A Study of Visitors to
Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer
At the National Portrait Gallery

Office of Policy and Analysis
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC

June 2011

Contents

Preface 3

The Exhibition 4

The Visitor Study 5

Two Audiences 6

Ratings—Expectations on Entrance 7

Ratings—Overall Experience at Exit 8

Experiences—Exhibition-Specific vs. General Visitors 9

Experiences—Exhibition-Specific Visitors 10

Experiences—General Visitors 11

Ratings of Artwork, Theme, Display, and Information 12

Discussion 13

Appendix A: Entrance Questionnaire 14

Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire 15

Appendix C: Frequencies of Responses 16

Preface

Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer, provided a window to one of America's most important popular musicians. The photographs depict a powerful force in familiar personal contexts. Elvis stands out as a person capable of realizing ambitions far beyond Mississippi and reminds visitors that his future did not merely happen, but that he created and shaped it. The photographs foreshadow his ability to permeate and impact the public's imagination and awareness and underpin his legacy to global culture.

Thanks are due to Marty Sullivan, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, and Nik Apostolides, Associate Director, who requested this study. Gratitude is also extended to Amy Henderson, Historian, for her explanation of the goals of and expectations for the exhibition.

I also wish to thank the OP&A team who worked on this study. Lance Costello and Andy Pekarik designed the survey. Bethany Miller, Charlotte Brown, Claire Eckert, Daniel Garcia, Eliza Kleintop, Givi Khidesheli, Jarrid Green, and Lindsay Haslebacher assisted with data collection. Andy analyzed the data and wrote this report. So Hyun Park put together the frequency table.

The Exhibition

Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer was an exhibition of photographs of Elvis Presley (1935-1977) taken in 1956 by photojournalist Alfred Wertheimer.[1] Wertheimer was hired by RCA Victor to take candid promotional shots of the 21-year-old performer at the moment that he was about to enter the national stage. The exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery included 56 photographs spread among six rooms—three on each side of a central hallway that included introductory text and also contained images. Each room was dedicated to the same time or event, and included Elvis in the recording studio, on the road, backstage, on stage, and at home.

The exhibition had a number of distinctive features: a well-known subject, striking photographs shown as large-scale prints, organization around a clear timeline, brief but evocative texts that described the group of photographs in a room, and a pared-down design that was spacious and relaxed.

[1] The exhibition was organized collaboratively by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), and the Govinda Gallery. It was shown at NPG between October 30, 2010 and January 23, 2011.

The Visitor Study

Separate but equally representative samples of visitors entering and exiting the exhibition were asked to complete a questionnaire asking about:

- **Rating of the exhibition** (anticipated rating for entering visitors; overall experience rating for exiting visitors)
- **Experiences** (anticipated and actual experiences in the exhibition)
- **Demographic characteristics** (sex, age, residence)
- **Visit characteristics** (whether visitors were visiting the museum for the first time; whether they had come to the museum to see this exhibition, who they were with)
- **Rating of the artwork, theme, information, and display** (for exiting visitors only)

The survey took place between January 8th and 14th, 2011, and involved 210 people entering the exhibition and 312 leaving it. The cooperation rate for the survey was 89% on entrance and 83% on exit. The 95% confidence interval for the data is +/-4%.

Two Audiences

Exhibition-specific visitors—those who came to the museum specifically to see *Elvis at 21* comprised one-third (32%) of all visitors.

General visitors—the other two-thirds (68%) of visitors to the exhibition came to the museum for other reasons. They had either not heard about the exhibition before arriving or had come to the museum to see something else.

Exhibition-specific visitors

Fewer came alone—9% of exhibition-specific visitors were visiting alone vs. 17% of general visitors

Older—the average age for exhibition-specific visitors was 43 vs. 38 for general visitors

More local visitors—63% of exhibition-specific visitors lived in the Washington DC Metropolitan area vs. 52% of general visitors

More repeat visitors—62% of exhibition-specific visitors had been to the building before vs. 49% of general visitors

Ratings—Expectations on Entrance

- **Exhibition-specific visitors** expected *Elvis at 21* to be close to an ***average*** Smithsonian exhibition, albeit one with fewer negatives (i.e., Poor/Fair/Good ratings 8% lower than the SI average), and fewer positives (i.e., Superior ratings 7% lower than the SI average)[2].

- **General visitors** expected it to be ***far below average***. (Poor/Fair/Good ratings 18% above average; Superior ratings 15% below average).

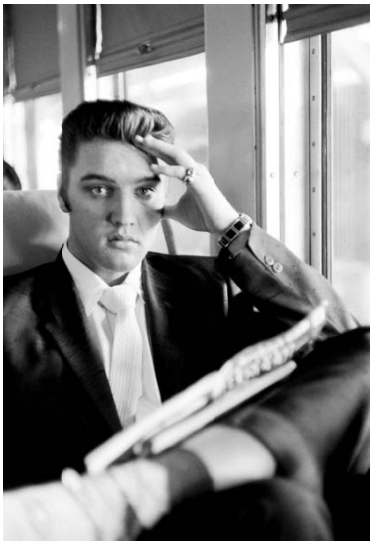
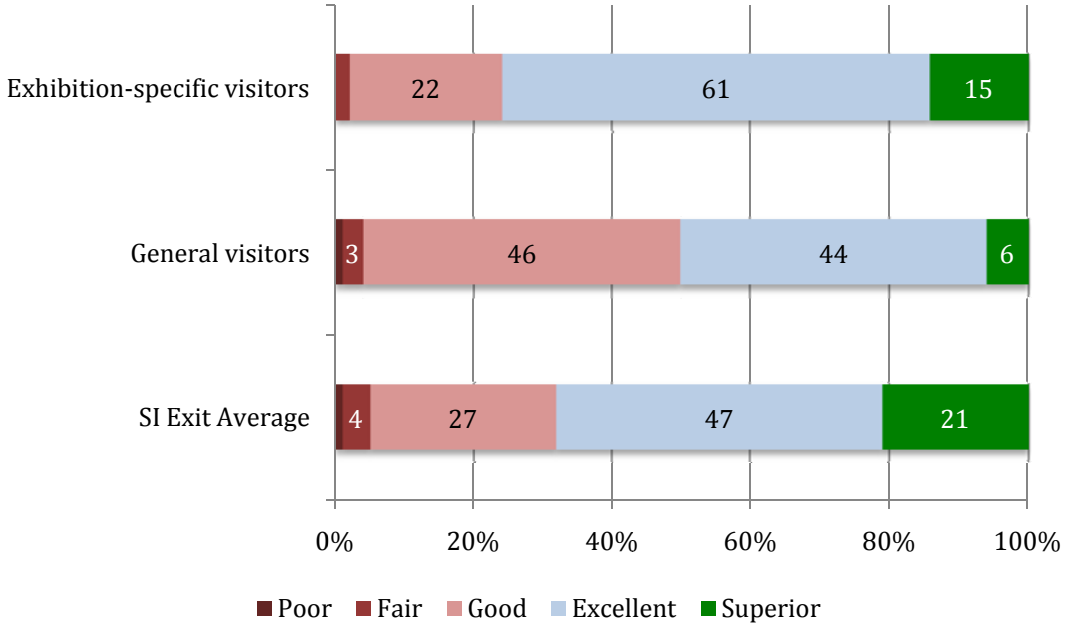


Figure 1—Expected ratings for exhibition-specific and general visitors on entrance (in percent)



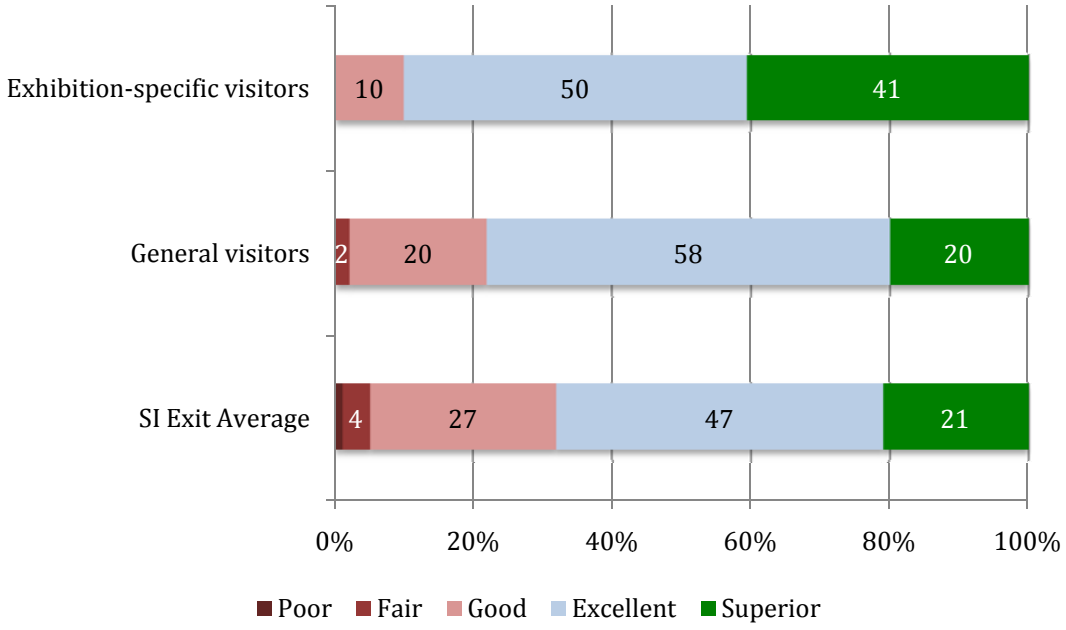
[2] "Excellent" is the average rating in Smithsonian museums and exhibitions and indicates a generally favorable, non-critical response. "Poor," "Fair," and "Good" represent some degree of criticism, while "Superior" is enthusiastically positive. The SI average is based on 68 exhibitions studied between 2004 and 2010.

Ratings—Overall Experience at Exit

- **Exhibition-specific visitors** were ***enthusiastically positive***, with Superior ratings twice the SI average and Poor/Fair/Good ratings less than half the SI average.

- **General visitors** rated *Elvis at 21* as an ***average*** Smithsonian exhibition, albeit one with fewer negatives (Poor/Fair/Good 10% below the average).

Figure 2—Overall experience ratings for exhibition-specific and general visitors on exit (in percent)



Experiences—Exhibition-Specific vs. General Visitors

On average, **exhibition-specific visitors** marked 3 experiences on entrance and exit. In comparison, **general visitors** marked 2.

Recalling memories was the most significant difference between the experiences of **exhibition-specific visitors** and **general visitors.**

- On entrance, more **exhibition-specific visitors** were looking forward to **recalling memories** (45% of exhibition-specific visitors vs. 12% of general visitors).

- On exit, too, more **exhibition-specific visitors** reported **recalling memories** as especially satisfying, although the gap between them narrowed (36% of exhibition-specific visitors vs. 21% of general visitors).

Experiences—Exhibition-Specific Visitors

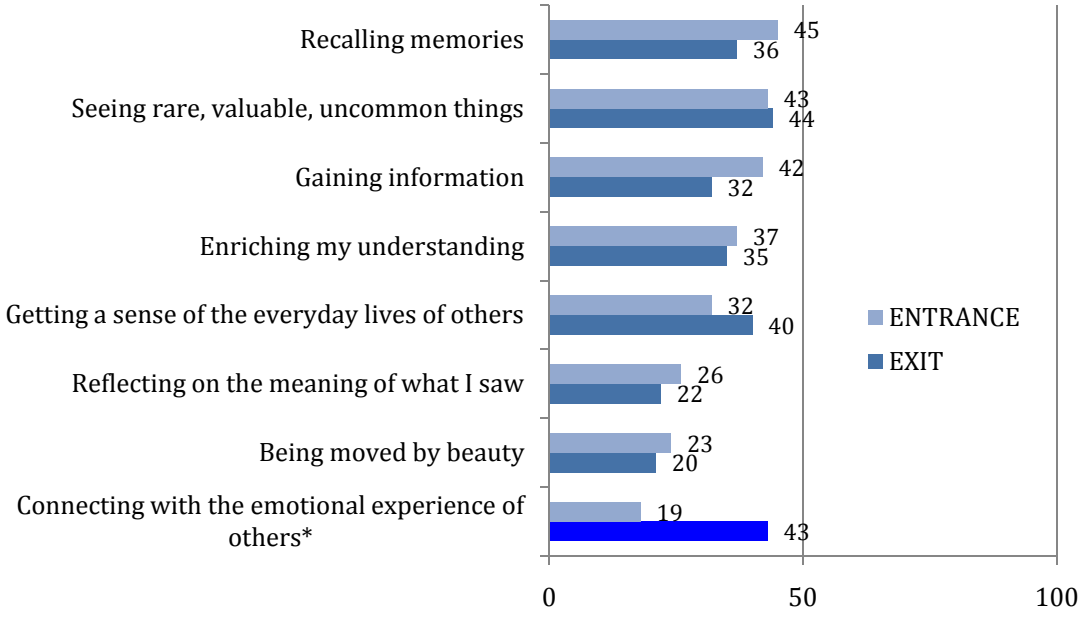
- Entering exhibition-specific visitors were most interested in **recalling memories; seeing rare, valuable, uncommon things;** and **gaining information.**

- Exiting exhibition-specific visitors found the experiences entering exhibition-specific visitors were looking for.

- Exiting exhibition-specific visitors marked one experience more often than entering exhibition-specific visitors expected. This **unexpected experience:**

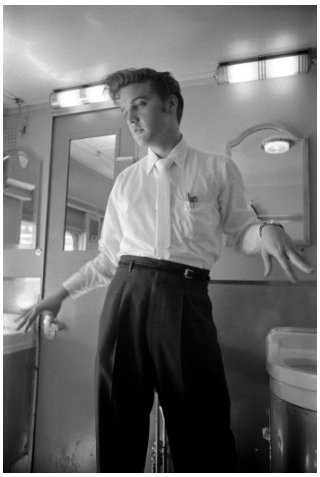
    - ***much more*** **emotional connection** (19% on entrance; 43% on exit)

Figure 3—Experiences of exhibition-specific visitors



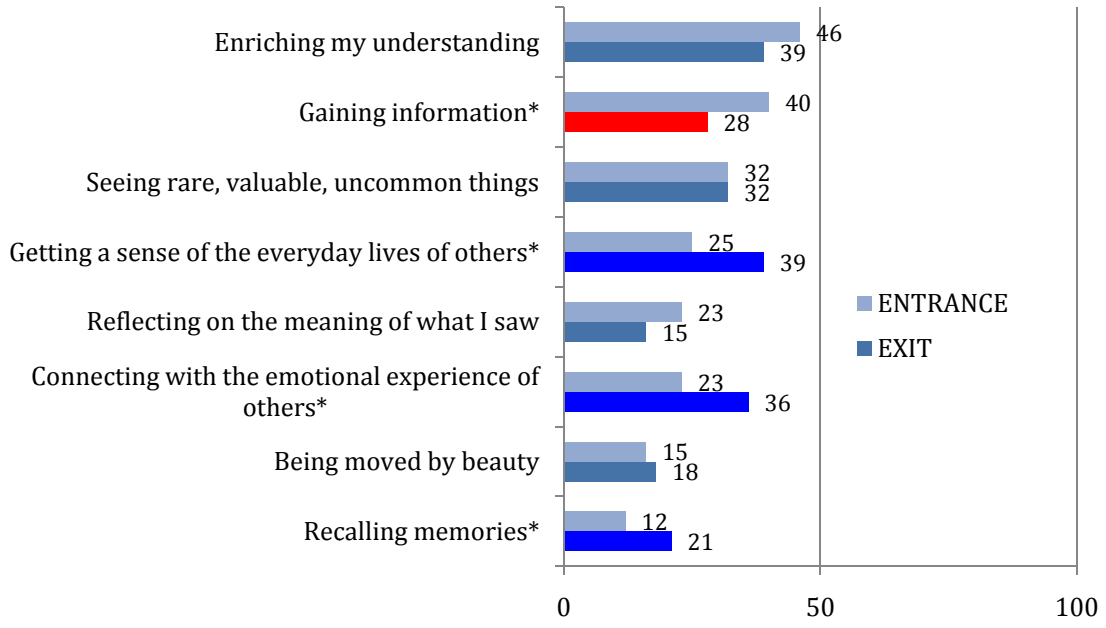
**Statistically significant difference–There is greater than a 95% chance that the difference exists among the population of all visitors to the exhibition during the period of the study.*

Experiences—General Visitors



- Entering general visitors were most interested in **understanding** and **information.**
- Exiting general visitors found ***less* information** than entering general visitors were looking for (40% on entrance; 28% on exit).
- Exiting general visitors selected three experiences more often than entering general visitors expected. These **unexpected experiences** were:
    - **everyday lives of others** (25% on entrance; 39% on exit)
    - **emotional connection** (23% on entrance; 36% on exit)
    - **memories** (12% on entrance; 21% on exit).

Figure 4—Experiences of general visitors



**Statistically significant difference–There is greater than a 95% chance that the difference exists among the population of all visitors to the exhibition during the period of the study.*

Ratings of Artworks, Theme, Display, and Information

Artworks (Photos) were the highest rated.

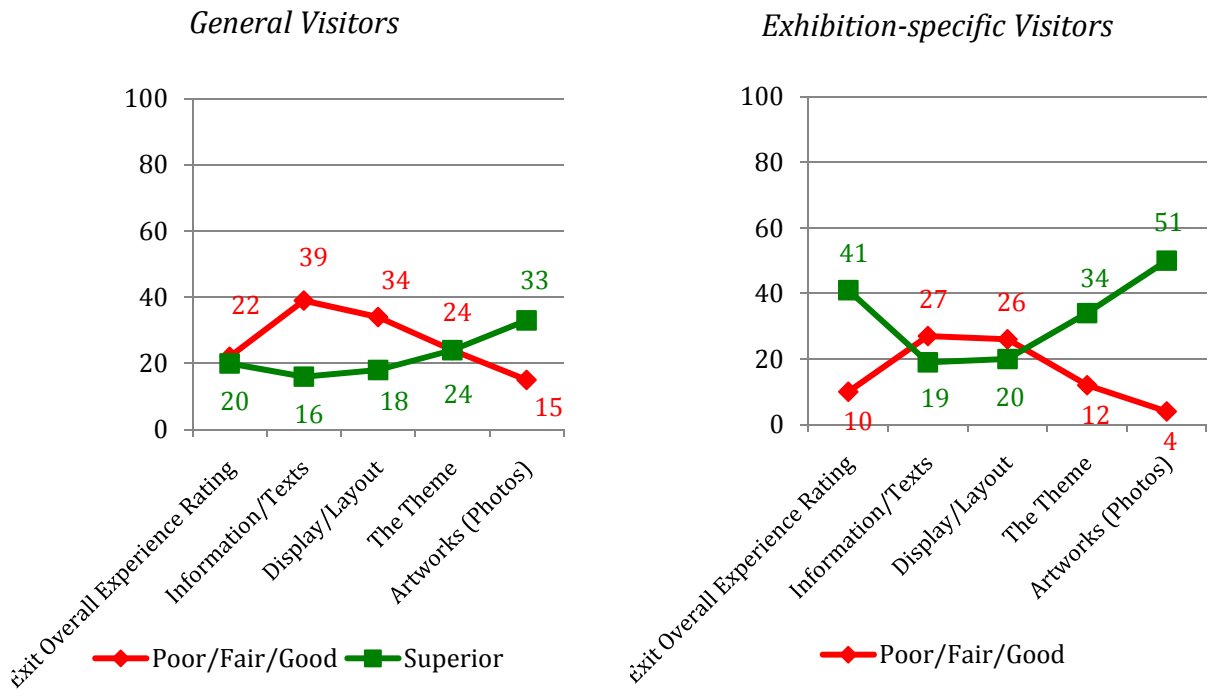
- Both **general visitors** and **exhibition-specific visitors** rated the photos higher than their overall experiences.

Information/Texts and **Display/Layout** were the lowest rated.

- **Information/Texts** was negatively rated by two of five **general visitors** (Poor/Fair/Good, 39%)
- **Display/Layout** was negatively rated by one of three **general visitors** (Poor/Fair/Good, 34%)

Both groups rated the exhibition **Theme** about the same as they had rated their overall experiences.

Figure 5-- Ratings of Artworks, Theme, Display, and Information (in percent)



Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between visitors with different levels of interest. Those with a greater commitment to the topic (in this case the visitors who came to the museum specifically to see the exhibition) arrived with higher expectations—they expected an average exhibition, while the other visitors expected a below-average exhibition.

The success of the exhibition is demonstrated by the fact that both audiences gave significantly higher ratings on exit. In both cases the highest possible rating, Superior, was more than twice as high on exit as on entrance while the relatively negative ratings (Poor, Fair, Good) were cut in half. In the end the committed audience rated *Elvis at 21* far above the Smithsonian exhibition average, while the other visitors rated it close to the average.

Typically exhibition-specific visitors are a higher proportion of the audience during the first month of an exhibition—when media coverage and reviews are at their peak. If the exhibition has good word of mouth, the last few weekends will also see higher proportions of committed visitors, as those who had postponed their visit realize that the closing date is near. The aggregate rating, since it is a combination of the ratings of these two audiences, can be expected to vary across the period that an exhibition is on view, in line with the changing ratio of committed to general audiences. By examining the results separately for each of these sub-groups, a more accurate measure of the effectiveness of the exhibition can be obtained than by looking at the aggregate data alone.

In this case, the results of the survey demonstrate that the photographs were very well received by both segments of the audience and that they inspired a number of unexpected experiences among the general visitors. Even for the committed visitors they provided many more emotional connections than expected.

General visitors seemed to have had a problem with the limited amount of information that was available in the exhibition. Presumably this was not a problem for the committed visitors because of their greater interest in and knowledge of Elvis' history.

Appendix A: Entrance Questionnaire

6166000290

National Portrait Gallery
Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer
Entrance

Is this your first visit to this specific building?
O No O Yes

How do you think you will rate your overall experience in *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer* when you leave?
O Poor O Fair O Good O Excellent O Superior

Which of these experiences are you especially looking forward to during your visit? [Mark one or more]
O Being moved by beauty
O Connecting with emotional experiences of others
O Enriching my understanding
O Gaining information
O Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others
O Recalling memories
O Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw
O Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things

Did you visit today specifically to see *Elvis at 21*?
O No O Yes

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]
O I am alone O Other adult(s) O Youth under 18

Are you male or female? O Female O Male

What is your age? ☐☐

Do you live in the United States or another country?
O United States, specify zip code: ☐☐☐☐☐
O Another country, specify: _____

THANK YOU!

D O O Ses ☐☐ Seg O O O O St O O O O ID ☐☐☐
E H 1 2 3 4 C R L I

Appendix B: Exit Questionnaire

1703570610

National Portrait Gallery
Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer
EXIT

Is this your first visit to this specific building?
O No O Yes

Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition, *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer*, today:
O Poor O Fair O Good O Excellent O Superior

Which experiences did you find especially satisfying in *Elvis at 21*?
[Mark one or more]
O Being moved by beauty
O Connecting with emotional experiences of others
O Enriching my understanding
O Gaining information
O Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others
O Recalling memories
O Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw
O Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things

Please rate the following features of this exhibition, *Elvis at 21*:

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Superior
Artworks (Photos)	O	O	O	O	O
Information/Texts	O	O	O	O	O
Display/Layout	O	O	O	O	O
The Theme	O	O	O	O	O

Did you visit today specifically to see *Elvis at 21*?
O No O Yes

With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]
O I am alone O Other adult(s) O Youth under 18

Are you male or female?
O Female O Male

What is your age?
☐☐

Do you live in the United States or another country?
O United States, specify zip code: ☐☐☐☐☐
O Another country, specify: _____

THANK YOU!

Door O O (E H) Session ☐☐ Segment O O O O (1 2 3 4) Status O O O O (C R L I) ID ☐☐☐

Appendix C: Frequencies of Responses

(In percent, except average and median age)

	All visitors		*Exhibition-specific visitors*		*General visitors*	
	Entrance	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*
Is this your first visit to this specific building?						
Yes	51	45	36	39	56	49
No	49	55	64	61	44	51
***Entrance:* How do you think you will rate your overall experience when you leave? *Exit:* Please rate your overall experience in this exhibition.**						
Poor	0	0	0	0	1	0
Fair	3	1	3	0	3	2
Good	40	16	22	10	46	20
Excellent	48	56	61	50	44	58
Superior	8	27	15	41	6	20
***Entrance:* Which of these experiences are you especially looking forward to during your visit? *Exit:* Which experiences did you find especially satisfying in *Elvis at 21*? [Mark one or more]**						
Being moved by beauty	17	19	23	20	15	18
Connecting with emotional experiences of others	22	39	19	43	23	36
Enriching my understanding	44	37	37	35	46	39
Gaining information	41	30	42	32	40	28
Getting a sense of the everyday lives of others	27	40	32	40	25	39
Recalling memories	20	26	45	36	12	21
Reflecting on the meaning of what I saw	24	17	26	22	23	15
Seeing rare, valuable, or uncommon things	35	36	43	44	32	32
Did you visit today specifically to see *Elvis at 21*?						
Yes	25	36	na	na	na	na
No	76	64	na	na	na	na

	All visitors		*Exhibition-specific visitors*		*General visitors*	
	Entrance	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*
With whom are you visiting? [Mark one or more]						
I am alone	15	14	11	8	16	18
Other adult(s)	82	83	89	86	80	81
Youth under 18	4	7	0	9	5	5
Are you male or female?						
Female	59	54	70	57	56	52
Male	41	46	30	43	45	48
What is your age?						
Average age	39	40	43	43	37	38
Median age	37	34	44	41	35	33
Generation Z (Born after 1995)	0	1	0	0	0	2
Generation Y (Born 1982–1995)	36	37	31	30	38	40
Generation X (Born 1965–1981)	34	28	27	26	36	29
Trailing Boom (Born 1956–1964)	13	12	12	13	13	11
Leading Boom (Born 1946–1955)	15	15	27	19	11	13
Silent (Born 1925–1945)	3	7	4	12	3	5
Do you live in the United States or another country?						
United States	98	98	97	100	98	97
Another Country	2	2	3	0	2	4
New England	6	8	2	3	8	11
Mid Atlantic	18	23	27	20	15	24
Metro Washington	55	54	55	65	55	48
South East	2	3	4	7	2	1
South Central	3	3	0	1	4	4
North Central	3	2	2	0	3	3
Midwest	1	0	0	0	1	0
Mountain	1	1	0	1	1	0
Pacific	3	1	4	0	3	2
Unspecified U.S.	5	3	4	4	6	3
Country other than U.S.	2	2	2	0	3	3

	All visitors		Exhibition-specific visitors		General visitors	
	Entrance	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*	*Entrance*	*Exit*
Please rate the following features of this exhibition, Elvis at 21:						
Artworks (Photos)						
Poor	na	0	na	0	na	0
Fair	na	1	na	0	na	1
Good	na	10	na	4	na	14
Excellent	na	51	na	46	na	53
Superior	na	39	na	51	na	33
Information/Texts						
Poor	na	1	na	0	na	1
Fair	na	4	na	5	na	4
Good	na	29	na	22	na	34
Excellent	na	48	na	53	na	45
Superior	na	17	na	19	na	16
Display/Layout						
Poor	na	1	na	0	na	1
Fair	na	4	na	5	na	4
Good	na	26	na	21	na	29
Excellent	na	51	na	54	na	49
Superior	na	18	na	20	na	18
The Theme						
Poor	na	0	na	0	na	0
Fair	na	3	na	2	na	3
Good	na	17	na	10	na	21
Excellent	na	52	na	53	na	52
Superior	na	28	na	34	na	24