

AHI article (Spring 2024)

Bitesize 4 – What emotions do cultural or heritage exhibits stimulate?

In researching this article, I found myself standing next to two elderly ladies viewing pieces of abstract artwork in an exhibition. The ladies were discussing the works and somewhat impolitely, I listened to their conversation. One lady was clearly in raptures over a particular work, she described the vibrancy of the colours, the way in which the lines and blocks merged and helpfully for the purposes of this article, the way she felt about the painting, she was clearly ‘captivated’ by it. The other lady nodded and smiled supportively to her companion’s obvious pleasure at the work in front of them, but as they walked away from it commented, “Yes, I liked the colours, but I didn’t understand it, what was it supposed to be”?

Emotion is a very personalised response to something we see, read or hear and the type and scale of response can often be framed by the context, the setting and of course by anyone else we are sharing the experience with. This article summarises the breadth of emotions generated by a range of exhibits and in so doing, also attempts to establish whether the emotional trigger from the exhibit might be grouped in any way according to the type of response stimulated.

Sixty groups of visitors were approached at a range of cultural and heritage locations. In terms of their social grouping: 11 were alone; 28 were with a partner and 21 with family and/or friends. A breakdown of the type of location visited is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Type of location being visited

Heritage site = 42%
Museum exhibition = 32%
Museum (general) = 18%
Gallery (general) = 8%

A breakdown of the specific type of exhibit or experience being viewed when their emotional response was recorded is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Type of exhibit or experience being viewed by the respondent

Object or collection of objects = 29%
Personal artefact = 23%
Commentary / living history sounds = 20%
Painting / photograph = 15%
Wall-mounted panel = 13%

In total, 225 emotional responses were recorded from which eight main groups of themes emerged, which are summarised in Table 3 below. This research only focused on the emotional response of adults and thus the response of any children within family groups was not captured.

Table 3. What emotions or feelings does the exhibit or experience stimulate?

Positive emotions / feelings (64%)	Negative emotions / feelings (30%)
Happiness / Pleasure / Delight (18%)	Shock / Sadness / Stunned / Depressed (15%)
Curiosity / Excited / Wonder (14%)	Anger / Frustration / Annoyance / Disgust (9%)
Awareness / Appreciation / Understanding (13%)	Confusion / Puzzlement (6%)
Surprise / Enchanted / Nostalgic (11%)	
Respect / Admiration / Inspire (8%)	
Other responses (6%)	

The most widely recorded response was one of ‘pleasure’ and ‘delight’ in what the visitor had encountered, whilst the second most popular response was one of ‘curiosity’ suggesting perhaps that the object or artefact being viewed had stimulated the visitor’s interest and potentially the desire to learn more about it or the people and civilisation it represented. By comparison, the most widely recorded ‘negative’ response was one of ‘shock’ or ‘sadness’ based on the personal story being told. This response although potentially negative, also helps the visitor to establish a deeper connection and understanding with the object or people associated with it.

It is interesting to record how these emotions or feelings were triggered through each visitor’s experience of viewing an exhibit, this is presented through the diagrams below.

1. Happiness / Pleasure / Delight

Associated with: Beauty of the exhibit (26%); craftsmanship of the artefact (24%); human story behind the exhibit (18%); method of display (14%).

2. Curiosity / Excited / Wonder

Associated with: Craftsmanship of the exhibit (38%); commentary / living history sounds (31%); label (content) for the exhibit (24%); human story behind the exhibit (12%).

3. Awareness / Appreciation / Understanding

Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (16%); authenticity of the object or artefact (12%); imagery associated with the exhibit (8%); label (story) for the exhibit (6%).

4. Surprise / Enchanted / Nostalgic

Associated with: Craftsmanship of the exhibit (27%); size of the object or artefact (24%); colours of the exhibit (22%); method of display (18%).

5. Respect / Admiration / Inspire

Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (32%); object or artefact itself (28%); label (story) for the exhibit (24%); commentary / living history sounds (18%).

In relation to the “negative” responses.

1. Shock / Sadness / Stunned / Depressed

Associated with: Human story behind the exhibit (42%); exhibit itself (33%); label (content) for the exhibit (23%); commentary / living history sounds (21%).

2. Anger / Frustration / Annoyance / Disgust

Associated with: Commentary / living history sounds (37%); human story behind the exhibit (28%); label (content & story) for the exhibit (24%); imagery associated with the exhibit (16%).

3. Confusion / Puzzlement

Associated with: Exhibit itself (18%); label (story) for the exhibit (16%); human story behind the exhibit (14%); commentary / living history sounds (11%).

What broad themes potentially emerge from this study?

1. *The human story behind the object or artefact featured strongly.* Reminding us of the importance of 'telling a good story', but also of making personalised connections with your visitors wherever possible, notably when you are bringing people 'to life' for a modern generation of visitors. The use of 'first person' stories clearly play a key role here, and was mentioned as being 'revealing' by visitors.
2. *Sounds or an audio commentary also featured strongly.* A soundtrack to the past or an audio explanation also clearly play a key role in helping to establish and strengthen connections. Although care should always be taken to ensure that through the commentary a 'scripted' visitor response (be that positive or negative) is not being too heavily promoted.
3. *Labelling of exhibits appeared to play an important role.* It is worth reflecting on the content of an exhibit's label. Those which guided the visitor on what to look at or, which posed specific questions for them to consider were mentioned favourably by visitors in this study.
4. *The craftsmanship of the exhibit* also appeared important in establishing a positive emotional response and so careful attention to the design and display of the exhibit as well as the associated text used should be undertaken. Colour, form and texture were all important components mentioned by visitors here.
5. *Authenticity did not appear to play a key role in developing an emotional connection.* It was only mentioned in relation to '*I appreciate seeing the real thing*'. It is interesting therefore to speculate whether visitors take it for granted that objects and artefacts on display are authentic or whether the

story developed through them is more important than the object or artefact in its own right.

In reflecting on the design of experiences and the stimulation of an emotional response, care should always be taken to ensure that any visitor response created is genuine and not overly, or too strongly shaped by shrewd use of language, imagery, colour or other design techniques.

Finally, it is important to recognise that this piece of research merely presents a 'snapshot' generated from visitors viewing one exhibit and therefore does not represent the full 'emotional' picture. At no point was 'indifference' to the exhibit recorded nor did 'experience fatigue' emerge as a response, both of which might well have been recorded had the researcher followed visitors through a longer period.

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