

# Meet the Users: Understanding the User Experience on Museums' Social Media

**Sophia Bakogianni**, Open University of Cyprus, Cyprus

## Abstract

Museums maintain a constant presence on social media in an effort to communicate and connect with their users and publicize their collections and events. Yet, little is known about the reasons that users follow museums on social media, what they think, what interactions happen there, and how they feel when they interact with museums on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This paper aims to clarify who the followers of museums on these three platforms are, what they like, what motivates them, and what they expect from museums. To do so, we conceptualize "experience" as a complex phenomenon of actions, thoughts, and emotions, and we conduct surveys and interviews to examine people's communicative practices, their views, and their emerging feelings through their interaction with museums on social media. To enhance our understanding, one study was designed in such a way to include users of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter who do not follow museums there. To our knowledge, this is the first time that a study targeting non-followers of museums' social media has been conducted. The results showed that followers of museum accounts are motivated both by informational and visual content. They are curious about museum posts and feel "connected" with the museums they are following. Despite their reluctance to engage with the content and the other followers in a visible way, they are still "present" in the network, while they anticipate that museum staff (or the social media manager) will participate in discussions on comments. On the other hand, the results provide insights into the perceptions of users who do not follow museums and the media and/or content that would encourage them to follow.

**Keywords:** museums, social media, users, surveys, interviews, experience

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing PhD project at the Open University of Cyprus, which aims to investigate the experiences of social media users who follow museums and offer a framework and a tool for museums to assess and develop their social media practices, and ultimately to enhance users' experiences. Specifically, this research aims to clarify who the followers of museums are on these three platforms, what they like, what motivates them, and what they expect from museums. We conceptualized "experience" as a complex phenomenon of actions, thoughts, and emotions, following Hassenzahl (2013a, 2013b), and

we conducted online surveys and interviews to examine people's communicative practices and their perceptions and emerging feelings through their interaction with museums. The methodological approach taken was mixed, as it adopted a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods that complemented and informed each other.

We addressed social media users who followed art museums on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, employing the case study approach that offers the opportunity to explore in-depth users' experiences (Bryman, 2012; Simons, 2014). The selected museums were the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which are among the most well-known art museums worldwide, with exemplary use of social media and commanding a large number of followers. The criteria for the two selected museums were recognizability, innovation, and substantial examples of users' engagement on social media. In addition, two more studies were conducted, addressing users of the three platforms who may or may not follow museums. These studies were not related to any specific museum but were intended to identify people's views for museums on social media in general. They also helped us to address potential users of museums on social media and for the first time, as far as we know, to give them the chance to express their views on the subject. They also provided us with findings that can be comparable to the surveys for the two specific art museums.

Each of these four studies was implemented through the conduct of three online surveys suitably adjusted for each of the three social media platforms. Thus, the research comprises the following four studies:

- Study 1 – For users of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter who *follow museums* on each of these platforms.
- Study 2 – For the *MoMA Museum of Modern Art* and its official accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

- Study 3 – For the *Van Gogh Museum* and its official accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
- Study 4 – For users of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter who *do not follow museums*.

This research was complemented with the conduct of semi-structured interviews via the Instant Messaging services of the three respective platforms to enhance and develop further our impressions and understanding of the investigated phenomena from the survey research data with more rich, qualitative data. The interviewees were recruited via the online surveys conducted for the four studies. The analysis and examination of both surveys and interviews are also framed by the conceptualization of “experience” from these three perspectives: from people’s communicative practices, their perceptions, and their emerging feelings through their interaction with museums on social media. The following sections present a brief literature review of the recent research on the use of social media in museums, an overview of our methodology, and a presentation of the findings. Finally, we will draw some conclusions and steps for further research.

## **2. Literature Review**

Use of social media by museums has grown steadily and is widely discussed within the museum sector among both scholars and professionals. Following a euphoric climate that prevailed the advent of social media at the dawn of the 21st century, museum scholars and professionals (e.g., Ellis & Kelly, 2007; Kelly, 2010; Russo, 2011) envisaged that its use would result in a number of positive aspects for museums, especially repurposing the role and the function of the contemporary museum in society and addressing issues of audience engagement and participation, as well as reframing museum authority and institutional control. Much of this early literature concerning museums’ social media use emphasized the potentials that these technologies might have for museum communication with the public, in alignment with the positive

discourse media scholars offered about the opportunity of social media to transform society (Bruns, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008).

Two trends can be noticed among those who conduct empirical research examining the adoption of social media by museums. The first one concerns those who survey and/or interview museum professionals about their motivations and types of engagement they pursue (e.g., Chung, Marckett, & Fiore, 2014; Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Lazzeretti, Sartori, & Innocenti, 2015; Lotina, 2014), or how they analyze museum posts and the engagement they induce, by using the metrics provided by the platforms and employing a range of methods, from content analysis (Kidd, 2014) and quantitative methods (Langa, 2014) to social network analysis (Espinosa, 2015) and cluster analysis (Zafiropoulos, Vrana, & Antoniadis, 2015).

By comparison, the second trend emphasizes the users who follow and interact with museums on social media. In this group there are studies that survey and/or interview museum followers in person or online (e.g., Bonacchi & Galani, 2013; Holdgaard, 2014; Suess, 2020; Villaespesa & Wowkowych, 2020; Walker, 2016), or analyze users' comments on social media in order to infer users' perceptions and motives through their responses to museums' posts, employing either quantitative or qualitative methods, such as content and sentiment analysis, discursive methods and machine learning techniques (e.g., Baker, 2016; Gerrard, 2016; Gronemann, Kristiansen, & Drotner, 2015; Laursen, Mortensen, Olesen, & Schrøder, 2017; Villaespesa, 2013, 2016), or textual and visual methods for the analysis of users' posts uploaded after a museum visit on Instagram (Budge, 2017, 2019; Budge & Burness, 2018). In some of the above studies the emphasis on the users of social media is exclusive, although in others it is complemented by interviews or surveys of museums' social media managers (Walker, 2016) or curators (Suess, 2020). Our analysis is positioned in this second group and brings forward a user perspective to the approach of museums and social media by designing and conducting an empirical study, employing both surveys and interviews.

### 3. Research methodology

This project focuses on the users of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter who either do (or do not) follow museums there; in particular, (1) how users of these platforms experience museums' accounts; and (2) what could motivate social media users to experience museums' accounts. Our aim is to better understand what people want from museums on social media, how they feel about them, and why they choose to interact or not with them in their daily life.

It comprises four studies and concerns the distribution of twelve (12) online surveys and data collection from the respondents of these surveys, between the end of March 2020 and the end of July 2020. For each study, online interviews were conducted for the users of the three platforms, between early April and the end of July 2020, but in some cases, it was not feasible to recruit interviewees from some platforms for the three of the four studies (see **Table 1**).

Study 1 - Museum social media users (they follow art museums)	Study 2 - MoMA	Study 3 - Van Gogh Museum	Study 4 - Social media users (they do not follow museums)
Surveys			
Survey of <b>Facebook</b> users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA's <b>Facebook</b> users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Facebook</b> users	Survey of <b>Facebook</b> users who do not follow museums
Survey of <b>Instagram</b> users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA's <b>Instagram</b> users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Instagram</b> users	Survey of <b>Instagram</b> users who do not follow museums
Survey of <b>Twitter</b> users who follow art museums	Survey of MoMA's <b>Twitter</b> users	Survey of the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Twitter</b> users	Survey of <b>Twitter</b> users who do not follow museums
Interviews			
Online Interviews with <b>Facebook</b> users who follow art museums	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with MoMA's Facebook users	Interviews with the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Facebook</b> users	Interviews with <b>Facebook</b> users who do not follow museums
Interviews with <b>Instagram</b> users who follow art museums	Interviews with MoMA's <b>Instagram</b> users	Interviews with the Van Gogh Museum's <b>Instagram</b> users	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with Instagram users who do not follow museums
Interviews with <b>Twitter</b> users who follow art museums	Interviews with MoMA's <b>Twitter</b> users	<b>No interviews</b> conducted with the Van Gogh Museum's Twitter users	Interviews with <b>Twitter</b> users who do not follow museums

Table 1: Online surveys and interviews undertaken for the four studies of the research project.

Two survey instruments were designed for the needs of this project; the one used for the surveys addressed to those who were following art museums on the three investigated platforms, and the other used for the surveys addressed to social media users who did not follow museums.

Both instruments were appropriately adjusted to the affordances of the investigated social media platforms and the specific studies, and consisted of a variation of multiple-choice, scaled, closed, and open-ended questions. All the semi-structured interviews were conducted through the Instant Messaging Services that the three social media platforms provide. Interviewees were recruited through the surveys. One exception was the first ten interviews with Facebook users following the Van Gogh Museum, which functioned as a pilot for the interviews.

The main eligibility requirement for respondents to participate both in the surveys and the interviews was to be users of the corresponding platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). All surveys were available only in English, so respondents also needed to speak the language to participate in the research. Most interviews were conducted in English, except seven which were conducted in Greek. A sample of the survey addressed to MoMA's Instagram users can be seen here: [https://sophiabakogianni.net/moma\\_instagram\\_survey/](https://sophiabakogianni.net/moma_instagram_survey/), while a sample of the survey addressed to Instagram users who do not follow museums can be accessed here: [https://sophiabakogianni.net/instagram\\_users\\_survey/](https://sophiabakogianni.net/instagram_users_survey/).

### **3a. Data collected**

The overall sample across surveys conducted for the four studies consists of 911 respondents. The number of responses received along with the number of complete and partial responses for all twelve surveys are detailed in **Table 2**. Incomplete responses were included in the analysis, if the respondent answered at least one question.

	Surveys	Total Responses	Complete Responses	Partial Responses
1 Van Gogh Museum's Facebook followers	25	19	6	
2 Van Gogh Museum's Instagram followers	153	107	46	
3 Van Gogh Museum's Twitter followers	19	15	4	
4 MoMA's Facebook followers	23	18	5	
5 MoMA's Instagram followers	103	93	10	
6 MoMA's Twitter followers	60	41	19	
7 Museum followers on Facebook	137	111	26	
8 Museum followers on Instagram	102	80	22	
9 Museum followers on Twitter	96	74	22	
10 Facebook users (non-museum followers)	107	91	16	
11 Instagram users (non-museum followers)	30	22	8	
12 Twitter users (non-museum followers)	56	40	16	
All responses	911	711	200	

Table 2: Number of total, complete and partial responses for the twelve surveys.

In total, seventy-three (73) interviews were conducted. The consent of all the interviewees was obtained before the interview. The number of all interviews conducted for each study and each platform are detailed in **Table 3**. Participation in the research was completely anonymous and voluntary and all the personal data collected was kept strictly confidential.

	Interviews	Number of interviews
1 Van Gogh Museum's Facebook followers	10	
2 Van Gogh Museum's Instagram followers	12	
3 Van Gogh Museum's Twitter followers	0	
4 MoMA's Facebook followers	0	
5 MoMA's Instagram followers	12	
6 MoMA's Twitter followers	4	
7 Museum followers on Facebook	4	
8 Museum followers on Instagram	16	
9 Museum followers on Twitter	8	
10 Facebook users (non-museum followers)	4	
11 Instagram users (non-museum followers)	0	
12 Twitter users (non-museum followers)	3	
Total number of interviews conducted	73	

Table 3: Number of interviews conducted for each study and each social media platform.

The challenges confronted were double; first, to find the specific targeted populations, and second, to convince them to participate, by filling out the

surveys. Although the surveys were addressed to social media users in general, at the same time, they targeted a specific and very small population, which although public, was not easily accessible. Because the Van Gogh Museum declined our request to distribute our surveys addressed to their followers on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and given our inability to reach anyone from MoMA after repeated attempts by email, our efforts concentrated into the development of a sampling strategy in order to publicize the study and recruit as many people as possible by ourselves. Therefore, both users who follow these two museums on social media, and the general public who follow museums on social media were unknown to us.

In consequence, it was impossible to have a representative sample. Instead, we relied on a convenience sample of social media users. We distributed the invitations to the surveys through a variety of means (personal accounts and networks of friends, posts on comments, direct messages to followers, targeted advertising on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), and whoever saw the invitation and decided to participate formed the self-selected convenience sample of respondents. Thus, this is an exploratory project that concentrates on a particular moment and makes no specific claims for generalizability.

### **3b. Analysis**

A mixed-methods approach is used for the analysis of the data, collected from the surveys and interviews with users. The data collected from the surveys were mostly categorical variables, comprising yes-or-no questions and categories to select from a list, which guided the quantitative analysis conducted. No statistical testing was performed for the data sets of surveys conducted, because the research sample is not representative, and most responses include multiple, interdependent variables. Instead, a descriptive analysis followed, which provided information on the basic qualities of data, including descriptive statistics such as range, minimum, maximum, and frequency. For the analysis of the

data from interviews, a thematic analysis followed, and data was categorized into common themes. For the scope of this paper, findings from interviews are not fully presented, but only some quotes are used together with findings from surveys to illuminate specific situations. It should be noted that all participant names used are pseudonyms.

## **4. Results from the museum followers' studies**

Here, we summarize some of the results of the 718 respondents who participated in the surveys which investigated the experience of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter users who followed art museums, through the conduct of three different studies.

### **4a. Who follows museums on social media and why?**

Participants in the surveys who followed art museums on the three investigated platforms were mostly from Europe and second from the Americas. They were well-educated people, who either worked or related to museums and the broader creative sector, but they were also from other sectors (e.g., health sector, IT, education, etc.). Some were occasional museum-goers, visiting a museum once or twice a year, and some of them were more regular museum-goers (3-5 times a year), especially among Twitter users. They belonged to different genders and age groups. **Table 4** outlines the profiles of the survey participants across three studies conducted.

	Museum Followers' study			MoMA study			Van Gogh Museum study		
	IG survey	FB survey	Twitter survey	IG survey	FB survey	Twitter survey	IG survey	FB survey	Twitter survey
Female	70%	76.58%	58.10%	65.60%	61.10%	61.00%	81.30%	57.90%	53.30%
Male	25%	20.72%	39.20%	30.10%	38.90%	36.60%	11.20%	26.30%	33.30%
Other	3.75%	2.70%	2.70%	4.30%	0.00%	2.40%	4.70%	10.50%	6.70%
Withheld	1.25%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.80%	5.30%	6.70%
Ages 18-24	20.00%	4.50%	4.05%	16.13%	0.00%	2.44%	65.42%	15.79%	6.67%
25-34	37.50%	24.32%	9.46%	25.81%	0.00%	4.88%	11.21%	10.53%	13.33%
35-44	12.50%	47.75%	18.92%	19.35%	44.44%	12.20%	11.21%	31.58%	20.00%
45-54	16.25%	16.22%	39.19%	18.28%	27.78%	39.02%	4.67%	10.53%	46.67%
55-64	10.00%	2.70%	20.27%	10.75%	22.22%	29.27%	3.74%	10.53%	6.67%
65+	1.25%	4.50%	6.76%	8.60%	5.56%	7.32%	0.00%	10.53%	6.67%
I don't want to disclose	2.50%	0.00%	1.35%	1.08%	0.00%	4.88%	3.74%	10.53%	0.00%
High school/Secondary	8.75%	4.50%	2.70%	8.60%	11.11%	0.00%	28.97%	21.05%	6.67%
University graduate	46.25%	27.90%	41.90%	58.06%	5.56%	43.90%	52.34%	31.58%	46.67%
Postgraduate	45.00%	67.60%	55.40%	33.33%	83.33%	56.10%	18.69%	47.37%	46.67%
Europe	67.50%	94.59%	64.86%	25.80%	88.88%	34.14%	76.63%	73.68%	53.30%
Americas	28.75%	3.60%	24.32%	59.13%	11.11%	63.41%	20.56%	21.05%	46.70%
Asia	0.00%	0.90%	1.35%	13.97%	0.00%	0.00%	2.80%	5.26%	0.00%
Australia and Oceania	3.75%	0.90%	9.45%	1.07%	0.00%	2.43%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Heritage/ Creative Professionals	58.75%	55.85%	37.83%	55.91%	38.88%	26.82%	41.10%	36.84%	26.66%
Other	35.00%	27.92%	48.64%	37.63%	44.44%	60.97%	50.50%	57.90%	66.66%
Not Identified	6.25%	16.21%	13.51%	6.45%	16.66%	12.19%	8.40%	5.30%	6.66%
<i>visited a museum last 12 months</i>									
0 times	3.92%	4.38%	7.14%	12.75%	8.70%	18.97%	12.42%	12.00%	15.79%
1-2 times	29.41%	23.36%	26.53%	24.51%	26.09%	24.14%	33.33%	48.00%	31.58%
3-5 times	21.57%	27.01%	20.41%	23.53%	21.74%	31.03%	30.07%	16.00%	36.84%
6-10 times	16.67%	19.71%	22.45%	15.69%	21.74%	12.07%	13.73%	8.00%	5.26%
More than 10 times	28.43%	25.55%	23.47%	23.53%	21.74%	13.79%	10.46%	16.00%	10.53%

Table 4: The participant profiles of the three studies conducted across art museum followers.

Across all studies, the three most selected reasons for following museums on the three platforms were: “to learn about exhibitions/events”, “to see photos of paintings/artworks”, and “to learn about interesting

objects/artworks”, although not in the same order. Going deeper into reasons for following museums, “reading stories about museum objects” was also selected by most respondents across studies. The most selected media features that users preferred to see on museums’ accounts were “photos & text” and “videos” (Carousel posts and Stories were also mentioned by participants in Instagram surveys), while among the most preferred content from museums were: “artwork from the collection”, “exhibition information” and “behind-the-scenes content”. It appears that what motivates people is a combination of visual features and informational content, with stories to be valued.

#### **4b. Feelings**

Across the three studies, the most prevalent feeling for all Instagram, Facebook and Twitter users when they saw a post from a museum was “curiosity”, while the feelings of “happiness” and “excitement” followed. “Humor” and “empathy” completed the spectrum of the positive feelings that people had regarding a museum post, although these two were less popular among respondents from the two case study museums. Negative or neutral feelings, such as frustration or indifference, were negligible. Finally, most participants felt “connected” with the museums’ accounts they followed on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, or specifically towards MoMA’s and the Van Gogh Museum’s accounts.

#### **4c. Practices and behaviors**

Across all studies, as expected, the majority of participants said that they “always”, “frequently”, and “sometimes” “like” a museum post, but they “seldom” or “never” leave a comment on it. These findings are in alignment with results from other studies (Holdgaard, 2014; Walker, 2016), which also found that interactions among users consisted mainly of viewing and “liking” content from museums on social media. But findings from this research revealed more specifically that most respondents from all platforms used to “read comments on museums’ posts”. Below, one interviewee reflects on why he usually reads replies on museum posts:

*“I think I usually see one or two (replies), and I do occasionally scroll down to look at more...It’s interesting to see other people’s reactions to tweets – what they don’t like, do like etc.” (Norman, between 35-44 years old).*

By reading comments on museums’ posts, someone understands how others feel or think about a post, connects or disconnects with them, and on the other hand, understands better or clarifies the content of the post with which may not be familiar. Although readers of comments are invisible for the platforms, they exist and they directly contribute to the museums’ social media accounts by “acting as a gathered audience” (Crawford, 2009, p. 527).

Moreover, findings across all surveys revealed that the “social component” (Bonacchi & Galani, 2013, p. 7) is still missing from museums’ accounts. Roughly speaking, one in ten respondents said that they were visiting a museum on social media in order to “to find other people with common interests”. Similarly, only a few felt “close to people” who were following the same museum with them on social media, and finally, most respondents did not like to “engage in discussions with others” on museums’ social media accounts. This is in alignment with the findings of Bonacchi & Galani (2013).

#### **4d. Perceptions**

Across all surveys, it came out that two statements illustrated users’ perceptions regarding their following of museums on the three platforms: “I like art because it cultures me” and “I follow museums to get a daily dose of art and culture”. The first statement connects the interest and perhaps the passion for art with an internalized and embodied experience, which affects people and makes them invest in the transformative aspect of art through their engagement with art museums on social media. Similarly, the second one concerns the developed habit of getting in touch everyday with art through following art museums on social media.

Although most survey participants were not interested in commenting or engaging in discussions, nevertheless, most respondents expressed their

expectation of the museum's social media manager to participate in discussions on comments. This highlights the importance of the relationship that they develop with the museum through its social media account, and how this is personified through the museum staff. This tendency was also noticed in the interviews conducted with users for this project. Communication with staff from the museum on social media seemed to be appreciated by many of the participants, as you can also see in the following remark of an interviewee:

*"It's a pretty big deal, I like that, it makes you feel that people who post want to communicate with the public and care about its followers" (Alexis, between 18-24 years old).*

## **5. Results from the non-museum followers' study**

Below, we present some of the results of the 193 respondents who participated in the three surveys addressed to social media users who reported that they did not follow museums on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

### **5a. Participants who do not follow museums on social media and why**

The majority of participants who did not follow museums on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were from Europe. Most of them were well-educated people, who worked in different sectors (e.g., health sector, IT, public servants, etc.) and as expected, they did not have any affiliation to the museum or the creative sector. They self-reported that they were occasionally museum-goers, visiting a physical museum once or twice a year, and they belonged to different age groups. Most Instagram and Facebook participants were women, while more Twitter users were men. Participants' profiles are summarized in **Table 5**.

Non-Museum Followers' study			
	Instagram survey	Facebook survey	Twitter survey
Female	54.50%	51.60%	42.50%
Male	45.50%	46.20%	47.50%
Other	0.00%	0.00%	5.00%
Withheld	0.00%	2.20%	5.00%
Ages 18-24	27.27%	3.30%	0.00%
25-34	22.73%	21.98%	7.50%
35-44	31.82%	50.55%	20.00%
45-54	18.18%	19.78%	25.00%
55-64	0.00%	2.20%	27.50%
65+	0.00%	1.10%	15.00%
I don't want to disclose	0.00%	1.10%	5.00%
High school/Secondary			
	18.18%	3.30%	7.50%
University graduate	50.00%	29.67%	50.00%
Postgraduate	31.82%	67.03%	40.00%
Europe	59.09%	94.50%	55.00%
The Americas	40.91%	3.30%	22.50%
Asia	0.00%	2.20%	0.00%
Australia and Oceania	0.00%	0.00%	22.50%
Heritage/ Creative Professional	36.36%	17.58%	2.50%
Other	45.45%	60.44%	60.00%
Not Identified	18.18%	21.98%	37.50%
<i>visited a museum last 12 months</i>			
0 times	26.67%	16.82%	26.79%
1-2 times	33.33%	41.12%	42.86%
3-5 times	26.67%	28.97%	19.64%
6-10 times	0.00%	7.48%	8.93%
More than 10 times	13.33%	5.61%	1.79%

Table 5: The participant profiles of the three surveys conducted across non-museum followers' study.

When participants were asked to indicate the reason why they did not follow museums, the majority of them (almost 7 to 10) responded that “they did not know. Never thought about it” (**Figure 1**). This must be a

spontaneous and honest answer, which perhaps intrigued many participants and made them think about it, as one interviewee said:

“I participated in this study/interview because it grasped my attention and made me think why I do not follow museums on Facebook, although I am in the Tech sector and I am interested in digital applications in museums. I am also interested in history and cultural heritage and I am visiting museums.” And she continues: “I concluded that this is not a conscious decision. Nothing got my attention until now, and I have never seen or at least noticed anything relative on my Newsfeed” (Victoria, between 35-44 years old).

Victoria’s latest remark is related to how platforms’ algorithms work and the visibility of museum content on social media users and how museums reach users.

#### Why don’t you visit museums on Instagram/Facebook/Twitter?

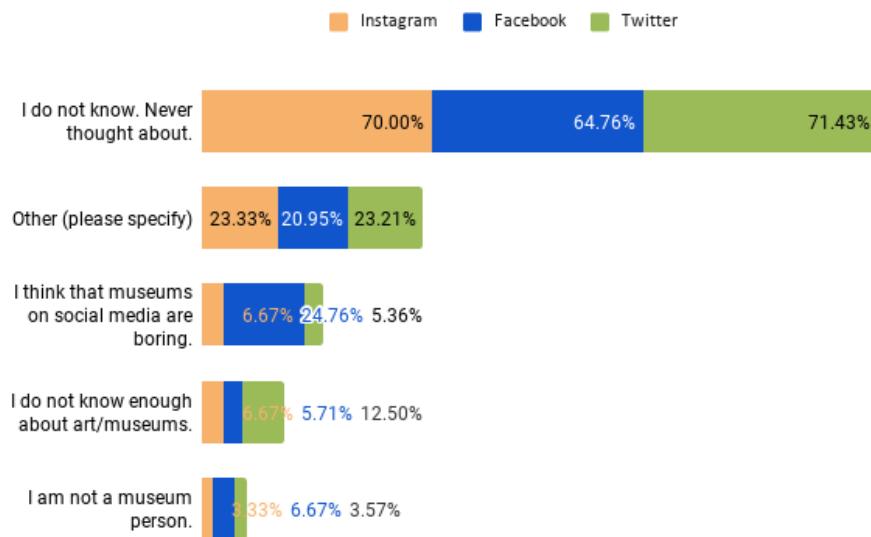


Figure 1: Reasons for not visiting museums on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter (Note: Percentages are higher than 100%, because this was a select-all-that-apply question).

Some participants (almost 2 in 10) preferred to explain why they did not follow museums in their own words. Most said that they preferred the “real” museum visit. Others liked going to the museum website more than going to social media, and surprisingly, some others (especially among

Facebook users) mentioned that they did not know that museums had a presence on social media. Finally, some users were referred to more personal issues, such as the lack of time or their complicated relationship to social media (e.g., some were trying to disengage from social media).

Regarding the media features that participants felt would encourage them to visit a museum's account, most respondents generally displayed a preference for videos and photos, but their choices were broader from what the museums usually present in their accounts. It should be noted that the variables used in this question were customized to each survey, according to the specifics of each platform. Thus, between Facebook and Instagram users, 360 videos, photos, and fun content (animated GIFs and memes) mentioned more, while Twitter users preferred "photos and text", "videos", and "#OnThisDay Hashtag".

On the other hand, when participants were asked what kind of content they would prefer to see from a museum account, their responses were in alignment with those from museum followers. The most selected responses were "artworks from the collections", "exhibitions/events information" and "behind-the-scenes" content. "Museum challenges" and "exhibition tours by curators" were also mentioned by both Instagram and Facebook users, while "Funny tweets" seemed to be appreciated by Twitter respondents.

### **5b. Perceptions and preferences towards museums's accounts on social media**

In this study, we were also interested in finding out how participants expressed themselves through the platforms, how they communicated, connected, and engaged in discussions with others, trying to enhance their profiles and look for things that could match with practices and behaviors enabled by museums on social media, but for the needs of this paper we present only some of these findings.

However, among the given responses across the three surveys, we traced the options of "seeing photos" or "viewing Instagram Stories" and

“watching videos”, which potentially could be a convergence point with museums’ accounts. Furthermore, across all surveys, most respondents appeared to “like learning new things” on social media, another threshold of confluence with museums, and appreciate fun and humoristic content there (“I like to see fun posts”), a possible direction for museums to go into (**Figure 2**).

Furthermore, we also aimed to investigate people’s perceptions towards museums on social media and art, in order to contextualize the likelihood of them to follow museums on social media. According to the findings (**Figure 2**), it seems that more than half of the Instagram and Facebook users appreciated that art could benefit them and help them cope with stress and anxiety. It must be noted that this study was conducted during the time in which we were all experiencing the stressful situation of the first wave of the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, fewer Twitter users mentioned this statement. Although not stated explicitly, the context of this statement was social media; thus, we can assume (although without certainty) that respondents recognized a potential role for art museums on social media regarding self-improvement and well-being.

Which of these statements do you agree with?

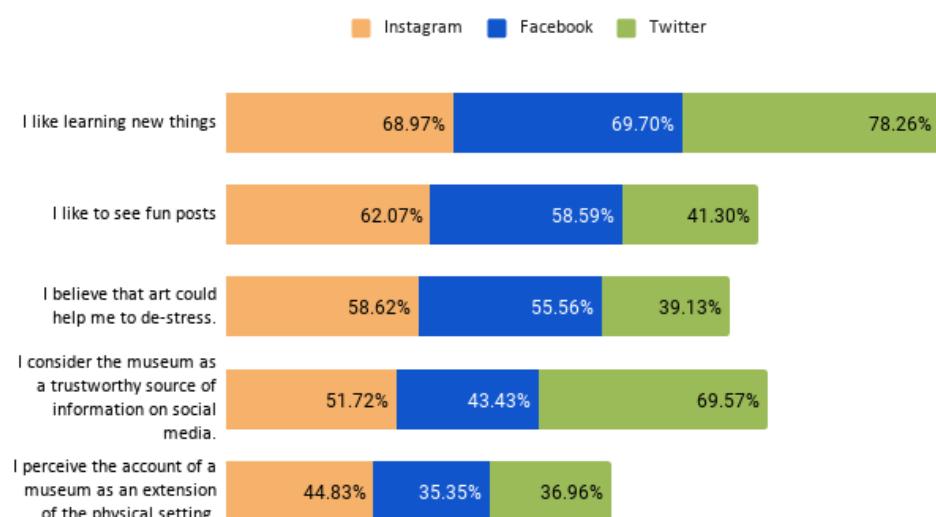


Figure 2: Respondents’ perceptions and preferences towards museums’ accounts on social media for the non-museum followers’ study. (Note:

Percentages are higher than 100%, because this was a select-all-that-apply question).

The perception of the museum on social media as a trustworthy source of information was valued by all respondents, but more among Twitter users (**Figure 2**). Finally, the association of the social media account to the physical museum was not of great importance for the participants in the surveys, and especially for Facebook and Twitter users (35.35% of them and 36.96% of them, respectively). Given that some respondents in these surveys mentioned that they valued the “real” visit at the museum, and they did not actually have experience of museums on social media, it is difficult to extract the exact meaning that they gave in this statement and more research is needed.

## 6. Discussion

Although at a first glance, followers of museums’ accounts appear to be positioned as “consumers of meaning and information, within a primarily educational remit” (Blackman, 2016, p. 51), at the same time, some affective dimensions are at work. The latest discussions about theories of affect studies in social media, which reconsider the role of the body and embodied forms of sense-making in being and becoming and the various ways affect and emotion come into play in social media. Therefore, they are very instructive for understanding the way users are related to museums, their contents, and the others in these environments.

Two things advocate for this coexistence of information and cognition with more affective properties in the relationship that users develop with museums on social media, and both of them are related to the prevalence of visual features and the rise of digital technologies. First, it is the extension of “seeing” art outside the space of the museum gallery, which now it is feasible both with mobile technologies and social media apps. As artist Richard Prince describes, “the platform [Instagram] is like carrying around a gallery in your pocket” (cited in Fisher, 2016, p. 104). Entangling images of museum collections into everyday life, habits and experiences

might create the possibility of someone “being moved” and “being affected” by this unexpected “meeting”, but this is also dependent on many other factors, making the person responsible and empowered for the direction of their actions (e.g., personal matters and moods, availability, etc.).

Second, it is the activation of the human sensorium through the digital images (Hansen, 2015), and the expansion of our senses. Fisher (2016) is referring to “an haptically mediated form of connectedness” (p. 103), which involves haptic perception and cognition, coming into effect through social media platforms, smartphones and touch-screen interfaces. Likewise, Mirzoeff (2016) contends that “seeing actually becomes a system of sensory feedback from the whole body, not just the eyes” (p. 13). Again Mirzoeff (1999) asserts that now “we learn to see and connect even faster” (p. 4), as a new skill we attain through our engagement with digital images, according to the “theory of attainment” (Miller & Sinanan, 2014), which talks about capabilities we attain as a result of our interaction with social media. In other words, drawing on Pedwell’s (2019) thinking, we can argue that new habits, senses and sensibilities, competencies and behaviors are emerging, with the advent of digital and algorithmic networked technologies.

The findings revealed that followers of museums on social media do not interact visibly. Research has already shown that visible interactions and participation on social media is neither the norm for users’ behaviors nor a proof of value and approval for the majority of users (Wong, 2015). Instead, only a small percentage of users is responsible for the contributed information that is distributed online, while the majority of users participate periodically, if at all (Coretti & Pica, 2016; Russo & Peacock, 2009; Shirky, 2008; Wong, 2015).

Although most users do not interact visibly either with others or the museum posts, this does not mean that they do not engage. By reading comments, users are present and create ties, although loose ones, with

others, the museum, and its content. This means that we need a more elaborate framework to understand interactivity and participation in museums' social media accounts, beyond the active-passive dichotomies that have been used until now. After all, being part of the network produces effects (Russo & Peacock, 2009) and further, reading comments could also be a periodic or temporary behavior possible to alter.

The metaphor of a performance that boyd (2011) uses for comments on social media is very illustrative: "Comments are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience" (p. 45). In this case, there is also the agency of the Museum. Three actors come into play under the comment section of a museum post (the museum, the commentators and the readers of comments), and at least two strands of behaviors are displayed.

By reading comments on museums' posts, someone understands how others feel or think about a post, and connects or disconnects with them, and on the other hand, they understand better or clarify the content of the post with which they may not be familiar. This is an invisible way for people to connect with museums and others, which is still valuable for the network, as research in online communities has revealed (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003). Although readers of comments are invisible for the platforms, they exist and they directly contribute to the museums' social media accounts by "acting as a gathered audience" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527).

Considering museums as trusted sources of information and expert providers is in accordance with the overall perception of museums (Dilenschneider, 2017). However, Parry (2013) criticizes museums for their traditional, conservative approach on social media by positioning themselves first as an information provider, as an expert, and second, by abandoning "...the playful, illustrative, fictive and theatrical qualities that have come to define the museum" (p. 30), as he mentions, and considers them more relative for social media.

Social media allows users to connect across spatial and temporal barriers, making interactions possible and part of their everyday reality. Moreover, museums have the potential to be “cultural connectors” (Castells, 2010, p. 433) of people, time and space in a networked society, but all these presuppose the embracement of digital as part of the real, part of the everyday.

## **7. Conclusions**

The data collected through the surveys and the interviews represent only a snapshot of the activity surrounding museums’ social media and their users, rather than a representative and comprehensive account of them. Nonetheless, they made visible both followers and non-followers of museums’ accounts. Drawing on the findings presented, participants who followed museums’ accounts seemed to appreciate learning about museum collections, staying informed with what is happening at the museums and viewing visual content from museums. Beyond this informational approach, affective dimensions were also at play on these accounts, enacted and enabled by digital technologies, visual content, and feelings, senses and relationships developed between users, museums and content. In this context, respondents of the surveys felt primarily “connected” with the museums’ accounts on social media, and although they were not keen on commenting or engaging in discussions with others, they were reading comments on museums posts, and were interested in others’ views. It became clear that museums on social media provided a stage for users to engage in processes of identity construction and building relationships, mainly with the museums. Communication with the museum staff and the managers of the accounts was considered of great importance and appreciated by participants.

On the other hand, those who did not follow museums’ accounts expressed their skepticism about how meaningful this experience would be for them and tended to understand social media by making distinctions between the digital and the analogue or the “real” and the virtual.

However, they valued social media interactions as part of their everyday reality in a networked society. They could appreciate both informational and affective dimensions of museums on social media, prioritizing the visual features of social media offered by museums, which fostered a fun and playful approach, and they envisaged museums' accounts playing a role in well-being.

The approach followed in our research offers a novel way of understanding and assessing museums' social media experiences based on the examination of people's thoughts, actions and emotions. Employing both museological and communicative perspectives towards the use of social media in museums and using methods from the tradition of museum visitor and audience studies, we suggest a conceptual and methodological framework for the empirical analysis and interpretation of users' experiences in museums' social media. This is an in-depth, user-centered method that goes beyond the metrics and analytics offered by the platforms, which do not focus directly on the objectives of museums. Social media metrics represent platforms' standpoints of view and many researchers (Baym, 2013; van Dijck, 2014; Wu & Taneja, 2020) have criticized the economic and business values intrinsic to these data.

Our findings will, we hope, help practitioners visualize and reflect on both followers and potential followers of museums on social media, enhance their understanding, and inform their practices. These findings could serve as an initial discussion of practitioners using the proposed approach to understand followers of their accounts and assess their success on social media from the perspective of their users. More case studies are needed to test this approach and expand it. Furthermore, it could be valuable for the museum sector to create a survey instrument blueprint for the development of surveys for capturing the social media users' perspective, their preferences, perceptions, expectations and feelings.

The current research will be complemented with the observation and analysis of museums' social media posts and users' comments, yielding an

enriched and elaborated understanding of the investigated phenomena, and informing the proposed methodology with another technique, that of content analysis. The proposed method does not come without challenges, and for this we argue that a combination of data from different sources (focus groups, representative user panels, data from third-party digital analytics and user research, etc.) is much needed today to better comprehend the user agency on museums' accounts.

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