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Master's Thesis

Seeing, Scrolling, Engaging: A User-focused Study of Experience-based Valuation of Museum Content on Social Media

By:

Lucrezia De Biase

Francine Hernandez Nicholls

Department of Service Studies

Campus Helsingborg

Supervisors:

Devrim Umut Aslan, Lund University

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Abstract

Following the outbreak of new media technologies, researchers in museum studies have acknowledged the increasing importance of digital content creation for museums. Today, Social Media provides museums with the opportunity to engage with their audiences beyond museum walls and pursue their organizational mission in innovative ways. Despite a growing interest in the organizational changes that make this possible, there is still a need for more research focused on user-centered perspectives to investigate their expectations, motivations, and underlying reasoning behind engagement as well as its impact on the online museum experience. Therefore, this thesis seeks to examine how Social Media users shape their online experiences while constructing, negotiating, and expressing the perceived value of museum-related content. Among museums at the forefront of this evolution, The British Museum stands out because of its efforts to build a strong presence across different Social Media platforms. Drawing on Valuation and Brand Experience Theories, we developed an integrated theoretical framework - the Experience-based Valuation Model - to analyze users' museum Social Media experiences from different evaluative perspectives. We collected relevant empirical data through netnographic observation of The British Museum's digital content and related public comments as well as semi-structured interviews with individuals who ranged from regular museum-goers to casual scrollers.

This allowed us to highlight that valuation processes rely on four registers of valuing: Sensory register, Affective register, Intellectual register, and Moral register. In most cases, the findings suggest that these registers are deeply intertwined and can work in synergy; in others, however, they clash and create devalorizing experiences.

Keywords: Museum Social Media content; museum experience; valuation processes; valuation processes in digital spaces; Brand Experience; registers of valuing; valorizing and devalorizing practices.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The modern museum: rethinking the role of museums in society

Museums, as archetypes of cultural organizations, are often central to the public discourse about the importance of culture within modern society. They provide valuable services to their communities and contribute, together with several other public entities, to the creation of public value, which in this context is defined as “value that is ‘consumed’ collectively by the citizenry rather than individually by clients” (Grüb & Martin, 2020, p. 338). While the value of cultural institutions in preserving cultural heritage is widely recognized, scholars across different research fields have also stressed the intangible contributions of arts and culture both on an individual level, through education and identity formation, and a societal level, by improving community prestige, fostering creative thinking, and strengthening social relations (Armbrecht, 2014).

In order to fulfill this mission towards society, the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO) identifies four fundamental values: social, collection, educational, and economic (Zbuckea, 2015). The *social values* of museums are tied to making culture accessible to citizens; *collection values* are tightly connected to preserving and managing historical and artistic collections; *educational values* are linked to providing experiences that enable knowledge dissemination and stimulate critical thinking; and *economic values* are related to museums contributions to economic growth by attracting visitors to particular cities and creating jobs (Zbuckea, 2015).

While previous definitions were heavily focused on preservation and safeguard of cultural heritage, the latest definition of museum by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) reflects the growing attention to the experiential dimension of museumgoing and the importance of providing visitors with opportunities for learning as well as amusement (Brown, 2020) by stressing how museums must “operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” (International Council of Museums, 2023)

Since the early 2000s, in fact, the interest in broadening cultural accessibility and inclusion has steadily grown in museum studies and cultural practices. Museums have worked to make their collections more visitor-friendly from physical, economic, intellectual, and cultural perspectives while maintaining high-quality services dedicated to preserving cultural heritage (Lang et al., 2006). To improve intellectual and cultural accessibility, many museums have adopted more captivating approaches by including elements of entertainment to enhance audience engagement and increase their appeal. As a result, the concept of entertainment has increasingly become integrated into the values of many museums (Zbucnea, 2015). Along with its educational, academic, and cultural contributions, Armbrrecht (2014) remarks on the recreational value that cultural heritage can offer. This shift can be rather difficult as museums cannot be purely entertainment-focused, but “they have to respect their cultural, social, and educational missions to properly manage their collections” (Zbucnea, 2015, p. 484).

Following the increasing adoption of entertainment-based strategies, museums are now frequently considered “experience-based economic forms” (Balloffet et al., 2014, p. 7) for inspiration, learning, and enjoyment (Lang et al., 2006). Museums are no longer just physical spaces for collecting and exhibiting artworks; today, they fulfill audiences’ cultural consumption needs, helping them accumulate cultural capital while fostering dialogue and collaboration (Lang et al., 2006; Gao & Yu, 2023). At the same time, this shift has contributed to positioning museums within “a client-focused environment of leisure consumption” (Burton & Scott, 2003, p. 60). As globalization and rationalization reshape business models in all industries, individuals have less and less free time for leisure activities, and museums become just one among many alternatives (ibid). As a result, museums now face rising competition from a wide range of entertainment sources (Kefi et al., 2024) and experiential activities (Guintcheva & Passebois, 2009), making it challenging to capture and retain people’s attention.

In addition to supporting their socio-cultural missions, Balloffet et al. (2014) suggest that the gradual turn to entertainment also reflects museums’ recent financial instability. Historically, European museums have been typically funded by both national and local governments, and their public expenditure has accounted for more than half of the budget at their disposal (Kotler et al., 2008). However, both academia and practitioners have highlighted that public budgets allocated for museums have significantly declined due to the effects of the global financial crisis and, more

recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, securing adequate economic resources has become a constant challenge for many museums (International Research Alliance on Public Funding For Museums (IRAPFM) & International Council Of Museum (ICOM), 2021). Similarly, private financial streams have also been negatively affected, especially by the 2008 financial crisis, and further complicated the financial status for many cultural organizations (ibid).

In light of this evolving landscape, museums are increasingly redefining their relationship with the public by adopting innovative approaches. Competition among museums and other leisure-time choices (Burton & Scott, 2003; Kefi et al., 2024), along with intensifying financial demands (International Research Alliance on Public Funding For Museums (IRAPFM) & International Council Of Museum (ICOM), 2021; Kotler et al., 2008) have led museums to turn to Social Media communication in order to explore the “perceived demand for different forms of engagement” and experiment with different forms of non-traditional museum experiences that can mitigate the current challenges (Kidd, 2011, p. 65). Social Media allows museums to engage in a more direct dialogue with their audiences and adapt to the increased relevance of the experiential dimension of museumgoing, which is in line with new museum studies (Zhang & Xu, 2024).

1.2 Research problematization and gap

Social Media represents a strategic showcase for museums since digital platforms significantly shape how audiences perceive these organizations, form expectations, and interpret museums’ role in society (Quinones Vila, 2020).

Following the outbreak of new media technologies, researchers in museum studies have acknowledged the increasing importance of digital content creation for museums (Park & Kudo, 2024). Booth et al. (2019) highlight how the use of Social Media platforms to communicate cultural heritage has caused forms of organizational change, with significant effects on museums’ organizational and managerial operations. Scholars have also focused on potential benefits (Manikowska, 2020; Vassiliadis & Belenioti, 2017) and challenges (Kidd, 2011; Manikowska, 2020) of integrating Social Media communication into the everyday museum

tasks, and its effects on museum outreach and ability to build more personal relationships with their visitors (Luo et al., 2022).

As Social Media usage increase within museums' strategic plans, particular attention has been given to the potential of such platforms in bringing together education and entertainment, adopting the concept of “edutainment” (Addis, 2005) - a compound word reflecting the convergence of the concepts of education and entertainment - into the digital realm of Social Media. Komarac et al. (2019) introduced the notion of “contemporary edutainment”, which relies heavily on the use of technology, communication platforms, and the Internet to deliver museum experiences that strike a thoughtful balance between educational and entertainment values. Within this context, contributions (Charitonos et al., 2012; Dolbeau-Bandin, 2016; Huebner, 2023) and potential risks (Balloffet et al., 2014; Lang et al., 2006) of Social Media in relation to the learning process within the museum context have also been explored.

Research has also widened its scope beyond an internal, organization-centered perspective (Vassiliadis & Belenioti, 2017). This has resulted in a growing interest in more user-oriented approaches, with emphasis on the interactions between museums and their audiences made possible by Social Media platforms and the adoption of interactive and collaborative approaches for cultural mediation (Kefi et al., 2024). Russo et al. (2009), for instance, note that cultural organizations such as museums are increasingly introducing some experimental and innovative practices to “make their collections and expertise more accessible on audience terms” (p. 160), thereby empowering audiences to voice their preferences and become active participants in the creation of their own museum experience.

Following a shift towards participatory practices encouraged by Social Media characteristics (Kidd, 2011; Zhang & Xu, 2024), audiences play an active role in shaping their own museum experiences. Therefore, further research is needed on individuals' behavior patterns on Social Media in relation to museum content and their impact on informal learning processes that are typical of digital environments (Vassiliadis & Belenioti, 2017). Understanding how museum-related Social Media content is received and interpreted is necessary for improving the effectiveness of Social Media strategies within cultural institutions (Guintcheva & Passebois, 2009). Parkhomenko et al. (2024) stress the urgent need for research to identify what can make

museum content on Social Media effective and engaging, investigating patterns and trends in users' behaviors to further understand how museum content is received, valued, and interpreted.

Some researchers have shown interest in visitor-centered and user-centered perspectives on how Social Media are leveraged for knowledge dissemination of cultural heritage and how people interact with museums in digital environments. Yet, much of this work has focused on User Generated Content (UGC) (Fu et al., 2023; Wight, 2020) or has relied on quantitative methods to analyze user behavior (Fu et al., 2023; Mardhatilah et al., 2023; Sundjaja et al., 2017). This calls for more qualitative approaches that allow for an in-depth investigation of the expectations, motivations, and underlying reasoning behind engagement with museum-related content on Social Media, as well as its impact on the online museum experience (Sundjaja et al., 2017). This can be achieved through more direct methods of data collection, particularly interviews, providing first-hand accounts of individuals' experiences (Gao & Yu, 2023) and offering a more profound understanding of psychological, cognitive, and emotional factors together with reactions to audio-visual stimuli (Mardhatilah et al., 2023).

Introducing analytical frameworks and conceptual tools from non-museum-related fields can add depth and original perspectives to research about user behavior and perception on Social Media. This can support a more comprehensive understanding of how the value of Social Media content is constructed and perceived. Therefore, we have chosen to adopt Valuation Theory as it relies on the idea of individuals enacting creative practices known as valuation processes to continuously construct, assess, and negotiate the value of something (Doganova et al., 2014). To complement this approach and add depth to the experiential side of consuming museum content online, we also introduced four essential dimensions from Brand Experience Theory, covering the "sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses" (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 52).

1.3 Research aim and questions

Through the application of this integrated theoretical framework, this study contributes to the research field of museum studies by exploring the processes through which the value of museum digital content is constructed, expressed, and negotiated within the overall museum experience on Social Media. *By focusing on the perspective of Social Media users, this thesis aims to understand how they perform and experience the valuation of museum Social Media content and*

how their observations, reactions, and behaviors reflect different, and at times conflicting, ways of valuing museum content.

This aim was addressed through a case study based on The British Museum content on Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube. As further illustrated in Chapter 4, The British Museum constitutes a compelling case as it has recently undergone a digital restructuring aimed at leveraging opportunities offered by Social Media platforms to reach broader audiences and build a stronger relationship with them (Hootsuite, n.d.). We approached this case study by triangulating two methods of data collection: a netnographic observation of The British Museum's Social Media content and its public comment sections, and a series of semi-structured interviews.

Therefore, the following research questions guided our study:

RQ1: *How do Social Media users define what makes The British Museum's digital content engaging and worth their interaction?*

RQ2: *How do different ways of interpreting and responding to The British Museum's Social Media content relate or contrast with each other?*

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis presents a six-chapter structure. Following this first introductory section, the second chapter is dedicated to a literature review of relevant publications within museum studies that position our thesis in the research field. The third chapter introduces our theoretical framework based on concepts from Valuation Theory and Brand Experience Theory, leading to the development of our integrated Experience-based Valuation Model and its application. The research strategy and methods chosen for this study are covered in the fourth chapter, along with justifications and reflections in relation to our methodological decisions. In the fifth chapter, we present and analyze our empirical material. This chapter includes a dedicated section for each register of valuing as well as one dedicated to the analytical implications of the concept of valorizing and devalorizing. Lastly, the sixth chapter tackles a final discussion about our findings and analysis, and a conclusion presenting our theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and proposals for future research.

2. Literature review

This chapter presents relevant academic and empirical studies about Social Media platforms, their applications, and implications within the museum field. First, we review literature on how Social Media can shape audience engagement and affect museum experience, followed by a focus on the importance of emotional connection and resonance between audiences and museum-related content. The third section is dedicated to the shift towards participatory practices and relevant critiques in this context. Lastly, we address the ongoing debate between educational value and entertainment within museum studies.

2.1 Museums and audience engagement on Social Media

Social Media is now a popular platform for organizations to promote themselves and encourage people to share opinions and experiences with each other (Luo et al., 2022). When it comes to museums, this is no exception, as Social Media impacts all levels of museums' business activities, from the acquisition and protection of artifacts to their research and communication (Suzić et al., 2016). Managers within the museum field have acknowledged the potential of Social Media to share information about activities, exhibitions, and collections with their public (Sundjaja et al., 2017) as well as attract new visitors (Komarac et al., 2019) and engage with them beyond museum walls (Huebner, 2023).

Within this trend of studies dedicated to how digital platforms influence engagement with museums. Bunea et al. (2024), for example, argue that Social Media engagement provides an opportunity to generate awareness and positively influence visits to museums. Their research also states that a particular Social Media site is only valid when it proposes quality and responsiveness, indicating that museums can not be successful when using Social Media unless they use it adequately. Focusing on museums such as the Louvre and MoMA, Rhee et al. (2023) explore the use of Instagram and how it shapes the embodied museum experience. According to this study, users have transformed from passive observers to active participants. In addition, Johnson-Nwosu (2024) examines how museums use Instagram reels to engage their audiences, noting that the top 10 cultural institutions on Instagram, including the British Museum, increased

their reel output by 37% from 2022 to 2023. During this same time frame, The British Museum alone witnessed a 38% increase in followers.

While bringing to the forefront how much people interact with museum-related content online, these studies still primarily focus on an institution-centered point of view that outlines cause-and-effect connections based on Social Media metrics such as reach, audience size, impressions, and engagement rate. This perspective lacks focus on how users themselves might experience museum-related content differently and overlooks the multi-dimensional nature of Social Media interactions as lived and social practices.

2.2 Opportunities and risks of emotional engagement

Research suggests that emotions are crucial to framing museum experience on Social Media. (Jensen, 2013) stresses the ability of platforms like Instagram to generate emotional connections between museum audiences and cultural heritage through visual storytelling. Despite showing this platform's technical possibilities, this top-down approach mainly considers institutional strategies, leaving out user perspectives. Reeves Meyer et al. (2023) emphasize how emotional engagement is key for museums that want to nourish a relationship with their audiences, because emotions are closely linked to how the museum experience is valued and remembered. Chen et al. (2019) further add to this perspective by arguing that audiences that are exposed to visual stimuli connected to emotions are more likely to comment and share.

However, literature on this topic also shows that museums have a hard time fully understanding the users' point of view when it comes to how they can leverage emotions in a positive way from users. Dawson (2024) claims that museums often face backlash when emotional communication is mishandled, showing an example of a well-known museum that has received backlash for a video that has been deemed sexist. Similarly, Manikowska (2020) observes how the public might perceive museums' superficial responses to sensitive and emotional issues as an oversimplification of serious matters. Bakogianni (2022) further argues that emotional resonance in storytelling is paramount to museums on Social Media, as emotions are the key to the interpretivist nature of their cultural heritage and should be part of a well-thought-out central strategy. Despite providing insightful contributions about emotional responses to museum-related digital content and the potential risk of mismanaging these stimuli, these studies lack a deeper,

audience-centered investigation into perceptions and negotiation practices to define the value of museum content in these contexts.

2.3 From a top-down approach to communication towards participatory practices on Social Media

Several authors have also examined how museums use Social Media tools and tried to understand what may be the proper use to get positive engagement. Arnaboldi and Lema (2021) emphasize that Social Media has deconstructed museums' top-down hierarchical approach to communication into a democratic, bottom-up type of structure; they also underline how this shift has challenged their authority in knowledge dissemination. Today, Social Media is their public face, whether they can control and leverage it or not. Their research emphasizes that the flow of content is bidirectional on Social Media, building on an interactive dynamic that is not possible in the real world. Closely related to this study, Kefi et al. (2024) analyze how Social Media broke the conventional interaction modes between museums and visitors and argue that a museum and its audience now co-construct each other's Social Media presence.(Jensen, 2013), however, critiques these dynamics and argues that, even though Social Media welcomes audience participation in different ways, institutions still often define the limits of this participation by controlling the content and themes on display. However, users still manage to participate in the curatorial processes by challenging or supporting museums' narratives.

2.4 Education and entertainment to engage Social Media users: benefits and limitations

While museums progressively enhance their presence on Social Media and integrate competencies and tools to manage them, a growing body of research is delving into how these platforms can reinforce their educational mission within online and offline communities. These studies also shed light on the tensions and contradictions emerging from trying to combine these two worlds.

Huebner (2023) describes Social Media as a virtual environment with potential for informal learning, thereby continuing museums' commitment to educating their audiences. Similarly,

Dolbeau-Bandin (2016) argues for the potential of Social Media platforms to bring innovation into museums' educational approach by considering the case of the Caen Memorial Museum and its Suzon Facebook. This study gives a good account of the motivations behind museums leaning into innovation, but it still privileges institutional tactics over user valuations. Charitonos et al. (2012) bring depth and nuance to this perspective with their study on museum learning through online interactions, suggesting that while digital tools such as Social Media can effectively support the museums' educational mission and improve the learning experience, the nature of personal exchanges is shaped by the characteristics of such virtual environments.

Even though the benefits of using Social Media to support educational objectives are acknowledged by numerous studies, the integration and compatibility of its entertainment elements within museums' traditional mission continue to generate some controversies. Several researchers have acknowledged that people primarily use Social Media for enjoyment, gratification, relaxation, and fun (Wei et al., 2024), as well as the importance of the addictive nature of Social Media and fear of missing out for Social Media engagement (Hoque and Hossain, 2023).

Some researchers have problematized the implications of knowledge dissemination on Social Media, raising concerns about the potential risks of treating museums as organizations solely focused on entertaining their public. Building on this concern, Lang et al. (2006) highlight both benefits and potential risks of such strategies aiming at making culture more appealing to broader and more diverse audiences. Their work reflects on the essential contraposition between "elitism versus popularization or 'dumbing down'" (p. 30). Balloffet et al. (2014) further stress that high culture, among which museums are included, is considered formal, serious, and almost sacred, and incorporating elements of popular culture and entertainment risks compromising these perceived qualities, as in the case of museums adopting edutainment strategies on Social Media. Similarly, Komarac et al. (2019) mention concerns among museum professionals in regards to this trend towards the commodification of culture through entertainment. They, in fact, warn that uncontrolled reliance on entertainment strategies could endanger the authenticity of museums and their place in society (ibid).

Despite these concerns, museums today act for the benefit of everyone, whether they are scholars, cultural experts, art enthusiasts, or non-attenders with limited experience of cultural

environments (Lang et al., 2006). Therefore, communication strategies must reflect this vision, justifying the coexistence of educational content with entertainment within online and offline museum experiences (ibid). In addition to the need for broader accessibility, financial considerations also play a role in supporting the adoption of edutainment; Balloffet et al. (2014) note that museums and other cultural organizations have adopted edutainment strategies to cope with financial concerns as they note that “[t]he amount of funding these institutions receive - if any - often depends on their attendance levels, which puts them under constant pressure to maintain or increase attendance figures” (p. 6).

Given the extent of this debate and the potential opportunities offered by edutainment in the museum sector, both Komarac et al. (2019) and Charitonos et al. (2012) point out a need for further research into the intersection of educational content, entertainment, and their impact on museums’ activities online. While Charitonos et al. (2012) stress the importance of understanding how the trade-offs between museums’ traditional role and the new demand for entertainment are reshaping the dynamics within virtual environments, Komarac et al. (2019) advocate for a deeper examination of the broader implications of edutainment for museums and other cultural organizations.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding our research and interpretation of our empirical material. First, we discuss how research has shifted from value to valuation processes. Next, we introduce key concepts of Brand Experience. Finally, we present how the selected theories complement each other to form a coherent theoretical framework and how they are applied to study user engagement with The British Museum's Social Media content.

3.1 Valuation processes

3.1.1 From value to valuation

Described as the meaning or relevance attributed to something made visible through acts of exchange (Baka, 2015; Barinaga, 2023), value is today at the centre of numerous studies and models in social sciences. Helgesson and Muniesa (2013) report contrasting perspectives on the nature of value, which portrays well the complexity in defining value with certainty. Drawing from traditional science studies, value can be subjected to a process of objectification and described as “something that something has as a result of its own condition and of its relation to other things (for instance, in relation to work or to money, or to any sort of standard metric)” (Muniesa, 2011, p. 26). Yet, value is also subjective in some capacity as it is constructed through personal considerations and interactions among people as well as between people and things (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Muniesa, 2011). Using price - a rather objective criterion - as the only regime of evaluation fails to fully capture differences in value (Kjellberg et al., 2013). People, instead, find multiple values in things that cannot be ascribable to objective economic parameters. Therefore, there are different conceptions of value that justify its multifaceted character (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Kjellberg et al., 2013).

However, recent developments suggest that a static interpretation of value is still reductive, and a shift in focus towards an act of valuation would be fruitful to further the research on this subject (Doganova et al., 2018). Researchers have found great interest in moving away from fixed research objects to focus on “fluid processes of [...] creating value” (Barinaga, 2023, p. 3). The operation or practice of attributing value to something contributes to a deeper understanding of

how value or values are created throughout a process, posing great emphasis on the dynamic and proactive actions of individuals (Muniesa, 2011). People employ written and spoken words, models, numbers, and other figures as tools to define and shape the reality they describe; similarly, the sets of actions involved in evaluating something's value contribute in the creation of the same value being assessed (Barinaga, 2023).

This reconceptualization of what value is has shifted its meaning to something enacted rather than intrinsically fixed, aligning with the concept of Doganova et al. (2014) that describes valuation as “any social practice where the value or values of something are established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested” (p. 87). This framework focuses on the creative process of valuation itself and the set of actions needed to carry it out; at its core lies the performative nature of value, constantly produced, calculated and qualified (Barinaga, 2023).

3.1.2 Key elements of valuation processes

Valuation Theory offers a number of core concepts essential to investigate how Social Media users determine the value of museum digital content, including evaluating and valorizing (Vatin, 2013), valorizing and devalorizing (Baka, 2015; Hutter, 2021), the relation between people, objects and competences (Baka, 2015; Lamont, 2012), and registers of valuing (Heuts and Mol, 2013).

Evaluating and valorizing

Evaluating and valorizing provide a fundamental understanding of how people engage in valuation processes. Vatin (2013) examined in depth the duality of valuation processes and took inspiration from the French language to distinguish between its two aspects with separate terms: *évaluer* (to evaluate), which refers to the assessment of value where people decide whether goods have value or not; and *valoriser* (to valorize), which instead refers to the production of value. While evaluating and valorizing can be identified as two separate activities from a linguistic viewpoint, in practice, the two occur simultaneously rather than sequentially and they are both essential parts of the process (Hutter, 2021). While examining user behavior towards museum content on Social Media, the simultaneity of evaluating and valorizing is of particular

relevance because they not only assess its value, but they actively shape it through engagement. Within valuation, the process of creation and the one of assessment are two sides of the same coin (Muniesa, 2011): as people examine and share their response to museums' posts, leaving reactions, likes or comments, they construct value by positioning this content as relevant or meaningful to them.

Valuation extends beyond practices of quantification such as price measurements (Barinaga, 2023); it also involves qualitative assessments, where people express attachment to things under valuation with “manifestations of physical reaction, like joy or disgust” and, most importantly, use language to reveal their judgements (Hutter, 2021, p.109).

Since valuation processes depend to a great extent on how people engage with them, the operation itself and its outcomes can look significantly different in different sites and situations, eventually leading to the perception of divergent values in relation to the same product (Baka, 2015). This also means that valuation can be both positive and negative, leading respectively to an increase (valorizing) or a decrease (devalorizing) of value attributed to something (Hutter, 2021).

People, objects, and competences

In order to fully understand valuation as a social practice, it is also crucial to first recognize that valuation is not just a human-driven process, but also dependent on social practices and interactive exchanges that involve groups of people as well as diverse sets of skills, knowledge, objects, and devices, all interconnected within socio-technical networks (Baka, 2015; Lamont, 2012). Within Social Media, for instance, users' valuation networks for museum content rely on platforms' data infrastructure, devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers, and the ability of both museum professionals to produce content as well as of users to understand and leverage Social Media dynamics. These ever-evolving interactions between humanity and technology are changing valuation processes. However, despite the significance of digital platforms in contemporary society and the richness of digitally-produced data, research about valuation processes has yet to explore in depth the interactions between producers and consumers of Social Media content, especially in the context of museums.

Registers of valuing

When trying to determine the value of something, people focus on identifying the category or categories it belongs to by considering its fundamental characteristics and functions. This operation, referred to as categorization or typification, allows them to assess whether the identified categories are somehow meaningful to them and how they can fit into their hierarchy. Alongside categorization, legitimation is the recognition of something's value by both oneself and others, which is a crucial aspect of valuation as it validates the worth of the good being assessed (Lamont, 2012).

However, valuation processes do not follow a fixed value system; instead, people rely on multiple, coexisting criteria for assessing and creating value that are affected by many economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors. Rather than one single, static hierarchy, people are guided in their valuation processes by heterarchies or plurarchies (Lamont, 2012) where different valuation regimes operate simultaneously for the same item or situation. Often referred to as registers of valuing, different grammars of valuation can relate to each other in different ways depending on the context, sometimes even conflict when alignment is impossible (Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013; Heuts & Mol, 2013; Kjellberg et al., 2013). Heuts and Mol (2013) are pioneers in the study of registers of valuing with their analysis of the valuation process of tomatoes, identifying five distinct but combined registers adopted by tomato experts when defining what makes a good tomato. Applying this example to heritage, we treat a museum's Social Media post virtually the same as a "cultivated artefact": this invites judgements of authenticity and care through a screen.

As different ways of valuing tangible and intangible offerings, registers are complex systems of principles, justifications, and personal ideals that Social Media users employ to determine the value of what they consume and negotiate its relevance in their social lives. The concept of registers of valuing helps see how different individuals receive and interpret museum Social Media content, trying to understand what engaging and meaningful content looks like for different users. Despite experiencing the same digital environment and assessing the same material, their valuation processes and outcomes may differ significantly. While sometimes they may employ similar registers of valuing, this does not necessarily mean they attribute the same

value because they relate to a product or experience differently or seek different benefits from it (Hesjedal et al., 2024).

While the concept of registers of valuing clarify the practices through which Social Media users define and shape their perceived value of museum content, Schröder et al. (2021) argue that registers of valuing cannot be assumed a priori or defined in their characteristics before studying their social environment and social behaviors of people enacting it. Registers are unstable by nature and highly context-dependent as they are realized in practice through individuals' actions (ibid). Therefore, we introduce relevant concepts of Brand Experience, which help us understand the experience during which these valuation processes happen.

3.2 Brand Experience

While the application of Valuation Theory offers a core framework for our thesis, the unique experiential nature of Social Media demands additional concepts to understand how people experience museum content online. To bridge this gap, we incorporated concepts from Brand Experience Theory to analyze how emerging registers of valuing connect with Social Media users' reactions, feelings, thoughts, and senses when evaluating museum content on Social Media.

Brakus et al. (2009) defined Brand Experience as the subjective and inner reactions of consumers, such as feelings, thoughts, and sensations that are brought on by stimuli associated with a brand, and these stimuli can be triggered by a brand's design, identity, packaging, and message.

Consequently, Brand Experience is the emotional, sensory, cognitive, and behavioral responses that arise from brand interactions. Different aspects of a brand trigger each of these responses. However, it is important to note that not all brand experience dimensions align perfectly with consumers' responses, as their relationship can be more complex than a simple one-to-one correspondence (Brakus et al., 2009).

The sensory dimension

According to Gómez-Suárez and Veloso (2020), the sensory dimension involves the visual aspects that are part of the aesthetic sense of the environment. According to Rodrigues et al. (2023), sensory Brand Experience also encompasses other elements, as it is the overall response provided by the five human senses. The sensory element of Brand Experience, according to Shamim and Butt (2013), focuses on consumers' senses of vision, smell, taste, and touch. In this dimension, how many senses are involved is relevant to creating an impactful experience. The more sensory memories activated, the more powerful the association between brands and consumers is (Podoshen, 2005). Two factors can influence consumers' perceptions within the sensory brand dimension: the number of sensory channels (senses) and the number of sensory touchpoints (number of times) (Gao & Lan, 2020).

The congruence of those sensory cues is also relevant within the sensory brand dimension. It is not only about how many senses are involved, but how consistent they are with the consumer's purpose. (Gao & Lan, 2020). People consume products for diverse reasons and sensorial experiences must match those intentions (Evanschitzky et al., 2014). The cultural and social context within the sensory experience is key, as brand stimuli should conform to the trends and fashions of the context to which they are relevant (Gao & Lan, 2020). Another important factor when discussing the sensory brand dimension is uniqueness since what makes a sensory experience successful, memorable, and even endurable is how unique it is (ibid).

The affective dimension

The affective or emotional dimension is connected to the moods and emotions consumers feel (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020; Iglesias et al., 2018). In the study *Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured?* by Brakus et al. (2009), participants who describe their experiences using words like nostalgia, fun, or inspired express strong emotions. Here, the authors also highlight that emotional responses are closely related to how consumers connect with brands on a personal level (ibid). The emotional responses that arise from the brand experience can be both mild or full, and consumers are aware of the intensity of the responses created (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2023). The degree to which a brand can strengthen these emotional ties with consumers serves as a base for creating deeper brand relationships (Aksoy, 2017).

The intellectual dimension

The intellectual or cognitive dimension represents the stimulation of curiosity and analytical and creative thoughts that might be reflected in relation to a brand experience (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). This means that these responses are created in relation to what the consumer perceives as intellectually stimulating content and thought-provoking narratives. The study by Brakus et al. (2009), where participants describe the experience with a brand as ‘intriguing’ or they make allusions to how it ‘helped them use their imagination or think’, highlights that the intellectual brand dimension is a differentiating factor as consumers can distinguish between cognitive engagement with brands and other experiential reactions. This indicates that intense intellectual experiences encourage consumers to invest cognitive resources in processing brand-related information and can potentially lead to more involved and lasting associations with a brand (Brakus et al., 2009).

The behavioral dimension

The behavioral dimension is the physical action derived from the brand stimuli (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). The study by Brakus et al. (2009) highlights that participants, when describing their behavioral brand experiences, use phrases like ‘It is a place I want to go’, and ‘I want to...’ followed by specific actions, emphasizing that brands can influence not only consumers’ feelings but also their actions.

For our research, we do not treat the behavioural dimension separately, as we consider it as a potential physical consequence derived from online judgments.

3.3 Combining Valuation Theory and Brand Experience: the Experience-based Valuation Model

Valuation Theory explains how users define and negotiate value, but lacks tools for the lived, experiential side of Social Media. Meanwhile, Brand Experience captures sensory-affective responses but says little about social negotiation of worth. Therefore, we integrate the two.

While Valuation Theory, particularly the registers of valuing, provides a good foundation to explore how value is created and assessed, this field of study still lacks all of the necessary tools

to describe the experiential aspect of these processes. More specifically, it does not consider how cultural organizations such as museums develop their relationships online with users to create a positive experience. The registers observed and developed by researchers in other contexts, in fact, cannot be directly applied to the valuation processes performed by Social Media users in relation to The British Museum's content.

In order to study how Social Media users articulate, negotiate, and express value in response to The British Museum's content, we decided to include the Brand Experience sensory, affective, and intellectual dimensions to acknowledge the experiential nature of interactions and exchanges in a digital environment. However, we deliberately set aside the *Behavioural dimension* as a standalone register because it is the observable action that follows brand stimuli, and we believe it operates more as an outcome of valuation processes rather than as a criterion for valuation in an online setting.

Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Social Media users assess and interact with museum content, we created the Brand-based Valuation Model by combining the sensory, affective, and intellectual dimensions from Brand Experience Theory with the concept of registers of valuing from Valuation Theory (Figure 3.1). This integrated model allowed us to extensively investigate all the different parts of their online museum experience and understand whether - and how - these encounters shape their perceived value of the content itself.

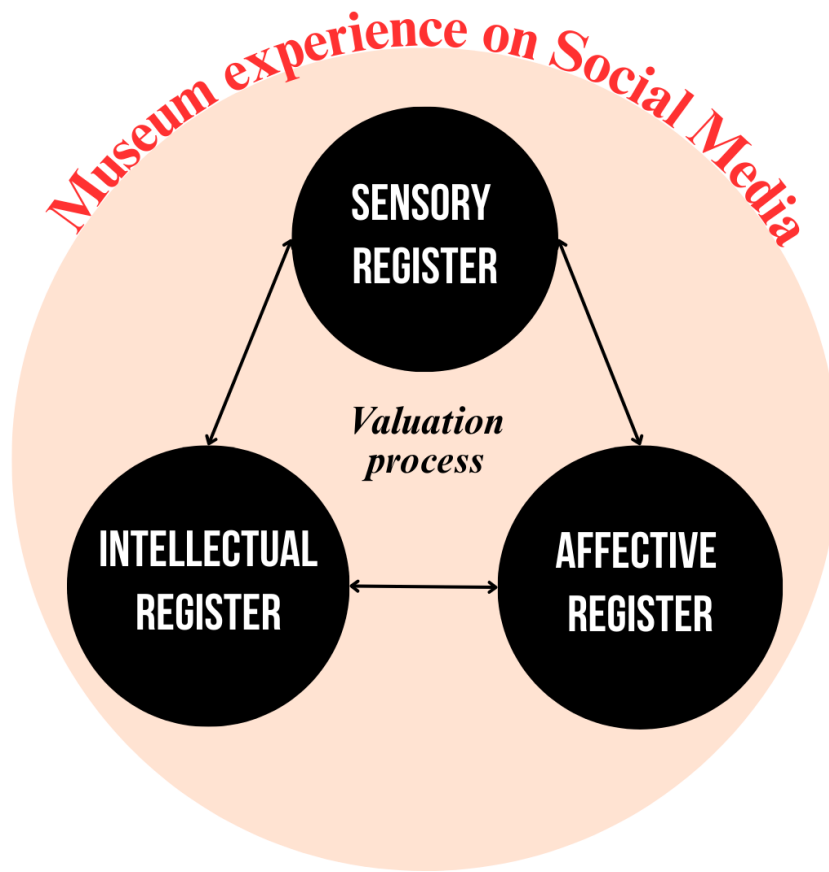


Figure 3.1 - Visual representation of the Experience-based Valuation Model

While we did not assume any register in advance, these dimensions guided our interpretation of the valuation processes observed in the empirical material. By applying this integrated framework, this research seeks to understand Social Media users' online experience with The British Museum's content through an analysis of their interactions with the museum posts and the ways they articulate, negotiate, and express value.

4. Methodology

In this chapter, we present our research design and methods for data collection and analysis. We start by outlining our ontological and epistemological position; next, we define our research design, followed by a presentation of the methods we have chosen for data collection and analysis, reflecting on our abductive approach. Lastly, we address some ethical concerns and reflect upon the limitations and quality of the research.

4.1 Research philosophy

This research adopts a constructivist ontology based on the assumption that reality is actively created rather than fixed (Elder-Vass, 2012) and constantly created and re-created differently through people's everyday social practices (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). This stance aligns with our view on online museum experiences as subjective, contextual, and relational, shaped by how Social Media users interact with museums' digital content. As in the online world, users shape their own realities to mirror their interests, questions, and social engagement (Salmons, 2016), we view valuation as a process that is shaped by each individual differently, based on personal interpretations and expression of their social and cultural background.

This study is also rooted in an interpretivist epistemological standpoint as we seek to understand how Social Media users make sense (Clark et al., 2021) of their relations, interactions, and processes within Social Media and how these practices impact their perceived value of museum digital content. Our epistemological approach prioritizes users' perspectives and focuses on the experiential nature of engagement with museums on Social Media in order to explore how different responses, beliefs, and behaviors lead to diverse, sometimes even conflicting, valuation processes.

4.2 Research design

To investigate how museum Social Media content is perceived and valued, we employed methodological triangulation, highlighting different perspectives on users' interactions with museum Social Media content and their valuation processes (Flick, 2018). Focusing on the British Museum as our empirical case study, we used netnographic observation of the museum's

Social Media posts on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as comments, to gather insights into how users engage with and perceive the museum's digital content. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with Social Media users who, instead, do not actively engage with the museum to further explore different types of experiences and perceptions related to The British Museum's content. By combining two methods and groups of Social Media users, triangulation enabled us to acknowledge that each insight from the data collection constructs reality in its own way (Flick, 2018). Therefore, we understand discrepancies not as inconsistencies to be resolved but as insights into the socially constructed and diverse nature of engagement and the valuation processes shaped by both the methods and the context (ibid).

4.2.1 The British Museum as a case study

The British Museum (BM) is one of the most important museums in Europe for its history, with more than 100 exhibition halls with over eight million cultural artifacts from all over the world (Ma, 2022). It was among the first museums to open to the public and is now one of the most well-known in the world (Ma, 2022). According to Statista (2024), it is now one of the most visited museums in Europe. In 2023, it attracted approximately 5.8 million visitors, making it the third-most-visited museum in Europe (ibid).

With millions of followers across Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and X, the BM is very prolific on these platforms, providing large amounts of rich data for our study: on Instagram and Facebook, the BM uploads content every or every other day; on YouTube, the pace slows down to roughly one longer-form video each month. The museum, instead, has not been active on X since 2018, which is why we decided to exclude it from our data collection.

The BM represents a compelling case for our research because of its use of a professional strategy and a Social Media management system to reach its online audiences in line with its priorities and museum goals (Hootsuite, n.d.). According to a recent case study by Hootsuite, the BM had a 126% increase in engagement on Social Media as a result of a two-year strategic plan to reinforce its brand as a museum “of the world, for the world”, centered around increasing online reach and engagement, strengthening relationships with its customers, and identifying opportunities to increase revenue (Hootsuite, n.d.).

4.3 Research methods

Aligning with our ontological and epistemological choices, this thesis is based on netnographic observation and semi-structured interviews to investigate Social Media users' interactions with museum-related content, their practices of valuation as well as their overall experience online.

4.3.1 Netnographic observation

Social Media exchanges between museums and their audiences generate large amounts of digital data (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022). We chose to leverage this data to explore the interactions, practices, reactions, and value systems that characterize an online museum experience by conducting netnographic observation (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2023). Netnography particularly aligns with the aim of this thesis as it sheds light on “values, value systems, and their exchanges” typical of digital environments (Kozinets, 2020, p. 157).

We first concentrated on the content published by the BM on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, followed by the observation of comments found under these posts to understand Social Media users' experiences, focusing on their opinions, perspectives, and reactions. Given the subject of our thesis, we determined that an unobtrusive approach (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022) was the most effective way to collect meaningful insights on human behaviors and social exchanges online without interfering in ways that could influence or bias the communication.

We conducted netnographic observation over a two-month period, from March to April 2025, to capture key elements of the museum content and become familiar with the BM Social Media content, a fundamental step to understand and contextualize Social Media users' interactions and responses. For each post, we followed an observation protocol (Appendix A) to collect a screenshot, a direct link to the post, and date of both the post and the observation; we also noted its format type (reel, carousel, image, or video), caption, engagement metrics (likes and comments), detailed description of its characteristics, tone and language, keywords, key visuals, call-to-actions, and additional personal reflections. Based on the four core museum values paired with entertainment (Zbuckea, 2015), we also reflected on the purpose of each post: a few posts across the different platforms fitted only one of these five frames, whereas many of them presented a combination of two or more purposes.

Along with observation of the BM content, we also focused on the comments under these posts with the intention of grasping user experience on a deeper level. We devised a protocol also for this part of the netnographic observation (Appendix B), allowing us to stay consistent and not miss key points for our research. In this case, we collected a screenshot of the corresponding post, date of the observation, sentiment of the comment section (positive, negative, or neutral), types of comments (explicit evaluation of the content, comparative comment, aesthetic judgement, comment about the museum's credibility, or cultural and ethical concerns), and keywords or concepts. While considering all the replies to obtain a comprehensive overview of the frequent patterns and considerations in different comment sections, as well as the general sentiment, we focused on comments we believed would be most interesting for our study because they were especially representative of a concept and clashed with or supported the post's message. Therefore, we also saved these comments by copying and pasting them into our observational notes and taking screenshots.

The sample included 81 posts on Instagram and Facebook (where the museum publishes the same content) as well as 4 videos on YouTube published between January 1st, 2025, and March 30th, 2025. Each researcher conducted a total of 40 hours of observation over the same period, though the distribution of hours per day varied individually, as the observations were carried out separately. By selecting the most recent digital content available at the time of our observation, we aimed to provide an updated and relevant portrayal of the BM's current presence across Social Media and its engagement with online audiences; moreover, this choice enable us to discuss the trends and patterns among users' reactions, interactions, and considerations as they unfold in this moment; lastly, it also allowed us to factor in the fast-paced nature of Social Media platforms and the constant shifts in user preferences and habits online.

4.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Since the observation of comments under the museum's posts captured the perspectives of Social Media users who had already made the choice to actively engage with the BM at least by leaving a public comment, we acknowledged the limitations of only relying on this group of users by generating complementary data from a broader target group. This was achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who showed different levels of interest in arts and

culture, but are not currently publicly engaging with the BM on Social Media. This strategy sought to mitigate self-selection bias and include a diverse range of viewpoints and experiences, without overlooking individuals who had less familiarity with the BM online. By including these participants, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the thought processes, reasoning, and valuation practices of those who do not expose their opinions online, but are nonetheless essential to painting a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of valuation and audience engagement.

We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews, 8 via Zoom and 3 in-person, each around an hour per respondent. The interviews were based on a 24-question interview guide (see Appendix C) that allowed us to explore and support participants' personal narratives as they were developing (Galletta, 2013). During the interviews, we also employed a variation of photo elicitation (Harper 1986; Nanne et al., 2023) to gain first-hand insight about how participants would interact with the BM Social Media content and ask impromptu questions about their experiences and actions. Inspired by the Social Media content and context elicitation method by Rivera et al. (2021), we asked interview participants to open and interact with one of The British Museum's Social Media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube). Apart from one participant opting for Facebook, everyone decided to look at Instagram. On two occasions, we also asked interviewees to briefly interact with YouTube content after learning about their interest and frequent consumption of long-format videos. During the first two interviews, participants were asked to interact with a few posts we randomly selected previous to the interview among the ones we included in our netnographic observation, whereas all the other participants were asked to scroll through the museum's feed freely and interact with posts of their choice. This change in dynamics put participants in charge of their online museum experience and, in return, enabled us to witness a more spontaneous Social Media content consumption and understand whether there were posts that resulted particularly interesting for multiple people.

In order to obtain participants for our study, we began with our social circle. Each one of us posted a message on Social Media to encourage people to participate in our study. We used a convenience non-probability sampling approach (Clark et al., 2021) due to resources and time constraints. Most interviews were held in English, while two of them were conducted in Italian since these interviewees felt more comfortable in their native language. After each interview was

finished, the transcription process was conducted by the person who held the interview and coded by both of us.

All participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix D) to inform them about the topic and purpose of the study, ethical use and storage of data, and confidentiality, while also verbally reiterating these details in clear, accessible language before starting the interview. They were made aware of their right to conclude or withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. We also made clear that all empirical material would be permanently deleted after concluding the study to further safeguard their safety.

The following table shows relevant data for the interviewees with their respective pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	Language of interview	Age	Nationality	Profession	Relationship with culture/ museums	Social Media engagement with museums
Olympia	Italian	27	Italian	Museum operator/mediator	Regular visitor and professional engagement	Follower but passive consumer
Ophelia	English	23	Italian	Student	Regular visitor and art enthusiast	Non-follower but interested
Lisa	English	29	Russian	Communication and marketing manager	Occasional visitor	Non-follower but interested
Gustav	English	-	Greek	Student	Regular visitor and academic engagement	Occasional interactor
Frida	Italian	22	Italian	Student	Occasional visitor	Non-follower but interested
Adele	English	24	Italian	Data analyst	Occasional visitor	Occasional interactor
Pablo	English	35	Myanmarese	Student	Rare visitor	Unaware/indifferent
Dora	English	24	Polish	Student	Occasional visitor	Unaware/indifferent
Vincent	English	33	Ecuadorian	Sales manager	Occasional visitor	Passive consumer
Marina	English	35	Ecuadorian	Professor	Regular visitor	Non-follower but interested

Paloma	English	33	Ecuadorian	Sr. Marketing analyst	Regular visitor	Passive consumer
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4.4 Data Analysis

Acknowledging that in qualitative research data collection and analysis often overlap (Galletta, 2013), we conducted data collection and analysis almost simultaneously, spending over two months deeply engaged with the material. During the analysis, we followed a thematic approach by noting thematic patterns emerging from the data (Galletta, 2013). We also followed an open coding strategy (Clark et al., 2021), allowing us to add new codes when the data revealed interesting or compelling information beyond what was previously determined. After analyzing the observational material and interview transcripts separately to identify recurrent themes and patterns, we combined the datasets together to explore similarities and differences in how the BM Social Media content was experienced and assessed. To ensure clarity in our examination, we consistently refer to all individuals as Social Media users in our chapter *Findings and analysis*, but we distinguish between the two target groups by referring to those who left a comment under the museum's posts as commenters, and to those who took part in our semi-structured interviews as interview participants or interviewees.

Based on concepts of Valuation and Brand Experience Theories, we noted patterns, recurring codes, and keywords. We observed how different registers of valuing were applied through the sensory, affective, and intellectual experiences with the BM Social Media content, helping us categorize and code the registers. We used the sensory dimension to determine how users experienced museum-related content in terms of sensory stimuli, aesthetics of the art displayed, aesthetics of the posts, and overall visual appeal. We used the affective dimension to explore the emotional responses to the museum's different narratives. With the intellectual dimension, we examined whether the posts prompted reactions of curiosity, analytical, or creative thinking. This flexible analytical process helped us identify an additional emerging category from the material that we named "Moral register," which was added to our Experience-based Valuation Model as a fourth register of valuing (Figure 4.1). Seeing morality is the distinction between what is right and what is wrong, or what is good and what is bad behaviour (Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023), the

Moral register gathered what Social Media users believed to be right, fair, and appropriate behavior for a museum, how these beliefs related to the content offered by the BM, and what were the effects of this (mis)alignment.

Following the emergence of a new register of valuing, we can describe our research approach as abductive (Clark et al., 2021), moving back and forth between our empirical material and the concepts from Valuation and Brand Experience. This strategy allowed us to step outside rigid categories from our theoretical framework and use data and theory to make reasoned inferences about users' engagement and experience with museum content.

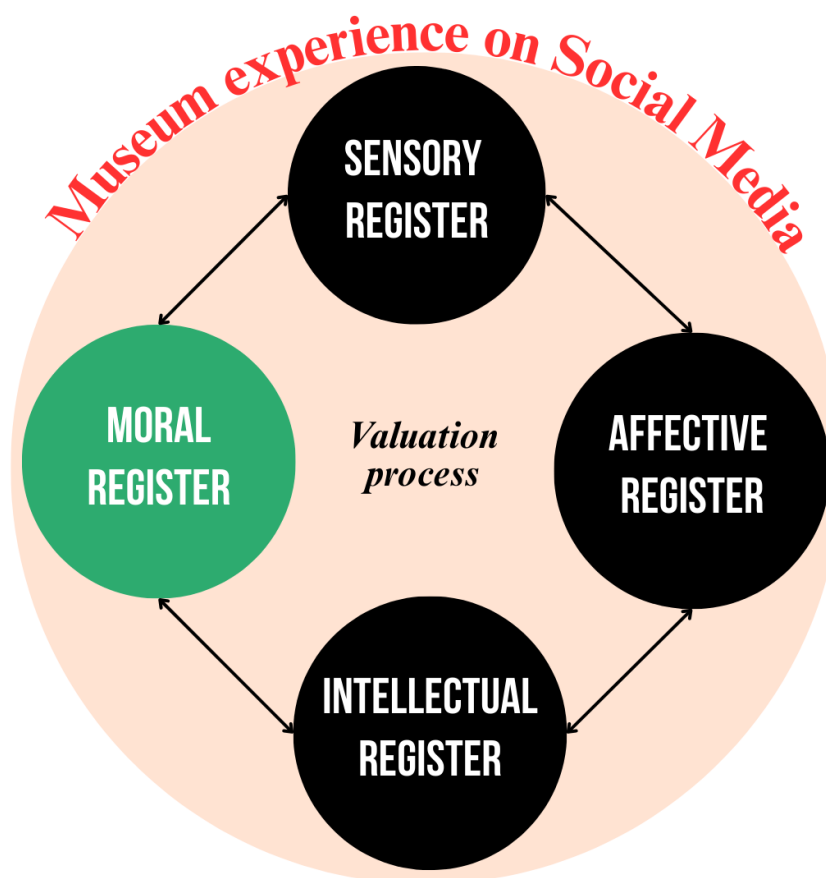


Figure 4.1 - Updated visual representation of the Experience-based Valuation Model with four registers of valuing

4.5 Ethical considerations

During our data collection and analysis, we follow fundamental ethical guidelines regulating the research-participant relationship. However, given the nature of our netnographic observation, we had to address some ethical concerns in the process. First, informed consent represented a

significant challenge as no direct interactions occurred with the observed commenters, which meant we had no opportunity to disclose our role as researchers or ask for their consent. Since observations on Social Media examine large amounts of publicly available digital data, some scholars argue that users, by accepting platform terms and conditions, are already aware that their content is visible and can be analyzed. Nonetheless, Kozinets (2020) emphasizes that many people are unaware that their Social Media interactions may be used for research purposes, a phenomenon he refers to as “the consent gap”. Given the limited timeframe available as well as the public and open nature of the Social Media platforms selected, we opted to conduct unobtrusive digital observation (Kozinets, 2020) without informing individual commenters, while still protecting their right to privacy by avoiding sharing their personal data.

The use of Social Media as both data source and research environment also raises concerns about privacy and confidentiality, especially following the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe (Kozinets, 2020). While GDPR regulations allow personal data usage for research purposes when it benefits society at large (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2022), we still protected the identity of interview participants by assigning them pseudonyms in data analysis and discussion. Complying with these guidelines, all collected data was stored on the university’s encrypted Google Drive, with access limited to the researchers and supervisor. Raw recordings of the interviews were deleted after transcriptions, and the dataset will be deleted after the conclusion of this study.

All these measures were implemented to prevent causing harm to research participants during both digital observation and interviews. Our goal in prioritizing confidentiality, ethical data handling, and participants’ awareness of the research process was to fulfill our moral obligation as researchers in social sciences. As the human element in social research is both fundamental and complex, our intention was to protect participants from any form of personal, professional or psychological harm.

4.6 Reflections on the methodological limitations and quality of our research

After presenting and justifying our methodological choices, we wish to reflect on their implication and limitations in relation to the quality of our data and overall research. To begin

with, this study adopts a qualitative approach, but several researchers have raised concerns about the quality of qualitative research at large, especially considering the contextual nature and subjectiveness in terms of validity and replicability (Flick, 2014). While our interview guide and observation protocols could be replicated precisely, the results of these studies would always be context-dependent. Moreover, this thesis employed methodological triangulation between netnographic observation and interviews, in an attempt to improve the quality of our insights into Social Media experience and valuation processes. However, both samples were convenient and relatively small, further subjecting the research to limitations typical of this approach. Therefore, we used trustworthiness as a criterion to contrast these limitations and maintain transparency by documenting all the steps taken when collecting data and analyzing the content.

Another potential limitation of this thesis rests in our selection of interview participants, which was based on voluntary participation of non-probability sampling. While making an effort to include individuals with different levels of engagement and interaction with the BM online, this sample remains limited. Similarly, we are aware that our analysis of posts and comments across Social Media is inevitably time-bound because platforms' dynamics, exchanges, and trends constantly and rapidly evolve. We do not intend to claim generalizability of our findings to the entire populations of Social Media users as our thesis prioritizes depth and rich contextual understanding of how users' experience and engage museums online, while being aware that the analysis of other groups could lead to alternative results.

Finally, language and translations constituted an additional concern in our study. On one hand, holding many interviews in English, which was not the native language of most participants nor of the researchers, may have introduced a language bias in the process and led to subtle limitations in the depth, clarity, and refinement of their stories and considerations. On the other hand, not all comments analyzed were written in English. Even though all platforms offered a tool for automatic translation, the sole act of translation caused some loss of nuances and details expressed in the original version of the comments.

5. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents our analysis and interpretation of the empirical material based on the theoretical framework combining relevant concepts from Valuation and Brand Experience Theories. We start by exploring how the same content can lead to both an increase or decrease in perceived value; then, we examine individuals' online experiences with the museum through the lens of four registers of valuing (Sensory, Affective, Intellectual, and Moral registers), focusing on a number of categories that emerged from the empirical material (see Figure 5.1). This allowed us to observe their interactions with The British Museum's digital content and understand what informed their valuation processes during their online museum experiences. Throughout the whole chapter, we also associate some patterns within different categories of registers of valuing with practices of valorizing and devalorizing, which we further explore and analyze in the final section of the chapter.

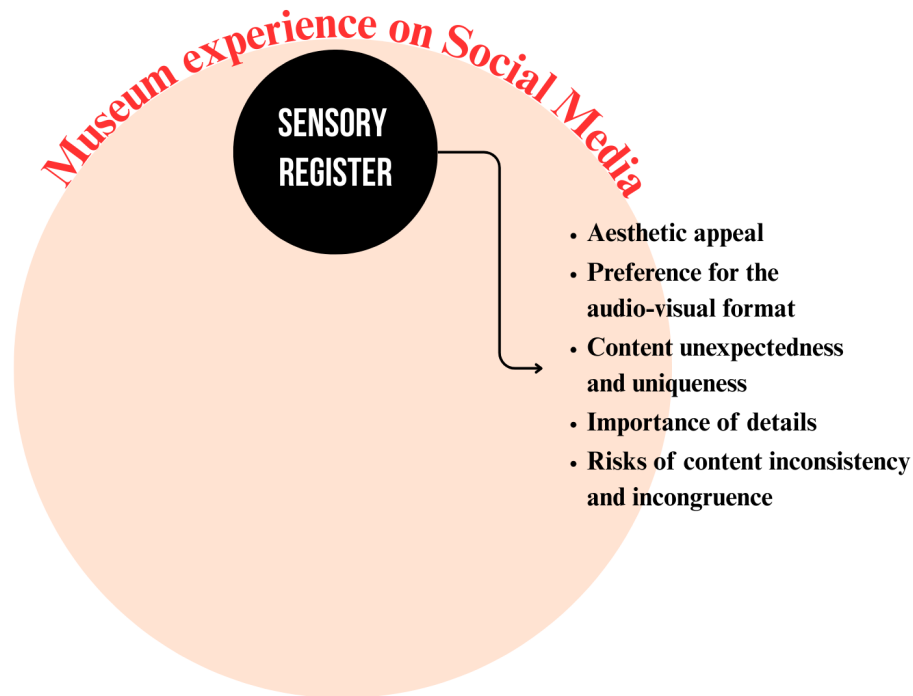
Sensory register	Affective register	Intellectual register	Moral register
Aesthetic appeal	Nostalgia	Knowledge Promise	Controversies about the BM history and acquisition practices
Preference for audio-visual formal	Relatability	Importance of balancing the amount of information	Reception of culturally sensitive practices from the BM
Content unexpectedness & uniqueness	Disappointment	Contextualizing References and use of pop culture	Appropriateness of the BM content
Importance of details			
Risk of content inconsistency and incongruence			

5.1 - Table summarizing the themes in each register of valuing

5.1 Sensory register of valuing for BM Social Media posts

Recent research on Social Media has emphasized the importance of sensory stimuli in supporting user experience and enhancing their engagement with the content (Mardhatilah et al., 2023;

Schlüssel & Frosh, 2023). In line with this statement, many Social Media users frequently engaged in aesthetic and other sensory considerations about the BM content. Consequently, the following section presents five recurring themes belonging to the Sensory register (see Figure 5.2).



5.2 - The five themes of the Sensory register

5.2.1 Aesthetic appeal

Social Media users subjected the BM Social Media content to a process of categorization (Lamont, 2012) by analyzing its basic characteristics and functions in order to decide whether it was valuable to them or not. Aesthetic valuations of the BM content on Social Media were carried out on two different levels simultaneously: individuals responded to the overall aesthetic appearance of the posts but also to the visual qualities of the artworks portrayed. Often, comments under BM posts on Instagram and Facebook praised the beauty and outstanding nature of the paintings, artifacts and archeological finds shown online, repetitively using reaffirming language and aesthetically connotated adjectives such as 'stunning', 'beautiful', 'remarkable', 'original', 'impressive', 'brilliant', and 'adorable'.

Among the interview participants, Ophelia provided a clear explanation of this thought process:

“I like the image at first thought, so maybe I will want to see if there's more images like that. Also the aesthetic will play a role. I will look at it and I do like the content itself, the image. So I will probably continue to scroll to see if there's more like it and then maybe I'll skip through the ones I'd like less and focus on the ones I like more. [...] I mean, maybe a bit trivial but If I like the aesthetic of it, I feel like it will make it engaging. So the way the post is presented, it is made. I find it interesting.”

These words illustrate how aesthetic assessments started the valuation process, indicating that the first filtering between content they found interesting and content they perceived as irrelevant or unengaging was heavily influenced by sensory stimuli. Beyond a first screening to discern what looked interesting enough to engage with from what it did not, sensory stimuli and their derivative aesthetic responses were central to a more in-depth valuation of a single post to understand what value people could gain from it.

5.2.2 Preference for the audio-visual format

Beyond the first impression about the aesthetic appeal of the content, interview participants expressed a preference towards reels and other video-formats rather than static images. The complementarity of audio-visual features prompted interaction with the BM because it was perceived as more attractive and noticeable among the general Social Media offer. Adele, for instance, reiterated the importance of receiving this kind of sensory input: “The videos are what attracts my attention the most because I would like to hear what people have to say.”

Other interviewees provided deeper context to users' preference towards audio-visual formats by further reflecting on the potential reasoning behind this behavior, which brought them to a similar conclusion: Pablo said that “Nowadays people don't like to read; at least for me, I don't like to read a lot, so you know, [I prefer] something audio, something visual,” while Lisa acknowledged “I'm one of the people from the generation who loves videos, I cannot resist it, so [...] I would interact more.”

They identified a general preference for short videos over static content that requires more time to read and consume as a typical trait of today's Social Media consumers, who are generally only willing to spend a short amount of time on a single post and have limited attention span. Huebner

(2023) reveals a similar pattern as participants first assessed content based on its speed and length. Short-form videos collected more positive feedback from young Social Media users because it aligned better with the type of content they usually consume and like on digital platforms (ibid). Although the participants in our research represented a broader age range and did not necessarily belong to the same generation as those in Huebner's research, they nevertheless displayed similar behaviors in their interactions with the BM content. On the contrary, analytical data collected about likes and comments on the BM main Social Media accounts did not consistently support this perception since reels or videos did not systematically receive more likes and comments than single images or carousels, suggesting that engagement levels were ascribable to factors beyond the content format alone.

5.2.3 Content unexpectedness and uniqueness

Another factor influencing the sensory experience with BM content was the presence of unique and unexpected content that deviated from their expectations of typical museum digital content, more specifically those featuring imagery standing out from recognizable pieces from the BM collection.

This is evident in the words of several participants that mentioned a specific post's distinctiveness as a criterion to select what content to interact with and to value. For example, Vincent focused on how different the Instagram post with LEGO figures (Figure 5.3) looked from the rest of the feed: "It's different from all the other pictures, and it's a bit colorful as well, it has a different palette of colors. [...] this one looks more modern and different."



Figure 5.3 - Instagram post *Small steps lead to big adventures...* (British Museum, 2025)

Posts showcasing non museum-related content such as food, books, or contemporary people particularly captured Social Media users' attention. This finds validation in the theoretical perspective that considers uniqueness as a critical factor to make a sensory experience amusing and memorable (Gao & Lan, 2020).

5.2.5 Importance of details

At the same time, users' valuation process of the BM communication on Social Media included judgements on the overall quality of content production as well. The analysis of comments under many of the museum's posts uncovered reactions related to technical specifications and other editing details, especially in relation to reels and videos that rely more heavily on the quality of their production and editing. Commenters online praised the well-executed technical elements such as transitions, good-quality photography and high resolution images (Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4 - Examples of comments about technical quality under the Instagram post *Thinking about what to read next?* 📖 (British Museum, 2025)

On a similar note, even though no one among interviewees mentioned being an expert in media creation such as photography or videography, the importance of such details as image definition and clarity was emphasized by Vincent: “The photos need to be in high definition for sure,” and Marina: “The photo is really clear and you can see all the details about this culture.” This stresses even more the level of attention interviewees paid to the details in the content provided by the BM.

Taking advantage of the digital format of this content, Social Media users showed appreciation for the opportunity to look at the art closely and really focus on its details. During her interview, Marina reflected on this benefit: “when you go to museums, you can see what they have, but you don't see it in detail. [...] I think it gives you a better value of what they have in the British Museum.” While we were unable to see commenters engaging with the posts through actions such as zooming in on specific visual elements, pausing and replaying videos, or taking screenshots, the comments they left under the BM posts can be interpreted as an indication of such activities (Figure 5.5; Figure 5.6). These actions contributed to creating a distinctive virtual experience that differed from a physical visit by enabling users, for instance, to study an artwork up close and notice its details without physical limitations.



Figure 5.5 - Example of comments appreciating an artwork’s detail under the Instagram post *You can stand under my umbrella* 🌂💙 (British Museum, 2025)

11w
love the detail in the kimono 🍡
Reply

Figure 5.6 - Example of comments appreciating an artwork's details under the Instagram post 🌧️ 'Spring breezes and spring rains assail his lovely form / The dew is heavy on a branch or two of fleeting blossom...' 🌸 (British Museum, 2025)

5.2.6 Risks of content inconsistency and incongruence

At the same time, this engagement with audio-visual components could also lead to negative responses when users found them problematic or inconsistent with each other. Previous research by Huebner (2023) notes that participants in her study “consistently wanted all elements to fit together harmoniously” (p. 457), highlighting the importance of internal consistency among the different aspects of a post. Similarly, after the publication of a video portraying a photographer shooting some pictures inside the museum's central hall (Figure 5.7), the BM received on Facebook some negative comments (Figure 5.8) expressing dissent about the choice of music - a trending song from the TV series *Squid Game* - in relation to what it is shown in the video.

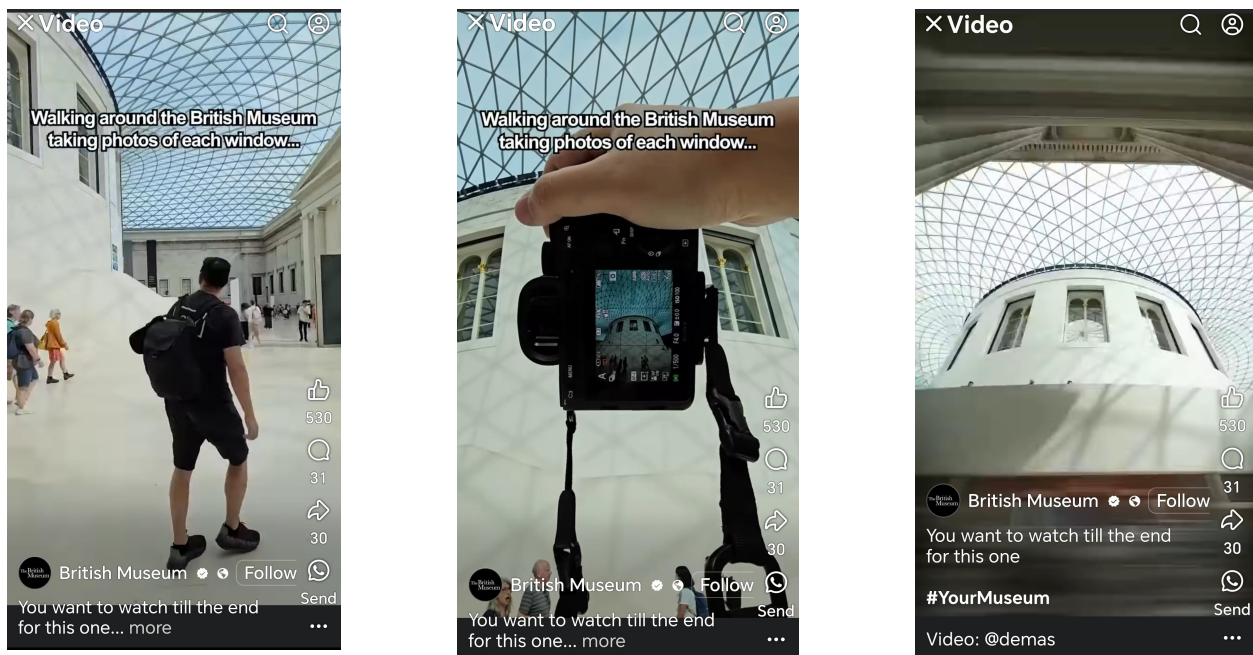


Figure 5.7 - Facebook video *You want to watch till the end for this one* (British Museum, 2025)



Figure 5.8 - Examples of commenters disagreeing with the music choice under the Facebook video *You want to watch till the end for this one*. (British Museums, 2025)

These observations emphasized the importance of the concept of congruence as reported in Brand Experience research by Gao & Lan (2020) and Arnold & Reynolds (2003), suggesting that the different sections of a sensory experience must align both with Social Media users' expectations and social conventions of communicating on these platforms. In this context, some users were not convinced about the congruence in the audio-visual construction of the aforementioned video and questioned the pertinence of this content in the BM feed, eventually resulting in a disappointing interaction and overall virtual museum experience (devalorizing).

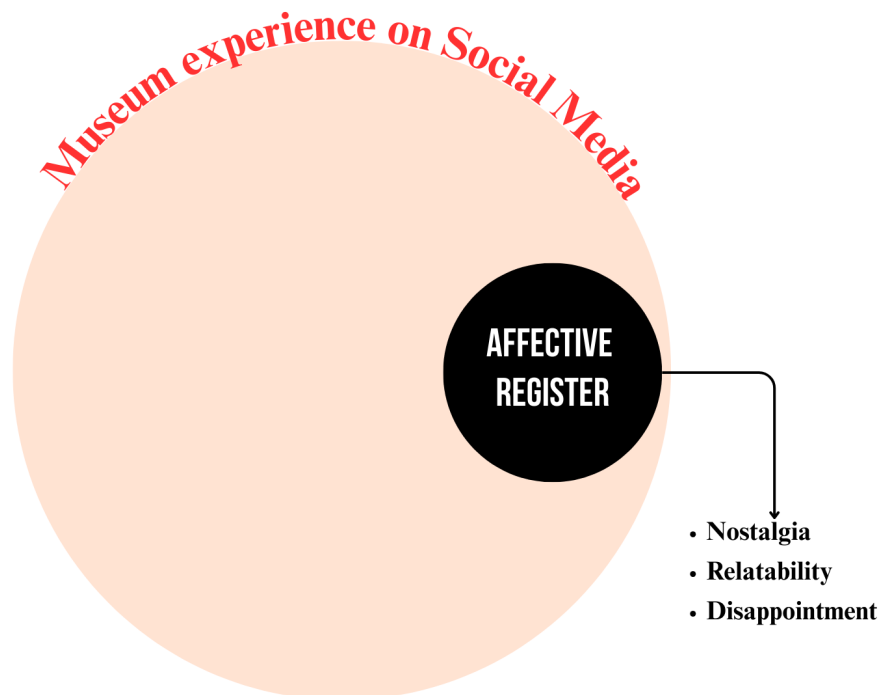
5.2.7 Conclusion

By analyzing Social Media users' responses within this register, it is clear that valuation starts from responses about bold visuals, artifacts with striking aesthetics, and other audio-visual stimuli, determining their intention to engage with the content. While these initial judgements are rather intuitive, users then tend to focus more on the details of a post, giving importance to the format type, its length and its internal coherence. As the first step of valuation, the Sensory register also determines whether users decide to apply different evaluative criteria from the other registers of valuing or not in order to further define and negotiate their perceived value of the content.

5.2 Affective register of valuing for BM Social Media posts

The virtual museum experience today is acknowledged to be in part shaped and enabled by the emotional disposition that are voluntarily or involuntarily involved in the experience itself with the intention to encourage an emotional connection with arts and culture (Jensen, 2013; Vlachou

& Panagopoulos, 2022). Emotional reactions also occurred in relation to the BM Social Media content and were insightful for generating a comprehensive understanding of the level of engagement from Social Media users. Among other fundamental components, their valuation processes were rooted in the emotional significance they could find in the museum's posts, with individuals trying to understand whether the content aligned or misaligned with their expectations and preferences, and whether they felt a connection with the organization on a personal, more intimate level, as suggested by Brakus et al. (2009). However, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty assessing the emotional state and underlying motives of commenters without the opportunity for a more in-depth conversation. While their replies provided an indication of their feelings and disposition towards the content, these were insufficient to fully capture the depth and intensity of their emotional engagement. The following section presents the main emotions identified within the Affective register (see Figure 5.9).



5.9 - The three main emotions of the Affective register

5.3.1 Nostalgia

Commenters were often motivated to interact with the BM content when it featured past museum events, which sparked sentiments of nostalgia and pleasant familiarity. There was especially one

post on Instagram and Facebook that collected numerous comments with an affective connotation and it was about the visit of the late Queen Elizabeth II to the *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition hosted by the BM in 1972 (Figure 5.10).

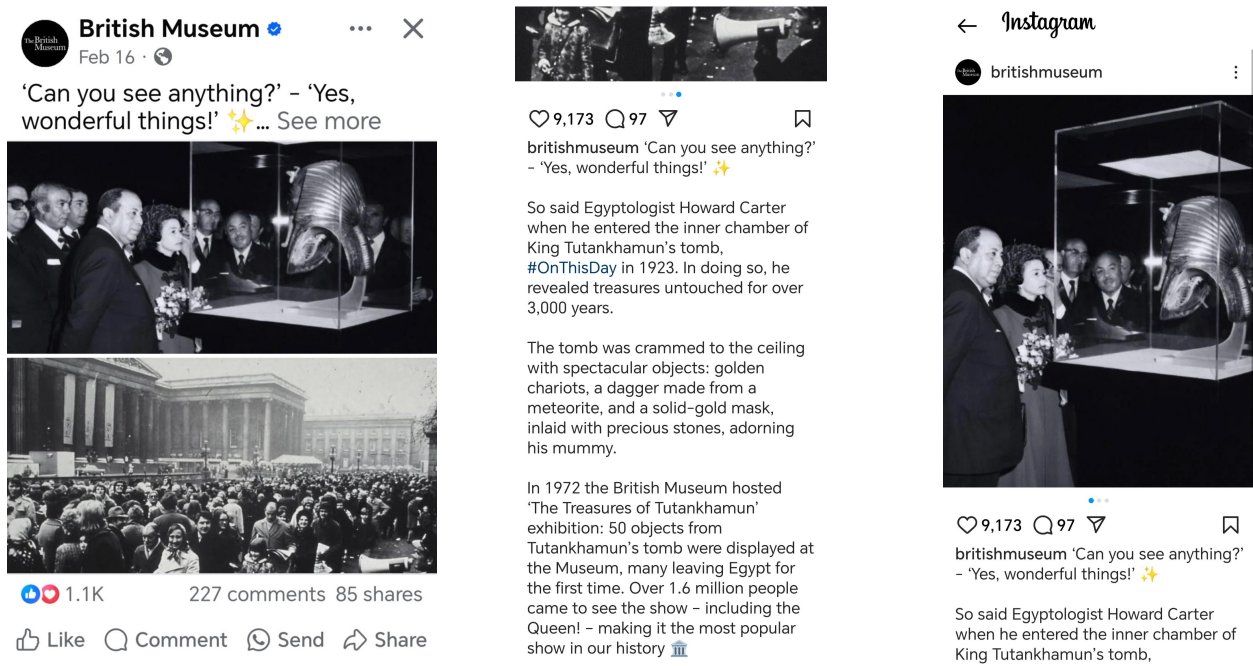


Figure 5.10 - Facebook and Instagram post 'Can you see anything?' - 'Yes, wonderful things!' ✨ (British Museum, 2025)

Here, most comments are dedicated to sharing memories connected to this historical moment, whether they had visited the exhibition themselves or had a story to tell about it. Commenters on Instagram (Figure 5.11) and Facebook (Figure 5.12) considered these memories very precious as they often coincided with sweet family moments or memorable childhood experiences. Interestingly, long hours of waiting in a line seemed to be a shared experience for many, paired with feelings of astonishment, awe, and mesmerism.



Figure 5.11 - Examples of commenters on Instagram sharing their memories relating to *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition in 1972 (British Museums, 2025)

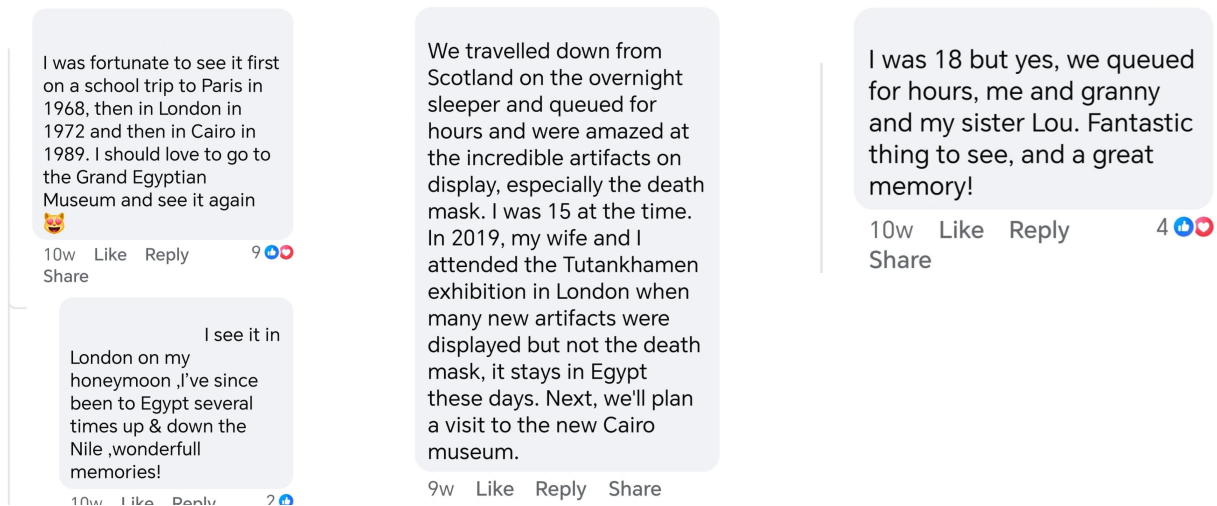


Figure 5.12 Examples of commenters on Facebook sharing their memories relating to *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition in 1972 (British Museums, 2025)

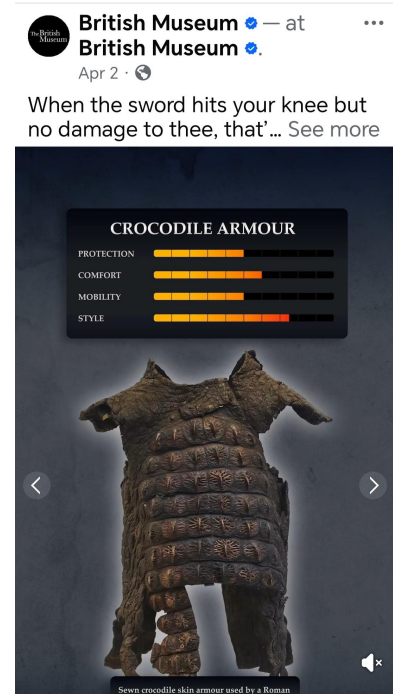
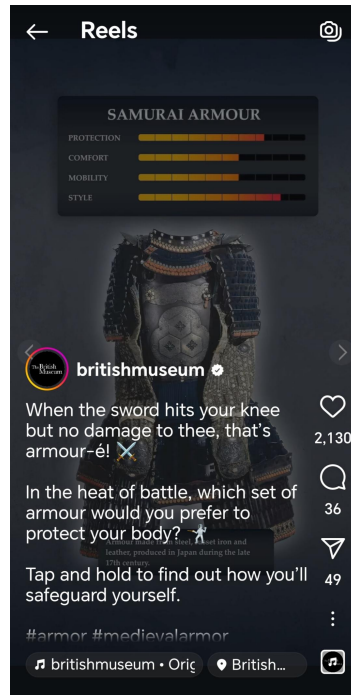
Such a strong emotional response prompted a significant high engagement under this post, which is also reflected by a greater number of comments compared to many others - 97 comments on Instagram and 227 on Facebook. This suggests how this type of Social Media content can trigger emotional connection with the BM, encouraging users to relate to the content through shared personal and social experiences, and eventually bring more interactions with the museum online. By positioning the museum as a (virtual) space for memory exchanges and identity reinforcement within personal narratives, the significance of such posts with a strong experiential dimension more naturally evoke emotional responses and urge users to include affective judgements into their valuation processes.

In contrast, the responses from the interviews revealed a different pattern because none of the participants showed particularly strong emotions in relation to the museum content. Instead, their

reactions were generally mild and characterized by a sense of indifference towards what they had seen during their interactions with the BM on Social Media. As noted by Gómez-Suárez & Veloso (2020) and Rodrigues et al. (2023) experiences can vary significantly in emotional intensity and consumers are aware of the different degrees of intensity their emotions can manifest with. In line with this, interviewees acknowledged the limited emotional impact the BM content had on them, with some explicitly commenting on it when asked about what feelings or emotional associations a post brought up.

5.3.2 Relatability

Closely tied to memories and emotional connections, the ability to identify with and relate to the BM content emerged as a key element for interview participants. The notion of relatability often played a central role in their interpretations of certain content and perceived value because it resonated with their personal interests, passions or past experiences, which resulted in the assignment of a greater value (valorizing). While everyone was instinctively drawn to something that they found especially familiar or appealing, some interviewees articulated this preference more clearly and also reflected on their behavior while enacting the process. For instance, Pablo and Vincent picked a video portraying different historical armors and their technical features, including level of protection, comfort, mobility, and style (Figure 5.13).



5.13 - Facebook and Instagram video *When the sword hits your knee but no damage to thee, that's armour-é!* ✂️ (British Museum, 2025)

Both participants lingered on this post because the use of typical language and visual style of a videogame immediately spoke to their personal involvement with gaming. Their reactions were not merely driven by the visual aesthetics of the reel, but by its evocation of personal memories and hobbies. The value they attributed to this video were rooted in their personal involvement and emotional response, reinforcing the importance of associative memory and relatability in affective valuation and attachment towards the museum.

Pablo, for example, said to be an active and enthusiastic player, and was intrigued by the museum's choice of educating about historical armors in gaming terms, as evident in this extract:

"I think it's interesting for me because I play a lot of games and medieval games are something I enjoy. So 'choose your armor' is something that I can relate to. [...] I would be interested to know what kind of armor represents different things, especially more related to the gameplay. [...] So that's the gamer in me, I can really connect to that and I think that's really interesting."

Both situations give evidence that users' attachment to museum content and its perceived value grow stronger when personal identity, passions, and emotional depth are involved. Affective

valuation often emerges from the alignment of the organization's intention and message with what leaves a mark in people's lives, which Brakus et al. (2009) already noted as a fundamental mechanism for the success of any brand interaction.

5.3.3 Disappointment

Along with positive emotions and expressions of approval, there was also a significant amount of unpleasant feelings that negatively impacted the final output of users' valuation processes. When scrolling the BM accounts, interview participants initially selected certain posts because at first sight there was something resonating with them. For example, the post portraying LEGO figures (Figure 5.3) was extremely appreciated on an aesthetic level and several interviewees clicked on the photo to discover more. However, there was a similar reaction every time the post was opened: it did not live up to their expectations and generated disappointment, which significantly weakened their emotional connection to the post and deteriorated their general opinion of their experience. A few also mentioned this occurrence during their interviews without being asked about it, signifying that the negative experience was significant enough to be worth mentioning it out loud. As appears from Lisa's words, the negative response arose from the museum (mis)using a widely popular and appreciated symbol of popular culture and playfulness to catch users' attention without giving them anything else in the post.

The lack of further contextualization and meaningful information of this post, especially in the caption, induced feelings of frustration in the participants who hoped to connect with the museum content through something appealing on a personal level, instead they were misled. In this extract, Dora clarified the whole process from being intrigued by the visuals of the post until the final sense of disappointment:

“First, I think it was definitely the visual of something that I knew, LEGO. [...] Second, I thought it was leading to something, I was like ‘Oh, it would be bizarre if somebody posted that with no context’, but they did. On one hand, I'm like ‘Wow, good job, you got my interest and I clicked on it’. So, marketing wise, [it is great]. But on the other hand, if there's not an announcement coming - because there are three dots at the end of the sentence - it's a little bit of a missed opportunity.”

While having the potential to be effective for the museum's engagement or virality and receive positive remarks within and outside the same Affective register of valuing, this example shows that good visuals that offer memorable aesthetic stimuli might lead to negative affective evaluations as they are deeply rooted in factors such as expectations management and fulfilment. Posts with an aesthetic appeal and emotional relatability can succeed in catching users' attention and attract interactions; however, if the promises are not honored and the individuals' expectations are not met with adequately elaborate and relevant content, users are likely to emphasize a dissonance between the anticipation and delivery, feeling disappointed due to this perceived inconsistency. Within valuation, these circumstances interfere with the valuation process itself and may eventually spoil the value attributed to this content.

5.3.4 Conclusion

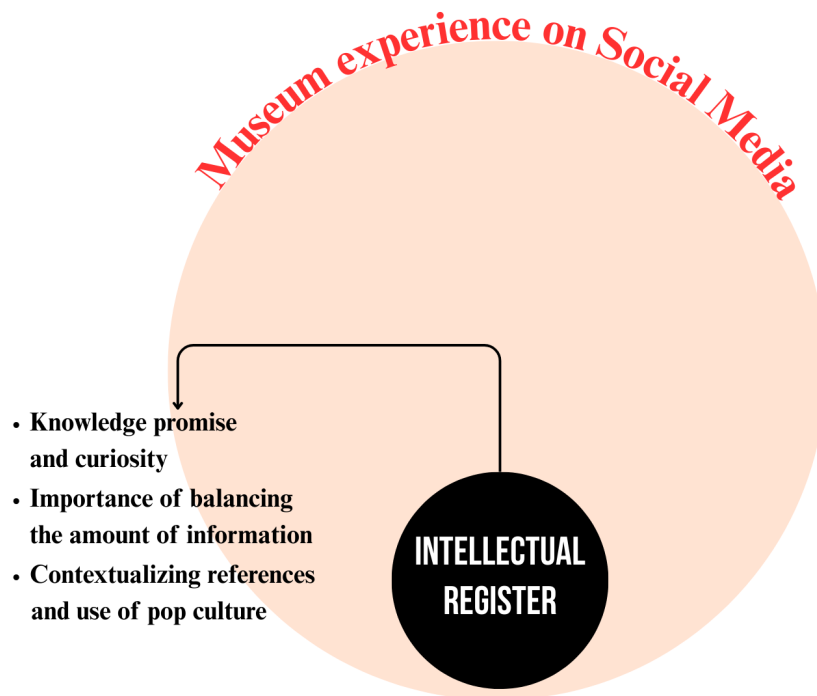
This analysis illustrates how users derive greater enjoyment and meaning from content they can relate to on a personal level and they feel emotionally attached to. When posts from cultural organizations such as the BM evoked familiar feelings and aligned with personal interests and passions, they helped transform something potentially irrelevant like museum Social Media content into something new and more resonant with their experiences and personalities, triggering a growth of the perceived value (valorizing). By bringing their own personal traits into the museum online experience, individuals found ways to match their personal narratives with the BM content. Not only did this create stronger emotional connections with the organization, but also contributed to their sense of relevance and engagement with the museum, making the Social Media material worth engaging with. However, when the characteristics of the content failed to align with users' expectations, feelings of frustration and disappointment emerged and led to the perceived value declining (devalorizing).

5.3 Intellectual register of valuing for BM Social Media posts

The Intellectual register emerged as Social Media users reacted with curiosity to a creative or intellectually challenging post, as they assessed the content in light of how it could spark new ideas or expand their knowledge (Brakus et al., 2009; Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). Unlike the

Affective register, the Intellectual register is anchored in how they make sense of a post's narrative; the more thought-provoking, the better aligned with the Intellectual register.

In the case of the BM, commenters and interview participants revealed three recurring themes within the Intellectual register, which we examine in the following section (see Figure 5.14).



5.14 - The three recurring themes of the Intellectual register

5.4.1 Knowledge promise and curiosity

Among different intellectual responses, posts that were considered intriguing by Social Media users sparked curiosity. This comment (Figure 5.15) remarks how the thought-provoking and engaging nature of the post can attract Social Media user's attention, resulting in willingness to move from passive scrolling to active engagement.

Really interesting exhibition drawing attention to Mr Locke's view of British Imperialism. Sure to provoke thought and hopefully rational debate.

The key is to acknowledge the past but to use it as a way to move forward. Charles II's 1660 Royal Africa Charter can't be undone but the heinous enslavement of others which occurs even today can be opposed. (Eg: ISIS/Daesh enslavement of Yazidi women).

Reply

5.15 - Example of comments mentioning reactions of curiosity under the Instagram post *Hew Locke: what have we here?* (British Museum, 2025)

The posts that consistently received responses belonging to the Intellectual register unpacked the technical details of certain artworks or involved museum curators. This type of response was often seen in longer format videos on YouTube (Figure 5.16, 5.17), where commenters were more engaged with the level of detailed explanation, appreciated the extra knowledge, or actively requested more details to enrich their learning. As a consequence, they were obliged to bring additional cognitive resources into the commenting process, signaling that they already perceived the post as valuable enough to warrant further mental effort.

Outstanding presentation. As someone who will not be able to visit, this was still quite illuminating. Thank you for posting!

 11  Reply

5.16 - Example of commenters appreciating educational-based content under the Youtube video *Curators' Tour of Hew Locke: what have we here?* (British Museum, 2025).

I absolutely love these Curator's videos. The professionals who work closely with these objects give much better descriptions than a narrator reading a script, and their love and enthusiasm for the items in their care shine through.

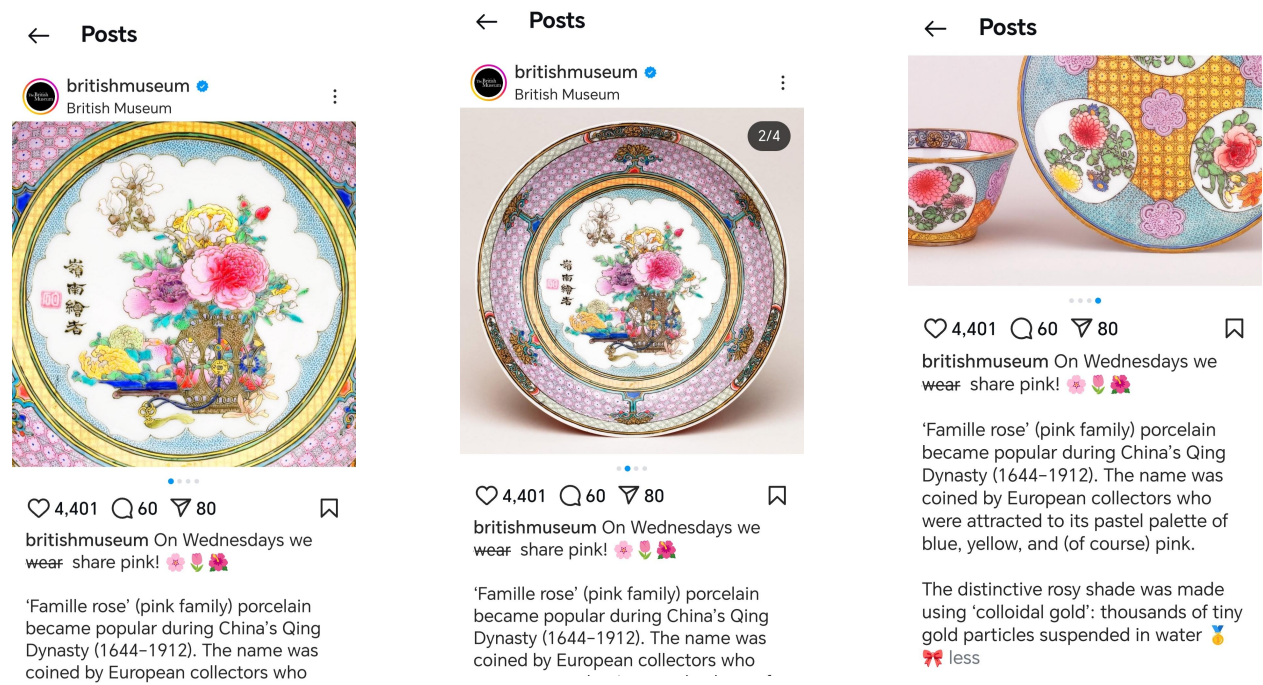
I'm not able to travel to the British Museum, but these videos offer me a chance to have an in-depth ...

 70  Reply

5.17 - Example of commenters appreciating the involvement of museum curators under the Youtube video *Curators' Tour of Silk Roads exhibition at the British Museum* (British Museum, 2025).

On Instagram and Facebook, some posts that at first glance were visually more interesting, oftentimes also resulted in deeper intellectual engagement when focusing on them a little more. In fact, certain posts were the premises of knowledge-sharing experiences where commenters

either expressed the intention to discover more about an artwork or contributed with additional knowledge and facts in the comment section. For instance, the Instagram post *On Wednesdays we ~~wear~~ share pink!* (Figure 5.18) had comments related to the beauty of the object portrayed in the post. Yet, several commenters added to this and discussed its symbolism and the material of its construction, effectively co-creating knowledge and context for the artifacts in the thread (Figure 5.19).



5.18 - Instagram post *On Wednesdays we ~~wear~~ share pink!* (British Museum, 2025).

These were all done during the reign of the Qing Yongzheng emperor, a brief rule marked by colorful floral enamels, of which the above are superb examples

5.19 - Example of commenters adding knowledge and interesting facts under the Instagram post *On Wednesdays we ~~wear~~ share pink!* (British Museum, 2025).

Similarly, interview participants were often drawn by visually captivating content, prompting them to want to learn more on the subject. The reel *When the sword hits your knee but no damage to thee, that's armour-é!* 🗡️ (Figure 5.13) encouraged some interviewees to pause, re-watch, and read the caption. As Gustav stated in his interview, he wanted more information. Even though he commented that the caption of the post was not informative enough, he was still

willing to investigate more on his own. This shows a pattern of how fleeting interest generated by visual cues can become a voluntary pursuit for more knowledge that extends the Intellectual register beyond the BM Social Media accounts.

5.4.2 Importance of balancing the amount of information

While Gustav showed interest in looking for more information, he nevertheless highlighted how the caption did not have a link to follow, making it difficult to have more information directly from the museum as a source. This shortfall created a knowledge-promise gap, as interview participants seemed to expect insightful information while the post withheld the promised details. As a result, they appeared to mentally “mark down” both the content and the museum’s credibility, lowering the overall value they assigned to the experience (devalorizing). This is evidence of a broader issue relating to the lack of opportunities for people to stay on the BM Social Media accounts instead of looking for information elsewhere. In the context of platforms like Instagram, informational value played a crucial role in generating positive attitudes (Nguyen et al., 2025). This means that balancing enough information in the post's caption with the visual content is crucial for museum engagement. On one hand, cognitive studies highlight that the human working memory has a limited capacity, which could be overloaded if presented with too much information (Apuke et al., 2022). This is corroborated by interviewees stating things such as: “it's something that gets my attention because it doesn't have that much text.”

On the other hand, both commenters and interview participants sometimes manifested their discontent about the lack of information the museum provided about certain artworks and artists, aligning with the pattern that intellectual inputs must trigger curiosity and satisfy it to a certain extent to be effective. This also recalls the necessity of reaching a “sweet spot” between educational and entertainment value when it comes to effectively framing intellectual content: educational information available must be enough to give snippets of knowledge that require to challenge the mind a little, but not so much that it changes the expectations of lightweight entertainment of Social Media.

5.4.3 Contextualizing references and use of pop culture

The context of the information on BM Social Media platforms also plays a role in the intellectual valuation of users. For example, narratives about pop culture seem to be a catalyst for intellectual responses from commenters and interviewees. Still, the reactions might vary and be either positive (valorizing) or negative (devalorizing), revolving around their popular culture knowledge and their willingness to mix high culture with popular culture.

In some cases, it is the background knowledge of pop culture references that determines users' response and valuation of a post. A commenter (Figure 5.21), for example, gave more information on the post 🌷 *Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking.* (Figure 5.20), while also showing their understanding of what the caption is referencing.



5.20 - Facebook and Instagram post 🌷 *Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking.* (British Museum, 2025)

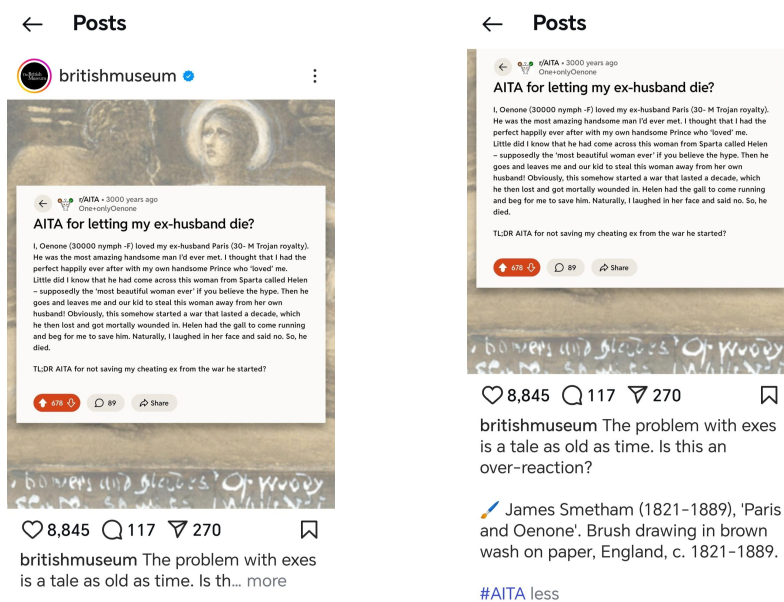
Florals may not be groundbreaking for spring, but Van Huysum's mastery certainly is! His delicate details and vibrant colors never go out of style. 🌸 ✨

3w Like Reply

3 🌟

5.21 - Example of comments engaging with the pop culture reference under the Facebook post 🌸 *Florals? For Spring?*
Groundbreaking. (British Museum, 2025)

For those who understood this type of references, the combination between institutional content and pop culture aroused a significant intellectual engagement. For example, the post referring to a popular Reddit trend *AITA [for letting my husband die?]* (Figure 5.22) gained a lot of traction on both Instagram and Facebook, with only some commenters providing contextual information for the rest of the comment section.



5.22 - Facebook and Instagram post *The problem with exes is a tale as old as time. Is this an over-reaction?* (British Museum, 2025)

This illustrates that, for some people, it is about showing how their unique position allowed them to decode high culture and pop culture elements, therefore being able to enjoy both dimensions. As Bhattacharya (2017) highlights, having this cross-cultural knowledge is a privilege and, as such, it might entice individuals to respond to this content.

Other commenters (Figure 5.23) seemed not to get the references made in the post 🌸 *Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking.* (Figure 5.20) and their responses fell flat in terms of intellectual involvement, as cognitively, they were not mapping the reference within their previous knowledge. Emphasizing how cultural capital comes into play to shape intellectual engagement, those who did not recognize such references struggled to enter the conversation and interact, as certain cultural products are meant to show off individuals' cultural fluency with both the codes of "high culture" and "popular culture" (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Such a lovely floral artwork!

5.23 - Example of comments missing on the pop culture reference under the Instagram post 🌸 *Florals? For Spring? Groundbreaking.* (British Museum, 2025)

5.4.5 Conclusion

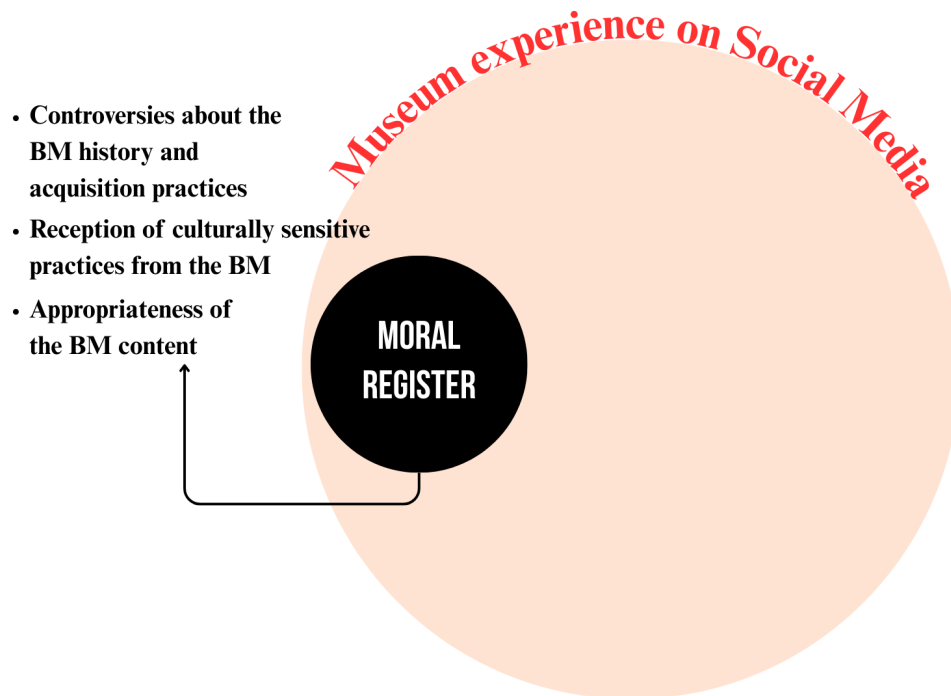
The analysis of the posts, comments, and interviews confirm that the Intellectual register is a pillar for Social Media users' valuation of the BM content as well as their experience of the museum as a whole. When the content uses relevant intellectual hooks, including but not limited to user-friendly knowledge, fun facts that balance the length of a caption with the necessary information, and pop culture references, it fulfills users' expectations and resonates with their need for accessible knowledge (valorizing).

5.4 Moral register of valuing for BM Social Media posts

Throughout the process of data collection, commenters and interview participants revealed a dimension of their valuation process that had to do with the use of moral guidelines to discern valuable content from irrelevant and unappealing material, whose considerations did not belong in any other theoretically informed register of valuing. A register characterized by moral judgement can support a deeper understanding of the role of socio-cultural structures within valuation processes (Lamont, 2012), while also stressing the importance of individual beliefs and reasoning in this context. In alignment with the essential characteristics of morality (Chaddha & Agrawal, 2023), people approached the experience with a clear distinction between what they considered right, fair and responsible and what they found appropriate or inappropriate about the

museum's behavior on these platforms. Decisions and judgements grounded in individuals' moral code at times intersected with the Affective and Intellectual registers: moral reactions, for instance, might be articulated through rational arguments that clearly overlap with intellectual responses, or, especially in the cases of interview participants, be deeply connected to a wide range of emotions. In particular, misalignment to their morality generated frustration and disappointment. However, their moral sense was rooted in different evaluative criteria, and distinguishing the Moral register from others allowed us to acknowledge that many users gave high priority to moral nuances in their process of valuation.

The following section discusses the main issues that triggered these types of moral evaluations (Figure 5.24)



5.24 - The main themes of the Moral register

5.5.1 Controversies about the BM history and acquisition practices

Regardless of their specific theme or purpose, BM posts were always received to some extent by provocative or critical comments questioning the legitimacy of the museum displaying so many artifacts from other countries and cultures, often allegedly acquired under unclear circumstances.

In line with Frost (2019), Social Media users seemed very conscious of the effects of colonialism and the British Empire on facilitating art acquisition by the BM, in spite of the fact that not all pieces of its collection are reported to be obtained in this way. While the tone and intensity of these remarks varied, we very seldom noticed content free from this type of moral feedback and overall encountered hundreds and hundreds of comments consistently mentioning terms such as ‘stolen’, ‘thieves’, ‘looting’, and ‘return [a specific artifact]’. The mode of these comments ranged from general inquiries about the acquisition of a certain artifact portrayed in the post without any particular argument behind it, to very articulated critiques reflecting on the circumstances and consequences of the appropriation of the object in question. This observation aligns with Frost (2019), which identified already between 2016 and 2017 a significant trend of individuals publicly engaging with themes such as colonialism, theft, and potential repatriation of artworks in the direct messages, comments and tweets directed at the BM.

A lot of commenters demonstrated to be very aware and mindful of the problematic practices perpetrated by the BM in the past, to the point that posts about temporary exhibitions and less controversial pieces were often misinterpreted and targeted by this range of replies. This reflects how hostile to the content they were, and how deeply their valuation was negatively affected by their moral inclination, preventing them from consuming unrelated posts unbiased.

The moral underpinning of some observations and opinions was just as significant in many of the interviews conducted. Even though participants showed different levels of awareness on the topic and few of them did not mention it at all, some introduced the topic unprompted and mentioned it multiple times. The problematic past of the museum was a central issue for some interviewees, and their perception of the Social Media content was severely dependent on their moral stances. More specifically, Gustav and Olympia, who both have an academic and professional background in cultural and museum studies, presented the most complex reflections on this controversy and most critical approach to the material presented to them. Similarly to what happened in the comment section, this critical examination eventually took away value and meaning from their assessment of the BM communication (devalorizing). Gustav was very reactive from a moral standpoint to the use of the BM as a case study for our research and was extremely candid about his aversion for this cultural organization, as is evident in these short,

sarcastic remarks: “Yeah a lot of great stuff. A lot of good stuff that is stolen”; “We all know that they have stolen artifacts to see.”

On a similar note, portraying Olympia’s deep awareness of the potential biases deriving from her pre-existent opinion on the museum and its actions, the following extracts show effectively the consequences of her beliefs and morality on her valuation process about the BM:

“I believe this is not related to its content but it depends on the fact that I don’t like the British Museum as an institution. I mean, of course it’s outstanding, but I don’t appreciate its philosophy. There are some political decisions behind the British Museum that turn up my nose.”

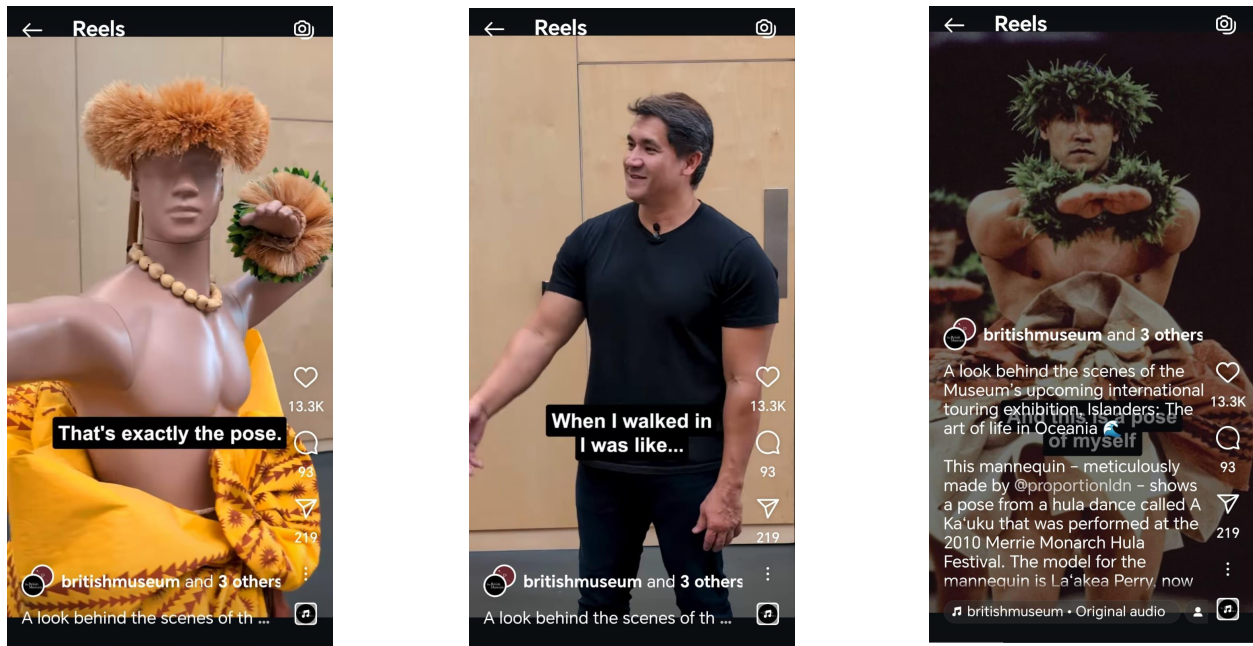
“ [...] the problem is the British Museum itself. I swear that if it was another museum, I would like the picture. Unfortunately, I can’t help but bring some conscience into it, which makes it difficult for me.”

These examples illustrate how interactions with the BM content and its overall valuation can be shaped by strong moral convictions that override other stimuli and criteria. Some users, in this context, were simply aware of the existence of historical disputes that still monopolize current narratives, which is a consideration they gave thought to together with many other observations; instead, people like Gustav and Olympia were more heavily influenced by their strong aversive positioning and placed this concern considerably higher up in their hierarchies within valuation.

5.5.2 Reception of culturally sensitive practices from the BM

On other occasions, moral considerations brought a positive variation in users’ valuation processes (valorizing), especially when the museum’s actions were perceived as mindful and socially responsible. This was particularly evident in the reactions to an Instagram reel promoting the opening of the *Islanders: The art of life in Oceania* exhibition (Figure 5.25), a topic that could have provoked harsh backlash. Instead, most comments under this post praised the museum for its respectful approach in successfully showing the depth and richness of Oceanian culture, for example by using mannequins resembling a typical pose of a hula dancer. In addition, by including experts with direct cultural knowledge and lived experience, who not only approved the exhibition’s content and format but also thoroughly presented it in the video,

the museum received approval for their decision to involve Pacific Islander communities through a co-curatorship process.



5.25 - Instagram reel *A look behind the scenes of the Museum's upcoming international touring exhibition, Islanders: The art of life in Oceania* 🌊 (British Museum, 2025)

Commenters responded positively to this content (Figure 5.26) because the respectful curatorial choices combined with the presence of culturally appropriate and trustworthy experts matched their value system and moral expectations, directly enhancing their trust in the exhibition quality and the perceived legitimacy of the museum's representation of Oceanian culture.



Figure 5.26 - Examples of the positive reception of the Instagram reel *A look behind the scenes of the Museum's upcoming international touring exhibition, Islanders: The art of life in Oceania* 🌊 (British Museum, 2025)

While in the previous cases moral judgement introduced biases into the valuation processes and prevented people from fully appreciating the BM posts due to their perception of the museum's controversial legacy, this example illustrates how a moral alignment between users' beliefs and museum's actions can increase the perceived value of a certain post (valorizing).

5.5.3 Appropriateness of the BM content

Along with considerations related to the socio-political role of the BM in the cultural world, many Social Media users were found to address their moral judgements also towards the appropriateness and compatibility of certain digital content with museums. Given that Social Media was first implemented for people's enjoyment and recreation during leisure time (Wei et al., 2024), people have heterogeneous, and often contrasting, expectations towards what a museum may publish on these platforms, not only based on personal preferences but also on which behaviors they deem morally acceptable for a museum in the digital realm.

The BM frequently alternated content adopting a serious or neutral tone with posts more explicitly focused on providing fun and light entertainment through typical Social Media formats such as memes, jokes and fun wordplays, and use of viral music and trends. For example, the museum repetitively used artifacts and paintings from its collection as a basis to create original memes or to give its own spin to popular memes trending on the Internet at that time. In response, individuals assessed the museum's attempts to combine educational messages with entertaining formats through diverging moral frameworks, reflecting a general disagreement on what is acceptable for a museum and how cultural heritage should be communicated online.

Interview participants expressed nuanced opinions about the museum's contemporary edutainment approach (Komarac et al., 2019) and adopted different perspectives that showed a variety of moral dispositions. For example, Frida, who is a student in media communication, showed no constraints in arguing in favour of this approach as she did not find anything problematic or controversial in building a more interactive relationship with its audience, as this extract explains: "I believe that if the goal is to try and involve as many people as possible, objectively it is a good reason to do so." At the same time, other participants stressed the importance of finding an effective compromise between the educational contribution of a certain post with its funny and engaging side. On this note, Adele expressed her willingness to consume

this type of museum content by stating that “if you can also make it funny, why not? I mean, it does not need to be completely done, but if it somehow manages to also make it engaging....”

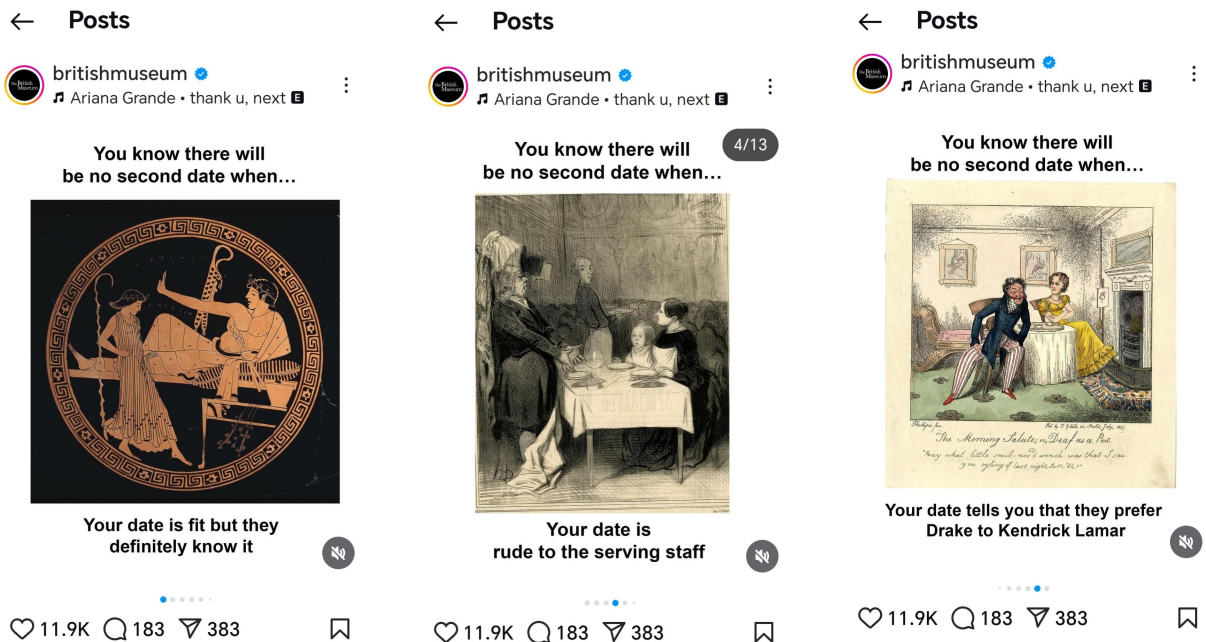
In the cases of other participants, however, posts with a pronounced use of memes, trends, and popular references were received with more emphasis on the moral stance, which took into consideration the seriousness and importance of the museum’s role in society, and struggled to view edutainment methods as a suitable way of disseminating knowledge even on Social Media. For example, Ophelia and Olympia, who both are art enthusiasts and expected to learn something about cultural heritage, shared a similar opinion on this matter:

“ [...] museums are not just there [on Social Media] to be trendy, they're there to show something interesting or improve your knowledge on something. I feel a bit conflicted about it and [...] will feel a bit off topic compared to what I would expect them to do” (Ophelia)

“I am not saying seriousness, but understanding of their role in society. Again, I am not saying that [a museum] must be put on a pedestal, but at least understand its role in society. I am aware that it has to get closer to its public - this is the museums’ essence - I mean peer-to-peer communication is important, but without making a fool of themselves. There absolutely must be a middle ground.” (Olympia)

These moral considerations significantly impacted their online experiences with the museum. Olympia expressed the discomfort of using Social Media-popular formats such as “POV” (Point Of View) trend or memes, which she felt trivialized the cultural position of the museum. This dislike is a perfect example of how engagement was filtered through a moral position that prioritized the cultural authority of the BM as an institution on Social Media.

Many comments under several BM posts echoed these moral considerations, yet the debate was most visible beneath content that combined classic arts with overt humor. For instance, the post *Sometimes it is better to stay single...* (Figure 5.27) triggered a bifurcated thread in the comments.



5.27 - Instagram post *Sometimes it is better to stay single...* (British Museum, 2025)

One cluster of commenters (Figure 5.28) framed the post as ‘undignified’ for a museum (devalorizing), while another cluster (Figure 5.29) countered that with levity, highlighting that this type of content brings art to where people actually are, online.

Social media team need firing. One thing insta doesn't need is more memes. Do better, you're publicly funded

5.28 - Example of outraged comments under the Instagram post *Sometimes it is better to stay single...* (British Museum, 2025)

A very clever way to get people talking about art and the museum. I'm here for it.

5.29 - Example of positive comments under the Instagram post *Sometimes it is better to stay single...* (British Museum, 2025)

In this context, reply chains appeared, with users correcting, justifying, or mocking one another, transforming individual reactions into collective boundary negotiations. These exchanges illustrate Lamont’s (2012) boundary work in which users negotiate what a museum should and

should not do. Each side used a distinct moral concern, one anchored in high-culture and traditional museum values, the other in accessibility and democratic learning. When commenters performed these actions, they implicitly ranked their values into categories. This visible dispute turned the comment section into an interactive moral debate, where the prevailing narrative can affect the BM's legitimacy. These moral compromises are not merely discursive, but inform the subsequent engagement patterns, as tone-shifting content can introduce a moral fault line: where every purely entertainment element can simultaneously invite and repel Social Media users, depending on whether their moral codes prioritize authority or accessibility.

5.5.4 Conclusion

The lack of uniformity in opinions among users interacting with the BM content reflected more than a simple preference based on aesthetics, visual cues or curiosity, but on moral negotiation among legitimacy of acquisition practices, museums as cultural authorities, accessible heritage, and risk of missing complexity and depth in art divulgation. Critiques and disapproving comments, in fact, were not only expressions of a resistance towards the content, but of a deeper internal debate. This exemplifies how people also contribute to shape museums' narratives online, at times adopting a different interpretation from what the organization originally intended to communicate (Jensen, 2013). In this way, judgements belonging to the moral register represent a part of valuation where individuals scrutinize not only what is communicated through a post, but also how it is communicated, putting emphasis on whether it is able to align with their own morality.

5.5 Valorizing and devalorizing as outcomes of valuation processes about the BM content

The analysis of the empirical findings through the lens of four registers of valuing emphasizes the extent to which people draw on a diverse range of observations, emotions, experiences and personal reactions to negotiate value and significance of the BM content on Social Media. Valuation processes are inherently unfixed and context-dependent (Schröder et al., 2021) and, also in this case, reliant on how people engage with the BM Social Media content. To different extent, all four registers were involved in valuation and contributed to shaping different - and

sometimes contrasting - perspectives of the perceived value of certain posts. Because valuation manifests differently depending on individual positions and conditions (Baka, 2015), people's reactions and judgements of the posts were never entirely predictable and gave rise to both valorizing and devalorizing (Hutter, 2021) dynamics, positively or negatively influencing the overall value attributed to the BM posts.

Valorizing practices emerged when individuals found personal significance, enjoyment, or informative value from the BM content, whilst devalorizing practices originated from a sense of skepticism, disapproval, or irrelevance. When the BM posts aligned with users' previous experience, they were much appreciated, described with positive words and often encouraged further engagement and different types of interactions, including liking the post, sharing it in private messages with friends or family members, or even searching for more information on the subject. In a similar way, posts that met individuals' aesthetic or audio-visual anticipations, sense of curiosity, creative thinking, or moral systems were perceived more favorably. These types of emotions, reflections, and behaviors hinted at an increase of the perceived value of the content. On the other hand, when the BM content failed to meet their expectations or conflicted with their perspective on a certain topic, users contested its relevance, expressed their disappointment and frustration, and felt dissuaded from further interaction. These reactions and attitudes, instead, suggested a decreased sense of value.

While it remains valid that the results of valuation processes rely on the criteria employed and how they are applied, our findings suggest that people often applied similar value regimes (Kjellberg et al., 2013), here presented as the four registers of valuing, yet arrived at divergent conclusions, which derived from how they related the content to their own value systems. Valorizing and devalorizing practices emerged as relational since each user was able to shape a unique value-making process through their own combination among their identity, expectations, passions and interests, and socio-political beliefs. At times, valorizing and devalorizing were also influenced by variables such as post format and theme. As a consequence, the same piece of content delivered with the same communicational intent triggered different reactions and prompted different valuation processes among users. This emphasizes how, even with common registers of valuing involved, the same posts can be assessed in completely different ways and the value of the overall BM content can greatly vary. The same elements might be central for

everyone's valuation, but be interpreted and assessed with opposite results. The valuation of museum Social Media content, and its subsequent valorizing and devalorizing practices, can be understood as a highly subjective, individual-dependent process where the interplay of different but complementary criteria creates a great level of complexity in defining what makes museum content overall interesting and engaging.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

In this last chapter, we first present key discussion points based on our findings and analysis: we start by outlining how different registers of valuing coexist, overlap, and contrast; then, we reflect on how the tensions between educational and entertainment content can be examined through the lens of valorizing and devalorizing; afterward, we address how online experiences can be part of a broader museum omnichannel experience. After our discussion, we conclude our thesis by going back to our aim and research questions, presenting some theoretical and managerial implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

6.1.1 Coexistence, overlapping, and tensions among registers of valuing

This research presents four registers of valuing that Social Media users put into practice to produce and qualify their perceived value of the BM content. By collecting a wide variety of comments online and responses from interview participants, the valuation processes of the BM content reflected people employing a combination of several criteria and valuation regimes (Kjellberg et al., 2013) at the same time. This can be noticed both online, where commenters reacted differently and referred to different aspects of the same post, and offline, with interviewees providing elaborate reflections. The heterogeneous reactions and multifaceted assessment shown by this study aligns with previous research within valuation studies claiming that people rely on composite heterarchies (Lamont, 2012) of worth systems to establish the perceived value of an object or an experience instead of fixed hierarchies, where only a single dimension of their experience online is taken into consideration and is meaningful for the outcome of their valuation.

Represented by the concept of registers of valuing, these evaluative heterarchies, for the most part, were applied together in the same situation and peacefully coexisted within single valuation processes. This contributed to the outlining of a detailed, rich assessment of the BM content as criteria belonging to different registers were able to complement and influence each other. Our analysis suggests that, at times, the interplay among registers is so intricate and developed that

differentiating between different types of responses or judgements was rather difficult, and assigning them to one register over the others was a deliberate decision for the sake of giving a clear analysis, which nonetheless limited the complexity of valuation processes. Among different combinations, for example, cues tracing back to the Affective and Moral registers often were found to tightly link together and mutually depend on each other because feelings of approval, gratitude or validation as well as disapproval, resentment or indignation could manifest as strong visceral reactions to the content's alignment or misalignment with each user's moral code.

A dissimilarity emerging during our data collection is that comments online seldom presented considerations relating to different registers of valuing at the same time. As Social Media exchanges are deeply rooted in immediacy and conciseness, only a few written replies under the museum's posts showed a multidimensional assessment of the content where, for example, sensory responses were paired with emotional resonance or curiosity; the variety in experiences and values, instead, resided in the comment section as a whole, as different commenters focused on different aspects of the same post. On the contrary, interviewees mostly provided more complex, multifaceted valuations as the characteristics of this method allowed us to get in depth into participants' thought processes and ask follow-up questions to understand the connection among different registers.

While all four registers of valuing were consistently employed, in some cases, certain criteria were prioritized and, conversely, other variables were pushed down in the hierarchies of the valuation process. As suggested during the analysis, sensory evaluations were always essential for people to form an initial impression of the BM posts before going more in depth. Without convincing aesthetic and graphic qualities, in fact, individuals made conscious decisions not to focus on certain posts any longer. This suggests that negative outcomes of sensory valuations directly led to the conclusion of the overall valuation process for visually uninteresting or underwhelming content. Moreover, a lot of comments online focused on audio-visual characteristics, further emphasizing the significance of sensory-related responses for valuation. In this context, interview participants expressed more critical perspectives about the aesthetic or audio-visual quality of the museum's content, demonstrating high levels of attention to details that often led to disregarding certain posts due to a perceived unsatisfactory appeal. By contrast, posts on different Social Media platforms primarily collected comments addressing the aesthetics

of the artworks in positive terms and, to a lesser extent, showing appreciation for the technical execution of images or videos. Considering the nature of Social Media consumption, the less frequent negative sensory feedback may be attributed to the fact that users who were not immediately caught by the aesthetic appeal or audio-visual qualities of a post were less likely to engage with a comment at all.

Once the content was considered intriguing or engaging on a sensory level, its perceived value was, in most cases, primarily influenced by two key factors: the emotional relatability evoked within the Affective register, and the arousal of intellectual reactions such as curiosity and a desire for knowledge sharing. Both commenters online and interview participants showed great levels of enthusiasm when a post resonated with something they personally cared about or recognized from their own experiences, stressing how personal connections and involvement naturally predisposed them to view this content more favorably.

Despite the analysis of the empirical material establishing that different registers of valuing were usually applied and integrated together without any major complications, some conflictual situations still emerged where registers worked in tension with one another. This made the valuation process more challenging and uncertain. Examples of these inconsistencies came especially from the Sensory register inviting attention, while the Intellectual register was not sufficiently active. As mentioned during the analysis, most times content that was aesthetically convincing and engaging attracted initial interest and led to a positive assessment. However, praise deriving from sensory stimuli was eventually diminished or questioned when a post - and especially its caption - was perceived as lacking contextual information and meaningful knowledge, leading to an unsatisfying experience. Particularly for those who approached museum material with intellectual curiosity and an expectation of learning, this shortfall often resulted in a sense of missed opportunity or even disappointment.

In addition to sporadic tensions between sensory and intellectual valuation criteria, our findings revealed a more persistent struggle among interview participants in reconciling the Moral register with any other kind of assessment. In these situations, strong moral judgements about the museum reduced and even invalidated other considerations, making their reception of the BM content irrelevant and preventing other forms of engagement. The overwhelming effect of the opinions belonging to the Moral register were also evident in the major number of comments

mentioning theft or stolen artifacts, asking for the return of artworks to the original countries, and other similar remarks mostly across Instagram and Facebook, which in many cases monopolized the comment section regardless of the subject of the posts.

6.1.2 Tension between educational value and entertainment as an exemplification of valorizing and devalorizing

Our observations of the BM across digital platforms clarified that its content adopts a mixed approach where, on one hand, it fulfils its cultural and educational mission and, on the other, it attempts at attracting a wider following through the entertaining formats and a lighthearted tone. The educational aspect here is representative of the intonation and communicative style that museums have traditionally adopted for their knowledge dissemination and learning activities. Building on an hedonistic approach where the Social Media experience is meant to provide feelings of joy and playfulness (Nguyen et al., 2025) the concept of entertainment stands for all those stylistic traits usually associated with Social Media communication, from popular trends, to specific jargons, digital-native expressions, and pop culture references that are assumed to be far from the museum world.

While users were generally accepting of this dual purpose, the tension between education and entertainment remained a point of reflection and, in some cases, critique. Whether one of these two sides were more or less appreciated or criticized depended on personal predisposition and how registers of valuing were applied. This resulted in several nuanced levels of appreciation or criticism towards what is communicated and how. Typically, those who experienced the BM Social Media content as a learning opportunity focused more on discussing its educational message. They also stressed the importance of the museum delivering content with high-quality pedagogic value, sometimes even criticizing the use of meme-based humor and similar strategies. In these cases, the perceived value is situated primarily in the institutional role of the BM content with its knowledge dissemination and cultural education through a predominant use of the Intellectual register of valuing. Those who appreciated the museum adopting the typical tone and style of communication on Social Media, instead, primarily paid attention to whether the intended message was delivered in an engaging and memorable way. Focused on the posts' entertainment potential, their assessments were mostly centered on enjoyment, humor,

amusement, emotional resonance, and appreciation for playful, media-native formats, displaying a tendency to prioritize the Sensory and Affective registers. This phenomenon can be reconducted to the idea that an educational post adopting media-native communicational codes can create additional perceived value for some (valorizing), whilst subtracts significance for others (devalorizing).

6.1.3 The omnichannel experience

Our findings suggest that considerations belonging to different registers happened within the same attention span and any gap, such as bland visuals, missing information, or off-key humor, could affect the overall valuation even when other registers performed well. Conversely, cross-register congruence produced an amplification effect that was rewarded with engagement in the form of longer scrolling time, likes, and comments in relation to the BM content. Sometimes, this engagement did not stop there: when a post was well-received in most aspects, the positive valuation nudged Social Media users toward the next practical step. During the data collection, some commenters and interviewees expressed an intention to bring their online experience with the BM into the physical world. This was evident in simple in-app moves, like saving a reel to rewatch later, sharing it with a friend, tapping a link to buy tickets or merchandise, but also in a desire to visit the museum or particular exhibitions, eventually creating a bridge from online judgment to offline engagement. This matches with the idea of the omnichannel approach, where every touchpoint, whether on Social Media or on-site, can be considered part of the same experience with the museum (Yin, 2024; Nöjd et al., 2020).

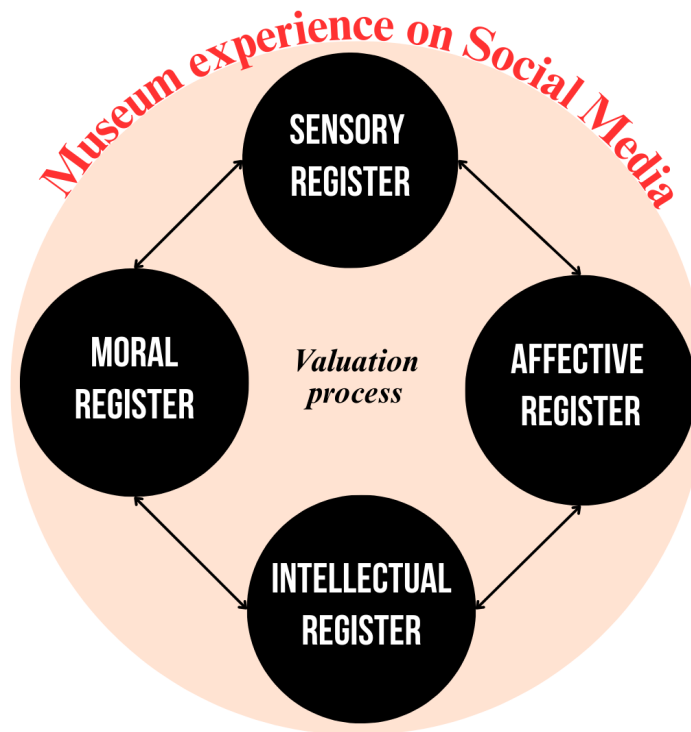
A positive social media experience can lead users into the funnel of omnichannel behavior, where digital interaction is just the first step in the overall museum experience. While our study focuses on users' experiences within a digital environment that might lead to an offline encounter with the museum, it is important to acknowledge that the flow is not one-way, but it can pivot at each touchpoint and create engagement across multiple channels (Nöjd et al., 2020).

6.2 Conclusion

This thesis is intended to understand the valuation processes that Social Media users undergo to define, manage, and express the value of museum Social Media content, and to investigate how

this shapes their online museum experience. This aim was achieved through the analysis of The British Museum's digital material on Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube, examining interactions as well as sensory, cognitive, emotional, and moral responses observed both in online comments and interviews. In order to collect empirical material for this analysis, we conducted netnographic observation, focusing on museum content and its public comments on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as semi-structured interviews.

Our findings suggest that Social Media users weigh each post against four registers of valuing: Sensory, Affective, Intellectual, and Moral (Figure 6.1). Attractive visuals open the door to the development of interest and engagement, acting as gatekeepers of any interactions; emotions hold their attention; concise, surprising facts reward curiosity; and ethical cues frame the overall assessment with a decisive influence. Registers and different elements within the same register can combine and complement each other to provide an extensive, multidimensional valuation of the content, but can also conflict with one another. More specifically, a post feels significantly worth of engagement when registers align; when they clash, instead, engagement stalls. If a post is judged meaningful on all levels, users tend to share it with friends, whereas if the post satisfies only one register it rarely sparks engagement, sometimes even receiving negative comments.



6.1 - Visual representation of the Experience-based Valuation Model with four registers of valuing

In addition to registers of valuing, engagement can also be informed by a constant negotiation between educational messages and entertainment-based formats, aligning with previous research by Balloffet et al. (2014), Dolbeau-Bandin (2016), Huebner (2023), and Komarac et al. (2019). These tensions shape expectations because some Social Media users look for informative posts while others prefer light, dopamine-charged content.

6.2.1 Theoretical implications and contributions

Our findings are in line with studies suggesting that Social Media consumption now significantly shapes the ways individuals engage with museums (Rhee et al., 2023), that these platforms require a shift towards participatory practices in which organizations and audiences equally participate in defining the museums' digital presence (Arnaboldi & Lema, 2022; Kefi et al., 2024; Zhang & Xu, 2024), and that designing a communication strategy that meets users' expectations is key to successful interactions (Bunea et al., 2024; Kidd, 2011). However, what previous studies have overlooked in this context are the synergies among different dimensions of the online museum experience, as many of them work on isolated variables without exploring

how they overlap, reinforce, or oppose each other, and their effects on what Social Media users gain from this content consumption.

As such, by developing an Experience-based Valuation Model (Figure 6.1) that combines complementary concepts from Valuation and Brand Experience Theories, this research contributes to museum studies by offering new insights into valuation processes in digital museum environments through a qualitative approach. The Experience-based Valuation Model allowed us to extensively explore Social Media users' engagement with The British Museum's content in all its aspects and revealed which criteria and value systems are significant during this experience, while also highlighting circumstances where synergies or tensions emerged between them.

Grounded in the four registers of valuing, different evaluative practices contribute to shaping a multidimensional experience, whether positive or negative. This pattern reflects a shift toward omnichannel engagement, where digital touchpoints can create a bridge between awareness and action (Nöjd et al., 2020). However, while Brakus et al. (2009) include the behavioral dimension as part of the Brand Experience, we chose to exclude it from our integrated theoretical framework as our focus was specifically on processes and experiences in the digital environment of Social Media.

By focusing on individual practices and personal experiences, this study brings the Social Media users' perspective to the forefront of research on digital engagement in the museum field. Our findings offer compelling arguments for the importance of this approach: valuation has proven to be a subjective and contextual process that heavily relies on how individuals interpret and combine different registers of valuing while interacting with digital museum content. The four registers of valuing are applied by different individuals in different ways, resulting in diverse - and possibly conflicting - experiences. As a result, practices of valorizing and devalorizing do not only reflect how organizations design their content, but also arise from how Social Media users respond and relate to it through the application of these registers of valuing. This emphasizes the central role of audiences in co-producing engagement and disengagement in digital environments and clarifies the importance of furthering research centered around their perspective.

6.2.2 Managerial implications

The managerial implications of our research are based on covering the online museum experiences, not as something that can only stay online but that leads to an omnichannel loop: a scroll may trigger a visit, and a visit can loop straight back into the feed. Every touchpoint, thus, must echo the same strategy and registers of valuing. Any gaps, for example, a playful reel online followed by an extremely serious tour guide on-site, might risk causing mismatched expectations and breaking the valuation chain.

We urge practitioners within the museum sector to consider the opportunities and implications of valuation processes through these four registers: to trigger the Sensory register, striking visual images or short videos are needed; heritage paired with emotional hooks that relate to personal stories can stimulate affective reactions; content that strikes a good balance between informative value and conciseness is effective to arouse curiosity and other responses connected to the Intellectual register; finally, moral concerns can override other positive considerations, therefore addressing them with transparency is essential to defuse controversies.

6.2.3 Directions for future research

Valuation processes within the digital realm, as much as the overall experience on museums' Social Media accounts, represents a significant direction for future research. Future studies can apply the Experience-based Valuation Model (Figure 6.1) presented in this thesis or develop similar integrated frameworks to explore the experiential dimension of Social Media users' engagement with museums in different contexts, particularly through qualitative approaches that emphasize the human element of these situations.

This research is focused on The British Museum and its Social Media content. However, this is just one among many museums with an online presence. This means that future studies could address in a similar way cultural institutions that differ in reputation, size, geographical location, and communication style. In particular, The British Museum is an well-established organization, supported by consistent public funding and private donations (The Trustees of the British Museum, 2024). This means that it is able to sustain a dedicated team for marketing and communication activities, including Social Media content production. Instead, smaller or less

resourceful museums often face more challenges in this context (Komarac et al., 2019), but still decide to be present on these platforms to reach physically-distant audiences. Thus, exploring whether and how institutional differences impact users' valuation of digital content is an interesting direction for future work.

Beyond the choice of case study, our thesis also put time limitations to the scope of our aim. Future research, instead, can delve into the long-term effects of digital engagement on offline actions and decisions by adopting a longitudinal research design. The characteristics of this approach would allocate enough time and resources to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the direct relationship between digital interactions and physical museum attendance, as suggested by the notion of omnichannel experience.

Lastly, while our study prioritized individuals' experiences, reactions, interactions, and personal processes, we recommend future researchers to more explicitly focus on user demographics - age, educational level, occupation, gender, and more - and how they affect Social Media users' valuation processes as well as their online experiences with museum-related content.

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Appendix A - Observation protocol (BM content)

Screenshot of the post	
Link	Url to the post
Link to comments	Url to a Google document with screenshots of all the comments under the post
Date	
<i>Of the post</i>	When the post was originally published
<i>Of the observation</i>	When the post was observed for our research
Type of post	The format of the post
<i>Reel</i>	A short vertical video
<i>Carousel</i>	Multiple images in a post
<i>Image</i>	Un single images in a post
<i>Video</i>	Long format horizontal video
Caption	The text below the post
Engagement metrics	How users interacted with the post
<i>Likes</i>	How many user clicked on the "like" button
<i>Comments</i>	How many users commented on the post
Detailed description of the post	
<i>Tone and language</i>	Does the post make use of formal/scholar tone and academic language? Does it use a casual tone with simple language, humor, emojis? Or is it a mix of conversational and formal tone with professional but accessible language?
<i>Key words</i>	Important words or phrases that stand out
<i>Key visuals</i>	The main design elements used in the post - visual images, colors
<i>Call-to-actions (engagement; educational; promotional)</i>	Phrases or prompts encouraging users to engage - Engagement: Like, comment, share, etc. Educational: Learn more, read, explore, etc. Promotional: Visit the museum, book tickets, buy merchandise, etc.
Purpose (content type)	What is the main intent of the post?
<i>Social</i>	How the post contributes to making culture accessible to society
<i>Collection</i>	How the post highlights the effort of preserving and managing historical and artistic collections
<i>Educational</i>	How the post encourages knowledge and stimulates critical thinking
<i>Economic</i>	How the post reflects contributions to economic growth (attracting visitors or job creation)
<i>Entertainment</i>	
Personal reflections	Our interpretation of the message in the post

Appendix B - Observation protocol (Comments)

Screenshot of the post	
Link to the corresponding post	Url to the Google Sheet entry with the observation notes about the corresponding post
Date	
Of the observation	When the comments were observed for our research
Sentiment	The emotional tone of comments
Positive	Comments express excitement, appreciation, admiration
Negative	Comments express frustration, disagreement, skepticism
Neutral	There is no prevalent pattern/sentiment
Mixed	
Type(s) of comments	How users engage with the post?
Explicit evaluations	Assessments of the content, expressing approval, disapproval, or general opinions.
Comparative	Comments comparing The British Museum's content to other museums, past posts, or alternative sources.
Aesthetic judgement	Evaluations of the visual, stylistic, or artistic aspects of the post.
Credibility	Comments questioning or affirming the accuracy and reliability of the information presented.
Cultural and ethical concerns	Discussions on museum ethics, cultural representation, and artifact ownership.
Recurring key words or concepts	Frequently mentioned words, phrases, or themes in user comments that reflect common audience perceptions, concerns, or interests.
Brand experience dimensions	
Sensory	Sensory dimension involves the visual aspects that are part of the aesthetic sense of the environment
Affective	Moods and emotions consumers feel; it can be both mild and full, making the consumers aware of its intensity and generating strong feelings
Intellectual	Is the stimulation of curiosity and analytical and creative thoughts
Behavioral	The physical action derived from the brand stimuli

Appendix C - Interview guide

Interview guide - English version

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our research. Before we start the interview, I would like to explain our research to you. We are Master's students in Service Management at Lund University and this study is part of our thesis to complete our degree. We are conducting this study to explore Social Media users' interactions and engagement with museum digital content, aiming to understand how they shape their experience and attribute value to this content.

The interview will last about one hour and we are interested in hearing your reflections and experiences about your Social Media usage and relationship with museum-related content.

The interview will be recorded and, afterwards, transcribed only for academic purposes, but the recordings will be securely stored and only accessed by the research team. Once we conclude our thesis, all recording and transcription will be deleted permanently. All your personal and sensitive information will be kept confidential and we ensure that data will be anonymized in the version of our study we will present.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary: you are free to withdraw at any point without consequences and you can choose not to answer specific questions.

Before we get to the interview, I would like to ask you the following question:

- Do you consent to participate in the study? (I will send you also a consent form to sign)
- Is it ok to record the interview today?
- Do you have any questions or concerns?

Participant background

1. *[present yourself - name, age, nationality, occupation]* Can you tell us something about yourself?
2. What is your relationship with culture and museums?

3. Can you recall the last time you visited a museum, and how was your experience?

Social Media usage

1. How active are you on Social Media in general? Which platforms do you use the most and why?
2. Can you describe your typical experience of scrolling through Social Media? What kind of content tends to catch your attention?
3. How do you usually engage with content (e.g., reading, liking, commenting, sharing, or simply browsing)?
4. Do you follow any museums online? Why or why not?
5. Do you actively engage with museums on Social Media?
6. What do you expect from cultural institutions when they share content online?
7. Do you think museums should be on Social Media? What value does it add (or not add)?
8. When you see museum-related content on Social Media, what makes you stop and pay attention?

The British Museum (BM)

1. Have you come across The British Museum on Social Media before?
2. [If yes] What are your impressions of their content?
3. [If no] Based on what you know about the museum, what kind of content would you expect them to post?
4. Have you ever interacted with their content (liking, commenting, sharing)? What motivates or discourages you from interacting?

Interaction with real posts from BM

[Participant is asked to open one of the BM Social Media accounts and scroll through the feed.]

- We would like for you to show us how you would interact with this post if you were alone scrolling on your phone.

Sensory dimension:

1. Can you describe what you notice first about this post? What draws your eye? (Caption, image, format, etc.)
2. Do you read the full caption?
3. Do you check the comment section? If yes, what do you look for?
4. If you came across this post naturally on your feed, what would you do? Scroll past it? Pause? Engage? [Would like to engage with this post by commenting or sharing or doing something else with it?]
5. Does the visual or stylistic aspect of the post influence whether you engage with it?

Affective dimension:

1. How does this post make you feel? What kind of emotions or associations does this post bring to mind?
2. Is there anything that surprises you or makes you think differently?
3. Can you relate to this content on a personal or cultural level?

Intellectual dimension:

1. What is the message of this post for you? What do you think the museum is trying to communicate?
2. Does it feel relevant or meaningful to you? Why or why not?
3. Does this post spark any thoughts or curiosities for you?
4. What kind of conversations do you think this post could generate?
5. Are there any aspects of this post that you find thought-provoking, controversial, or challenging?
6. Do you think these posts address complex histories or sensitive topics?

Others:

1. What motivates or discourages you to engage with this post?
2. Would you share this post with someone? Why (not)?

Feedback on BM's posts:

1. What do you think about these posts? Why do you (dis)like them?

2. What is your idea of the BM now after looking at these posts?
3. Has this experience on the BM Social Media influenced your attitude towards the museum?
4. Does this content reinforce, change, or challenge your perception of BM?
5. Does the content align with what you expect from BM? Why or why not?

Final questions

6. After engaging with these posts, how would you describe BM's Social Media presence overall?
7. In your opinion, what made the museum's content engaging, meaningful, or high-quality?
8. What kind of posts did you find irrelevant or uninteresting?
9. Can you think of a museum or cultural page that does social media particularly well? What makes their content stand out?

Interview guide - Italian version

Introduzione

Grazie per aver dedicato del tempo a partecipare alla nostra ricerca.

Prima di iniziare l'intervista, vorrei spiegarti meglio il nostro studio. Siamo studenti magistrali in Service Management presso Lund University e questa ricerca fa parte della nostra tesi di laurea. Con questa ricerca vogliamo esplorare le interazioni e l'engagement degli utenti con i contenuti pubblicati dai musei sui Social Media, cercando di capire che valore venga attribuito a questi contenuti e come sia l'esperienza generale.

L'intervista durerà circa un'ora e siamo interessati ad ascoltare le tue riflessioni ed esperienze riguardo all'uso dei social media e al tuo rapporto con i contenuti legati ai musei.

L'intervista verrà registrata e successivamente trascritta esclusivamente per scopi accademici. Le registrazioni saranno archiviate in modo sicuro e accessibili solo al nostro team di ricerca. Una volta conclusa la nostra tesi, tutte le registrazioni e trascrizioni saranno eliminate definitivamente. Tutte le tue informazioni personali e sensibili saranno trattate con la massima riservatezza e garantiamo che i dati saranno anonimizzati nella versione finale del nostro studio.

La tua partecipazione a questo studio è completamente volontaria: sei libero/a di interrompere la tua partecipazione in qualsiasi momento senza conseguenze e puoi scegliere di non rispondere a determinate domande se lo desideri.

Prima di iniziare, vorrei farti alcune domande:

- Acconsenti a partecipare allo studio? (Ti invierò anche un modulo di consenso da firmare)
- Posso registrare l'intervista?
- Hai qualche domanda o dubbio che vorresti chiarire?

Background dell'intervistato

1. *[mi presento - nome, età, nazionalità, professione]* Potresti raccontarmi qualcosa di te?
2. Che ruolo hanno nella tua vita la cultura in generale e i musei?
3. Ti ricordi l'ultima volta che hai visitato un museo, e com'è stata quest'esperienza?

Uso dei Social Media

1. Quanto sei attivo (se sei attivo) sui Social Media? Quali piattaforme usi di più e perché?
2. Come descriveresti una tua tipica esperienza di navigazione sui Social Media? Quali contenuti ti attirano maggiormente?
3. Che tipo di interazione hai con i contenuti social di solito? (es. mettere "mi piace", commentare, condividere, o semplicemente leggere la caption/i commenti)
4. Segui dei musei sui Social Media? Perché sì/no?
5. Che tipo di interazione hai con i contenuti social pubblicati dai musei?
6. Cosa ti aspetti dalla comunicazione social delle organizzazioni culturali?
7. Pensi che i musei dovrebbero essere attivi sui Social Media? Che valore possono fornire agli utenti su queste piattaforme?
8. Quando ti capita di trovare contenuti museali sui Social Media, su cosa ti concentri e cosa cattura la tua attenzione?

The British Museum (BM)

1. Ti è mai capitato di vedere i contenuti del BM sui Social Media?

2. [Se sì] Che impressione hai avuto di questi contenuti?
3. [Se no] In base a quello che sai del BM, che tipo di contenuti ti aspetti sui Social Media del museo?
4. Hai mai interagito con i loro post (mettendo “mi piace”, commentando, condividendo)? Cosa ti spinge o ti scoraggia nell'interagire?

Interazione con alcuni post social del BM

[In questa fase dell'intervista, l'intervistato viene invitato ad aprire l'account del BM su uno dei tre Social Media - Instagram, Facebook, Youtube - e di iniziare a scrollare nel feed]

- Ti chiediamo di mostrarci come interagiresti con questo post se stessi scorrendo i social da solo.

Dimensione sensoriale:

1. Cosa noti per prima in questo post? Cosa attira la tua attenzione? (Caption, immagine, formato, ecc.)
2. Leggi la caption per intero?
3. Ti fermi a leggere la sezione commenti? Se sì, cosa cerchi?
4. Se trovassi questo post nel tuo feed, cosa faresti? Lo ignoreresti? Lo guarderesti/leggeresti e basta? Interagiresti con un “mi piace”, un commento o qualcos'altro?
5. L'aspetto visivo o stilistico del post influisce sulla tua scelta di interagire o meno?

Dimensione affettiva

1. Che emozioni ti suscita questo post? Quali sensazioni o associazioni ti vengono in mente?
2. C'è qualcosa che ti sorprende o che ti fa riflettere in questo post?
3. Senti in qualche modo una vicinanza a questo post a livello personale o culturale?

Dimensione intellettuale

1. Qual è il messaggio di questo post secondo te? Cosa pensi che il museo stia cercando di comunicare?
2. Ti sembra un contenuto rilevante o significativo? Perché sì/no?
3. Questo post ti ha fatto venire in mente nuove idee o curiosità?
4. Che tipo di discussioni/riflessioni pensi che questo post potrebbe generare?
5. Ci sono aspetti di questo post che trovi stimolanti, controversi o difficili da affrontare?
6. Secondo te, come vengono gestiti temi potenzialmente sensibili e complessi nel post?

Altro:

1. Cosa ti motiva o ti scoraggia a interagire con questo post?
2. Condivideresti questo post con qualcuno? Perché sì/no?
3. Quali sono gli elementi che ti aiutano a formare un'opinione su questo post?

Feedback sui Post del BM

1. Cosa ne pensi di questi post? Cosa ti piace o non ti piace?
2. Dopo aver interagito con questi post, che idea ti sei fatto del BM?
3. Pensi che questa esperienza con i contenuti social del BM abbia influenzato la tua percezione del museo?
4. Pensi che questo tipo di contenuti rafforzino, cambino o mettano in discussione la tua percezione del BM?
5. Pensi che questi post corrispondano a ciò che ti aspetti dal BM? Perché sì/no?

Domande Finali

1. Dopo aver interagito con questi post, cosa ne pensi della comunicazione social del BM?
2. Secondo te, cosa ha reso i post coinvolgenti, significativi o di qualità sui Social Media?
3. Ci sono dei contenuti museali che hai trovato irrilevanti o poco interessanti sui Social Media?
4. Ti viene in mente un museo o istituzione culturale che usa i Social Media in modo particolarmente interessante o efficace? Cosa rende i loro contenuti così validi?

Appendix D - Consent form for interview participants

Consent for personal data processing

I consent to my personal data in the form of:

- Email address
- Name (or pseudonym assigned for anonymization)
- Age
- Nationality
- Occupation
- Relationship with museums and cultural institutions
- Social media engagement with museum content
- Audio recording of the interview
- Transcription of the interview
- Any personal reflections or opinions shared during the interview

being processed by Lund University for the following purpose: This data is collected as part of a Master's thesis research project at Lund University. The purpose of the study is to explore users' interactions with museums' Social Media content, aiming to understand how they perceive and engage with this content.

Information on Data Processing

The personal data will be processed in the following way:

- The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.
- The audio recording will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team.
- The data will be anonymized in the final study, ensuring that no identifiable personal information is included in the published research.
- Once the study is completed and submitted, all recordings and raw data will be permanently deleted.

The data will be used for the above purpose and in accordance with this form. The legal basis for the processing of your personal data is that you have given your voluntary consent. We do not share your personal data with third parties.

This consent is valid until the completion of the research project.

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. You can do this by contacting lu1772de-s@student.lu.se or fr1777he-s@student.lu.se. If you choose to withdraw, we will cease processing any further personal data collected based on this consent.

I consent to Lund University processing personal data about me in accordance with the above.

Town/city	Signature
Date	Name in block letters