

VISIT MOTIVATIONS

A Case Study of Chinese Families in Vancouver



Above: A diver interacts with visitors and marine life in Vancouver Aquarium's Strait of Georgia exhibit. Photo Credit: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre.

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Visit motivation has a very significant influence on family groups' museum visitation and experiential outcomes. In visitor studies, understanding visit motivations of audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds can arguably help museums to better serve audiences with various needs, aspirations, and expectations. Such understandings in turn, further help museums to more effectively fulfill their educational missions and social responsibilities.

Visit motivation is influenced by visitors' previous life histories, personal interests, and social relationships, as well as the values they hold about museums, education and learning. As a result, visitors driven by different motivations can make meaning of their museum visit from a plethora of different perspectives. The contemporary literature on this topic has provided a number of varied perspectives or categories of visit motivations.



John Falk's *Identity and the Museum Visit Experience* classified visitors into five groups:

- the explorer: being curious about exploring the attractiveness of exhibitions
- the facilitator: taking care of other family members
- the professional/hobbyist: satisfying personal interests and professional needs
- the experience seeker: collecting visit experiences
- the recharger: having physically, emotionally, and intellectually recharging moments

In Jan Packer's 2004 study with visitors in science museums, she identified visit motivations in terms of learning and discovery, passive enjoyment, restoration, social interaction, and self-fulfillment. Although these studies suggest different structures of visit motivations, there

Top Right: Children explore the world of nature in Telus World of Science's Search Gallery. Photo Credit: Science World British Columbia.

still exists some common ground. That is, visitors often come to museums for the opportunities of education, entertainment, social interaction, personal interest, as well they are influenced by other practical issues such as weather conditions.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of the published literature in regard to visit motivations has been conducted with visitors from Western culture contexts and in museums situated in Western countries.

However, given differences in cultural rules, norms, and values, across ethnic boundaries, it seems reasonable to question whether those from non-Western cultural backgrounds, and in the case of this study, Chinese visitors, hold the same visit motivations as those suggested by the current literature. Consider, for example, Tlili, Cribb, & Gewirtz's article, "What Becomes of Science in a Science Center?", in which they view that museums should be a public sphere where visitors may initiate dialogue, discussion, and debate with family members, general audiences, and/or museum educators. On the surface, and from a dominantly Western world view, there seems little reason to question such a statement of virtue. However, according to the traditional hierarchical culture in China that advo-

cates respect to the authorities and keeping mian zi (面子, face, a kind of self-reputation in society), social interaction may not be a common phenomenon in Chinese museums or among visitors with Chinese heritage. Our general assumptions about visitors and their visit motivations are important to scrutinize – particularly in the light of cultural identities of visitors.

In recent years, Vancouver is "becoming the most 'Asian' city outside of Asia" (**around 43%** of residents in Metro Vancouver have Asian heritage). More significantly, around 15% of residents' mother tongue is Chinese (including Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Chinese), which constituted the most common non-official language in Vancouver. Since the population of Chinese residents is increasing year by year, the number of Chinese visitors to local cultural institutions, like museums, is also increasing. However, visitor studies have seldom considered this ethnic group as a focus of research investigation. Therefore, it is important to understand visitors from non-Western cultural backgrounds and explore why these visitors, such as visitors with Chinese ethnic origin, come to visit museums. This will further provide information for museums to more deeply understand Chinese visitors, and accordingly tune the museums' educational approaches with this demographic in mind.



Above: Children explore the properties of water with ball launchers and water tables. Photo Credit: Science World British Columbia.

The Study

The data reported here used a survey-based, quantitative approach to identify dominant motivations of Chinese family groups in the Vancouver Aquarium and Telus World of Science, Vancouver¹. Chinese family groups were identified and the caregivers (parents or grandparents of the children in the group) were interviewed us-

ing a facilitator-led questionnaire at these two research sites. The questionnaire included 15 items covering possible motivations, such as education, entertainment, social interaction, personal interest, and practical issues, which derived from the existing literature.

Percentage and Ranking of 15 Motivation Items, Comparison of Visiting Motivation between Different Sites

	Total		Telus World of Science		Vancouver Aquarium		p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
I want my child/(ren) to have fun here.	198	80.8	120	88.06	78	73.12	<.001
I want my child(ren) to learn something here.	183	74.7	107	78.98	76	70.64	<.001
I love doing hands-on activities.	111	45.3	48	35.13	63	59.08	<.001
It is an interesting place.	99	40.4	48	35.62	51	47.25	>.05
It is a good place to improve the relationship among my family members.	81	33.1	45	32.86	36	33.93	>.05
I want my child/(ren) to socialize with others.	80	32.7	52	38.02	28	26.44	<.001
I want to have fun.	75	30.6	33	24.26	42	39.25	<.05
I want to learn something new here.	71	29	37	27.45	34	31.47	>.05
The environment here is attractive.	69	28.2	39	28.83	30	27.85	>.05
I love exploring new things.	65	26.5	35	25.42	30	28.44	<.001
It is a famous tourist attraction in Vancouver.	60	24.5	17	12.68	43	39.96	<.001
I want to relax myself here.	51	20.8	20	14.49	31	29.25	<.05
It is a good place for a social outing.	42	17.1	22	16.18	20	18.34	>.05
It was recommended to me.	38	15.5	17	12.53	21	19.59	>.05
Of weather.	34	13.9	15	10.80	19	18.05	>.05

This study was part of a larger project that compared Chinese family groups' visit motivations to science museums between Vancouver and Beijing (Ji, Anderson, Wu, & Kang, 2014).

Participants selected five dominant motivations according to their actual thoughts and needs at the time of their visit. The number and percentage of each selected visit motivation item were calculated, and the motivation differences between Telus World of Science and Vancouver Aquarium were compared.

The top five motivations perceived by visitors and reported in Table 1 included:

“I want my children to have fun here” (80.8%)

“I want my children to learn something here” (74.7%)

“I love doing hands-on activities” (45.3%)

“It is an interesting place” (40.4%)

“It is a good place to improve the relationship among my family members” (33.1%)

It is interesting to note that the top two dominant motivation items demonstrated a highly children-centered approach for Chinese families when they made decisions to visit science museums. This result was consistent with several previous studies, which also supported “acquiring knowledge” and “[to] have fun” are two main reasons for visiting science museums. The compatibility of visitors’ expectations for learning and fun can be described as “Edutainment”.

What Does this Tell us?

The data illustrates that social interaction in science museums was not strongly recognized as an important motivation for Chinese visitors. The percentage of participants who selected items in relation to social interaction motivation was less than 35%. It is interesting to note that, in another study conducted by Jiao Ji in 2015, museum educators in mainland China also reported their difficulty in engaging Chinese visitors socially in educational activities.

In general, facilitating visitors having social interactions with family members, other visitors, and museum staffs is a goal pursued by many museum educators. However, this study and Ji’s study do not strongly support a strong valuing of social interaction in museums among Chinese visitors in family groups – a finding consistent with much of the contemporary studies conducted among Western visitor demographics. Such inconsistency provides reason to question the universality of such a visit motivation and leads to questioning why visitors of Chinese ethnic origins demonstrate a relatively low recognition on social interaction motivation in museum context. These findings also afford an opportunity for museum educators to reflect on the ways to encourage Chinese visitors to value the social interactive function of museums more deeply.

This study revealed differences in motivation profiles between visitors in Telus World of Science and Vancouver Aquarium. Compared to Vancouver Aquarium, more participants in Telus World of Science selected children-centered motivations, such as seeking education, entertainment, and socialization opportunities for their children. On the other hand, more participants to Vancouver Aquarium selected motivation items that represented their own needs and preferences, such as seeking relaxation and fun for themselves at the Aquarium.

Although both sites strive to fulfill educational missions for visitors at different age groups, in this study, compared to Vancouver Aquarium, families visiting Telus World of Science were more oriented towards satisfying their children’s needs.

Comparatively, visit motivations at Vancouver Aquarium were seen to be not only for their children but also oriented towards their own preferences.

The research findings provide insights for museum practitioners to better understand the characteristics of Chinese family groups in Vancouver museums. In this study, the background of visitors with Chinese origin in Vancouver were complicated with regard to their immigration (year of residence in Canada) and educational history. However, traditional Chinese culture and educational philosophy in which these caregivers were enculturated likely still impacts their views and perspectives about education and museums.

The outcomes of this study may further help museums to tune their programs and pedagogy for this particular audience demographic, and also raises interesting issues to consider in future research on the topic of visit motivations among ethnically diverse cultural groups.

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Left: Vancouver Aquarium's BC Hydro AquaVan delivers aquatic education on wheels across B.C. and Alberta. Photo Credit: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre.



Image: Our Eureka! Gallery hosts many hands-on exhibits that explore physics, like the Dyson air wall.
Photo Credit: Science World British Columbia.