

FROM PUBLIC TO PARTICIPANT AND MEDIATOR OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

Whenever we design participatory interventions we always ask the following questions: is the intervention relevant to? Why do participants participate? How do they engage? What experience do they take away from participating? In addition, there are always questions about the participants' expertise.

This paper addresses these issues by asking what motivations and interests people satisfy by participating in a project. Very little is known about museum publics: who they are, why they come to museums, and why they participate in museum activities. In the first part of the paper I look at participation as a method for analyzing the audiences around the museum. Following audience conceptualisations and the concept of motivations, I analyze what makes people move from one audience category to another – perhaps from public to participant. Finally, I bring this understanding together in one case study example from the Estonian National Museum (hereinafter referred to as ENM) and ask whether participants can become mediators of museum values.

Keywords: Participation, intervention, audiences, visitors, users, public, participants, motivations.

Introduction

Today's society is often described as having weakening ties between the state and citizens. The traditional role of cultural institutions, and their position as an institutional network in society, has changed. The traditional role of cultural institutions has been to represent the dominant values of the state and the nation, and to educate and reflect people's roles and responsibilities in society. Competing with other organisations for people's leisure time has increased the need for museums to understand their audiences, who mostly take a traditional view of the role of museums, not critically assessing the knowledge provided by them.

Currently most museums, and other cultural institutions, are experimenting with strengthening the participation of the public by engaging them in two-way conversations, most often using social media, web environments or exhibition spaces for facilitating participatory activities. By participation I mean that museums are sharing functions and responsibilities with the public and participatory interventions may provide opportunities for the museums to reinvent or renew the role of the public and suggest additional ways for visitors to interact with museums.

Noëlle McAfee sees the success of participatory actions in society only "when the political becomes personal" or when people's subject positions are intertwined (McAfee, 2000: 159–160). Cultural heritage, memories and the past are not necessarily part of one's everyday life, therefore, it is a challenge to involve the public in creating heritage and the dialogue related to heritage.

Participation as a method of analysing museum visitors

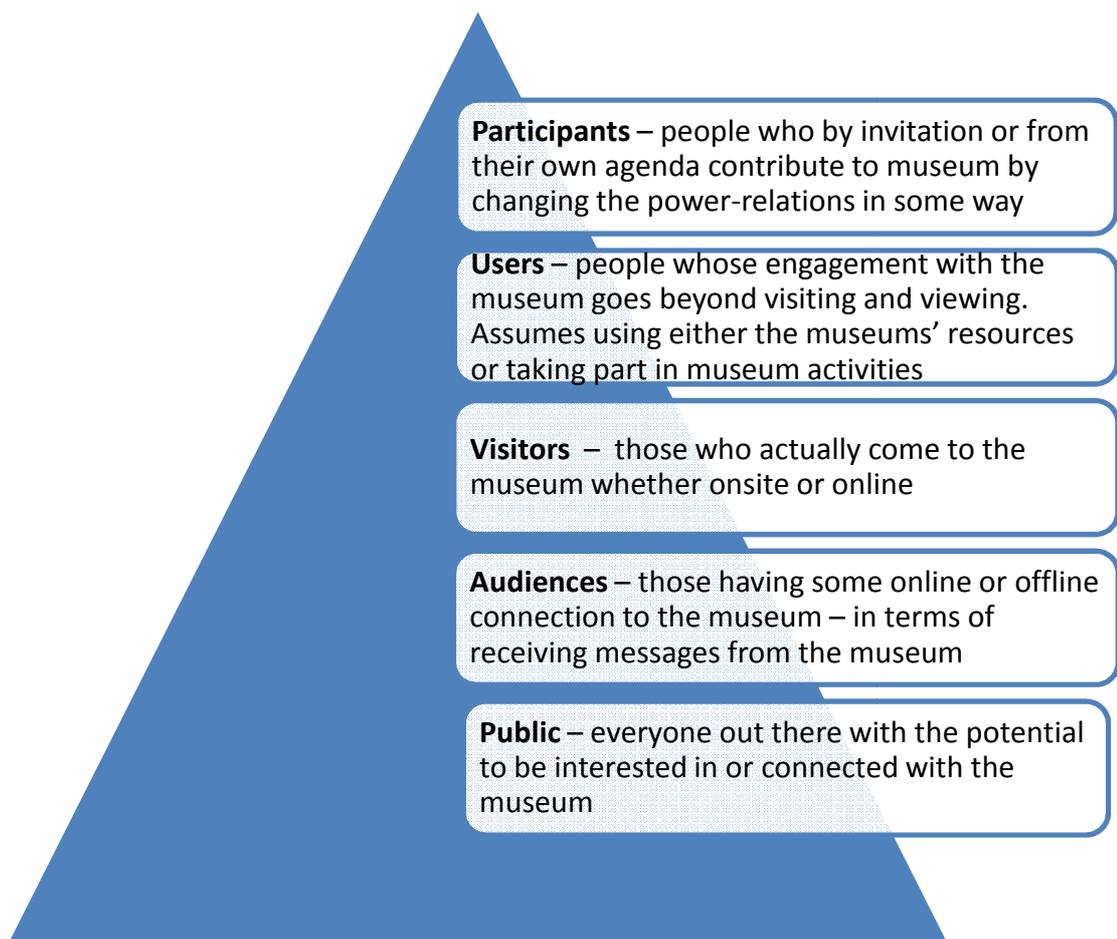
As museums change their positions in society the perception of museum exhibition visitors, collection and other services users has changed. Museum visitors are not seen as the general public with demographic differences, but as individual interpreters with their own social contexts. Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (2010) sums up the developments in the field of museum visitor studies since the 1990s, showing how these approaches have been taken into account in museums and museum studies and have led to a paradigm that presents the museum as an "open work that is completed by the visitor" (Stylianou-Lambert 2010: 137). Beyond the classical site-visit situation museum studies acknowledge that the museum experience starts well before the visitor steps through the door of the museum.

"Visitor studies" has become an umbrella term for a range of different forms of research and evaluation involving museums and their actual, potential and virtual visitors, which collectively can be termed the "audience" for museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2011: 363). Museum visitors are categorised by user-friendly

models, by their motivations for visiting museums and also by their behaviour in museums (as Falck 2009). Also, museum web-service users behave in many different ways, from inactive to creators, similar to the media user types suggested by Kelly and Russo (2008). Nina Simon (2007) proposes five categories of users of museums on the web, from the passive reception of content to social interaction with the content, pointing out that movement between categories depends on age, personal or social circumstances and experience of using the technology.

Participation has also become a method for analyzing the audiences, as good knowledge of the potential audience and participants is the basis for designing user-friendly discussion spaces. In the end, technological potential does not equal actual participation. So, people within and nearby the museum have different assumptions, expectations and understandings of the museum, and these need to be taken into consideration. Runnel et al (2014) have conceptualized people around the museum on the basis of their different relationships with museums.

Figure 1: Progression of people in and around museums from public to participants. (Runnel et al 2014: 222)



The *public* group refers to a large unattached set of people. The more attached people are to the museum, the higher up they are on the pyramid and there are a decreasing number of people higher up the pyramid. *Audiences* are conceptualised as groups who do not go to the museum and use its resources very little, they never enter the museum, but they are aware of the messages from the museum. *Visitors* are the most traditional group in museum studies; they are the people who enter the museum to pay it a visit. *Users* use the online resources and spaces of the museum, which in the ENM case is still smaller than actual visits, although the museum collections in databases are now being used more than ever before. *Participants* are defined as the group of people with whom the museum is willing to share a small amount of decision-making power, and who need most attention from the museum to maintain an ongoing relationship (Runnel et al 2014: 222-223).

Participatory interventions in the Estonian National Museum

The ENM has organized much of its daily work in recent years by using participatory ideas¹. Pille Runnel (2009) has stated that the ENM, as a set of words, as well as an institution, carries several meanings and thus several obligations. On the one hand, “National” means state owned and the ENM is the first, largest and most representative museum of the Estonian state and nation. On the other hand, the Estonian name for the museum can be translated as meaning a museum of the Estonian people, encompassing the different ethnic groups who live in Estonia and also the ethnographic nature of the museum. All these meanings come together in the complex set of expectations present when reinventing the Estonian nation in the 21st century and opening the new museum building in 2016.

Since 2007 over 30 interventions have taken place and they have been analyzed to look at the influence of participation on the museum institution, the museum professionals, exhibitions, collections, visits and participants. For this paper I have chosen 10 of these interventions and their analyses to study the participants’ motivations.

The 10 interventions were chosen to reflect different aspects of participation – they were aimed at different audience groups, have different designs, some are online and some offline, some were successful and some were not, they have different purposes and outcomes, and different amounts of work were involved in undertaking them, from long commitments to brief encounters, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Overview of selected participatory interventions

| Intervention | Short description | Time | Number of participations | Group addressed / amount of work |
|--|---|-----------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Estonian Moments | Uploading photos to web-based environment for collecting museum photographs representing contemporary Estonian everyday life. | 2007-2013 | 589 photos ² | Public / Medium |
| Donate a Day to the Museum | Description of a “typical day”, 14 April 2009 on text, video, photo, map etc. sent as gift to ENM for its 100th anniversary. | 2009 | 450 descriptions | Public / Vast |
| Photo commenting exhibition “With a 1000 steps...” | Commenting on photos with post-it notes and pens in an exhibition of ENMs photo collection, where every 1000th photograph (by order of accession) was chosen. | 2009 | 80 comments | Visitor / Easy |
| Create Your Own Exhibition1: vote | Voting on favourite exhibition ideas, proposed for Open Curatorship online and offline in Exhibition House. | 2010 | 201 comments | Visitor, public / Easy |
| Museum night: comments | Commenting of ENMs permanent exhibition in Museum Night event | 2010 | 17 comments | Visitor / Easy |
| My Favourite from collections of the ENM | Co-operation with handicraft web-communities, where people had to choose their favourite from museum collections and make an authentic copy or use the original for inspiration. | 2011 | 54 objects | Users, visitors / Vast |
| Take a picture of what you eat | Uploading food and meal pictures to web-environment. | 2012 | 711 photos | Public / Medium |
| Regretted purchases | In parallel with contemporary consumption exhibition, “Chopping Fever” took place in many interventions, and one of them asked to share the stories and objects of regretted purchases. | 2012 | 50 stories, 44 objects | Public / Medium |
| Own exhibition3: Railway Gardens / curators | Process of the third realized Create Your Own Exhibition. | 2013 | 1 exhibition | Participants / Vast |
| Own exhibition3: Railway Gardens / visitors | Share the stories in exhibition environment related to the exhibition subject. | 2013 | 47 stories | Visitor / Easy |

¹ Interventions and the analysis of those interventions has been undertaken in the Estonian Science Foundation's (ESF) project “Developing museum communication in the 21st century information environment” (2008-2012). Many of the research group members were working at the ENM at the same time or as post-doctoral or doctoral students of communications studies at the University of Tartu. The position comes from auto-ethnography and production ethnography (for more Tatsi 2013:33).

² 589 photos were taken to collections, when all together ca 1500 photos were uploaded.

The media scholar, Sonja Livingstone, stresses that participation is always mediated and she looks at which modes of participation are offered to people by the particular media and communication infrastructure which mediate the social, cultural or political spheres of life (Livingstone 2013:28). Tatsi and Aljas (2012) have used the access-interaction-participation (AIP) model, elaborated by media and communication scholar Nico Carpentier³ (2011), to analyze the impact of participation on museum collections. In ethnographic museum collections a history of at least 80 years of inclusive methods of collecting contributions from the people is typical, and we can see that museum collections are influenced by the minimalist participatory mode and the influence of participation is mostly on the web and in exhibition halls. However, digitalised collections, collecting digitally created content and tagging, as a form of metadata enrichment of the collections, has changed the relationships between museums and their audiences, and the museum collections are also more open and visible than ever before.

Mapping the motivations

We have been trying to understand the motivations of museum audiences for a long time and in different contexts (some recent examples of studies include Peacock et al 2007, Ellenbogen et al 2007:188, Saldago 2008 and Fantoni et al 2012). The reasons for engaging with museums are often difficult to define because of the confusion about the nature of motivation and any discussion of the motivation of audiences to participate will extend to the discipline of psychology.

The psychologist, Anita Woolfolk (2001), has defined motivations as an “internal state that arouses, directs and maintains behaviour”. Some of the influences on motivation are internal, such as enjoyment, curiosity, and personal needs and interests. Other influences are extrinsic, external to the individual, such as incentives, punishments and social pressure. When one is intrinsically motivated to do something, incentives or pressure are not necessary, as the task itself is rewarding (Goldman 2004). For psychologists the difference in the motivations lies in the origin of the motivation – is the cause of motivation external, that is, extrinsic motivation, or internal, that is, intrinsic motivation (Russo 2009). Unfortunately, most activities stretch across these two categories, and the concepts are also much debated by psychologists.

This also creates a connection with self-determination theory, which presumes that people are by nature active and self-motivated. However, social conditions and processes have an impact on what people do and how they feel while acting, and as a consequence of acting, the social environment supports, directs or thwarts that. People are often moved by external factors, such as reward systems, grades, evaluations or the opinions they fear that others might have of them. Yet, just as frequently, people are motivated from within, by interests, curiosity, care or abiding values. These intrinsic motivations are not necessarily externally rewarded or supported, but nonetheless they can sustain passions, creativity and sustained efforts (Ryan et al 2000).

Participation and the motivation of people to participate have been subjects for that have been considered for many years, in parallel with the development of new ideas for participating, and the instinct motives and external forces that lead to motivation have been analyzed. Usability expert, Jakob Nielsen (2006), has proposed five ways to motivate people to participate and overcome participation inequality. As participation should be made easy, as side effect of the visit, he proposes the concept of editing and not creating, rewarding after participation and particularly promoting a high quality contribution. Nina Simon (2010), based on Clay Shirky's arguments (2008), sees the social conditions for motivating participation as coming from the institution's clear and open expression of *promise*, which would lead to personal fulfilment, and the achievement of personal goals and interests. Participants also need clear *tools* for participation and *bargain*,

³ Carpentier integrates democracy theory with the AIP model so that participation can be conceptualised as either minimalist or maximalist. Minimalist participation relies on the assumption that the political does not necessarily reach beyond the realm of conventional politics, and that professionals should be in control of the structure and processes, allowing them to homogenise audiences whenever necessary. The maximalist approach to participation, however, is based on a belief that the political is an underlying dimension of the social and that participation (ideally) entails power sharing, heterogeneity of audiences and also allows for structural changes (Carpentier 2011:17–22, 69).

as they would like to see that their work is integrated in a timely, attractive, respectful way after they have contributed to the institutions. Patric Waterson has analyzed participation in online communities and has summarised that motivations are dynamic and shifting, and resemble the following basic desires: 1) Seeking information for personal benefit; 2) Opportunities to exchange ideas and find solutions to problems; 3) Fun; 4) Opportunity for dialogue; 5) Opportunity to help others; 6) Chance to gain respect and visibility within a community; 7) Seeking to build social cohesion within a group; 8) Shared sense of identity and belonging; 9) Raise profile with peers; 10) Commitment to shared values and norms and resembling basic desires (Waterson, 2006: 334, in Russo 2009).

To analyze ENMs participants' motivations I chose 10 internal and 10 extrinsic motivations. Based on interviews, comments and different feedback from participants I also mapped the social conditions that motivate participation.

The analysis indicated that it does not matter what the person's relation to museum had been before the intervention, public, audience or visitor, what is important is that the subject is relevant and interesting to them, that the communication and participation design are appropriate and that cooperation has taken place.

The differences in motivations depending on the amount of work and time that people are willing to invest in museum participation are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Participation conditions and motivations arising from commitment.

| Participation with vast workload | Participation with moderate workload | Fast, easy and spontaneous participation |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Related to personal interest •Documents about yourself in the museum •Getting institutional recognition •Testing skills and knowledge •Getting new knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Related to personal interest •Expressing personal opinion •Interaction with others •Institutional recognition is less important | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expressing personal opinion •Related to personal interest •Institutional recognition is not important at all |

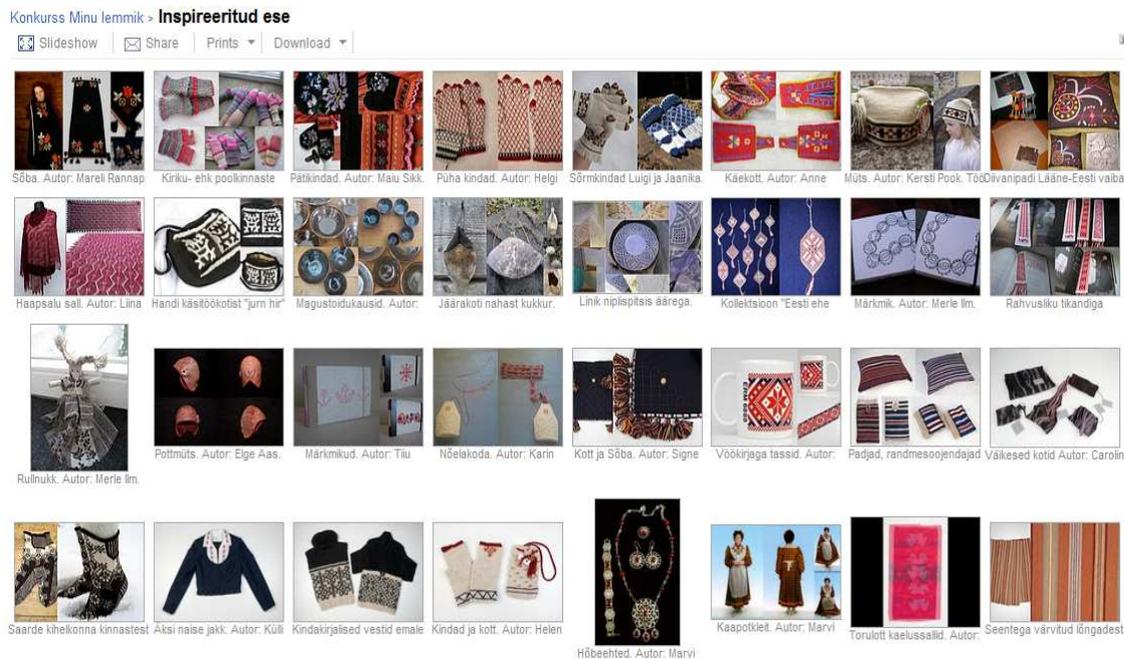
Fast and easy participation, like voting, tagging and commenting, is mostly activated when the subject is relevant and when people can express their opinions. If a moderate participational workload is required, as in my cases in telling stories and uploading pictures, the motivation is associated with personal expression and personal interest in the subject, also in interacting with others. The greater the time and effort involved in the participation process and the longer the commitment, the more important for the participant is the relation to the institution, its image, getting recognition from the institution, and having documents about themselves in the museum. Testing personal skills and knowledge are then also important in relation to motivation.

Runnel et al (2014:223) claim that participants are the most desirable group that the museum is looking to engage with, but there is another group, beyond participants, that I define as mediators of museum values. With the next case study example I will try to open this discussion and analyze what would motivate a group of participants or users to become mediators of cultural heritage.

Case study – the intervention “My favourite from the ENM collections”

The participatory intervention “My favourite from the ENM collections” was organized by the museum together with online handicraft communities. Handicraft makers had to choose one object from the museum collections or from ENM’s permanent exhibition “Estonia. Land, people, culture.” or from the databases of collections (for example, www.muis.ee and [vaibad.erm.ee.](http://vaibad.erm.ee)) or from publications. They then had to make an authentic copy or use the original for inspiration to create a new version from the object.

Photo 1: Pictures from entries uploaded to the “inspirational objects” category.



The museum, its collections and values are most appreciated by those who are in close contact with it. Most of the participants were previously familiar with the ENM collections, so surfing the Internet databases and finding favourites was a familiar activity for them. So, the handicraft makers’ relationships with the museum could be as visitors to museum exhibitions and users of the collections, and their daily hobby could be related to the museum collections. If the museum’s first goal was to introduce the craftsmen to the vast databases of museum collections on the Internet and to expand the use of objects beyond well-known museum pieces, then the second goal was to analyze how the participants reacted and gave new meaning and use to the original museum objects.

The competition entry consisted of an object, or a photo of the object, and a description of an item with reference to the original museum piece from the ENM collections. The process took place on the web, as is normal with web community competitions, where people could upload their handicraft pictures. An offline option was also offered. The competition entries could be seen on the Internet (on the museum webpage), where news about the competition was also constantly updated and information was distributed via the handicraft forum, *Isetegija*⁴. In the end personalized versions and new meanings of 41 objects were submitted from professional or hobby handicraft makers.

⁴ *Isetegija* (one who makes it oneself) is the forum of handicraft hobbyists on the website isetegija.net, where photos of self made handicraft items are uploaded, blogs with descriptions of the processes of making the items (techniques, materials) are kept and where handicraft hobbyists hold discussions, learn and get inspiration from each other. Contests of handicraft making, auction sales and other activities that are meant to be shared are also published on the website.

Based on the analysis of the interviews with participants, undertaken by Marke Teppor⁵, I analyzed the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and how the participatory environment supported the motivations.

First, there are always personal motivations. The most common answer to the question about reasons for entering the competition was related to the motivation to test one's skills.

I am a self taught person. And thus I thought that it is a good opportunity to test myself. It coincides with my interests, anyway, I have already visited Estonian National Museum to see their collection of bowls, it is good to have such specific task with set timeline, so I thought to give it a try and see whether something comes out of it or not. /.../ it is just such a challenge. I did not enter so much to compete, winning some place was not a major issue for me, and it was totally irrelevant. I am simply happy that I managed to fulfill the task I set myself. (W, age 21–34).



Photo 2: Andrus Kunnus, Cooking grid for Baltic Herring.

Also important in motivating people to participate was the possibility of presenting their work in a real exhibition. The authority of the ENM, and its support and recognition, was mentioned as one of the key motivators for entering the contest.

It is great that an institution which is so important ...and famous all over Estonia... organizes a contest.... well what can I say... would it had been anybody else, I probably wouldn't have participated. (W 1, 35–49)

This is the thing with ENM, that when you tie yourself with this trade mark... then even in other places you would probably get a little "credit confidence", if I may put it that way. (W, age 21–34)

Although the name ENM added importance, other aspects associated with the ENM should not be underestimated, as they may be even more important than the name - like the ENM's vast collections and former personal experience with the ENM. Participants were also motivated by the idea that the competition could draw the attention of the museum to their handicrafts in the hope that they could become part of the ENM collections.



Photo 3: Airi Gailit, Striped fabrics dyed with mushrooms.

⁵ Teppor, Marke 2011. Kultuurilise osaluse võimalustest ERMi ja käsitööharrastajate näitel. (Cultural participation practice using the example of the ENM and handicraft hobbyists). Master's thesis Tartu: Tartu University, Institute of Journalism and Communication.

At the same time the importance of the museum as the keeper and interpreter of national heritage and its initiative to cooperate with hobbyists was acknowledged. While the museum is seen as a partner, the interviews clearly indicated that, for the handicraft makers, the museum, rather than the handicraft forums and local initiatives, has a monopoly on truth when it comes to quality, interpretation and approach (from expertise and knowledge, the preservation of objects, and organizing competitions). So, in contrast to the expectations of the museum, the entries were mostly not very original or new ideas, but participants made objects that they thought the museum would like. Thus, the choices were mostly traditional and were from the collections used most frequently, for example, ethnographic textiles and the reuse of their ornaments.



Photo 4: Above the source of inspiration - Mittens from Saarde parish (ERM A 564:1513), below a competition project - socks made by Virge Inno.

The third motivation category is co-operation motivations. Hobbyist handicraft makers, as users of museum collections, publications, databases and exhibitions, have some ideas about new ways to collaborate with the museum. Both the museum and the handicraft makers are interested in valuing and popularising Estonian handicrafts and cultural heritage, and this could be done together. The museum has knowledge and the handicraft makers have potentially knowledgeable people in their areas of interest. Different ideas for co-operating were proposed: contributing to the digitalisation and information provision for the objects in the databases, providing instructions about how to make copies of the objects, if their skills are good, making good copies of damaged objects, assisting in collecting information and conducting research in the less well researched handicraft domains, and they could also inform other communities, organise exhibitions, provide courses, publish books, and test databases for user friendliness.

While the museum's interpretation strategies of cultural heritage are based on scientific research and knowledge, the handicraft hobbyist see their approach in interpreting the heritage as a process of communication, during which, through their work, they find and recreate the meaning and values of heritage, bringing it to a contemporary context and making it understandable for the public.

Conclusion

In this paper I analyzed the various museum audiences and how their participation has supported by museum. Different audience groups have different relationships with museums and their motivations are dependent upon their perceptions of museums. For successful participation these expectations need to be understood, as does the amount of time and effort required from both partners.

My analysis indicated that each participation experience is the synthesis of an individual's motivations and how the museum is perceived to satisfy the needs and interests that are the consequence of that motivation. The main reason for participation is personal interest in the subject the museum is calling for participation

on. However, the larger the participation process is, the more important are motivations related to the institution – its image, previous contacts, interactions and recognition for the participant from the institution.

The case study of participants of the intervention “My favourite from the ENM collections” indicated the possibility of the participants becoming mediators of museum values, if their perceptions are taken into consideration.

As we can see, handicraft makers position themselves as help-seekers, or users, in relation to the museum; they define themselves as a small, temporary group who lack of knowledge. This means that some acknowledgement and encouragement is needed to support this particular group in their valuable interactions with the ENM. While the museum relies on research and knowledge, handicraft hobbyists are more creative and interpret heritage more freely, which could result in a useful cooperation for both partners, who can trust each other and share expertise and knowledge.

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