

MuseumsForward

A part of it: Understanding infrequent art museum visitors' feelings of belonging during their visits

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Abstract

For some visitors, a trip to a museum can be an intimidating experience. Feeling unwelcome, stripped of agency, or uninitiated by environments and experiences can have negative impacts on feelings of belonging. Belonging – a personal, emotional feeling of attachment or being “at home” – is tied closely to an individual’s emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. The purpose of this study was to understand infrequent art museum visitors’ feelings of belonging during their visit to an art museum. This study employed a descriptive survey design using semi-structured interviews conducted in-person at three large art museums in the US. One hundred and nine infrequent art museum visitors – defined as those who visited an art museum three or fewer times in the previous five years – were interviewed. Participants generally felt positive feelings of belonging across three dimensions: people-fit, place, and context. Participants pointed to two key factors that influenced their feelings of belonging, including connections, or conversely a lack of connections, with art based on their interests and identities, as well as positive or negative interactions with other guests and museum staff. The results of this study address belonging in museums in a new group – infrequent visitors – and add to what is known about infrequent visitors’ perceptions of and relationships with art museums.

Keywords

Belonging; art museums; infrequent museum visitors

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Introduction

For some visitors, a trip to a museum can be an intimidating experience. Encountering unwritten rules about visitor etiquette, difficult-to-understand labels, and confusing or inaccessible spaces are not unreasonable expectations (David, 1999). Other barriers, particularly for infrequent visitors, are a lack of time, personal interest, and money to visit museums (Lam, 2004). These experiences and barriers negatively impact visitors' perceptions of museums (Claudio, 2019). Art museums, in particular, are perhaps the guiltiest of creating unwelcoming environments. They are frequently seen as elitist, exclusionary institutions (David, 1999; Ellefson, 2020; Kluge-Pinsker & Stauffer, 2021). Their exhibits tend to use sparser written interpretation, more inaccessible language, and provide less choices for visitors to engage with the objects on display (Lenz Kothe, 2016).

Feeling unwelcome, stripped of agency, or uninitiated by environments and experiences can have negative impacts on feelings of belonging (Block, 2009; Carver, 1997). Belonging – a personal, emotional feeling of attachment or being “at home” and an external metric of exclusion or inclusion – is tied closely to an individual's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being (Antonsich, 2010; Lambert et al., 2013; Morris, 2021; Rubin et al., 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006). As art museums position themselves as spaces that can positively influence visitor well-being, belonging must be considered as a metric of well-being particularly for infrequent visitors, or those who don't regularly go to art museums (Falk, 2022). Infrequent visitors in particular value feeling comfortable in museum spaces and understanding their experience (Edwards et al., 1990). This article describes a research study designed to understand infrequent art museum visitors' feelings of belonging during visits to art museums.

Belonging

While the term has many proposed definitions, “belonging” may be defined as both a personal, emotional feeling of attachment or being “at home” and as an external metric of exclusion or inclusion (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Research indicates that feeling like you belong is a fundamental human motivation, seeking “affectively positive” social interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A person's

sense of belonging has important implications for their well-being and many other aspects of their lives.

Belonging and Wellbeing

Belonging is closely tied to mental health and emotional well-being. Broadly, a stronger sense of belonging correlates with a stronger perception of the meaningfulness of life. In a study of 644 subjects, researchers found that belonging could predict a sense of meaning; when participants responded in the affirmative to questions about whether they felt they had a place they belonged or people they belonged to, they also tended to respond positively to statements like “I understand my life’s meaning” (Lambert et al., 2013). In addition, the literature presents examples of belonging tied to metrics of well-being in more specific contexts. In a 2019 study of 190 Australian women, the lower their perceptions of sexism in the workplace, the better their mental health and job satisfaction; a lower sense of belonging was tied to lower job satisfaction and mental health (Rubin et al., 2019). A study of postgraduate masters and PhD students from a cross section of disciplines in several UK universities found that a greater sense of belonging to academic cultures and structures correlated with greater postgraduate well-being (Morris, 2021). For folks living in assisted living, a greater sense of belonging was correlated with fewer feelings of loneliness and depression (Park et al., 2020).

A sense of belonging is also tied to academic success (J. D. Edwards et al., 2022; Oyserman et al., 2006) and more positive physical health outcomes (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Even when accounting for academic preparation, chemistry students performed better on final exams with a greater sense of social belonging within their course (Edwards et al., 2022). For male students of color, fitting into their community was a protective factor for their academic performance (Oyserman et al., 2006). In a study where students received messaging about belonging, not only did GPAs rise but the number of doctor’s visits were reduced (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Conversely, a lower sense of school belonging can lead to greater academic stress (Abdollahi et al., 2020).

Factors Impacting Belonging

As previously explained, a sense of belonging can come from a personal feeling of fitting in as well as external mediators of inclusion. That is belonging may be impacted by a person’s context, their fit with the physical space or “place-belonging,” and their feeling of being

welcomed and accepted by the people around them or “people-fit” (Price & Applebaum, 2021). Context refers to a person’s identity within a broader social context. In order to feel a sense of belonging, individuals must feel as though they have a place within a larger community and agency in a space (Block, 2009; Carver, 1997). In a museum, context plays a large role in the visitor experience. The context of a person’s visit, such as their intentions for the visit or their identity, affects their museum experience (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Kelly, 2007). Place-belonging refers to a person’s connection or attachment to a space. This can mean both attachment to the physical space of a place like the layout, architecture, and aesthetics (Alawadhi et al., 2011; Glusac, 2015; Yousefi et al., 2017) as well as the history connected with it (Eckersley, 2017). Finally, people-fit refers to how well an individual feels they fit in with the people around them. Fitting in means feeling connected with other people in the space, welcomed, and valued (Antonsich, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2006; Pickering, 2010).

Art Museums and Belonging

Art museums are frequently seen as elitist, exclusionary institutions (David, 1999; Ellefson, 2020; Kluge-Pinsker & Stauffer, 2021). Casual museum visitors’ attitudes toward art and art history can be quite different from those of the museum professionals who interpret it. For example, in a study of New Zealand youths, their conception of contemporary art did not align with what curators, art professionals, and art historians may consider the “art gallery orthodoxy” (Mason & McCarthy, 2006). What’s more, art collections and interpretation practices tend to be culturally exclusive (Jensen, 2013). Those who are blind or visually impaired are generally met with exclusion at every turn in art museums due to their “ocularcentric orientation” (Candlin, 2003). High admission fees can be prohibitively expensive for some potential visitors while also creating a culture of classism (Small, 2023). Lenz Kothe describes several aspects of art museums space that she calls “anti-invitations,” including the “formidable entrance leading up to the hallowed halls of the museum,” the ever-present security and cameras, and the signs telling visitors “do not touch” and “no photography” (Lenz Kothe, 2016, p. 101).

Infrequent Visitors’ Perceptions of Museums

Visitor research generally divides museum visitors into three categories using a variety of labels to describe the groups: non-visitors,

infrequent/occasional visitors, and frequent visitors (Claudio, 2019; Hendon, 1990; Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017; Packer & Ballantyne, 2005). Non-visitors are those that never visit museums. In the literature, these individuals have been defined by their complete lack of museum visits in adulthood or self-identification as never visiting museums (Hendon, 1990; Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017). Frequent visitors have been identified in the literature as those that either self-describe as visiting museums often or meet some minimum metric of frequency, visiting several times per year (Mercier, 2017; Packer & Ballantyne, 2005). This study's focus is on the infrequent/occasional visitor, whose visiting frequency falls between a non-visitor and a frequent visitor. The bounds on visiting frequency that identify an infrequent visitor vary in the literature. However, generally these visitors visit one or fewer times per year or self-describe as visiting only occasionally (Claudio, 2019; Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017).

Non-visitors and infrequent museum visitors make up the majority of the United States population. In 2017, only 24% of the population visited a museum or art gallery (National Endowment for the Arts, 2019). Research indicates that frequent and infrequent museum visitors have differing attitudes towards museums (Brida et al., 2016; Hood, 1981; Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017). Frequent visitors are more likely to value museum visits as leisure time activities (Hood, 1981; Lam, 2004). However, infrequent visitors tend to rank museum visits as a much lower priority for a leisure activity when compared to activities like exercise, watching movies, reading, or listening to music (Lam, 2004). Infrequent visitors tend to prefer leisure activities that are entertaining or positively impact their wellbeing (Claudio, 2019).

Infrequent visitors to art museums still tend to have positive perceptions of the institutions themselves (Claudio, 2019; Lam, 2004). They generally view art museums as places for socializing, learning, and revitalization (Claudio, 2019). However, they also credit negative perceptions of museums with affecting their choice to visit (Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017). A lack of content that appeals to the infrequent visitor's personal interest is a large factor in their decision making (Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017). Additional barriers include a lack of information about the museum, a lack of free time, and financial barriers (Lam, 2004). Ultimately, infrequent visitors value feeling comfortable during their visit and feeling like they understood the museum's content (Edwards et al., 1990).

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand infrequent art museum visitors' feelings of belonging during visits to art museums. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do infrequent visitors experience feelings of belonging during their art museum visit?
2. What factors, if any, impact infrequent visitors' feelings of belonging during art museum visits?

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design using semi-structured interviews conducted in-person at three large art museums in the United States to understand infrequent art museum visitors' feelings of belonging during visits to art museums.

Sampling Strategy

Study participants were infrequent adult art museum visitors, defined as those who visited an art museum three or fewer times in the previous five years. The frequency criterion was chosen based on how infrequent visitors have been defined in the literature – generally visiting one or fewer times per year (Claudio, 2019). This criterion was modified to three visits in the past five years to account for the dip in museum visitation during to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling at three large art museums. Two of the sites were encyclopedic art museums in major cities in Colorado and Ohio. The third museum, located in a large city in Washington state, focuses on primarily Pacific Northwest and Western art. These museums were selected for the larger size of their visitorship, ranging from 57,000 to 685,000 visitors per year. Because participants meeting the infrequency criteria represented a subsection of the potential participant pool, maximizing the size of the participant pool was important. Indeed, although 368 people were approached and agreed to participate in the interview, only 30% (n=109) were determined to be eligible to continue the interview based on art museum visiting frequency.

Adult visitors were approached near the exit of each museum to ensure that they had already completed the majority of their museum

visit. Adults who agreed to participate in the study were then asked the filter question “Not including today, how many times have you visited an art museum in the previous five years?” to determine eligibility to continue their participation. Those who said they had visited more than three times were thanked and told that the interview would not continue. Those who said they had visited three or fewer times were then asked if they would be willing to participate and directed to a seating area to begin the interview.

Description of Sample

A total of 109 adults were interviewed. Over half identified as women (56%, n=61); 40% identified as men (n=43); 2% identified as non-binary (n=2); and 2% selected multiple gender identities (n=2). One person opted to self-describe with “he/she/they” (1%). Seventeen percent of participants (n=18) were 41-50 years old (n=18); 34% (n=37) were 18-30 years old (34%, n=37); 21% (n=23) were 31-50 years old; 20% (n=22) were 51-60 years old; and 7% of participants were 61 years or older (n=8). Three-quarters of participants identified as white (76%, n=82); 8% as African, African American, or Black (n=9); 6% (n=6) as Asian or Asian-American (n=6); 6% (n=6) as multiple races or ethnicities (n=6); and 5% (n=5) as Latina/o/x, Hispanic, or Chicano (n=5).

Two thirds of participants (63%, n=69) had never been to the art museum they were visiting at the time of data collection in the past five years. About one fifth of the participants (21%, n=23) had visited once in the last 5 years; 12% had visited twice (n=13); and 3% had visited three times (n=3). Twenty eight percent (n=30) had not been to *any* art museum in the past five years (n=30); 25% (n=27) had been to an art museum once in the past five years; 27% (n=29) had been to an art museum twice in the past five years; and 20% (n=22) had been to three art museums in the past five years.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted from February 15, 2024 through March 17, 2024. Once participants agreed to participate in the study and demonstrated that they met the study criteria, they were encouraged to sit for the interview. Interviews typically lasted 5 minutes in length, and involved three parts: i) Likert scale questions about their feelings of belonging during their museum visit, adapted from Price and Applebaum (2021); ii) open-ended questions about how participants defined belonging, and moments they felt like they did and did not

belong during their visit; and iii) demographic questions about participants themselves (see Appendix A for the interview guide). The researcher audio recorded interviews and used Otter.ai to transcribe them.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data across the three data collection sites were aggregated. Interview transcripts of the audio recordings were cleaned and edited for clarity. Responses to the three open-ended questions were analyzed using emergent coding in order to find themes across the responses. A coding rubric was developed and used to code these qualitative data (Appendix B). The mean for all ratings for each Likert scale statement was calculated, as well a mean rating for each dimension of belonging: people-fit, place, and context.

Results

To what extent do infrequent visitors experience feelings of belonging during their art museum visit?

Participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with 26 statements measuring their sense of belonging during their art museum visit. Statements measured belonging across three dimensions: a) people fit, b) place, and c) context (Price & Applebaum, 2021).

People fit

People fit describes the ways that people feel connected and welcomed as well as rejected and excluded; in short, the way they fit in (Price & Applebaum, 2021). Price and Applebaum's model proposes 11 statements to measure the ways in which people feel included and excluded in a museum (see Table 1). Study participants were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1-7, with one being "strongly disagree" and seven being "strongly agree." Table 1 shows the average ratings for each statement.

Table 1

Participants' ratings of people fit statements to indicate their feelings of belonging in the art museum (N=109)

Statement	Mean rating (1-7)
Because I did not belong there, I felt distant when surrounded by crowds	5.9
I felt isolated from everyone else at the museum	5.8
I felt I was not included in the activities of others at the museum	5.8
I did not feel like an outsider at the museum	5.6
When at the museum, I felt as if people cared about me	5.5
When I was with other guests, I did not feel like a stranger	5.5
I had a sense of belonging at the museum	5.2
I had a place at the table at the museum	4.8
I felt connected with other guests at the museum	4.0
I had bonds with other guests at the museum	3.7
Mean people fit belonging	5.2

Place

Place belongingness describes the ways that people feel attachment to physical space, historical context, and social environment of a place (Price & Applebaum, 2021). Price and Applebaum's model offers six statements to measure the ways in which people feel connected to the physical and psychological features of the museum space (see Table 2). Study participants were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1-7, with one being "strongly disagree" and seven being "strongly agree." Table 2 shows the average ratings for each statement.

Table 2

Participants' ratings of place statements to indicate their feelings of belonging in the art museum (N=109)

Statement	Mean rating (1-7)
I was fond of the museum	6.2
I felt connected to the museum	5.2
I felt like I belonged at the museum	5.2
When I was at the museum, I felt part of it	5.1
The museum made me feel like no other place can	4.9
The museum was designed for me	4.2
Mean place belonging	5.1

Context

Context fit refers to how a person's identity fits into their larger cultural context as well as the ways in which they feel agency in that context (Price & Applebaum, 2021). Price and Applebaum's model presents six statements to measure the ways in which people feel they fit into the cultural context of the museum as well as the ways in which they exercised agency (see Table 3). Study participants were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a scale from 1-7, with one being "strongly disagree" and seven being "strongly agree." Table 3 shows the average ratings for each statement.

Table 3

Participants' ratings of context statements to indicate their feelings of belonging in the art museum (N=109)

Statement	Mean rating (1-7)
I felt very comfortable at the museum as a person of my gender	6.1
I felt very comfortable at the museum as a person of my race and/or ethnicity	6.0

Table 3 (continued)

I could be myself here	5.9
The museum promoted an equal experience for people like me	5.6
Museum content reflected my community	4.8
My presence here mattered	4.8
Museum guests reflected my community	4.7
By being here, I made the museum a better place	4.4
I could help others have a better experience at the museum	4.1
Mean context belonging	5.2

What factors, if any, impact infrequent visitors' feelings of belonging during art museum visits?

Definitions of belonging

Study participants were asked to give their definition of the word "belonging." Responses were coded into six emergent categories. One third of participants defined belonging with reference to comfort and security (33%, n=36). One participant said, "I think it just means feeling comfortable and safe in an area to be yourself and not feel judged by others around you." A third of the participants used language related to inclusion and acceptance (32%, n=35). For example, a participant said belonging meant "just feeling you fit in somewhere." Another defined it as feeling "welcomed." Another major definition for belonging was tying the word to community or connections with others in a space (30%, n=33). For example, a visitor said, "To me belonging means that I feel connected to the people in the space that I'm in."

Many participants described belonging as feeling a part of something (28%, n=28). Most of these participants used the phrases "a part of it" or "a part of something." Other participants shared that belonging meant feeling like their interests and/or identity were represented in a space (12%, n=13). For example, one participant stated, "Belonging would be being somewhere where you're represented." Another said they feel belonging when they "feel like the topic matter is something that means something to [them]." Still other participants emphasized

feeling like their presence mattered as a definition for belonging (8%, n=9). For example, one participant shared, "Belonging means being seen. Being valued." While another said belonging means feeling like "you matter."

The remaining participants defined belonging in different ways (7%, n=8). These definitions included feeling like they could see themselves "growing...in the space" and "ownership."

Factors positively impacting belonging

Most participants (82%, n=90) were able to identify a moment during their visit when they felt like they belonged in the museum. Of those (n=90), responses were coded into four emergent categories describing what it was that prompted and/or contributed to that moment.

33% (n=30) said their feelings of belonging were prompted by seeing art they liked with subject matter or aesthetics that caused positive feelings like familiarity, beauty, and wonder. For example, one participant said they felt belonging when they "saw art [they] liked, and [they] wondered about how it was made." Another said they felt belonging when they saw "pieces of art that were either very calming or something [they were] familiar with."

33% (n=30) pointed to positive connections with others at the museum. Some felt connected to other guests and others had positive connections with museum staff. One participant said, "I could hear other people asking questions about the same kinds of things." Another participant described an experience that "in every single exhibit [they] went into, there was at least one person who asked [their] opinion about a piece." A participant who felt belonging due to positive staff interactions said, "The staff was very pleasant." Another said they felt belonging when they were "talking to the people that work [there]."

28% (n=25) attributed their feelings of belonging to specific art on the basis of their identity, most often their racial or gender identity. They appreciated seeing art that represented their heritage or lived experiences in the art museum. For example, one participant said, "It was when I went to the Latin American part, and I felt like the art there really told a story about my ancestors and whatnot." Another visitor who identified as Asian and trans said, "I definitely felt very seen [when the exhibit] talked about the experience of femininity and the abuse that they went through, and a lot of the perspectives of the Asian lens."

16% (n=15) described the factors that influenced their feelings of belonging in varying ways, such as appreciating kid-centered activities

for their children, enjoying the architecture of the building, and being able to contribute to an interactive installation.

Factors negatively impacting belonging

Most participants were unable to describe a moment when they felt they did not belong (56%, n=62), saying they didn't experience such a moment. One of these participants said, "No, I felt fine. I felt comfortable. Welcomed. It was a nice experience. I liked it." These words are nearly identical to all other participants that responded that they could recall no such moment.

Forty three percent (n=47) were able to recall a moment when they did not feel belonging. Of those (n=47), responses were coded into 5 categories.

36% (n=17) said they felt they did not belong when they encountered art they did not like or understand. These responses typically objected to the style or subject matter of an art piece. When asked to describe a moment when they did not feel belonging, one participant said, "Maybe just around some of the more modern art, it just doesn't feel like it fits me." Another said they did not feel belonging while viewing an immersive video installation saying, "We were just there very briefly, but it just wasn't our thing."

23% (n=11) felt they did not belong when they either encountered art that *did not* connect with their identity or did not find art that *did* connect with their identity. For example, one participant said they did not feel belonging "in the Asian art where [they] didn't really feel connected to it because it's not [their] heritage." A Black participant also said, "I probably would have maybe liked to...have seen more artwork...done by Black artists."

19% (n=9) pointed to negative interactions with other guests and staff as contributing to their feelings of not belonging in the museum. One participant said, "When I wanted to take a picture, and I had someone run up to me and tell me that I had to stay at least an arm's length away from the art." Another said, "It'd be a couple of people crowding and stuff and it feels a little bit awkward to try and walk up even though I kind of like looking over it all and discussing it and stuff."

14% (n=7) described their feelings of not belonging in other ways, such as feeling concerned that their child was being disruptive, having difficulty navigating the building, and disliking the commercial nature of the museum giftshop.

9% (n=4) said they felt like they did not belong in the museum when they and felt out of place as an art or art museum “outsider.” One participant explained, “I’m not like an artist per se, or that’s just not a personal strength of mine. So sometimes that part feels a little more disconnected.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand infrequent art museum visitors’ feelings of belonging during an art museum experience. Interviews with 109 infrequent visitors across three art museums in the United States surfaced several major findings which are discussed by research question.

To what extent do infrequent visitors experience feelings of belonging during their art museum visit?

This study supports and expands upon the findings of Price and Applebaum’s (2021) study of belonging in museum visitors by expanding the audience and types of cultural institutions in which belonging has been measured. Price and Applebaum’s (2021) study took place in a science museum and sampled guests with no filter for frequency. This study focused on infrequent visitors in art museums. However, both studies found similar themes in participants’ definitions of belonging as well as the positive ratings of belonging across people, place, and context. In general, infrequent art museum visitors tended to feel positive feelings of belonging during their visit. This was true in general as well as within each of the dimensions of belonging measured in Price and Applebaum’s instrument. Additionally, most participants were unable to pinpoint a moment when they did not feel belonging. These findings align with previous research that indicates infrequent art museum guests have generally positive perceptions of art museums (Claudio, 2019). However, Claudio’s study focused on perceptions of museums as places for socializing, learning, and revitalization. This study sheds further light on perceptions of art museums by infrequent visitors in respect to belonging.

What factors, if any, impact infrequent visitors' feelings of belonging during art museum visits?

Art-Interest & Identity Connections

For infrequent visitors, belonging in art museums appears to be heavily influenced by the experiences they have while viewing the art. Specifically, connecting with art based on interest or through some aspect of their identity were the largest categories of responses for factors that positively and negatively impacted belonging. This corroborates previous research that found that infrequent art museum visitors indicate that understanding museum content during their visit is a top priority (Edwards et al., 1990). Finding art that appealed to some personal characteristic – either a personal interest or their identity – aligns with the idea that infrequent visitors seek out experiences that they can understand. Previous research also indicates that infrequent visitors point to a lack of content that appeals to them as a reason for not visiting museums (Lam, 2004; Mercier, 2017). This could partially explain why an interest- or identity-based connection with art was the most salient factor positively impacting belonging among participants. A lack of connection to the art based on identity being a factor negatively impacting belonging in infrequent guests sheds further light on research that demonstrates a decrease in belonging when individuals do not have an identity in-group (Oyserman et al., 2006). Not only does a lack of representation of a visitor's identity in the people around them potentially detract from their experience, but the lack of their identity represented in the art they see can also negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Interestingly, despite the art-interest and art-identity connections representing the largest category of factors impacting belonging, participants defined belonging with identity or interest representation much less frequently. Again, the infrequent art museum visitor's strong motivation to feel like they understood the content may shed some light on why this more minor aspect of belonging became such an important factor impacting belonging in the specific context of an art museum (Edwards et al., 1990).

Interactions with Other Visitors and Staff

Another major factor impacting belonging both positively and negatively was interactions with other guests and to a lesser extent museum staff. Although participants indicated in the survey that they

did not feel bonds with other guests in the museum, they did feel included with other guests. The frequency of positive interactions with others as a factor impacting belonging supports much previous research that emphasizes people-fit or “fitting in” as an important dimension of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2006; Pickering, 2010; Price & Applebaum, 2021). However, the discrepancy between the agreement with feeling included with other guests and disagreement with feeling bonds with other guests may illustrate the ways in which art museums do not support holistic feelings of community for infrequent art museum visitors.

Implications

For Research

This research is significant to the body of literature around belonging in museums. It addresses belonging in museums in a new group – infrequent visitors – and adds to what is known about infrequent visitors’ perceptions of and relationships with art museums. One area of future study is examining feelings of belonging in infrequent BIPOC art museum visitors. The participant pool in this study was largely white (76%). Although the whiteness of this study’s sample aligns with general art museum visitorship trends, it may not reflect the potentially much more diverse population that fits the criteria of “infrequent art museum visitor” as defined by this study. Another related line of inquiry would be understanding feelings of belonging in infrequent visitors recruited in non-museum settings. This study was conducted to understand belonging *during* visits, and data collection was therefore done in situ at three art museums. This approach may have excluded potential participants who were even less frequent visitors or non-visitors all together. The next iteration of this research might intercept participants in an environment completely unrelated to museums to understand non-visitor feelings of belonging toward art museums.

Finally, this study was conducted in three large, urban art museums. While this study’s findings are illuminating for larger institutions, the same findings may not be true for a smaller or rural art museum. For example, findings related to place-belonging may be different between physically large museums in more urban settings as opposed to smaller museums in a less populated area. An additional area of future research could be to replicate this study in smaller museums in rural or suburban settings.

For Practice

The results of this study are also useful for museum practice. These findings can help art museum staff understand how to bolster belonging among infrequent guests, an audience that many museums are interested in reaching. A major finding in this study is that belonging in infrequent visitors is closely tied to the art viewing experience as it relates to the visitor's interests and identity. Belonging is most impacted by whether the art appeals to some interest of the visitor or relates to their lived experience. This has practical implications for museum staff curating new exhibits and developing interpretive content: curating art-viewing experiences that appeal to a diverse range of interests and identities.

Another major finding of this study was the weight of positive and negative impacts with other guests and staff. Infrequent visitors appreciated positive conversations with staff and communal art-viewing experiences with other guests. Conversely, feeling othered or followed by gallery staff and crowded by other visitors detracted from belonging. These findings may be instructive in the training of museum employees to enhance experiences of belonging for infrequent guests.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Filter

Q0: NOT including this visit, how many times have you visited an art museum in the past 5 years?

- If the respondent indicates more than three times, conclude the interview.
- If the respondent indicates three or fewer times, proceed with the interview.

Interview

Part 1

This interview has three parts. Part 1 involves answering these questions here, on this paper (hand them the belonging questionnaire). Take as long as you need, and then we'll move to part 2.

Part 2

Part 2 involves 3 questions. Are you okay if I record your responses to those questions?

Q1: What does the word "belonging" mean to you?

Q2: Describe a time during your visit when you felt like you belonged.

Q3: Describe a time during your visit when you felt like you did not belong.

Part 3

Finally, would you please complete this short questionnaire so that I know who I collected data from for this study. (Hand them the participant questionnaire.)

Thank you.

Belonging Survey

Thinking about your experience today, please respond to the prompts below.

	Strongly disagree			Neutral			Strongly agree
When I was with other guests, I felt included.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I had bonds with other guests at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I had a sense of belonging at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I had a place at the table at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt connected with other guests at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt like an outsider at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When at the museum, I felt as if people did not care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Because I did not belong there, I felt distant when surrounded by crowds.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt isolated from everyone else at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When I was with other guests, I felt like a stranger.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt like I was not included in the activities of others at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thinking about your experience today, please respond to the prompts below.

	Strongly disagree			Neutral			Strongly agree
I felt connected to the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

When I was at the museum, I felt part of it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt like I belonged at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I was fond of the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The museum made me feel like no other place can.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The museum was designed for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thinking about your experience today, please respond to the prompts below.

	Strongly disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree		
The museum promoted an equal experience for people like me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Museum guests reflected my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Museum content reflected my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt very comfortable at the museum as a person of my gender.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I felt very comfortable at the museum as a person of my race and/or ethnicity.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I could be myself here.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I could help others have a better experience at the museum.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
By being here, I made the museum a better place.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My presence here mattered.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Demographics Survey

1. Not counting today, how many times have you been to this museum in the last 5 years?

2. Not counting today, how many times have you been to any art museum in the last 5 years?

3. In what year were you born? _____

4. Which of these options best describes your gender identity? Check all that apply.
 Woman Man
 Non-binary Transgender
 Prefer to self-describe: _____

5. Which of these options best describes your race/ethnicity? Check all that apply.
 African/African American/Black
 Native American/American Indian
 Asian/Asian-American
 Latinx/Latina/Latino/Hispanic/Chicano
 Middle Eastern/Arab/Arab American
 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
 White/Caucasian
 Prefer to self-describe: _____

6. Who are you visiting the museum with today?
 Alone Group, adults and kids
 Group, all adults Other: _____

Appendix B

Coding Rubric

Q1: What does the word "belonging" mean to you?

Code Name	Code Description	Examples
Inclusion/Acceptance	Described feeling included and accepted	"Just feeling you fit in somewhere." "A part of. Included."
Comfort/Security	Used words to describe feeling comfortable, safe, and at ease existing in a space	"That I feel comfortable in a place I guess." "I think it just means feeling comfortable and safe in an area to be yourself and not feel judged by others around you."
Community/People Connection	Described feeling connection to others in a space	"I guess just like a sense of like connection and community to things." "To me belonging means that I feel connected to the people in the space that I'm in."
Identity/Interest Representation	Described feeling like they see some aspect of their identity represented in a space, like gender, race, ethnicity, cultural values, etc.; This can be in reference to other people as well as subject matter.	"Belonging would be being somewhere where you're represented..." "You feel like the topic matter is something that means something to you"
A part of something	Describing feeling like they were part of something; used the phrase "a part of something" or "a part of it"	"Like you're a part of something"
Presence Mattering	Described feeling like their presence mattered/was valued in a space	"I think just feeling...like you matter" "Belonging means being seen. Being valued."

Other	Any descriptions of belonging that do not fit into the other categories	"Ownership"
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Q2: Can you describe a moment during your visit today when you felt belonging?

Code Name	Code Description	Examples
Art-Identity Connection	Described encountering art that they connected with based on some aspect of their identity	"It was when I went to the Latin American part, and I felt like the art there really told a story about my ancestors and whatnot."
Art-Interest Connection	Described encountering art that they liked and prompted positive feelings in them like beauty, wonder, and familiarity.	"When I saw art I liked and I wondered about how it was made." "I would say when I would see pieces of art that were either very calming or something I was familiar with."
Positive Guest/Staff Connections	Described positive interactions with other guests and staff including conversations, greetings, etc.	"Talking to the people that work here." "I could hear other people asking questions about the same kinds of things."
No Moment of Belonging	Could not describe a moment of feeling like they belonged	"Not really. I guess I felt like more I was just a participant rather than I belong here."
Other	Any descriptions moments of belonging that do not fit into the other categories	"It was when I went to the Latin American part, and I felt like the art there really told a story about my ancestors and whatnot."

Q3: Can you describe a moment during your visit today when you did not feel belonging?

Code Name	Code Description	Examples
No Moment of No Belonging	Could not describe a moment of feeling like they did not belong	"No, I felt fine. I felt comfortable. Welcomed. It was a nice experience. I liked it."
Art-Interest Disconnect	Described encountering art that they did not like or did not understand	"The movie. The immersion one. We were just there very briefly, but it just wasn't our thing." "Maybe just around some of the more modern art, it just doesn't feel like it fits me."
Art-Identity Disconnect	Described encountering art that they DID NOT connect with on the basis of some aspect of their identity OR not encountering art that they DID connect with on the basis of some aspect of the identity	"Maybe in the Asian art where I didn't really feel really connected to it because it's not my heritage." "I probably would have maybe like to maybe seen more artwork maybe done by Black artists."
Non-Art Identity	Described themselves as not the type of person who visits are museums and feeling a lack of belonging because of this	"I guess when I heard other people talking about art, I don't know if I didn't understand it." "I'm not like an artist per se. Or that's just not a personal strength of mine. So sometimes that part feels a little more disconnected."
Negative Interactions with Guests/Staff	Described interactions with other guests or museum staff that made them feel othered, harassed, or disturbed their museum experience	"When I wanted to take a picture and I had someone run up to me and tell me that I had to stay at least an arm's length away from the art." "Some of them, it'd be a couple of people crowding and stuff and it feels a little bit awkward to try and walk up and even though I kind

		of like looking over it all discussing it and stuff."
Other	Any descriptions moments of not belonging that do not fit into the other categories	