



# Motivations Matter

FINDINGS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A  
NATIONAL SURVEY OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

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# Motivations Matter

## FINDINGS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Those who wish to understand or expand cultural participation need to pay much greater attention to its diversity. Participation in arts and cultural events is not monolithic, though it is frequently discussed and acted upon as if it were. As one observer notes, “We often talk as if the ‘arts’ were a single thing.”<sup>1</sup> The fact is that people attend different types of cultural events for different reasons, with different people, in different places, with different experiences.

Thus, if those seeking to enlarge participation are to succeed, they need to clearly define and understand the type of “culture” in which they wish to expand participation and target their strategies accordingly.

This is the central conclusion from a national survey of cultural participation commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and conducted by the Urban Institute. Survey findings also indicate some important differences in participation among members of different ethnic groups and among frequent, moderate, and infrequent attendees. Arts organizations wishing to reach those audiences should be aware of such differences.

Taking a broad and inclusive definition of culture, the survey asked a random sample of 1,231 Americans about their participation patterns, motivations, and experiences.<sup>2</sup> As is

<sup>1</sup> Paul DiMaggio. 2002. “Taking the Measure of Culture.” [http://www.princeton.edu/~artspol/moc\\_prospectus.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~artspol/moc_prospectus.html). See also Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks. 2004. *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand.

<sup>2</sup> The 1,231 people represent a response rate of 45 percent.

typical of such surveys, we asked people about their participation during the previous 12 months. The major innovation of this study was that we also asked people a set of questions about their *most recently attended event*: what they attended, why, where, with whom, and what experiences they had. This provided information that allowed us to link particular types of motivations, venues, and experiences to particular types of arts attendance in order to determine what people wanted from a particular kind of arts event and whether they felt the event actually delivered. The survey therefore permits us, for instance, to go beyond knowing that a desire to socialize is a common motivation for arts attendance. We can now ask whether or not a desire to socialize is common for *all* attendance or has greater or lesser importance for those who attend specific kinds of arts events.

The ability to do so distinguishes this survey from others, including the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,<sup>3</sup> that ask about participation over the course of the past 12 months but do not ask about motivations and circumstances associated with particular types of arts attendance.

The different motivations and experiences prevalent among those attending different art forms turned out to be numerous indeed. Overarching statements about “cultural participation” that fail to take the differences among events into account can therefore be very misleading. Survey findings show this is clearly not the case, with direct

## TO READ THE FULL REPORT

For a more extensive and detailed presentation of findings, see Francie Ostrower, “The Diversity of Cultural Participation: Findings from a National Survey Report.” Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. The full report can be downloaded at

<http://www.urban.org> and

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org>

<https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AD3773.001>.

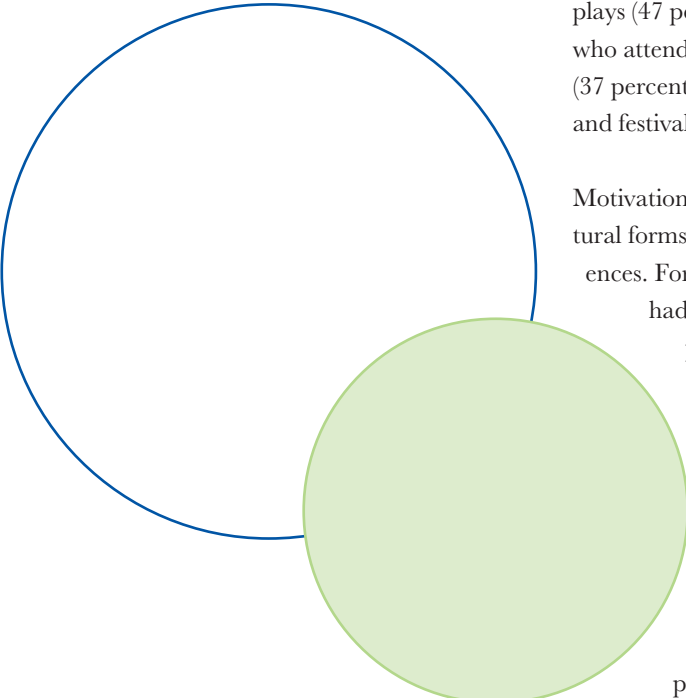
implications for those who study or wish to expand cultural participation. The most fundamental implication of these findings is that arts research, policy, and management need to be reoriented to pay greater attention to the diversity of cultural participation—that is, the differences in *what* people attend and the differing motivations, expectations, and experiences that accompany particular types of arts participation.

This survey represents a preliminary step toward demonstrating the diversity of motivations and circumstances that characterize cultural participation. We do not attempt to document the extent and nature of that diversity comprehensively. Instead, this report examines only live attendance and does not cover other modes of participation, such as production, participation through media, or reading. The evidence presented in this report indicates the pressing need for additional analyses that make diversity a central facet of examining other dimensions of participation.

<sup>3</sup>The National Endowment for the Arts has conducted this, the major national survey of participation, for over 20 years.

## Motivations for Attendance

People attend different types of cultural events for different reasons (exhibit 1). For instance, most people who attend museums (65 percent) say they are strongly motivated by a desire to gain knowledge or learn something new. That is true far less often for people who attend music performances (29 percent) or plays (36 percent). For them, a primary motivation is to socialize with friends and family: 60 percent of those attending music performances and 68 percent who went to plays. Likewise, a desire to experience high-quality art is far more prevalent among those who attend art museums or galleries (56 percent) and plays (47 percent) than among those who attend music performances (37 percent) or arts and crafts fairs and festivals (26 percent).



Motivations varied even among cultural forms that tend to share audiences. For instance, respondents who had been to art museums in the previous 12 months were also more likely to have been to plays and vice versa. Yet there are striking differences in the reasons that respondents go to those events. This reinforces the point that the same people may go to different types of cultural events for very different reasons. It may well be that a desire for a diversity of experiences is exactly what drives these individuals to attend diverse cultural forms.

Motivations can also differ for attending subgenres of the same cultural form, as our data on music attendance indicate. Thus, a desire to experience high-quality art is a major motivation for attending classical music (61 percent) and jazz (47 percent) performances, but not for attending rock/pop and country music performances (35 and 24 percent, respectively). And, although a desire to learn something new is not typically a major motivation for attending music performances, it is a more important reason among those who attend religious music performances (45 percent).

Certain motivations also varied among members of different ethnic groups, and among frequent and less frequent attendees. African-American and Hispanic survey respondents were far more likely than white respondents to express a desire to learn about or celebrate their cultural heritage as a major motivation for attendance: 50 percent of African Americans and 43 percent of Hispanics, but only 15 percent of whites gave this response.<sup>4</sup> This finding is noteworthy for organizations with predominantly white audiences that wish to diversify their audiences but say they are having difficulty doing so. At the same time, organizations cannot expect that merely presenting isolated events with programming that addresses cultural heritage will automatically increase attendance by African Americans or Hispanics at their other events. Organizations need to take a multifaceted approach, built on an

<sup>4</sup> African-American and Hispanic respondents were also more likely to cite a desire to support a community organization, though the gap was smaller.

understanding of the audience they wish to reach and the multiple reasons that African Americans and Hispanics, like other groups, attend.

Frequent arts attendees more often say their major motivations include experiencing high-quality art, supporting a community organization, gaining knowledge, learning about their cultural heritage, and having an emotionally rewarding experience. Fully 59 percent of frequent attendees said a desire for high-quality art was a major motivation, compared with 34 percent of moderate and 21 percent of infrequent attendees. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who say a major motivation for their attendance is to learn something new drops from a high of 64 percent among frequent attendees to a low of 34 percent among infrequent ones.

A clear message of these survey findings is that motivations matter in spurring attendance. Even after controlling for standard demographic predictors of attendance (such as level of education and childhood socialization), a desire to experience

## FREQUENT ATTENDEES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE DONORS

The most frequent attendees are also more likely to make monetary donations to cultural institutions. The percentage of respondents donating to arts institutions rises from 7 percent among nonattendees to 11 percent among infrequent attendees, 23 percent among moderate attendees, and 47 percent among frequent attendees. The clear message to arts organizations seeking to raise more money is that fundraising efforts should be linked to engaging audiences.<sup>5</sup>

high-quality art remains a significant predictor of more frequent attendance. Frequent attendees also have a greater number of strong motivations for attending cultural events. Note that frequent attendees not only attend more cultural events, they also attend a greater variety of events. Taken together, the findings indicate that frequent attendees' active engagement is driven by the very multiplicity and variety of positive experiences they derive from attendance.

## Places People Attend Cultural Events

People attend different types of events at different types of venues. Furthermore, some forms of cultural attendance are more or less concentrated in a small number of venues, or at dedicated arts venues versus other community venues. Attendance at musical events occurred at the widest variety of settings. By contrast, atten-

dance at arts and crafts fairs was highly concentrated at parks and other outdoor facilities.

The case of parks and outdoor venues illustrates how important it is to go beyond blanket generalities about attendance. Overall, parks and other outdoor facilities were among the most

<sup>5</sup>For extended discussions of the relationship between giving and participation based on the 1998 local Urban Institute surveys, see Chris Walker. 2002. *Community Connections*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Overarching statements about “cultural participation” that fail to take the differences among events into account can be very misleading.

frequent places where respondents (57 percent) attended cultural events.

However, virtually all attendance at parks and other outdoor facilities (86 percent) was for fairs and music performances. Respondents rarely attended other types of events at such venues. In short, parks and outdoor facilities are common venues for certain types of cultural events, but not others.

A particularly striking finding is that clubs, restaurants, and coffee

houses are far more prominent venues for frequent arts attendees than for moderate and infrequent ones. Most frequent attendees (59 percent) had been to an event at a club, restaurant, or coffee house at least once during the past year; these venues were tied with museums as the third most often attended venue among frequent attendees. By contrast, clubs, restaurants, and coffee houses ranked sixth for other people. Thus, arts organizations seeking to target frequent attendees would do well to reach out to these nondedicated arts venues when advertising or, where feasible, by presenting their own work.

## Experiences at Cultural Events

People overwhelmingly reported positive experiences at their most recently attended events, but those experiences vary for different types of cultural events (exhibit 2):

- Those who attended museums were far more likely to agree strongly that they gained knowledge or learned something new (51 percent) than those who attended fairs (23 percent) or music performances (28 percent).
- People who attended plays were most likely to agree strongly that they had an enjoyable social occasion (67 percent), while those attending arts and crafts fairs and festivals were least likely (45 percent).
- More people (approximately 55 percent each) who went to music per-

formances, plays, and art museums strongly liked the venue than did those who attended dance performances or fairs (44 and 34 percent, respectively).

Frequent arts attendees more often reported strong positive experiences and were more likely to agree strongly that the artistic quality was high, the event was socially enjoyable, they learned something new, they liked the venue, the event was emotionally rewarding, and they would go again. For instance, 69 percent of frequent arts attendees, compared with 45 percent of infrequent attendees, strongly agreed they had an enjoyable social occasion.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, the findings show frequent arts attendees to be individuals with a wide variety of inter-

<sup>6</sup>The percentage who strongly believed that they learned something new dropped from 43 to 23 percent between the most and least frequent attendees, that the artistic quality was high from 59 to 36 percent, that they liked the venue from 61 to 43 percent, that it was emotionally rewarding from 49 to 27 percent, and that they would go again from 74 to 46 percent.

ests and the ability to derive fulfillment from a wide array of activities—both cultural and otherwise. Frequent attendees not only attend more arts events and a greater variety of arts events, but they tend to be “joiners” who are also more likely to engage in other civic, social, and religious activities.

Although most people characterized their attendance positively, some were negative about aspects of their experiences—even though many of them still expressed a willingness to go to a similar event again. The two negative experiences that were most likely to result in respondents saying they would not attend again were not liking the venue and not having an enjoyable social occasion.<sup>9</sup> This illustrates how factors other than programming, including a venue’s appeal or lack of it, can affect future attendance.

## Attendance with Other People

The vast majority of respondents (87 percent) attended their most recent cultural event with others, usually a relative or a friend. However, people were more or less likely to attend certain types of cultural events with friends versus relatives. For instance, people were more likely to attend

### FREQUENT ARTS ATTENDEES ARE MORE CIVICALLY ENGAGED

Those who attend cultural events more frequently tend to be more involved in social, religious, and civic activities. They more often belong to associations, do volunteer work, attend religious services, and register to vote.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the proportion of respondents registered to vote climbs from 73 percent among nonattendees up to 91 percent among frequent attendees.<sup>8</sup> Attending religious services rises from 64 to 82 percent, doing volunteer work rises from 27 to 63 percent, and membership in associations rises from 16 to 46 percent.

music performances and plays than other types of events with friends.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, higher percentages of those who went to dance performances and fairs went with relatives than did those attending museums, music, and plays.<sup>11</sup>

People were also more likely to attend certain types of venues with friends than with relatives. Most people who attended an event at a place of worship, college, museum, or concert hall went with a relative. But that was not true of those who attended events at a community/recreation center, library, or club. People were far more likely to go to clubs, coffee houses, and restaurants than to other venues with

<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of cultural participation and civic engagement based on the 1998 local Urban Institute surveys, see Chris Walker. 2003. *Arts Participation: Steps to Stronger Cultural and Community Life*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>8</sup> The percentage who say they generally vote in most elections climbed from a low of 59 percent among nonattendees to a high of 83 percent among frequent attendees.

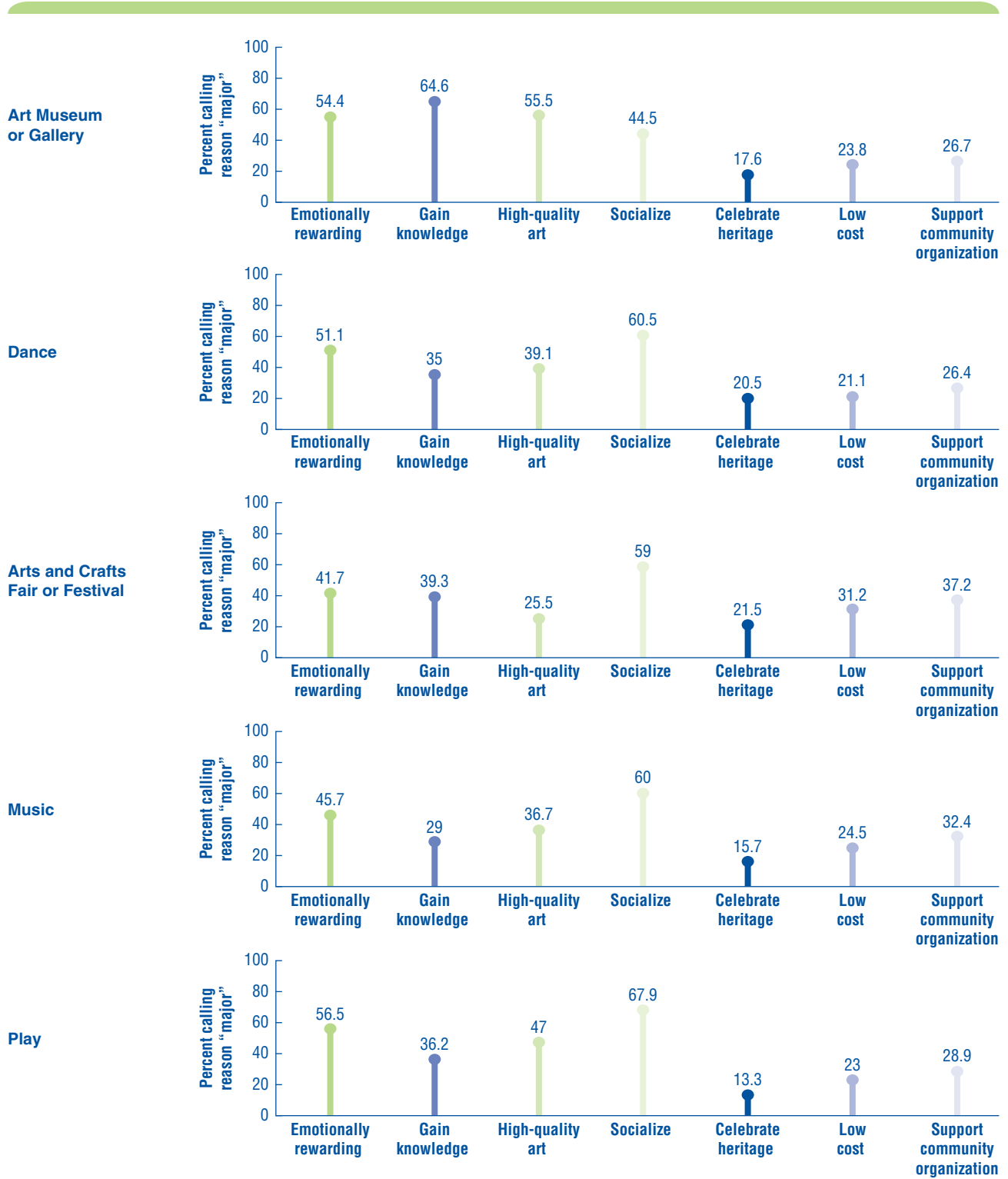
<sup>9</sup> Twenty-three percent of those who did not like the venue and 19 percent who did not enjoy themselves socially said they would not go to a similar event again.

<sup>10</sup> Forty-six percent of those who attended music performances and plays attended with a friend. For other types of events, the percentage ranged from 26 to 34 percent.

<sup>11</sup> Seventy-five percent of those who attended dance performances and 70 percent of those who went to fairs went with a relative. The percentage attending with a relative ranged from 55 to 64 percent for other types of events.

**EXHIBIT 1**

**MAJOR MOTIVATIONS FOR ATTENDING DIFFERENT CULTURAL EVENTS**

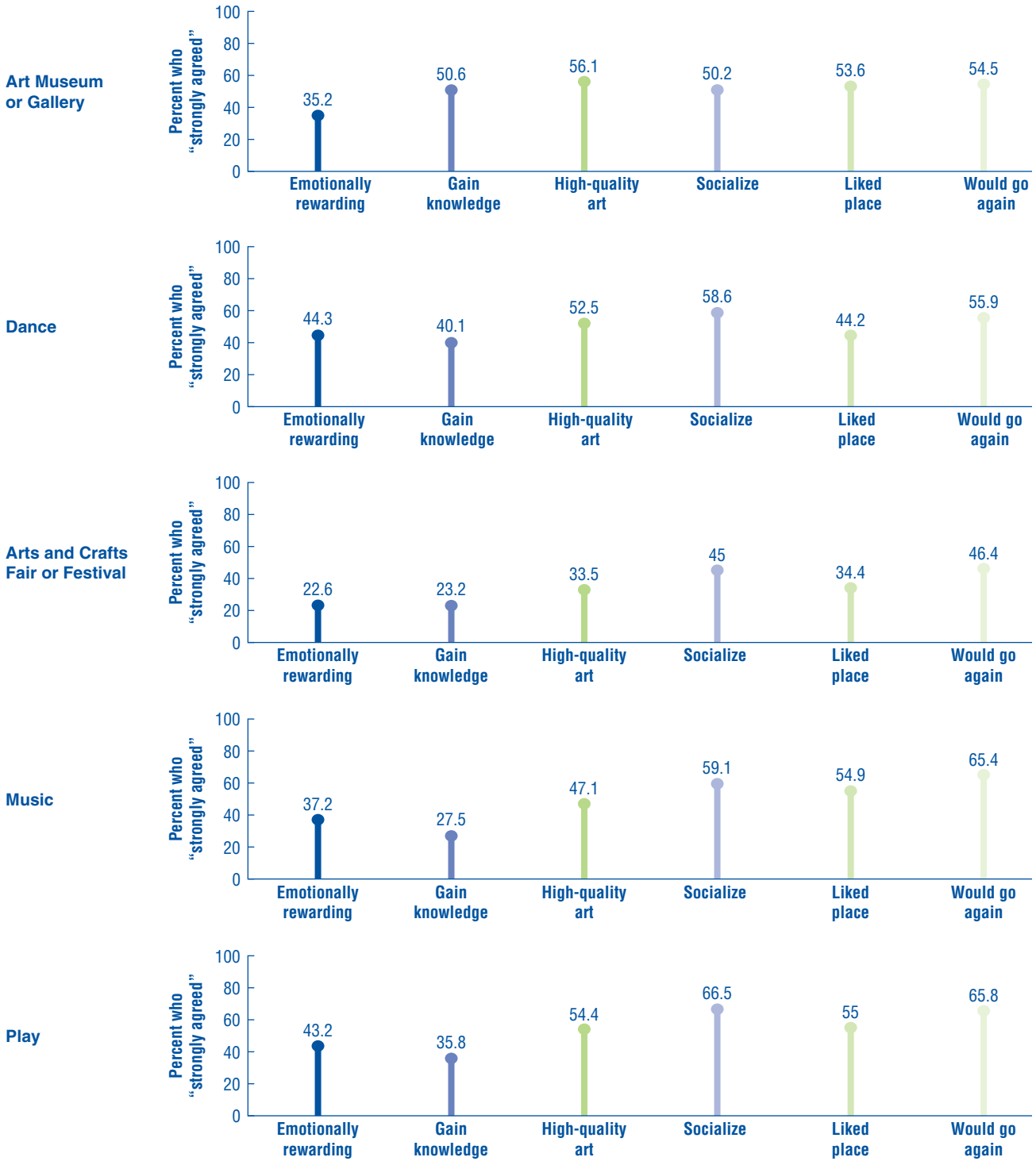


Source: 2004 National Survey on Cultural Participation, The Urban Institute



**EXHIBIT 2**

**EXPERIENCES AT DIFFERENT CULTURAL EVENTS**

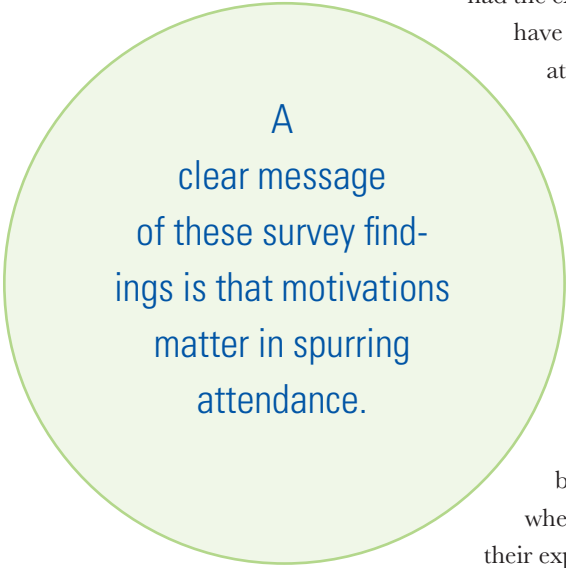


Source: 2004 National Survey on Cultural Participation, The Urban Institute

friends.<sup>12</sup> Such comparisons suggest that even similar categories of motivations and experiences are complex and heterogeneous. For instance, socializing is cited as a major reason for going to plays, dances, and clubs—but the

type of social experience sought differs. While attending plays and dance events are social experiences with family, going to clubs, restaurants, and coffee houses more often involve socializing with friends.

## Comparing Motivations and Experiences: Do Arts Attendees Get What They Seek?



A clear message of these survey findings is that motivations matter in spurring attendance.

The survey reveals that most people had the experiences they hoped to have at their most recently attended event. For instance, most people who said they were strongly motivated to attend an event because they wanted to experience high-quality art agreed strongly that the artistic quality of the event had been high. However, there were important variations by type of cultural event where significant numbers said their expectations were not met.

For instance:

- Fifty-nine percent of fair/festival attendees said a major reason they went was to socialize—but only 45 percent strongly agreed it was a socially enjoyable occasion.
- Fifty-seven percent of play attendees said a major reason they went was that they thought the experience would be emotionally rewarding—but only 43 percent strongly agreed that it was.

- Sixty-five percent of museum attendees said a major reason they attended was to gain knowledge or learn something new—but only 52 percent strongly agreed that they had.

To understand whether people are getting the experiences they seek from a particular art form, it is critical for arts institutions to consider experiences in relation to motivations. Otherwise, it is easy to mistakenly focus participation-building efforts on improving less relevant aspects of the experience. For example, only 34 percent of those who went to fairs strongly agreed the artistic quality was high—lower than for any other area. But only 26 percent of those who attend fairs say they are doing so out of a desire for high-quality art. What is far more relevant from the standpoint of increasing participation is that for many attendees, fairs seem to be falling short in fulfilling their *major* motivation of being socially enjoyable.

<sup>12</sup> Sixty-two percent attended clubs, coffee houses, and restaurants with friends, a figure that drops to 43 percent for community centers, down to a low of 30 percent for art museums and galleries.

## Implications: One Size Does Not Fit All

These survey findings have significant implications for those who study or wish to expand cultural participation. The most fundamental implication is that arts research, policy, and management should be reoriented to pay greater attention to the diversity of cultural participation. For researchers, that will mean probing more deeply into motivations and experiences, and exploring variations within, as well as across, disciplines. For those seeking to expand participation, it will mean defining the type of “culture” they wish to attract people to and targeting their efforts accordingly. Efforts to enlarge attendance cannot be based on why people attend “culture,” in a broad-brush sense, but must be rooted in information about why people attend that type of cultural event, where they attend, with whom they attend, and the experiences they hope to have.

Within this framework, the findings also suggest some other practical steps those seeking to enlarge participation might take:

- Organizations should examine the experiences that attendees have in relation to their major motivations and tailor their participation-building efforts accordingly.
- Organizations that hold special events aimed at attracting people by appealing to particular motivations should not count on such strategies to build sustained participation in regular programming in the absence

of a careful analysis of the full range and depth of motivations that would keep such people coming back.

- Arts organizations seeking to further engage frequent attendees might consider ways to reach out to clubs, coffee houses, and restaurants when advertising or, where feasible, by trying to present their own work in such venues.

The major message of these survey findings is that when it comes to increasing cultural participation, one size does not fit all. Strategies that are based on overly broad and general concepts of “culture” that do not take the diversity of motivations and experiences into account will hinder, rather than advance, efforts to clearly understand and promote cultural participation.

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it comes to  
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### ABOUT THE STUDY

The Wallace Foundation commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a national survey of cultural participation. Building on the *Reggae to Rachmaninoff: How and Why People Participate in Arts and Culture* study (2002), also commissioned by Wallace and conducted by Urban Institute, the national survey took a broad and inclusive approach to culture. The survey was administered by phone to a random sample of 1,231 American adults during June and July 2004. Survey results make it possible to compare motivations and experiences for participation at different types of cultural events. Other Wallace-commissioned reports in this UI series can be downloaded at <http://www.urban.org> and <http://www.wallacefoundation.org>.

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The Wallace Foundation seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people.

Its three current objectives are:

- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement;
- Enhance out-of-school learning opportunities;
- Expand participation in arts and culture.

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