What do families with children need from a museum?

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Abstract

Family visitors with children are vital audiences to museums. Marketing theory suggest that consumers make purchasing decisions in response to their needs of certain products or service. A purchasing choice is a result from evaluations of different options during the decision-making process. This paper is derived from a qualitative decision-making research. Family interviews including the voice of children were employed to understand the complex behaviour in the pre-purchase decisions. The focus of this paper presents the family needs from museum products based on their selections of a suitable museum product. The analysis studied how particular museums had been chosen as the option of family day outing from three analytic dimensions: taken the insider's perspective, studied the evolution of the decision process in its leisure context and the family evaluations between the emerged museum options.

The inclusion of children in family leisure is a simple fact. Having a relaxing and fun leisure experiences was the dominant desire of family outings. This was particular true for the children. When making family leisure choices, parents tended to constantly considering the nature of the children (they were active and love to play) and seeking a suitable option for the whole family. Museum-visiting was judged as a meaningful leisure choice. Such perception was associated with the educational benefits museums could offer to the children. For parents, the enjoyment of children was the central focus of the any family outings. The museums that offered more interactive and entertainment features became more appealing choices since it would lower the risks of having an unpleasant museum visit and maximise the enjoyment of children.

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What do families with children need from a museum?

Introduction

Family visitors with children account for a significant segment of museum audiences. Most museums target family groups and organise family-oriented events in their programmes. Surprisingly, as Sterry (2004) criticises that even though museum sectors recognise the need to understand their market in order to deliver satisfactory service, few museums collect information about family visitors and little research has been done on understanding what this distinct group needs.

Marketing theory indicates that a purchasing choice normally is derived from the needs of the certain products/service. The final purchasing choices are the results from evaluations of different options during the decision-making process, that is, the process from the theoretical pre-purchase phase to the purchase phase. Subsequently, the outcome of the purchase will be evaluated and taken into account when making the next purchasing decision (Assael 1998, Sheth et al. 1999). This research aims to understand HOW families chose to visit museums in their leisure contexts by a qualitative decision-making approach. Through tracking back how a particular museum was chosen as the family leisure option, the needs of family visitors from museum products were revealed.

Adapted from both the definitions of families (Gilgun 1992) and museum family visitors (Sterry 2004), a family group visitor in this research refers to '*any multi-generational social group of more than two people, containing at least one child, who have biological or legal ties that visit a museum as a unit*'. This paper presents the needs of family groups derived from the initial findings of an in-depth analysis.

Literature review
Museum motivational studies

Previous museum researches into family motivations to visit museums offer a glimpse of the subtle desires in museum participation. Motivational studies tended to ask WHY family visitors with children visit a museum. The motivation-expectation approach dominates the investigation into what happens before a family visits. Table 1 summarises 5 major family motivations to visit museums, including: *education* (opportunities for informal learning or education benefits to children), *entertainment* (having fun), *quality family time*, *the need of social outings* and *the need of children*. These motivational themes suggested the scopes of family needs from museum

products.

A couple of methodological issues remain in previous researches into family visitors. Firstly, adults' perspectives prevail in the representation of family groups. What family members expected and needed from museum products were mainly based on the accounts of parents (Falk & Dierking 1992, McManus 1994, Hooper- Greenhill 1994, Baillie 1996, MORI 2001, Moussouri 2003, Kelly et al. 2004, Sterry 2004). Families as an intimate social group; apparently, parents can articulate what they perceive as the need of their children and the roles children play in making the choices to visit museums. However, the voice of children should not been ignored in order to reflect the nature of a family choice.

Secondly, many studies served to evaluate the relationship between family motivations for museum participation and their impact on family learning in museum (Falk & Dierking 1992, McManus 1994, Moussouri 2003). How families choose to visit particular museums in response to their leisure needs has rarely been highlighted. Baillie (1996) criticises that most museum professionals tend to concentrate museum missions on collection, preservation and interpretation; as a result, how effective an exhibition is delivered to visitors in terms of learning becomes a key interest. She argues this would narrow the understanding of family visitors. Little is known about how museums emerged as the choices of family outings during the pre-purchase decision-making process and how family visitors (both the parents and children) perceived museum products could fulfil their needs.

Thirdly, these motivational studies were mainly investigated by quantitative questionnaire surveys. The motivational factors were defined by the researchers. Motivations are treated as the triggers for the decisions to visit museums. All these researchers studied family choices of museum participation in an exclusive museum context without acknowledging general leisure markets and leisure contexts. Some researchers suggested that these motivational factors are intertwined and inter-related. However, only few attempts have been made at revealing a more holistic and detailed picture of reflecting the complex needs of families from museum products in its leisure contexts.

Table 1: Museum motivational studies on family visitors

Researcher	Examined motivational factors	Key motivational themes	Multiple motivations
Falk & Dierking (1992)	- Social interaction opportunities for parents and children to explore and learn together and to have fun and to relate the museum experience to the family history	• Social interaction • Education • Entertainment • family history	Independent multiple motivations
McManus (1994)	- Seeking informal learning & pleasure experience	• Education • entertainment	Dual agenda
Hooper- Greenhill (1994) & MORI (2001)	- In response to the needs of their children	• The need of the children	Child-oriented motivation
Baillie (1996)	- Educational opportunity in an enjoyable way & opportunity to enjoy being together	• Education, • Entertainment, • Quality family time	Trio motivations
Moussouri (2003)	Motivation factors: - Learning about the subject of the museums or in general - Adult revisited the same museum with their children/grandchildren that they visited in childhood - Having fun - Having a nice day out with family and friends Child-oriented visit: parents, grandparents and other relatives	• Education • Family life-cycle • Entertainment • Quality family time	Multiple and child-oriented motivations
	Family agenda: - Children: expected to see specific object/exhibits and focused on the "doing" aspects. - Parents: expected to see particular theme/subject and intended to influence their children's educational experience and enjoyment. - Grandparents and other relatives: denied any expectations.	• Children: exhibit-specific agenda Parents: subject-specific agenda, influence on children's learning	Multiple agenda/ expectations
Kelly et al. (2004)	- Seeking social interaction and learning together in museums - Family outing as a social event: spend quality time together and maximise the enjoyment of children	Motivations: • Social interaction • Education) Purposes of day out: • Quality family time • Enjoyment of children	Dual motivations Dual purposes of day out:
Sterry (2004)	- Need for both a social outing that offered entertainment and as a place that would enhance a child's learning'	• Need of social outing • Entertainment • Educational benefits to children • Intergenerational benefit	Quartet expectations:

A family pre-purchase decision process approach

When family consumers want to go on a group outing, making a choice that may ultimately cater for the diverse requirements of individual members could be complex. Marketing literature conceptualises consumer behaviour into a three cyclical phases: the pre-purchase phase, the purchase phase and the post-purchase evaluation, as Diagram 1 shown. A purchasing choice is a result of rational considerations of various possibilities during the decision-making process. The decision process of the pre-purchasing phase is conceptualised in a 4-stage model: the need arousal stage, the information search and sharing stage, the alternative evaluation stage and the final choice stage. Subsequently, the outcome of the purchase will be evaluated and taken into account when making the next purchasing decision (Assael 1998, Sheth et al. 1999). The outside-the-house family leisure and vacations are a shared form of consumption, hence, making such choices are normally a joint decision (Assael 1998, Sheth et al. 1999, Kotler et al. 2006). A family decision to visit museums might share this joint attribute.
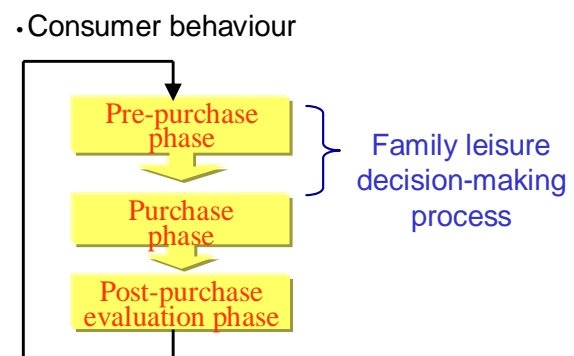
Diagram 1: Three phases of consumer behaviour

Much evidence highlights that children exert significant influence on family leisure and holiday decisions, especially adolescents aged over 12 (Darley and Lim 1986, Swinyard and Sim 1987, Dunne 1999). The influence children have covers both active and passive aspects, that is, through direct involvements and as the objective of parental considerations during the decision-making process (Mangleburg 1990). The influence of children indicates that a potential different perspective between adults and children might exist when making a family leisure choice. However, this issue remains untouched, since many researchers excluded children and only sampled parents as respondents (Jenkins 1979, Darley and Lim 1986, Swinyard and Sim 1987, Dunne 1999). Sterry (2004) argues the under-researched phenomenon of museum family visitors is associated with the difficulties both in collecting information from multi-members and in presenting conflicting opinions. Even so, the conflicting opinions could be treated as the entry points to understand the diverse perspectives of adults and children who play different roles in a family and might have their distinctive needs.

Methodology

Family interviews and the voice of children

Quantitative methods have dominated previous museum studies on family visitors and the decision-making research into family leisure choices. One major weakness of quantitative methods is the failure to yield any insight into the uniqueness and complexity of human behaviour (Saunders et al. 2003). Qualitative methods offer a better means to study family visitors as a whole and to capture the complex meanings behind their actions in leisure contexts. Semi-structured interviews with adults and children together were employed in four museum sites in Taiwan. Due to the limited cognitive and verbal ability of younger children, especially those less than 8 years, the account of child participants was subsequently not as rich as the adults. Nevertheless, this does not take off the weight of what children said. Many children were capable of articulating their perceptions and preference of leisure choices. Moreover, they often reflected an interesting perspective, even more outspoken, while listening to the recollections of their adult members on family leisure choices.

An IPA analytic approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is chosen as the analytic approach in this research. Originally from the discipline of psychology, the IPA aims at an in-depth examination of the participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of these experiences within their personal and social world (Smith 1995, 2004). Semi-structured interview is considered as the best way for an IPA approach, since its flexibility of generating data facilitates to produce a detailed analysis. The IPA approach assumes that the complex meanings of social actors' experiences are not visible and easily accessible. Yet, the picture can be revealed through 2 tactics: by obtaining an *insider's* perspectives and an *interpretative* activity with the verbal accounts (Smith and Eatough 2006). In order to gain a comprehensive picture of the studied phenomenon, the IPA strongly recommends a smaller sample size and an intensive analysis on one interview transcript before moving on to the others. After several readings of all interview transcripts, 20 out of the 37 interviews were chosen as the analytic samples because of their particular richness in reflecting the research questions. These chosen analytic samples were subsequently divided into couple analytic sets in order to carry out a detailed analysis. The following presents the initial findings of the first analytic set of two family interviews. It reveals the family decision-making process to visit museums that served the purpose of a weekend leisure outing.

Findings and discussion

Quick and joint decisions

This paper focuses on what family group visitors needed from museums through tracking back how a museum was chosen to be the final choice of outings. The nature of visiting the chosen museums for the both families was for weekend day outing and an occasional leisure choice for them. These findings echo to the recent museum studies (Kelly et al. 2004, Sterry 2004) - the only two researches that explored the issues of family decisions to visit museums. For both of the sampled families, No. 13 and No. 24, the decisions were made in *last minutes* (on the day before the visits) and made *jointly* with the involvements of parents and children. A simple question '*shall we go out today?*' triggered the leisure decision-making process. The chosen museums were a *compromise* choice between the interests and needs of various family members.

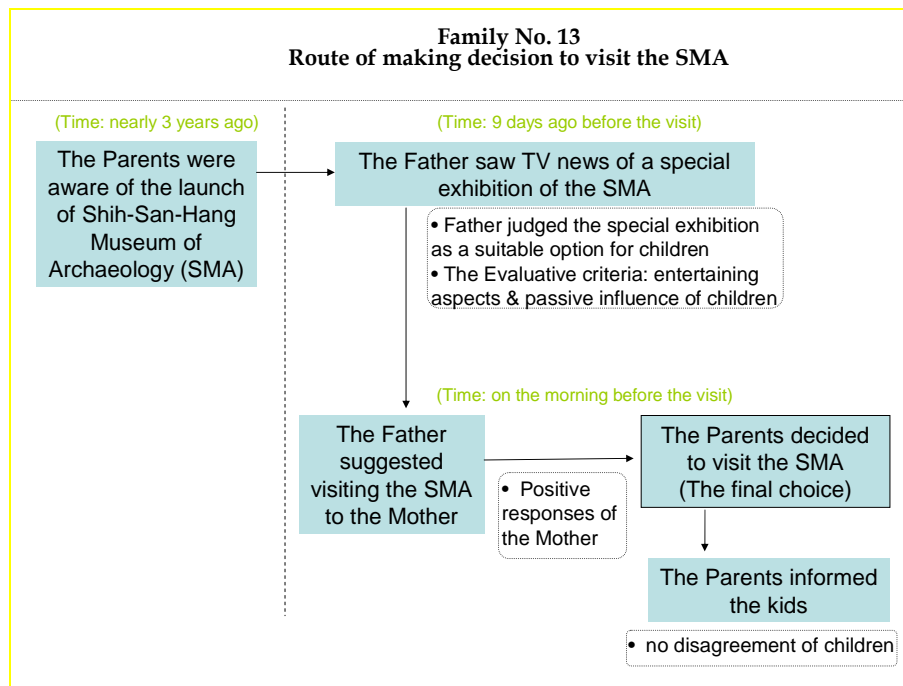### *The route toward the chosen museums*

A parent's initiation without any disagreement - Family No. 13 with younger children

Diagram 2 presents how the sampled family No. 13 (abbreviated as FM13) chose to visit the ShihSanHang Museum of Archaeology (abbreviated as SMA). The parents of the FM13 made the most leisure decisions since the ages of their children were relatively young and have limited information about what kind leisure/tourism choices were available. This particular archaeological museum had never been considered as leisure option until the father received information about a special exhibition and judged it to be as a suitable option for his children.

Visitors profile of the FM13

Chosen museum:	ShihSanHang Museum of Archaeology (SMA), Taipei County, Taiwan
Date of the visit:	14th January 2006 (Saturday)
Group composition:	o Couple parents with 2 children: Father (42); Mother (41); Elder Daughter (9); Younger Daughter (6)
Live in:	Chung-Li, Tao-Yuan Country, one hour away to Taipei by car

Diagram 2: The decision-making process of the sample family No.13

Family No. 13
Route of making decision to visit the SMA

(Time: nearly 3 years ago)

The Parents were aware of the launch of Shih-San-Hang Museum of Archaeology (SMA)

(Time: 9 days ago before the visit)

The Father saw TV news of a special exhibition of the SMA

• Father judged the special exhibition as a suitable option for children
• The Evaluative criteria: entertaining aspects & passive influence of children

(Time: on the morning before the visit)

The Father suggested visiting the SMA to the Mother

• Positive responses of the Mother

The Parents decided to visit the SMA (The final choice)

The Parents informed the kids

• no disagreement of children

• **Key of the flow charts:**
(Time of the actions)

| The actions of the family members | • Key features of the decision making |

• **The time scale of the flow charts:**
  • From top left to right and top toward bottom, follow the arrows
• **Viewing guide of the flow charts:**
  1. Read the top left green texts then the blue textbox underneath
  2. Follow the arrows to the next green texts
  3. If there are black textboxes, read after the blue textboxes
  4. Repeat the Step 2 and 3

The parents of the FM13 have been aware of the SMA for a long time but they never considered visiting this museum. Their first visit was stimulated by the interactive features of the special exhibition. The entertaining feature triggered the initiation of the visit. The parents perceived the entertaining aspect could generate the interest of their 5-year-old and 9-year-old daughters, based on their past museum visits.

Father: Today (we visit the SMA) because of this special exhibition…I think it is quite suitable for children, the laser fishing exhibit, haha.. (I think) it would be something fresh for my children, So I decided to come.

Elder daughter: My dad, he told me about (the SMA).
Question: When you heard of it, what did you say?
Elder daughter: [A short and exciting reply] Good!
Question: Do you know what it is?
Elder daughter: Not really, I just know that it's a kind of museum…. Dad normally summarises what is there… If there's nothing interesting there, I don't want to go. (aged 9)

Parents and children sought the 'best' choice of the day - Family No. 24 with older children

Diagram **3** presents how a particular museum was evolved to be the final choice of the day in the case of the sampled family No. 24 (abbreviated as FM24). Museums, as a product category, emerged as an alternative indoor venue since the initial movie options were unfeasible. Two particular museums were recalled in the information search stage. One was an arts museum, the National Palace Museum (abbreviated as NPM). The other was a science museum, the Taipei Astronomical Museum (abbreviated as TAM).

Visitor profile of the FM24

Chosen museum:	Taipei Astronomical Museum (TAM), Taipei city, Taiwan
Date of the visit:	19th February 2006 (Sunday)
Group composition:	○ Couple parents with 2 children: 　　Father (46); Mother (42); 　　Elder Daughter (15); Younger Son (12)
Live in:	Taipei City

Diagram 3: The decision-making process to visit the museum of the sample family No.24

Family No.24
Emerged leisure options before the decision to visit the TAM
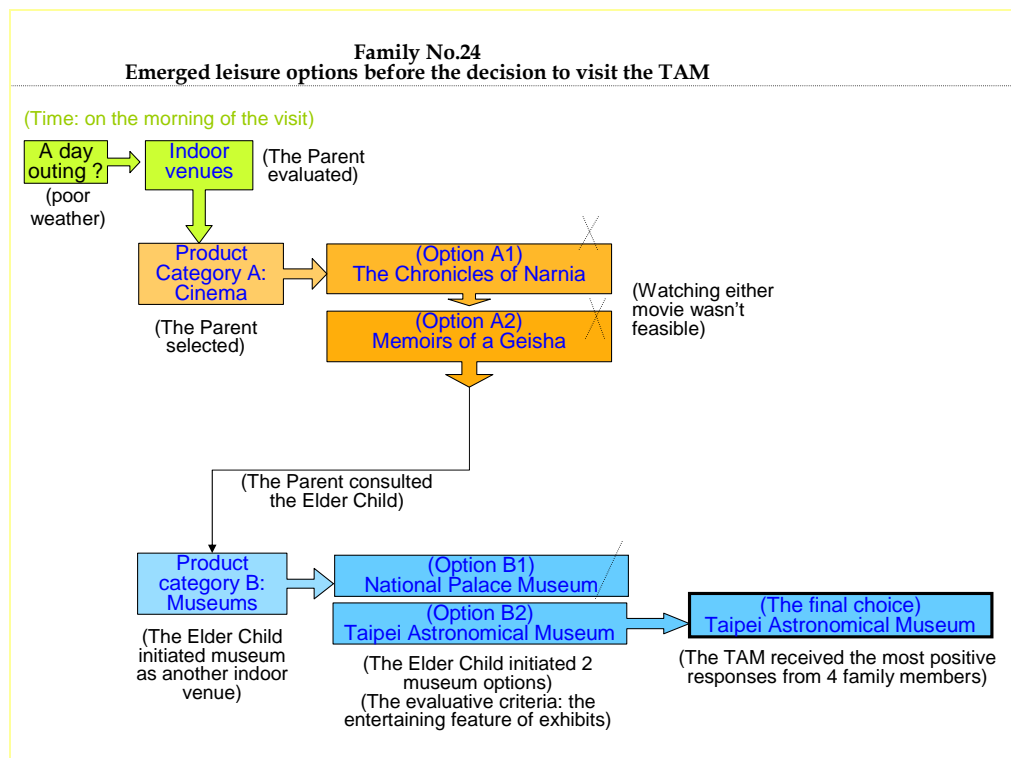
• **Key of the flow charts:** Colour textboxes - different emerged leisure options / (Time of the actions) / (The action of the family members)

• **The time scale of the flow charts:**
  • From left to right and top toward bottom, follow the arrows

• **Viewing guide of the flow charts:**
  1. Read the top left green texts
  2. Then read the colour textboxes and the side black texts
  3. Follow the arrows
  4. Repeat the Step 2 and 3

9

All four family members had previously made family visits to the two proposed museums. Additionally, the two children had also been to the TAM on excursions with their respective schools. Once the two museums were proposed, both parents and children vividly recalled their previous experiences to both museums through casual discussions. The TAM received the most positive responses from all four members; hence, it turned out to be the choice of the day.

> Mother: When elder daughter suggested the National Palace Museum and the Taipei Astronomical Museum), then (her) brother said, 'TAM isn't bad, we went before, the school brought us there…and it was fun'…
> (FM24)

Constantly passive influence of the children

The accounts of the parents stressed a simple fact that families normally travel with their children in a group. The parents of the both families were not typical museum visitors before their marriages. Moreover, museums are not normally their family leisure choices. Due to the presence and the inclusion of children in family leisure, both parents engaged a constant passive consideration of their children when making a leisure choice. In particular, the parents need to consider what kind of leisure option would be beneficial to their children.

> Father: Before we got married, we didn't visit museums so often. Mainly because at that time we just enjoyed ourselves. (Now) because we travel together, every time we go out, we would consider my two daughters, whether we could go to a place that is good for them.
> (FM13)

Museum-visiting is a 'meaningful' leisure choice

What distinguishes museums from other leisure products is the educational benefit to the children. Previous motivational studies tend to conceptualise the educational dimension of museum participation in associated with *learning*. For example, families visit museums to learn about the exhibitions. Compared with other leisure choices, the parents of the FM13 perceived visiting museums is one of the *inspirational* leisure activities.

> Father: Firstly, sometimes (our leisure choices) are more outdoor-oriented. There are some public open spaces, like some parks, allowing (my daughters) to explore and have fun. Or we can go cycling. Sometimes we judge if a destination could inspire my kids, more inspirational-oriented, like visiting museums or bookstores. These are our main considerations (for family leisure).
> (FM13)

The parents from both families perceived any leisure options that bring benefits to their children either physically (e.g. sports, outdoor activities) or intellectually (e.g. museums, bookstores) as a 'meaningful' choice. The older children like FM24 were conscious of such distinctions. Selman's (1980) social development theory indicates that children move from merely being aware of their own perspectives (3 to 6 years old) to being socially involved with different perspectives (10 to 12 years old) (John 1999). Clearly, as children grow older, they learned from the judgements of their parents regarding the distinction between a meaningful and meaningless leisure activity.

> Father: Just like today we visit the TAM, the kids might gain some knowledge about science or see something been mentioned in school textbooks. This could be considered as meaningful. Those leisure activities bring physically benefits to them are meaningful as well.
> Mother: If my son said I don't want to go out, I prefer to play computer games.
> Younger son: [immediate response to his mum] That would be meaningless. (FM24)

Previous studies indicate that the 3 major themes (education, entertainment, quality family time) interlace the family motivations for visiting museums. Museums were perceived as a beneficial leisure choice in the both families and this is associated with the educational theme. However, a different weighting of these 3 motivational themes that root to the need of family visitors is revealed in the initial findings.

Seeking a relaxing family outing

The selection of what they wanted and what they did not want in the family decisions to visit museums reflects clearly the family needs of museum products. The actual decision-making process was analysed from three dimensions: (i) taken the insider's perspective, (ii) studied the evolution of the decision process in its leisure contexts and (iii) the evaluations between the emerged museum options. Through these three analytic dimensions, the emphasis of family leisure was revealed.

Kelly et al.'s (2004) research, the only study investigated the relationship between museum participation and the purpose of family outing, revealed an intertwined purpose of a day out: family-oriented and child-centred. As the parents of the FM24 specified, what they wanted from a leisure experiences was a relaxing day out. Visiting a museum was one of the choices could fulfil this leisure need.

> Mother: To us, it's quite nice to visit a museum occasionally. Our main concern is 'to leisure''. So a museum is just one of the many options

we can consider. We tend to do more sports because of the pressure
and heavy schoolwork our kids have.
(FM24)

The desire of having fun and maximising the enjoyment of children
In general, *having fun* (the entertainment aspect) is the dominant desire of family
outings. This is particular true for the children. The parents supported the idea that
museums, as a leisure product category itself, could bring educational benefits to
their children. However, when families decided which particular museums they
preferred to visit, the museums that offered more entertainment features became
more appealing choices. Such preference is associated with the nature of children --
they are active and love to play. It could say that from the parent's perspectives,
maximising the enjoyment of children is the key focus of any family outings.

The solution to lowering the risks of having an unpleasant museum visit and to
maximise the enjoyment of children was by judging the entertaining features of a
particular museum and by avoiding any museum that merely offered non-interactive
exhibits. The father of the FM13 stressed the interactive features offered at the
special exhibition was the key behind his initiation to visit the SMA.

> Father: If it wasn't for this special exhibition, I might have skipped visiting
> the SMA…The reason is if the exhibits are purely browsing-
> oriented, it will be too boring for the kids. Like some painting-
> oriented exhibitions, if we go, the kids normally have a quick look
> at the paintings, then they tend to walk faster and faster…So for
> such art-oriented exhibitions, it's not suitable for them.
> (FM13)

Similarly, once the two museums were proposed as the potential leisure choices of
the day in the FM24, all four members including the initiator herself had a hidden
consensus to avoid visiting the museum that lacks entertaining aspects (which they
referred as pure-browsing type). The evaluative source was mainly from the
perceptions of their previous visits. The children were much older and had more
experiences of visiting museums, both with their families and schools; their
preference for entertaining and interactive visiting experiences was much stronger.

Negative responses towards the National Palace Museum as an option

Younger son:	Just a gut feel, which tells me that the NPM isn't good... Because it feels like you just keep browsing and browsing, and there's nothing to play with. (age 12)
Elder daughter:	I feel bored once I hear the NPM. (aged 15)
Mother:	Because when they were younger, they've never liked pure browsing. They prefer to interact, or more hands on stuff…they fell asleep when we visited the NPM.
Father:	Since kids are more active, they didn't like (arts museums or museums with passive exhibits). If we visited science museums, they really love it because they can play with the exhibits.

Positive responses towards the Taipei Astronomical Museum as an option

Younger son:	Once (my) elder sister mentioned the TAM, I recalled it immediately…Then I said 'good good'.
Mother:	Once sister mentioned (the TAM), you thought it would be fun, right?
Younger son::	Yes! There are some interactive exhibits in the TAM which are useful towards Natural Sciences subject in school. Like last time, we were learning about typhoons, and there was a typhoon device here. I just remembered that I played it before.
Mother:	Kids still place emphasis on the entertaining value.
Younger son:	The Cosmic Adventure, it was really good fun (and The IMAX theatre) is very cool!
Elder daughter:	We love to play.
Mother:	A purely informational type of museum won't attract the kids… So we thought, 'let's find something like the TAM, which would help with the kid's school work'. I reckon in a science museum like TAM, there would be some hands-on exhibits that the kids will enjoy. (FM24)

Practical considerations of parents

Practical concerns have rarely been valued as important factors in previous museum studies (Moussouri 2003). The children of the FM24 mainly concerned about obtaining a more entertaining experience of visiting a museum. The parents tended to consider more than whether a leisure choice like museums is beneficial activity and whether visiting a particular museum could bring the enjoyment of their children. The parents tended to be very practical. The service of a museum (e.g. pricing, the parking service), the external conditions of the day (e.g. the weather conditions) and the feasibility of visiting a museum (the available free time and the travelling time to the attraction) all need to be taken into account by the parents. Only a museum product that met these practical concerns would successfully turn out to be the choice of the day,

Father: When anyone suggests, 'why don't we go to this place this afternoon?', then we will evaluate the options based on traffic, parking, whether it's meaningful. If everyone (in the family) wants to go, I become the driver and bring them there.
(FM24)

Conclusions

This research applied marketing theory to investigate the family decisions to visit museums. The qualitative family interviews with inclusion of children provided a better means to uncovering the uniqueness and the complexity of family choices to visit museums. Through tracking back how families chose to visit particular museums, the needs of families from museum products were revealed a slightly weighting from previous motivational studies.

When a family with children intends to have a day out, one simple fact is that they travel together as a group. Due to the presence of children, parents tended to constantly consider the needs of their children. Seeking a fun and relaxing experience were the dominant desires of family outings. For children, their priority was to play. The parental focus of deciding a suitable museum option was to maximise the enjoyment of children. Because children were more active and loved to play, a museum which provided more entertaining and interactive features were regarded as more appealing to children and were subconsciously applied as the major criterion to choose a particular museum product.

Any leisure choices that could benefit the children, either intellectually or physically, was considered as a meaningful choice by the parents. With the intension to pursue a pleasant leisure time, the potential educational benefits a museum can offer to children were regarded as an extra bonus of a family day out. Based on these considerations, the museum that received the most positive supports of all family members naturally turned out to be the choice of the day. These complex and intertwined needs and considerations were constructed by parents and children together during the pre-purchasing decision-making process, which could explain the needs of family visitors.

Museums as a leisure/tourism product that offers informal learning opportunity, apparently, evaluating the delivery of exhibitions in terms of learning is important to museum sectors. Sterry (2004) claims the most crucial challenge for all cultural attractions is to offer a quality and satisfactory experience to family groups that contain mixed ages and generations. When taking into account how family visitors

made their choices to visit museums, another challenge for museums would be how to perform its missions and, at the same time, balance the educational and entertaining aspects. Therefore, an enjoyable informal learning experience could be delivered to this special market segment through the design of the programmes, exhibits and the service in order to fulfil its diverse needs.

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