Museums as Playful Venues in the Leisure Society

Babak Taheri (Durham University, UK) and Aliakbar Jafari (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow – UK)

Leisure society

Our contemporary society – at least explicitly in more economically developed contexts in urban spaces – is becoming a leisure society. Compared to our predecessors, we are more restless. We get bored easily. We show little interest in seriousness. Serious things scare us. Nowadays, people tend to watch less TV news than they do quizzes or soap operas or reality shows. TV news channels, which traditionally broadcast serious materials, are turning their studios into theatres of "infotainment" (Brants, 1998). Educators are encouraged to apply interactive methods to entertain students and keep them engaged in the classroom. Individuals seem to become afraid of being on their own. On the train, on the bus, or on foot, people are becoming more accustomed to having their earphones on, listening to music, or playing with their smart phones. City councils arrange more festivals and public shows to entertain their citizens. Thanks to the online environment (e.g., social media, email, and blogs) and multi-application smart phones, more entertaining contents (e.g., jokes, amusing video clips and photographs, and artistic tastes) are shared amongst people.

With the intensified pace of life in the conditions of modernity, we are becoming more aware of the value of time and self, the time that we could devote to fulfilling our own satisfaction, pleasure, and peace of mind. In our everyday life situations in urban spaces, by and large, we encounter stressful moments in different areas of social life. In the midst of all the roles we hold and play in society, work in particular is becoming more stressful. Under unprecedented economic pressure, we are required to work harder and deliver more. For a majority of middle-class populations creating balance between personal and professional spaces is becoming ever more difficult. The fear of missing out a meeting at work or leaving a task unfulfilled brings more anxiety to our lives. These stressful conditions make us increasingly needier for leisure (Deem, 1996).

Our society is seriously becoming a leisure society. Once signifying childhood and mental and emotional immaturity, leisure and play have become necessities for modern mankind (Gillin, 1914). Based on our socio-cultural norms, economic resources, and personal agendas, we pursue different forms of leisure in order to cope with the reality of life (Stebbins, 2009). By leisure, we may seek ways of transforming our less satisfactory present life conditions (e.g., boredom or anxiety) into more desirable modes of being (Taheri and Jafari, 2011). Whilst some of us may proactively pursue more enduring agendas such as personal achievement and self-actualization in "serious leisure" activities, others may simply seek commonplace temporary moments of pleasure in "casual leisure" activities (Stebbins, 2009).

Our growing interest in leisure is not only driven by our 'instinctive desire' for entertainment (Gillin, 1914). We are becoming more interested in leisure because our imagination is stretched out beyond the boundaries of our everyday life horizons. We are now more able to imagine a wide variety of new moods of being. We are more able to embrace leisure in different ways. With the advancement of technology, the boundaries of vicarious experiences and lived experience are becoming more blurred than ever. Second Life best exemplifies this scenario. People immerse themselves in the virtual worlds as though they are more real than real. For Facebook users, there may be more meaning and value to their virtual communities than to the non-virtual ones.

We live in an experience economy where organizations are increasingly making efforts to engage people in memorable and extraordinary experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). With the rapid development of leisure industry, we have more choices out there. There are more cinemas, theatres, concerts, recreational centers, holiday opportunities, online entertainment activities (e.g., gambling and bets), TV productions, and the like. Shopping centers are also becoming leisure centers, keeping people engaged for longer hours in their experiential environments (Bendar, 1989; Howard, 2007; Millan and Howard, 2007). In the age of pursuing desires, the lines between advertising and entertainment have also become increasingly blurred (Kenway and Bullen, 2011; Moore, 2004).Whilst children are born into an entertainment-driven society, adults are similarly getting more eager to experience moments of pleasure and playfulness. Adulthood is somehow becoming pre-mature and childhood is becoming extended. That is, in a society driven by passion for desire (Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2003), children are pulled towards adulthood in order to experience more entertainment and adults are equally pushed to experience childhood moments of play. There seems to be no or little difference between childhood and adulthood anymore. The boundaries of reality and hyper-reality are fading away in contemporary life (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

In such conditions, our consumption practices become particularly important as they shape our modes of being. Whether our consumption activities are regards as ends in themselves (e.g., functional instances such as eating food for resolving hunger) or instrumental means of fulfilling varying higher order human needs, wants, or desires (e.g., experiential aspects such as dining out at a restaurant), they are part of our overall strategies and activities of "organizing our lives" (Firat, 1999). As life-organizing activities, they reflect broader dynamics of an ever-changing landscape of life in which our expectations and mode-making activities also change. Our consumption practices are no longer exclusively determined by functional pursuits. Instead, we are driven by multiple motives that "extend" our selves (Belk, 1988) and address different dimensions of our "fragmented" and "made-up" selves (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995).

It is based on these premises that leisure becomes a significant part of our lives as we seek more pleasurable experiences and modes of being. Leisure activities provide us with moments of excitement, happiness, creativity, escapism, learning, socializing, fun and play and the like. And amongst a diversity of leisure production and consumption venues, museums have traditionally played an important role in creating such qualities. Museums are important institutions that fulfil many functions in today's leisure society (Sandell, 2002; Veal, 2009; Carnegie, 2010). The self directed form of learning and enjoyment is important to both museums and their visitors, particularly as museums are operating progressively more in the leisure sphere and leisure society (Scott, 2009). Museums have the capacity to capture human imagination, augment fantasies, stimulate different feelings and sensibilities, and

teach a myriad of lessons about past, present, and future (Kotler, Kotler and Kotler, 2008;Welsh,2005; Carnegie,2010). Creation of such experiences, however, highly depends on the depth and quality of 'engagement'. There are many venues (both offline and online) that competitively put a great deal of effort into winning audiences and keep them engaged in their increasingly attractive physical or virtual environments. Shopping malls, casino hotels, Dysneyfied theme parks and the like have all become 'cathedrals of consumption' (Ritzer, 2001) in which consumers of goods and services are encouraged to spend longer hours and consequently more money. With its $2 trillion market, the global entertainment and media industry (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011) continues to attract more and more people in all corners of the world. In the midst of such an enormous market, one would wonder how museums can remain competitive and attract visitors! A foregone conclusion is that it is only through enduring and high quality engagement that museums can accomplish their mission and remain attractive to their evasive modern audiences who demand more different and memorable experiences.

Experiential consumption

In order to better understand how engagement can be augmented in the context of the museum, we need to examine the nature of the consumption that paves the way for engagement. Consumption can be understood in light of the way consumption objects are appropriated. Holt's (1995) typology of consumption situations provides a useful means of understanding these varying appropriations: consuming as experience (where consumers subjectively and emotionally react to objects), consuming as integration (where consumers acquire and manipulate meanings of objects), consuming as classification (where objects can classify their consumers), and consuming as play (where objects are used as means of entertainment). Although all of these four consumption situations are relevant to our present discussion, the interconnectivity of consuming as experience and consuming as play is more pivotal to understanding consumption in the museum context.

Consumers often directly engage in consumption of entities (objects or events) and use such entities as resources to interact with fellow consumers or further immerse themselves in their engagement activities. Consumption encompasses a wide range of activities and modes of being around leisure, things such as aesthetics, variety seeking, pleasure, creativity, engagement, interaction, and emotions. These qualities are generally regarded as experiential aspects of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). As people around the world increasingly seek desirable experiences, more and more businesses are increasing their efforts towards creating, promoting, and delivering such experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The money consumers spend in consumption spaces is not just the price they pay for the product/service they buy, but also for the atmospherics (i.e., lighting, staging, shelving, space, smell, and so forth) of the spaces in which their purchase or consumption activities take place. Hence, the concept of experience becomes a prominent theme in contemporary consumption situations. Such an experiential approach to consumption recognizes the role of 'emotions in behaviour; the fact that consumers are feelers as well as thinkers and doers; the significance of symbolism in consumption; the consumer's need for fun and pleasure; the roles of consumers, beyond the act of purchase, in product usage as well as brand choice, and so forth' (Addis and Holbrook, 2001: 50).

This conceptualization of consumption as an experience shapes the foundations of leisure and tourism. Organizations in this industry sector are becoming more aware of the importance of

engaging their clients, in memorable and active ways, in order to create extraordinary and enjoyable experiences (Arnould and Price, 1993; Caru and Cova, 2007). However, organizations' efforts in optimizing consumers' experiences are not simply focused on utilizing organizational resources. Such efforts also largely focus on maximizing consumers' participation in co-creation of experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The active role of consumers in the production and consumption of experience is substantial (Sherry, Kozinets and Borghini, 2007). For consumers, the experience of creating an experience can sometimes be a great experience in itself. For instance, the experience of engagement in stage settings can be more pleasurable than the finished experience. The consumption experience scene can be viewed as a playground in which players activate their imagination and creativity and set their own ideal scene. Consumers, therefore, may value co-creation of the experience more than having the experience made readily available to them, in a one-way tradition, by experience providers.

Co-creation of experience

Sometimes, solutions can paradoxically be problems. Offering solutions can sometimes decrease the level of creativity and suppresses imagination. In the age of experiential consumption, ready-made solutions (see the traditional view of the problem solving cognitive consumer) can hamper consumers' efforts and render consumers powerless and bored audiences. This is like forcing a group of energetic teenage footballers to watch a live football match without giving them any opportunity to play themselves. In the age of theatres of consumption, consumers want to be on the stage rather than simply watch, from their seats, actors play on the stage. Disempowering consumers can therefore result in feelings of agitation, exclusion, and alienation. In Grant's (2000: 123) words, in our modern consumption spaces, 'people expect to have a part to play and, when they don't, they feel shut out.'

Such metaphors can be extended to a majority of experiential contexts including the museum. Museum visitors are interested in co-creating their experiences (White, Hede and Rentschler, 2009). They want to be seen as participants and not just idle audiences who stand aside and watch the game take place. Consumers and organizations, as partners and not oppositions, both can benefit from this willingness to participate (Grant, 2000). Whilst consumers can have better feelings and experiences in their consumption spaces, organizations can equally channel their consumer-centered activities towards enhancing such experiences and augment their brand image and value propositions. With no doubt, better utilization of resources can also benefit organizations. Such partnership is therefore valuable for both parties. Co-creation of experience can co-create value.

Whilst the creation of value has historically been viewed as the favorable outcome of an economic transaction (Arnould, Price and Malshe, 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), within the realm of cultural consumption (heritage/tourism), and the museum context in particular, the creation of value is principally associated with consumers' experience (Shaw, Bailey and Williams, 2011). Examples are abundant. The creation of the theatre experience in Disneyland largely depends on the quality and level of interaction between consumers and producers (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008). Similarly, there are symbiotic relationships between participants and organizers of an exhibition. For instance, a photographic exhibition's existence and success relies on not only what the exhibition exhibits but also who visit the exhibition (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). In other words, exhibitions gain credit on

the account of their visitors. The quantity and quality of visitors are increasingly becoming touchstones for assessing exhibitions' performance.

This question of 'who' is crucial to the organization and management of the museum. A key challenge for any museum can be how to synchronize its own goals with its visitors' intended experiences (Black, 2009). Since co-creation of experience requires that both parties' interests be taken into account, museums need to meticulously examine their visitors' dynamic and varying expectations. Only in light of sufficient knowledge of consumers' intended experiences can museums plan to co-create such experiences. Acknowledging the difficulties of balancing the museum goals and visitor interests, Simon (2010) suggests that museums should still prioritize co-creating with visitors in their agendas. This way, they can address their visitors' needs and interests, provide a place for dialogue, and help visitors develop skills that will support their own individual and social goals. Given the differences in visitors' intrinsic motivation and personal interest, deciding the breadth and depth of activities for engagement and co-creation of experience remains a prime challenge for museum managers and marketers (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010; Leinhardt, Knutson and Crowley, 2003).

In this regard, Misiura (2006) suggests that careful application of marketing techniques can help to resolve the problem. For instance, in heritage marketing, as long as heritage products' core value is maintained, cultural product designers can assist to create and augment the image of cultural sites in visitors' minds. Similar suggestions have been offered (Dowell, Kleinschafer and Morrison, 2011; Gruen, Summers and Acito, 2000) in order to enhance the image of art galleries by incorporating designers' ideas. Such suggestions imply the fact that although for cultural consumption sites (e.g., museums) it is very difficult to reconcile all varying interests of their visitors, they can leverage different techniques to make their atmospheres more appealing to their visitors and hence maximize engagement and co-creation of experience. Since the quality of experience in the museum highly depends on the quality of engagement, museums' prime focus is now on enhancing the duration and quality of engaging their visitors.

Engagement in the museum

Engagement has been 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). Also, Higgins and Scholer (2009: 102) define engagement as 'a state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed, or engrossed in something sustained attention.' Engagement, as consumers' 'commitment to an active relationship with a specific market offering,' is differentiated from involvement which describes consumers' 'interest in a product category' (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde and Marshall, 2011: 1061). Engagement requires more than the use of cognition; it necessitates the satisfying of both experiential value and instrumental value (i.e., involvement) (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). Engagement is in harmony with other concepts that describe consumer interest, including involvement, flow, and interactivity (Abdul-Ghani, et al., 2011; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Mollen and Wilson, 2010).

Whatever definition we take, engagement refers to the level and type of interaction and involvement individuals undertake in their consumption situations. In the context of the museum, for instance, visitors willingly focus on artifacts and exhibits and during their visits

interact with(in) the museum context. Even in the case of surreal museums, reposed on their imagination, visitors can willingly suspend[1] their sense of disbelief and engage with the museum content and context. This kind of willingness can magnify the level of enjoyment, excitement, or any other emotional uptake one can derive from the museum environment. For example, in visiting museums of stimulated horror (e.g., the London Dungeon), although visitors know in advance that the atmosphere of the museum is not real and does not impose any threat on them, they willingly give up this notion of unreality and immerse themselves in the experience of horror the venue intends to create. The experience of horror is therefore partially dependent on the level of visitors' willingness to being horrified.

Given the importance of meaningful engagement to high quality experience and visitor satisfaction, museums now strive to retain visitor attention and increase satisfaction levels by engaging visitors with innovative presentation and interpretation techniques. These methods are of course heterogeneous in nature but homogeneous in purpose. That is, although all such methods are geared towards enhancing visitor engagement, the forms of these methods vary based on the characteristics (e.g., demographics and psychographics) of their audiences. For instance, a family's visit to a museum may be determined by children's interests (Sterry and Beaumont, 2005).

Just like any other consumption situation, cultural consumers' consumption choices and experiences are determined by many internal and external factors. Museum visitors' types and levels of engagement are associated with particular personal preferences and characteristics. Prior research (Plog, 1974) has already delineated two distinct types of cultural consumers: psychocentric (those who prefer the familiar) and allocentric (those who prefer the unfamiliar). Psychocentric individuals prefer to encounter more commonplace and familiar objects/event and allocentric people have preference for more challenging situations in which they can activate their imagination to engage with the objects/events of consumption. Such orientations towards consumption situations determine the level of engagement in cultural consumers' experiences. Those with a higher level of zest and willingness to face the unfamiliar can be both more demanding and proactive in their visits to cultural sites such as museums (Pattakos, 2010). They seek more exciting and challenging experiences whereby they can fly their imagination and enact their creativity.

The level of engagement is also associated with the nature of exhibits and the physical context in which the experience is created. Physical context includes the architecture and feel of the museum building, design and layout, space, lighting, color, sound as well as the artifacts enclosed within (Falk and Dierking, 1997). These elements have a great deal of impact on the type of engagement in the museum because they facilitate the experience. Prior work on engagement (Bilda, Edmonds and Candy, 2008; Edmonds, Muller and Connell, 2006) identifies four core categories of interaction between exhibits and visitors: static, dynamic-passive, dynamic-interactive and varying. These represent a hierarchy of level of engagement which can be drawn on to identify skills and knowledge visitors require in engaging with the different types of exhibits. At the highest level of interaction, dynamic-interactive relationships between the visitor and the artwork occur when the experience is

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[1] The concept of 'willing suspension of disbelief', first coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his Biographia Literaria in 1817, denotes the status of suspending one's belief that a piece of artwork is not real. Suspension of one's disbelief is crucial to enjoying the aesthetics and fantasies of a piece of art.

influenced by both players and changes over time as a direct result of the history of interactions. Different degrees of engagement bring with them different types of rewards; that is, depending on their expectations, visitors can derive different levels of satisfaction from their cultural consumption experiences.

Driven by the motive to enhance visitors' satisfaction level, art galleries and museums now attempt to engage cultural consumers through the ways objects are displayed and the activities constructed for the multiple purposes (e.g., enjoyment or learning) visitors pursue. From an educational perspective (Bourdieu and Darbel, 2008; Falk and Dierking, 1997; Guintcheva and Passebois, 2009; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), these activities expand a variety of offerings for visitors of different age groups with various motivations. Modern museums utilize a variety of ways to engage visitors and provide them with playful venues that offer intrinsic rewards (Holt, 1995; Zwick and Dholakia, 2004). Activities include organized events as well as engaging the audience with visual and interactive cultural facilities (Anderson, 1999; Black, 2009; Kotler, et al., 2008). These playful consumption situations create enjoyable experiential outcomes such as informal learning and pleasure, what Sherry et al. (2007) refer to as "ludic autotely". Experiencing such autotelic experience requires less preparation or low level of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2007; Hein, 1998; Whitaker, 2009). However, achieving this kind of experience requires two conditions to be met: rich content and efficient mechanism. Rich content provides the sufficient means for different types of interpretation for any given exhibit, and an understandable and meaningful mechanism facilitates visitors' retrieval of content of interest and enjoyment (Simon, 2010).

Creation of such interpretations is closely related to cultural consumers' prior experience. Individuals' own characteristics and motifs largely affect their interaction with the contents and context of the museum. As Ooi (2002) reminds us, visitors interpret cultural products through their own lens and their worldviews contribute to the operant resources they use in engaging with local cultures and co-creating the experience. Mindful visitors experience greater learning and understanding as well as higher levels of satisfaction than mindless visitors who, in the absence of commitment and focus, exercise weak levels of engagement (Moscardo, 1996; Pattakos, 2010). Individuals with more prior knowledge and experience about the museum experience higher levels of engagement and satisfaction than those less knowledgeable (Black, 2009; Fienberg and Leinhardt, 2002). Regular visitors are more likely to seek deeper levels of engagement during their visit (Black, 2009). Previous experience may come not from previous visitation to the museum itself, but from awareness and knowledge of the exhibit itself (Goulding, 1999). These characteristics also affect the way visitors personalize the museum's meanings and message(s). When seen in collective forms, prior knowledge can both influence and be influenced by others' personal agenda. For instance, most visitors go to museums in a group and even those who visit museums alone may come into contact with other visitors and museum staff; therefore, their perspective is influenced by the social context (Falk and Dierking, 1997, 2002).

Playfulness

Engagement is the main part of a valuable experience and a sense of being in the scene (Higgins and Scholer, 2009). That is, it is mainly through the consumption stage of the service encounter that individuals' experience is affirmed through the level of their

engagement (Caru and Cova, 2003). Thus, the success of exhibits is often measured in relation to the average time spent on an exhibit and the perceived level of interactivity, as well as the ease with which a visitor can use an exhibit. Such measures reflect the increasingly high-tech forms of edutainment which can effectively enhance engagement amongst museum visitors. Given the emphasis on enjoyment, therefore, 'play' becomes an important construct within the museum experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990; Holt, 1995; Sherry, et al., 2007).

Play is usually associated with various consumption definitions such as an act of consumption (Holt, 1995) and a dimension of experiential value (Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva and Greenleaf, 1984). In Zwick and Dholakia's (2004: 228) words, 'playful consumers pursue actions for their propensity to enhance the interaction among the game's participants. Thus, interaction becomes an end in itself, thereby stressing the non-instrumental character of playful consumption.' In playful situations, visitors involve in an activity for its inherent pleasure and enjoyment rather than for some utilitarian purposes or external benefits (Huang, 2006).

Play has different forms. Sometimes, it can be a simple form of entertainment. That is, individuals involve in a game and feel moments of cheerfulness and amusement. For instance, playing cards with friends whist chatting creates temporary moments of fun and amusement. This kind of play may be part of one's pastime activity. One may play to pass time. But sometimes, the same action of playing cards with friends may involve more mental engagement which requires the players to mentally concentrate on the game. In this case, the actors involved in the game take the task at hand more serious and use their skills in order to play better and possibly win. Playing the game may also require them to have moments of silence and anxiety which can indicate players' concentration and thinking. In such a situation, players may also enhance their skills and knowledge of the game. In this scenario, the passage of time is not felt because the players are deeply involved in the game. This second type of play which requires deeper levels of engagement involves moments of "flow experience" Csikszentmihalyi (1975).

The flow experience brings moments of enjoyment and satisfaction. In fact, enjoyment is the focal driver of the flow experience. What we wish and what we think are in harmony (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). In flow experience, mind and heart can reconcile; that is, one can engage with the task at hand both mentally and emotionally. Such experience also needs harmony between one's challenges and the skills required to face the challenges. In the presence of this harmony, the concentrated individual can feel moments of wholly engaged sensation and experience high levels of enjoyment. This experience can be intrinsically enjoyable for its own sake, regardless of any rewards that might be relative with the knowledge achieved (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Research on the flow experience (see, for example, Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson, 1990; Griffin, 1998) indicates that museums are amongst the most powerful contexts in which optimum moments of enjoyment can be created. As visitors engage with(in) the museum, they can immerse themselves in the act of engagement to an extent that they don't feel passage of time and experience pleasure. Such visits to museums can be highly rewarding. Learning can be mixed with fun and further skills can develop. The act of visiting can therefore be more rewarding than initially intended. For instance, whilst a museum's initial goal may be informative (e.g., communicating a piece of information about

a scientific fact), creating the flow experience can further fructify the museum, adding enjoyment to information. That is why a large number of museums have embarked on employing highly interactive means of engaging their visitors. Such offerings can certainly help to promote the image and value of museums in an ever-changing society.

Playful engagement and its value propositions

The museum experience has shifted from the Victorian idea of education to a more learning for fun aspect (Black, 2009; Packer, 2006; Whitaker, 2009). Visitors are no longer viewed as passive individuals; they are seen as active and pro-active people (Bagnall, 2003; Bourdieu, 2007; Peterson, 2005). Over time, museums' functions have changed. There are questions around "what defines public taste?", "who has the right to choose collections, engage and enjoy the exhibits and social environment?", and "how to represent them?" These questions are related to the context-dependency of the role of museums and the set of values they propose. Museums are 'social constructs, and powerful ones at that, and they need to assume their place in the mainstream of contemporary life, not sit eccentrically on the margins' (Fleming, 2005: 9). No establishment can come to the forefront of society without engaging the public. Visibility needs effort. That is, in order to be visible, any entity needs to endeavor to make itself not only visually available to the public but also insert an impact on the members of society. To achieve such a mission, museums' most crucial task is to engage the public. That is, they should influence peoples' worldviews, knowledge, experiences and private and public lives. Museums' commitment to effective engagement is beneficial from different perspectives. Playful engagement at the level of flow experience may apparently seem to be a prime objective for some visitors in their visits to museums, but this playfulness can also be instrumental. That is, through playful engagement, ultimately a range of other objectives may be met and both visitors and museums benefit in a variety of ways.

Creating fun

Play inherently involves fun. Through playful activities, we pursue pleasant moments of enjoyment. Play is fundamental to health, both physically and mentally (Millar, 1968). Through play, children develop their personality, their mind and emotions (Caplan and Caplan, 1973). They interact with other children and learn ways of interacting with them. Play is a powerful activity whose benefits go beyond the realm of childhood and encompass a wider life span. Adults, too, can immensely benefit from play activities (Millar, 1968). Play can be an escape from the monotony of everyday life situations. It is also an escape into better experiences in which one does not have to think about serious matters. Play can take adults back to the pre-institutionalization stages of their life, their childhood (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). As we grow older, life institutionalizes us through schooling, work, and other social institutions. We develop a consciousness towards all matters around us and this consciousness changes our perception of what happiness is. Play can simplify life for us by removing this consciousness and immerse ourselves in moments of happiness and contentment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

Playful engagement experiences in museums can create such feelings of satisfaction, for both children and adults. Through voluntary engagement in playful activities, visitors can achieve

better feelings themselves and transfer their positive feelings and moments of enjoyment to others around them. In stressful conditions of life in urban spaces, we need to find ways of reducing our stress and play more. Play slows down the maniacal pace of life. It makes us stop to pay attention to ourselves and to those living with us around us and those with whom our relationships have been formalized through work and social roles. The positive impact of play can be further strengthened through its occurrence in public spaces such as museums. In public atmospheres, positive energies spread faster as others watch us play and enjoy. By creating playful engagements, museums can therefore act as healing centers where people can share their fun with others in healthy ways.

Activating creativity and imagination

Playful engagement fosters creativity and imagination. Through play activities, we play roles and do our best to play them well. Since plays are often developed around a task, we work towards resolving the puzzle or problem at hand and do the task as perfectly as we can. Through engagement in a given activity, if we don't have the required skills to accomplish the task, we think of acquiring new ones. Hence, we search for new ways of handling the task. This needs us to creatively think about alternative approaches. The psychology of play (Caplan and Caplan, 1973; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Millar, 1968) provides evidence that play strengthens individuals' creativity. Play also provides the grounds for enacting our imagination power and put into practice what we have in mind. In playful engagement there is no penalty for making mistakes. One can stretch their wings of imagination as far as they can. In a stress-free context, one can try different ways of playing the game. And this makes a difference to applying imagination. At work and real-life situations, our imagination is restricted to the boundaries of our responsibilities. Our imaginative minds have lower ceilings because we have to think of the consequences of our imaginations. Any mistake will dearly cost us.

In museums, we can fly our imagination. Playful engagements legitimize trial and error in a cost-free manner. We have any right to try the game and fail. We can also close our eyes and travel in history in the past. The atmospherics of the museum can let us imagine different modes of being for ourselves in the present. We can also be futuristic and travel ahead in time. We can play in a guilt-free way different games and watch others play too. We can also inspire others and be reciprocally inspired by them. Such qualities of museums can create stages of performance for zealous visitors who yearn for participation. Children and adults can both benefit. Those who activate their imaginations more often can enhance their performance in other areas of social reality of life (e.g., work, family ties, and relationship with friends). Imagination in turn activates creativity.

Enhancing learning

Play can also act as a medium for learning and skill development (Bergen, 1988). Play acts as a personality development workshop. Participants in playful engagements consciously or unconsciously involve in learning, learning about objects, themselves, and others. Children can develop a wide range of key skills such as seeing, analyzing, thinking, identifying, calculating (Singer, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). As they are exposed to playful

situations, they learn how to conduct the act of playing. They learn how to find their way through the play and achieve the target. In their mission they are encouraged by parents and others around them. They feel rewarded and build a sense of self-confidence. They also learn how to competitive. All of these qualities can apply to adults too. As adults, we can enhance our personal as well as social qualities through playful activities. Through playful activities we don't get bored and learn things by doing.

Museums can enhance visitors' learning through playfully engaging their visitors. Research (Malone and Lepper, 1987) confirms that playful learning is more effective and enduring. Museums therefore use interactive and playful means of engagement (application of sound and lighting effects, digital screens, 3D games, and mechanical tools and playgrounds) to foster their visitors' learning process (Hein, 1998). This learning enhancement is also important for another significant reason. Since people's interests in things can be associated with their level of knowledge in those things, enhancing individuals' knowledge can develop in them a sense of interest in certain things they were not previously interested in (Leinhardt, et al., 2003). Through playful engagement activities, therefore, museums can ultimately attract uninterested groups.

Nurturing social interaction

Playful activities nourish sociability and social interaction. In playful venues people are more relaxed; they smile more and are more open to new ideas and social relationships. In playful activities, people are even more generous in sharing their feelings and thoughts. Due to such characteristics, playful engagements in museums can cultivate seeds of friendship and social interaction. Such positive human relationships influence visitors' experience. Playful engagements with objects and interactive means and equipment become excuses for visitors to talk to one another. Even those who visit museums on their own and do not actively pursue social contact may become interested in socializing with others (Debenedetti, 2003; Taheri and Jafari, 2011). Through social interaction, visitors' cultural consumption experiences can become even more enjoyable. Apart from learning faster (Hilke and Balling, 1985), they can come into contact with other individuals who may share similar interests. Therefore, for visitors museums can act as social hubs in which they construct and reconstruct their social ties primarily around the playful context of the museum and also extend their relationships beyond the physical boundaries of museums (Taheri and Jafari, 2011).

The museum and leisure society

Visitors are affected by not only the historical period in which they grew up – and hence developed certain knowledge about history, society, culture, science, and life at large – but also the present set of circumstances that shape and possibly alter their interpretation and understanding of the knowledge and experiences they hold about the past. Museums have a great capacity to develop a distinct consciousness of generations' experiences and knowledge (Hetherington, 2000; López-Sintas, Garcia-Alvarez and Filimon, 2008). Ensuring that museums can sustain this significant historical role in transferring generational knowledge and experience requires museums to remain at the centre of social reality of life. An effective way of achieving this goal is to attract visitors and engage them not only in the context of the museum but also in the total sphere of life in society. That is, visitors should be able to take with them memorable experiences and knowledge and share such uptakes with others in

society (Simon, 2010). The offerings of museums should go beyond the museum walls (Taheri and Jafari, 2011).

Today's leisure-driven society has forced museums not only to concentrate on the education of their visitors, but also entertain their audiences in order to successfully compete with the growing variety of available entertainment facilities (e.g., computer games, smart phones, cinemas, theme parks and live shows) in the world around them (Packer, 2006; van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2001). This evolution means that museums should undergo constant metamorphoses. Museums are allocating more resources to participatory experiences than they had previously put towards traditional singular exhibits (Kotler, et al., 2008; Simon, 2010). For instance,

Witcomb (2003) demonstrates how museums position themselves as entertaining sites through incorporating popular culture with exhibition programs. Kotler et al. (2008) and Simon (2010) also provide a host of examples in which museums strategically employ marketing techniques to re-position themselves as highly valuable and entertaining socio-cultural hubs in the twenty-first century.

For many museum marketers, these processes of popularization and commercialization call into question their definition of a traditional museum, as they consider it to be a 'debasement' of cultural experiences (Tufts and Milne 1999). A key question for museums is how to provide infrequent visitors with a "wow experience" rather than concentrate on repeat visitors (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Kotler, et al., 2008). In the time of economic hardship (budget cuts and financial crises) museums are forced to undertake commercial roles. For museums managers the focus is, therefore, on more practical considerations such as visitor numbers, education and funding and other market considerations (Genoways and Ireland, 2003). The visitor is increasingly being thought of as a 'customer', and while such a designation would have been improbable fifty years ago, today museums are actively competing for the flexible leisure time and commercial income of both residents and tourists (Chhabra, 2007; Kotler, et al., 2008).

The majority of museums are now concerned about their ability to remain competitive in the 'art world' and 'leisure-driven society'. Funding, as a fundamental issue, often places museums at the centre of local development plans that require them to renew their strategy and mission statement accordingly with regards to public opinion (Stevenson, Airey and Miller, 2008; Strom, 2002). Even in free market economies (e.g., the UK and the USA) museums are no longer autonomous institutions. Governments are increasingly intervening in museums' policies and operations (Smith, 2001). Technology is another important issue to address. With the rapid growth of technology, museums are also forced to install and renovate their technological systems. In a technology driven world, this is a necessity not a cosmetic supplement. Technology's role in enhancing visitor experience is undeniable.

Museums compete for the public's leisure time, which is becoming more and more dominated by computers. Thus, sustaining cultural heritage and encouraging less interested audiences, mobilizing younger technology-maniac generations, enhancing connections and cooperation among different players within the tourism, heritage and museum fields and extending event management, and rebranding and rejuvenating conventional images of museums gains importance in the museum marketing.

Taheri, B. and Jafari, A. (2012) 'Museums as Playful Venues in the Leisure Society.' In Richard Sharpley and Philip Stone (Eds.) The Contemporary Tourist Experience: Concepts and Consequences. pp. 201-215. New York: Routledge.

Conclusion

In our opening paragraphs, we argued that in a leisure society museums' main challenge is to compete with many well-equipped and well-resourced establishments (e.g., media and game industry). Museums therefore, need to employ sophisticated marketing techniques to make them competitive enough. What we propose here is not to make museums competitive enough 'to survive'. This is a reactive or rather passive strategy. The ideal situation is to make them sufficiently competitive in order to outdo competition. A key strategic approach in this regard is to change the image of the museum. As discussed earlier, recent developments in this case testify the fact that museums are becoming more aware of seriously incorporating the element of entertainment into their strategic and tactical plans. However, these activities should be strategically channeled towards enhancing the image of museums as modern institutions that can play a significant role in contemporary society.

In a society which is becoming more and more leisure oriented and the traditional boundaries of demographic segmentation are fading away, museums need to promote many of their other values that come in a package. Augmenting playful engagement for museums may not be the only, but certainly, a crucially significant, way of attracting and retaining visitors. Playful engagements should not be viewed as only activities that take place within museums; if effectively implemented, these activities can insert their impact on society even outside museums. Besides, museum marketers and managers should not see playful engagements exclusively as ends in themselves. They can serve a multitude of purposes that can collectively offer value to society. Recognition of these values by people highly depends on how museums communicate such values with their existing visitors or a large number of potential cultural consumers out there in society. Understanding this important task and strategizing effective and efficient action plans is a key priority for museum managers and marketers to consider. In a leisure society, competition amongst leisure providers is increasing. Museums are too valuable to fall behind.

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