An exploratory study of the implications of free admission to museums and monuments : perceptions and effects on visiting behaviors.

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An exploratory study of the implications of free admission to museums and monuments: the public's perceptions and effects on their visiting behaviour

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SUMMARY

What perceptions does the French public have of free admission to museums and monuments, both as visitors and non-visitors? What are the consequences of such perceptions on individuals' interpretations, their projects for visiting and behaviour patterns *vis-à-vis* museums and monuments? This research attempts to answer these questions by multiangulation, combining various methods of data production and analysis. The results show that free admission alters the public's perceptions of museums and monuments, making it a secondary consideration in planning and implementing a visit, and that the experience of a free visit can spark a learning process that results in the appropriation of a free admission scheme. Our conclusions primarily focus on the need to enhance the public's involvement in the visit and explain the reasons for free admission.

Key Words: Free admission, price, museums and monuments, multiangulation

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INTRODUCTION

Free admission has been the subject of long and heated debate between supporters of free access to culture and promoters of pragmatic financial reasoning, and today the question is once more at the forefront of discussions surrounding museums and monuments. Examples of note include the Louvre in 1996, all historical museums and monuments in France in 2000, and Parisian museums, several municipal museums, such as Caen, Dijon and Bordeaux, and departmental museums, such as Isère, in 2002. Although realism has lead those in charge of cultural policy to renounce the idea of 'everything for free', they remain nonetheless strongly attached to the concept of free admission for its status as original symbol and ideal value of museums (Gombault, 2002). At the Louvre, as is the case in museums across France, there is an increase of approximately 60% in visits on free admission Sundays, as opposed to paying Sundays. This effect is diminishing over time however, and the long-awaited democratic principles we've been hoping for are still yet to be seen (Fourteau, 2001; Octobre and Rouet, 2002). Outside these few frequentation statistics, there is very little data to shed any light on the public's perceptions of free admission to museums and monuments and its effects on their visiting behaviour patterns. What perceptions does the public have of free admission, and how are these ideas related to their perceptions of museums and monuments, their visit planning practices and frequentation behaviour in relation to these locations? These are the questions that this research attempts to answer (Gombault, Petr, Bourgeon-Renault, Le Gall-Ely, Urbain, 2006)[1].

Although in marketing research the question of price is examined in its many facets (Desmet and Zollinger, 1997; Monroe, 1990; Zollinger, 2004), free admission is a research subject which has been almost entirely overlooked (Gorn, Tse and Weinberg, 1990). This fact has lead us to approach this research in an exploratory manner and to use a multiangulation method[2] for producing and analysing data (Weick, 1989; Lewis and Grimes, 1999). This approach allows the researcher to compare multiple sources of empirical and theoretical data when drawing conclusions, thus guaranteeing a greater validity and reliability in the results. Four methods of data production were employed: the primary mode being individual interviews, complemented by group interviews, on-site observations and a questionnaire. We dealt with free admission in all the various forms it can assume in the context of museums and monuments: free admission for all (free admission Sundays), by category (targeted exemptions for children under 18 or the unemployed), permanent (Paris city museums, for example), for special events only (Patrimony Days, Night of the Museums), total (access to all areas and exhibits) and partial (limited to permanent exhibits or monument gardens).

This research project lead to the formulation of three metapropositions in the form of hypotheses[3] which assist in understanding the way the public perceives free admission and the way these perceptions affect the public's visiting behaviour patterns. Firstly, free admission is comprehended by the public via their perceptions of museums and monuments and this lack of entrance fee calls these perceptions into question. Secondly, free admission is a secondary

[1] This research was conducted for the Department of Studies, Forward Planning & Statistics of the Ministry of Culture and Communications.

[2] Multiangulation is most often used as a tool for validating qualitative research data. However, when used systematically, it can become a research strategy in itself and is used to explore the different dynamics of a complex social phenomenon, allowing a global view of the research question. This is the reason multiangulation was chosen for this research project.

[3] A metaproposition is an aggregate of propositions in the form of hypotheses which aims for a general level of theoretical knowledge of the area in question.

consideration when planning and executing a visit to a museum or monument. Finally, it seems that actually experiencing free admission can allow certain visitors to learn about the practice of visiting museums and monuments, as well as to adopt the free admission policy.

The next part of this paper presents a review of the literature on the subject and the methodology used, followed by an analysis and a discussion of the results. The conclusion introduces the research's management implications for cultural institutions, its limits and further lines of research relative to employing a free policy in the cultural sector and services or, more generally, for any product.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Firstly, let us note that the term "free" is polysemic (Godbout and Caillé, 1992), and can mean without exchange value (without price), without usage value (without usefulness), without rationale (an affirmation without proof) – insérer une note, generous, gracious (a gift) and finally, liberated, without obligation and without requiring a return (for the giver). This last interpretation is the meaning which has been the most contested, particularly by different research studies on the gift and the act of giving[4]. Although philosophers (Hénaff, 2002), sociologists indirectly through the notion of giving (Godbout, 2000; Godbout and Caillé, 2002), and even certain economists dealing with services freely exchanged between individuals (Jouvenel, 2002) have expressed interest in the concept of freeness, they do not address the issues it raises in management science. In particular they do not deal at all with the perceptions[5] individuals have of this policy and very little with its effects[6]. We have therefore searched the literature on the behaviour of visitors to museums and monuments, and on consumer behaviour in general, in the effort to discover publications which may bring light to our research questions, i.e. what are the perceptions of free admission and what are its effects on the behaviour of the public, whether visitors or non-visitors.

Free admission and the behaviour of visitors to museums and monuments

In the field of museums and monuments, the major part of existing work is devoted to the politics of free admission, i.e. the concept of free admission as the institutions perceive it and as they put it into practise (for a review, see Gombault, Petr *et alii*, 2006). The few studies examining the targeted public deal primarily with the quantitative impact that free admission has on

[4] Sagot-Duvauroux (1995) remarks that "the giver addresses their gift in an act of supremacy, and may create a debt, dependence, and reciprocal relationship with the receiver. Freeness is a temporary transfer, anonymous or otherwise." A free act has a disinterested character, groundless, whilst the gift creates a relationship based on the dependence of the receiver (Godbout and Caillé, 1992; Mauss, 1923-1924).

[5] Perception is understood here to mean "a form of knowledge, developed and shared socially with a practical aim concurrent to constructing a reality common to a social ensemble" (Jodelet, 1997). It is at once " the product and the process of a mental activity through which an individual or a group reconstitutes the reality with which it is confronted and attributes it with a specific signification" (Abric, 1987).

[6] Thoughts on the notion of freeness remain subject to the assertion of the day, such as "that which is free is worth nothing", "that which is priceless must be free" or "nothing is ever free".

frequentation. It is shown to be positive in the short term, a sort of "honeymoon effect" (Dickenson, 1993; Bagdali, 1998) and neutral in the middle and long term. These results reinforce the economic studies demonstrating that price is a secondary variable in the cultural consumer's behaviour patterns, particularly the museum or monument visitor (O'Hare, 1975; O'Hagan, 1995; Bailey *et alii*, 1997). Generally speaking, a lack of visitor involvement constitutes the major barrier in visiting practices and not the price, which comes into play in visiting decision process when the potential visitor is already interested in this practice.

In France, only two empirical studies have dealt with the perceptions that visitors to museums and monuments have of free admission and their effects. Ducros and Passebois (2003a and 2003b) address the perceptions of free entry of the visitors to a contemporary art gallery. These researchers show that free admission can be interpreted symbolically by the consumers as a signal and can thus place them in a gift/return-gift relationship with a service provider[7]. However, this research, being limited to permanent free admission in a single contemporary art gallery, provides no data as to the effects on the perceptions of the gallery or on the behaviour of the visitors. Gottesdiener and Godrèche (1996) demonstrated the effects of free admission on visiting plans at the Louvre: incentive, transfer (deferring to free admission Sundays) or counter-transfer (avoiding free-admission Sundays), depending on the socio-demographical characteristics of the visitors. However, these effects are not explained and, moreover, are limited only to visitors to the Louvre, a very atypical institution. The sparse amount of studies in the domain of museums and monuments lead us to examine a wider range of literature on consumer behaviour.

Free admission and the behaviour of the consumer

In this area also, the freeness of an offer is pondered very little. Gorn, Tse and Weinberg (1990) write: "Despite the abundance of literature written on the price-quality ratio, we have found no study which examines the perceptions of a product's quality when it is offered for free". These authors see freeness as being an exceedingly low price and conclude that it has a negative impact on the perceived quality, whatever the sector, dealer or buyer. This conclusion, if generalised to include museums and monuments, would contradict what those in the cultural sector already presume, persuaded of the positive effect of free admission as a symbolic measure on the behaviour of the public.

Despite the great quantity of research carried out on sales promotions (Chandon, 1994), the tools surrounding free admission[8] have been explored very little in comparison to price reductions or coupons (Chandon, Wansink and Laurent, 2000). The most recent research focuses on the effects of these tools on the perception of the product, which are different from the effects of monetary promotional tools: the positive effect of "more product for free" on the perceived value of the offer (Diamond, 1992; Smith and Sinha, 2000; Darke and Chung, 2005) and the risk of devaluing the product itself (Raghubir, 2004). Other studies reveal a positive effect on brand

[7] Also in the cultural domain, i.e. exchanges of music files on Napster, Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) arrive at the same conclusion: freeness is not always perceived as an absence of price. It can also be considered a potential gift/return-gift situation and may create a relationship.

[8] The concept of freeness is not to be confused with promotion. The latter can be defined as a temporary and tangible modification which aims to have a direct impact on the customers' behaviour and on the sales force (Chandon, 1994). The promotional aspect therefore only concerns periodical freeness and not the permanent freeness of an offer. Moreover, only some forms of promotion are based on freeness: the offer of a similar product for free is considered a monetary promotion as it reduces the overall cost, as are free gifts (different product or object from the basic offer), whilst trial techniques and samples are forms of non-monetary promotion.

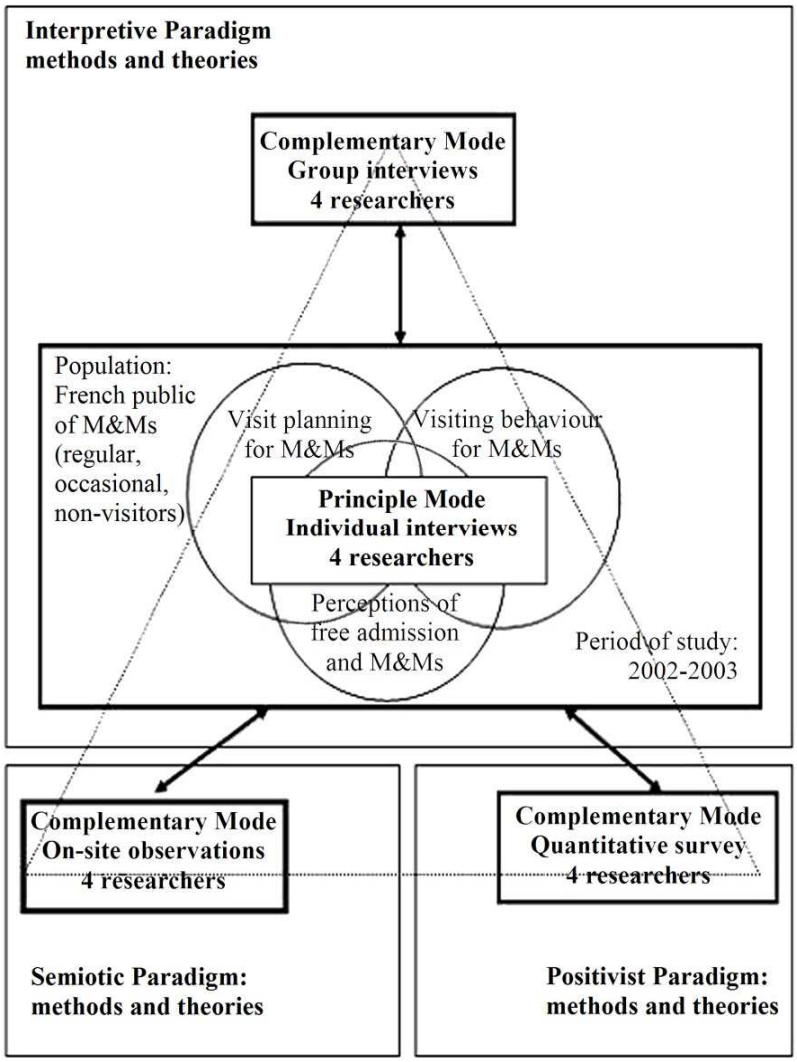
awareness by drawing attention to it (Palazon-Vidal and Delgado-Ballester, 2005) and preferences (Liao, 2006). This research also shows that the effects of freeness are complex and sometimes contradictory. It may therefore be valuable to pursue our research questions further so as to be able to manipulate this pricing policy appropriately.

In the final analysis, these studies lead us to think, without allowing us to draw any conclusions, that the perceptions of freeness and its effects on behaviour are contradictory. The scarcity of previous research determined our choice of methodology: an explorative objective using a multiangulation strategy for data production and analysis following an inductive and iterative reasoning process described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as *grounded theory* and applied, amongst others, by Bergadaà (2006).

RECHERCH METHODOLOGY

Our research question is formulated as follows: in the French context, what perceptions do both visitors and non-visitors to museums and monuments have of free admission, and how are these related to their perceptions of these places, their visit planning practices and their visiting behaviour patterns in regards to these locations? We aim to contribute through this research theoretical knowledge on these perceptions and their effects using empirical data. This research employed both inductive logic (developing a theory progressively throughout data production and analysis without referring to a defined theoretical corpus as such) and iterative logic (constantly comparing empirical data and the progressively emerging theoretical data). In the interests of quality results and with the objective of conducting an exploratory study, a multiangulation strategy (Denzin, 1978; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Gombault and Hlady-Rispal, 2004) was adopted. All the tactics of multiangulation (data, means of data production, theories, researchers and paradigms, with the exception of returning the analyses to the subjects[9]) were employed.

[9] This technique involves giving the analyses back to the subjects, recording their reactions and then analysing them. It would have been time consuming and costly to implement this procedure.



Data was collected in different regions (Paris and others, urban and rural zones), observations were recorded for institutions of varying natures (a museum and a monument) and in different pricing configurations in 2002 and 2003. Research was carried out according to a precise format: a principle mode for data production and analysis– 52 individual in-depth interviews, structured but not researcher-lead, complemented by 4 group interviews, 36 on-site observations and 580 questionnaires, with the data being collected from both regular and occasional visitors[10] as well as non-visitors[11]. The interview guide, identical for all interviews (individuals, groups, on-site visits), contained two main questions: "What does free admission to museums and monuments signify for you?" and "What are your habits concerning museums and monuments?" Each main question was accompanied by a thematic guide suggesting further questions. Interviews were concluded by a scenario offering a free ticket: "If we gave you a free ticket to a museum near you, would you use it within the coming month?"

[10] The characteristics of the samples interviewed are presented in Appendix A1.
[11] Regular visitors had been on more than 2 visits in the past year, occasional visitors at least once in the last five years and non-visitors had not been on a visit in the last five years. Only subjects residing in France were questioned.

A thematic content analysis[12] of all the transcribed interviews was carried out (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wacheux, 1996). This purely qualitative analysis involved transcribing and manually coding the interviews, i.e. reducing them and segmenting them into portions of meaning representing an identified empirical theme. In this way, a dictionary of empirical themes was constructed. The individual interviews allowed the principle empirical themes concerning perceptions of free admission and its effects on visiting behaviour patterns to emerge. The group interviews enhanced saturation slightly by integrating social aspects and group dynamics without contributing any real contradictions. By giving a context to data production, the observations and on-site visit interviews brought an understanding of the real-life experience of free admission to the data. Finally, in accordance with the exploratory nature of this research, the quantitative survey allowed us to further explore certain empirical themes.

In the next phase, analysing the dictionary of empirical themes by theoretical inference (induction and iteration) lead us to construct a dictionary of theoretical themes, an inventory of concepts and theories that help interpret and understand the empirical themes. We researched existing theories surrounding the notions of freeness, price, and consumer behaviour, both in general and in the cultural context in particular, as well as theories from different disciplines– psycho-sociology, sociology, psycho-analysis– being connected with perceptions, money, culture and museums and monuments. This final dictionary of theoretical themes allowed us to formulate 27 theoretical propositions in the form of hypotheses. These were then evaluated, discussed and reduced into three metapropositions, which are theoretically able to be generalised (Gergen, 1994).

The research process endeavoured to satisfy the validation criteria proper to qualitative and mixed methods (Mucchielli, 1996): completeness and saturation achieved through multiangulation on the one hand, and internal acceptation, internal coherency, external confirmation achieved through exchange between researchers with the sponsor and the academic community on the other hand. The research process does however have its limits, particularly its synchronic dimension (results obtained over a single period).

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The research lead to the development of three metapropositions in the form of hypotheses. The first primarily concerns the perceptions of free admission and their effects on the perceptions of museums and monuments (MP1), the second allows a greater understanding of the effect of free admission on visit planning in relation to these sites (MP2) and finally, the third highlights the changes in behaviour related to the experience of a free visit (MP3). These are the three metapropositions we will present and discuss as results of the research. Following inductive reasoning, the empirical results[13] of the research will be presented and interpreted them in the context of different theories.

MP1: Perceptions of museums and monuments for the most part fall into a unique frame of reference, one of common cultural commodities in a commercial system, which free admission calls into question.

[12] A presentation of the data analysis method is given in Appendix A2.
[13] Passages in italics are extracts from interviews.

Although museums and monuments are described by their public as being common cultural commodities which, according to collective thinking, should be accessible to all, they are recognised as belonging to a commercial system. First and foremost, the public individually perceives free admission, as an absence of price, and not collectively as a cultural policy[14]. They systematically associate free admission with whether or not you have to pay for entry. More precisely, analysis of the interviews identified that paying the entrance fee is considered an entrance visa into museums and monuments, that it is a material representation of a cultural, economic and physical distance between museums and monuments and their visitors and that it makes their involvement in the act of visiting concrete. Consequently, visitors consider that free admission annuls this visa, reduces this distance and makes engaging in a visit less formal. Moreover, free admission is discussed from a very material angle, being associated with an opportunity, even a "good deal", or with a waste. Finally, visitors associate free admission with the value attributed to museums and monuments and to their visit: element of value for some, of devaluation for others, or an element unrelated to value.

From this angle, two intra-individual paradoxes appear. On the one hand, for several more pro-free admission people, not having to pay for entry is generally important. They feel that free admission leads to more visits, for others, but much less so for them. They then talk about lack of time and individual constraints which prevent them from taking advantage of the free admission. This first paradox shows a contradictory vision of free admission: how people perceive it for themselves and how for others. On the other hand, some people, who often declare themselves unfavourable towards free admission, consider that it devalues museums and monuments and their visit, particularly by degrading the conditions of their visit (depreciation of sites, crowds, presence of disinterested onlookers, etc.). They associate it with waste, all the while insisting that it doesn't increase frequentation. These same people agree however on the status of common cultural commodities and that they should be accessible to all.

Strong inter-individual divergences were also observed. 62.6% agree with the proposition that "*entry into museums and monuments should, by principle, be free*". This is the pricing policy supported by 21.5% of them. 86.3% of respondents agree with the principle of a symbolic contribution, 67% support this pricing policy. Finally, 28.1% of individuals agree with the proposition that "*entry into museums and monuments should, by principle, be paid for*", and price is the policy proposed in first position by 6% of individuals. Thus, for some, accessibility means free admission. For others, paying a symbolic price represents their attachment to collective heritage, a contribution to its upkeep and their involvement in the visit. For still others, this heritage justifies paying for entry, and, in the last scenario, visiting museums and monuments is a leisure activity like any other which must be paid for, or which may be free on special occasions. So the debate on the question of the validity of free admission is open: should we or shouldn't we make museums and monuments accessible by making them free? Collective and individual thinking comes to a confrontation.

These contrasting perceptions of a collective cultural commodity whose use (the visit) is subject to a price, result in a conflict between perceptions of money (Urbain, 2000, 2002) strongly tinted with morals (Sédillot, 1989), evolving collective and individual values and very ideological perceptions of culture. By annulling the entrance visa that paying the entrance fee represents, free admission reduces the distance between museums and monuments and their visitors, a distance

[14] This frame of reference appears far removed from the concept held by institutional directors who generally view free admission as a founding value of the original ideology of museums and monuments (Gombault, 2002) or perceptions of free admission as a gift as expounded by Ducros and Passebois (2003a and 2003b).

which money and payment introduced into an objectification process (Reiss-Schimmel, 1992; Simmel, 1907). The contradictory effects concerning the value of the free object, highlighted in research on non-monetary promotions (Diamond, 1992; Smith and Sinha, 2000; Darke and Chung, 2005; Raghubir, 2004), are confirmed here.

These perceptions of free admission are linked to the diversity and dynamics of the perceptions the public has of museums and monuments. They are generally thought of as belonging to a unique frame of reference: common cultural commodities offered within a commercial system. Four universes divide this frame of reference: a sacred universe, the original perception of museums and monuments, marked by a dogmatic and aesthetic vision in which free admission is considered natural; a patrimonial universe in the cultural sense but also in the economic and legal sense, dominant today, in which the very controversial policy of free admission appears an impossible ideal; a universe of leisure activities which offers services in a consumer logic that considers free admission a special offer or promotion; and a final universe, in which museums and monuments are absent, where free admission and price have no meaning. Identifying the leisure activity universe within the French public draws parallels with the American research on such concepts as *entertainment economy* or *experience economy* (Falk, 1994; Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Wolf, 1999).

MP2: Free admission is a secondary consideration when constructing and executing a visiting plan.

The empirical data shows that these contrasting perceptions of free admission affect the public's visiting intentions, but that free admission in itself is not enough to create the desire to visit these sites. Thus regular visitors say that "*free admission won't make anyone come or so few people [that] it's not a genuine problem*".

The research shows that people's perceptions of free admission are incorporated into their perceptions of the price of the visit. This is seen as an overall price: not only the entrance price is mentioned but also travel costs (transport, parking, etc.), and even accommodation *i.e*. the monetary efforts generated by the visit. People also evoke the inconveniences of the visit such as the necessity to decide upon and then organise the visit, the risk of disappointment and the intellectual effort required, fear of crowds or an unpleasant atmosphere, anticipated physical fatigue; in other terms, the non-monetary efforts of the visit– psychological and physical. The public also expresses a broad acceptance of price, considered as what is abandoned or sacrificed in order to obtain a product (Zeithaml, 1988). The price of the visit comprises a monetary element and a non-monetary element (Murphy and Enis, 1986).

The non-monetary component of the price, despite the free admission, is particularly high: the intellectual effort, the time needed, the organisation of the visit. Other non-monetary efforts are heightened and even created by free admission: crowds, the presence of uninterested or different people from the usual visitors, having to plan the visit in order to take advantage of the free admission, etc. In this context, free admission represents removing only one of the direct monetary efforts of the visit: the absence of an entrance price within an overall price. Visitors then stress that a free visit doesn't really exist: given that visiting museums and monuments, even without an entrance fee, always involves some form of effort, monetary or not, it is never free.

We are therefore reminded of the importance, in the context of museums and monuments, of the non-monetary elements of price, already noted by Bailey and Falconer (1998), Fines (1981) and McLean (1997). The conclusions of Prottas (1981) are confirmed: the non-monetary elements of price are all the more important in light of the fact that a service is free, although this is when we would spontaneously think that there is nothing left stopping us from visiting. By erasing the price,

free admission emphasizes the others costs weighing upon the decision to visit and which are just as much obstacles in carrying it out. These elements confirm the results concerning the negative impact of free admission on the perceived quality which is most evident in the promotional domain (Gorn, Tse and Weinberg, 1990).

These considerations on the true nature of free admission lead individuals to discuss the effect that this policy may have on their intentions to go on a visit. A significant contribution of this research is to emphasise that free admission does not create an intention to visit. It simply facilitates putting that intention into action where it already exists.

Firstly, free admission does allow museums and monuments to be thought of as a potential Sunday activity. Secondly, free admission improves the objective (financial and physical) and symbolic accessibility of what museums and monuments offer. When entry is free, museums and monuments are no longer perceived as they normally are. We are distanced from the habitual vision of a visit, with its behavioural rules, its intention and obligations of cultural viability. Thirdly, free admission changes the decision-making process surrounding a visit. When the museum or monument is free, the process of making a decision is simpler and more spontaneous.

Here we find the positive effects that free admission has on the public's awareness of the object concerned, as demonstrated by Palazon-Vidal and Delgado-Ballester (2005). It is also possible to say that the decision making process is modified. Within the context of free admission, the consumer indeed declares that, as such, he no longer needs to evaluate the pertinence of this consumer activity by carrying out any significant information research. Free admission allows the individual to "consume" the cultural location differently and comes into play as a stimulant for the exploratory tendency of the consumer. This suggests that the consumer adopts, thanks to free admission, an experiential behaviour of the exploratory kind (Berlyne, 1960; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Bourgeon, 2005).

MP3: The experience of a free visit to museums and monuments can allow a learning process of this practice and an ownership of the free admission scheme.

Finally, to reduce the dissonance created by the existence of free admission policies and the experience of free admission, people react in one of two ways. Most stay within the frame of reference of an exchange and reject the free admission: they reinforce their pre-existing perceptions of free admission. The others, having experienced free admission, allow this frame of reference to evolve.

The empirical data shows how a free visit can prove a disconcerting experience for certain visitors accustomed to paying (not for all however). Free admission leads to an experience where their behaviour is more relaxed, even more profane, but beyond this deconstruction of habitual reference points, the free visit can in fact be a different visit from the one expected. Far from corresponding to the negative perceptions generally associated with this pricing policy, the free visit is a new experience in the sense that it makes one feel free, stimulates the social relationship, modifies the ownership of the location and one's feelings. The perceptions of museums and monuments, the objectives in visiting them and the ways of discovering them are changed. They are suddenly perceived as being more accessible. Visiting a cultural site when it's free gives rise to a visiting plan which is less rigid and less synonymous with intellectual effort, i.e. less "cultural", as respondents have indicated.

Thus, the measure of free admission can contribute to deconstructing the perceptions and behaviours linked to the usual way of visiting museums and monuments. A learning process of the

free admission experience is put into motion, which can, by boomerang effect, lead to learning about the practice of visiting. The visitor reduces the cognitive dissonance linked to the initial negative perceptions through a process which can be qualified as learning through experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

On the other hand, for those who have not experienced free admission, the perceptions of the free visit and the visitors benefiting from it remain negative for the most part (this is also the case for a few visitors who have experienced free admission but who remain very attached to payment). To reduce their cognitive dissonance, those who have not experienced free admission insist on avoiding it in order to strengthen their certitudes and are therefore the most critical of this policy. There is therefore a phenomenon of avoiding this practice, a reasoning of reinforcing negative perceptions of this policy and an argument based on discriminating between visitors (*"it's for others but not for me"*) amongst those who have not experienced free admission.

The results show that experiencing free admission can give rise to a learning process about the practise practice ? of visiting museums and monuments. By allowing non-visitors to discover what they can experience when visiting a museum or monument, the experience of a free visit can provoke the "cultural penny" to drop, as professionals hope for. These visitors might tempt this experience for the first time and "try" visiting a museum and/or monument. The real experience of a free cultural visit may then lead individuals to seek out other visiting experiences based on the experiential approach (Bourgeon *et alii*, 2006). During the visit, the individual is in fact experiencing new elements of an activity which impose adjustments to one's prior perceptions. It therefore reduces the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), a process which can be linked with the theory of instrumental conditioning (Skinner, 1950). If the consumer behaviour leads to a positive experience (a reward), the possibility it will be adopted increases (positive reinforcement). The learning process is therefore carried out according to the principle of addiction, which is significant in the habits of cultural consumption: "the more an individual consumes a cultural activity with pleasure, the more he desires to consume this activity."

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The results presented in this paper were aimed at answering the following interrogation: in the French context, what perceptions do visitors to museums and monuments have of free admission and how are these related to their visit planning, behaviour patterns and perceptions of their visit? The three metapropositions as hypotheses resulting from the research contribute to understanding the public's perceptions of free admission and their effects:

– Our first result states that perceptions of museums and monuments generally fall into a unique frame of reference, one of common cultural commodities in a commercial system, which is altered by free admission. This result shows that perceptions of freeness also change according to the object they are related to. Thus, the contrasts explored result from the perception of museums and monuments as sacred places, as sites of common heritage or as a leisure activity. This result is strongly linked to the cultural and public dimension of our research field. These results have strong management implications. They show in particular the necessity to clarify the purpose of each institution and to situate them in a perception universe: "specialised" exhibitions for the initiated public, cultural heritage available to all, an alternative leisure activity, etc. The results also highlight the need to differentiate between pricing policies (free, fare or price) according to these purposes.

 – Our second result shows that free admission is a secondary consideration when planning

and carrying out a visit. The free admission in itself is not enough to create a desire to carry out a visit; it can only update latent intentions. This result seems that it could potentially be generalised to any product or service. Even if it is free, no product is any more desirable if the consumer is not involved in its consumption. This result is also important on a management level. It highlights the need to increase the public's involvement in this activity and the need for greater communication on free admission policies so as to reveal latent visiting intentions. A management program should be put into place for the non-monetary costs a visit entails which are accentuated and even created by free admission so as to eliminate barriers to the visit. A free admission pricing policy is therefore likely to entail costs (insofar as it does not cancel out any revenue) if the institution doesn't want the perceived quality of the visit to suffer.

 – Lastly, our third and final result shows that the experience of a free visit to a museum or monument can trigger a learning process of this practice as well as an ownership of the free admission policy for certain visitors. Free admission also allows a trial and can provoke an attachment to the free object, but also to its being free. This result also seems able to be generalised to any type of goods or services, the effects of loyalty to promotion having been demonstrated in the market sector (Desmet, 2002). This revelation of a learning process highlights the need to reflect upon the continuity of this pricing policy and to establish frequentation rituals based on free admission. It also seems necessary to promote its festive, exceptional dimension (as can be the case with Patrimony Days or Night of the Museums) and to specify the targeted segments, so as to reduce negative presuppositions.

These results call on institutional directors to act on two major points:

- Firstly, the need to increase the visitor's involvement in the visit. We repeat: free admission facilitates or allows a visit, but it is far from being *the entrance key* into museums and monuments. The first task would be to identify the levers for increasing both interest in the practice by initiating a visit and the attractiveness of the locations, as well as the pertinence of people's visits as an alternative leisure activity. This must be executed taking into account the diversity of visitors and their perceptions of these places. A more animated and lively image of these sites needs to be built, allowing visitors to discover emotions, share an experience, and so on (Bourgeon *et alii*, 2006).

- Secondly, the need to better explain the free admission scheme, to make a true policy or strategy of it and where these already exist, to clearly identify their meaning: Why apply a free admission policy? Which choices does this come from? Which strategy is being followed? What goals should be reached? How is it implemented? The beneficiaries insist on the need to maintain the relevance of this approach and to generalise it throughout museums and monuments across France so that it be completely integrated into the habits of modern society, taking into account the need for on-going study of both free admission policy and the cultural activity. The other strategic choice would be to make a periodical or occasional event of it which would be widely advertised, taking for example Patrimony Days. Putting this into place would also require taking measures to reduce the inconveniences cited by the public (crowds, diversity of visitors, need to plan and organise, etc.).

This research also contains limitations and opens the way to further research.

In a general sense, it offers an exploration of the current state of affairs which can serve as a point of reference for further investigations. A diachronic study would be useful in verifying the

degree of stability for the observations over time and, in particular, to verify the long term effects of the policy on practices (trial and loyalty). It would also be worthwhile to obtain results specific to the type of product (reputation of sites, positioning, etc.). Furthermore, identifying the universes which structure the perceptions of museums, monuments and their free admission would in itself be worthwhile exploring to observe the process of structuring these perceptions and identify the intervening variables with a typological analysis of visitors.

More generally, this research questions the pricing practices of all organisations, whether commercial or otherwise. It could be followed up by studying the different types of free admission (permanent or periodical, by category or not, total or partial) and the objectives which can be accorded to each (to induce trialling, buy, buy back, entice to the sales point, train and inform, etc) by considering their appropriateness to different targets and different types of product (involving or not, familiar or not, etc.). It may also be important to measure the non-monetary costs exacerbated by a free admission context so as to better evaluate the impact of free admission on overall perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988; Aurier, Evrard and N'Goala, 2004). It would also be worthwhile to explore the influence of free admission on the future perception of prices and particularly on the formulation of reference prices (Zollinger, 2004) or the willingness to pay (Le Gall, 2000). Finally, a reminder of the specificity of our field of application: French museums and monuments (public service with indirect payment, with negative external effects where crowding occurs, a product with social connotations). The questions raised by freeness deserve to be studied in other cultural fields (music, photography, newspapers) and other services, whether public (transport, libraries, education, health, etc.) or private which use freeness as a promotional tool.

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APPENDIX A1 – Characteristics of samples interviewed

Characteristics of samples	Individual interviews	Group interviews	Visiting observations and interviews	Questionnaires
Size	52 interviews	4 interviews	18 observations at the Magnin museum (Dijon) 18 at the National Château-neuf-en-Auxois Monument 12 observations during Patrimony Days (exceptional and publicised free admission) 13 on a free Sunday (periodical free admission) 11 on a paying Sunday	580 questionnaires
Place of residence	12 % Paris and region 54 % other cities 34 % rural zone	Dijon	Inhabitants and tourists of the Dijon region	17 % Paris and region 48 % other cities 35 % rural zone
Frequentation	40% regular 36% occasional 24% non-visitors	G1: 10 regular G2: 8 occasional G3: 9 regular G4: 5 non-visitors	66% regular 31% occasional 3% non-visitors	54% regular 38% occasional 8% non-visitors
Sex	46 % women 54 % men	G1: 6 w/4 m G2: 4 w/4 m G3: 5 w/4 m G4: 1 w/4 m	34 % women 66 % men	60 % women 40 % men
Age [min – max], average	[17 - 81] 44 years	E1: [59 - 75], 66 E2 : [20 - 46], 36 E3 : [29 - 47], 35 E4 : [22 - 31], 28	Criterion replaced by the notion of unit of observation: single person (5), family unit (20), friends unit (11).	Under 18 = 1 % 18 to 25 = 26 % 26 to 35 = 15 % 36 to 45 = 17 % 46 to 55 = 19 % 56 to 65 = 11 % 66 and over = 10 %

APPENDIX A2 – Thematic content analysis of data

The extracts given below illustrate the method used for thematic content analysis: from the coding of the interviews to building the dictionaries of empirical and theoretical themes.

Extract from an interview analysis sheet

PERCEPTIONS-/PRICE.MUSEUMS&MONUMENTS=EXPENSIVE: pg. 1, 3, 4, 5
...Verbatim pg. 5E22: *But it is true that it's expensive; leisure activities are basically a luxury in a sense, even if it is becoming more accessible, you can't just go and do any activity you feel like.*

Extract from the dictionary of empirical themes[15]

VIII FREE ADMISSION & ACCESSIBILITY
• Free admission and access to museums and monuments for different publics
[...] PERCEPTIONS/DECISION.FREE/POWER.PUBLIC/MOTIVATIONS=OPEN TO ALL: The directors of museums and monuments decide to offer free admission for the opening of museums and monuments for all E9: pg. 9; EC16: pg. 5 PERCEPTIONS-PAYING/ELITISM: Paying to visit museums and monuments is elitist: the people with the means are privileged EC11: pg. 2, 3; E6: pg. 5; E7: pg. 1

Extract from the dictionary of theoretical themes[16]

I) – HOW IS FREE ADMISSION TO MUSEUMS AND MONUMENTS COMPREHENDED? A GENERAL APPROACH. A) Perceptions of free admission to museums and according to individual thinking. a) Freeness: a price * The price of a visit: an overall price
Empirical dictionary Part I Freeness, payment and price The high cost of museums and monuments [10 and 11] Willingness to pay for visits to museums and monuments [11 and 12] Part IV freeness and budget The place of spending on visits to museums and monuments in the budget [25] [...] P0) In the perceptions, free admission functions as a price, i.e. like the absence of monetary or non-monetary P1) In the public's perceptions, free admission manifests as a price: it is seen as the erasure of a monetary price and can modify the perception of non-monetary costs

[15] The dictionary of empirical themes is organised in a directory structure, this allows empirical themes to be linked back to the codes of the interviews at their source.
[16] The dictionary of theoretical themes is organised in a directory structure, this allows theoretical themes to be linked back to the empirical themes at their source.