Book of Abstracts
3rd European Mineralogical Conference
EMC 2020, Cracow, Poland

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3rd European Mineralogical Conference Cracow Poland
29 August - 2 September 2021

AUDIENCE PRELIMINARY STUDY FOR MULTI-SENSORY EXHIBITS ALONG THE MINERAL EXPOSITION OF THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM (UNIVERSITY OF PISA)

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The described study took place between January and June 2019, in the Natural History Museum of the University of Pisa. The purpose of the study was to investigate the views of the museum visitors, to design multi-sensory exhibits in the Mineral Gallery favoring the accessibility to a visually impaired and blind audience. Sixty-five people participated in this screening activity, including Museum single visitors, organized visiting groups, people of the Museum staff, as well as some people belonging to the local section of the "Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired".
Some workstations containing a series of minerals were set up in a room adjacent to the Mineral Gallery. Each station included the presence of certain specimens of minerals and rocks with certain physical characteristics and specific properties. Participants, except for the blind and visually impaired, were randomly assigned to one of two different experiences. The former should have been done with a blindfold over their eyes, thus involving an approach to the mineral samples based on touch, smell, and hearing; the latter, without a blindfold, including sight, touch, smell and hearing.
During the multisensory experience, the museum operator wrote down in a notebook the participant's behavior, taking also a note of their spontaneous comments. For each station, the operator performed a brief structured interview aimed at understanding what the visitors thought they had touched and what features they perceived. At the end of the test, a further interview was carried out, in semi-structured mode, aimed at collecting both data on the enjoyment of the experience and suggestions for improving the stations.
The subdivision of the experience into two types, with a blindfold and without, allowed to collect data on two different ways of approaching the minerals allowing to understand how the perception of the relevant characteristics of the minerals varied depending on the presence or absence of the sense of sight. Moreover, it was possible to analyze the impressions of the visitors related to the experience and the suggestions related to the future exhibition.
All the results were discussed together with the person in charge of the exhibition in order to integrate the visitors' points of view in the design of the future multisensory stations that will be included in the Mineral Gallery.