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The Latino Experience in Museums: An Exploratory Audience Research Study

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INTRODUCTION

The fast growth of the Latino population in the United States is a well-known fact, but most museums acknowledge that this growth is not reflected among their audiences. According to the National Endowment for the Arts's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA, the nation's largest population survey of arts participation trends), cultural participation among Latinos is slowly growing. For example, the 2013 SPPA report shows that 14.5% of adults who visited an art museum identify as Latinos—an increase of just 0.2% from the 2008 report. Even though there are many general demographic studies about the participation of Latinos and other minority groups in museums and the arts (SPPA/NEA, 2013; Farrell, B. & Medvedeva, M., 2010; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2008), there are few studies that focus specifically on the perceptions, motivations, and values of this population associated with museums and other cultural institutions (Betancourt, 2012; MPAC, 2008). Contemporanea's primary motivation in conducting this study is to contribute to the field of museums and cultural institutions by deepening the discussion of audience diversification.

An in-depth understanding of the Latino experience in museums can help provide institutions with the foundation for strategic planning that supports long-term sustainability. This exploratory research study attempts to understand the drivers of engagement and the underlying factors that permeate the experience of Latinos at museums—any type of museum—with the goal of helping organizations to design experiences that are engaging and relevant for this important growing population¹. While there are important distinctions among the different types of museums that need to be considered, our analysis focuses on commonalities and shared insights. Additional research and analysis may be useful in building on this research and highlighting those differences. Furthermore, while this study focuses on museums, its implications are broader in reach and likely relevant for the cultural participation field in general.

¹ For the purposes of this study, we do not include Latino or other culturally specific museums in the scope of this research.

METHODOLOGY

1. Six focus groups among self-identified Latino respondents were conducted in California. A total of 50 participants were divided into two main categories:

- Spanish dominant – limited or no English fluency (sessions conducted in Spanish with 28 participants)
- Bilingual – different levels of Spanish fluency, from conversational to fully bilingual (sessions conducted in English with 22 participants)

All respondents represent head of household, the majority with children and/or grandchildren under 18 years old living at home. The respondent pool includes a mix of education and income levels; urban, suburban, and rural residencies; and countries of origin representative of the total Latino population. Most respondents (75%) were foreign born, while the rest were born in the United States. All participants had visited at least one museum (of any type) at least once in the 12 months prior to the interview date.

2. An online survey was conducted with self-identified Latino residents of California (224 respondents). Respondents selected their preferred questionnaire language, with 58.9% responding in English and 41.1% in Spanish. A mix of income and education levels participated, and all had visited a museum of some type in the previous year. A convenience sampling approach was used in accordance with the exploratory objectives of the study.

For the purposes of this report, respondents are divided in two main segments: low acculturation and high acculturation². The level of acculturation was based on language preference (Spanish dominant and bilingual); place of birth (U.S. born and foreign born); education and socioeconomic levels; and (for the foreign born) number of years living in the United States. This segmentation approach is commonly used in corporate-sector market research studies, and provides a base for an analysis of the evolution of attitudes over time.

² Acculturation refers to the process of acquiring a second culture, while maintaining the original one.

MAIN FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results herein are presented in three sections. The first looks into the signals of inclusion provided by a museum that make Latinos feel welcome. The second explores the motivations and drivers of participation among Latinos, including desired experiences and the dynamic impact of acculturation. The third section outlines perceptions and real-world experiences that inhibit engagement, and identifies immediate areas of opportunity for museums seeking to engage Latino audiences.

1. Signals of Inclusion and Acknowledgement

This study explores aspects of museum participation among Latinos and offers numerous insights on their participation drivers and barriers. A pervasive theme woven throughout respondent feedback, including that related to driver and barrier insights, was the delivery (or lack thereof) of overt signals of inclusion that speak directly to Latinos. The presence or absence of these signals in many ways amplifies or inhibits their experience and directly shapes their perceptions of value. Therefore, due to their importance, these signals are provided first to give context to themes presented in the remainder of this report.

In this research, respondents articulated ways in which museums can welcome and include potential Latino visitors. Without exception, the two most important factors that convey inclusion are:

- A diverse staff that “looks like us” in language, appearance, cultural identity, values, etc.
- The use of Spanish language communications

Of these two, the first is considered by far the most important. Participants reported wanting to see other Latinos working at museums, “...but not only as janitors.” Personnel who interact directly with visitors are critical for newcomers because they can help decode the experience, convey behavioral expectations, highlight available resources, and otherwise create a comfortable experience. In addition to seeing Latino staff included in visitor services, respondents would like to

see them included in the planning of exhibits and programs, actively contributing a Latino perspective as curators and advisors. This research implies that museums integrating Latino staff throughout more levels and functions of the organization can make large strides in delivering programming and experiences that are valued by Latino visitors.

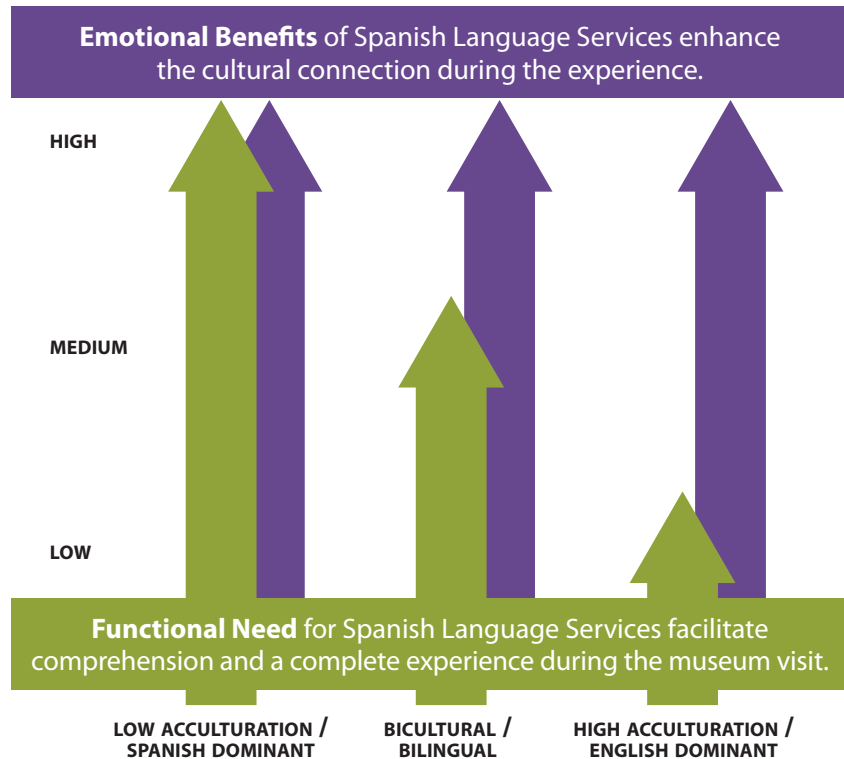
The presence of Spanish-language communications is considered critical, not only to support comprehension of the exhibits or programs (a functional need), but also to create an emotional connection. Low-acculturation respondents frequently mentioned feeling more comfortable reading labels and panels in Spanish and cited largely functional benefits. High-acculturation and bilingual respondents mentioned more emotional reasons, including the concern that Spanish-dominant family members also enjoy the visit. In essence, museums can immediately leverage the use of Spanish-language communications in marketing and interpretation to signal inclusion and cultural relevance to Latinos of all acculturation levels.

2. Drivers of Museum Participation among Latinos

2.1 An Educational Experience

The role of museums as educational institutions is well established among this sample of Latinos. Respondents refer to them as places:

- Worth visiting
- To discover new things to learn
- To learn in a fun or entertaining way
- To explore the cultural and scientific heritage of different people
- To appreciate art and artifacts from people and cultures around the world
- To learn about the past and its connections to the present
- To teach children about their own or other people’s heritage and traditions
- Where individuals can come together, leave behind societal labels, and simply appreciate the beauty and inspiration of art



The benefit of a museum visit is strongly connected to education, though this perception is nuanced by the presence of children in the home. Respondents with no children at home are more focused on their own individual experiences, specifically that of having a meaningful and enjoyable visit and sharing it with their friends or family. Conversely, respondents with children living at home tend to prioritize benefits for the children over their own. For these parents, the role and impact of the museum or specific exhibit on child growth and education is the most important consideration.

Latinos in this study specify that, in addition to being educational, the experience must be enjoyable for the entire party and not solely for the children because visitor groups are often multi-generational and include extended family and friends. While the entertainment value of the experience is clearly not the primary reason for attendance, it is regarded as an important component, an engagement driver, and an underlying prerequisite for attendance.

2.2 An Experience of Connection

In this study, we identified a certain connecting function that museums fulfill for Latinos, which may be better explained using the concepts of bonding and bridging. As Robert Putman defined in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), “bonding” refers to the value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people. “Bridging” refers to that of social networks between socially heterogeneous groups.

Bonding. One of the most powerful experiences at museums for our respondents is related to the connection they feel to their native cultures through culturally specific programs and exhibits. Many indicate that their interest in attending a museum was initially sparked by a particular exhibit related to their own culture (cherished Día de los Muertos celebrations were mentioned most often). The interest in and attraction for these types of exhibits and programs lies primarily in the connection that respondents feel to their own traditions and heritage (and the associated nostalgia), but also in the desire to pass these cultural values to

their children. They are endeavoring to teach their children not only the particulars of the content, but also the value of pride in their own heritage and traditions. Museums that make these programs available provide an additional type of validation and reinforcement of the importance of that heritage. While central for all respondents, the desire for bonding experiences was most pronounced among less-acclimated Latinos.

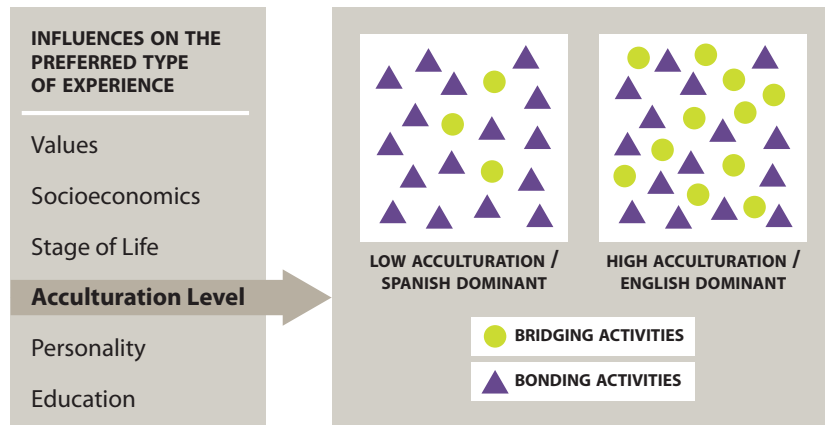
Bridging. Many respondents in the study expressed interest in programs and exhibits that extend beyond Latino subjects, and felt resentment when museums limited outreach efforts to Latino-specific programs or exhibits. Clearly there is an underlying desire for a more expansive (bridging) experience in those cases. *“Monet is also part of my experience, because we are also European,”* one respondent explained. More acculturated respondents feel that a dichotomy exists between being American and being Latino, but they embrace both with equal enthusiasm. While connecting with “other cultures” most often implies American White (non-Latino) culture and traditions, respondents indicate an appreciation of the many cultures they encounter in their daily lives and an interest in learning more about them.

Study results suggest that the preference for bonding versus bridging experiences may be linked to the accul-

turation level of the Latino visitor, in that less-acclimated Latinos tend to prefer culturally specific programs and exhibits that are targeted directly to them. However, acculturation is not the only variable at play. Respondent comments suggest that the desire for bonding or bridging experiences may be dynamic in nature and further influenced by life stage, socioeconomic and education level, personality traits, and personal values. What is perhaps most interesting is that people tend to find affinity with likeminded individuals, creating social networks based on these factors and developing a shared approach to cultural participation. As these networks grow larger, they become real communities. As one respondent explained: *“We went [to a museum] because my friend who’s been here longer than I said it was a good thing for us.”* Museums should be aware of these networks, understand how they form and operate, and learn how to connect with them. This could be one of the most important and effective engagement strategies for diversity that a museum could pursue, as it leverages and reinforces valued social connections.

Understanding cultural participation as a function of a particular community’s interest in either bonding or bridging experiences should ultimately prove useful in the planning and execution of programs, exhibits, and

Acculturation is one of the important influences on the preferred type of experience.



communications. A single exhibit might generate significantly different levels of interest, participation, and impact depending on visitor objectives, which could encompass fostering intimacy with their own culture as well as seeking understanding and connection with other people and cultures.

2.3 An Experience of Inclusion

Our findings indicate that the perceived value of bonding and bridging experiences is amplified by an organization’s ability to create an inclusive experience. There is a strong desire for institutional acknowledgment and welcome of the Latino visitor.

The *preliminary release of findings* for this study presented two psychographic clusters based on the needs that respondents associated with their cultural identity and the role of museums in their lives. These two clusters were based on:

- Cluster A – the need to be identified as Latino by the museum with which they are engaging: *“As a Latina, there is no recognition of my culture at the main museums.”*

- Cluster B – the need to be acknowledged as a regular museum-goer without any classification: *“The good thing about being in a museum is that you can leave behind the labels that we assign to each other and enjoy art together as human beings.”*

During preliminary analysis, these seemingly different attitudes surfaced as a potential basis for a segmentation model for engaging Latinos. Cluster A Latinos appear to prioritize bonding experiences and culturally relevant programs and exhibits. Cluster B respondents appreciate these culturally relevant experiences, but gravitate towards bridging experiences as a key value of museums.

As data was further collected and analyzed, initial assumptions were questioned. It became increasingly apparent that these two needs might not be mutually exclusive. In fact, the report asserts that these needs may exist as part of the same spectrum—a phenomenon identified here as *the Latino Paradox*. Findings indicate that Latinos want to be acknowledged as such by museums, but not singled out as different from any



other visitor. Initially, this may seem contradictory and mutually exclusive, but for bicultural Latinos this perspective is natural and mirrors their day-to-day experience. Many respondents reported being regular Americans, just like everybody else. **At the same time**, they feel they are different from the rest of the population. To paraphrase respondents: “I am Latino and different from the rest of Americans, and I am American and the same as everybody else.” What seems paradoxical is actually a normal way of life.

In practical terms, what this means for an engagement strategy is that the Latino visitor expects and desires an experience that feels inclusive in the broadest sense of the word, and he or she simultaneously expects and demands to be treated just like any other visitor. Stated in another way, this means offering Latinos the culturally specific services and acknowledgement that will provide them with the same or comparable visitor experience that other groups enjoy. Delivering this nuanced experience in an organic, authentic way may depend on the extent to which the organization’s staff mirrors the demographic reality of its community.

Most respondents mentioned that when they are making the decision to visit a museum, there is virtually nothing that makes them feel invited or speaks directly to them as Latinos. There is no advertising or publicity directed to them that reflects their experience. Most respondents agree that, with the exception of culturally specific exhibits or programs that are by nature temporary, there is very little at a museum that inspires them to connect with their ethnic and cultural identity. Latinos are looking for indications that a museum is open and willing to engage with all facets of their identity. This helps illustrate why Spanish-language communications and Latino staff are such critical, yet missing, signals of inclusion.

3. Inhibitors of Engagement

This study reveals a large number of factors that currently inhibit Latino participation and engagement with museums, many of which intersect and compound each other. While some of the most persistent and challenging obstacles are perceptual (beliefs and

assumptions), others are tangible and directly experienced, and represent immediate opportunities to strengthen engagement.

3.1 Perceptions of exclusion

While museums are broadly acknowledged as educational institutions, the *personal* relevance and importance of these institutions has not been established for many Latinos in this study. Evidence of personal detachment is apparent in their descriptions of museums as:

- For white [non-Latino] people
- For Americans (as opposed to “minorities” or people of color)
- For people “with money”
- Places in which they feel discriminated against based on their appearance, and their socioeconomic status
- Places that are not for them
- Places that are behind in making them feel welcomed and included, even respected
- Places that do not provide services that fulfill their needs
- Places that look at them only when they have a “Latino exhibit” and forget them the rest of the time
- Places where everything is expensive
- Places that are boring

It is important to clarify that these perceptions and the overall participation in museums varies by level of acculturation. Low acculturation respondents tend to see museums as places where they do not belong. High acculturation respondents tend to perceive themselves as active participants (even though actual participation might be low). Some of these differences are linked to perceptions of status, in that some respondents believe museums are places for “rich people,” “White [non-Latino] people,” or “other people.” Some acculturated Latinos tend to see these descriptions as evidence of self-exclusion, lack of familiarity, or ignorance of the behavioral code expected at these types of venues. They also tend to see themselves as more adapted to U.S.

culture and willing to take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

Regardless of their participation level with museums, respondents are universally and keenly aware of the lack of diversity at both the staff and board levels. As a key driver of engagement, the absence of Latino and multicultural staff not only impacts respondents' on-site experience, but also reinforces their perceptions of museums as being for White (non-Latino) or wealthy people.

Among the more acculturated sample in our study—regardless of the content of exhibits and programs—there exists a perception that museums have a strong point of view that is Euro-centric. This is particularly problematic when the exhibit is focused on a Latin American culture and is curated by a non-Latino person, since the implication is that there are no Latinos capable of curating such an exhibit. This perception, although most pronounced in art exhibits, is prevalent across museum types: art, history, science, technology or a combination of these.

3.2 Lack of familiarity

Potentially more influential than level of acculturation is the respondents' background familiarity with museums, specifically childhood experiences with their families. One of the most important factors associated with active participation in museums as an adult appears to be a person's own experiences and familiarity with museums as a child, regardless of his or her education, income level, or birth place. Respondents with experience visiting museums in their own countries of origin felt more at ease with visiting museums in the U. S., while those with no experience far more often attributed their lack of participation to both real and perceived obstacles.

3.3 Museums as "One Time Occasion"

A nearly universal inhibitor of engagement among Latinos is an entrenched perception of museum visits as a one-time occasion. For most, attendance is infrequent and not part of their regular activities, even among those familiar with museums. Accordingly, a visit is largely considered a special occasion, something new

and different from their routines, and is often prompted by a particular exhibit or by a special family occasion (often associated with Latino-specific exhibits or programs). After visiting, most believe they have experienced all the venue has to offer, and see no reason to establish an ongoing relationship with the organization. It is not considered necessary or important to visit again unless a special exhibit of interest occurs in the future, in which case the visit will again be strictly for that purpose.

3.4 Visitor group size

Another factor that appears to inhibit participation is the price of admission, which was commonly mentioned as an obstacle by both segments in this study (low and high acculturation). Upon further probing of this particular issue, the study found that the main obstacle associated with admission price is the size of the visiting party. Latinos not only have larger (and younger) families compared to the general population (2012 U.S. Census), but because of the high value placed on social experiences, they tend to visit in large groups. These groups often include not only nuclear and extended family members, but also friends and even acquaintances. It is common that the responsibility for paying belongs to one or two of the organizers (*"he/she who invites, pays"*). Thus the price of admission that may be affordable for a family of four becomes a challenge for a group of ten.

Also impacting the cost of the experience for these larger visitor groups is the price of food and souvenirs that are part of the museum outing. Food is not only a complement to the visit, but in many cases an essential aspect of the social experience. Sharing food is highly valued and has a strong cultural connotation that is alluring. For some respondents with young children, food is also a necessity to keep their child engaged and nurtured. For respondents with older or no children, a visit to the restaurant and museum shop contributes to the special nature of the occasion. However, most criticize the high prices of food at the museum's restaurant or cafeteria, which they consider prohibitive for larger families. Many opted instead to visit a preferred off-site restaurant after their visit.

Although the total cost of a museum visit for larger groups is a significant obstacle for respondents, deeper discussions quickly revealed that the true barrier is a gap between cost and perceived value. Most respondents stated that price (along with location, transportation, and other barriers) would not be an impediment if they found sufficient value and meaning in participating in a museum experience.

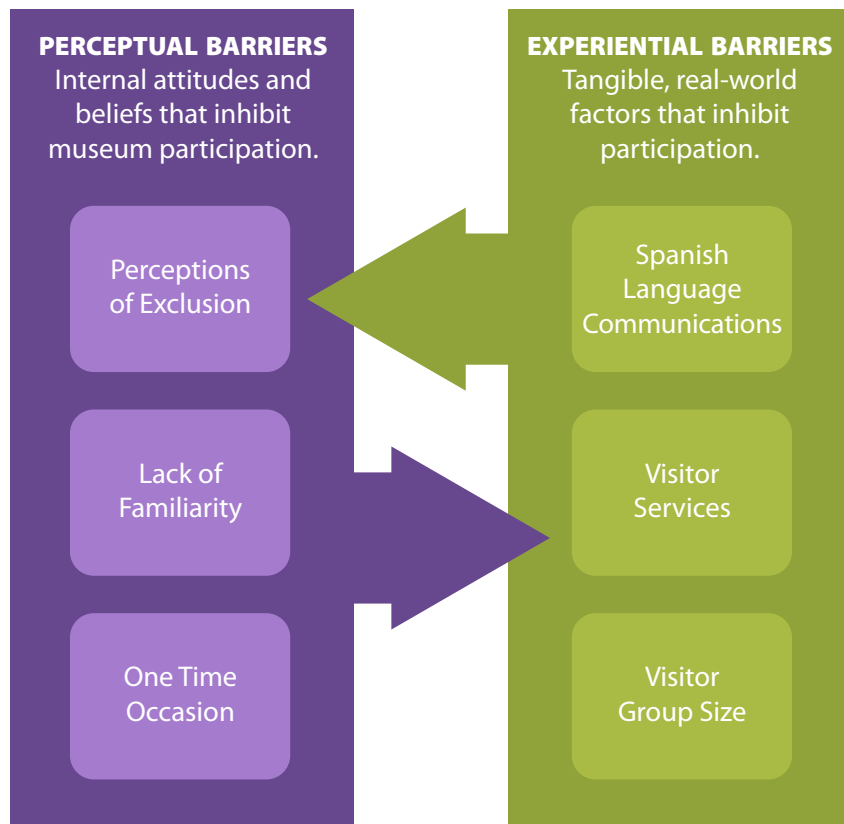
3.5 Spanish-language communications

Most respondents believe that museums are not interested in engaging them because they encounter little or no publicity directed towards the Latino population, as explained before. Even in cases where Latinos are interested in a particular museum, they feel unwelcome because they don't see any targeted communications that speak directly to them. With no advertising in Spanish-language TV or radio, most potential Latino visitors rely on personal recommendations to assess

the value offered by a museum, which may have the residual effect of perpetuating existing beliefs and behaviors. Added to the absence of Spanish-language media is the lack of on-site Spanish-language services, including signage, printed and audio materials, and bilingual personnel. This often solidifies the perception that museums are “not for them,” especially for low acculturation, Spanish-dominant Latinos. Even many bilingual Latinos vividly recalled language difficulties during a visit. As a result, they felt disconnected from the experience.

The conspicuous lack of Spanish-language communications at museums stands out to respondents because most other organizations, businesses, and brands they encounter now provide these services. While many Latinos acknowledge this is a function of living in California (where Latinos reached a plurality in 2013, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center report), they find it perplexing that museums with public-service missions

Barriers are interrelated and compound each other.



seem uninterested in reaching and serving Latinos, the largest ethnic group in the state.

3.6 Visitor Services

Many respondents described the prominent role of guards and docents in their experience, but unfortunately most interactions were not positive. Of all museum staff, guards may have the longest and closest interactions with visitors. They appear to play a crucial role in shaping the experience, especially for first-time visitors. Through stereotyping and discriminatory practices, guards are likely the main variable that can transform the Latino visitor experience from unfamiliar or difficult to unequivocally negative. As a direct result of how a guard treated his family on their first visit, one respondent said, *"I'm not going back to that museum, or any other museum for that matter!"* It is critical that museums take decisive steps to minimize these types of experiences because of the strong role of word of mouth in the Latino population. As Latinos rely heavily on personal recommendations, one family's negative experience will circulate widely in a dramatic ripple effect.

Another key factor is docent interactions. Docents have a large impact on the museum visit, making respondents feel included and helping them to navigate the experience. However, respondents reported that bilingual docents were exceedingly rare, despite the opportunity they have to create a meaningful experience for visitors. Furthermore, most respondents were unaware at the time of their visit that a docent is a volunteer position who is trained on the content of the exhibit, but not necessarily on basic information of museum operations. As a result, it was disconcerting to respondents that docents did not know museum hours or prices of admission. The perception is that these "employees" are not familiar with their own institution.

CONCLUSIONS / CONSIDERATIONS

Museums are the depositaries of a country's idiosyncrasies, history and identity, and they usually represent the point of view of the dominant culture. We suspect this influences the decision Latinos make to visit museums. Our data indicates Latinos know there is much more to visiting a museum than simply being entertained. Respondents pointed most often to the high educational value of museums, and in deeper discussions, praised the connective and inclusive experiences these organizations could potentially provide. Accordingly, we reject the notion that a decision to visit a museum is exclusively a leisure one. Rather it is, in many ways, a conscious or unconscious decision to learn about, and therefore participate, in the narrative that conforms to the identity of a society.

That being said, noting respondents' infrequent visitation patterns and numerous barriers given, it becomes immediately clear that the perceived value is a distant and transactional one at best. Many simply do not have an internalized sense of personal relevance and importance attached to the museum experience. In fact, many overtly acknowledge that obstacles like price, transportation, location, etc. would not be deterrents if they recognize the evident value in a museum visit.

Therefore, the opportunity for museums lies in establishing a connection, fundamentally demonstrating personal value, and building a tangible, reciprocal relationship. To be sustainable, this relationship cannot be static, but must evolve over time and become a reflection of what is important for both sides. This research delivers compelling evidence that to achieve these objectives, an organization must reflect the cultural diversity of its community and prioritize inclusive experiences for its Latino visitors.

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