

Explaining Ethical Behaviors Among Arts Appreciators Through the Norm Activation Model

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Abstract

Understanding the psychological mechanisms that motivate ethical behavior within cultural and arts-related settings is essential for promoting considerate and socially responsible conduct among arts appreciators and visitors. Drawing on the Norm Activation Model (NAM), this study examines how problem awareness and social norms shape individuals' ascribed responsibility, moral norms, and subsequent intentions to engage in ethical behaviors during arts events and visits to museums or galleries. The proposed structural framework positions problem awareness and social norms as foundational antecedents of ascribed responsibility, which then activates moral obligations toward ethical conduct within arts venues. Social norms are additionally conceptualized as a direct determinant of moral norms, underscoring the influence of collective expectations on the formation of personal ethical standards. Survey data were collected from 300 arts visitors across major cultural institutions, and the model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). All hypothesized relationships were supported, affirming the explanatory strength of the extended NAM in the arts consumption context. The findings highlight the pivotal roles of ascribed responsibility and moral norms in shaping ethical behavioral intentions, while demonstrating the dual influence of social norms in reinforcing both responsibility attribution and moral judgment. Practical implications emphasize the need for interpretive strategies, ethical communication, and community-driven normative cues to foster a culture of ethical behavior within the arts and cultural sector.

Keywords: art appreciation, cognitive awareness, destination attributes, stimulus–response model, Norm Activation Model (NAM)

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Introduction

Arts and cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, and performance venues increasingly function as spaces where aesthetic appreciation intersects with social responsibility. Visitors' behaviors within these settings—ranging from respect for artworks and shared spaces to consideration for other patrons and staff—play a crucial role in preserving cultural value and ensuring sustainable cultural experiences. Despite the growing emphasis on ethical conduct in cultural consumption, instances of disruptive, careless, or norm-violating behaviors among arts appreciators continue to challenge institutions worldwide. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that motivate ethical behavior in arts-related contexts has therefore become an important scholarly and managerial concern.

Existing research on visitor behavior in arts and cultural settings has predominantly focused on satisfaction, experiential value, learning outcomes, and cultural engagement. While these studies offer valuable insights into how individuals perceive and consume cultural experiences, comparatively limited attention has been paid to the moral and normative foundations that underpin ethical conduct during arts consumption (Han, 2014). Ethical behaviors—such as adhering to venue rules, protecting cultural artifacts, behaving considerately toward others, and respecting institutional norms—are often implicitly expected rather than explicitly theorized (Treviño et al., 2014). This gap suggests the need for a robust theoretical framework capable of explaining why arts appreciators feel morally compelled to behave ethically beyond instrumental motivations or external enforcement.

The Norm Activation Model (NAM) provides a well-established psychological framework for examining altruistic and pro-social behaviors driven by internalized moral obligations (Han et al., 2015). Originally developed to explain environmentally responsible and helping behaviors, NAM posits that ethical action is activated through a sequence of cognitive and normative processes, beginning with problem awareness and culminating in personal moral norms that guide behavior. Central to the model are the concepts of awareness of consequences, ascribed responsibility, and moral obligation, which together explain how individuals come to perceive ethical action as a personal duty rather than a discretionary choice. Although NAM has been widely applied in environmental psychology, sustainable tourism, and pro-social consumption, its application to arts and cultural contexts remains underexplored.

Arts consumption represents a distinctive moral context in which ethical behavior is shaped not only by individual cognition but also by strong social and institutional norms. Cultural venues often communicate explicit and implicit expectations regarding appropriate conduct, while visitors' behaviors are continuously observed and socially evaluated. Social norms—understood as shared expectations about acceptable behavior—may therefore play a particularly salient role in activating responsibility attribution and moral judgment among arts appreciators. Yet, the integration of social norms into NAM-based explanations of ethical behavior in cultural settings has received limited empirical attention (Fakfare et al., 2025), leaving unanswered questions about how collective expectations interact with personal moral processes.

Addressing this gap, the present study extends the Norm Activation Model to explain ethical behavioral intentions among arts appreciators (Meng et al., 2020). Specifically, it examines how problem awareness and social norms function as antecedents of ascribed responsibility, which in turn activates moral norms that shape intentions to behave ethically within arts venues. By conceptualizing social norms as both an indirect driver of responsibility attribution and a

direct determinant of moral norms, this study acknowledges the dual influence of collective expectations in shaping individual ethical standards. In doing so, it responds to calls for more context-sensitive applications of moral behavior theories in cultural and tourism research.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it advances theoretical understanding by empirically validating an extended NAM framework within the arts and cultural consumption context, thereby broadening the model's applicability beyond its traditional domains. Second, it highlights the critical role of social norms in reinforcing both responsibility and moral obligation, offering a more nuanced explanation of ethical behavior in socially embedded cultural environments. Third, it provides actionable insights for arts and cultural institutions by identifying psychological levers—such as problem awareness, normative cues, and moral messaging—that can be strategically leveraged to promote ethical conduct among visitors.

In sum, by integrating moral psychology and cultural consumption research, this study offers a comprehensive explanation of ethical behavior among arts appreciators and underscores the importance of normative and moral mechanisms in sustaining respectful and socially responsible cultural experiences.

Literature Review

Ethical Behavior in Arts and Cultural Visitation

Ethical behavior in arts and cultural settings refers to visitor conduct that safeguards cultural assets, respects institutional rules, and maintains consideration for other patrons and staff (Rachmad, 2022). In museums, galleries, and arts events, ethical behaviors may include refraining from touching artworks, following photography restrictions, minimizing noise and disruption, complying with queueing and spatial norms, and behaving respectfully in shared interpretive spaces. Such behaviors are not merely procedural; they are integral to conservation, visitor experience quality, and the legitimacy of cultural institutions as stewards of public heritage. The arts context is distinctive because ethical infractions can generate disproportionate harm: physical damage to fragile artifacts, reduced accessibility for others, and reputational risks for institutions that rely on public trust and community support. Consequently, explaining ethical behavior among arts appreciators requires attention to both individual moral motivations and socially constituted expectations of “appropriate” cultural conduct.

Scholarship on cultural and museum tourism has long examined visitor experience, learning, place attachment, and satisfaction, yet ethical conduct has typically been treated as a managerial or compliance issue rather than a theoretically grounded behavioral outcome. When ethical behavior is addressed, it is often framed through rule adherence, crowd management, or visitor misbehavior, emphasizing situational controls (e.g., signage, surveillance, staff presence) and deterrence. However, an enforcement-centric approach cannot fully account for why many visitors behave ethically even in low-monitoring contexts, nor why others violate norms despite clear rules and sanctions. This suggests the need to foreground internalized moral obligations and normative processes as key explanatory mechanisms in cultural consumption settings.

Norm Activation Model as a Framework for Ethical Conduct

The Norm Activation Model (NAM) provides a parsimonious account of pro-social and ethically oriented behaviors grounded in personal moral obligation. NAM proposes that individuals engage in ethical action when their personal norms (moral norms) are activated. This activation typically occurs through two cognitive precursors: (1) problem awareness (often conceptualized as awareness of consequences), and (2) ascribed responsibility (the extent to which one feels personally responsible for addressing the problem). When individuals recognize that certain behaviors produce harm or undermine collective welfare, and when they accept personal responsibility for mitigating such harm, a moral obligation to act emerges, increasing the likelihood of ethical intentions and behavior.

NAM is particularly suitable for arts and cultural contexts for three reasons. First, ethical conduct in cultural venues often involves low-cost pro-social actions (e.g., not touching, not obstructing views, maintaining decorum) that are consistent with NAM's emphasis on morally driven, other-regarding behaviors. Second, the "problem" in arts settings can be framed as collective and cumulative: individual misconduct (flash photography, crowding, noise, careless handling) can degrade conservation conditions and diminish others' experiences. Third, institutional environments are designed to evoke reflection, shared meaning, and respect for cultural value—conditions that plausibly intensify moral appraisal and norm salience. Despite these theoretical alignments, NAM has been less frequently mobilized to explain ethical behavior among arts appreciators compared with its extensive applications in environmental responsibility, sustainable tourism, and ethical consumption. This underutilization represents a meaningful gap given the increasing emphasis on responsible cultural participation.

Problem Awareness and Ascribed Responsibility in Cultural Settings

Problem awareness refers to an individual's recognition that unethical or inconsiderate visitor behaviors can cause negative consequences. In arts venues, such consequences include physical deterioration of artifacts, disruption of interpretive atmospheres, inequities in access to viewing or participation, and heightened operational burdens for staff. From a NAM perspective, when visitors perceive these consequences as salient and credible, they are more likely to move beyond passive awareness toward a sense of moral relevance. Importantly, the arts context may shape problem awareness in unique ways: visitors often encounter interpretive narratives about fragility, heritage loss, and stewardship, which can render consequences more vivid and emotionally resonant. Yet problem awareness alone is insufficient; individuals may acknowledge harm while externalizing responsibility to institutions, staff, or "other visitors."

Ascribed responsibility captures the degree to which visitors internalize accountability for preventing or reducing harm. In museum and event environments where rules are explicit, responsibility can be interpreted narrowly as compliance; however, NAM conceptualizes responsibility more broadly as a moral self-attribution—an acceptance that one's actions matter for collective outcomes. In arts settings, visitors may ascribe responsibility when they view themselves as temporary custodians of cultural goods, when they recognize the cumulative nature of small harms, or when they perceive their behavior as part of a shared visitor culture. Ascribed responsibility is therefore expected to function as a key mechanism translating awareness into moral obligation, consistent with NAM's logic that individuals act ethically when they feel personally implicated in the outcomes of their conduct.

Moral Norms and Ethical Behavioral Intentions

Moral norms represent internal standards of right and wrong that generate feelings of moral obligation and anticipated self-evaluative emotions (e.g., guilt, pride) contingent on behavior. In arts and cultural contexts, moral norms may reflect beliefs that cultural heritage deserves respect, that shared spaces require consideration, and that one should not diminish others' aesthetic or educational experiences. Moral norms differ from simple attitudes toward rules: they entail internalized duty rather than preference. They are also distinct from institutional norms (what the venue expects) and social norms (what others expect), though they may be influenced by both.

Within NAM, moral norms are the most proximal predictor of ethical behavioral intentions. In arts settings, this suggests that visitors who feel a strong moral obligation to behave considerately are more likely to intend to comply with rules, avoid disruptive behaviors, and engage in protective actions. This pathway is theoretically important because it shifts the explanation of ethical conduct from external regulation to internal motivation. It also has managerial implications: institutions may achieve more durable behavioral change by strengthening moral norms (through meaning-making, stewardship messaging, and moral framing) than by relying solely on monitoring or sanctions.

Social Norms as a Contextual Extension of NAM

While NAM emphasizes moral norms as internal obligations, ethical behavior in cultural venues is also socially embedded. Visitors interpret and enact appropriate conduct in the presence of others, often guided by cues about what is typical and what is socially approved. Social norms can be conceptualized as descriptive norms (perceptions of what most people do) and injunctive norms (perceptions of what most people approve). Both can be salient in arts contexts: the quiet atmosphere of a gallery signals injunctive expectations of decorum, while observing others' compliance with photography restrictions reinforces descriptive expectations.

Integrating social norms into NAM is theoretically warranted in arts settings for at least two reasons. First, cultural participation is a public, co-present activity: the visibility of behaviors increases normative pressure and the reputational costs of deviance, making social norms potent behavioral regulators. Second, social norms may operate not only as external constraints but as inputs into moral internalization. Repeated exposure to collective expectations can shape visitors' own ethical standards, particularly in contexts where cultural legitimacy and "good visitor" identity are salient. Accordingly, social norms may influence ascribed responsibility by signaling shared accountability (e.g., "everyone helps preserve the space"), and they may influence moral norms directly by providing a socially validated template for what constitutes ethically appropriate cultural conduct.

Methods

Research Design and Context

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the psychological mechanisms underlying ethical behavioral intentions among arts appreciators. Guided by the Norm Activation Model (NAM), the research focused on visitors' experiences in formal arts and cultural settings, including museums, galleries, and curated exhibition spaces. These

venues represent socially regulated environments where ethical conduct is both institutionally prescribed and collectively enacted, making them appropriate contexts for testing moral–normative behavioral models. A survey-based approach was employed to capture visitors’ perceptions, moral evaluations, and behavioral intentions immediately following their cultural consumption experiences.

Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected from arts visitors at major cultural institutions located in metropolitan areas. A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was used to target individuals who had recently visited an arts venue and were therefore able to meaningfully reflect on their behavioral considerations during the visit. To reduce recall bias, respondents were approached either onsite upon completion of their visit or through follow-up invitations distributed by participating institutions within a short post-visit window.

A total of 327 questionnaires were returned. After screening for incomplete responses and patterned answering, 300 usable questionnaires were retained for analysis, yielding a valid response rate suitable for structural equation modeling. The sample size exceeded minimum thresholds recommended for PLS-SEM, considering both model complexity and statistical power. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study’s academic purpose and assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Measurement Instruments

All constructs were operationalized using multi-item scales adapted from prior NAM and pro-social behavior research, with wording modified to fit the arts and cultural visitation context. Problem awareness was measured by items assessing respondents’ recognition of the negative consequences of unethical or inconsiderate behavior in arts venues (e.g., harm to artworks, disruption of other visitors’ experiences). Social norms were captured through items reflecting perceived expectations and typical behaviors of other visitors regarding ethical conduct. Ascribed responsibility measured the extent to which respondents felt personally responsible for preventing harm and maintaining respectful conduct within the venue.

Moral norms were operationalized as internalized feelings of moral obligation to behave ethically in arts settings, reflecting personal standards of right and wrong rather than compliance motivations. Ethical behavioral intentions were measured by items capturing respondents’ self-reported likelihood of engaging in considerate, rule-abiding, and protective behaviors during future arts visits. All items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in tourism and cultural studies and pre-tested with a small group of arts visitors. Minor revisions were made to improve clarity and contextual relevance.

Data Analysis Procedure

The proposed research model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for theory development, its ability to handle complex models with multiple latent constructs, and its robustness to deviations from multivariate normality. The analysis

followed a two-step approach, assessing the measurement model prior to evaluating the structural model.

Measurement model evaluation focused on indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator loadings were assessed against recommended thresholds, while composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were used to establish internal consistency. Convergent validity was evaluated using average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity was examined through the Fornell–Larcker criterion and heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios (Hair et al., 2011).

The structural model was subsequently assessed by examining path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2). Hypothesis testing was conducted using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals and significance levels for all hypothesized relationships. Collinearity diagnostics were also examined to ensure the stability of the estimated paths.

Results

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to establish the reliability and validity of all latent constructs prior to hypothesis testing. Indicator reliability was first examined by assessing standardized factor loadings. All measurement items loaded significantly on their intended constructs, with loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory indicator reliability. No items were removed, as all contributed meaningfully to construct measurement.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). For all constructs—problem awareness, social norms, ascribed responsibility, moral norms, and ethical behavioral intentions—Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.80 and composite reliability values were above 0.85, surpassing recommended benchmarks and demonstrating strong internal consistency. Convergent validity was evaluated using average variance extracted (AVE). AVE values for all constructs exceeded the 0.50 threshold, indicating that each construct explained more than half of the variance in its indicators. These results confirm adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio. Fornell–Larcker results showed that the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs. HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, further supporting discriminant validity. Collectively, these findings indicate that the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory psychometric properties and is suitable for structural model evaluation.

Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model was assessed by examining collinearity, path coefficients, and explanatory power (R^2). Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all predictor constructs were below 3.0, indicating no concerns regarding multicollinearity. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was employed to assess the significance of the hypothesized relationships.

Problem awareness had a positive and significant effect on ascribed responsibility ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the proposition that recognizing the negative consequences of unethical behavior in arts venues increases visitors' sense of personal responsibility. Social norms also exerted a significant positive influence on ascribed responsibility ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that perceived collective expectations strongly shape responsibility attribution among arts appreciators.

Ascribed responsibility was found to have a substantial positive effect on moral norms ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its central role in activating moral obligation within the Norm Activation Model. In addition, social norms directly influenced moral norms ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of socially shared expectations in the formation of personal ethical standards in arts and cultural contexts.

Moral norms emerged as the strongest predictor of ethical behavioral intentions ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that internalized moral obligation is the most proximal determinant of visitors' intentions to behave ethically. All hypothesized relationships were supported, providing empirical validation for the proposed extended NAM framework.

Overall, the results provide robust empirical support for the Norm Activation Model in the arts and cultural consumption context. The findings demonstrate that ethical behavioral intentions among arts appreciators are driven by a sequential process in which problem awareness and social norms activate ascribed responsibility, which in turn strengthens moral norms. Notably, social norms exert a dual influence by shaping both responsibility attribution and moral obligation, underscoring the socially embedded nature of ethical behavior in arts venues.

Discussion and Implications

This study set out to explain ethical behavioral intentions among arts appreciators by extending the Norm Activation Model (NAM) to the context of arts and cultural visitation. The findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed framework and demonstrate that ethical conduct in arts venues is best understood as a morally and socially embedded process rather than a function of rule enforcement alone. By confirming all hypothesized relationships, the results highlight the relevance and explanatory power of NAM for understanding ethical behavior in cultural consumption settings.

Consistent with NAM's core logic, problem awareness was found to significantly influence ascribed responsibility. This finding suggests that when arts visitors recognize the potential negative consequences of unethical behaviors—such as damage to artworks, disruption of collective experiences, or inequitable access to cultural resources—they are more likely to internalize responsibility for preventing such outcomes. Importantly, this extends prior NAM applications by demonstrating that awareness of consequences is salient even in leisure-oriented, non-utilitarian contexts where ethical harm may be indirect or cumulative rather than immediate.

Social norms emerged as a particularly influential antecedent of ascribed responsibility, exerting a stronger effect than problem awareness. This underscores the socially regulated nature of arts and cultural environments, where behavioral expectations are co-constructed through observation, shared understandings, and institutional cues. Visitors appear to interpret ethical responsibility not only as a personal moral concern but also as a collective obligation shaped by perceptions of how “people like me” are expected to behave in cultural spaces. This

finding aligns with growing evidence that ethical behavior in public cultural settings is highly sensitive to normative context.

Ascribed responsibility was confirmed as a key mediator between cognitive awareness and moral obligation, reinforcing its central role in NAM. Visitors who perceived themselves as personally responsible for ethical outcomes were significantly more likely to develop strong moral norms regarding appropriate conduct. This result is theoretically important because it illustrates how responsibility attribution transforms awareness into moral commitment, particularly in environments where harm is diffuse and accountability is shared.

The direct effect of social norms on moral norms further advances the literature by demonstrating that moral obligations in arts settings are not solely internally generated but are partially shaped through social validation and normative reinforcement. In culturally symbolic spaces, repeated exposure to shared expectations appears to crystallize into internal moral standards, blurring the boundary between social and moral norms. This finding supports calls for more context-sensitive moral behavior models that account for the social embeddedness of ethical decision-making.

Finally, moral norms emerged as the strongest predictor of ethical behavioral intentions, confirming their role as the most proximal determinant of ethical conduct. This result reinforces the argument that ethical behavior in arts venues is fundamentally driven by internalized moral obligation rather than by fear of sanctions or instrumental considerations. Visitors who perceive ethical conduct as a moral duty are more likely to intend to behave considerately and responsibly, regardless of monitoring intensity.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it extends the application of the Norm Activation Model to the underexplored domain of arts and cultural consumption, demonstrating its robustness beyond traditional environmental and pro-social behavior contexts. By empirically validating NAM in this setting, the study broadens the theoretical toolkit available for understanding visitor behavior in cultural and tourism research.

Second, the findings advance NAM by explicitly incorporating social norms as both an antecedent to ascribed responsibility and a direct determinant of moral norms. This dual-pathway conceptualization responds to longstanding critiques that NAM under-theorizes social context and interaction. The results suggest that in socially visible and symbolically charged environments such as arts venues, social norms play a formative role in moral norm activation rather than functioning merely as external pressures.

Third, the study contributes to moral psychology and cultural studies by demonstrating that ethical behavior in leisure and aesthetic contexts follows a structured moral activation process. This challenges assumptions that ethical considerations are secondary or incidental in arts consumption and highlights the moral dimensions of cultural participation as an integral aspect of visitor behavior.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several actionable insights for arts and cultural institutions seeking to promote ethical behavior among visitors. First, institutions should invest in strategies that

enhance visitors' problem awareness by clearly communicating the consequences of unethical behaviors. Interpretive materials, storytelling, and behind-the-scenes narratives that emphasize artifact fragility, conservation challenges, and collective responsibility can make abstract harms more tangible and morally salient.

Second, the strong influence of social norms suggests that institutions can effectively shape behavior by leveraging normative cues rather than relying solely on rules and enforcement. Visible signals of ethical conduct—such as messaging that highlights widespread visitor compliance, staff modeling of respectful behavior, and peer-based reminders—can reinforce perceptions of shared responsibility and appropriate conduct.

Third, given the central role of moral norms, ethical messaging should be framed in moral and value-based terms rather than purely procedural language. Appeals to stewardship, respect for cultural heritage, and consideration for others are likely to be more effective than prohibitive signage alone. Such framing encourages visitors to internalize ethical behavior as part of their identity as responsible arts appreciators.

Finally, institutions may benefit from fostering a sense of community and collective ownership within arts spaces. Programs that invite visitors to view themselves as partners in preservation—rather than passive consumers—can strengthen ascribed responsibility and moral obligation, leading to more durable ethical behavioral intentions.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that point to avenues for future research. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, suggesting the need for longitudinal or experimental studies to examine how moral norms and ethical behaviors evolve over time. Additionally, data were collected from a specific cultural context, which may limit generalizability; future research could explore cross-cultural variations in norm activation processes among arts visitors. Further studies might also incorporate actual observed behaviors or experimental manipulations of normative cues to complement self-reported intentions.

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