appears to be the view that engaging with cultural institutions is ‘too hard’ or something of which the non-visitor has knowledge. Other views are that a lack of past engagement (ACA, 1999), a poor past experience (Davies and Prentice, 1995) or lack of socialisation with cultural institutions (ACA, 1999; Davies and Prentice, 1995; Crawford and Godbey, 1987) makes any
engagement more difficult. In these cases, getting people to visit for the first time and having an enjoyable experience may have significant flow-on effects to future visitation. This is similar to getting consumers to try a new service for the first time, the more difficult the consumer perceives the experience to be, the less likely they are to trial it (Higgs et al, 2005).

**Information Barriers**

A lack of information about cultural institutions was identified by a number of authors as an issue as well. This related to visitors and non-visitors not having information on the attractions such as; when the exhibit is on, what it comprises, etcetera (ACA, 1999; Crawford and Godbey, 1987; Henderson et al, 1988; OMRG, 2006; Rentschler, 2006). This would seem to be closely linked to other barriers, as non-visitors may be developing incorrect beliefs about institutions, which then shape behaviour - a cycle identified in various traditional marketing literature (Higgs et al, 2005).

**Discussion, Implications and Conclusions**

The eight barriers are summarized in Table 1 and their interrelationships are illustrated in Figure 1 where we propose the eight barriers be categorized into three groups based on shared commonalities: (1) external/situational, (2) product-specific, and (3) personal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Broad sub-issues/themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical Access</td>
<td>1. Physically difficult to get to</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Public transport access difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Other, e.g. unwilling to travel/use public transport; too difficult to organise a visit or travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal Access</td>
<td>1. Personal feeling perceptions of the experience e.g. being uncomfortable, not entertaining, not fun; too challenging</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Personal factors precluding attendance, e.g. family circumstances, disabilities or health issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Other, e.g. personal perceptions that opening hours were not suitable when visitor could attend; too much planning required; no one to go with and could not go alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cost</td>
<td>1. Perceptions that could not attend due to limited incomes or lack of concession pricing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Cost of the overall encounter and supplementary costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Value for money</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Other, e.g. too expensive; overestimated cost of attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Time &amp; Timing</td>
<td>Time poor consumers lack time to attend; no pressing need to attend; attend when on holidays; inconvenience of opening hours and activity schedules</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Product</td>
<td>Poor quality offerings; represents class distinction that is “not for me”; too serious, too confronting and too intellectual; no need to re-visit; service staff were not friendly or welcoming and were unable to assist the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Personal Interest &amp; Peer Group</td>
<td>Products not relevant or of interest; have different interests; do not reflect self identity perceptions; peer group would not attend or think it the “thing to do”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Socialisation &amp; Understanding</td>
<td>Perception that cultural institutions are not for them, consumers do not understand them, engagement is too hard, unfamiliar, lack of past engagement, poor past experience, lack of socialisation with cultural institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Information</td>
<td>Lack of information about the cultural attractions; information not accessible to non-English speakers; staff unable to provide information in other languages or unable to assist in explaining exhibitions</td>
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</table>

**Table 1: Summary of Themes Related to Barriers to Visitation**

In this categorization (Figure 1), physical barriers and cost are considered to belong to both situational and product-specific categories. It is proposed that the barriers are not mutually exclusive as the decision of non-attendance can be a result of a combination of factors. In addition, causal relationships may exist among factors. In the above conceptual framework,
arrows 1 to 3 indicate that external/situational factors, product-specific factors, and personal factors all have a direct impact on decision-making. Arrow 4 shows that factors in the external environment have impact on personal factors; e.g. the lack of information reduces personal interest. Arrow 5 refers to the impact of factors in the external environment on product-specific factors; e.g. the lack of provision of public transport makes the location of the museum a barrier to visit. Finally, arrow 6 shows the impact of product-specific factors on personal factors; e.g. uninteresting product content leads to low personal interest.

**Figure 1: Interrelationships of Factors Leading to Non-Attendance**

This review has identified that non-visitation is complex and at least eight barriers affect individuals’ willingness to visit cultural institutions, with clear linkages between barriers in the majority of cases. Hence any strategies developed to increase visitation of cultural institutions need to be multi-pronged to allow all pertinent barriers to be addressed, possibly further complicated by the fact that there are different segments of non-attendees who do not visit institutions for different reasons. Marketers of cultural institutions need to identify segments of non-visitors and target those who will be ‘easiest’ to facilitate initial trial, which will then possibly facilitate re-visitation. This might relate to the fact that some non-visitors have not been socialized, to consider attendance at cultural institutions as activities in which they can participate. It also seems that information may be a critical factor in addressing non-visitation. However, promotion needs to focus not simply on information or persuasion about the products and services, but to also address consumer perceptions of visitation. Thus promotion may need to be informative, and also take on a social marketing role where behaviour modification is sought. Those seeking to increase attendance have a difficult task, as strategies may have to be targeted to different the segments, exhibitions and cultural institutions. What is clear from the literature, is that visitors and non-visitors view the experience as including a broad set of activities and interactions, all of which need to be considered when seeking to increase visitation.

While non-visitation has been explored from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, further in-depth qualitative research is called for to allow a richness of understanding about how targeted segments view barriers and how these can be overcome, including cross-cultural variations and for a cross section of institutions, where barriers may differ. This study has also proposed complex interactions amongst barriers and further in-depth qualitative research is needed to explore these for various segments of non-visitors. Once these are well understood, there may also be opportunities for traditional quantitative research to be undertaken. Quantitative modelling techniques have been applied in the leisure studies area (i.e. Jackson and Scott, 1999) and tourism area (e.g. McGuiggan, 2004) and could be also extended to the cultural area.
References


