

MuseumsForward

Curating clicks: how museums leverage social media to inspire and attract gen Z

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Abstract

This study investigates how museums leverage social media to engage Generation Z (Gen Z), a digitally native and culturally influential demographic. The research addresses a pressing challenge in the cultural sector: how to remain relevant and accessible to younger audiences in a rapidly evolving digital environment. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes surveys of museum professionals and content analysis of Instagram posts, the study examines the strategies institutions employ to reach Gen Z and the challenges they face in doing so. Key findings reveal that Gen Z prefers visually engaging, trend-aligned, and interactive content, with short-form videos and posts incorporating humor, slang, and pop culture references driving the highest engagement. Despite these insights, many museums struggle due to limited resources, algorithmic unpredictability, and institutional hesitation to embrace emerging norms fully. Professionals emphasize the importance of dedicated staffing, collaboration with Gen Z creators, and an authentic voice in fostering meaningful connections. This research highlights the urgent need for museums to treat social media not merely as a promotional tool, but as a transformative space for co-creation, dialogue, and sustained relevance. It offers practical implications for developing platform-specific, culturally resonant strategies and outlines opportunities for future inquiry into long-term Gen Z engagement across different types of museums.

Keywords

Gen Z, museums, social media, digital engagement, museum marketing

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Introduction

In 2019, the Museum of English Rural Life tweeted a picture of a massive sheep with the caption: "Look at this absolute unit." The post went viral, gaining international attention. This quirky, low-stakes tweet did what millions in marketing dollars often cannot: it made a rural museum culturally relevant overnight. What if we stopped seeing social media as marketing and started treating it as curating? This thesis, *Curating Clicks*, investigates how museums can shape digital narratives that build community, spark dialogue, and sustain relevance in an age defined by the scroll. This viral moment illustrates a broader shift in how institutions like museums are beginning to use new tools such as social media to connect with audiences meaningfully.

One of the newest tools for marketing in the last fifteen years has been social media. "With the click of a button," businesses and museums can easily communicate with their target audiences. However, this new tool also brings challenges, such as figuring out how museums should use social media and who they are trying to reach. "Gen Z, also known as the iGeneration, is one of the most tech-savvy and digitally connected generations, having grown up as 'digital natives' with little to no memory of a world before smartphones" (Pew Research Center, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center, this generation is redefining consumer behavior profoundly, prioritizing brand transparency, valuing social and environmental responsibility, and expecting personalized, digital-first

experiences. To capture the attention of Gen Z, brands must embrace social media strategies that are interactive, visually engaging, and authentic, resonating with their desire for transparency and real connections.

While the Great Recession of 2008 was a defining moment for Millennials in terms of demographic and economic trends, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 served as a similar milestone for Generation Z. During the pandemic, researchers Elena Bonel, Mauro Capestro, and Eleonora Di Maria explored Gen Z's digital museum experiences in their 2023 article *"How COVID-19 Impacted Cultural Consumption: An Explorative Analysis of Gen Z's Digital Museum Experiences."* Their research offers insights into how Gen Z engaged with cultural content online during and after the pandemic.

The study found that Gen Z audiences increasingly sought digital content connecting them with education, culture, and the arts. The pandemic also ushered in a new era in which influencers and content creators turned their online presence into full-fledged careers. In adapting to this shift, these creators cultivated a generation of users who engage with content and the brands behind it. Living and working in a post-pandemic world means reimagining how social media can be leveraged to drive online and in-person engagement. Today, a well-placed TikTok or influencer collaboration can be more impactful than a traditional newspaper ad. As Gen Z continues to engage deeply with digital content, it becomes increasingly clear that museums must embrace these platforms as essential tools for connection.

However, engaging Gen Z presents unique challenges for museums. This demographic has distinct digital preferences shaped by rapid technological change and continuous online innovation. Without effective engagement strategies, museums risk losing relevance and diminishing their ability to attract and retain younger visitors, potentially impacting their long-term sustainability.

Many museums try connecting with Gen Z through social media, but few employ evidence-based strategies or fully understand the most effective approaches. Many museum professionals report difficulty keeping up with fast-changing trends, particularly when constrained by limited resources and a lack of clarity around Gen Z's expectations.

This study aims to explore how museums use social media to connect with and engage Gen Z audiences meaningfully. Three main questions guide this research:

1. How are museums adapting marketing strategies to engage Gen Z audiences?

2. How are museum professionals leveraging social media to optimize Gen Z engagement, and what challenges do they face?

3. What factors contribute to successful Gen Z engagement in museums, and how do social media strategies vary across institutions?

To explore these questions, this thesis begins with a review of the literature on Gen Z engagement, social media marketing, and museum communication strategies, establishing the broader context for this study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the mixed-methods approach used, including surveys of museum professionals and a content analysis of Instagram posts to assess patterns in engagement and strategy. The findings section synthesizes insights from both data sources, identifying effective practices, recurring challenges, and growth opportunities. The thesis concludes by discussing the broader implications of these findings for the museum field and offering recommendations for how institutions can more effectively engage Gen Z through culturally responsive and platform-specific digital strategies.

Literature Review

The literature consistently highlights the dramatic evolution of social media marketing within museums, particularly in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic eras. Before the pandemic, social media was viewed as an informal space for personal expression and self-promotion. However, the onset of the pandemic shifted this perception, pushing social media into the realm of essential communication and marketing. Research from the American Alliance of Museums (2021) illustrates how social media became vital for businesses and influencers, particularly in reaching niche communities.

After the pandemic, brands, influencers, and cultural institutions, including museums, began to prioritize authenticity in their digital content strategies, responding to a growing demand for genuine, relatable communication. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram became essential tools for engagement, as organizations recognized that connecting with younger, digitally native audiences required more than traditional marketing. Museums started to share more informal, behind-the-scenes, and personality-driven content to build trust and connection. This approach reflects broader trends in influencer culture, where full-time creators focus on transparency and align with audience values. As noted in Forbes, "Influencers earn the trust of their followers and become

successful when they always provide high-quality, authentic, relatable content." (Forbes, 2023).

Lauren Parker (2024), in her M.A. thesis on museum social media strategies, offers valuable insight into how institutions are shifting their digital communication to engage Gen Z better.

"Museums seeking to engage Generation Z must adapt their communication and marketing strategies to align with the preferences and behaviors of this demographic. Effective strategies include leveraging social media to create visually appealing, authentic, and interactive content." (Parker 2024)

This approach has proven crucial in connecting with Gen Z, a generation deeply embedded in the digital world.

Disagreements: Gen Z's Social Media Usage and Perceptions

Despite general agreement about the central role of social media in Gen Z's lives, there is significant variation in how studies portray their engagement with these platforms. Some reports, like *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future* by Kim Parker and Ruth Igrlnik published by the Pew Research Center. Perpetuate stereotypes about Gen Z's supposed immaturity or excessive reliance on social media, while overlooking the complexity of their digital interactions. These portrayals often ignore how Gen Z uses social media for entertainment, education, activism, identity formation, and community building. Their engagement is multifaceted, driven by a desire for connection, self-expression, and access to information. These functions make platforms like TikTok and Instagram powerful tools for meaningful engagement rather than mere distractions. Continuing the narrative that Gen Z is always on their phones, rather than discussing how to optimize this communication, misses an opportunity to understand and connect with this generation more effectively.

In contrast, studies as Lauren Parker's *Reaching New Generations: Exploring Museums' Social Media Strategies for Engaging Younger Audiences in the Post-COVID-19 Era* provide a more nuanced picture, showing that Gen Z engages with platforms like TikTok and Instagram not just for entertainment but as tools for product discovery, social interaction, and activism.

This discrepancy is highlighted by the increasing use of TikTok as a search engine alternative. According to Forbes (2023), "74% of Gen Z now prefers

TikTok over Google for discovering new products and services." (Koetsier, 2024). This shift challenges traditional understandings of how people access information online and underscores the need for brands to tailor their strategies to reflect these changing behaviors.

Overlooked Aspects: The Role of Social Media in Gen Z's Museum Engagement

While much of the research on social media marketing focuses on consumer products and brand engagement, less attention has been given to how museums can leverage these platforms to connect with Gen Z. Gen Z's activism and demand for inclusivity are reshaping how cultural institutions should engage with this demographic. As the American Alliance of Museums (2021) notes, "museums must go beyond surface-level efforts and engage Gen Z through meaningful reform" (Klibanoff, 2021). This means addressing institutional practices, rethinking representation, and being transparent about values and decision-making. It also calls for museums to listen actively to young audiences and involve them in shaping content and programming. For this study, the AAM's emphasis on reform highlights the importance of using social media as a promotional tool and a space for dialogue, accountability, and co-creation with Gen Z audiences. Social media offers a platform for museums to create interactive and authentic content that resonates with Gen Z's values, yet this aspect remains underexplored in the literature.

The literature also highlights a gap in understanding how social media can foster long-term engagement with museum audiences. "While much has been written about its ability to drive immediate engagement, there is less focus on how museums can use these platforms to build lasting relationships with future visitors and donors" (Parker, 2021). Future research should explore how social media can cultivate these relationships, helping museums engage Gen Z as consumers and active participants in shaping museum practices.

As Parker (2024) explains, "Museums are incorporating TikTok and other social media platforms into their digital strategy to effectively reach and connect with younger generations, while still maintaining their educational mission." (Parker 2024). This shift is central to the focus of this study, which critically examines how museums are evolving in response to the needs and preferences of Gen Z. This digital-native generation values interactivity, authenticity, and inclusivity. The core of this research lies in exploring how museums can use social media not just as a promotional

tool, but as a transformative space for fostering engagement, co-creating content, and reshaping educational practices.

Museums that have successfully engaged younger audiences through social media have utilized user-generated content, interactive campaigns, and collaborations with influencers. These strategies are not just about increasing visibility; they are about cultivating trust, building community, and making space for Gen Z voices within institutional narratives. As platforms like TikTok redefine how information is shared and consumed, museums must adapt their communication models to remain culturally relevant and socially responsive. This study highlights how embracing these digital tools is strategic and essential to the future of museum engagement.

The literature provides essential insights into the role of social media in engaging Gen Z. However, there remains significant room for further research into how cultural institutions can harness these platforms to connect with younger audiences in meaningful and lasting ways. As Parker (2024) concludes, "Understanding Generation Z's Museum attendance patterns and preferences is crucial for museums aiming to engage this demographic effectively." (Parker, 2024).

The existing literature clarifies that social media is no longer an optional or peripheral tool for museums; it is a central component of how they communicate, educate, and stay relevant. While scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize the value of digital engagement, particularly with Gen Z, gaps remain in understanding how museums can move beyond visibility to cultivate genuine, lasting relationships through these platforms. The research reveals a growing awareness of Gen Z's expectations for authenticity, interactivity, and inclusivity, yet also underscores the need for more focused inquiry into how these values can reshape museum practices from the inside out. This study builds on that foundation by exploring how museums can use social media to reach Gen Z and collaborate, redefining institutional roles, narratives, and relationships in the digital era.

Methodology

Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to examine social media engagement strategies in museums. This design allowed for a comprehensive view of how museums connected with Gen Z through social media, incorporating statistical data on engagement and in-depth perspectives from museum professionals. The study included surveys with museum social media

professionals, content analysis of museum posts, and observation of audience engagement patterns

Data Collection Methods

Questionnaires

The questionnaire was initially distributed to museums and galleries that demonstrated active engagement with Generation Z through social media. These institutions were identified through a combination of methods, including browsing Instagram feeds and looking for evidence of participation in Gen Z-related trends such as viral challenges, meme formats, and campaigns using popular audio or visual styles. Particular attention was paid to posts that referenced or used hashtags commonly associated with museum culture, including #museummemes, #GenZintern, #Curatorsofinstagram. Institutions were also considered if they had visible engagement with younger audiences in the comments or through collaborations with youth creators and influencers.

The survey was then expanded to include a broader range of institutions, regardless of whether they had clearly participated in such trends. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how museums of various types and sizes approach social media engagement with younger audiences. In total, the survey was sent to over 100 museums and galleries. Responses were received from 38 professionals working in marketing, communications, digital media, and education roles.

To increase the survey's visibility and broaden the respondent pool, the survey was also shared on LinkedIn. It was reshared by several museum professionals, which helped reach individuals beyond the initial contact list. The survey focused primarily on Instagram and TikTok, as these platforms are most commonly used by Gen Z audiences. Questions addressed a range of topics including content types (such as reels, stories, and static posts), posting frequency, preferred platforms, engagement strategies, and success metrics. These responses offered valuable insights into current practices and attitudes regarding how museums leverage social media to build relationships with younger audiences.

Content Analysis

This study analyzed museum social media content to identify common themes, engagement patterns, and strategies that resonated with Generation Z. Although TikTok emerged as the platform with the highest

level of Gen Z engagement, its future was uncertain during the research period due to ongoing discussions in the United States about a potential nationwide ban. These legislative efforts, driven by concerns over data privacy and national security, created instability for institutions investing time and resources into TikTok-based outreach. As a result, this study also examined how museums were responding to the uncertainty and whether they were turning to alternative platforms, such as Instagram Reels, to maintain engagement with younger audiences. Additionally, Jeff Fromm's Forbes article found that Instagram remains the most used platform among this demographic: "Generation Z: Visual storytelling rules their world, with Instagram (65%), YouTube (63%), and TikTok (58%) leading the pack. Nearly half (46%) use these platforms as their go-to search engines" (Fromm, 2025).

By examining real museum social media content, this study provided concrete insights into which post types generated higher engagement. Comparing engagement metrics across institutions helped reveal effective content themes and stylistic elements.

To ensure consistency in measuring engagement, this study focused on comment activity rather than likes or shares. A growing trend among content creators involved disabling visible engagement metrics like likes, making them unreliable indicators of success. Comments, however, required more effort from users, making them a stronger reflection of genuine interest and interaction. The collected engagement data allowed us to assess which trends or content approaches drove the most meaningful audience participation.

While content creators also can disable comments, this feature is typically used in specific contexts, such as when addressing sensitive topics or attempting to prevent backlash. Unlike disabling likes, which can affect broader perceptions of a post's popularity, turning off comments does not create the same ripple effect across audience engagement. As a result, when comments are enabled, they remain a more intentional and reliable indicator of user interaction.

Participants & Sample

Participants were museum professionals responsible for managing social media accounts within their institutions. This included social media managers, digital marketing specialists, and communications staff in museums, specifically those who oversaw or contributed to Gen Z-targeted campaigns.

To gather data, I manually selected 100 Instagram posts from museums using a systematic sampling interval approach. After identifying museum accounts through Instagram's search function, I selected every n th post from each account. This method ensured an unbiased and varied sample, capturing different trends across museums while avoiding overwhelming the data analysis process. I focused on English-speaking or translated museum pages to streamline the process and maintain consistency across the sample.

The sample of 50 museums and cultural institutions reflects the accounts from which content was analyzed using the systematic sampling approach described above. These institutions were not pre-selected but were the result of the sampling process applied across a wide range of museum Instagram accounts.

The full list includes:

1. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis
2. Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture
3. John G. Shedd Aquarium
4. Seattle Aquarium
5. American Kennel Club Museum of the Dog
6. The Bronx Museum of the Arts
7. Museum of the Home
8. Portland Art Museum
9. The Baltimore Museum of Art
10. Museum of Contemporary Art Australia
11. The Cleveland Museum of Art
12. Everson Museum of Art
13. National Justice Museum
14. Maine Maritime Museum
15. Bellevue Arts Museum
16. WNDR Museum
17. American Museum of Natural History
18. Van Gogh Museum
19. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
20. The British Museum

21. Pacific Bonsai Museum
22. Smithsonian Institution
23. Museum of Ice Cream
24. Mütter Museum
25. Whitney Museum of American Art
26. Seattle Art Museum
27. Denver Art Museum
28. Museum of the City of New York
29. Victoria & Albert Museum
30. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met)
31. Museum of Glass
32. Vancouver Maritime Museum
33. Chrysler Museum of Art and Perry Glass Studio
34. Virginia Museum of History & Culture
35. Akron Art Museum
36. Beamish, The Living Museum of the North
37. Museum of Flight
38. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)
39. Museum of Modern Illusions
40. Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI)
41. MoMath: The National Museum of Mathematics
42. Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University
43. Pacific Science Center
44. Woodland Park Zoo
45. Oregon Historical Society
46. National Nordic Museum
47. Denver Museum of Nature & Science
48. Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP)
49. Aquarium of the Pacific
50. Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum

Potential Bias in Sampling

While the sampling method aimed for randomness and variety, there were some potential biases to consider. By focusing solely on English-speaking or translated museum accounts, posts from non-English-speaking museums may have been excluded, potentially skewing the results toward trends primarily in English-speaking regions. Additionally, the use of Instagram's search function might have favored larger, more popular museums due to the platform's algorithmic priorities, leading to an overrepresentation of certain types of institutions. These biases may have impacted the generalizability of the findings, particularly if trends in non-English-speaking or smaller museums differed significantly from those in English-speaking institutions.

Analysis Procedure

The analysis of both the survey data from museum professionals and the content data from Instagram posts was conducted in a systematic, multi-step process to draw meaningful insights about social media engagement strategies aimed at Gen Z.

Survey Data Analysis

The survey responses from museum social media professionals were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative Data

Descriptive statistics were applied to questions related to content types, posting frequency, and preferred platforms. This allowed for the identification of common practices across institutions.

Qualitative Data

Open-ended responses were analyzed through thematic coding. This process involved identifying recurring themes or strategies mentioned by museum professionals, such as challenges in engaging Gen Z, perceived best practices, and success metrics. Themes were categorized and compared to draw conclusions about professional perspectives on social media engagement with Gen Z.

Content Analysis Approaches

The Instagram posts selected through the systematic sampling interval approach underwent both manual and automated analysis.

Identification of Content Themes: Posts were categorized based on content type (educational, promotional, interactive, behind-the-scenes, etc.). Each post was analyzed for stylistic elements, such as tone, visuals, and language, as well as its alignment with trends popular among Gen Z, such as memes, influencer collaborations, or interactive features.

Engagement Metrics Analysis: Engagement was primarily measured through comment activity, as it reflected a deeper level of interaction compared to likes or shares. Posts with higher comment engagement were compared to those with lower engagement to identify potential content strategies that resonated with Gen Z. Statistical tests (correlation analysis) were used to explore the relationship between content type and engagement level.

Trend Analysis: Engagement patterns, such as peak posting times or the effectiveness of specific content themes, were analyzed to identify successful strategies. Trends in post engagement were compared across different types of museums to observe variations in how engagement strategies might differ by institution size or mission.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative approach was used to triangulate findings from the survey and content analysis. The insights gathered from the survey on the types of content museums believed resonated with Gen Z were compared to the actual engagement metrics derived from Instagram posts. This comparison helped assess whether professional perceptions aligned with observed engagement patterns. Further, the content strategies employed by the most successful museums (as indicated by comment engagement) were contrasted with those used by less successful museums, providing a deeper understanding of what worked best in engaging Gen Z audiences.

This section presents the key findings from both the content analysis and professional survey, revealing how museums are navigating the evolving landscape of social media to engage Gen Z audiences better. The results are organized into five thematic areas: content themes and strategy, visual and trend-based engagement, platform-specific approaches, professional insights into challenges and strategies, and broader institutional goals. These findings highlight the successes, tensions, and

complexities of creating digital experiences that resonate with Gen Z, underscoring the importance of cultural fluency, authenticity, and institutional investment in shaping meaningful engagement.

Results & Discussion

How are museums adapting their marketing strategies to engage Gen Z audiences?

Museums Combine Institutional Themes with Gen Z Cultural Trends

The analysis began by identifying common content themes and strategic patterns that illustrated how museums have attempted to align their messaging with Gen Z audiences' values and cultural references. Recurring themes across the dataset included science, Taylor Swift, dinosaurs, community, and art, revealing a blend of institutional priorities and contemporary pop culture. These thematic choices suggest an effort to balance the promotion of traditional museum content with more culturally resonant and timely material. While maintaining institutional credibility remains essential, integrating popular culture and internet trends has emerged as a potential strategy for enhancing digital engagement with younger audiences.

This finding is significant because it highlights a broader shift in how cultural institutions conceptualize their public roles in a digital, participatory media environment. As Gen Z increasingly interacts with the world through social media, institutions that successfully tap into shared cultural references are better positioned to capture attention and foster relevance. Moreover, the ability to engage Gen Z audiences meaningfully is not simply a marketing concern; it is directly tied to museums' long-term sustainability, community impact, and educational mission. By experimenting with more accessible and culturally responsive communication strategies, museums can broaden their reach and reframe perceptions of who museums are for and what they represent in contemporary society.

One particularly notable approach within this broader strategy is incorporating Gen Z-specific language and humor into digital content. As museums experiment with different methods to resonate with younger audiences, trends originating in popular culture, such as internet slang, memes, and casual, self-aware tones, have emerged as powerful tools for connection. However, while these trends offer promising avenues for engagement, they also introduce complex questions about representation, professionalism, and the perceptions of Gen Z staff within institutions. Understanding these approaches' opportunities and potential

pitfalls is crucial for museums seeking to build relationships authentically and respectfully with younger generations.

The connection to the Gen Z population through Gen Z has made waves online by creating a trend of using Gen Z slang within a script for a video or Reel. While echoed by other fields, this trend struck a chord in the museum world by connecting digital slang and energy to museums. As discussed in Verity Babbs's article, this phenomenon can be used as a bridging tool for museums. Babbs (2024) notes,

“The popularity of these videos in the art world comes in part due to these institutions’ tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment that there is a generational divide when it comes to access to and enjoyment of cultural spaces.
“(Babbs 2024)

While this trend is fun and inclusive, some language, such as "letting our Gen Z intern" create content, can unintentionally create an atmosphere where Gen Z staff and team members feel pigeonholed into intern or supporting roles. This framing reinforces the idea that Gen Z is immature or childish, rather than recognizing their professionalism and expertise. Although the trend is intended to be lighthearted and welcoming, it risks minimizing the contributions of younger staff and perpetuating the perception that Gen Z lacks seriousness or authority.

Overall, the content analyzed tended to lean toward bright, colorful visuals, pop culture references, event promotion, and educational material. The most resonant posts with Gen Z were those that were visually engaging, tapped into current trends, and reflected an effort to meet the generation where they are. While this is still an emerging space, institutions are beginning to lay meaningful foundations for connecting with Gen Z in the digital landscape.

Short-Form, Visually Dynamic Content Yields Higher Engagement

Analysis of content performance revealed that content type plays a significant role in engagement rates. Reels and visually dynamic posts consistently generate more comments and interactions than static photos. Video content, especially short-form formats like Reels, aligns closely with audience preferences and platform algorithms, making it a key strategy for boosting engagement among Gen Z users. These findings highlight the increasing importance of creating short, visually stimulating posts that can quickly capture audience attention in a crowded digital environment.

Data collected through the questionnaire further supports this trend. When asked about preferred content formats, 53.6% of respondents identified visual content, such as Reels and videos, as the most effective for engaging Gen Z audiences. Trend-based content, including memes and challenges, followed at 21.4%, indicating a strong preference for culturally relevant and interactive posts. Educational content ranked lower at 10.7%, suggesting that while learning-focused material does have an audience, it may be more successful when integrated into visually engaging or trend-driven formats. An additional 14.3% of respondents selected "Other," with one respondent noting that the most successful approach combines visual storytelling with trend-based elements to reach Gen Z effectively.

Furthermore, posts incorporating Gen Z slang, humor, and pop culture references, such as Taylor Swift or the "Brat Summer" trend, consistently generate higher engagement. A strong alignment with viral trends and cultural moments often correlates with increased interaction among younger audiences. Museums that successfully integrate popular culture into their digital strategies are better positioned to capture attention, foster participation, and remain relevant to Gen Z users.

Interactive and Community-Based Posts Strengthen Connection

In addition to aesthetics and trend alignment, engagement was further influenced by the degree of interactivity and community orientation present in the content. According to the professional questionnaire, interactive content is the most widely used strategy for increasing engagement with Gen Z, with 61.5% of respondents selecting tools such as polls and quizzes. This data demonstrates the importance of two-way communication and participatory experiences for younger audiences.

To strengthen their connections with Gen Z, museums should move beyond static posts and include more dynamic and relatable content. This could entail incorporating memes, behind-the-scenes videos, and POV-style storytelling. Short-form video platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels provide excellent opportunities for experimenting with trends, humor, and interactive challenges, making exhibits feel timely and engaging. As one professional pointed out,

“Museums could better connect with Gen Z by creating more interactive and relatable content, such as memes, behind-the-scenes videos, and POV-style storytelling. Leveraging short-form video platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels with trends, humor, and engaging challenges would make exhibits feel more relevant.

Collaborating with influencers and encouraging user-generated content could also make museums feel like an experience rather than just a place to visit.”

This perspective reflects a broader shift in how Gen Z audiences perceive museums. Rather than seeing museums as static institutions, Gen Z increasingly expects them to function as immersive, participatory spaces online and in person. This expectation is supported by findings from both the survey and the professional questionnaire, where interactive strategies such as polls, quizzes, and user-generated content were identified as highly effective for engaging younger audiences.

Museums that host interactive challenges on Instagram or TikTok, invite audience submissions for exhibitions, or create behind-the-scenes content that encourages comments and shares, respond directly to Gen Z's desire for two-way communication and involvement. The Black Country Living Museum in the United Kingdom has exemplified this approach, using TikTok to post humorous, character-driven videos that bring historical life to modern audiences and have garnered millions of views and widespread engagement. By embracing Gen Z's content preferences and communication styles, museums can foster more meaningful, lasting connections and position themselves as dynamic cultural spaces co-created with their communities.

Museums Must Tailor Their Content to Fit Each Platform's Strengths

Content effectiveness was closely tied to the platform that museums prioritized, with each platform demanding different strategies based on audience expectations and engagement styles. Analysis of the survey responses revealed that Instagram remains the dominant platform for museums, with 96.4% of respondents actively using it to share content. Facebook/Meta follows at 89.3%, while LinkedIn holds third place with 64.3% of institutions posting regularly. TikTok, known for its strong Gen Z user base and trend-driven culture, is utilized by only 50% of surveyed museums, suggesting untapped potential for reaching younger audiences. X (formerly Twitter) ranks lowest, with just 21.4% of respondents maintaining a presence there.

Other platforms mentioned by respondents included Threads, YouTube, Bluesky, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Mastodon, though these were typically used in more experimental or supplementary ways.

The platform a museum chooses is not a neutral decision--it shapes the tone, style, and type of content that will perform best. For example, Instagram and TikTok reward visually engaging, short-form video content

that aligns with trending audio, memes, and challenges, whereas LinkedIn favors more professional, institutional storytelling. Museums that adapt their communication style to the strengths of each platform are better positioned to maximize engagement, reach diverse audiences, and build stronger digital communities. Conversely, museums that repurpose duplicate content across all platforms without considering these differences may struggle to achieve meaningful interaction. To optimize on all platforms a content calendar or use of scheduling tools could make efforts more effective.

Reframing the Museum Experience Makes It More Accessible to Gen Z

While efforts to reframe museum narratives were evident, professionals also reported numerous challenges and limitations. The subsequent sections addressed these obstacles, and the strategic responses developed in practice. Beyond platform and content considerations, a broader shift was observed in how museums conceptualized their institutional identity and cultural relevance with Gen Z. A recurring theme in professional responses was the importance of reshaping how museums are perceived by Gen Z. For many institutions, this means dismantling the long-standing idea that museums are exclusive, formal, or only for a specific type of visitor. Instead, professionals emphasized the need to present museums as welcoming, inclusive spaces where fun, creativity, and learning coexist. As one respondent passionately stated:

“Any time you are able to rewrite the narrative of museums being a place for only a certain type of person, we are doing the right thing. Making sure your audiences, especially Gen Z, know that museums are accessible and fun and that there is something there for them is the perfect first step!”

This perspective aligns with broader strategies to make museums feel approachable through casual language, interactive exhibits, or digital content that reflects Gen Z's interests and identities.

However, other professionals also noted the need to balance this accessibility with intentional learning goals. While aesthetic appeal and social media moments may draw Gen Z in, there is still a desire to reinforce the educational mission of museums. As one respondent shared: "Generation Z needs to understand that learning is a need. They should not go to museums just to take photos. Museums can focus on this." This comment points to a deeper tension between entertainment and education that many institutions are actively navigating. The key may

lie in bridging these goals: creating experiences that are both visually engaging and intellectually enriching, so that Gen Z visitors do not have to choose between fun and learning; they can have both.

How are museum professionals leveraging social media to optimize Gen Z engagement, and what challenges do they face?

Social Media Roles Vary Widely Across Museum Job Titles

Questionnaire respondents self-described their roles within their respective museums or institutions across various positions. These roles encompassed digital communications, marketing, education, visitor engagement, exhibition design, and leadership. Titles included Digital Communications Manager, Marketing Consultant, Associate Director of Marketing & Communications, Digital Manager, Consultant/Career Coach, Social Media Coordinator, Executive Director, Senior Content Manager (Social Media), Exhibit Design Manager, Director of Education and Engagement, Digital Marketing Coordinator, Marketing Specialist (Social & Email Manager), Content Manager, Visitor Services Chief, Communications Director, Curator of Community Engagement, Graphic Designer & Social Media Manager, Collection Specialist, Director of Public Programs, Digital Media Specialist, Social Media and Content Marketing Specialist, Digital Engagement Manager, Marketing Manager & Group Tour Coordinator, Digital Marketing Specialist, Director of Social Media, and Communications Officer.

The variety of roles highlights the interdisciplinary nature of museum work, with professionals contributing to digital engagement, audience development, and institutional outreach. This wide array of titles also demonstrates how the role of social media engagement is challenging to define. For some institutions, this role is grouped with visitor services, while others may group it into marketing.

Museums Prioritize Brand Awareness Over Attendance on Social Media

Respondents placed brand awareness as the most important goal when asked to rank their social media priorities. This emphasis suggests institutions increasingly use social media to build and maintain their identity in the crowded digital landscape. By cultivating a recognizable and consistent online presence, museums aim to stay top-of-mind among younger audiences, particularly Gen Z, who often encounter brands and institutions first through digital platforms. For many professionals, brand awareness is not just about name recognition, but about shaping the tone, values, and personality that set the institution apart. Several

respondents indicated that establishing a relatable or approachable brand voice on platforms like Instagram helps foster a sense of community and authenticity qualities that Gen Z values highly.

Promoting educational initiatives ranked second. This reinforces the notion that museums still view education as a central pillar of their mission, and that digital spaces are being harnessed to extend that mission beyond the physical gallery. Respondents noted that social media allows for innovative educational content that is often more informal, visual, or interactive than traditional programming, such as reels breaking down exhibits, curator Q&As, or behind-the-scenes peeks at collections. By emphasizing education, institutions demonstrate a commitment to accessibility and lifelong learning, which aligns with Gen Z's desire for meaningful content and social good.

Engaging with specific audiences came in third, indicating that while targeting Gen Z and other key demographics is a goal, it is often framed within broader institutional priorities like brand and education. Some respondents described audience engagement as a byproduct of creating authentic and mission-driven content rather than something pursued in isolation. Others highlighted that the algorithmic nature of social platforms often makes reaching the "right" audience a challenge, pushing museums to focus instead on producing high-quality content and letting discovery happen organically.

Increasing attendance was ranked as the least important objective. This may seem counterintuitive for institutions that rely on foot traffic, but it suggests a shift in measuring success in the digital space. Respondents shared that the impact of social media is often more diffuse and long-term, raising awareness, building trust, and establishing connections that may eventually lead to in-person visits, but are not always immediately traceable to ticket sales. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing hybridization of museum experiences have helped deprioritize physical attendance as the primary metric. For many professionals, success on social media is less about conversions and more about cultivating relevance, inclusivity, and engagement in the digital public sphere.

These rankings collectively suggest that museums treat social media as an ecosystem for values-based outreach and relationship-building rather than just a marketing funnel. They reflect a more profound institutional shift toward community engagement and mission alignment in the digital age, with brand and educational impact taking precedence over short-term gains in visitor numbers.

Limited Resources and Algorithm Changes Are the Top Barriers

The most significant challenge museums face when engaging Gen Z is limited resources, an issue identified by 78.6% of respondents in the professional questionnaire. This finding reflects a broader strain across the museum field as institutions continue to grapple with shrinking budgets, increased expectations for digital outreach, and growing political pressures. Many professionals described how these constraints have turned social media management into a side responsibility rather than a dedicated role, typically falling to education, marketing, or communications staff who are already juggling multiple demands.

As one respondent put it: “Museums need to give their social media people way more resources—time, people, money—to do their job. Managing multiple platforms is so much work for one person!”

Another elaborated:

“For us (and I'm sure many other nonprofits), our biggest hindrance is limited resources in the form of staffing and time, which is really a consequence of a small budget. I am a one-person social media team, and we have so much going on at all times that we have to prioritize getting information out over some of the more fun content I could do if we had the extra hands.”

Funding challenges are not only reflected in institutional budgets but are acutely felt through limited staff time and lack of access to essential equipment. High-quality content creation requires more than creativity. It demands the capacity to experiment with evolving tools like lighting kits, editing software, or upgraded camera lenses. However, many museums lack the infrastructure or funding to invest in this technology.

These issues are poised to worsen with the looming threat of cuts to federal support, particularly the defunding of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Grants from IMLS, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) are vital funding sources for museums, libraries, and cultural spaces. The reduction or loss of these grants will have significant ripple effects on staffing, programming, and digital capacity, deepening the resource gap at a time when digital engagement is increasingly essential.

At the same time, changes in museum funding models and increased competition for grants have led to broader instability across the sector. Several respondents described a general sense of unrest, where financial uncertainty and leadership turnover limit institutions' ability to plan and invest in sustained digital engagement. These conditions contribute to

staff burnout and high turnover, weakening the consistency and authenticity of outreach efforts aimed at Gen Z.

“Creating roles for young people on your committees and councils, rather than a separate youth council or internships. Taking social media seriously as a vehicle for information to meet curiosity (and to know what others are saying).”(Klibanoff ,2021)

Compounding these structural barriers is the challenge of staying current in a fast-moving digital environment. The second most cited obstacle, reported by 75% of respondents, was adapting to social media algorithm changes. Platforms are in constant flux, and shifts in algorithmic priorities can dramatically impact reach, often undermining carefully crafted strategies. Instagram was frequently mentioned as a source of frustration due to its pivot toward video content, de-emphasis on likes, and prioritization of creator accounts over institutional ones.

This creates a reactive environment where teams must constantly adjust formats and timelines to keep up with each platform’s evolving preferences, often without the time or training needed for deeper strategic planning. These algorithmic changes not only hinder innovation but also obscure how success is measured month to month.

As museum teams begin to explore new content creation tools, they often encounter a steep learning curve. Professionals expressed frustration with the need to stay ahead of trends, aesthetics, and platform-specific formats, especially when faced with minimal institutional support. These barriers widen the gap between audience expectations and institutional capacity, making it even harder to reach younger, digitally fluent audiences like Gen Z.

Another complication is the uncertain future of TikTok. While the platform remains immensely popular among Gen Z, its political entanglements, particularly concerns over data security and ownership, have made some museums wary of investing heavily in it. The looming possibility of a ban has disrupted long-term planning and left teams unsure whether building a TikTok presence is worth the risk.

Alongside platform-specific hurdles, many professionals noted internal tensions within museum teams about what social media content should look like. Specialists such as curators or collections managers often want to share thoughtful, in-depth content that reflects the institution’s mission. However, these more senior staff may overestimate their familiarity with digital platforms, leading to friction between creating

engaging, trend-savvy content and preserving professional standards. This disconnect can result in missed opportunities to reach Gen Z audiences.

To bridge this gap, institutions must provide clear guidance on what types of content perform well on various platforms and why. By involving staff across departments in collaborative discussions and digital storytelling training, museums can foster a more inclusive approach to online engagement, one where everyone feels invested in evolving the institution's digital voice.

Despite the challenges of staying current, only 32.1% of respondents cited difficulty keeping up with trends as a primary concern. Interestingly, the least cited barrier was a lack of knowledge about Gen Z preferences. Most professionals felt they understood this audience but noted that applying that understanding within institutional cultures, especially when leadership and core audiences skew older, was more complex. One respondent observed: "I'm the only Zoomer on our team, and the content I make that resonates with me doesn't resonate with the Gen X audience we've built."

Another shared: "Our audience and leadership demographics skew older, so when we try out new trends, it is often met with confusion and backlash." Others pointed to the challenge of visibility, even when employing Gen Z-savvy strategies:

"We believe we are on the right track with the content we are creating, but getting in front of young people has been difficult. We tried doing trends and using trending audio, but those did not get as much reach as our more educational Reels focused on storytelling from history. Gen Z only makes up 5% of our Instagram followers, and 1% of our Facebook followers are under 25."

Together, these reflections paint a picture of a sector striving to evolve but struggling to do so within an unstable, under-resourced, and often risk-averse environment. For museums to meaningfully engage Gen Z, they must not only understand younger audiences' digital preferences but also invest in the people, tools, and training needed to meet them where they are.

Hiring Gen Z and Collaborating with Influencers Improves Strategy

Many professionals emphasized the importance of intentional staffing and collaboration with Gen Z voices to address the ongoing challenges of limited resources and rapidly changing digital landscapes. A key theme across responses was the value of having team members who not only

understand the platforms and trends but are also part of the target demographic. As one respondent expressed: “Hire people in that demographic who understand. And having it be a dedicated job position.” This perspective reflects a broader call for institutional investment in the professionalization of generational insight and digital engagement roles. Rather than assigning social media as an add-on task, respondents advocate for dedicated staff with the time, expertise, and cultural fluency to develop effective strategies. Another professional highlighted the need for diverse voices and roles within content creation:

“Have Gen Z on staff to help establish content needs and choices, and to provide a variety of voices. Have dedicated social media staff—most museums, the content manager also wears 6 other hats.”

Acknowledging overextended staff points to a structural issue within museums. Digital engagement is often undervalued despite being one of the most visible public-facing roles. Collaboration was also a recurring suggestion. As one professional shared: “They just need to dedicate time to working with people from the Gen Z community, even as volunteers, consultants, influencers, etc., rather than trying to guess.” Another echoed this: “Hire or collaborate with younger marketing professionals.” These responses speak to a shift in mindset—from creating content *for* Gen Z to co-creating content *with* Gen Z.

These strategies emphasize that authenticity, relevance, and sustainability in digital engagement require the right people and institutional support. By investing in Gen Z voices and digital fluency, museums can move beyond guesswork into meaningful, resonant communication with younger audiences.

What factors contribute to successful Gen Z engagement in museums, and how do social media strategies vary across institutions?

Posts That Include Calls to Action Receive More Meaningful Responses

Most posts in the dataset lack an explicit call to action, which may be a missed opportunity. A Call-to-Action (CTA) is language that prompts the user to engage with the content. Posts that prompt users to comment, tag friends, or share experiences could boost engagement within the sample content that applied a CTA form, which obtained more engagement. By offering a curated space like a CTA on content for visitors on and offline,

they may engage with the organization further. This could also be a space to connect with community members. One idea is to use social media as a form of canvassing for more community connections and offering space for community members to highlight and connect people, programs, and institutions.

Cultural Trends, Humor, and Pop References Boost Engagement Scores

High trend score correlates with high engagement. Posts with gen z slang, humor, and references perform well. Posts incorporating pop culture references, Gen Z humor, and viral trends (Taylor Swift, Brat Summer, The Rehearsal.) consistently see higher engagement. Museums that tap into these cultural moments attract more interaction, particularly among younger audiences

Posting Cadence Varies by Platform and Affects Reach and Retention

Posting frequency among museums is not just a logistical decision but a strategic one that reveals how institutions negotiate capacity, audience engagement, and the demands of platform-specific ecosystems. According to the survey, 48.1% of respondents post several times a week, while 40.7% maintain a daily schedule--only 11.1% post weekly, signaling a range of approaches that balance visibility with sustainability.

Critically, 75% of respondents indicated that posting frequency varies by platform, underscoring how museums are actively tailoring their strategies to platform-specific logics. This reflects a shift from one-size-fits-all digital outreach toward a more nuanced, audience-aware communication model. As one professional explained:

“Frequency in posts heavily relies on the platform and what content is favorable there, as well as the audience on each platform. For example, LinkedIn has a significantly lower posting frequency since it is primarily used for philanthropic efforts or major museum announcements. In contrast, TikTok's algorithm favors extremely frequent posting and provides a space for more playful content.”

Another respondent emphasized how different platforms demand different rhythms to remain effective:

“Yes, posting frequency differs by platform due to audience behavior and algorithm preferences. For example, Twitter (X) thrives on multiple daily posts, while

Instagram and Facebook perform well with a few high-quality posts per week. LinkedIn favors professional content, so posting a few times per week is ideal, whereas TikTok can benefit from frequent posting to stay visible in trends.”

These platform-specific adjustments are not simply reactive they are strategic. Several institutions reported using engagement metrics to inform posting cadence, prioritizing the platforms that demonstrate higher audience return:

“We have a post cadence set for each platform based on the return on engagement. We prioritize posting more frequently on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where our followers are more active and engaged.”

Some institutions are even reevaluating their platform presence altogether. Rather than maintaining legacy accounts for the sake of coverage, they are phasing out platforms that no longer align with institutional values or audience activity--most notably X (formerly Twitter): “X we've moved away from, and Bluesky we are beginning to explore.” This shift away from X often reflects a strategic redistribution of labor and attention, as teams prioritize platforms that offer higher engagement or clearer mission alignment: “We no longer use X, but our newsletter automatically populates when it posts.”

Together, these responses reflect a strategic and evolving understanding of social media as more than a distribution channel; it is a site of intentional engagement, shaped by both internal capacity and external pressures. Museums are adapting to algorithms and user behavior and using them as indicators to make informed, value-driven decisions. Posting frequency becomes a lens through which to understand how institutions align their digital practices with their broader missions, audiences, and goals.

Implications & Conclusion

This research reinforces the growing imperative for museums to adapt their communication strategies to resonate with Gen Z. This generation is digitally fluent, socially conscious, and increasingly influential in shaping cultural narratives. As institutions tasked with preserving history and educating the public, museums now face the challenge of meeting audiences where they are online, in visually dynamic, interactive, and culturally responsive digital spaces.

A key implication of this study is the need for museums to treat social media as a strategic priority rather than an auxiliary communication channel. Instagram, the focus platform of this study, reveals that Gen Z engagement is highest when content is aligned with current cultural trends, utilizes short-form video formats, and incorporates language or humor native to Gen Z digital culture. However, while many institutions attempt to lean into these formats, they often fall short due to resource constraints, lack of dedicated roles, or institutional hesitation to embrace emerging digital norms fully.

The findings suggest that trend alignment, content formatting, and community interaction are central to successful engagement. Museums should consider developing a dynamic scoring system that evaluates content based on "trendiness," content type, and engagement performance. Such a system could help forecast which posts are likely to perform best and align museum storytelling with emergent digital culture moments, increasing both reach and resonance.

Furthermore, this research calls attention to the power of explicit calls to action. Although frequently underutilized, posts that include direct engagement prompts such as "tag a friend," "drop your thoughts," or "what is your favorite?" garnered higher comment activity. These interaction cues invite participation and help cultivate an active, invested audience. Future experimentation with these prompts' frequency, tone, and placement could offer valuable insights into optimizing Gen Z engagement.

The inconsistent use of hashtags across the sampled posts indicates an area ripe for improvement. A museum-specific hashtag strategy balancing institutionally branded tags with trending cultural ones can enhance visibility and foster community participation. Future research should delve deeper into the effectiveness of various hashtag structures and their impact on reach, especially as platform algorithms increasingly prioritize personalized content discovery.

Regarding scheduling, this study found that museums vary widely in their posting cadences, often driven by internal capacity rather than audience behavior. However, identifying peak engagement windows could allow for better content performance. Tools that analyze engagement over time could help institutions tailor their posting schedules more effectively and avoid content fatigue or missed opportunities. A solution for this is implementing a content creation calendar and using scheduling tools.

Another critical implication is the need for institutional investment in generational fluency and authentic voice. Many professionals interviewed in this study advocated for hiring or consulting Gen Z staff or

collaborators not just to interpret trends, but to authentically co-create content. Museums that value youth perspectives in their digital strategies are more likely to produce content that resonates and feels genuine, rather than performative or tone-deaf.

Beyond practice, this research opens several avenues for continued study. Longitudinal research is needed to assess how Gen Z's social media preferences evolved and how museums can maintain long-term relationships with this demographic beyond one-off engagements. Additionally, there is room to investigate how engagement strategies differ by museum type, size, mission, and regional context. How might a small local history museum successfully engage Gen Z compared to a significant art institution? What role might digital activism and values-driven storytelling play in fostering loyalty and attendance?

Finally, museums must remain agile as platform landscapes continue to evolve, particularly with the potential regulation or banning of platforms like TikTok. Adaptive, audience-informed strategies will be key to staying relevant in a world where social media is both a marketing tool and a public space for identity, creativity, and learning.

Engaging with Generation Z is not just about following trends; it is about being timely, thoughtful, and attuned to the digital landscape of a generation that expects institutions to reflect their values and engage in meaningful conversations. Social media serves as a bridge for this engagement. The challenge and opportunity for museums lie in how they navigate this connection.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questions for Museum Professionals

Demographics & Background

1. What is your role within the museum? (Social Media Manager, Marketing Specialist, etc.)
2. What type of museum do you work for? (Art, History, Science, Cultural, Other)
3. How many years of experience do you have managing social media for museums?
 - a. Less than 1 year
 - b. 1-3 years
 - c. 3-5 years
 - d. 5+ years

Content Types

1. What types of content do you post most frequently? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Event promotions
 - b. Educational content
 - c. Behind-the-scenes content
 - d. User-generated content
 - e. Historical/cultural spotlights
 - f. Other (please specify)
2. Which type of content do you find engages Gen Z the most?
 - a. Educational content
 - b. Interactive content (e.g., polls, quizzes)
 - c. Visual content (e.g., reels, videos)
 - d. Trend-based content (e.g., memes, challenges)
 - e. Other (please specify)

Posting Frequency

1. How often does your museum post on social media?
 - a. Daily
 - b. Several times a week
 - c. Weekly

- d. Less than weekly
2. Does posting frequency differ by platform?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

(If yes, please elaborate in the comments section at the end.)

Platform Preferences

1. Which platforms does your museum actively use? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Instagram
 - b. Facebook
 - c. TikTok
 - d. Twitter
 - e. LinkedIn
 - f. Other (please specify)
2. Which platform do you perceive as most effective for engaging with Gen Z?
 - a. Instagram
 - b. TikTok
 - c. Twitter
 - d. Other (please specify)

Engagement & Metrics

1. What metrics do you use to evaluate the success of your social media efforts? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Likes
 - b. Comments
 - c. Shares
 - d. Reach/Impressions
 - e. Website traffic
 - f. Event attendance linked to posts
 - g. Other (please specify)
2. How would you rate your museum's current success in engaging with Gen Z on social media?

- a. Very successful
 - b. Moderately successful
 - c. Somewhat successful
 - d. Not successful
3. What challenges do you face in engaging with Gen Z on social media? (Select all that apply)
- a. Limited resources (e.g., staff, budget)
 - b. Difficulty staying relevant to trends
 - c. Lack of knowledge about Gen Z preferences
 - d. Platform algorithm changes
 - e. Other (please specify)

Strategies & Goals

1. What strategies does your museum use to increase engagement with Gen Z? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Collaborations with influencers
 - b. Trend-based content creation
 - c. Interactive content (e.g., polls, quizzes)
 - d. Promoting youth-focused events
 - e. Other (please specify)
2. What are your top goals for using social media at your museum? (Rank in order of importance, 1 being the most important)
 - a. Increasing attendance
 - b. Building brand awareness
 - c. Engaging specific audiences (e.g., Gen Z)
 - d. Promoting educational initiatives
 - e. Other (please specify)

Open-Ended Question

15. In your opinion, what could museums do differently to better connect with Gen Z on social media?

Appendix B: Sampling Method Description

This study used a systematic sampling interval approach to select Instagram posts for content analysis. After identifying museum Instagram accounts using the platform's search function, every n th post was selected for inclusion in the sample. The specific interval (n) varied slightly based on the size of each account's posting history, but the method remained consistent to ensure a balanced and non-redundant dataset. For example, if an account had 300 posts and 5 posts were needed for the study, every 60th post was selected, starting from an unbiased number within the first 60 posts to introduce an element of randomness.

Justification of Sampling Method

Systematic sampling offered a practical and replicable way to gather a manageable yet diverse dataset. It allowed for:

- Broad representation across time, avoiding only the most recent or popular posts.
- Avoidance of selection bias that might occur with convenience or purposive sampling.
- A simplified manual process that was feasible without automated tools or scraping software, aligning with ethical research practices for Instagram data.

This method is commonly recommended in content analysis for reducing bias while ensuring the sample remains representative of the population being studied (Neuendorf, 2017).

Formula Used

To determine the interval (n) for systematic sampling:

$$n = \text{Total number of posts} \div \text{Number of posts to sample}$$

Example:

If a museum account had 200 posts and I wanted to sample 4 posts:

$$n = 200 \div 4 = 50$$

I would then select every 50th post, starting from a random number between 1 and 50.

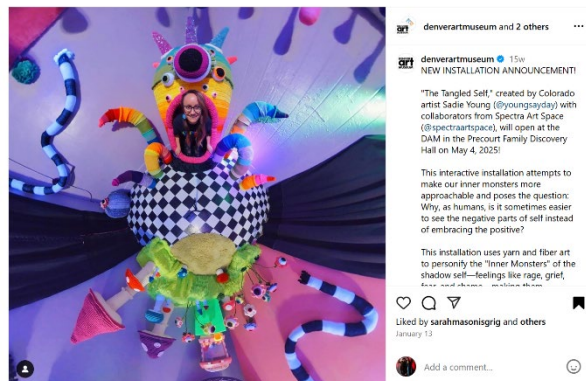
Sampling began with a random number within the range of 1 to n , then proceeded by selecting every n th post. This method is a variation of *probability systematic sampling*, where the first unit is randomly selected and subsequent units are chosen at regular intervals.

Sampling Parameters

- **Total Sample Size:** 100 posts

- **Number of Museum Accounts:** 50
- **Language Constraint:** Only English-speaking or English-translated accounts were included
- **Platform Focus:** Instagram, due to its stability and cultural relevance during the TikTok regulatory uncertainty
- **Engagement Metric Focus:** Comments, due to the de-emphasis or disabling of likes/shares on many posts

Appendix C: Example of Instagram posts analyzed



Name of Museum: Denver Art Museum

Content Type: Photo

Post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/DEx3u9bM2bs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Caption: NEW INSTALLATION ANNOUNCEMENT!

"The Tangled Self," created by Colorado artist Sadie Young (@youngsayday) with collaborators from Spectra Art Space (@spectraartspace), will open at the DAM in the Precourt Family Discovery Hall on May 4, 2025!

This interactive installation attempts to make our inner monsters more approachable and poses the question: Why, as humans, is it sometimes

easier to see the negative parts of self instead of embracing the positive?

This installation uses yarn and fiber art to personify the "Inner Monsters" of the shadow self—feelings like rage, grief, fear, and shame—making them approachable, colorful, and playful while inviting viewers to face and embrace these emotions as part of healing. Larger-than-life crochet monsters will dominate the space, representing the often-overwhelming nature of these feelings, while smaller, hidden "pockets of positivity," inspired by nature, symbolize the harder-to-find yet integral aspects of joy, beauty, and peace. The work emphasizes that both the shadow and the positive are interconnected aspects of the self, encouraging viewers to embrace all sides of themselves with compassion and understanding to foster healing and wholeness.

Visitors will be able to step inside the enormous mouths of towering monsters, dodge playful tube creatures, and discover hidden and unexpected surprises in this colorful yarn and fiber-based installation.

This installation will be included in general admission, which is FREE for everyone 18 and under every day, as well as for museum members.

Photo of Sadie Young by David Hannon

HashTags: #DenverArtMuseum [#Denver](#) [#Colorado](#) [#Art](#) [#Museum](#)

ContentThemes: New Exhibit

Visual Style: Bright colors, Odd angles

Intended audience: Everyone, New Vistors, youth

Trend Score: 3

Engagement Score: 2

Appendix D: Engagement score

Comment Count	Score
2,000+	5
1,500-1,999	4.7-4.9
1,000-1,499	4.5-4.6
750-999	4.3-4.4
500-749	4.1-4.2
300-499	3.8-4.0
200-299	3.6-3.7
150-199	3.4-3.5
100-149	3.1-3.3
75-99	2.8-3.0
50-74	2.5-2.7
30-49	2.2-2.4
20-29	1.9-2.1
10--19	1.5-1.8
5--9	1.2-1.4
below 5	1.0-1.1