USER EXPERIENCE (UX) IN THE CULTURAL FIELD

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ABSTRACT

This commentary paper aims to promote the acknowledgment of user experience (UX) research principles in the cultural field. As discussed in the preceding dissertation, *The Meaning of Participation: Detecting the space for inclusive strategies in the Finnish and German museum context* (2022), efforts to get to know one's audience (or users) should not be ignored. What is the meaning of UX research, why should it be used sustainably, and how can it be beneficial? This paper aims to answer these questions by explaining and unfolding the reasons for conducting such research and proposing it to the cultural audience development work.

Knowing Your User

"Know your user" is a user-centered design mantra (Penin, 2018, p. 150). In the context of the cultural field we could also say, "know your visitor" or "know your participant." Why should we? As Sternfeld (2012) asks, "why should anyone be interested in taking part in a game invented entirely by others?" UX is an evergrowing part of the everyday vocabulary, for example, in the IT, automotive, and other more technical industries, to make informed, research-based design decisions. Because the cultural field is from people and for people, it would be worthwhile to discover all the stakeholders more profoundly and promote inclusion through co-creation.

Making Informed Design Decisions

The demand of knowing your users can be grounded on broad ethical human rights reasons because all the museums "have duties to fulfill regarding human rights" (McGhie, 2020, p. 11) due to their public, non-profit role in society. Working with participation is a concrete way of trying to reach these aims (Shutzberg, 2016), and in order to fulfill the standards of participation, knowing one's user is essential. While visitor research gathers the needed information to become more inclusive, researching non-visitors could uncover the barriers to involvement (Wintzerith, 2010). Exploring visitor expectations has also been a key to achieving successful exhibitions and developing a mode of communication that helps connect with the audiences (Sarraf & Bruno, 2013).

According to Rose Paquet Kinsley, "redistribution remedies tend to be focused on getting people to the museum and reducing barriers to access. These remedies, however, are limited in that they fail to address visitors' experience once they get in the museum" (Kinsley, 2016, p. 485). Indeed, the reasons for experience research should be straightforward. If one aims for participation and benefitting your institution with their skills, backgrounds, stories, and histories, it is ethical to get to know them. Consider communicating, listening, and acknowledging the persons taking part in the action by utilizing the shared wisdom to benefit all the stakeholders.

As essential as it is to clarify the institutions' focuses in implementing collaborative processes, it is also essential to discover and value the focuses of those participating (Fox, 2010). One-way decision-making on behalf of the powerholders may make participation terms unattractive. Those who seem to reject an offer might, in fact, be rejecting the terms of participation (The World Bank, 2013).

Consider monitoring participants' experiences throughout and after the process. As a recent study, *The Aftermaths of Participation* (Boersma, 2023) proposes, the interest towards participants should not be limited to the processes. In an ethical sense, it should be expanded to the experiences after the participation. Perhaps here is the chance to keep in contact with those former participants; to discuss, collaborate, and ideate further.

Transforming Through Knowing

The ability to change derives from the ability to criticize ourselves. Educator Lisa Gilbert (2016) applies Mariana Ortega's (2006) concept

of *loving, knowing ignorance*. Gilbert suggests that to become aware of instances of loving, knowing ignorance, and learning to avoid it, it is crucial for museum professionals who hope their institutions to fulfill their educational mission to be open for everyone in a diverse and democratic society (Gilbert, 2016). Satirically, the terms loving and knowing are incomplete, creating ignorance when a knower claims to be both, yet failing to be either. When museums produce knowledge and claim to know without attempting to understand or admitting not to be fully understanding, they create ignorance (Gilbert, 2016).

Moreover, this also means the ability to switch perspectives . Andrew Pekarik (2011) discusses insider and outsider viewpoints. The first point of view assumes that the museum visitors are essentially those who work in museums. These are the "great audiences." If the insiders make designs they personally relate to, visitors will have those same experiences or aspire to have them. The outsider perspective starts from the premise that museum visitors and the museum staff are distinctly different from each other. Therefore, the critical task for museum staff is to understand these differences and use this knowledge to make the museum more effective for more visitors (Pekarik, 2011).

Studying Visitors

Now, you may argue that visitor research is not anything new and has been conducted for decades. Rightfully so. For example, in Germany, visitor research in terms of interest in the audience of public cultural events began at the end of the 19th century (Renz, 2016). The Berlin Institute for Museum Studies at the State Museums of Prussian Cultural Heritage has promoted visitor research since 1979 (Rosenstiel, 1996). Furthermore, the Finnish Museums Association has systematically researched museum visitors since 1982, with the last one conducted in 2021 (Holm & Tyynilä, 2022). The most recent study surveyed over 4,000 museum visitors from 112 museums. The study discusses the attractiveness of the museums and the exhibitions, the likeability of the visits, how much the visitors spend and how much money the museum visits bring to the city when the museum visit is part of an overnight trip (Holm & Tyynilä, 2022).

Since the launch of the Finnish *Museokortti* (Museum Card) (Holm et al., 2017; Museoliitto & YouGov, 2015) the interest towards visitors and visiting motivations seem to have been increased, which nation-wide inquires demonstrate. The Museum Card is a nation-wide service, which allows the card holder limitless visits to all the Finnish museums which are collaborating with this service by paying an annual fee. American professor John Falk and his research team undertook the most recent study with eight Finnish museums and science centers on museums' impact on well-being. The study highlights the public value of such institutions (Falk et al., 2023). Therefore, visitor, value, and image studies have evolved tremendously.

However, the studies tend to focus on arguing the importance of the museum system as it is. The UX research that I am going to discuss in this paper aims to encourage the cultural field to get motivated in self-reflection and change for individual relevance and ethical approaches toward their participants. In the best case, and according to Wintzerith (2010), visitor research "emerges being particularly productive in the field of inclusiveness" (p. 459) by identifying barriers and evaluating outcomes of certain

services. Black (2005) states that if museums acknowledge that they should be audience-centered, an adequately resourced program of visitor studies should be an essential, systematic element of a museum's activities, with the museum director as a critical advocate.

There needs to be a shared understanding and acknowledgment of what kind of research qualifies as sufficient to promote inclusion. For example, quantitative audience mapping and defining visitor profiles are essential tools when planning marketing strategies, but they do not help in understanding the subjective experiences of the visitors. Merely consulting the statistical data of visitors may create an illusion that the visitors are well known when, in reality, the visitors are only known as representatives of some groups (Niemelä, 2011). Moreover, settling to closed-ended feedback loops of visiting satisfaction merely informs whether what is done now is well-liked. Markus Lutz (2011) notes that simple positive feedback can prove misleading. Appropriate knowledge of needs, expectations, and attitudes is a basis for visitor-orientated action (Lutz, 2011). To ensure this, studies should be carried out regularly to ensure sustainability and meaningful results. Evaluation enables a dialogue between the audience and the cultural institution and the achievement of the set goals (Wegner, 2011).

UX for Sustainable UCD

As suggested in my dissertation, service design can provide approaches, methods, and structures for the participatory aims in the cultural field when concepts such as empathy, relevance, and participant ownership are considered essential. Service design, in its simplest sense, is an iterative process of exploration, creation, reflection, and implementation, which are the fundamental approaches to the structure of a complex design process (Stickdorn, 2018). Research and monitoring are essential parts of all these steps, causing iteration. While discussing user experience or UX, user-centered design (UCD) and human-centered design (HCD) come in play by aiming to meet the needs of the user by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Wetter-Edman, 2012). The methods used are qualitative, often ethnographic, such as interviews, observations, shadowing, and close and continuous consideration of users, ensuring that their needs and perspectives are central to developing a new product, service, or process. Gaining understanding means gaining empathy, which helps draw forth inspiration from the user's situation (Wetter-Edman, 2012). Research also clarifies the value and the nature of relations between people and organizations of various kinds (Kimbell, 2018).

"...[I]ndividual's experiential knowledge is valued, and their reality viewed as legitimate and worthy of consideration" (Pollock & Taket, 2014, p. 84). The findings should be consciously acknowledged and used for the benefit of a project or another process. Therefore, the ability to tolerate uncertainty becomes crucial because the exact result of such a process may not be defined beforehand. Indeed, because the service offering is a value proposition the service provider makes to users, it must have a compatible value recognized by users and providers to be successful. Therefore, the service proposition must emerge from research on users, contexts, service organizations, and operational structures (Penin, 2018).
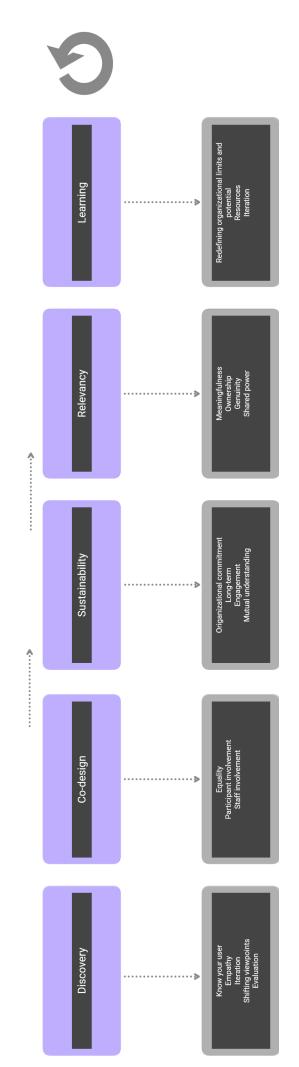
During the beforementioned exploration phase, the needs and goals of the stakeholders will be understood, and the problem will be identified.

This problem might turn out to be something else that at first anticipated (Stickdorn, 2018). After exploration-based creation, a reflection, or testing the creation or a prototype provides an image of the service so that the participants can evaluate it (Stickdorn, 2018). This can be realized through iterative consultations with people through participatory methods and co-design processes throughout the development of service propositions (Penin, 2018). The implementation phase can then produce a more meaningful product.

By combining the comprehensive literature around the concepts of participation and inclusion in the cultural field and the new learnings from the service design field, I suggested an *Inclusion-directed Participation Model* (Schaaf, 2022) for the context of audience development. In this commentary paper I shall present an updated version of this, a *Relevant experience model* (Figure 1), while the fundamental, inclusion-directed idea remains the same. Here the parts collected from the museum and service design fields are combined and renamed and more detailed contents of these points are presented under them. The model does not unfold the "how" of a participatory process, or the outcomes, because that depends on each individual process or a project. However, it points out the "what" that should occur on the human side of the doing, so that it would remain relevant for its makers. It also encourages more detailed monitoring, documentation, and research during a process. For example, to ensure relevancy or sustainability, these need to be discovered through transparent research. This and communication of the findings could occur in discussion situations, ensuring stakeholder awareness, but should be conducted semi-systemically through analysis and communicating the findings through reports or presentations.

Starting from the left, the first point *Discovery,* includes both the very initiative phase of getting to know the target groups or individual participants as well as iterating the process according to the previous findings. Here it is worth dealing personally with a few individuals, as UX research field does, instead of solely relying on statistical visitor studies. This promotes empathy and possibly helps to shift viewpoints from curatorial practices into a more complex understanding of the relationships and aims between the museum and the participants. Furthermore, it can assist in finding the right problem to solve. This approach proposes a transformation from closed-ended processes with clear starting and ending points towards an open-ended and self-improving continuum.

Moving right, *Co-design* emphasizes the equal involvement of the participants and staff members, and possibly other stakeholders such as representatives of relevant groups into the outcomes of the process, meaning, that they are influenced and come from the end-users. On the third point, *Sustainability* reminds us to ensure organizational commitment, including the directory. It also means that mutual aims are understood, acknowledged, and respected. Then, the outcomes of the projects or processes can sustain long-term. Sustainability leads to *Relevancy*. Having a substantial part of the process, the future of the outcomes, and real influence on something visible also to others— power— makes it matter.

The most fundamental difference to the original model is the last point. Previously known as *Obstacles,* this point is now *Learning.* Learning promotes transformation, what the overcoming of obstacles such as miscommunication or fear of losing control also does, but much more than that. The learners here are both the out-of-house participants, but also everyone

Relevant experience model

Discovery	Co-design	Sustainability	Relevancy	Learning
Know your user Empathy Iteration Shifting viewpoints Evaluation	Equality Participant involvement Staff involvement	Organizational commitment Long-term Engagement Mutual understanding	Meaningfulness Ownership Genuinity Shared power	Redefining organizational limits and potential Resources Iteration

Figure 1. Relevant experience model

involved in the process on the organizational side who might discuss, argue, and redesign together. While it might prove challenging to shift viewpoints and make space for more fundamental participant ownership and tolerate unawareness of the final outcomes, allowing learning presumably helps to redefine organizational limits and (re)discover its potential. Here it can also be reviewed how resources are divided. Moreover, as the circle arrow on the right side of this figure indicates, here begins the iteration process to base a next prototype, process, or another project for other participants, leading back to the discovery phase.

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