

# MuseumsForward

## “This is what white families do on a Sunday”: Investigating the visit motivations of BIPOC families in arts and culture museums

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### Abstract

Although families are a core audience for museums and the share of American families that identify as Black, Indigenous, or persons of color (BIPOC) is on a steady rise, the share of literature featuring the experiences of BIPOC families is notably slim. This article describes findings from a study designed to understand what motivates BIPOC families to visit arts and culture museums. The questions this study explores are two-fold: first, what motivates BIPOC families to visit museums; and second, how do these families perceive their motivations for visiting a museum are similar to and/or different from those of white families. Data for this study were collected through facilitated intercept surveys at three mid-sized arts and culture museums across the Puget Sound region. Thirty-five families were intercepted through convenience sampling and the descriptive survey provided both qualitative and quantitative data about families' reasons for visiting the museum. Findings emphasized the importance of learning as a motivation for both caregivers as well as their children, along with desires to connect with families' heritage and identity, seek entertainment, and spend time with each other. Additional findings highlighted how identity could serve as a visit motivation, described a tension between BIPOC and museums' representations of them, and pointed to a lack of access to cultural resources among BIPOC families. Findings from this study have implications for researchers and practitioners seeking to examine the inclusivity of museums' practices and create spaces that appeal to families of color.

### Keywords

families; motivations ; race

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## Introduction

Families are a core audience for museums. A 2018 study by British research group The Audience Agency found that 35% of museum visitors attended in family groups (The Audience Agency, 2018). Within the field of museum studies there is ample research about why families visit, what they do in museums, and how they learn in museums; however, only a slim margin of that work addresses the experiences of families of color (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010; Maldonado & Nguyen, 2020). As American communities continue to diversify and museums work to overcome their predominant focus on white Western narratives, it is important to understand the full range of family relationships with museums, not just those of mostly white families. This article describes findings from a study designed to understand what motivates families of color to visit museums.

### Motivation and Family Learning

Motivation has been found to have a direct effect on visitors' in-museum learning behavior. Moussouri (1997) identified six family motivations for visiting museums:

- *Place*, related to the museum's status as a destination, emblematic of the locale or region;
- *Education*, being a place to learn about the subject or learn at all;
- *Lifecycle*, being something to repeat or introduce at certain stages in one's life;
- *Social event*, being a place for individuals to enjoy themselves separately or together;
- *Entertainment*, being a place for leisure; and
- *Practical reasons*, related to external factors such as weather, proximity, availability of time, crowding, or entrance fees.

Building on Moussouri's work, Falk, Moussouri, and Coulson (1998) found that visitors who voiced strong educational motivations or strong entertainment motivations showed significantly greater learning than those who voiced low motivation in those areas. While the roles caregivers play can vary depending on the individual, the exhibit content, and the institutional context, caregivers often serve as facilitators for young people's learning (Falk, 2009; Palmquist & Crowley, 2007). According to Falk et. al (1998), museum visitor agendas are understood to have two dimensions: the motivations people have, and the strategies used. This study explores the first aspect by examining how the museum visit fits into the "cultural/ leisure/ educational fabric of society" for families of color through their motivations for visiting (Falk et al., 1998, p. 108).

The most common museum visit motivation expressed by families is desire to learn (Hood, 1989; Moussouri, 1997; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). Family learning is regarded as a social process where participants co-construct meaning with and from one another, and conversations are seen as "both a process and product of family learning in museums" (Leindhardt & Knutson, 2004; Rhinehart, 2018, p. 13). Through conversations, families use free-choice settings to reinforce past experiences and use "shared, memorable experiences to create a common history and narrative" (Bourque, Houseal, & Welsh, 2014, p. 16; Ellenbogen, Luke, & Dierking, 2004). However, family studies from museums may be difficult to generalize to non-white audiences. Despite decades of advocacy for greater insight into the needs of underserved audiences, the body of research about non-white families' learning experiences remains scarce (Briseño-Garzón & Anderson, 2012; Dierking & Falk, 1994; Ji, Anderson, Wu, & Kang, 2014). A recent literature review by Maldonado & Nguyen (2020) saw that roughly 2% of the last decade's literature published in *Curator: The Museum Journal* focused on families, with an even thinner margin featuring families with underrepresented identities. Assumptions about the purpose of museum visits, the role adults should play in learning, and the roles of children in driving interactions vary across cultures; but the prevailing assumptions of museum professionals in designing experiences for families most closely align with the cultural values of European-Americans (Gaskins, 2008).

This disconnect points to a greater need for both research and practice that is inclusive of families of color. The American Alliance of Museums (2018) noted in their report *Facing Change* that "expanding diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion requires a constant evaluation of whose voices are being represented or silenced" (p. 12). Similarly,

studies show that intentional inclusion of underrepresented groups, such as through language accessibility, can improve visitor's enjoyment and perceptions (Briseño-Garzón & Anderson, 2012; Yalowitz Garibay, Renner, & Plaza, 2013). Movements to address white normativity in museum education practices are underway, but practices that have been constructed with, by, and for Anglo audiences still prevail.

### **Motivations as Barriers to Museum Visitation for Families of Color**

Several studies have attempted to describe the visit motivations of persons of color, though seldom have those studies looked specifically at the motivations of families. Marketing studies have found that African Americans are more likely to attend events where they feel fairly and proportionately represented in the content, staffing, and audiences; seeking out experiences that are perceived to be “for us, by us” (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990). In a similar vein, African American and Hispanic or Latino participants are more likely than white participants to indicate a desire to celebrate heritage and support their community as reason to attend arts and cultural events (Ostrower, 2005). Studies of Latino visitors' attitudes toward museums have found that those with lower education and income levels tend to seek cultural activities that engage extended families and promote family unity, as well as provide educational activities for children (Farrell et al., 2010). Meanwhile, second-generation Latino visitors have strong expectations that museums should include diverse staff, bilingual interpretation, Latino perspectives, and some Latino-themed content (Stein, Garibay, & Wilson, 2008).

But while American museums strive to become more inclusive, their audiences are still predominantly white (Farrell et al., 2010). Barriers to museum participation can be structural or intangible (Bourque, Houseal, Welsh, & Wenger, 2014; Dawson, 2014; Melber, 2006). Structural barriers include museum policies and systems, geographic location, composition of the staff hired, and the cost of admission. Intangible barriers can be an individual's perceptions that certain spaces are not for them and having negative emotions about the type of museum. Dawson (2014), for example, studied low-income, ethnic minority students' visits to a science center/museum. She found that students' pre-conceptions of science centers and museums as unwelcoming and exclusionary were reinforced by the institution's “problematic assumptions about the capital that participants could bring to their visits,” especially regarding their ability to access the

language, vocabulary, financial resources, 'free' time, and familiarity with informal science education (p. 1004).

Dawson's example shows that where museums have the power to assign worth to the narratives, practices, knowledges, and values within our society, they also wield the power to enact symbolic violence by not recognizing or delegitimizing the narratives, practices, knowledges, and values of non-dominant groups (Dawson, 2014). As Dawson writes, "It's not that non-white visitors enter museums without capital; it's rather that the capital they have is not valued in those institutions" (2014, p. 1004).

### **Manifestations of Whiteness in Museums**

Fifi & Heller (2019) describe whiteness as "a socially constructed concept, designed to privilege its members, determined by those already considered part of the category" (p. 101). Historical boundaries around whiteness, as a category, have been ever-shifting—at times including and then excluding groups of people with a variety of physical appearances. Although whiteness is about racial identification, its impact is also more than that: according to Critical Race Theory, whiteness refers to certain privileges, as well as behaviors and values associated with privilege (Allen, 1995; McIntosh, 2020). In a society where being white is "normal" or "neutral," the cultures, histories, and lives of persons of color are deemed "exotic" or "ethnic"—categorized as deviant from the norm, considered as the "other" (Incluseum, 2020) To move through the world with whiteness can mean existing in a state of unconscious about the ways elements of society privilege experiences and tools that are more easily obtained by those of the dominant race (hooks, 1994).

White supremacy culture, then, is the system of "beliefs, values, norms, and standards that teach us overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value" (Okun, 2021, p. 4). As social institutions, museums are not exempt from the machinations that perpetuate white supremacy culture. In a three-year case study of a nationally recognized art museum, Embrick, Weffer, & Dóminguez (2019) concluded that museums center whiteness in three main ways: 1) through their use of spatiality, or the physical centering of white, Eurocentric narratives in main galleries and thoroughfares; 2) through their policing of the space with racist differentiation; and 3) through their management of access, with high admissions rates and hours of operation that favor those with wealth and leisure time. In this case, examples of white, Eurocentric narratives include ancient Greek and Roman works of art

which are considered superior by both the academy and pop culture. Whether done consciously or not, museums' organizational practices can either perpetuate or dismantle racial inequities. Social justice educator Tema Okun (2021) elaborates on this in an update to a framework she originally penned with the late activist and educator Kenneth Jones, which outlines characteristics of white supremacy culture that can emerge in majority white workspaces. This study uses three of those characteristics to aid in the analysis: objectivity, denial, and worship of the written word, which will be explained more in the sections below. Taken together, the aforementioned strategies allow museums to serve as white sanctuaries, "as spaces that allow whites to feel good about themselves in a world in which they might feel that whites are becoming the minority population," but at the cost of comfort and inclusion for visitors of color (Embrick, 2019, p. 1006). These assertions are echoed in results from studies that describe barriers for people to participate in museums (Bourque, et al., 2014; Dawson, 2014; Melber, 2006).

### **Opportunities for Change**

Although museums are institutions collectively built upon foundations of colonialism and white supremacy, many are actively wrestling with this past in order to meaningfully engage diverse audiences—namely, communities of color—as social demographics, and thus audience demographics, undergo a significant transformation (Embrick et al., 2019; Fifi & Heller, 2019; Mesa-Bains, 2012). American demographics are projected to dramatically shift over the next several decades, showing that by 2050 most children will be BIPOC—that is, Black, Indigenous, or people of color (Farrell, Mendvedeva, Cultural Policy Center & NORC, 2010). Museums have a unique opportunity to respond to this change, reshaping their values and practices to create welcoming spaces for visitors who have been historically excluded. To not respond would threaten the relevance of museums in society, when in an ideal future museums would reflect the communities in which they exist (Farrell et al., 2010; Maldonado & Nguyen, 2020; Martinez, 2020).

As museum audiences undergo a demographic shift in race and ethnicity, they are also expected to shift in age and generation. Although a majority of museum visitors attend with children under the age of 18, this share of intergenerational groups among visitors is on a steep and steady decline (Dilenschneider, 2018). Continuing to appeal to families is essential to maintaining museums' relevance as

community spaces that foster learning. Knowing that families learn with and from each other within a social and cultural context, museums must consider families socio-cultural backgrounds as they relate to visitors' experiences (Briseño-Garzón & Anderson, 2012; Maldonado & Nguyen, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978).

### Study Purpose and Questions

This study intends to describe the motivations that bring BIPOC families to visit arts and culture museums. The questions this study explores are two-fold: first, what motivates BIPOC families to visit museums; and second, how do families of color perceive their motivations for visiting a museum are similar to and/or different from those of white families.

### Methodology

To freshly capture BIPOC families' visit motivations, data for this study were collected through facilitated intercept surveys at three mid-sized arts and culture museums across the Puget Sound region: the Washington State History Museum, the Frye art museum, and the Bellevue Arts Museum. Intercepts were done through convenience sampling where groups that met qualifications with initial filtering questions would participate in an interview, and their verbal responses were audio-recorded then transcribed verbatim. The intercepts lasted eight to twelve minutes and took place over a total of ten days between late spring and early summer of 2021.

Families were loosely defined as "two or more people in a multi-generational group that has an ongoing relationship, they may be biologically related, but not necessarily .... If a group defines itself as a family they are one" (Dierking, n.d.). Although children were present, respondents were adult representatives over the age of 18 years old. It is important to note that during data collection, Bellevue Arts Museum charged full admission, the Frye Museum offered free admission, and the Washington State History Museum offered free admission on two of the four data collection days. Additionally, both the Frye and the Washington State History Museum happened to display special exhibits overtly centering the experiences of persons of color (see Appendix B).

### Table 1

*Number of families successfully intercepted at each site.*

	Bellevue Arts Museum	Frye Art Museum	Washington State History Museum
No. intercepts	6	9	20

The study was designed as a descriptive survey (Creswell, 2014) to probe families' reasons for visiting the museum. The researcher first explored families' motivations qualitatively, allowing them to voice with their own words potential reasons including and beyond what is known in the literature. Open-ended questions specifically asked respondents to reflect on why they came that day, what they hoped to do, how they made that choice, and why those reasons matter to them; examining desires for their selves and the young people in their family (see Appendix A). Next, closed-ended Likert scales asked visitors to quantitatively rank the importance of the six family motivations identified by Moussouri (1997) to their family's reasons for visiting that day; providing another means of directly comparing findings to the literature. Demographics were collected as context for the backgrounds and prior experiences of each respondent. Pulling from transcripts, the researcher used emergent coding to identify themes within participants' responses. Closed-ended responses were analyzed for descriptive statistics.

That these data were collected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic presented some obstacles and limitations. Travel restrictions limited the researcher to sites within Washington state, and hesitation around prolonged face-to-face interactions meant that several potential sites declined to participate in this study. During data collection, museums across Washington state were in various phases of re-opening and had capacity limits in place to maintain social distancing, which greatly reduced the number of potential participants. Taken together, these limitations may point to results that best describe the experiences of BIPOC families within the confines of this particular time and place, and the results may be interpreted as such.

### **Demographics: Who were the study participants?**

The study subjects were 35 family groups who self-identified as Black, Indigenous, or persons of color. The average family size was three individuals: two adults and one child. Of the 35 families, 43% (n=15) indicated more than one racial identity. Geographically, 86% (n=30) of families lived within Washington state.

To participate, one adult representative was self-selected from each group to lead discussions with the researcher. Representatives tended to be middle-aged (ten were between ages 35-44, and nine were between ages 45-54) and 69% (n=24) of them identified as a woman. A majority had pursued some form of post-secondary education: 20% (n=7) completed some college, 34% (n=12) had a bachelor's degree, and an additional 34% (n=12) completed a graduate degree.

Demographic questions also asked about participant's recent museum-going habits. None of the study participants were members at their respective museums, but nearly a quarter were members at another museum, science center, zoo, or aquarium. When asked about the frequency of prior visits to the museum *they were currently at*, only one family indicated that they had visited within the last year. When asked whether they had visited *any other* museums in the last year, 43% (n=15) indicated that they had made at least one visit; most commonly attending art museums, followed by history museums and science museums. Among those who gave a reason for their absence, all respondents mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor.

## Results

To explore the motivations of the families who participated in this study, the researcher chose both open- and closed-ended questions to prompt reflection. After describing their general motivations, hopes for their selves, and hopes for their children in their own words, participants were asked to rank possible reasons for visiting on a scale of 1-5. The data were gathered directly from the study participants through facilitated intercept surveys. The findings from these questions are presented below.

### **What motivates BIPOC families to visit arts and culture museums?**

#### *Top-of-Mind Motivations: Why are you here today?*

Two questions asked participants to reflect on their motivations for visiting: an open-ended question asked at the beginning of the intercept, and a scale question asked toward the end. Three main themes emerged from the families' responses: a) seeking entertainment; b) learning; and c) connecting with an identity.

Forty percent of participants (n=14) *wanted to "get outside" or do "something fun and interesting"* with their families, often because of

pandemic restrictions. This was exemplified in a statement from a Black/Caucasian mother who “came to the museum today because [she] was vaccinated and was looking to get out of the house and experience some culture.” Within this subset of responses, six respondents also pointed to the affordable cost of admission as a reason for attending, including a multi-racial mother who came “because it’s a free museum day and it was something fun and interesting to do for my family.” All six groups who specifically mentioned affordability attended a free museum or low/no-cost admissions day.

A further thirty-seven percent (n=13) *wanted to learn* as a motivation for visiting. Six participants wanted to experience a specific exhibit or event, such as a train exhibit or a collection by a particular artist. For example, one Native American/Caucasian mother stated they were visiting “Because [their child] is learning about trains and Native American history, and this is the perfect place to get that more hands-on experience.” Four participants described wanting to be exposed to new ideas or experiences. One parent described wanting to “get [their] kids to the art side of the world, to see the different kinds of art that we have. It’s the art knowledge that I want to give to my kids, that’s the reason I’m here.” Three participants stated that they wanted to facilitate broad learning experiences for their family’s children. In the words of an Asian American mother, “We come here for the kids—just, they like the museum.”

Twenty percent (n=7) *wanted to learn about their heritage or to see how an aspect of their identity might be represented* in a museum. As one adult at the Frye succinctly put it, “The exhibition is focused on Blackness: Blackness in a way that I’m familiar with, and Blackness in a way that I want to further understand. And I’m Black.” A Native American mother expressed a similar sentiment during her visit to the state history museum: “I want my children to learn about our heritage and the state of Washington ... to have exposure for my own children to be able to see things that are different and not your normal understanding of where everything comes from.”

Finally, one participant made a comment that was categorized as “Other.” They stated that their motivation was to replicate experiences they had as a child, because their daughter has “never actually been to [an art museum] at this age, so we thought we’d do it.”

### *Scale Ratings of Potential Visit Motivations*

Following the open-ended discussions of their reasons for visiting, adult representatives were asked to rate possible reasons for visiting that day on a scale of one to five, one being “not at all important” and five being “extremely important” to their family. The statements provided were based on the six family visit motivations described in Moussouri’s (1997) dissertation study. Table 2 presents a summary of findings for these scales, which largely support the themes found in participants’ open-ended responses. The families in this study were nearly unanimous in their strong desire for the museum visit to be a social event, an opportunity to spend time with each other. They also strongly expressed a desire to be entertained, and to learn either about a particular subject or to learn in general, but felt that the museum’s status as a destination and practical reasons were only somewhat important to their motivations for the day. When asked about the importance of museum visitation as a tradition or part of the life cycle, however, most respondents indicated that was of neutral importance to their motivation, usually offering a comment about how these experiences were not a part of their own childhood experience. This was further supported by the scarcity of the theme in open-ended questioning: throughout the entire study, only one respondent mentioned museum-going as a part of their childhood experience, while five others spoke about the rarity of those experiences.

**Table 2**

*Adult perspective of motivations for visiting today.*

Reasons for Visit n=34	1- Not at all important	2- Somewhat unimportant	3- Neutral	4- Somewhat important	5- Extremely important	MEAN
Social event	0	0	0	5	29	4.9
Entertainment	0	0	1	8	25	4.7
Education	0	0	0	13	21	4.6
Place	1	2	9	9	13	3.9
Practical reasons	4	0	6	13	11	3.8
Lifecycle	4	5	11	10	4	3.1

*Adult’s Hopes for their Own Experiences*

Each group's adult representative was asked to reflect on their desires for the visit: as an adult in the group, what did they hope to get out of the experience for themselves? Participants described four main themes: a) learning, b) facilitating experiences, c) being refreshed or inspired, and d) exploring something new or exciting.

Forty percent (n= 14) of respondents named *learning* as a motivation for their selves. Five respondents described a desire to learn, without naming a specific interest or topic. A White/Black mother shared that she had never been to that museum before, and "some basic learning would be nice." Nine respondents described a specific idea or subject that they hoped to learn more about during their visit. For example, one Asian American mother stated, "I get to learn stuff, too. I get to check it out and I get to find out more things about Washington."

Twenty-six percent (n=9) of adults mentioned wanting to successfully *facilitate a learning experience* for the young people in their group. One Asian American mom put it this way: "I guess for me being the mom, it would just be having them get the enjoyment. I mean— if I was a single person, I would probably pay more attention to the exhibits themselves."

Twenty percent (n=7) *wanted to be refreshed or inspired*: to reconnect with the outside world, seek new ideas to inspire or change their perspectives, or find a way to lift their spirits. One Black/Caucasian woman stated that she expects "to be connected with the outside world, so having a chance to see art from other places and just sort of be connected to art and feel inspired." Similarly, a Latino/Black/Asian mother spoke about how she came to explore how art could elicit deeper meanings, "or they can provide more context to things that some people might not quite understand."

Eleven percent (n=4) *wanted a chance to see what was new or exciting*. As a multi-racial parent put it, "I've been here before, so I like to see the different new exhibits that they have." Finally, one participant, a Black caregiver, gave a statement that was categorized as "Other", sharing that they wished to bring their children to museums because they didn't have those experiences as a child.

### *Adult's Hopes for their Children's/Youth's Experiences*

When asked about their hopes for their family's children or young people, adults' responses became more introspective. Responses were categorized into four main themes: a) learning about their selves and

communities, b) generating interest in a subject, c) learning in a broad sense, and d) spending time together.

Thirty-seven percent (n=13) of respondents described a desire for their young people to *learn more about their heritage or identity*, and how it connects them to greater traditions or broader communities. One African American father at a history museum put it this way: "... to just be aware of the history of our ancestry and the knowledge that helps guide them to the things they plan to do going into their future, and how they can better support them—not just themselves, but their community."

Twenty-six percent (n=9) hoped that the experience would help their young people *gain an interest in a topic*, be it a general topic like history or the arts, or a specific topic such as oil paintings or a particular city. As one Asian father put it, "To learn something new about Tacoma, because we're from nearby, so we want to learn about the local area." A Latina aunt answered that her main goal was "exposing [her niece] to different types of culture and art and [artistic] mediums."

Seventeen percent (n=6) of respondents wanted their young people to *learn broadly*, without naming a specific topic or expectation. An Asian mother put it this way: "I think they can learn more things when they come here. Learn more things and become more knowledgeable—that is my main purpose for them."

Eleven percent (n=4) named spending time together as their main hope for their children. One multi-racial caregiver stated, "I just think that oftentimes you just find a good time being here, doing something that's not considered sort of the normal thing that maybe younger people would do ... it's just neat to see more and learn more to be a part of it."

Finally, three families gave responses that were categorized as "Other." Two of those respondents spoke about the meta experience of attending museums to learn about museums: in the words of a Latino father, "seeing what's out there, what a museum is like—other artists, ideas, and getting some sense of what goes up in a museum." A Black adult figure expressed a similar idea, as she spoke about giving her young people "exposure and appreciation of the [cultural] resources we have." The third parent, an Asian mother, shared her hope of giving her child experiences she personally missed out on when she was young, "so that maybe it'll give [her child] a better chance for success, to learn."

## **How do families of color perceive that their motivations for visiting a museum are similar to and/or different from those of white families?**

### *Adult Perceptions of BIPOC Families' Visit Motivations*

In the final open-ended question, adult representatives were asked to consider whether families of color, families like theirs, might come to arts and culture museums for the same reason or different reasons than white families. Responses to this question laid out some perceived differences in the purpose a museum might serve for white families versus BIPOC families.

Six percent (n=2) of families said they were unsure or felt uncomfortable speculating about other people's intentions, "because I wouldn't know what to compare it to, because I don't know what [white families] come for." Twenty-nine percent (n=10) of families stated that they perceived no difference in the visit motivations between white families and families of color, saying that families' reasons for visiting are likely the same, irrespective of a family's racial or ethnic identity. A white/ Native American mother said, "I think it's the same reasons. To learn more about artists, to gain a better understanding of other people's perspectives." Or as an Asian father put it, "To go learn something, to go and hang out—you know, I think Black and white, it's the same reasons. I don't see any difference."

Among the sixty-six percent (n=23) of families who did perceive a difference in museum visit motivations between families of color and white families, three themes emerged: a) identity as motivation, b) narrative and representation, and c) lack of access. Twenty-six percent (n=9) of respondents shared how in their experience, families like theirs were more likely to attend events and exhibits that represented their heritage and culture. One participant described how identity was a driving factor for their family because while "white stories" – stories that centered the experiences of white people – were easily available, as a Black father "a lot of our history is in race, and some of it is histories of having no history. So, we go look for our history .... And you know, finding it wherever you can."

Twenty-three percent (n=8) of participants pointed to the different ways that white families and families of color might receive narratives and representations within museums. Adults spoke about a disconnect between museums' broad depictions of people who share their identities, and the way they want their young people to think of and

imagine themselves; noting that misrepresentations may cause BIPOC families to avoid such spaces. On the other hand, three participants talked about entering spaces that demonstrate erasure or misrepresentation and using those moments to spark conversations with their young people. One Black mother shared, for example: “I want my boys to see how history did not and did depict them in negative ways and how to process that now so that when they do end up—and they will, they have already – come across that negativity that they’ll be like, aha! You’re just perpetuating [stereotypes]!”

And finally, seventeen percent (n=6) expressed a difference in access to time, money, exposure or opportunity that prevents families of color from attending arts and culture museums. A Latina caregiver described it like this: “We just didn’t have a lot of exposure to this, and for families that are new to the country ... they don’t have time for that stuff, where I feel like white families are more established—this is what white families do on a Sunday.”

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe the motivations that bring BIPOC families to museums and to explore how families of color perceive that their motivations are similar to and/or different from those of white families. The following section discusses how the themes that emerged from participant’s responses resist and confirm larger trends in the literature, which have been previously described in literature about predominantly white audiences. The findings reflect elements of several existing frameworks for understanding visitor motivations; though no single framework captures the full breadth of motivations expressed in this study.

### **Learning: Broadly, Specifically, and About Oneself**

Wanting to learn was the largest motivation to emerge from this study. This finding is no surprise, as the literature strongly supports learning as a motivator for museum visitation (Hood, 1989; Moussouri, 1997; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). Packer (2006) found that a significant segment of visitors come to museums and cultural attractions to experience “learning for fun.” It is the process of learning, more so than the specifics of learning, that is important to these visitors. One family in this study, for example, spoke about how they hoped to “open [their child’s] mind— to try see other kinds of art, because she likes art herself, so being better exposed to all of that media.”

Themes about learning rose to the top in participants' responses whether they were asked about their top-of-mind motives, motives for their selves, or motives for their children. This reflected the findings of Moussouri's 1997 study, which categorized "education" in a widely encompassing way to include learning broadly, learning about specific topics, and having emotional or aesthetic experiences. To illustrate the last point, one person in this study who identified as Hispanic/Asian/Black shared that they were at the art museum, "because we just wanted to experience some art. We, me and my grandmother, we both love our artistic expression. My mom loves listening to music, which is also an artistic expression. We just like being enlightened by the artistry." In other frameworks for describing visitor motivations, this sub-category is pulled out and treated as its own entity. Free-choice learning researcher John Falk suggests a model for what he calls little "i" identities which are fluid, dynamic, and context-specific visitor motivations shaped by the needs and realities of a specific moment or situation (Falk, 2009). Within his model, the respondent who wants to be "enlightened by artistry" would be considered a Recharger, someone who is seeking a contemplative, spiritual, and/or restorative experience (Falk, 2011).

Within these data was a notable subset of responses that described wanting to facilitate learning experiences for younger family members. As one mother put it, "I didn't think of myself before I came here. I just wanted to bring my kids here to learn." While Moussouri's model for family motivations clusters these responses within the umbrella of "education," Falk's model describes these visitors as "Facilitators", those who are socially motivated and focused on enabling the experiences and learning of others (Bond & Falk, 2012, p. 435).

Another small, but notable, segment of families in this study described wanting to see something new and exciting. Whereas Moussouri's framework wraps this theme into "education," Falk's visit motivations might consider these visitors to be "Experience Seekers" who are satisfied by having 'been there, done that' (Falk, 2011).

### **Connecting with Heritage and Identity**

Another major motivation to emerge from this study was families' desire to connect with their heritage or identities. In his book *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, Falk (2009) states that "in the world of free-choice learning, learning is typically, if not primarily, for personal rather than public reasons and often strongly motivated by the needs of identity formation and reinforcement" (p. 60). Rounds (2006)

expounds on this idea by describing how museums can be used to do what he calls “identity work,” to reinforce or explore one’s identity. When visitors use museums for “identity maintenance” they seek out structures that align with their current identities and serve to strengthen those narratives; alternatively, when using the museum for “identity exploration,” visitors “try on” roles and explore content that is inconsistent with their current identities (Rounds, 2006, p. 144).

The desire to do identity maintenance is a divergence from Moussouri’s framework for family motivations. This centering of cultural identity in BIPOC families’ motivations – their hope to connect with some aspect of their identity or personhood – more closely aligns with a museum visit motivation described by Bond and Falk (2012) as “Community Seekers.” Participants described wanting to use the art, artifacts, and stories they found in museums as a tool to help their young people explore aspects of their selves and their and cultural legacies. During an intercept at the state history museum a Latino/white/Asian identifying mother visiting with a child who is trans shared that, “We’ve been here before, but there’s a new exhibit that particularly speaks to our family dynamics, which is learning about trans people in our region. So that’s pretty exciting. And so I’m just kind of hoping that my children will see that the world is becoming more inclusive to who they are.”

### **Seeking Entertainment**

Many families in this study also wanted to be entertained, to “get out of the house and experience some culture.” The emergence of this theme aligns well with the motivation models outlined by both Moussouri and Falk—Moussouri, whose description of this motivation is rooted in seeking leisure, and Falk, who captures such motivations under the label of Thrill Seekers (Falk et al., 1998). Within this subset, however, was an interesting cluster of responses that touched not only on the entertainment value of the venue but also the affordability of the experience. This theme lines up with Moussouri’s model (1997) which accounts for a variety of “practical reasons” for attending museums: external factors such as weather, proximity, timing, or entrance fees. As one family put it, they came “because it’s a free museum day and it was something fun and interesting to do for [their] family”. That these two motivations, seeking entertainment and practical affordability, were inextricably linked within this study’s findings reinforces Bond and Falk’s notion that motivations are not fixed or mutually exclusive (Bond & Falk, 2012, p. 436).

## **Spending Time Together**

Through this study's responses about desire to enjoy themselves, either separately or together, we see another one of Moussouri's (1997) motivations: what she calls "social event". The presence of this category also mirrors findings from several studies, including one from Jan Packer and Roy Ballentyne (2002), who described "social interaction" as a visit motivation.

## **What Wasn't Represented**

Moussouri (1997) suggested that families visit museums for six main reasons – place, education, lifecycle, social event, entertainment, and practical reasons. Of these motivations described by Moussouri, two items were either un- or underrepresented within this study: "Place," being related to a museum's status as a destination to be seen, and "Lifecycle," noting the importance of museum visits as experiences repeated or introduced at certain stages of life (Moussouri, 1997). Most families in this study were locals, not tourists, which may account for the absence of "Place" within these findings. Some families did, however, mention the "Lifecycle" aspect of museums—but to negate its relevance to their experience. While one participant specifically mentioned wanting to recreate experiences from her own youth for her daughter, it was more common that participants discussed a lack of museum-going in their youth. This topic is explored further in the following section.

## **Perceived Visit Motivation of BIPOC Families**

When sharing their perceptions of the visit motivations of BIPOC families and white families, most participants affirmed a perceived difference in visit motivations based on race or ethnicity. Families spoke of a) identity as a potential motivation, b) that there is a tension between BIPOC and museums' representations of them, and c) discussed a lack of access to cultural resources. Together, these three points captured both structural and intangible barriers to museum visitation (Bourque et al., 2014; Dawson, 2014; Melber, 2006). That families felt compelled to attend events and exhibits that reflect their racial and cultural identities was unsurprising; studies of BIPOC visitors' motivations have demonstrated the importance of designing and

marketing experiences that are intentionally created “by us, for us” (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; Stein et al., 2008).

Families’ discussions about narrative and representation circled around issues of erasure. Participants noticed the absence of histories and perspectives that they know to be true, but are overlooked by predominantly white institutions. One Black father spoke about how Black histories may not be found in museums partially due to the lack of written records. This is true for many communities, including Indigenous communities, who have relied on strong oral traditions to preserve and interpret the memories of participants in past events (Molenaar, 2020). But by overly valuing scholarly perspectives over community-based perspectives, museums may be practicing what Okun (2021) calls “worship of the written word” which is a characteristic of white supremacy culture. But as in this father’s example, a history’s value doesn’t lie in its written existence. Though his family’s history might feel elusive within those museum walls, to him it was worth gleaning what he could on a Saturday afternoon so that he could pay homage to it and share it with his children. Bond and Falk would call this type of visitor a “Respectful Pilgrim”—someone who visits with a sense of duty or obligation to honor the memory of those represented (Bond & Falk, 2012). One woman shared that “When I talk to friends about going [to exhibits that reflect us], it’s almost like a little pilgrimage. Like we find things, we find exhibits and shows to go to and we all kind of make it an event to go. So I don’t know if that’s the same motivation as [white people] because like, white culture is everywhere.”

Participants also spoke about a tension between BIPOC, the narratives seen on museum walls, and the accuracy of that representation. The existence of this problem has been documented in studies such as one by Fifi and Heller (2019) which found that museums may choose to deflect or avoid, rather than engage with the racial and cultural nuances of their content. This theme begins to speak to what Okun (2021) calls “objectivity”—the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or ‘neutral.’ Museums and their interpretation are often treated as neutral while privileging dominant Western ideals of race, class, and gender (Museum as Site for Social Action, 2017). This study’s findings show that museum visitors can take notice of the messages that underpin historical and cultural interpretation. Take, once again, the mother who shared how the representations of “Blackness” she sees on museums walls can be incongruent with her real-life experiences as a Black American woman. She spoke about how she uses art and artifacts to start conversations, creating a space where she and her son can reflect on larger themes around identity,

discrimination, and what it means to be a young Black person in America—like a practice round for spotting the perpetuation of white supremacy in society. This dissimilarity between depicted and lived experiences speaks to what Okun (2021) calls “denial”: the act of rewriting, reframing, or omitting histories to erase or downplay racism, which once again is a characteristic of white supremacy culture.

Additionally, several participants spoke about a perceived lack of access among BIPOC families. Participants described hindrances like high admissions costs, a lack of early exposure to museums, and a lack of leisure time during normal museum hours. This aligns with the findings of Embrick et. al (2019), who noted that museums may center whiteness through their management of access which favors those with wealth and leisure time. One family put it this way: “I guess the difference would be whether some of the Indigenous and other races, whether or not we have the time because we maybe be so busy working, especially on the weekends, too.” Another family, led by a Latina mom, pointed toward a misalignment between expectations of museum-going as leisure and cultural norms: “it wasn’t like one of the top things that we would do. It’s not that education isn’t important, but whenever we had a free day we would just spend time together and not really, like, educating ourselves more—just spending time with each other kind of things.” However, according to Dierking (n.d.) family learning isn’t limited to academic subjects but can encompass shifts in attitudes, values, beliefs, aesthetic understanding, psychomotor skills, and social or cultural dimensions. Regardless, this mother’s statement supports literature that calls for museum experiences which engage extended families and support family unity (Farrell et al., 2010).

## Implications

If arts and culture museums want to earnestly work toward creating inclusive spaces for BIPOC families, they must first take a critical look at the values and practices they apply every day. This study provides both practical and research implications for those institutions. First, this study reinforces learning as a motivation for all members of family groups, suggesting that parents’ interests should be supported alongside those of children. The findings also highlight the importance of providing experiences that fairly and accurately showcase narratives reflective of BIPOC communities. Thoughtful and nuanced representations of BIPOC communities—with discussions that look critically at social and historical contexts— may attract “Respectful Pilgrims” and “Community Seekers” to museums that might otherwise

be ignored. As one mother in this study put it, “We’re here explicitly because there’s a Black exhibit .... maybe with Black Lives Matter there’s more white folks who want to do that as well, but I can imagine if I were just white, you just come because you feel you belong at [this museum].”

This study’s findings also emphasize perceived disparities in access. It should be noted that this study’s author attempted to intercept BIPOC families across three sites over ten days, but the most fruitful days for data collection coincided with free or low-cost admission days. For many families, regardless of cultural identity, the cost of bringing a family to museums can be prohibitively high. Access programs that offer admissions discounts, admissions waivers, and extended hours can be a step toward greater inclusivity for families of all backgrounds and income brackets.

The work of this study only scrapes the surface about what brings BIPOC families into museums, how that might translate into a successful visit, and how those visits may lead to ongoing relationships with families. Possible next steps for this work might include a larger scale study across a broader geography that allows researchers to test the generalizability of these themes across cultures and regions. A larger dataset would also allow researchers to parse data according to ethnic or regional identities which would provide important nuanced understanding of the visit motivations for communities within their cultural context. There is much to be learned about the visit motivations of BIPOC families in arts and culture museums, and the specific motives may vary based on various factors—but this study may serve as inspiration and a reference point for museum researchers and practitioners who are examining their own institutions and wish to build inclusive museums for *all* families in their communities.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

*Thank you for participating! This interview should take 10-15 minutes to complete. There are no right or wrong answers, we just want to know about your motivations for visiting today. If you have questions about this interview or how your responses will be used, please reach out to [bonebrav@uw.edu](mailto:bonebrav@uw.edu).*

- 1. Why did you come to this museum today?**
  - a. What were you hoping to do?**
  - b. How did you decide that?**
  - c. Why does that matter to you?**

- 2. What did you expect to get out of your visit...**

- a. ... for yourself?**

- b. ... for the children or young people in your group?**

3. Why did you choose to come to this museum?

a. You mentioned wanting to do \_\_\_\_\_, but why did you choose this place to do it?

4. The following are possible reasons for visiting this museum. Please rank how important each was in your decision to come today on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 5 (extremely important).

<i><b>We visit(ed) this museum because....</b></i>	1 Not important at all	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Extremely important
... it is a good representation of the city or region we are in.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... it is important to learn about this subject, or to learn in general.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... I want to recreate experiences from my youth.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... I want to have a nice day out with family or friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... I want to have fun.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... it is a practical thing to do (ex: the weather, being close by, or having time).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



5. Today I'm talking to folks that are BIPOC- that is, Black, Indigenous, or people of color. As an industry, much of what we know about why families come to museums has been gathered from research with white families. Do you think BIPOC families visit museums like this for the same reasons or for different reasons than white families?

6. Including this visit, how many times have you visited this museum in the last 12 months?

While alone	_____
With other adult(s) only	_____
With child(ren)	_____

7. How many times have you visited other museums in the last 12 months?

Art museums	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> None
Children's museums	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> None
History museums	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> None
Science museums	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> None
Zoos & aquariums	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> None

8. Do you currently have a membership...

... at this museum?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
... at another museum?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No



## Demographics

The following questions are optional, but they help me to make sure I'm talking to a representative sample of people.

### About You

#### What is your age group?

- Under 18
- 18-24 years
- 25-34 years
- 35-44 years
- 45-54 years
- 55-64 years
- 65-74 years
- 75 and above

#### What was your highest level of formal schooling?

- Less than HS
- High school
- Some college
- Trade or vocational school
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

### About your group:

#### Who are you visiting with?

##### Check all that apply.

- Your parents
- Your children
- Your siblings
- Your grandchildren
- Your aunts/uncles
- Your nieces/nephews
- Your spouse/partner
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

#### What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Non-binary
- Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_

#### How do you self-identify? Check all that apply.

- White / Caucasian
- Hispanic / Latino
- Black / African American
- Asian / Asian American
- Native American
- Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to say

No. of children with you: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of adults with you  
(including yourself): \_\_\_\_\_

Which state do you live in? (ex: Texas, Maine, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B: List of Exhibitions Offered During the Data Collection Period

*Descriptions have been borrowed from online marketing materials and edited for brevity.*

Museum	Exhibit / Program	Brief Description
<b>Washington State History Museum</b>	Crossing Boundaries  <i>Temporary exhibit; Newly opened</i>	Highlights historical narratives of transgender people in the West and considers how westward migration provided opportunities for self-expression and fulfillment.
	Remembrance: The Legacy of Executive Order 9066 in Washington State  <i>Permanent exhibit; Newly opened</i>	Explores the legacy and intergenerational impacts of the incarceration of people of Japanese descent during World War II as a result of Executive Order 9066.
	Washington: My Home  <i>Permanent exhibit</i>	Explores migration and immigration through the experiences of diverse individuals who, over time, have come to live in Washington.
	Great Hall of Washington History  <i>Permanent exhibit</i>	Showcase of the state’s earliest history and a variety of artifacts from Native American civilizations and cultures.
<b>Frye Art Museum</b>	Art on the Mind: Ten Years of Creative Aging  <i>Temporary exhibit</i>	Features artwork from the Frye’s creative aging program participants, illustrating the success of arts engagement in bringing joy, respect, and dignity to those with dementia while destigmatizing the disease.
	Black Refractions: Highlights from the Studio Museum in Harlem  <i>Temporary exhibit</i>	Presents close to a century of creative achievements by artists of African descent. Celebrates the Studio Museum’s role as a site for dynamic exchange of ideas about art and society and proposes a plurality of narratives of Black artistic production and multiple approaches to understanding these works.

	<p>Unsettling Femininity: Selections from the Frye Art Museum Collection</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>Presents portrayals of mostly white women created during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily by German and Austrian artists organized around four primary themes – judgement, morality, performance, and artifice- and asks viewers to reconsider the very act of looking with all its positive and negative connotations.</p>
<b>Bellevue Arts Museum</b>	<p>Alden Mason: Fly Your Own Thing</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>The first comprehensive museum exhibition for Northwest artist Alden Mason since his passing in 2013.</p>
	<p>The Last Supper</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>800 plates illustrating final meals of US death row inmates invite meditation on capital punishment.</p>
	<p>COVID-19: Labor Camp Report</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>Ink drawings and hand-lettered text from the artists' daily practice of recording the thoughts, feelings, and change being wrought in the world during the first waves of the COVID-19 global pandemic.</p>
	<p>Pulped Under Pressure: The Art of Handmade Paper</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>Brings together a group of seven artists whose paper-based artwork underscores contemporary issues while remaining steeped in craft history. Themes include environmental crisis and global marginalization.</p>
	<p>Injustice Murals</p> <p><i>Temporary exhibit</i></p>	<p>Curated to amplify the shared compassion, pain, and love experienced by the community of Capitol Hill and city of Seattle during the Capitol Hill occupied protest.</p>