

THE FORMATION MECHANISM OF MUSEUM VISITORS' BEHAVIORAL INTENTION WITHIN A STIMULUS-ORGANISM-RESPONSE FRAMEWORK: A DUAL-MEDIATION CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF VISITOR PERCEPTION AND SATISFACTION

JING WANG

Suan Sunadha Rajabhat University, Thailand

Email: s6458491706@ssru.ac.th

ABSTRACT

Museums are increasingly evaluated not only by the cultural value of their collections but also by their ability to deliver visitor-centered experiences that translate into sustainable behavioral outcomes. Prior research often compresses the museum visit into a single “experience quality” construct and treats perceived value and satisfaction as interchangeable, which limits explanatory precision and managerial actionability. Drawing on the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), this paper proposes an integrated conceptual model for public museum tourism. Four manageable experience stimuli are specified: visitor services quality, curatorial quality, technology-enabled experience quality, and servicescape. Two distinct organism states are modeled in parallel: visitor perception and satisfaction. Behavioral intention is conceptualized as revisit intention, recommendation intention, positive word-of-mouth, continued engagement, and support intention. The model theorizes both direct effects of each stimulus on behavioral intention and dual mediation via visitor perception and satisfaction. By separating experience stimuli into actionable modules and clarifying the psychological boundary between perception and satisfaction, the framework offers a testable basis for empirical validation and supports evidence-based experience design and resource allocation in museums.

Keywords: museum tourism, stimulus–organism–response, visitor perception, satisfaction, behavioral intention, conceptual model

Introduction

Many museum systems have shifted from collection-centric institutions toward visitor-centered cultural platforms, where the quality of the visit experience is central to public value and organizational sustainability (Falk & Dierking, 2016; Lu et al., 2023). In this context, visitors' behavioral intentions—such as revisiting, recommending, sharing experiences, and sustaining engagement—are used as proximal indicators of relationship continuity and long-term demand (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Yet experience-to-intention research in museum tourism still faces two recurring constraints that limit theoretical precision and managerial usefulness. One constraint is dimensional oversimplification. Museums offer a compound service-experience bundle that includes frontline service encounters, interpretive narratives, digital interactions, and physical/ambient environments. These domains are often managed by different units and involve different investment levels. Aggregating them into a single “experience quality” score may conceal stimulus-specific pathways and reduce actionable

guidance for experience design. A second constraint is constructing conflation. Value-based perception (often framed as perceived value) and satisfaction are frequently treated as equivalent, despite their different psychological roles. Perceived value reflects a benefit–sacrifices evaluation that can include functional, emotional, social, and symbolic returns (Sheth et al., 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Satisfaction, by contrast, is a comparative judgment formed when visitors contrast actual performance with prior expectations or standards (Oliver, 1980, 1997). Conflating these constructs makes it difficult to explain museum management puzzles such as high perceived educational value with modest revisit rates, or high satisfaction with limited recommendation behavior. To address these gaps, this paper develops a conceptual model grounded in the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) logic. The model (a) specifies four manageable experience stimuli aligned with museum operations, (b) distinguishes visitor perception and satisfaction as parallel organism states, and (c) links them to multidimensional behavioral intentions. The framework is proposed as a theory-building contribution and as a basis for subsequent empirical validation. Against this backdrop, visitor behavioral intention has become a proxy for museums’ long-term sustainability. Intentions to revisit and recommend translate into repeat attendance and positive word-of-mouth, which matter under intensified competition for visitors’ time and attention (Kotler & Kotler, 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1996). For public museums, these outcomes also align with accountability expectations focused on participation and social reach (Kotler & Kotler, 2000).

This paper therefore positions museum experiences within an S-O-R logic and articulates a dual-mediation mechanism that distinguishes visitors’ perception from satisfaction. The conceptual contribution lies in clarifying what constitutes “stimuli” in museums and in explaining how each stimulus may influence behavioral intention directly and indirectly. The framework is intended to support theory building as well as empirical testing using structural equation modeling approaches commonly adopted in tourism and service research (Chen & Chen, 2010; Hair et al., 2011).

Literature review

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 S-O-R as an Explanatory Logic for Museum Experiences

The S-O-R paradigm explains how environmental stimuli shapes internal cognitive states and, in turn, behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In services and tourism, S-O-R has been used to connect designed environments to evaluation processes and behavioral outcomes, particularly where multiple cues jointly shape experience (Bitner, 1992). A museum visit naturally fits this logic: visitors are immersed in a bundle of stimuli (service encounters, interpretive narratives, technologies, and physical environments), process these inputs into evaluative states, and then form intentions that influence future behaviors. Originating in environmental psychology, the S-O-R approach assumes that individuals do not respond to settings in a purely mechanical way; rather, they interpret environmental cues and form internal states that shape action tendencies (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In service environments, this logic has been operationalized through atmosphere and servicescape

research, where layout, sensory conditions, and human interactions influence emotions and cognitive evaluations, which then predict approach behaviors such as staying longer and returning (Bitner, 1992; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). In museum settings, S-O-R provides a flexible structure for integrating both tangible and intangible elements of the visit. It is particularly suitable for museums because visitors often pursue symbolic, hedonic, and learning-oriented outcomes beyond functional service efficiency, which resonates with experiential consumption perspectives (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The model also accommodates the possibility that multiple internal states coexist. Value-based perception can arise from meaning-making and novelty, while satisfaction can reflect confirmation of expectations about convenience, comfort, and interpretive clarity (Oliver, 1980; Sheth et al., 1991).

2.2 Multidimensional Experience Stimuli in Museums

Visitor services quality. Service quality research emphasizes reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles as core dimensions shaping customer judgments (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In museums, these dimensions appear in ticketing and entry procedures, wayfinding support, staff professionalism, accessibility assistance, and the clarity of visitor information. High-quality service can reduce perceived effort costs and strengthen trust, thereby shaping both evaluation and behavioral tendencies (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996). **Curatorial quality.** Museums' core offering is interpretive content, and curatorial decisions shape narrative coherence, information credibility, interpretive clarity, and display design. These elements influence meaning construction and learning, which are central to value-based evaluations in heritage and cultural consumption (Chen & Chen, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 2016). **Technology-enabled experience quality.** Museums increasingly deploy mobile guides, interactive screens, augmented/virtual reality, and smart installations to enrich engagement and interpretation. Technology acceptance research highlights perceived usefulness and ease of use as primary determinants of technology-related evaluations (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Museum studies also show that interactivity and enjoyment in mobile guides can raise satisfaction and revisit intentions (Kim, 2018), and AR design features can enhance experiential value and subsequent intentions in museum contexts (He et al., 2018). In parallel, bibliometric evidence suggests rapid growth and diversification of technology-related museum experience research, supporting the need to treat technology as a core stimulus (Lu et al., 2023). **Servicescape.** Servicescape theory argues that ambient conditions, spatial layout, signage, aesthetics, and maintenance shape affective and cognitive responses and can influence subsequent behaviors (Bitner, 1992). In museums, servicescape includes spatial legibility, comfort facilities, lighting and sound conditions, crowding management, and cleanliness. Museum-specific evidence indicates that physical environments relate to satisfaction and loyalty-relevant outcomes (Han et al., 2019).

2.3. Dual Organism States: Visitor Perception and Satisfaction

Visitor perception. Visitor perception represents a multidimensional assessment of what visitor's gain from a museum visit. Consistent with perceived value theory and consumption value theory, it can include functional (learning, efficiency), emotional (enjoyment, awe), cultural (identity, meaning), social (relationship and symbolic capital), and novelty-epistemic (curiosity and cognitive stimulation) value (Sheth et al., 1991; Zeithaml,

1988). **Satisfaction.** Satisfaction is an overall judgment formed by comparing the experienced visit with expectations, standards, or prior museum experiences (Oliver, 1980, 1997). Unlike visitor perception, which focuses on value acquisition, satisfaction captures the degree to which the visit is evaluated as meeting or exceeding what was anticipated.

Distinguishing these organism states is theoretically consequential because a museum may deliver high perceived value (e.g., deep interpretive content) while generating lower satisfaction due to congestion or fatigue; conversely, a comfortable visit may satisfy expectations while offering limited perceived value, weakening long-term engagement. Modeling visitor perception and satisfaction in parallel helps capture these potentially divergent pathways. Visitor perception is treated here as a value-based, multidimensional appraisal of what is gained from the museum visit relative to what is invested. Consumption value theory highlights functional, emotional, social, and epistemic components of perceived value, suggesting that cultural experiences are evaluated through both utilitarian and symbolic benefits (Sheth et al., 1991). In operational terms, perceived value can be measured through validated multidimensional scales that capture quality and performance, emotional value, social value, and value-for-money considerations (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). For museums, cultural value and novelty-epistemic value are often central because visitors seek learning, identity affirmation, and discovery. Satisfaction, in contrast, is conceptually anchored in expectation–confirmation logic. Visitors enter with reference points regarding accessibility, interpretive support, crowding, and service responsiveness; satisfaction reflects whether the experienced performance meets or exceeds those reference points (Oliver, 1980, 1997). Empirical museum studies suggest that satisfaction can predict revisit and recommendation intentions even when the effects of specific service elements are controlled, indicating its role as an integrative post-consumption judgment (Harrison & Shaw, 2004; Wu & Li, 2015).

2.4 Behavioral Responses: Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intention reflects the likelihood of future actions that benefit the museum, including revisiting, recommending, positive word-of-mouth, continued attention to exhibitions and programs, and support intentions such as membership renewal or donation (Zeithaml et al., 1996). For museums, these intentions indicate relationship continuity and are relevant to both attendance sustainability and public influence. Behavioral intention in the museum context encompasses both transactional and relational behaviors. Transactional responses include repeat visitation and purchases of related services, while relational responses include advocacy, positive word-of-mouth, and continued engagement with museum communication channels and membership programs (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Recent museum research also suggests that visitor-generated content, such as sharing photos and reviews, can function as an extension of behavioral intention because it shapes public perceptions and influences other potential visitors (Vu et al., 2018).

Table 1. Constructs and Illustrative Dimensions in the Proposed Model

Model Component	Construct	Illustrative Dimensions
Stimuli (S)	Visitor Services Quality	Reliability; Responsiveness; Assurance; Empathy; Service-related tangibles
Stimuli (S)	Curatorial Quality	Content depth; Content credibility; Narrative coherence; Interpretive clarity; Display design quality
Stimuli (S)	Technology-Enabled Experience Quality	System quality; Information quality; Interaction quality; Technology-enabled immersion; Personalization & adaptivity
Stimuli (S)	Servicescape	Spatial legibility; Ambient conditions; Aesthetic appeal; Functional comfort; Maintenance & cleanliness
Organism (O)	Visitor Perception	Functional value; Emotional value; Cultural value; Social value; Novelty–epistemic value
Organism (O)	Satisfaction	Overall satisfaction; Cognitive satisfaction; Affective satisfaction; Confirmation-based satisfaction; Comparative satisfaction
Response (R)	Behavioral Intention	Revisit intention; Recommendation intention; Positive word-of-mouth; Continued engagement; Support intention

3. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Figure 1 positions four stimuli (visitor services quality, curatorial quality, technology-enabled experience quality, and servicescape) as predictors of behavioral intention, both directly and indirectly through two parallel mediators: visitor perception and satisfaction.

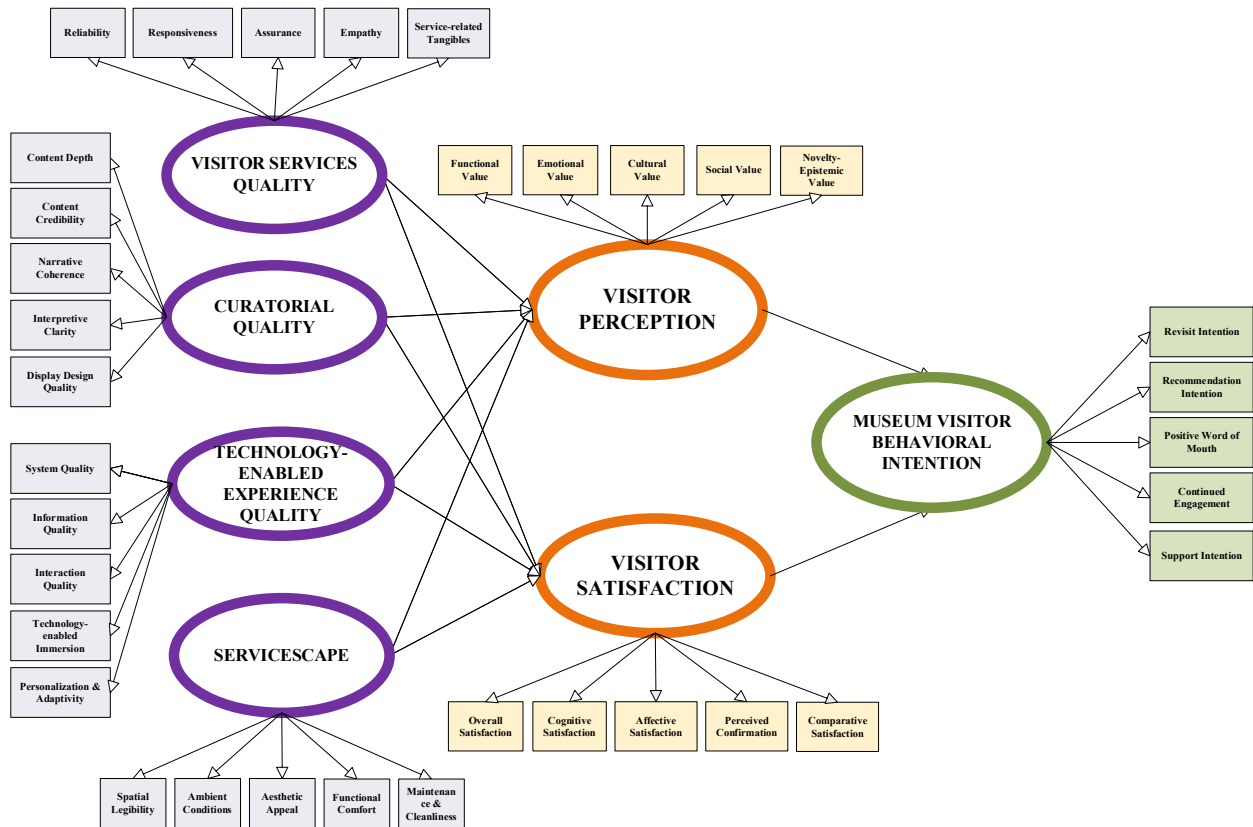


Figure 1. Conceptual model (S-O-R with dual parallel mediation).

3.1 Direct Effects of Experience Stimuli on Behavioral Intention

Direct effects are theorized because museum experience elements can shape behavioral intention even without fully passing through post-consumption evaluations. Service quality and servicescape cues may trigger immediate approach tendencies, such as willingness to stay longer, return, or recommend, particularly when visitors perceive strong reliability, comfort, and accessibility (Bitner, 1992; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Curatorial and technology-enabled quality may also influence intention directly by signaling uniqueness and competitiveness of the museum’s offering, which matters when visitors compare multiple leisure alternatives (Chen & Chen, 2010; Kotler & Kotler, 2000).

- H1a: Visitor services quality positively influences behavioral intention.
- H1b: Curatorial quality positively influences behavioral intention.
- H1c: Technology-enabled experience quality positively influences behavioral intention.
- H1d: Servicescape positively influences behavioral intention.

3.2 Effects of Experience Stimuli on Visitor Perception

Experience stimuli are expected to influence visitor perception because each stimulus contributes to the benefit–sacrifice calculus underlying value-based appraisal (Zeithaml, 1988). High-quality service reduces psychological and time costs; coherent curation enhances learning and cultural enrichment; well-designed technology increases interaction quality and immersion; and an effective servicescape improves comfort and perceived control (Falk & Dierking, 2016; Sheth et al., 1991).

H2a: Visitor services quality positively influences visitor perception.

H2b: Curatorial quality positively influences visitor perception.

H2c: Technology-enabled experience quality positively influences visitor perception.

H2d: Servicescape positively influences visitor perception.

3.3 Effects of Experience Stimuli on Satisfaction

Stimuli are also expected to influence satisfaction because satisfaction aggregates visitors' judgments about whether the visit met their expectations for a "good museum day." Service reliability and responsiveness reduce service failures and enhances perceived fairness, which strengthens satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980). Curatorial quality can influence satisfaction by enabling visitors to achieve their visit goals, such as learning, inspiration, or family education, particularly when narratives are clear and displays are well designed (Falk & Dierking, 2016).

H3a: Visitor services quality positively influences satisfaction.

H3b: Curatorial quality positively influences satisfaction.

H3c: Technology-enabled experience quality positively influences satisfaction.

H3d: Servicescape positively influences satisfaction.

3.4 Effects of Organism States on Behavioral Intention

Both organism states are theorized to predict behavioral intention because they represent internal justifications for action. Visitor perception provides reasons to engage again ("this visit was meaningful and worth it"), while satisfaction provides reassurance that repeating the experience will meet expectations. In tourism and service research, perceived value and satisfaction often operate as proximal drivers of loyalty-related intentions, although their relative strength can vary by context and by the nature of the experience (Chen & Chen, 2010; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

H4: Visitor perception positively influences behavioral intention.

H5: Satisfaction positively influences behavioral intention.

3.5 Dual Mediation Effects

The mediation hypotheses reflect a central assumption of S-O-R: stimuli shape behavioral responses largely because they influence internal evaluations. Visitor perception is

expected to mediate when stimuli enhance the perceived benefits of the visit, such as cultural enrichment, emotional enjoyment, social sharing value, or novelty (Sheth et al., 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). Satisfaction is expected to mediate when stimuli influence confirmation of operational and experiential expectations, such as ease of navigation, interpretive support, and service responsiveness (Oliver, 1980, 1997). Modeling both mediators in parallel allows the framework to capture cases where one internal state dominates. For example, immersive AR/VR may exert a stronger indirect effect through visitor perception, whereas servicescape and front-line service improvements may exert a stronger indirect effect through satisfaction. Empirical museum studies have reported such differentiation, where content-related factors explain meaning and engagement while operational factors explain satisfaction and revisit intention (Han & Hyun, 2017; Wu & Li, 2015).

H6a–H6d: Visitor perception mediates the relationships between each experience stimulus (visitor services quality, curatorial quality, technology-enabled experience quality, and servicescape) and behavioral intention.

H7a–H7d: Satisfaction mediates the relationships between each experience stimulus (visitor services quality, curatorial quality, technology-enabled experience quality, and servicescape) and behavioral intention.

3.6 Suggested Empirical Validation Strategy

Although the present paper is conceptual, the proposed framework is designed for empirical testing in public museum settings. A typical validation approach would involve an on-site, post-visit survey administered to adult visitors after completion of their visit, ensuring respondents have sufficient exposure to evaluate service encounters, exhibition interpretation, technology interaction, and physical environments. Measures can be operationalized as reflective indicators aligned with the dimensions in Table 1, and behavioral intention can be measured through likelihood items covering revisit, recommendation, word-of-mouth, continued engagement, and support intention. Structural equation modeling can then be used to compare the relative magnitude of direct effects (H1a–H1d) and indirect effects via the two mediators (H6a–H6d; H7a–H7d), with bootstrapped confidence intervals used for mediation inference. Cross-museum replication would further clarify boundary conditions and practical priorities. A typical validation design would survey visitors immediately after they complete an on-site visit, ensuring adequate exposure to exhibitions, service encounters, and physical settings. To support generalizability, data collection can be implemented across multiple time slots and exhibition areas, capturing differences in crowding, visitor motivations, and technology usage. Respondents who did not engage with optional technologies (e.g., AR/VR) can still evaluate system accessibility and information quality if they interacted with basic digital touchpoints such as ticketing apps or mobile maps (Kang et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2023). Measurement development should follow established construction operationalization procedures. Items can be adapted from validated scales in service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty research, with wording adjusted to the museum context and pretested for clarity (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). When new items are required (e.g., technology-enabled immersion or narrative coherence), scale development guidance suggests combining expert review, pilot testing, and item purification to ensure content validity (Churchill, 1979). Data analysis can be

implemented using variance-based SEM, such as PLS-SEM, which is widely used for complex models with multiple constructs and mediation paths (Hair et al., 2011). Evaluation typically involves examining indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Convergent validity can be assessed via average variance extracted, while discriminant validity can be evaluated using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). Mediation can be tested via bootstrapping of indirect effects, reporting confidence intervals and the proportion of total effects carried by each mediator (Chen & Chen, 2010). Given that museum studies often rely on self-reported surveys collected at a single time point, procedural and statistical remedies for common method bias are recommended. Procedural steps include protecting anonymity, reducing item ambiguity, and separating measurement of predictors and outcomes in the questionnaire. Statistical checks can include full collinearity assessments or marker-variable approaches, acknowledging that no single remedy fully eliminates method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Discussion and Implications

4.1 Theoretical Implications

The model contributes to museum tourism research by refining the broad notion of “museum experience quality” into four operationally distinct stimuli aligned with museum governance and resource allocation. It clarifies the psychological boundary between visitor perception and satisfaction by positioning them as parallel organism states rather than interchangeable mediators. Finally, it integrates direct and indirect paths, reflecting the plausibility that some stimuli may trigger immediate behavioral impulses (e.g., sharing and recommending) while others operate primarily through value-based perception or expectation-based satisfaction. Conceptually, the framework also bridges museum-specific scholarship and general service experience theory. By treating curatorial quality as a distinct stimulus rather than subsuming it under generic service quality, the model respects the museum’s dual identity as a cultural authority and a leisure provider (Falk & Dierking, 2016; Kotler & Kotler, 2000). This distinction helps explain why museums with similar operational performance may generate different levels of perceived cultural value and repeat visitation. The dual-mediation logic additionally contributes to the ongoing debate about the relationship between perceived value and satisfaction. Rather than assuming a fixed sequential chain, the model allows perception and satisfaction to operate in parallel, which can be empirically examined through competing model tests. This approach aligns with evidence that value-based appraisals and satisfaction judgments may originate from different cognitive processes and may respond differently to experience redesigning efforts (Oliver, 1980; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

4.2 Practical Implications

For practitioners, the framework provides a diagnostic map. By estimating the relative strength of direct effects and mediated pathways, museums can identify which experience modules most effectively convert visits into revisits, recommendations, or sustained engagement. For example, if curatorial quality operates mainly through visitor perception, investment priorities would include interpretive design, narrative coherence, and educational programming (Chen & Chen, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 2016). If servicescape primarily affects

behavior through satisfaction, improvements may focus on comfort facilities, crowding management, and environmental maintenance (Bitner, 1992; Han et al., 2019). If technology-enabled experiences show strong direct effects, museums can treat digital experience design as a strategic lever for engagement and diffusion, consistent with evidence that technology-related museum experience research and adoption is expanding (Lu et al., 2023). In applications, museums can use the framework to align interventions with targeted behavioral outcomes. When the goal is to strengthen revisit intention among local audiences, operational satisfaction drivers such as queue management, spatial legibility, and staff responsiveness may yield quick gains. When the goal is to strengthen recommendation and advocacy among tourists, perceived cultural and novelty value may be more influential, implying emphasis on curatorial storytelling, interpretive clarity, and memorable immersive touchpoints (Han et al., 2017; Vu et al., 2018). The framework also supports technology governance decisions. Investments in AR/VR or mobile guides are likely to contribute to behavioral intention when they are integrated with curatorial narratives and when system quality is reliable. If technologies are deployed as isolated “add-ons,” they may increase novelty value for some visitors but fail to translate into satisfaction or revisit intention, as recent evidence suggests (Aprilia et al., 2022; Choi & Nam, 2024).

5. Conclusion and Future Research

This paper proposes a dual-mediation S-O-R framework to explain how multidimensional museum experience stimuli shape visitors' behavioral intention. The conceptual model is designed to be empirically testable and managerially actionable. Future research should (a) develop and validate measurement scales for each construct, (b) test the model across museums with different types and regional contexts, (c) examine visitor heterogeneity (e.g., motivation, cultural background, familiarity) as moderators, and (d) employ longitudinal designs to assess whether stimulus effects persist or decay over time. The model is intentionally positioned as a foundation for empirical evaluation rather than as a final causal claim. Several limitations warrant attention when the framework is tested. Cross-sectional surveys can capture post-visit evaluations but cannot fully disentangle reciprocal effects or changes in perceptions over time. Longitudinal designs that track repeat visitors, membership renewal, or subsequent online engagement can strengthen causal inference and link intentions to observed behavior (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

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