

Understanding the Impact and Potential of Museum Stores

— A Critical Analysis for Bainbridge Island Museum of Art

Sihan Wang | Museology Graduate Program | sihanw4@uw.edu

Committee Group: Angelina Ong (Chair), Brecca Farr, Ph. D., Korum Bischoff



Definition of Museum Stores

The museum store is a retail environment that is a part of the museum's organizational construction. It supports the organization's mission, offers the retail sale of merchandise to its visitors or other shoppers, and educates them through the products (Farr, 2000; Hata, 2019; Shapley, 2011).

Background

As public sectors and private foundation funding for museums began to decline in the 1980s and further in the 1990s, museums were forced to find other funding sources (Farr, 2000; Kovach, 2014). It was during this time that museums established or expanded their retail presences (Farr, 2000). Today, U.S. museum stores account for 8% of organizational income (Shapley, 2011).

Not all museum stores perfectly maximize their opportunities to generate revenue, the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art (BIMA) is an exceptional example. BIMA considers supporting artists from the Puget Sound region to fulfill the museum's mission as its store's priority, and the store put less effort into revenue generating. As a result, BIMA is trying to understand the revenue opportunity of its store.



A view from the entrance of BIMA's museum store, the photo is credited to the researcher.

Purpose

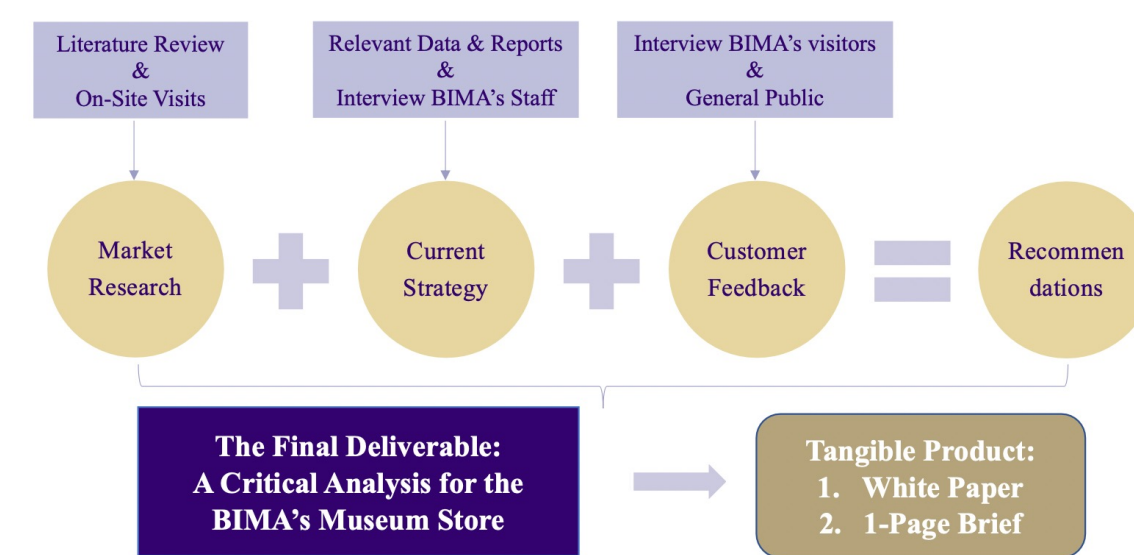
The purpose of this project is to help Bainbridge Island Museum of Art conduct a critical analysis of its store's potential by combining literature and research into field-wide practices with an examination of its current impact and reach.

References

- [1] Farr, B. R. (2000). Museum stores: *Curators and marketers of culture* (Publication No. 12682). [Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University]. Iowa State University Digital Repository.
- [2] Hata, S. (2019, November 4). *How Museum Stores Support Their Institutions and the Public*. American Alliance of Museums. <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/11/04/how-museum-stores-support-their-institutions-and-the-public/>
- [3] Kovach, S. D. (2014). *Developing the Museum Experience: Retailing in American Museums, 1945-91*. *Museum History Journal*, 7:1, 103-121, DOI: 10.1179/1936981613Z.00000000024.
- [4] Shapley, H. (2011). *Exhibit A: The Museum Store*. Gift Shop Plus. https://giftshopmag.com/article/exhibit_a_the_museum_store/

Process

By combining market research, the analysis of current strategy, and interview feedback from BIMA and non-BIMA visitors, the analysis ends with recommendations for BIMA's store.



Market Research

It was important to establish what was known about museum stores objectively, through literature, and directly through on-site visits.

> Literature Review

- ✓ **Merchandise**
 - The uniqueness and quality of the store items are two primary factors in the success of museum stores (Farr, 2000).
- ✓ **Staffing**
 - Good museum store staff have 3 essential characteristics (Farr, 2000; Shapley, 2011):
 1. Being excited about their institutions and able to share this excitement with visitors;
 2. It is all museum staff's responsibility to know what is going on in the museum, including collection, exhibition, and their rotation;
 3. Keep in mind the museum's mission and the goals of its store.
 - The courtesy of the museum store's staff and volunteers is a critical component of visitors' overall satisfaction.

> Bainbridge Island On-site Visits

- ✓ **Location**
 - Two traffic lights in front of BIMA affect people's decision to visit BIMA first or later.
- ✓ **Display & Staffing**
 - Most stores on Bainbridge Island display products well and have good interaction between their staff and visitors to attract more passers-by to visit and shop.



Two stores' outdoor decorations on the Bainbridge Island, photos are credited to the researcher.

Current Strategy

It was necessary to know the current and the past efforts of BIMA's store to make the final recommendations more appropriate and practical to the situation of BIMA's store.

> BIMA Store's Major Objectives

From the current strategy, BIMA's store supports Puget Sound artists and fulfills the museum's mission by selling products designed by these artists. Meanwhile, BIMA views its store as an extension of the museum visiting experience, and uses the profits earned from the store to balance the overall revenue and expense.

> Current Challenges

70%-80% of the store products are designed by Puget Sound artists, and the store always features the same artists, which makes the style of the store products monotonous. In addition, a large number of goods are piled up on display, resulting in a crowded store environment with fewer eye-catching highlights. Moreover, even though the store's primary purpose is to support local artists, it might be because of the lack of specific signages, most customers do not know the design concepts of these products when they shop at the store.

Furthermore, due to the constant shifts and high staff turnover, the museum staff seem not to be aware of what contributions they need to make or can make to the store except for the cashier.

Customer Feedback

It was essential to understand the museum store customers' needs and wants for precisely improving the shopping desires of the store's customers and potential customers.

> Data Sources

This section involved personal observation and semi-structured interviews conducted with 28 people representing BIMA visitors and the general public. For the result, interviewees were divided into 2 groups – BIMA visitors (n=20) and non-BIMA visitors (n=8).

> Reasons for shopping at BIMA's Store

- 2 BIMA visitors were shopping for remembering their museum visiting experiences.

> Reasons for not Shopping at BIMA's store

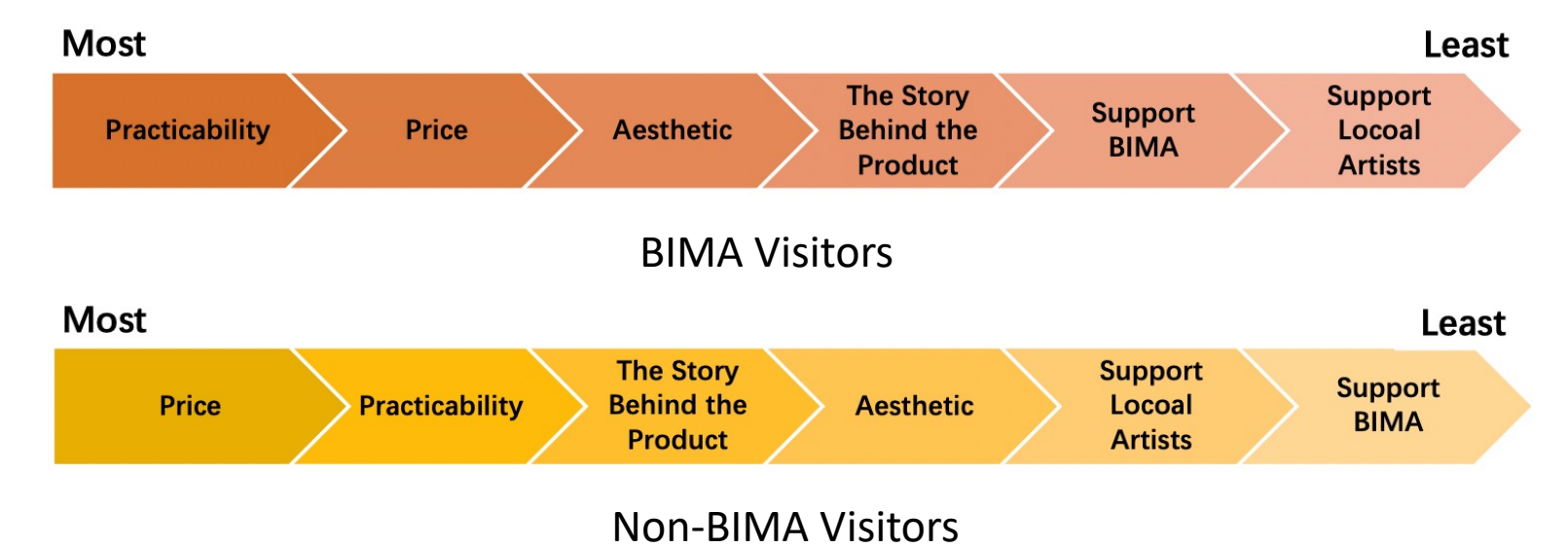
- 5 BIMA visitors thought the prices were higher than their expectations, and 2 non-BIMA visitors believed that museum store items were high-end, and most items were more expensive than retail stores.
- 13 BIMA visitors pointed out that there were not so many choices in BIMA's own designs.
- 3 non-BIMA visitors expressed that the store could not be easily recognized by passersby.

> Shopping Budgets for Shopping at Museum Stores

Most of the BIMA visitors' budget range was between \$30-\$50, while non-BIMA visitors' budget range was between \$10-\$30.

> Barriers to Purchase

The researcher developed 6 concerns with BIMA to let interviewees rank: *Price, Aesthetic, Practicability, the Story behind the Product, Support BIMA Financially, and Support Local Artists Financially.*



Recommendations

The final recommendations for BIMA's store were drafted out from 4 aspects – **collaboration, staff, merchandise, and display.**

Currently, BIMA is interested in:

- **Staff Training:** update the content of staff training to improve customer service.
- **Display:** 1) Provide more opportunities to allow the store shoppers to understand the stories behind the items; 2) Design elaborate displays to provide a sense of freshness to the shoppers and highlight some products; 3) Utilize the store's window to attract passersby's attention.

This project suggests:

- **Merchandise:** Provide unique merchandise by 1) developing BIMA's own product line, and 2) offering personalized services.
- **Outdoor Display:** BIMA should consider designing outdoor displays to draw more passersby's curiosity and attention during the holidays. This could potentially attract more visitors to BIMA.

Next Steps

- There were limited resources and literature about museum stores. Future studies could consider adding more case studies, including related industries, such as theme parks, aquariums, etc.
- As BIMA has not defined its target audience yet, the museum should prioritize identifying the group to develop the store strategy and provide more customized experiences.
- BIMA should continue conducting interviews to understand the needs and preferences of diverse communities. The responding demographic will also change when interviews are conducted at different periods. For example, BIMA can reach younger customers, such as Millennials, during holidays.