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Are public spaces welcoming to all? A conjoint experiment on cultural representation and inclusionary practices in museums



¿Son los espacios públicos accesibles para todos? Un análisis conjunto sobre la representación cultural y las prácticas inclusivas de los museos



Zachary Mohr¹ | Alexandra Olivares² | Jaclyn Piatak³

¹University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

²The Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

³UNC Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Correspondence

Jaclyn Piatak, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA.

Email: jpiatak@charlotte.edu

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Abstract

While art should be for everyone, public institutions like museums are not always inclusive to all members of society. Arts participation varies by sociodemographic characteristics despite the numerous benefits of the arts. To date, much of the research has focused on how visitor characteristics influence museums, but how do museum characteristics influence arts participation? We employ a conjoint experiment where respondents assess how they value different art museum attributes. In particular, we examine differences in cultural representation of artists and museum programming as well as accessibility in terms of object labels and cost. Our findings support the need for greater use of inclusionary practices and cultural representation in museums, particularly for more relatable language labels and more community-based program events. We also find notable differences across subgroups, such as partisanship and race, emphasizing the

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need for more representative, accessible, and inclusive museums.

Resumen

Aunque el arte debería ser para todos, las instituciones públicas, como por ejemplo los museos no siempre incluyen a todos los miembros de la sociedad. La participación en las artes varía según las características sociodemográficas a pesar de los numerosos beneficios que nos aporta el arte. A la fecha, gran parte de estudios se han centrado en cómo influyen las características de los visitantes a los museos, pero ¿cómo influyen las características u objetivos de los museos en la participación en actividades artísticas? Empleamos un análisis conjunto en el que los encuestados evalúan distintos atributos de un museo de arte. En concreto, examinamos las diferencias en la representación cultural de artistas, la programación de museos, así como la accesibilidad en cuanto las fichas objetuales y el precio de entrada. Nuestros resultados apoyan la necesidad de un mayor empleo de prácticas inclusivas y de representación cultural en los museos, en particular las fichas con textos más comprensibles y programas más orientados a la comunidad. Asimismo, encontramos diferencias notables entre distintos subgrupos, como el partidismo político y la raza, lo que marca la necesidad de museos más representativos, accesibles e inclusivos.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A global shift toward inclusionary practices continues to occur in the art and museum field. However, the arts face tensions between serving the broader public or the elite (Brenton & Bouckaert, 2021; Lewis & Brooks, 2005). To de-institutionalize patterns that have impeded wider participation in the arts, museums substitute them with practices and values that foster broader arts participation (Fraser, 2001). Yet “museums still have work to do to truly serve their communities, especially when their staff, boards, and funders do not reflect the demographics of the communities they serve” (Knight Foundation, 2020, p. 10). While there continues to be a lack of socio-demographic diversity in arts participation (e.g., DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; National Endowment for the Arts, 2019; Olivares & Piatak, 2021), we know little about how museums can engage broader audiences. For example, cultural heritage is often cited as a reason for attending art museums by Black and Latinx individuals (Olivares & Piatak, 2021; Ostrower, 2008), but we know less about how representation, programming, and other museum characteristics influence public preferences.

Understanding audience preferences can guide museums to diversify offerings to better serve the public. However, focusing solely on visitor demographics only provides half of the picture. In this study, we look at common museum attributes that are widely offered in conjunction with respondents’ demographic information. Museums often focus on collections, objects, and exhibitions, but what about public preferences? More specifically, how do

museum characteristics shape interest in attending museums? Additionally, do different museum factors attract different audiences?

Using a survey experiment designed in partnership with a local art museum, we examine how the content, object labels, events, programs, location, and cost influence museum choice. We find object labels and community-based programs influence museum choice. Our findings also illustrate important nuances across subgroups, such as political partisanship and race, highlighting the need for museums to be attentive to how different offerings or approaches can influence visitor diversity. Findings have implications for theory and practice to foster more representative and inclusive museums.

In the following sections, we describe the arts field and prior research on diversity in arts participation from which we build our expectations. We then describe the research design, including the conjoint experiment with specific museum attributes and sample, followed by a discussion of the analysis and results for the whole sample and across notable subgroups. We close with a discussion of our contributions to prior research and practical recommendations.

2 | ARTS PARTICIPATION

The museum field has, since its inception, struggled with attracting and welcoming diverse audiences. Director of the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C., Ngaire Blankenberg, said: “Museums are institutions that carry a lot of systemic baggage from their colonial origins, but they are vital public spaces to reconsider how we connect and contend with one another and the planet, and where we can refine, heal and reconcile” (Valentine, 2021). Today, museums around the world focus on the visitor experience and increasing participation as part of their mission statements and strategic objectives (Ashley, 2014). Additionally, the International Council of Museums, a global museum governing body, promotes addressing inequalities and exclusion as a key part of every museum's policies and operations when fulfilling their mission to serve society (2022). However, museums are still struggling to find a path that is welcoming to all.

Museums face tensions between artistic values and public funding (Lewis & Brooks, 2005). National governments, like the UK, Australia, and Canada, have mandated museums to become more inclusive (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Kinsley, 2016; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012), to develop social initiatives and contribute to strengthening of social ties and promoting the participation of all citizens in cultural life (UNESCO, 2019). In “postcolonial societies, such as Australia, reconciling the past raises difficult questions for current national identities, and thus museums are faced with making politicized curatorial decisions, even in deciding not to address such questions” (Brenton & Bouckaert, 2021, p. 723). In UK, museums “are being asked to assume new roles and develop new ways of working—in general, to clarify and demonstrate their social purpose and more specifically to reinvent themselves as agents of social inclusion” (Sandell, 1998, p. 401). The 2015 UNESCO “Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society” indicates that for museums around the world, understanding visitors and audiences is “a relatively neglected activity” (p. 55). In a world aspiring for equality and equity, museums are critically reevaluating their role in society. How can museums be more representative of the people in their communities and inclusive in their policies, management, and practices?

It is well established that museum participation is low. Only 23% of U.S. adults attend an art exhibit every year; of which 27% of those individuals who participated were White, 17% of individuals were Black, and 16% of individuals were Latinx (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). Furthermore, diverse populations such as Native American, Black, and Asian or Pacific Islander individuals perceive art museums as places where systemic racism is present (Culture Track, 2021). Perhaps attracting under-represented audiences could be a means to increase arts participation in addition to advancing inclusion and social cohesion by revealing how to connect with people who are not participating. The discrepancy between population growth and decline in museum participation is a major concern and demonstrates the need for museum leaders to engage diverse audiences.

In addition to the lack of diversity in arts participation, research finds race directly influences arts participation and highlights the role of cultural representation as a motivation to attend an art museum for Black and Latinx populations (Olivares & Piatak, 2021). However, prior research has focused on the individual (e.g., DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; National Endowment for the Arts, 2019; Olivares & Piatak, 2021). While research on barriers to participation is an important piece of the puzzle for the lack of diversity in arts participation, it is only one aspect. Individual motives are complex and beyond the control of museums. However, we know far less about the role of museums themselves. How do museum attributes influence individual preferences?

3 | ELITE OR OMNIVORE?

Over time museums progressed to serve the general public, but access to museums in the mid-eighteenth century was reserved for the few privileged members of society (Sandell, 1998). However, the challenges facing the museum field today hail from the original elite audience they were intended to delight, and the perception of this persists for certain potential visitors. Ostrower (2020) illustrates the perpetuation of elitism on museum boards, where the elite status of board members only broadens the gap between the museum and the community at large. Lee (2021) finds art organizations with more diverse boards are more likely to serve the broader public through community development activities. Elitism remains in museum leadership (e.g., Ostrower, 2020) which in turn reflects on museum operations such as exhibition and educational programming as well as broader engagement efforts.

As a result of the elite history of museums, there are varying cultural and leisure values among different people (Falk, 1995). However, research suggests preferences have moved from elite “highbrow” taste to omnivorous (e.g., Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996). While some debate the omnivore hypothesis, this may be due to strongly interpreting it to mean cultural elites are averse to class-based inclusion, a broader interpretation is that elites have broad tastes and do not seek class-based exclusion (de Vries & Reeves, 2021). We test these competing perspectives across a range of museum attributes to examine how museum attributes shape public preferences, both in general and across subgroups.

3.1 | Cultural representation: Content, language, and labels

Previous research has suggested the content and artists displayed in the galleries are extremely important to motivating a person to attend a museum. Cultural representation can be defined as: “the extent to which an individual’s cultural heritage is represented within the mainstream culture” (Azmat et al., 2015, p. 377). Museums produce and share meaning and knowledge through the art represented (Hall, 2010). Through the artwork and exhibits chosen to be included or excluded, museums recognize and highlight certain cultures over others. Black and Latinx individuals tend to report cultural representation or being able to celebrate their culture as a reason to participate in the arts more than white individuals (Acevedo & Madara, 2015; Garibay, 2009; Olivares & Piatak, 2021; Ostrower, 2008; Phillipp, 1993; Stein et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Stein et al. (2008), Latinx visitors indicated feeling a strong personal connection to Aztec, Maya, and Spanish collections. Likewise, Phillipp (1993) found that Black individuals ranked cultural resources like “tribal costumes” higher than white individuals (p. 301). Audiences value representation in museum spaces. According to representative bureaucracy, public organizations should reflect the communities they serve and in turn the representation could have symbolic effects for the public (e.g., Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). Perhaps museums with greater cultural representation appeal to broader audiences.

When planning an exhibition, the object labels on museum walls are a crucial part of the story-telling process. Language is the main entry point visitors have to make sense of the art; it facilitates the meaning-making process during a visit (Coffee, 2008; Hall, 2010). Namely, meaning can only be exchanged through our common access to language, which is why it is central to have accessible language in exhibition spaces and on object labels that describe

the works on view (Hall, 2010). It is common practice in museums that audio or text is often highly detailed and delivered with assumptions about previous knowledge held by visitors, creating an inaccessible and restricted learning opportunity (Dawson, 2014). The visitor is expected to understand how to read a label, how it is structured, be familiar with technical terminologies, as well as be able to see and read in the official language of the region. In the United States, Latinx individuals revealed that bilingual labels were essential to a positive museum experience (Acevedo & Madara, 2015; Stein et al., 2008). If a key aspect of the museum experience is sharing knowledge and offering a learning opportunity, museums should not structure any practices, such as object labels, in a way that would make visitors feel “othered” or excluded” (Dawson, 2014). The choices museums make either encourage engagement or meet visitors with an immediate disadvantage in which they must rely on their own resources to have a successful visit.

3.2 | Cost and programming

Cost is often considered a barrier to entry (Acevedo & Madara, 2015; Garibay, 2009; Jun et al., 2008). Admission prices and policies can be associated with issues of economic efficiency and visitor equity (Bailey & Falconer, 1998). Among Hispanic visitors, affordability and cost were important criteria for participation in descriptive studies (Acevedo & Madara, 2015; Garibay, 2009; Stein et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, people at higher-income levels, were just as likely as people at lower-income levels to attend art exhibits on free admission days (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015). However, Bowman et al. (2019) found that on free admission days the sample included significantly higher percentages of Hispanic and African American participants and a significantly lower percentage of White participants.

Museums have been operating with several assumptions of their visitors; however, “the field overall lags in audience work,” only 18% of museums in the United States are using audience data to shape efforts and offerings (Knight Foundation, 2020, p. 10). Globally, evaluation studies of a museum's social role and promoting the participation of all citizens is equally lacking (UNESCO, 2019). If museums are aiming to engage more diverse visitors, the answer is targeted and thoughtful programming.

Drawing upon prior research (e.g., Brenton & Bouckaert, 2021; Olivares & Piatak, 2021) and the competing perspectives of continued elitism compared to a shift to popular culture and omnivorous art preferences, we present our expectations for each of the museum attributes in Table 1. From the elite perspective, we expect a preference for conventional content, academically written object labels, art history lectures, and public tours, regardless of location outside of the city or a higher cost. From the shift to an omnivore perspective, we expect a preference for more diverse content, relevant and relatable language on object labels, and community-based programming with perhaps a lower price point and more centrally located.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To test the research expectations, we designed and administered a choice based conjoint survey experiment in the fall of 2020. The survey was administered to 386 undergraduate and graduate students at a large public university in the southeast United States (Table 2). The descriptive statistics show that the sample is younger than the general population but is reasonable for a student sample that is of interest to the museum. The sample is quite diverse with more than 40% of the sample being non-White. The sample also leans Democrat as may be expected with a student sample, but Democrats are still less than half of the sample. The sample also leans slightly female which is what is expected in a sample of college students.

The experiment randomized six different common museum attributes to guide the choice of museum. Table 3 shows the attribute and the value of the attribute that was randomly selected to be shown to the experiment

TABLE 1 Expectations for omnivore versus elite.

Museum attribute	Omnivore	Elite
Content: artist		
Romare Bearden	+	
Dale Chihuly		(−)
Object label		
Art educator description	+	
Curator description		(−)
Events		
Arts history lecture		(−)
Artist festival	+	
Programs		
Cultural dance night	+	
Public tour		(−)
Location		
Uptown/downtown	+	
Outside center city		(−)
Cost	(−)	+

TABLE 2 Survey sample statistics.

	Mean	Std. dev.
Age	22.04	5.49
	Frequency	Percent
White/Caucasian	222	57.81
African American	65	16.93
Hispanic	45	11.72
Asian	19	4.95
Other	33	8.59
Democrat	171	44.53
Republican	71	18.49
Independent	112	29.17
Other and two or more races	30	7.81
Male	172	44.56
Female	209	54.15
Other gender	5	1.3

respondents. The table also includes a shortened name for discussion purposes only that was not shown to the respondents. Randomized experiments are ideally suited for plausible combinations of attribute values or attribute values that might be reasonably offered. All of the attributes come from the current programming of the museum or in the case of cost are comparable values. All the attribute values have an equal likelihood of being included.

Following our expectations, the artists that were chosen are featured prominently at the art museum. The Kehinde Wiley object label offers two descriptions of Wiley's work with the curator description written including

TABLE 3 Attributes for museum choice.

Attribute	Randomly selected value of attribute	Shortened name
Artist	Romare Bearden	Romare Bearden
	Dale Chihuly	Dale Chihuly
Exhibit description	Wiley recasts famous Old Masters paintings with young black men he notices on the street and randomly selects; the subjects choose what portrait and pose they want to be painted into from art history books in Wiley's studio.	Art educator description
	In juxtaposing contemporary urban imagery with the style and scale more familiar in art historical precedents such as Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo; Wiley translates the authority of Eurocentric Western painting onto his anonymous models.	Curator description
Events	Arts history lecture	Arts history lecture
	Artist festival	Artist festival
Programs	Cultural dance night	Cultural dance night
	Public tour	Public tour
Location	Centrally located in uptown	Uptown/downtown
	Historic building just outside the city	Outside center city
Cost	\$7	\$7
	\$9	\$9
	\$11	\$11
	\$13	\$13
	\$15	\$15
	\$17	\$17

academic terms used by museum curators and those in the art history field. While the shortened art educator description was written taking an art educational approach that may be described as more accessible or approachable to a wider audience. Both events and programs are activities that the museum does regularly. The locations describe the two locations of the same museum. Finally, the current admission cost of the museum is \$15, and \$17 is a reasonable value, but we test whether reduced admission might attract a broader audience. Therefore, the cost values are also \$13, \$11, \$9, and \$7.

The respondents saw the randomly selected attribute values for two museums and were then asked to make a choice between which of the two they would prefer to visit. An example of the conjoint is shown below (Figure 1). The experiment respondent then chose which of the two museums they would prefer to visit. This procedure was then repeated five more times for the respondents with a new randomization of attribute values. This type of choice based conjoint (Ben-Akiva et al., 2019) has been used extensively in marketing (Natter & Feurstein, 2002), economics (Ben-Akiva et al., 2019), and increasingly in disciplines such as political science (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Leeper et al., 2020), public policy (Hankinson 2018), and public administration (Witesman et al., 2022). This type of analysis is ideally suited for analyzing complex and multidimensional attributes of products that make them attractive to customers and patrons, such as museums.

The standard way of analyzing the causal effect of the attributes is to use the average marginal component effects to analyze the marginal effect of the individual attributes. Since we are also interested in how different subgroups are influenced by the different attributes, we follow the standard and use marginal means (MM) analysis (Leeper et al., 2020). A positive characteristic of MM analysis for a forced-choice design with two alternatives is that

	Museum A	Museum B
Featured Artist	Romare Bearden	Dale Chihuly
Kehinde Wiley Exhibit Description	Wiley recasts famous Old Masters paintings with young black men he notices on the street and randomly selects; the subjects choose what portrait and pose they want to be painted into from art history books in Wiley's studio.	Wiley recasts famous Old Masters paintings with young black men he notices on the street and randomly selects; the subjects choose what portrait and pose they want to be painted into from art history books in Wiley's studio.
Events	Artist Festival	Artist Festival
Programs	Cultural Dance Night	Public Tour
Cost	\$13	\$15
Location	Historic building just outside the city center	Centrally located in Uptown

FIGURE 1 Example of conjoint choices.

the marginal means are directly interpretable as probabilities of the attribute influencing the choice holding the other attributes constant (Leeper et al., 2020, p. 2010).

4.1 | Analysis

4.1.1 | Analysis of the full sample

Figure 2 shows the results of the choice based conjoint analysis for the full sample and the appendix (Table A1) shows the regression output.¹ The analysis shows that there is not a significant difference between Dale Chihuly and Romare Bearden, the different types of programming, or the location at standard levels. The art description does significantly influence respondents' choice of museum. On average, respondents that read about a museum that used the more formal curator language were 1.81 percentage points less likely to attend that museum ($p < 0.05$). However, the respondents that were shown the art description with the more approachable art educator language were 1.77 percentage points ($p < 0.1$) more likely to attend the museum. (Note that the grand mean of the two choices is 50% or a proportion of 0.5. Deviations from the grand mean are the average marginal increases or decreases of choosing that option, which are expressed here as percentage points.) These are practically small effects, but they are low-cost interventions that the museum may want to consider to increase attendance.

More significantly, the events and the cost have larger effect sizes on the full sample. The art history lectures decreases willingness to attend by 5.05 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). The artist festival increases willingness to attend by 4.89 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). The cost has the largest effect size with a stated willingness to attend the museum decreasing by nearly 20 percentage points if the cost was \$17 ($p < 0.001$). The \$15 price point is nearly

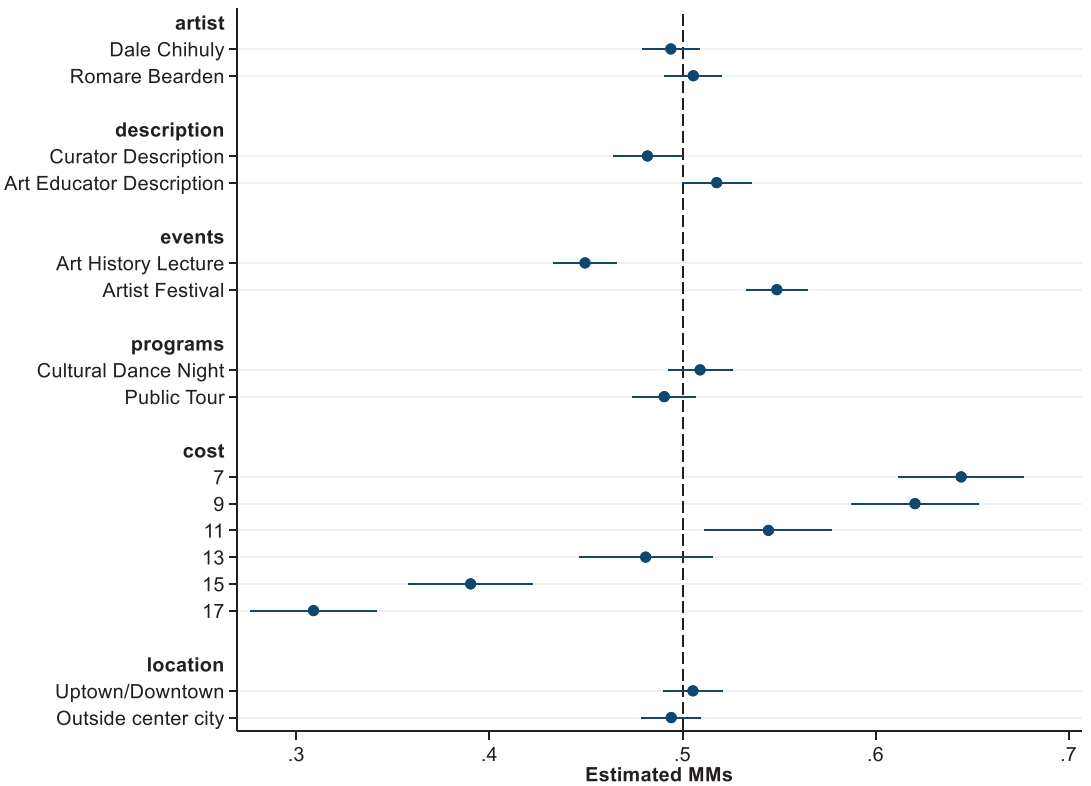


FIGURE 2 Experimental attributes effect on choice of museum for the full sample.

11 percentage points less likely to attend ($p < 0.001$), and the \$13 price point is almost 2 percentage points less likely to attend but not significant at standard levels. The \$11 price point increases stated willingness to attend by 4.45 percentage points ($p < 0.01$). Both the \$9 and \$7 increase willingness to attend the museum by over 12 percentage points and 14.43 percentage points, respectively ($p < 0.01$).

4.1.2 | Sub-group analysis

Now that we have examined the full sample, we want to look at how different respondents may respond to these different attributes. Since there is a lack of diversity in arts participation, perhaps different museum attributes appeal to different audiences. This section first examines the response based on the race of the respondent, then it looks at gender, age, and partisanship. The last subgroup analysis is the analysis of whether the respondent visited the museum in the last 12 months, which is practically important to the museum.

While all racial categories were a bit unique in how they responded to the different attributes, the type of the event is the most salient (Figure 3). White respondents slightly preferred the curator language to the more accessible art educator language, the difference in response was not significant at standard levels. Black respondents preferred the art educator label but this difference was only significant at $p < 0.1$. Hispanic/Latinx and Asian also slightly preferred the more approachable art educator description, but these differences were not significant at the standard social science level. Interestingly, the other category, which includes Native Americans and people of two or more races, does strongly prefer the art educator description ($p < 0.05$). For these respondents, the accessible language is

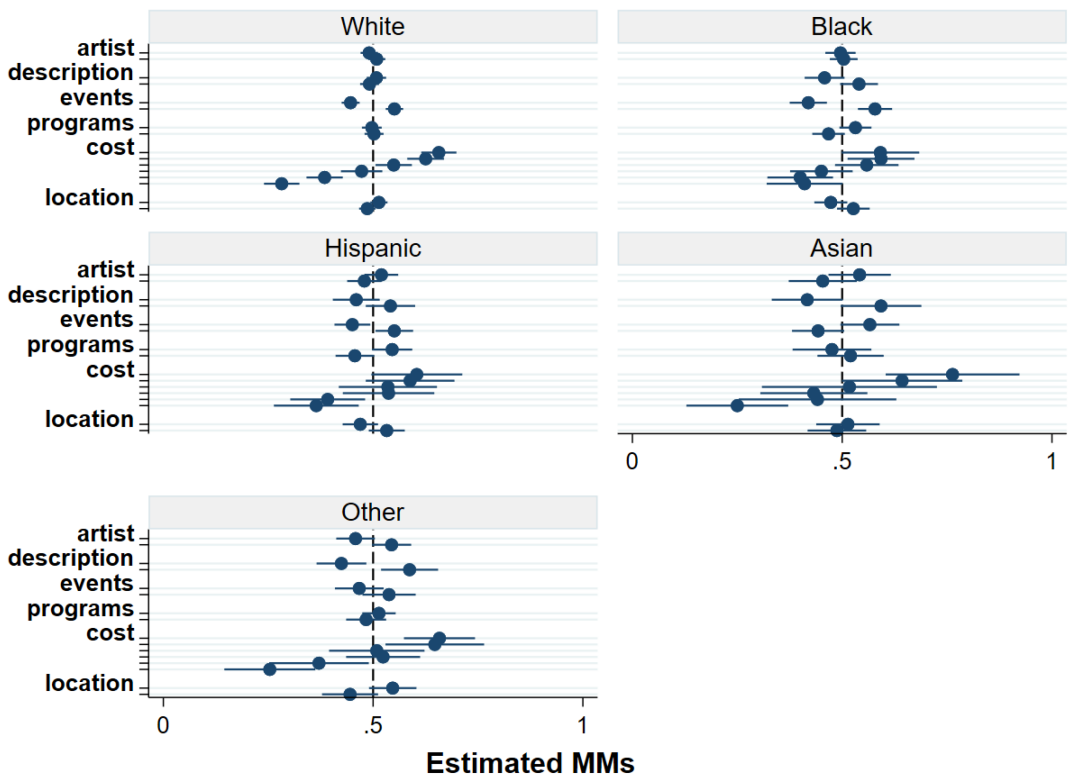


FIGURE 3 Experimental attributes effect on choice of museum by race of respondent.

predicted to increase the choice of the museum by 8.7 percentage points whereas the more formal curator description is expected to decrease the choice by 7.55 percentage points.

The second subgroup analysis that we will consider is the differential response by gender (Figure 4). While we had five respondents that noted a gender other than male or female this leads to relatively large confidence intervals for this group. The much larger category of male and female show marked differences. For example, men tend to prefer the curator description, but neither description is significant at standard levels. Women, however, have a marked preference for the art educator description ($p < 0.0001$). Both men and women prefer the artist festival ($p < 0.01$), but women have a significant preference for the cultural dance night. Overall, men and women respond similarly to cost with only the \$11 price point being significantly different.

Exploring the effects of age on preferences for museums, we do not see much difference between Millennials and Gen Z (Figure 5). Gen X seems to have some marked differences, as the oldest generation in the sample preferring the more traditional curator description over the art educator description, but the sample of Gen X was small with correspondingly large confidence intervals. Interestingly, Millennials showed the most distinction between the two descriptions ($p < 0.05$) preferring the art educator label compared to the curator label. Neither Gen X nor Gen Z responded significantly to the description, but younger generations seem to prefer more relatable art labels written by art educators rather than more traditional art labels written by curators. Both Gen Z and Millennials have a statistically significant preference for the artist festival relative to the art history lecture ($p < 0.05$). Cost has a similar pattern of preference as the overall sample and the artist, the programs, and the location are all not statistically significant.

We also observed interesting museum attribute preferences depending upon the political affiliation of the respondent (Figure 6). Republicans prefer the curator description and dislike the art educator description ($p < 0.05$).

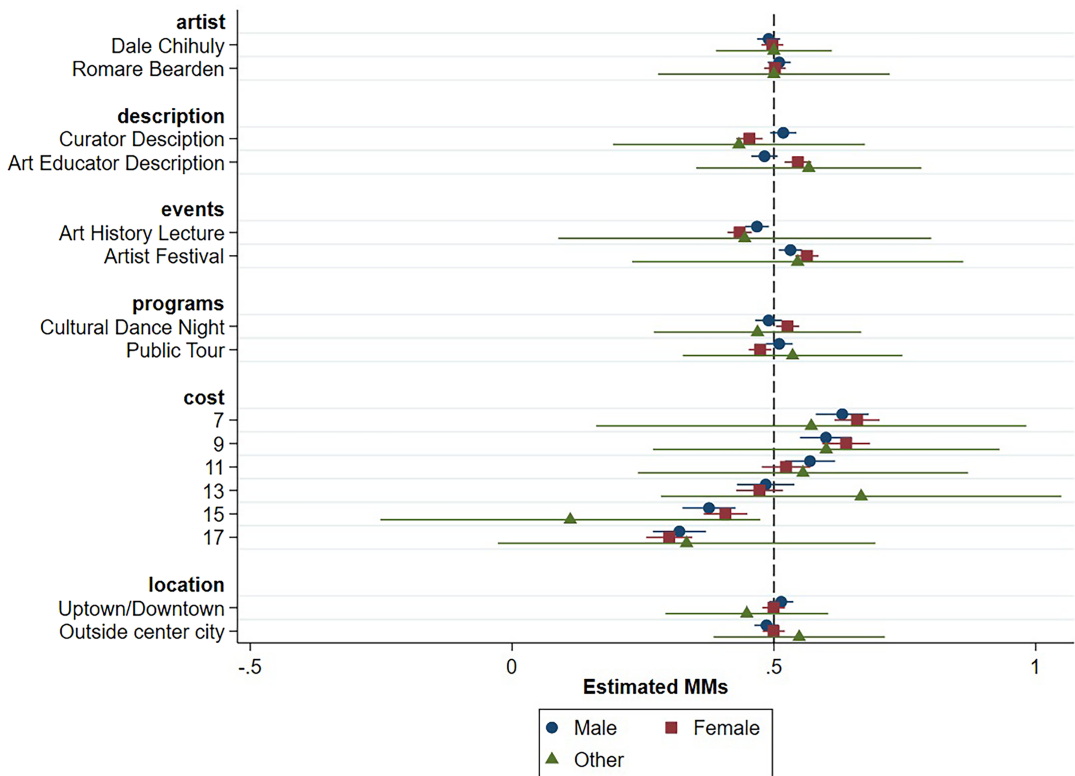


FIGURE 4 Experimental attributes effect on choice museum by gender of respondent.

Democrats and Independents prefer the art educator description and are significantly averse to the curator description ($p < 0.05$). There is notable agreement that Democrats, Independents, and Republicans prefer the artist festivals and are less likely to prefer a museum with art history lectures ($p < 0.05$). Democrats prefer the cultural dance night programming and dislike the public tour ($p < 0.05$). Republicans are the opposite of the Democrats preferring the public tour and disliking the cultural dance night ($p < 0.05$). Cost is mostly similar to the previously reported findings but Independents seem particularly price sensitive with a very large decrease in the probability of attending a museum with a cost of \$17 (26.4 percentage point decrease). Artist and location attributes were not significant at standard levels for any subgroup and the other political subgroup was not significant on any of the attributes again because of the relatively large confidence intervals for this group.

Finally, a breakdown by whether a respondent has ever visited the museum is practically important for museums, and the analysis shows some interesting similarities and differences by this subgrouping (Figure 7). For those that have visited the museum locations before, we see that they prefer the art educator description ($p < 0.05$) and are turned off by the curator description ($p < 0.01$). Those that have never visited the museum before have a slight preference for the accessible language and are slightly less likely to want to visit a museum with the curator art description, but these differences are not statistically significant at standard levels. Both groups had similar preferences for artist festivals ($p < 0.001$) and were less likely to choose the museum that had art history lectures ($p < 0.001$). An interesting difference is that those that have visited the museum before were more likely to prefer the cultural dance night and less likely to choose the museum with the public tour ($p < 0.01$). Although not significant, those never visiting slightly preferred the public tour and were slightly less likely to choose the museum with the cultural dance night programming. Again, the attributes of cost, location, and artist are all similar to the previous description.

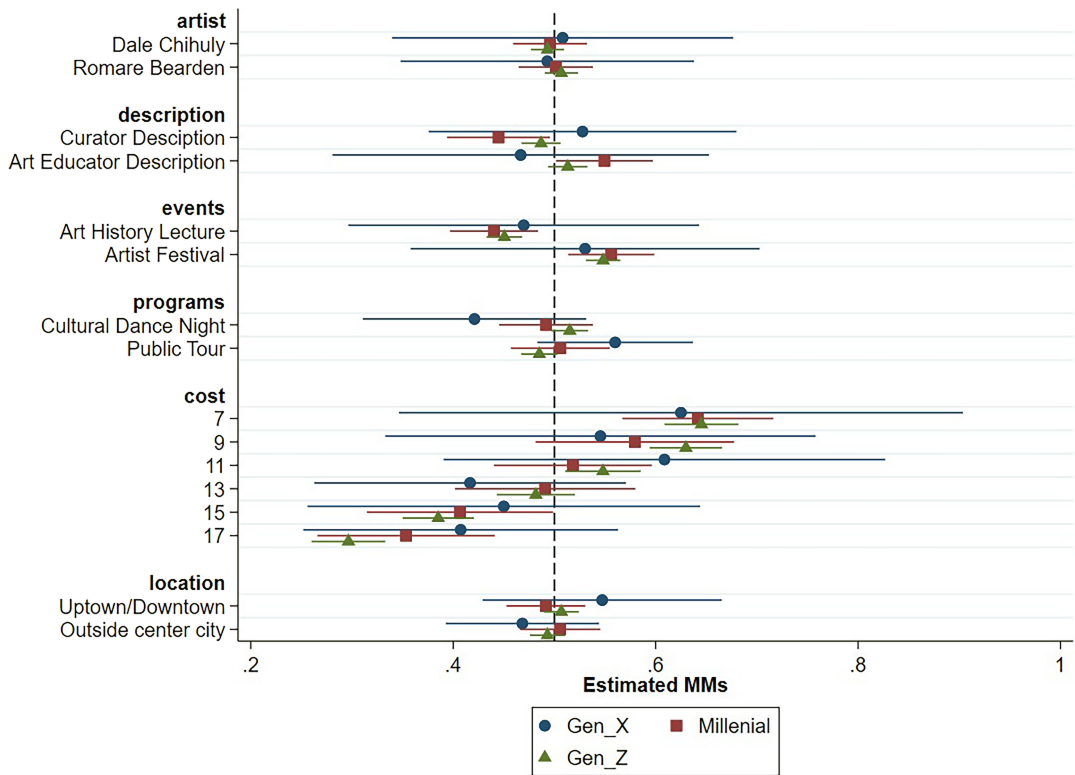


FIGURE 5 Experimental attributes effect on museum choice by age cohort of respondent.

5 | DISCUSSION

To address the lack of diversity in arts participation (Olivares & Piatak, 2021; Ostrower, 2008) and shed light on the elite/omnivore debate (Brenton & Bouckaert, 2021; de Vries & Reeves, 2021), we turn to the museums themselves. What attributes shape individual museum preferences and do preferences vary across subgroups of respondents? Using a conjoint experiment to examine museum content, object labels, programming, location, and cost, we find the language museums use to describe objects plays a significant role for museum preference. Museums using more relatable and culturally relevant language were chosen over those using more academic, art history language. This suggests museums could benefit from revisiting their object labels to ensure not only good writing but also accessibility, relatability, and relevance. Our findings also highlight the role of programming as museums with artist festivals increased willingness to attend as well as cost, where lower admission prices increased willingness to attend. Contributions to broader public administration on using accessible and relatable language and the value of representation are discussed.

Notably, our findings support the omnivore hypothesis. First time visitors, return visitors, and the general public prefer accessible and culturally relevant labels as well as community-based events across racial groups. Our findings support previous research that cultural and educational motivations are strong predictors of omnivorous consumption among diverse audiences (Kottasz, 2015; Olivares & Piatak, 2021). Contrary to the exclusion perspective, more accessible, relevant, and relatable labels significantly influence museum preferences among certain subgroups, like Native Americans and people of two or more races, Millennials, women, and previous visitors. Similarly, artist festivals and cultural dance nights increases willingness to attend, especially for certain subgroups like women and Millennials, over more traditional museum programming and events. In this sense, transforming the museum experience

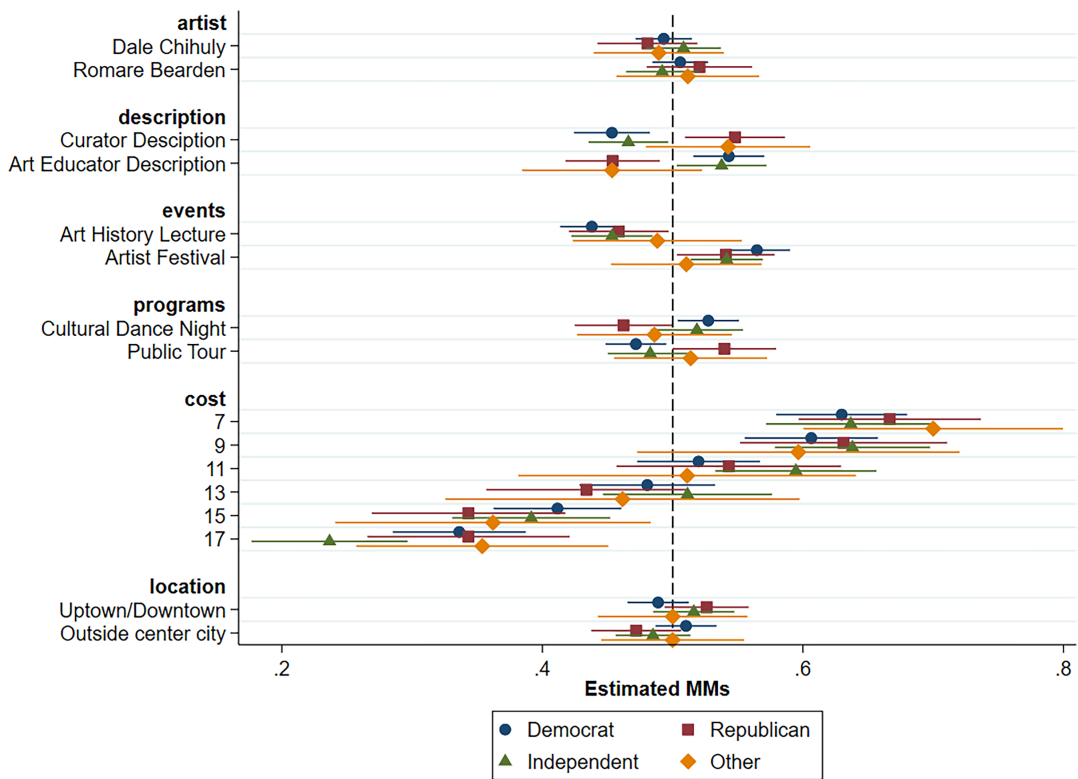


FIGURE 6 Experimental attributes effect on choice of museum by partisanship of respondent.

by engaging visitors with easy-to-read labels and thoughtful, innovative programming would be more inclusive and could increase overall attendance and the diversity of museum audiences.

However, we find notable nuances by political affiliation. Unfortunately, a Republican preference for the traditional object label and traditional programming of a public tour indicate a desire to keep the arts elite among this subgroup. Perhaps this is due to the increasing polarization in the United States, but politics should not dictate inclusion in the arts. Lewis and Brooks (2005) highlight the challenge arts administrators face and the importance of artistic freedom. When cultural representation and inclusionary values are not considered, organizations structure practices in a way that “other” those who are not “ideal” visitors, perpetuating exclusion (Dawson, 2014; Sandell, 1998). To shift toward positively improving the whole visitor experience, investment in visitor services, education, interpretation, and including more multidisciplinary approaches are required. Museums are in control of their offerings and should be willing to consider changes that could potentially be more welcoming to a greater audience.

The finding that price matters across almost all demographics aligns with the research (National Endowment for the Arts, 2015) and is indicative of how important this is for museums to consider. The large effect size on this attribute suggests that this may be a very important way to increase participation, especially for traditionally excluded populations. Museums must consider thoughtful pricing strategies, the findings here suggest that pay what you can, low, or no-cost models may increase participation.

This study is not without limitations. While conjoint analyses are helpful in examining public preferences and we partnered with a local art museum, our study relied on a student sample. We have no reason to think this would influence our key findings on art labels and programming, but this may have influence the finding on cost. Students may have a lower discretionary budget than many working adults. Future research should examine preferences for museums for different populations. Our study also highlights the role of different museum attributes in shaping

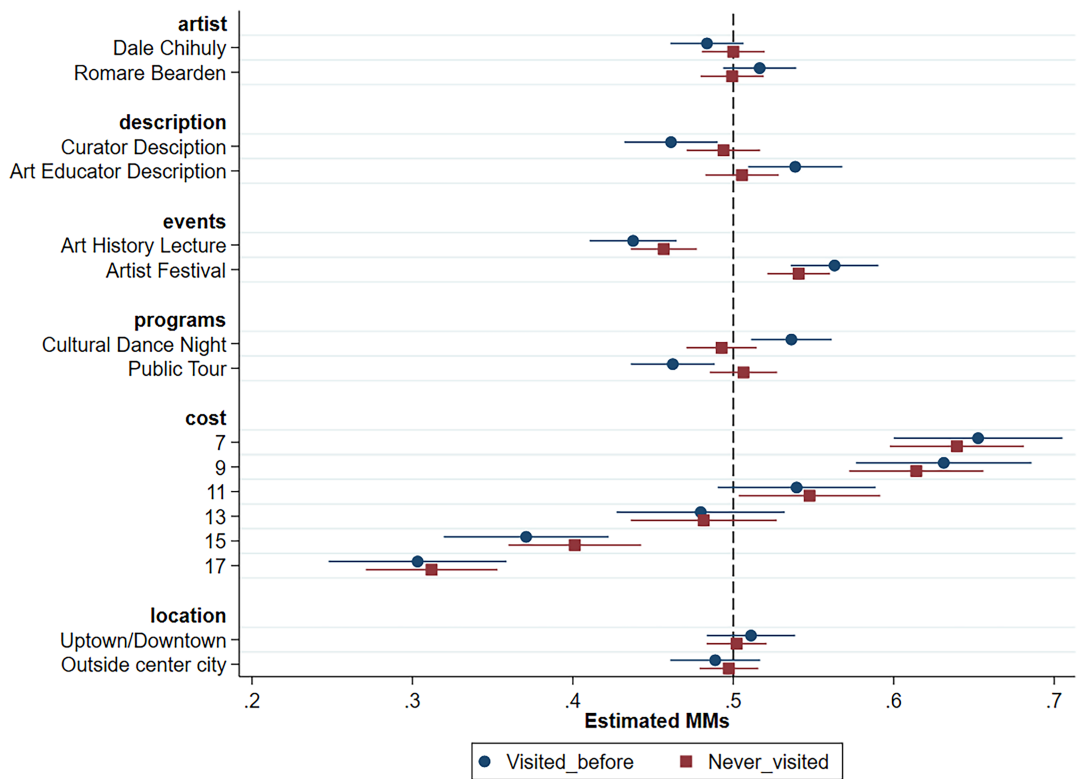


FIGURE 7 Experimental attributes effect on choice of museum by previous museum visit.

preferences, but we know less about the reasoning behind those decisions. Further examination of art descriptions and object labels as well as the role of programming in broadening arts participation is needed.

These types of experiments could also be used for a variety of other policy and administrative decisions where input on service attributes matters such as public amenities like recreation centers or parks. These studies are also valid studies for assessing willingness to pay (Ben-Akiva et al., 2019) and may be useful in a variety of public finance contexts such as developing bond referenda and other public services. Important possible extensions for future research could be to examine price and willingness to pay using latent class segmentation (Kamakura et al., 1994) to examine how the marketing of public amenities can be best targeted at the groups that are most likely to respond.

5.1 | Conclusion and implications

Beyond museums, our findings highlight the importance of both representation and using accessible and relatable language. Our findings on the cultural representation of programming and events supports theories of representative bureaucracy, where governments should reflect the communities they serve (e.g., Kingsley, 1944; Krislov, 1974; Mosher, 1982; Selden, 1997). Perhaps people are more likely to attend museums that have programming and events that reflect them in line with symbolic representation (for an overview, see: Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). This would be similar to symbolic representation found in recycling and policing (Riccucci et al., 2016; Sievert, 2021; Van Ryzin et al., 2017).

Our findings on object labels support the plain language movement toward using clear, concise, and understandable language in law, reporting, and government. The New Public Service geared to enhancing democracy and

centering the public, including an emphasis on plain language (e.g., Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). In the United States, the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Public Law 111-274) aimed to enhance citizen access to government information and services by ensuring government documents are written clearly. Clarity and accessibility is vital for all areas of the public, including museums, where we found more relatable object labels to be more broadly appealing. In addition to using clear and accessible language as detailed in the U.S. federal plain language guidelines (<https://www.plainlanguage.gov>), perhaps government agencies and nonprofit organizations should consider the relatability of their language.

For museums, our findings support the omnivore approach to the arts over the historically elite role. For museums interested in broadening arts participation and incorporating inclusionary practices, there are numerous resources available. Practitioners across the field are developing new and innovative techniques and programs and we would like to point to a few of these resources.

Writing a label requires quality writing skills, knowledge about the objects, plus an understanding of the visitors who will be reading the label. Beverly Serrell's (2015) book *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* presents an in-depth look at writing exhibition labels, offering tips on sentence length, vocabulary, and metaphors. Serrell (2015) states: "visitors who are experts are not the target audience for the label copy, and experts (unless they are really snobs) will not be insulted by clear, concise labels written with enthusiasm for the subject and a respect for novice visitors" (p. 100). The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Mia) offers a visitor- focused guide to interpretation, sharing thoughtful and researched tips and examples of label copy. "The museum's interpretive program grows directly from an understanding of our visitors' needs and is intended to promote viewers' engagement with works of art. This approach emphasizes creating opportunities for discovery and critical thinking rather than simply imparting facts" (The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2010, p. 4). It goes on to highlight cultural differences, audience diversity, and accessibility. Finally, at the Delaware Art Museum, they are integrating community-created label copy into all their interpretation for special exhibits, to include a range of voices (Faherty, 2022). This technique produces relevant and relatable labels and is inclusive and engaging to the local community.

Museums have prioritized single frameworks such as art history and excluded other disciplines; creating narrow ways of knowing that do not encourage the interests and motivations of the general public but rather deters potential visitors marginalized from museum representation (Anila, 2017). As populations worldwide continue to grow and become more diverse, legitimizing multiple expertise, multidisciplinary approaches and counternarratives will benefit visitors and museums. Museums can choose to engage art educators, designers, and other professionals in label writing and exhibition design. Recognizing the shift in audiences and incorporating different approaches such as response stations, can change traditional authoritative models and help museum spaces feel more welcoming (Anila, 2017). Museum educator, Radiah Harper, suggests finding: "new ways to talk about the histories and identities that surround an artwork, and invite in the visitors' interests" (Harper & Hendrick, 2017, p. 164). For example, at the City Museum of Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, staff involves residents in the development of exhibitions and projects; ensuring everyone has a voice in the city's heritage (UNESCO, 2019).

Museums are public spaces for society as a whole; they can play an important role developing social cohesion and education through intentional and thoughtful programming (UNESCO, 2019). Ng et al. (2017) call out programming targeted at particular cultural communities as superficial. Events like Dia de los Muertos point to how museum programming is actually focused on white audiences every other day of the year. Similar to Richard Sandell's (1998) social justice framework to museum work; Ng et al. (2017) use a holistic approach called allyship, focusing on the experience of racialized and marginalized people to disrupt the status quo that privileges white, elite perspectives and uses other skills such as practicing active listening, empathy, and self-reflection. Another inclusive practice that has been developed in Australian arts and culture institutions is called "customized engagement: identifying minority artists, groups, and audiences; targeting them in culturally sensitive ways; helping them to build their individual strengths; and providing steppingstones to create important links and interaction with others" such as museums, the

public and other organizations (Azmat et al., 2015, p. 384). Museums must consider the public and their communities in developing their programming.

The conjoint experiment provides evidence that the museum practices and policies including choices made between cost, programming, what objects are collected and exhibited, the presence or absence of specific interpretations, and how those interpretations are framed make a difference to the visitor and visitor experience. We invite museums to stay curious, use data and design, and interpret for the audience.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest that would influence our objectivity with this research.

OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data and Open Materials badges. Data and materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IPRSTZ>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the PA Harvard Dataverse website at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IPRSTZ>.

ORCID

Zachary Mohr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7533-3382>

Jaclyn Piatak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6977-7497>

ENDNOTE

¹ Data and replication materials for the analysis can be found on the *Public Administration* account on the Harvard Dataverse website. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IPRSTZ>.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Experimental attributes effect on choice museum for the full sample.

Variable/levels	Est.	SE	t	$p > t $	LCI	UCI
Artist						
Dale Chihuly	0.4940	0.0076	-0.7956	0.4267	0.4791	0.5089
Romare Bearden	0.5056	0.0076	0.7392	0.4602	0.4907	0.5206
Description						
Juxtaposing	0.4819	0.0092	-1.9804	0.0484	0.4639	0.4999
Black men	0.5177	0.0092	1.9338	0.0539	0.4997	0.5357
Events						
Art history lecture	0.4495	0.0083	-6.0654	0.0000	0.4332	0.4659
Artist festival	0.5489	0.0081	6.0580	0.0000	0.5330	0.5647
Programs						
Cultural dance night	0.5091	0.0085	1.0740	0.2835	0.4924	0.5258
Public tour	0.4905	0.0084	-1.1291	0.2596	0.4741	0.5070
Cost						
7	0.6443	0.0166	8.7115	0.0000	0.6118	0.6769
9	0.6204	0.0168	7.1518	0.0000	0.5873	0.6535
11	0.5445	0.0168	2.6513	0.0083	0.5115	0.5775
13	0.4809	0.0175	-1.0886	0.2770	0.4465	0.5154
15	0.3903	0.0164	-6.6991	0.0000	0.3581	0.4225
17	0.3089	0.0167	-11.4438	0.0000	0.2760	0.3417
Location						
Uptown downtown	0.5054	0.0079	0.6869	0.4925	0.4899	0.5209
Outside center city	0.4942	0.0078	-0.7415	0.4588	0.4788	0.5096