MUSEUM EXPERIENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON VISITOR REACTIONS

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Abstract

Designing engaging visitor experiences has become a paramount concern for museums; however, a comprehensive understanding of the impact of museum experiences on visitors' reactions remains incomplete. Our paper aims to assist museums in implementing more effective strategies. By examining three distinct characteristics of museum experiences - subjectivity, multidimensionality, and co-creation - we formulate four hypotheses to assess the influence of visitor journeys on their reactions. We concentrate on the journey at the Capitoline Museums, employing qualitative and quantitative methods (in-depth interviews, subjective personal introspection, non-participant observation, and questionnaires) involving 110 participants. Our findings indicate that (a) Visitor attitudinal and behavioral reactions exhibit consistency for the overall experience but not when analyzed for specific areas; (b) Visitor satisfaction is correlated with the number of companions but not with the number of visited areas in the museum experience; (c) Visitor's apparent dominance over visitor satisfaction is not linked to visitor satisfaction. We develop a managerial decision-making framework that empowers museums to create captivating experiences for their visitors.

Keywords: visitor experience, museums, touchpoints, non-participant observation, survey

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Introduction

Museums hold a pivotal role in shaping identity, driving economic growth, fostering creativity, and enhancing overall well-being, underscoring the significance of their success for both present and future generations (Addis & Rurale, 2020). Similar to any other organization, the achievement of their goals hinges on the delivery of captivating customer experiences (Edelman & Singer, 2015; Holbrook, 2023; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Over the years, museums have been encouraged to embrace marketing principles (Burton, 1999; Kolb, 2000), amplify their market orientation (Kara, Spillan, & DeShields, 2004), and cultivate enduring relationships with their visitors (Camarero, Garrido, Vicente, & Redondo, 2019). The impact of this perspective was further underscored by the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted the importance of cultural marketing (Cronin, 2021; ICOM, 2020). Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the necessity to "make the journey a compelling, customized, and open-ended experience" (Edelman & Singer, 2015, p. 91), the definition of customer experience remains fragmented, lacking a precise scope, underlying factors, or outcomes (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). This void is particularly apparent in the realm of arts and culture, as even though "the consumption of arts and culture is typically experiential […] cultural institutions cannot often adopt a customer experience-oriented approach consistent with the peculiarities of the context in which they operate" (Carù & Cuadrado-García, 2020, p. 215). Deeply contextual museum experiences (Maklan & Klaus, 2011), are characterized by three pivotal features namely high subjectivity, multidimensionality, and co-creation. Indeed, museum experiences encompass a broad spectrum of visitor processes, spanning cognitive, affective, physical, sensory, and social dimensions. These dimensions collectively elicit attitudinal and behavioral reactions unique to each individual (Schmitt, 1999). At the same time, museum experiences draw upon a diverse array of experiential elements, leading to intricate combinations of factors that collectively shape the museum visit (Chan, 2009). Finally, these

experiences are characterized by active involvement and co-creation, stemming from immersion and a gradual process of engagement and ownership (Carù & Cova, 2013).

The understanding of specific features characterizing museum experiences and their influence on visitor reactions remains limited. This gap is particularly crucial, as translating theoretical concepts into practical strategies faces challenges during execution within customer-focused approaches (IBM, 2005; Nenonen, Rasila, Junnonen, & Kärnä, 2008; Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013; Teixeira, Patrício, Nunes, Nóbrega, Fisk, & Constantine, 2012). Poor implementation often accounts for the struggles encountered in marketing strategies (Malshe, Hughes, Good, & Friend, 2022). Our study endeavors to explore the relationship between museum experiences and visitor responses, with specific emphasis on subjectivity, multidimensionality, and co-creation as distinct features.

To address this issue, we employ the case of the Capitoline Museums in Rome, renowned worldwide, as a foundational context to extend existing theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Our research adopts a multi-method approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques, including in-depth interviews, subjective personal introspection, non-participant observation, and questionnaires. By employing these methodologies, we aim to map the visitor journey and delve into visitors' reactions to the experiences offered at the Capitoline Museums. Such an approach is somewhat unconventional in museum research (Chen & Chen, 2010; Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010), and it "will require considerable changes in the professional practices of museums" Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: p. 362). Museums need marketing strategies to address their current competitive change, shifting from traditional "curators' dictation" to "visitor orientation" (Dirsehan, 2012: p. 104).

Utilizing customer inputs, the creation of process-oriented diagrams that pinpoint main interaction touchpoints between customers and entities like brands, companies, environments, etc., over a timeline (Nenonen, Rasila, Junnonen, & Kärnä, 2008; Richardson, 2010) helps identify managerial processes pertinent to customer experience (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Consequently, meticulously analyzed and organized customer journeys offer organizations the potential to

innovate and distinguish their offerings (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014), thereby achieving optimal financial outcomes (Norton & Pine, 2013). However, in contrast to prevailing practices and aligned with theoretical indications, our approach positions mapping the customer journey as the initial step within a customer-centric strategy. This approach fosters the adoption of the customer's perspective (Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008), generates fresh market insights and knowledge for designing and enhancing superior customer experiences (Patrício, Fisk, Falcão e Cunha, & Constantine, 2011; Venkatesan, 2017), and holds the potential for significant gains in comprehending and designing phases before, during, and after the experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2011).

Our research project addresses the call made by Burton for a reevaluation of marketing principles in the context of museums (1999), and it aligns with Cronin's appeal (2021) to bridge the gap between theory and practice, adopting a pragmatic research approach. Our proposed framework draws insights from marketing, design, and museum literature, with a specific focus on the contemporary understanding of visitor experience. In doing so, we contribute to a more precise application of the visitor journey map within the museum context, ensuring it accommodates the unique characteristics of museums and avoids oversimplification, leading to suboptimal outcomes. The customer journey map is among the most potent and commonly utilized tools for crafting engaging experiences (Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2011). Through its capacity to identify and analyze touchpoints where customers interact with organizations, the journey map aids managers in comprehending and interpreting customer perspectives, ultimately facilitating the design and improvement of exceptional customer experiences (Maklan, Antonetti, & Whitty, 2017; Venkatesan, 2017; Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008)

Recognizing the necessity for structured guidance in managerial decision-making (Maklan, Antonetti, & Whitty, 2017), our research emphasizes the significance of empirical exploration into customer experience and the application of journey maps (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Trischler, Zehrer, & Westman, 2018). By introducing a novel and integrated approach to customer experience,

we provide actionable insights to address the unique nature of museum visitors' experiences and facilitate customized design strategies. Our goal is to enrich marketing literature with a decision-making framework that empowers museums to create captivating experiences for their visitors. This involves identifying interactions, processes, and the participatory roles of visitors in co-creation, thereby elevating visitors to pivotal sources of strategic knowledge.

The subsequent sections of the paper are organized as follows. We commence with a review of existing literature concerning visitor experience and its constituents within the museum industry, specifically subjectivity, multidimensionality, and co-creation. This literature review establishes the basis for constructing our conceptual framework and formulating associated hypotheses. Subsequently, we move into the empirical analysis phase, wherein we present the chosen case study and elucidate our research methodology. Following that, we outline the outcomes of our study, before concluding by discussing the managerial implications and addressing the limitations of our research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Subjective responses to the museum visitor experience

Customer experience, a well-defined concept within marketing literature, is encapsulated as “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings during the customer’s entire purchase journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). These experiences inherently possess sensory, subjective, profoundly symbolic, and context-dependent qualities (Addis & Holbrook, 2001), giving rise to multifaceted reactions. Over the course of four decades of research, the intricate nature of customer responses and the diverse dimensions of customer experience have been widely recognized across various industries (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009). The concept of customer experience originated in the cultural realm and has since proliferated across various sectors where managerial practices have been developed and where the multidimensional range of

customer responses has been identified (Colbert, 2023; Holbrook, 2023). Indeed, when immersed in an experience, customers' reactions encompass both rational and emotional, sensory and physical, as well as spiritual aspects (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007).

For museums, this spectrum gains even greater significance as their experiences trigger profound cognitive and emotional processes, characterized by highly diverse dimensions linked to the visitor experience (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). Museum experiences engage both the individual and collective aspects of visitors' hearts and minds, making them unique in their capacity to potentially reshape lives and well-being, surpassing impacts seen in other industries (Addis, 2020). Although museum experiences predominantly rely on behavioral data captured through the support of big data to map their visitors' journeys, as demonstrated by cases like the Louvre Museum (Yoshimura, Sobolevsky, Ratti, Girardin, Carrascal, Blat, & Sinatra, 2014) or the Museo Egizio in Turin (Sturmhoevel, 2015), the intricate nature of visitor experience within museums suggests a composite response. Thus, a comprehensive perspective is essential for a more nuanced examination of the visitor experience. While these responses may differ, they still represent manifest variables of the same underlying construct. Therefore, we propose that they are harmonious responses expressing either an approach or an avoidance reaction (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Consequently, we put forth the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1 (H1).** Visitors will demonstrate coherent attitudinal and behavioral reactions to museum experiences.

1.2. Multidimensionality of the museum visitor experience

Customer experiences are shaped by either direct or indirect interactions with the brand (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). Over time, three primary categories of stimuli have been identified (Addis, 2020): (a) the technological stimuli that provide opportunities to immerse consumers in experiences and create adaptable environments; (b) the physical stimuli that are crucial for constructing experiences, as environmental cues strongly influence psychological responses, including emotions.

The physical environment significantly affects the overall museum experience; and, (c) the social stimuli that have a significant impact on consumption processes, defining an individual's role in society and shaping their self-image on various levels. Museums have the potential to provide engaging social contexts through appropriately designed experiences. These interactive stimuli vary in intensity, control, and aggregation (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), collectively contributing to shaping customer experiences. These interactions affect both the personal and social dimensions of the visitor experience (Sheng & Ming-Chia, 2012).

Incorporating multiple stimuli into a customer experience enhances its richness, completeness, and overall engagement. While this principle is well-established in consumer behavior, comprehensive analyses regarding stimuli and their effects on visitor experiences within the context of museums appear to be lacking. Amidst the plethora of possible contributors to the visitor experience, our study focuses on two variables particularly relevant to museums: the comprehensiveness of experiences in terms of the museum space visited and the social orientation of the museum experience measured through the number of companions during the visit. Indeed, for visitors to enjoy a museum visit, they must feel comfortable within that specific environment, making spatial factors and social interactions pivotal in shaping museum experiences and memories (Kottasz, 2006; Vom Lehn, 2006). While the significance of the physical environment has long been recognized in environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), the relevance of social exchange has emerged more recently. Recent studies suggest that “the personal relationship between the visitors brings them a new perspective on the museum exhibits, helping them see new meaning and relevance in the artifacts in light of their connection” (Ryding et al., 2021: p. 1151).

Specifically, our focus is on the extent to which the museum experience encompasses the spatial layout of the museum and the number of companions during the visit. These two variables possess three distinctive characteristics that merit investigation: they are both (1) easily observable, (2) promising in terms of enhancing visitors' favorability, and (3) highly amenable to managerial design. As a result:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The more comprehensive the museum experience, the more favorable the visitor reactions toward it.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The more socially oriented the museum experience, the more favorable the visitor reactions toward it.

1.3. Co-creation of the museum visitor experience

Museum experiences are inherently dynamic and interactive, with visitors actively participating and co-creating the encounters, leading to a multitude of potential experiences. Whenever individuals engage in an experience, it becomes a co-created process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008).

Indeed, museum experiences primarily result from co-creation, evolving through ongoing interactions with visitors that can only be partially anticipated and predetermined. Visitors engage in a dialogue with artworks, collaboratively constructing educational and aesthetic experiences that are infused with unforeseen and unique meanings (Caldwell, 2000). Visitors adopt an active participatory role within the learning environment, investing significantly in cognitive, emotional, and imaginative aspects. The proliferation of touchpoints and channels, facilitated by technological solutions and increased visitor interaction (Edelman & Singer, 2015), allows museums to connect with current and potential visitors, share cultural projects, and elevate their interactive value as a core driver of success (Padanyi & Gainer, 2004). This heightened level of consumer involvement restricts the potential for standardizing the visitor experience.

Given the diverse range of touchpoints, channels, and the multitude of visitor profiles, each with its distinct subjectivities, visitors are presented with extensive opportunities to co-create personalized experiences. These experiences evolve before, during, and after visits, catering to distinctly varied visitor profiles (Falk & Dierking, 1992). Despite the pervasive nature of co-creation in visitor experiences, numerous questions remain unanswered. For example, when visitors co-create, they gain a heightened level of control over their museum experiences during the process of immersion or appropriation. However, it remains uncertain whether the dominance of the

environment by visitors leads to more favorable experiences. According to the environmental psychology approach (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), dominance refers to the extent to which an individual feels in control of or free to act within a situation. Unlike other dimensions such as pleasure and arousal, its impact on visitor responses is yet to be clearly understood. Therefore, our study capitalizes on the co-creative aspect of museum experiences, focuses on dominance, and presents our final hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 4 (H4).** The more pronounced the visitors' apparent dominance of the museum experience, the more favorable their reactions toward it.

2. Empirical analysis

2.1. Research approach and context

We embarked on an extensive qualitative and quantitative research endeavor that spanned 10 months to delve into the realm of the Capitoline Museums. The selection of the Capitoline Museums was guided by three pivotal reasons. Firstly, the museum holds an exceptional heritage, preserving the legacy of Ancient Rome, and it stands as a globally renowned institution. Its collection boasts iconic works such as Bernini's Medusa and Caravaggio's Fortune Teller, alongside exquisite classical sculptures including the Capitoline She-wolf, the Capitoline Venus, and the Dying Gaul. Established in December 1733 by Clemente XII Corsini (r. 1730-1740) with the mission of "bringing to the public" its treasures, the Capitoline Museums hold historical significance as the world's first modern museum. Secondly, the Capitoline Museums actively enhance and integrate tourist and cultural services to cultivate enduring and engaging relationships with external stakeholders. Thirdly, the complexity of its visitor experience presents itself from various perspectives. In terms of governance, the visitor experience reflects its public nature, characterized as being "directly controlled and managed, and fully funded (through the government or culture department budget allocations on which they depend) by a central or sub-central government" (Camarero, Garrido, Vicente, & Redondo, 2019: p. 1376).

Specifically, the museum is overseen and operated by the Rome City Council through the Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali. From a managerial perspective, the visitor experience has been shaped by a longstanding history of hierarchical administration (Osborne & Brown, 2005). However, from a marketing standpoint, the museum tends to adopt a product-oriented approach, potentially underestimating the importance of achieving market success (Fernández-Blanco & Prieto-Rodríguez, 2011).

Architecturally, the Capitoline Museums' experience is intricately intertwined with a multitude of architectural challenges originating from the original functions of its three buildings: (1) Palazzo dei Conservatori, which once served as the seat of Roman magistrates; (2) Palazzo Nuovo, located alongside the Piazza del Campidoglio and designed by Michelangelo; and (3) Palazzo Clementino-Caffarelli, a distinct yet interconnected structure in the museum complex.

2.2. *Research design and data collection*

A variety of desk, qualitative (semi-structured in-depth interviews and subjective personal introspection), and quantitative (non-participant observation and questionnaires) analyses have been conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the visitor experience at the Capitoline Museums and to delve into the journeys of its visitors. By utilizing multiple methods, we aimed to triangulate data and perspectives, enhancing the robustness of our findings. Our extensive field research encompassed three categories of participants: museum staff, visitors, and researchers. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of our data collection initiatives, outlining the number and profiles of participants, the methodologies employed, the rationale for participant selection, and the specific areas of investigation. This diverse participant pool brings together both internal and external viewpoints on the visitor experiences, aligning with the recommendations of Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

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In the first place, we started with a preliminary desk analysis, involving the collection of archival information and textual data to assess the museum's overall context. Collaborating with staff members provided valuable insights into the museum's framework, including the visitor journey map, educational mission, and market strategy. This initial phase facilitated our understanding of the interactions between the museum and its visitors, which in turn informed our research design.

Subsequently, we run two qualitative techniques involving visitors and researchers. First, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten visitors selected at the outset. The decision to conduct in-depth interviews was based on the potential of these interviews to allow visitors to freely express their thoughts and judgments without external influences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), thereby offering an authentic and comprehensive perspective from the visitors' viewpoints (Kvale, 1996). Detailed personal notes were taken to enhance the accuracy of understanding their opinions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). A diverse group of visitors was chosen, considering factors such as age, gender, and their level of interest in museums, to explore a wide range of experiences. Visitors were recruited on-site after completing their museum visits and were subsequently invited to participate in further interviews at their convenience. On average, the interviews lasted about 90 minutes. To gain insight into their experiences, visitors were queried about their emotional and cognitive processes during their museum visit, the services, and touchpoints that captured their attention, their perception of an ideal museum considering attributes, benefits, and values, as well as their level of engagement during the visit. The inquiry continued until subsequent interviews no longer yielded new insights. The collected data underwent an open data coding process through thematic analysis. Each researcher reviewed the verbatim responses and notes, categorizing units of analysis based on pre-identified concepts, such as internal processes and visitor services, as well as emerging concepts (Gummesson, 2017). The second qualitative research technique investigated the researchers' own experiences by way of the subjective personal introspection method, an

interpretative qualitative research approach introduced by Holbrook (1995) and acknowledged as "an appropriate approach to the study of arts marketing" (Hart, Kerrigan, & Vom Lehn, 2016, p. 378). In the initial phase of the research design, the researchers visited the Capitoline Museums twice to familiarize themselves with the museum and personally undergo the visitor experience, concentrating on the mental and emotional processes involved and identifying key touchpoints. Subsequently, they reflected on their individual visitor experiences to uncover emotions and meanings, greatly enriching the exploratory analysis in conjunction with other research methods (Brown, 1998; Woodside, 2004, 2006).

After completing the qualitative analysis, we proceeded to the final quantitative phase, which involved examining visitor behaviors (captured through the non-participant observation technique) and gathering attitudinal data via a questionnaire. This allowed us to correlate information within the same sample of visitors. The non-participant observation technique was chosen to gain insights into non-verbal behaviors and interactions within the specific museum environment (Adler & Adler, 1994) because it ensures the integrity of data by minimizing potential influences from researchers or the project itself (Pearsall, 1970; Jorgensen, 1989). From the pool of visitors entering the museum through the metal detector, a randomized sample of 111 visitors was observed, with every third visitor included. The observation followed a structured scheme, documenting behaviors and interactions with the physical environment, museum staff, and fellow visitors. The recorded information encompassed their chosen route, the amount of time spent in different sections, the number of people accompanying them, and whether they displayed dominance over their experience, indicating a sense of control in the spaces they occupied. Conversely, the observation also accounted for instances where visitors appeared disoriented, as indicated by behaviors such as unsuccessful attempts to seek information, wandering, or verbally expressing confusion and a lack of control within the environment. After the museum visit and observations, researchers approached the visitors, explained the research design, invited them to complete a questionnaire, and requested their consent to include their data in the study. Eleven visitors declined to participate after being

observed, resulting in their exclusion from the sample. Ultimately, 100 visitors agreed to take part, and by combining observational and attitudinal data, a more comprehensive understanding of their experience was achieved (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The questionnaire, provided in four languages (Italian, English, French, and Spanish) to cater to diverse visitor backgrounds, collected data in two main categories:

a) Visitor profile (Table 2), including age (with an average of 37.54 years, SD=14.921), gender (54% women), educational background (61% possessing at least a degree), employment status (47% employed), nationality (31% Italian), familiarity with the Capitoline Museums (with an average of 0.5 visits in the previous 5 years), and general museum visits (with an average of 7.8 museum visits in the last 5 years).
b) Visitor attitudinal responses to Capitoline Museums experiences, investigated through overall visitor satisfaction (measured using a single-item 9-point scale) and visitor delight in each of the eight museum areas (represented by eight dummy variables indicating whether each area was one of the three most satisfying; coded as 0 if not mentioned, and 1 otherwise).

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The sample closely resembles the profile of the participants in the customer satisfaction survey, which is the only available data concerning visitors to the Capitoline Museums. To ensure the reliability of the observational scheme, questionnaire, and the entire procedure, a pre-test trial was conducted involving 10 individuals. With this comprehensive array of collected data, our research moves forward to testing our hypotheses.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Before delving into testing the four hypotheses, we conducted two preliminary analyses of the museum experience.

First, we delineated eight distinct sections of the visitor experience, which were identified as key cohesive zones within the visitor's journey based on input from museum curators. These areas are characterized by their architectural location and the heritage they exhibit. As a result, these sections are self-contained entities both architecturally and conceptually. The finalized segments of the Capitoline Museums experience include:

1. The first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori, featuring notable works like the Capitoline She-wolf (currently located in the Exedra of Marco Aurelio).
2. The Exedra of Marco Aurelio and the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.
3. The Gallery of Paintings, showcasing works by Caravaggio, Titian, and Rubens.
4. The area within Palazzo Clementino-Caffarelli, highlighting the medal collection.
5. Palazzo Nuovo, where the Dying Gaul is exhibited.
6. The Tabularium, offering views of the Roman Forum.
7. The Lapidary Gallery, housing the Capitoline epigraphic collection.
8. The temporary exhibition space.

These sections are distinguished by their architectural layout and the significant heritage they encompass.

Secondly, by tracking visitors through observational data, we identified the most common visitor route taken at the Capitoline Museums (as illustrated in Figure 1).

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The Capitoline Museums' overall experience commences at the entrance of Palazzo dei Conservatori, where initial touchpoints include the ticket office, metal detector, and cloakroom. The journey then progresses to the first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori. In these initial rooms, which

house the renowned Capitoline She-wolf, visitors spent a significant amount of time, with an average duration of 17 minutes (*SD*=10.28), and 10% of the sample dedicating at least half an hour. One visitor during our study notably spent over seven minutes admiring this masterpiece.

On the first floor, the typical visitor path proceeds to the Exedra, where the prominent statue of Marcus Aurelius garners the attention of 84% of the sample. Many visitors engage in activities such as taking photographs (47%) or sitting on the stairs and sofas (47%). The journey then leads towards the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, with 5% of the sample stopping to read information panels and merely 3% interacting with the available PCs to gain a deeper understanding (recently replaced by modern touchscreens). The route then takes in the Horti Room, although 15% of the sample bypassed it and proceeded directly to the second floor.

Observations indicated that 75% of the sample continued to the second floor via the staircase, leading directly to the Gallery of Paintings. Within this gallery, 26% of the sample sat in front of the two Caravaggio paintings. The primary route guided 68% of the sample to the lower ground floor and the tunnel leading to Palazzo Nuovo. This area holds significance due to architectural constraints. Of the sample, 28% proceeded directly to Palazzo Nuovo, while 38% inquired with attendants for directions and 34% consulted available maps.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the route on the lower ground floor is relatively short. The Lapidary Gallery, situated beneath Rome's City Hall, was explored by visitors in less than three minutes on average (SD=3.5), the time it takes to traverse, and then proceed directly to the striking view of the Roman Forum. After experiencing the view, the primary route leads to the ground and first floors of Palazzo Nuovo. Within Palazzo Nuovo, many visitors take the opportunity to relax in the inner courtyard. Only 10% ventured towards the Egyptian Room. To conclude the visit to museum areas, 86% of the sample utilized the staircase and elevator to explore the first floor, home to the masterpieces of the Dying Gaul (ranked third among the museum's masterpieces by 8% of the sample) and the Capitoline Venus (ranked fourth by 6% of the sample). This marks the conclusion of the museum area visit, with the route guiding visitors to the exit of Palazzo Nuovo.

3.2. Test of the hypotheses

By consolidating the collected data from each visitor into a comprehensive database, we were able to create a comprehensive overview that encompasses both attitudinal and behavioral aspects, facilitating the testing of H1. This synthesis of visitor experiences and their journeys throughout the museum enriches the depth of our investigation. When examining these data concerning the entire experience, the findings highlight a notably high level of visitor satisfaction, with an average overall satisfaction rating of 7.53 (*SD*=1.298). Additionally, the duration of the experience is substantial, as visitors spent an average of 101 minutes (*SD*=40.709) within the museum, with durations ranging from 24 minutes to over 4 hours. Remarkably, these two indicators of visitor reactions exhibit a significantly positive correlation (r=.381; p<.001), thereby confirming H1.

However, upon closer examination of the attitudinal and behavioral aspects of visitor reactions, specifically regarding visitor delight (attitudinal data derived from the questionnaire) and the time spent during visits (behavioral data collected via observational analysis), it becomes evident that the correlation between these two dimensions is less robust than initially anticipated. The data reveal notable variations in the levels of delight experienced across the eight identified museum experience areas. Some areas consistently achieve the highest levels of visitor delight, frequently being mentioned among the top three enjoyable areas. Notable examples include the first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori (80%), the Gallery of Paintings (48%), Palazzo Nuovo (46%), and the Tabularium (45%). However, the areas examined do not consistently correspond to the time visitors spend within them: certain areas are extensively explored (such as the first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori, where visitors spend an average of more than 16 minutes; *SD*=10.282), while others are experienced more briefly (on average, visitors spend less than 1 minute in Palazzo Clementino-Caffarelli). Table 3 provides the key statistics for these variables. To investigate the relationship between visitor delight and time spent, a series of independent sample t-tests were conducted. These

tests aimed to identify significant differences in the duration of time spent within each area based on the categorical variable "delight." The outcomes exhibit diversity, as shown in Table 4.

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Please insert Table 3 and Table 4 here

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For Palazzo Clementino-Caffarelli and the temporary exhibition area, the limited sample size (<5) makes it impractical to conduct significance tests. The findings suggest that within the Capitoline Museums, the hypothesis that visitors expressing high satisfaction with a particular area would spend more time exploring it is not consistently supported. Among the six instances examined, the results show that in three cases – specifically, Palazzo Nuovo, the Tabularium, and the Gallery of Paintings – visitors do indeed spend significantly more time in areas they recall as particularly satisfying, nearly doubling their time within those spaces. However, in the remaining three areas (the first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori, $t(98)=.933$, $p=NS$; the Lapidary Gallery, $t(98)=-1.904$, $p=NS$; the Exedra of Marco Aurelio and the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, $t(98)=-.097$, $p=NS$), the findings reveal no substantial differences in the time spent between those who express delight and those who do not. This provides partial support for H1.

Furthermore, our dataset allows us to explore visitor responses regarding both the comprehensive and social aspects of the museum experience. Due to the limitations of our research design, which restricts causal inference between visitor satisfaction and interactions with physical stimuli (i.e., does visitor satisfaction lead to visiting more areas, or vice versa?), we conducted correlational analyses in both scenarios to assess H2 and H3.

To evaluate the comprehensiveness of the museum experience, we analyzed the number of areas each visitor explored. On average, visitors engaged with approximately 67.8% of the entire museum experience, exploring an average of 5.43 areas (SD=1.395) out of the eight examined. The number of areas visited ranged from a minimum of two areas (6% of the sample) to a maximum of all eight areas (3% of the sample). The results suggest that there is no significant correlation

between visitor satisfaction and the number of areas visited (r=.135, p=*NS*), leading to the conclusion that H2 is not supported.

In relation to H3, the socially-oriented aspect of the museum experience was evaluated by considering the number of companions accompanying each visitor during their museum visit. On average, visitors explored the Capitoline Museums in small groups, with an average of 1.835 companions (*SD*=1.469). The number of companions for each visitor ranged from 0 to 8. The findings reveal a significant correlation between visitor satisfaction and the size of the companion group (r=.181; p=.036), providing support for H3.

To test (H4), the concept of apparent dominance was examined using a dummy variable that indicates whether visitors exhibited behaviors associated with dominance during their museum experience. This variable was coded as 1 if the visitor did not engage in behaviors such as looking for information without success, going up and down to find a way through, or verbally expressing disorientation and lack of dominance of the environment (73% of the cases). Conversely, the variable was coded as 0 if the visitor displayed any of these disoriented behaviors (27% of the cases). The results of the t-test analysis, reported in Table 5, revealed a non-significant difference between the two clusters of people in terms of their overall reported satisfaction (t(98)=.588, p=*NS*). Consequently, even when visitors appeared to be dominant in their museum experiences, this state of dominance did not significantly impact their reported satisfaction. Therefore, H4 is not supported by the findings.

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4. Discussion

Every organization aims to provide exceptional customer value by creating captivating experiences that lead to success and have various positive effects on market performance (Harmeling, Moffett,

Arnold, & Carlson, 2017). In pursuit of this goal, mapping the customer journey and comprehending the experience from an individual perspective are immensely helpful. However, these tasks pose challenges for museums due to the intricate nature of the experiences they offer and their influence on visitors' responses. Our research reveals four noteworthy characteristics of these connections.

First, visitors' overall attitudinal and behavioral responses are coherent, but when dissecting the museum experience into specific units, there emerges a certain level of inconsistency between the two reactions. As anticipated, a more content visitor tends to spend more time exploring the museum as a whole. However, this correlation doesn't uniformly apply when assessing visitor delight and the time spent in each distinct area. Our findings reveal that this relationship between visitor delight and time spent holds true for only certain specific areas. Conversely, in other instances (particularly in highly popular areas like the first floor of Palazzo dei Conservatori and the Exedra of Marco Aurelio and the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus), this expected connection breaks down. In such cases, the duration of the visit doesn't significantly differ between visitors who are delighted and those who aren't. This suggests that the interplay between visitor attitudes and behaviors can be intricate and influenced by various factors such as the substantial popularity of the renowned masterpieces housed in these areas, prompting visitors to appreciate them regardless of their level of delight. Museums need to recognize and address the complexity of visitor experiences, considering both overall satisfaction and detailed interactions within different sections.

Second, our study challenges the assumption that a comprehensive visit to a museum is necessary for high visitor satisfaction. Visitors who explore only specific parts of the museum can still have a satisfying experience, suggesting that museums should focus on providing quality interactions and experiences within each area, rather than solely emphasizing a complete visit. Museums should focus on offering high-quality and engaging experiences across different parts of the institution. This has implications for how museums design and curate their spaces to cater to diverse visitor preferences.

Third, our research demonstrates that the presence of companions significantly enhances visitor satisfaction. Museums that provide opportunities for social interactions and experiences can create additional value for their visitors by facilitating connections and relationships among them. This finding suggests that museums could design programs or spaces that encourage social engagement, acknowledging their potential as cultural and social hubs.

Finally, our study reveals that visitor satisfaction is not contingent on individuals feeling in control or dominant during their museum experiences. Even visitors who appear disoriented or confused can still find their experiences satisfying. This suggests that visitors might value immersive and engaging experiences over a sense of control, emphasizing the importance of offering rich and captivating encounters. This outcome could be influenced by the diverse range of visitor expectations, as previous research has shown that individuals vary widely in their preferences and motivations, with some seeking more challenging and meaningful encounters rather than just seeking ease and entertainment (Sheng & Ming-Chia, 2012). In any case, museums should prioritize creating immersive and emotionally resonant experiences.

Like any study, our paper is subject to certain limitations that suggest potential avenues for future research. Specifically, there are at least three directions that could be pursued to expand our understanding. First, while our study offers a comprehensive framework, there is room to incorporate additional research techniques to gather diverse and novel data, enhancing the depth of insights. For instance, techniques like Z-met, which thanks to the use of images go deeply into the individual unconscious dimension, could uncover unexplored aspects of the visitor experience and reveal subconscious obstacles faced by visitors (Proietti & Addis, 2022). Various research techniques can be harnessed, but the challenge lies in integrating them into a unified dataset that serves as the foundation for subsequent statistical analysis. According to a survey of 400 executives focused on customer experience management, 51% identified achieving a "single view" of the customer as a primary challenge (Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2014). Thus, the process of obtaining and integrating both behavioral and attitudinal data for each visitor, as done for

the Capitoline Museums, becomes a critical precursor for meaningful analysis. The integration of different data sources can yield valuable insights and implications for advanced management strategies.

A second promising avenue for future exploration pertains to the temporal dimension and the broader consumption context. Our current study examines the interactive funnel between the Capitoline Museums and visitors within a specific timeframe. Expanding this project could involve tracking visitors over extended periods to identify repeat visits and behaviors. Additionally, the perspective on cultural consumption constellations could be broadened to encompass other behaviors, such as visits to different museums, cultural institutions, and even other product categories, providing a holistic view of the city's overall consumption platform.

Lastly, further research could delve into the analysis of outcomes beyond visitor satisfaction. While visitor satisfaction was chosen as the primary KPIs for measuring success in the context of the Capitoline Museums, other museums might prioritize different KPIs, such as net promoter score or customer loyalty. Adopting different KPIs could lead to adjustments in the research design for mapping the visitor journey. Regardless of the chosen yardstick, the analysis process should assess the potential impact of various experience features and visitor profiles to identify the key drivers that warrant future investments. Streamlining the analysis with a single measure of success simplifies comprehension for organizations.

Ultimately, the need for continued research in this vital area extends beyond specific museums and extends to society at large. A more profound understanding of the visitor experience can not only help museums design enhanced offerings but also raise the competitive bar for the entire industry, transforming places into beloved destination brands (Aro, Suomi, & Saraniemi, 2018). Mastering the art of crafting visitor experiences not only benefits museums but also contributes to societal well-being. Knowledge has always been a pivotal factor for competitive advantage in any context (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and a complete grasp of customer knowledge—encompassing life situations, resources, capabilities, and values—is foundational (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008;

Shah, Rust, Parasuraman, Staelin, & Day, 2006). A research design that generates fresh customer insights remains a central driver of superior performance (Slater, 1997).

5. Conclusion

Our study identifies four different strategies that museums could adopt to enhance satisfaction and improve efficiency in these experiences. Visitor satisfaction increases with more social and thematic visitor experiences. Our research underscores the importance of the social aspect, indicating that museum managers should prioritize social interactions, even if they aren't directly linked to physical touchpoints. This could involve creating social platforms within museums where visitors can connect and engage with each other, fostering new social bonds. Indeed, museums can capitalize on the inherent social nature of the museum visit. Recognizing that visiting a museum is not just an individual experience but a social practice where people come together to explore, learn, and engage can lead to more effective strategies for enhancing the visitor experience. Since visitors aim to connect with others who share similar interests or curiosities, creating spaces and opportunities for social interactions, discussions, and shared experiences can significantly enhance the value that museums offer to their visitors. By fostering a sense of community and providing platforms for dialogue, museums can unlock new value areas, elevate the overall experience, and make it more memorable and fulfilling for their visitors.

At the same time, our study indicates that visitor satisfaction doesn't necessarily hinge on the completeness of the museum experience: the extent to which visitors explore all areas of the museum doesn't significantly impact their reactions. Museums can capitalize on liberatory and anti-functional experiences, as highlighted by Roederer and Filser (2018). Thus, museums can benefit from designing shorter, themed experiences that align with the interests of their target audience. This strategy enables museums to accommodate a wider array of visitor preferences and interests, aligning their cultural initiatives more closely with their audience's inclinations rather than solely emphasizing the exceptional quality of their collection.

With regard to the enhancement of efficiency in museum experiences, two key conclusions emerge, i.e. the need to track visitors to gain a comprehensive understanding of their multidimensional reactions, and the need for a bottom-up approach in designing the visitor experiences.

Tracking visitors involves employing a multi-method approach for data collection, enabling an integrated and realistic view of the visitor experience. Employing various research methods and techniques would capture both explicit and implicit reactions, encompassing cognitive and emotional aspects. By adopting a flexible approach and integrating different dimensions, museums can develop a comprehensive framework to understand visitor experiences. This strategy emphasizes the significance of knowing available demographic profiles, attitudinal variables, and visitor expectations (Falk & Dierking, 1992), actively listening to visitors, and observing their behaviors to create a customer-centered approach (Norton & Pine, 2013). Only by carefully integrating attitudinal and behavioral data, museums can avoid misleading conclusions driven by incomplete views of the visitor experience. For instance, analyzing the behavioral observation of visitors to the Gallery of Paintings might indicate a lengthy visit, but it might not reveal the significant time differences between those who appreciate the area and those who do not. Similarly, our results challenge the assumption that satisfaction and time spent are invariably linked.

The second efficiency-oriented strategy cautions against the assumption that strategies aimed at making the museum visit easy and user-friendly will invariably lead to satisfying experiences for visitors. The highly co-creative nature of museum experiences could result in visitors who appreciate or tolerate a certain degree of confusion within the experience. This indicates that there is no single optimal solution for museum experiences. In settings rich with masterpieces, the interactive nature of museum visits allows for multiple equally satisfying routes. Consequently, the number of areas visited and apparent visitor disorientation do not significantly impact visitor satisfaction. This finding aligns with a previous study by Yoshimura, Sobolevsky, Ratti, Girardin, Carrascal, Blat, and Sinatra (2014), which found no statistically significant differences in visiting

styles between short-stay and long-stay visitors. Conventional top-down approaches to mapping customer journeys often focus on identifying the optimal sequence of touchpoints for an ideal customer experience, an approach common in for-profit industries. However, in museum settings, this approach neglects the diversity of subjective customer journeys that emerge due to consumers actively participating in shaping their unique experiences. As a result, the concept of a universally "best" experience becomes untenable. Museums' co-creative experiences stem from personalized, subjective, complex, and emotionally rich interactions with visitors. The immersive and highly engaging nature of museum visits calls for treating visitors not as passive users confined to predefined offerings and predetermined paths, but as active creators of solicited experiences. Various potential journeys can cater to specific visitor desires and needs, an essential consideration as museums aim to cultivate enduring relationships with multiple stakeholders (Camarero, Garrido, Vicente, & Redondo, 2019). Arts, as an industry, engage a diverse public more extensively than other sectors (Butler, 2000). Therefore, museums should analyze data holistically, managing heterogeneity instead of focusing on specific data types collected through particular channels at specific times (Maklan, Antonetti, & Whitty, 2017).

In conclusion, innovations in designing successful visitor experiences in museums should offer shorter yet focused experiences, in museums that are meeting places for interactions, that track visitors to integrate their behavioral and attitudinal data, and that are open to their co-creative participation. Since to implement these strategies, a comprehensive analytical approach and a customer-centric approach are needed (Ordenes, Theodoulidis, Burton, Gruber, & Zaki, 2014), museums have to reinvent themselves investing in innovative and advanced skills, competencies and tools that are often lacking (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014; Maklan, Antonetti, & Whitty, 2017).

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Table 1. Overview of the research design in the Capitoline Museums' case

Participants	**Expected benefits of their involvement in the research project**	**Investigated area of knowledge**	**Research techniques used**	**Profiles**
Visitors	Visitors are the key informants providing central information on their attitudes	Visitor insights on their experiences with particular regard to emotions, cognitive processes, services, and touchpoints that attracted their attention; engagement	Qualitative: In-depth interviews	10 visitors of different ages, genders, and experiences
	The actual behaviors of people during the visit with specific regard to interactions with the museums and with other people; Visitors' attitudes, expectations, and profiles (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)	Behavioral and attitudinal data	Quantitative: Non-participant observation & questionnaire	A random sample of 100 visitors who have first been observed during their experience at the Capitoline Museums through non-participant observation and have then been administered a questionnaire after completing their visit
Researchers	Researchers provide useful insights combining consumers' and researchers' perspectives, and reflecting on their own experiences (Holbrook, 2005, 2006)	Fresh and personal approach towards customer experience, with specific regard to touchpoints and emotional and cognitive reactions	Qualitative: Subjective Personal Introspection	3 researchers

Table 2. Visitor profile (a) qualitative and (b) quantitative variables

Qualitative variables		
Variable		*Frequency and %*
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Education	Compulsory education	5
	High school degree	34
	Graduate and post-graduate degree	61
Occupation	Employee	47
	Entrepreneur/Self-employed	14
	Student	24
	Other	15
Nationality	Italian	31
	Other country	69

Quantitative variables					
Variable	*N*	*Min*	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*
Age	100	14	70	37.5	14.9
Familiarity with museums*:					
• Capitoline	100	0	10	0.5	1.3
• Museums and exhibitions in general	100	0	39	7.8	7.7

Note. *: number of times visiting the Capitoline Museums/museums and exhibitions in general in the last 5 years excluded today

Table 3. Visitor delight and time spent in each area of the visitor experience

Area of the visitor experience at the Capitoline Museums	*Top 3 Visitor Delight Area**	*Time spent (minutes)*			
		Min	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*
Palazzo dei Conservatori – 1st floor	80	0	52.0	16.8	10.3
Palazzo Nuovo	46	0	68.1	15.9	11.6
Tabularium	45	0	35.0	7.6	6.2
Lapidary Gallery	7	0	15.3	2.6	3.5
Gallery of Paintings	48	0	64.4	14.1	12.1
Palazzo Clementino-Caffarelli	2	0	18.2	.9	3.1
Exedra of Marco Aurelio & Jupiter Capitolinus Temple	27	0	37.2	5.9	5.4
Temporary exhibition	2	0	25.0	1.0	3.6

Note. Sample size (N) = 100; *: *frequency and %.*

Table 4. Differences in time spent in the eight areas of the visitor experience by visitor delight

The Capitoline Museums Area	*Visitor Delight*	*Visitors number*	*Time spent (in min)*	*t-test(98) (p-value)*
Palazzo dei Conservatori – 1st floor	1	80	16.1	.933 (*NS*)
	0	20	19.3	
Palazzo Nuovo	1	46	20.5	-3.806 (.000)
	0	54	12.0	
Tabularium	1	45	10.7	-4.981 (.000)
	0	55	5.1	
Lapidary Gallery	1	7	4.1	-1.904 (*NS*)
	0	93	2.4	
Gallery of Paintings	1	48	19.0	-4.171 (.000)
	0	52	9.6	
Exedra of Marco Aurelio & Jupiter Capitolinus Temple	1	27	7.4	-.097 (*NS*)
	0	73	7.6	

*: coded 1=mentioned among top 3; 0=not mentioned.

Table 5. Differences in overall visitor satisfaction by the visitor apparent dominance/disorientation

Apparent dominance/disorientation	*N*	*Visitor satisfaction*	*t-test(98) (p-value)*
Dominance	73	7.6	.588 (*NS*)
Disorientation	27	7.4	

Figure 1. The overall main visitor journey at the Capitoline Museums

