Visitor Trust When Museums Are Not Neutral

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ABSTRACT

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The idea that museums are trustworthy sources of information is a frequent refrain among museum professionals and museum advocates. Research into trust in museums and sources of information more broadly suggests that information sources are more trusted when they are perceived to be neutral; however, museums are increasingly embracing non-neutral positions and addressing contemporary social issues in their exhibitions. This study examined the degree to which visitors trust the information presented in museum exhibitions that address contemporary social issues, as well as the factors that visitors consider when determining trustworthiness. The researcher interviewed 57 visitors to three exhibitions that featured contemporary social issues. Results showed that visitors had a high level of trust in both the information presented in the exhibition and the museums that hosted the exhibitions. Visitors considered a range of reasons when determining whether the exhibitions' information was trustworthy, most frequently citing the presence of evidence, the perceived accuracy of the information on view, and a trust in the presenting institution. These findings suggest that museums can present socially-engaged and/or non-neutral exhibitions while maintaining visitor trust.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Museums Are Trusted," proclaims the American Alliance for Museums' introductory information page for "Museum Facts & Data." Museum professionals and advocates have long promoted the idea that museums are "educational, trusted, beloved and economic assets to communities everywhere" (AAM, n.d.). This assertion has been supported by research across different types of museums and different countries, all of which indicate that the public has a very high level of trust in museums as institutions and as sources of information (Ashton and Hamilton, 2008; Conrad, Letourneau, and Northrup, 2009; Dilenschneider, 2017; Griffiths, King, Pomerantz, 2008; IMLS, 2008; Museums Association, 2013; Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998).

The few studies that address the reasons behind that trust, however, suggest that at least part of the public trust in museums is based on their perceived neutrality and position as authoritative conveyers of facts. Rosenzweig and Thelen's 1998 study examining how Americans connected to the past found that the most common explanation for trust in history museums as sources of information was the perception that museums allowed unmediated contact with the past – as one participant put it, people believed that a museum "isn't trying to present you with any points of view" (p. 106). A recent study from the UK found that the public believed that "promoting any biased or subjective perspective is not deemed an appropriate purpose for museums, which are revered as trustworthy sources of balanced information" (Museum Association, 2012). Participants in this study argued against museums engaging with social issues, encouraging debate on controversial issues, or promoting any subjective perspective.

Museums are increasingly addressing social issues, serving as forums for discussion and debate about complex issues affecting their communities, and developing content and

programming with underrepresented groups. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience network, made up of historic sites and museums that "connect past struggles to today's movements for human rights" (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, n.d), has more than 50 affiliates in the United States alone. Museums are increasingly engaging with issues that affect their communities and taking a stand on social and political issues. Recent examples include MOMA's decision to display works by artists from countries affected by President Trump's travel ban and the Queens Museum's decision to close its exhibits and host a workshop creating protest materials on Inauguration Day.

Although previous studies show that the public's trust in museums is connected to their perceived neutrality, we do not know what public trust looks like in museums that are embracing non-neutral, socially-engaged perspectives through their exhibits, programs, and other activities. Given how highly museum professionals value the public's trust in museums, understanding the public's trust in socially-engaged museums will be critical as museums continue to engage with social issues.

Despite the importance museum professionals place on public trust, there is little literature that specifically studies the public's trust in museums in depth. Discussions of public trust in museums tend to take the form of opinion pieces or essays rather than research (Cuno & MacGregor, 2004; Gardner, 2004; Marty, 2014.). Research into people's trust in other sources of information, such as the news or academic research, supports the idea that perceived neutrality is important, as individuals tend to have greater trust in sources that they perceive to be neutral and unbiased (API, 2017; Bråten, Strømsø, and Salmerón, 2011; Kolsto, 2001).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of visitors' trust in museums that are actively addressing contemporary social issues in their exhibits. The study was guided by two key research questions:

1) What is the nature of visitor's trust in the information presented in museum exhibits that address one or more contemporary social issues?

> By "visitor's trust" I mean the degree to which visitors say they find the information in the exhibit to be true and reliable

2) What factors do visitors consider when determining the trustworthiness of the information in that museum?

> "Factors" might include aspects of the exhibit, qualities of the information, or the visitors' assumptions, understanding, or perspectives

Significance

This study is relevant to a wide range of museum professionals because the trend towards increased social engagement concerns museums of different types, sizes, and areas of focus. Many museums have begun serving as forums for debate within their communities or addressing social issues in their exhibits. Understanding how those new roles impact the public's perception of museums as trustworthy could impact the way those museums understand their audience. If the trend of museums becoming more socially engaged continues (and it seems that it will), museums will need to understand how this shift impacts their audiences' trust in their organizations, positively and/or negatively. The findings of this study could inform the ways that museums present themselves to the public or their messaging about the way they address social

issues. More broadly, issues of public trust are highly significant to the museum field,

particularly given that this trust is often used as a justification for financial support.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of visitors' trust in museums that are actively addressing contemporary social issues in their exhibits. It draws upon three key bodies of literature: a) public trust in public institutions and information sources; b) public trust in museums as sources of information; and c) museums as socially-engaged institutions. An exploration of this literature demonstrates that public trust in socially-engaged museums is a highly relevant but understudied area of museological research.

Defining Trust

For the purposes of this study, trust is defined as "firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something" (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.). The EOLD provides a supplementary definition concerning trust in information: "Acceptance of the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation." However, the example sentence that they provide to exemplify this definition is "I used only primary sources, taking nothing on trust." This suggests that "statement" in this definition refers to a claim, interpretation, or assessment.

One insightful addition comes from Gambetta (1988), who was primarily concerned with interpersonal trust as opposed to trust in information:

> *"Trust (or, symmetrically, distrust), is a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such an action... and in a context in which it affects his own action….When we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability that he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him."* (p. 217)

A key implication of this statement is that trust inherently requires a degree of risk, as there is only ever a "probability" that a person is trustworthy. According to Gambetta, the decision to trust another person is based not only on the perception that they can be relied upon,

but on the assessment that the probability of harm is low enough to warrant the risk. Applied to trust in information sources, this raises the question of whether that trust is based on positive assessment of reliability, or negative assessment of the risk for harm.

Public Trust in Information Sources

The literature exploring why people trust public institutions and sources of information is vast and complex. Scholars in diverse fields such as psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology have all explored ideas of trust from different perspectives and using different definitions of trust (Chryssochoidis, 2009; Gambetta, 1988; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer, 1998). This review will necessarily explore a limited selection of research that has relevance to the public's trust in museums.

One area of research that provides insight into public trust in museums relates to the public's trust in media sources, specifically in the news. The idea that museums are a form of media akin to books, film, and the news has proved a valuable perspective in museum research (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995; Levin, 2006; Sandell, 2007), and can offer a useful perspective when considering the public's trust in museums. A recent study conducted by the American Press Institute (API) (2016) found that when people are deciding what news sources to trust, the most significant factors they consider are accuracy, timeliness, clarity, and fairness. The study found that people considered different trust-related factors for different types of news. For example, when describing what was an extremely or very important factor in deciding whether to trust political news, 80% said that source had to be concise and 78% said it had to present expert sources and data; when trusting lifestyle news, those figures were 55% and 48%, respectively. The study also found that participants' level of trust was positively correlated with frequency of interaction with a news source, and that those with high levels of trust were more likely to pay

for that source or follow and share it on social media. Another important finding pertained to participants losing trust in a news source. The study found that the most common reason that people lost trust in a news source was "instances of perceived bias or inaccuracies," and that trust was very unlikely to be restored once it had been lost (p. 3).

The Pew Research Center has conducted a number of studies exploring how the public perceives a range of institutions, including libraries and the government. One recent study focused on the public's view of libraries, finding that "Most Americans view public libraries as important parts of their communities, with a majority reporting that libraries…play at least some role in helping them decide what information they can trust" (Horrigan, 2016, p. 1). By contrast, trust in the government is at historic lows, with only 18% of Americans saying that they can trust the government "just about always" (3%) or "most of the time" (15%) (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Another area of research relevant to the public's trust in museums pertains to people's trust in sources of information more broadly. Most of the studies that explore the public's trust in museums specifically address the question of museums as sources of information (American Alliance of Museums, 2001; Conrad, Ercikan, Friesen, Létourneau, Muise, Northrup, and Seixas, 2013; Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2008; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). However, museums have rarely been included in the larger literature addressing information-seeking behaviors, instead occupying, as Sandell (2007) puts it, "a relatively marginal place in the broader mediascape" (p. 105). A telling illustration is found in Case and Given's 2016 survey of research pertaining to information seeking behavior, meant to be a comprehensive overview of how people seek information for a wide range of purposes and areas of study. Of the more than 1,300 pieces of literature included in the survey, only two focus on museums, and those focus on

visitors to museum websites, not in-person museum visits (Skov, 2013; Skov & Ingwersen, 2014).

A recent study by the Pew Research Center examined how different people approach a range of information sources, such as news organizations, social media, and libraries (Horrigan, 2017). It identified five different categories for people's approach to engaging with information: the Eager and Willing (22%) who have a high interest and high trust in information sources but seek to improve their information literacy; the Confident (16%) who have a high level of trust and interest in information and are self-assured in their ability to assess sources; the Cautious and Curious (13%) who are very interested in information but have low levels of trust in information sources; the Doubtful (24%) who have low levels of trust in information and little interest in increasing their information literacy; and the Wary (25%), who have very low levels of trust in information sources. It is noteworthy that 62% of participants reported low or very low trust in information sources.

Within the museology field, Marty (2014) has argued that understanding museums as sources of information is particularly important as museums are increasingly understood as being part of a larger network of information sources, driven by the dramatic increase in information accessibility brought on by the digital revolution. Similar to Gardner (2004), Marty argues that the public has historically misunderstood the nature of the information in museums as consisting of pure, unbiased facts. As information becomes more accessible, however, people must do more work to assess the many information sources available to them; consequently, museums must more consciously consider how the public views them and the information that they present.

One recurring finding in the literature exploring people's trust in information sources is the importance that those sources be perceived as neutral and unbiased, particularly when that

information pertains to a controversial topic. In a study exploring how high school students assess information addressing socio-scientific issues, Kolsto (2001) found that approximately half of participants identified researcher bias as a potential problem in a source's trustworthiness. In practice, however, students had difficulty assessing the neutrality of a source, and many students raised the question of whether it would even be possible for a researcher to be neutral on a highly controversial issue.

Challenges in assessing source neutrality have been found to relate to a person's familiarity with the subject matter in question. In a study exploring how people select sources of information, Goldman (2011) found that people with a high level of pre-existing knowledge on a topic were more likely to consider source attribution when assessing the trustworthiness of information, while those with low levels of pre-existing knowledge focused more on content. Bråten, Strømsø, and Salmerón (2011) found similar results when studying how people assess sources related to climate change, with the additional finding that those with little expertise in climate science were more likely than experts to select sources of information that were backed by oil companies. Both of these studies suggest that those with little background in a given subject may have a more difficult time analyzing an information source for neutrality.

The public's trust in the information in museums can be situated within the larger context of the public's trust in public institutions and information sources more broadly, specifically the recent decline in trust in institutions. The most recent iteration of the Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual study exploring trust on a global scale, found that the United States experienced a "trust crash" from 2017 to 2018 characterized by the steepest drop in public trust in institutions (specifically government, business, media, and NGOs) in the 17 years that the study has been conducted (Edelman, 2018). This is important for museums due to other research that has found

a "spillover" effect in trust, whereby trust in specific institutions is correlated to trust in other institutions (Hayer and Monness, 2016). If trust in institutions and sources of information is falling overall, then trust in museums may be impacted by association.

While trust in institutions overall may be falling, some institutions draw more public trust than others. A recent study by the Pew Research Center looked at the public's trust in several organizations, finding that the American public had a high level of trust in the military, scientists, K-12 principals and superintendents, and religious leaders (more than 50% of participants saying they had "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of confidence in these groups to act in the best interest of the public), and a low level of trust in the news media, business leaders, and elected officials (Funk, 2017).

The Public Trusts Museums

The widely-promoted assertion that museums are trustworthy institutions is based primarily on a series of studies conducted by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The first of these was a study commissioned by AAM, conducted by Lake, Snell, and Perry Associates (2001), examining "Americans' perceptions of museums, of their importance as an educational resource, and of their trustworthiness as sources of objective information" (p. 1). The study consisted of phone interviews with 1,000 adults, sampled to be representative of the population of the United States at the time. Further details of this study's methodologies are not known because a full report of the study was never published. Instead, the findings of the report were published in a memo from Lake, Snell, and Perry to AAM.

The most prominent finding of this study was that "among a wide range of information sources, museums are far and away the most trusted source of objective information. No other

institution has a similar level of trust" (p. 1). Museums were perceived as more trustworthy than books, television news, newspapers, and the internet. Of those surveyed, 87% said that museums were trustworthy sources of information, and all demographic groups and geographic areas said that museums were trustworthy at a rate of at least 80%. The study found that people had a range of reasons for their trust in museums, with the three most prominent being "they present history, they are research-oriented, and they deal in facts" (p. 1). Since its publication, the findings of this study have been widely referenced as evidence that museums are valuable institutions; to this day, it is referenced on AAM's "Museum Facts" webpage to support the claim that "museums are educational, trusted, beloved and economic assets to communities everywhere" (AAM, n.d.).

Another study that has been widely cited throughout the museum world is *InterConnections*, a 2008 study conducted by IMLS in partnership with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that explored "needs of users and potential users of on-line museum and public library information and the Internet" (p. 7). As part of the study, 1,047 people were interviewed over the phone about their experience with in-person and remote visits to museums. Participants were asked to rate aspects of their last visit to a museum on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the "worst rating" and 5 being the "best rating"), including trustworthiness of the displays and exhibits, quality of the descriptive information about the displays or items, oral presentation describing displays or items, and the overall experience with the museum. Of these aspects, trustworthiness received the highest score of 4.62 out of 5. Participants were also asked to assign the same ratings to their most recent visit to a museum website via the Internet. Although average scores in all categories were lower for remote visits than in-person visits, participants again assigned trustworthiness the highest score, 4.54 out of 5.

The study also included a survey about individuals' trust in different sources of information, including museums, libraries, historical societies, genealogical societies, government websites, commercial websites, and private websites. Museums and libraries were rated as significantly more trustworthy than all other sources of information. Based on these findings, the primary conclusion presented in the *InterConnections* report was that "museums evoke consistent, extraordinary public trust among diverse adult users" (IMLS, 2008, p. 3). This conclusion echoed the findings of AAM's 2001 study, further bolstering the evidence that the public trust the information in museums.

High levels of trust in museums have also been found in studies exploring not only museums and libraries, but sources of historical information more broadly. A key study in this area of research is "The Presence of the Past" (Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998), which surveyed more than 800 American adults about their perceptions and relationship to "the past." Part of the survey asked participants to rate their trust in different sources of information about the past, including museums, historic sites, personal stories, and books. Of these, museums were considered the most trustworthy source, with more than half of respondents assigning museums a score of 9 or 10 on a 10-point trustworthiness scale.

Similar studies have been conducted in several different countries, and all have found a high level of trust in museums as sources of information about the past. "Canadians and their Pasts," a 2013 study modeled on "The Presence of the Past," found that like Americans, Canadians believed that museums were the most trustworthy source of information about the past – more so than teachers, family stories, web sites, non-fiction books, and historic sites (Conrad et. al, 2013). A similar study from Australia also found Australians believed that museums were the most trusted source of information about the past, with the noteworthy

exception of Aboriginal groups who were more likely to trust personal stories (Ashton &

Hamilton, 2010).

While these studies are often referenced in the museum field as proving that the public

has a high level of trust in museums, further details about *why* the public trusts museums are less

frequently mentioned. When this question has been asked, several concepts recur across different

studies, such as their presentation of authentic artifacts and their role as research institutions

(Conrad et. al, 2013; IMLS, 2008; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1999; Sandell, 2007). Another

recurring theme is public scrutiny, including the idea that any misinformation presented would

be caught by the public and that as public institutions, museums have a vested interest in

maintaining a reputation as trustworthy institutions. For the purposes of this study, however, the

most significant finding across many studies is that many people trust museums because of the

perception that museums are neutral, unbiased institutions that present only objective facts.

While this finding has been discussed by a few scholars, such as Gardner (2004), Gurian (2011),

and Sandell (2007), it has not yet been studied in depth.

Rozensweig and Thelen (1998) found that much of the public's trust in museums was

based on perceptions that museums do not provide interpretation of the artifacts they exhibit,

instead providing only direct, uninterpreted encounters with artifacts. While the study's

participants perceived other sources of information as often presenting biased or distorted

versions of history, they viewed museums as presenting a more balanced, neutral perspective:

> *"Approaching artifacts and sites on their own terms, visitors could cut through
> all the intervening stories, step around all the agendas that had been advanced in
> the meantime, and feel that they were experiencing a moment from the past almost
> as it had originally been experienced... A 60-year-old man from Downers Grove,
> Illinois valued museums because visitors could observe the artifacts and "come to
> some conclusion on your own instead of listening to someone else's tainted
> conclusions." A 44-year-old painter from Wisconsin trusted museums because by
> displaying objects "for everybody to see," the museum "isn't trying to present*

you with any points of view… You need to draw your own conclusions." Many
respondents felt that there was nothing between them and the reality of the past."
(p. 106)

In "Canadians and Their Pasts," Conrad et. al. (2013) found a similar belief that museums

are trustworthy because they do not interpret information in the way that other sources of

information do. Participants in the study explained that presenting authentic artifacts was

important to generating trust because it let them make their own interpretations of history – as

one participant put it, "They're not interpreting it as much as a book or the Internet might, so

someone can look at the pictures and make up their own mind" (p. 51).

In his research exploring museums' role in addressing prejudice and cultural differences,

Sandell (2007) found similar findings regarding visitors' perceptions of museums as sources of

information. He found that "many visitors to both St. Mungo's and the Anne Frank House

spontaneously cited trustworthiness as a means to contrast museums favourably with television

and other media" (p. 132). He goes on to explain that "a large number of interviewees at both

sites used words such as 'unbiased' and 'balanced' to describe the museum, frequently

contrasting it favourably with other media sources perceived to be more partisan" (p. 132). These

findings are particularly striking given that Sandell selected his research sites (the Anne Frank

House and St. Mungo's Museum of Religious Art) specifically because they seek to change

visitors' perspectives and prejudices about people different from them.

Sandell's findings are supported by another recent study conducted by the Museums

Association in the United Kingdom that explored public perceptions of the purpose of museums

in society (Museums Association, 2013). The study found that the public did not want museums

to "provide a forum for debate" or "promote social justice and human rights," explicitly

connecting these kinds of activities to the public's trust in museums. In summarizing their findings, the researchers concluded that,

> *"... museums are seen as one of the last vestiges of trust (particularly in comparison to the government and the media which are seen as untrustworthy and agenda driven. The public want to keep their trust in museums by believing they are being given unbiased and non-politically driven information"* (p. 6).

Put more succinctly, as one participant stated, "museums do have a good image and they'll remain trustworthy if they stay out of the politics" (p. 26). Another participant's statement echoes Rosenzweig and Thelen's (1999) findings from more than a decade earlier: "Just tell us the facts and let us make our own minds up" (p. 20).

The connections between trust in museums and neutrality/social engagement were addressed in a recent survey of 1,000 adults conducted by MuseumNext (2017). Participants were asked how much they trusted politicians, brands, media, celebrities, and museums. As in previous studies, museums were rated as the most trustworthy, with politicians as the least trustworthy. The survey went on to ask participants whether they could identify a brand, celebrity, or museum that takes a stance on a social issue. While 75% could name a celebrity that did this, only 15% could name a socially-engaged museum. Participants were also asked whether museums "should have something to say about social issues." Most responded "maybe" at 41%, while 31% said "no" and 28% said "yes." Visitors who visited museums more frequently were more likely to say "yes" – 21% of those who had not visited a museum in the past twelve months responded "yes," compared to 27% of those who had visited one or two times, 37% of those who had visited five to six times, and 40% of those who had visited more than six times. The survey also found that participants who were under 30 were more likely to say that museums should engage with social issues.

These findings are in striking contrast to another survey conducted by *Impacts*, a market researching company for visitor-serving cultural institutions (Dilenschneider, 2017). The company conducted a survey comparing people's trust in museums (specifically, history museums, zoos, aquaria, art museums, science centers, and natural history museums) with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), state agencies, federal agencies, and daily newspapers. The survey found that participants were more likely to agree with the statement that museums were "a highly credible source of information" and to say that they trusted museums more than any other organization. However, participants were also more likely to agree that museums should "suggest or recommend certain behaviors or ways for the general public to support its causes and mission" than they were for NGOs and government agencies (on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 100 (strongly agree), museums were scored between 73.2 (history museums) and 75.0 (zoos), while NGOs and government agencies were scored 64.8 and 59.1, respectively). This survey and the MuseumNext survey suggest that the public may have a mixed understanding of the role that museums should play regarding social action. This may be related to the phrasing of the questions, with participants reacting differently to the ideas of museums having "something to say about social issues" as opposed to recommending "certain behaviors."

A few museum professionals have questioned whether the public's high level of trust in museums should be understood as universally positive. Referring specifically to Rosenzweig and Thelen's 1999 study, Gardner (2004) has argued that the public's trust in museums stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that museums work, noting,

> *"...I don't take comfort in their finding that the public trusts museums "as much as they did their grandmothers." That trust is apparently based in a perception that museums stand for authority and accuracy in a way that professors, teachers, and books do not. At first glance that may seem flattering, but Rosenzweig and Thelen explain that the public feel they can go to museums and interpret artifacts as they want, unmediated, without concern that ideas are being interposed*

between them and the objects. And that means the public really don't get what museums do, that we too have perspectives, make choices, present arguments, just like our colleagues elsewhere in the profession." (p. 13)

Gurian (2011) has similarly questioned whether the public's high level of trust in museums should be considered a universal good. She notes that the very traits that appear to drive the public's trust in museums also contribute to museums being unresponsive to their communities, leading to the perception of museums as irrelevant and old-fashioned. Despite these criticisms, the idea that museums are trustworthy institutions continues to be promoted as a justification for the value of museums.

Another area in which the public's trust in museums has come under scrutiny is the relationship between public trust and race, specifically the fact that museums have tended to focus on the histories and cultures of white Europeans to the detriment of other racial and ethnic groups. Consequently, individuals from underrepresented communities frequently have lower levels of trust in museums and are more likely to see museums as agents of cultural exploitation and colonialism (Peers and Brown, 2003). Faden (2013) has argued that, if museums are to maintain their position as trusted institutions, they must actively pursue more racially inclusive practices in their content, staff, and audiences. When discussing the challenges that the Manchester Museum faced when developing an exhibit about race, Lynch and Alberti (2010) argue that museums need to embrace "radical trust" in communities of color in order to address past and ongoing racial injustices.

Although the idea that museums are trusted institutions is valued by many museum professionals, it has not frequently been the focus of museological research. Most of the literature that explores the public's trust in museums in depth take the form of essays or commentary rather than research. An important example is *Whose Muse: Art Museums and the*

Public Trust, a series of essays exploring the public's trust in art museums (Cuno & MacGregor, 2004). These essays are primarily concerned with perceptions of museums as institutions rather than sources of information, and consequently focus on issues related to funding and politics.

Museums, Neutrality, and Engagement in Social Issues

The relationship between neutrality and trust is important to the museum world because museum professionals are increasingly arguing that museums are not, and never have been, truly neutral institutions. Both historically and in the present, these discussions frequently contrast the concept of museums as neutral against the idea of museums as socially-engaged (Ames, 1992; Cameron, 1971; Murawski, 2017; Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). While it is important to note that neutrality is not the "opposite" of social engagement, the fact that these two concepts are so consistently linked in the museum literature makes them useful contrasts when exploring the public's trust in the information within museums.

The idea that museums are not neutral institutions has been present in the museological literature for decades. Cameron's (1971) often-referenced "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum" (1971) argues that museums are by their very nature constructed by people with perspectives and biases. He connects this argument with the then-emerging idea that to stay relevant, museums needed to engage more deeply with their communities and take on the role, at least partly, of a "forum." In another frequently-referenced article, "From Being *About* Something to Being *For* Somebody," Weil (1999) notes that over the previous three decades, the concept of what museums should be had become, "nothing short of communal empowerment (the museum as an instrument for social change)" (p. 175).

Taking this a step further, some have argued that the very nature of museums means that they *cannot* be neutral. Alpers (1991) makes the case that the act of putting an object on display

in a museum changes the way that people perceive that object, regardless of the exhibitor's

intentions. Bennet (2005) has also made the case that placing objects in a museum creates a

cultural narrative that by default takes the perspective of those with social and cultural power.

Speaking specifically about anthropology museums, Ames (1992) argues that because museum

exhibitions are created by people within a particular historic and cultural context, they are

inherently biased and incapable of presenting a truly "neutral" presentation. He also discusses the

impact that these biases have had on seemingly scientific presentations of anthropological

material, often creating harmful misrepresentations of peoples and cultures made all the more

damaging because of the perception that these presentations come from "neutral" sources.

Stylianou-Lambert (2010) has made similar arguments about art museums and neutrality,

particularly in the digital age.

   While the idea of museums as non-neutral, socially engaged institutions has existed for

decades, in recent years it has become increasingly present in both museum research and

practice. On the research side, Sandell (2007) has conducted research into the ways in which

museums can impact visitors' prejudices and perceptions of other cultures. He conducted a case

study of the Anne Frank House and St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, two museums

that intentionally feature exhibits designed to reduce visitor prejudice, by interviewing visitors

about their museum experiences. His research found that museums could be perceived as places

where people could safely discuss prejudices and social inequality.

   Sandell's research is particularly significant given that discussions around museums as

non-neutral institutions increasingly exist not only in museological research, but among

conversations between museum practitioners. One of the most explicit signs of this is the

emergence of #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, a social media movement centered around discussions

about museums as non-neutral spaces (Autry, 2017; Murawski, 2017). Another social media movement, #museumsrespondtoFerguson, focused on the role that museums play in perpetuating or combating racial inequities (Incluseum, 2014; Jennings, 2015). Conversations about the relationship between museums and neutrality have also been featured on AAM's Center for the Future of Museums blog, with a focus on the non-neutrality of museums (Center for the Future of Museums, 2015; Kelley, 2016). Organizations like the Incluseum and Museum Hue foster discussion about museums' role in social justice movements and actively encourage museums to become more engaged with issues of social equity.

The issue of museum non-neutrality has become increasingly salient among museum professionals in part because museums are increasingly putting these ideas into practice by tackling social issues within their exhibitions and their programming. Many museums are increasingly taking a collaborative approach by working directly with communities outside of the museum, giving up or sharing their perceived role as "authorities" (Peers and Brown, 2003). One significant illustration of museums' increasing engagement with social advocacy can be found in the journal *Museums and Social Issues*, in publication since 2006. Recent volumes have explored the ways that museums engage with issues including incarceration (2017), LGBTQ rights (2016), and racial biases in policing (2015).

Recently, several museums have drawn attention from the news media for protesting the actions of the Trump administration (Gardenswartz, 2017; Scott, 2017). On the day of President Trump's inauguration, Queens Museum hosted an event for making protest signs (Queens Museum, 2017) and Brooklyn Museum hosted a marathon reading of Langston Hughes "Let America Be America Again" (Brooklyn Museum, 2017). Following the issuing of the Trump administration's travel ban on January 27, 2017, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) replaced

several works of art in its galleries with works by artists from the countries included in the ban, accompanied by a label explaining the artist's origins and a statement that the museum had taken this action "to affirm the ideas of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States" (Scott, 2017). While prohibited from taking direct political action per their status as 501c3 organizations, these institutions chose to take a stance on this issue.

Summary

The literature indicates that the public has a high level of trust in museums as sources of information, yet frequently attribute that trust to a perception that museums are neutral, unbiased spaces. This is consistent with literature addressing trust in sources of information more broadly, as perceptions of neutrality are often seen to be an important factor in assessing a source's trustworthiness. However, museums are increasingly moving away from "neutral" stances and embracing social engagement. This raises the question of what the public's trust in the information presented in these non-neutral museums looks like, a question that has not been addressed in depth in the current literature. Sandell (2007) has explored questions of trust in socially-engaged museums, however this research was only one part of a much larger study and was not examined in great depth. As museums move towards increasing their engagement with social issues, understanding the public's trust in the information presented in these institutions will be critical to understanding the relationships between museums and the public.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of visitors' trust in museums that are actively addressing contemporary social issues in their exhibits. This study was driven by two research questions:

1) What is the nature of visitor's trust in the information presented in museum exhibits that address one or more social issues?

2) What aspects of an exhibit on social issues contribute to visitors' thinking about the trustworthiness of the information in that exhibit?

This study used a descriptive survey design (Cresswell, 2014) in which data was collected from a random sample of museum visitors with the goal of generalizing findings to a larger population. Data were collected through in-person, facilitated interviews with adult museum visitors. This chapter describes the procedures of participant sampling, data collection, and analysis of collected data.

Research Sites

Data were collected at three research sites that met the following criteria: 1) the museum had an exhibit that addressed a social issue within their community; 2) the museum was a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network of organizations that connect places of memory to contemporary human rights issues; 3) the exhibit included significant content related to one or more contemporary social issues; and 4) the exhibit had been recognized as actively engaging with these social issues, such as receiving awards for social engagement or being featured in websites or blogs as socially-engaged exhibits. Data were collected at three exhibits:

1) *Honoring Our Journey* at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American

    Experience, Seattle, WA

    This exhibit explores the experiences and history of Asian Pacific Islander Americans

(APIAs) in coming to and living in the United States. It addresses contemporary issues of

prejudice, racism, and stereotypes against APIAs, as well as the complexities of APIA identity.

These contemporary social issues are explored throughout the exhibit but are not the exhibits'

exclusive focus; other topics include historic APIA immigration trends and patterns, cultural

contributions of APIAs to the United States, and the incarceration of Japanese Americans during

World War II.

2) *Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration* at Eastern State Penitentiary,

    Philadelphia, PA

    This exhibit explores the challenges and failures of mass incarceration in the United

States. The entire exhibit is dedicated to encouraging visitors to consider recent trends in the

American prison system and the ways that the current system of mass incarceration isn't

working. It is located in Eastern State Penitentiary, a prison that operated from 1829 to 1971 and

is currently a historic site. While most of the site is a "stabilized ruin" focused on the prison's

history, *Prisons Today* is focused on the contemporary prison system and there are contemporary

art installations throughout the site that explore both historic and contemporary incarceration.

3) *#1 in Civil Rights: The African American Freedom Struggle in St. Louis* at the Missouri

    History Museum, St. Louis, MO

    This exhibit explores the role that St. Louis played in the Civil Rights Movement. It

covers material from Missouri's early days as a territory through the present day. The final

section of the exhibition addresses the unrest in Ferguson following the shooting of Michael

Brown and encourages visitors to consider these and other contemporary events within the context of the larger civil rights movement.

Data Collection

Data were collected through facilitated interviews. Participants were selected using convenience sampling as they exited the exhibition space. Only guests 18 and over were sampled. Visitors were informed of the purpose of the study, told that participation was entirely voluntary, and asked to give verbal consent to participate. All interviews were recorded to ensure accurate capturing of participants' responses. Data were collected from 57 visitors, with 16 interviews conducted at the Wing Luke Museum, 22 interviews conducted at Eastern State Penitentiary, and 19 interviews conducted at the Missouri History Museum.

Each interview consisted of four sections (see Appendix A for interview guide). Section one asked visitors to use a whiteboard and magnets to mark their agreement or disagreement with statements about whether they thought the information in the exhibit they had just exited was trustworthy, clear, balanced, out-of-date, and inaccurate. Visitors were then asked to explain each rating. Next visitors repeated the process, this time answering questions about whether they agreed or disagreed the museum overall was trustworthy, transparent, biased, or neutral. Section three sought to understand participant's thoughts about socially-engaged museums more broadly. Section four collected basic demographic data from guests.

Data Analysis

All audio data were transcribed and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed through emergent content analysis procedures (Patton, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Specifically, responses were analyzed using an emergent, inductive coding system that identified repeated themes across participant responses. All

interviews were coded and analyzed using the rubric (Appendix B). A critical friend reviewed the coding matrix, and asked questions to enhance the reliability of the analysis.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that participants had self-selected to go through an exhibit that addressed a social issue, potentially creating a bias towards visitors with an interest in social issues. This may mean that visitors in this study have a higher level of trust in the information presented in these exhibitions than the general public, limiting the degree to which the findings can be generalized to non-visitors. Another limitation pertains to the generalizability of the three exhibits selected as research sites. The exhibits addressed different social issues, but with some similarities (for example, racial profiling and bias). The findings of this study may not apply to exhibits addressing different social issues, or who approach their social issue in a different way.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

In this chapter, results are summarized by research question. Data were analyzed according to the coding rubric found in Appendix B.

Research Question 1: What is the nature of visitors' trust in the information presented in museum exhibits that address one or more social issues?

This section will address the degree to which visitors said that they agreed that the information in the exhibit was trustworthy, as well as their overall trust in the exhibiting museum. It examines how visitors' perceptions of other aspects of the exhibit and their personal beliefs regarding museums encouraging social issues correlated with their ratings for the information's trustworthiness.

<u>Trust in an exhibit's information</u>

Visitors were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statement, "In general, I think that the information I encountered in the exhibition was trustworthy" on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. As seen in Figure 1, visitors reported high levels of trust in the information presented in the exhibitions, with an average rating of 6.14 (s.d.=1.11; n=57).

Figure 1: Visitors' ratings of the trustworthiness of the information presented in the exhibit (N=57)

Agreement that the information in the exhibition is trustworthy
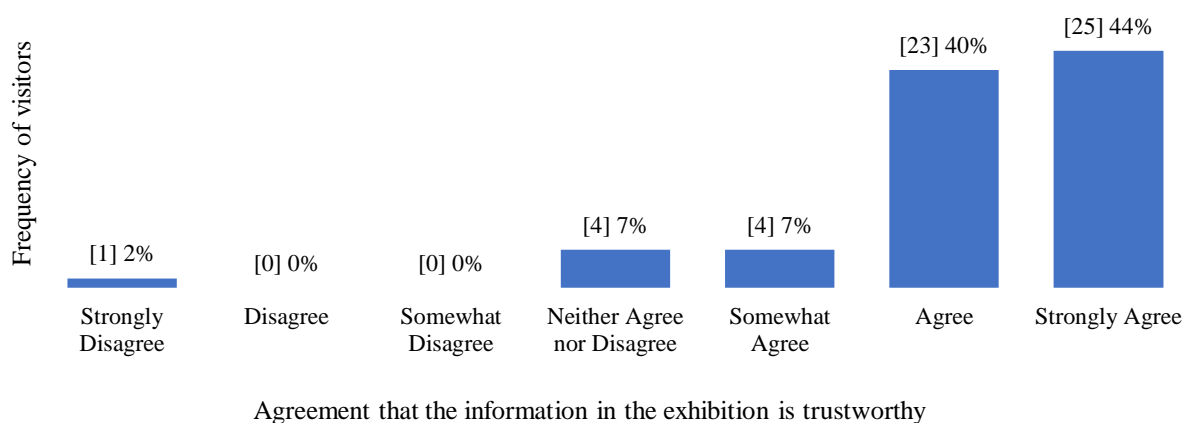
The one visitor who said they strongly disagreed that the exhibit's information was trustworthy explained that it was their third visit to the exhibit. On their first visit they had a positive reaction to the information provided in the exhibit. On their second visit, however, they visited with their grandmother who had experienced the events featured in the exhibit, causing them to have a different understanding of the information presented:

> *"The very first time I came by myself… I thought that the information was what it was supposed to be, because it was my first time and I really didn't know the history. Until my second time, when I actually brought my grandmother. And it changed all of my views because for my first time, if you would've caught me the first time all of my answers would have been over here [Visitor indicated "agreement" side of the scale]. OK. But now that I have the correct information from somebody who lived it and went through it and was like centered and you know involved in it, I'm leaning on all of my answers being on the disagree with the information because it's sugarcoated for the kids."*

How visitors' perceptions of the exhibit's content influenced their trust in the information.

Visitors were asked to rate how much they agreed with four characterizations of the exhibit's content: a) clarity of information; b) timeliness of the information; c) balance of the information; and d) accuracy of the information. The goal was to identify which factors, if any, were related to visitors' perceptions of the information's trustworthiness. Table 1 shows visitors' average ratings. Also, it shows significant positive correlations between all four aspects of the exhibit's content and visitors' trust in the information. For example, visitors who strongly agreed that the exhibit's content was clear also strongly agreed that the exhibit's information was trustworthy.

Table 1: Visitors' average ratings of characteristics related to the information presented in the exhibit (scale: 1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree).

"In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibition was…	Average Rating	n=	Correlated with Trustworthiness of Exhibit Information? (p>.05)
Clear	6.21	57	Yes
Balanced	5.75	57	Yes
Out of date	1.95	56	Yes
Inaccurate	1.84	57	Yes

How visitors' expectations for exhibit content influenced their trust in the information.

Visitors were asked what kind of information they expected to see during their visit. Visitors who said that they saw something that they did not expect to see in the exhibit provided significantly lower ratings for the trustworthiness of the information in the exhibit than those who did not (5.50; n=10). Of these, four visitors mentioned not expecting to see information about contemporary issues, while the other six visitors mentioned other unexpected elements such as the inclusion of a particular ethnic group or a focus on history.

How visitors' beliefs about the role of the museum in encouraging social action influenced their trust in the exhibition's information.

Visitors were asked whether they believed that museums should encourage people to take action on social issues. Most visitors provided a positive response (54%, n=31), while 26% (n=15) provided a negative response. An additional 6% (n=11) responded that it would depend on the type of museum:

> *"All museums? I don't know, it depends on the mission of the museum. Like this type of museum, it's very moving. Some museums are not moving. It's just, 'Okay, this is history. Here's a pottery dated 3000 B.C.' That doesn't really move me… this one, there's more of a social element to it. Impact. It's more impactful."*

> *"I can see why that should be perhaps a call to action in a museum like this. In other museums it's more difficult to see the link, for me… if I visit a museum on*

the Second World War, in Europe about D Day, per say there isn't a social issue as such directly behind it."

Five visitors (9%) responded with uncertainty. There was no correlation found between participants' opinions about whether museums should encourage people to take action on social issues and their ratings for the trustworthiness of the information in the exhibition.

Trust in the museum overall

How visitors' perceptions of the museum influenced their trust in the institution overall.

Visitors were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statement, "In general, I think that [the museum] is trustworthy" on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. As seen in Figure 2, visitors reported high levels of trust in the presenting museums overall, with an average rating of 6.21 (s.d.=0.79; n=57).

Figure 2: Visitors' ratings of the trustworthiness of the museum overall (N=57)

Agreement that the information in the exhibition is trustworthy
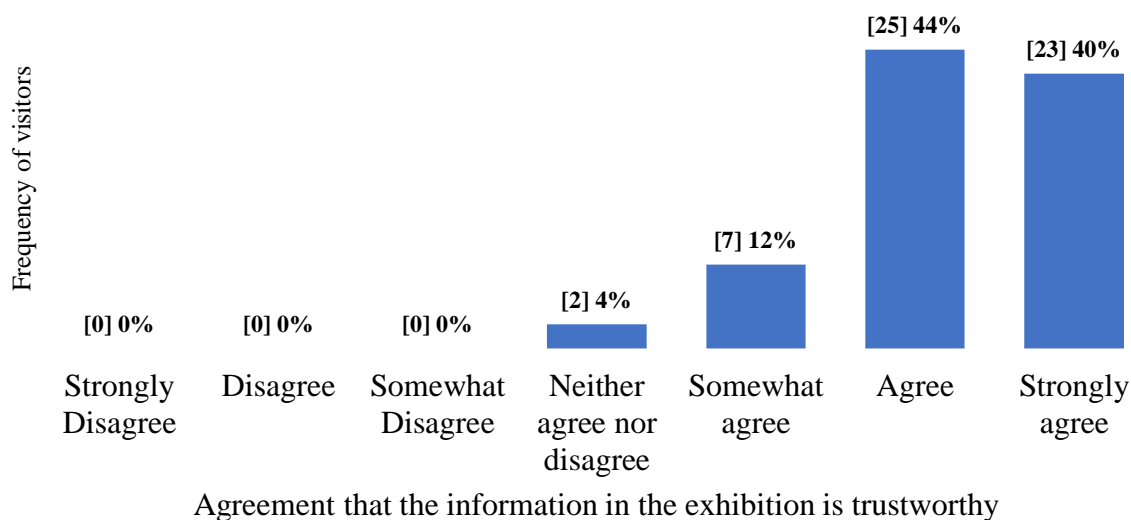
Visitors' ratings for the museums' overall trustworthiness were positively correlated with their ratings for the information presented in the exhibit. Visitors were also asked to rate how much they agreed with three characterizations of the museum: transparency, neutrality, and bias.

As seen in Table 2, none of these correlated with visitors' ratings for the trustworthiness of the exhibits' information.

Table 2: Visitors' average ratings of qualities related to the museum overall (scale: 1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree)

"In general, I think that [the museum] is…"	Average Rating	n=	Correlated with Trustworthiness of Exhibition Information? (p>.05)
Trustworthy	6.21	57	Yes
Transparent	5.68	57	No
Neutral	5.05	57	No
Biased	2.98	57	No

How perceived neutrality and bias influenced visitors' trust in the museum overall.

While visitors' perceptions of the museum's neutrality and bias were not found to be correlated with the perceived trustworthiness of the exhibits' information, there was a statistically significant correlation between visitors' ratings of the museum's overall trustworthiness and their ratings for both the museum's overall neutrality and bias (p<.05). Visitors were more likely to provide higher scores for the museums' overall trustworthiness if they also provided a low rating for the museums' bias and a high rating for the museum's neutrality.

How patterns of visitation influenced visitors' trust in the museum overall.

Sixty-seven percent (n=38) of the visitors in this study were visiting the museum for the first time, while 33% (n=19) had been to the museum at least once before. First-time visitors on average rated the museum's trustworthiness as 6.11 on a 7-point scale, while repeat visitors rated their trust as 6.21 on the same scale. The difference in these ratings is statistically significant, with first-time visitors provided significantly lower ratings for the museum's overall trustworthiness than did repeat visitors (p<.05).

Visitors were also asked to estimate how many museums they had visited in the past twelve months. There was no correlation found between visit frequency and ratings for the trustworthiness of the information in the exhibition.

Summary of Research Question 1

Overall, visitors reported having a high level of trust in the information presented in the exhibit and in the presenting museum. Level of trust was found to correlate with visitors' perception of the information's' clarity, timeliness, accuracy, and balance, their overall trust in the museum, whether they encountered something they did not expect in the exhibit, and whether they were first-time visitors. There was no correlation found between visitors' trust in the exhibit's information and their beliefs regarding museums encouraging social action, any aspects of the museum other than its perceived trustworthiness, or their overall museum visitation frequency.

Research Question 2: What do visitors consider when determining the trustworthiness of the information in that museum?

This section will explore visitors' explanations for why they did or did not trust the information in the exhibit, as well as the museum overall. Several themes emerged across visitors' responses, including the presence of evidence, the perceive accuracy of the information, and trust in the presenting museum.

Visitors who trusted the exhibit's information

The most frequently-mentioned factor that visitors discussed when asked why they found the exhibit's information trustworthy was the presence of supporting evidence (44%, n=25). Visitors specifically mentioned seeing facts, numbers, and dates (n=9), physical objects or documents (n=8), evidence of research (n=7), and the presence of first person narratives (n=5).

Seven visitors mentioned seeing something related to sources in general but did not specify what they saw. Several visitors mentioned seeing multiple types of evidence supporting the exhibition's trustworthiness, such as one visitor who stated:

> *"I mean, they have a lot of historical facts and personal quotes that corroborate the facts. And they had videos of interviews, so I thought they did a good job showing where they got their information."*

The second most frequently mentioned factor was the perceived accuracy of the information on view (30%, n=17). Three visitors said that they felt that the exhibit seemed accurate in general, with statements like, "I trust that what they're trying to educate the community on and visitors on is accurate." More common, however, were visitors who said that the information on view in the exhibit seemed accurate in light of their own personal experiences, previous knowledge, or research (n=15). Visitors mentioned a range of sources for their corroborating knowledge and experiences, including school, personal reading, family stories, and visits to other museums:

> *"I think a lot of it's just based on what I know already, research that I've done and what I've learned in school."*

> *"I think about the stories of grandparents and elder aunts and uncles, just reading some of the things I remember them talking about and experiencing in some way."*

> *"From my own personal research and personal experiences I found things just to be accurate… I've been to other Asian American museums in California. I'm part Japanese so I know quite a bit about the internment, and everything that was presented was everything I've ever studied or heard about."*

Just over a quarter of visitors said that they based their trust in the information in the exhibit at least partly on their trust in the presenting institution (28%, n=16). Specifically, visitors mentioned having knowledge of the people running the organization (n=6), having a

general trust in the institution (n=6), trusting a government-run organization (n=3), and a belief

that the organization would not present inaccurate information due to public scrutiny (n=2):

> *"The Wing Luke Museum, it's run by people with Asian American immigrant and refugee experiences… when a museum is founded by people like that you sort of trust that they can accurately represent what that viewpoint is."*
>
> *"I trust the Missouri History Museum as an institution"*
>
> *"It's in my brain that a museum put on by Philadelphia should be trustworthy."*
>
> *"They're not going to put out something [incorrect] in the field knowing full well anybody could dispute it and prove it wrong."*

Of the 16 visitors who mentioned their trust in the institution, more than half (n=9) were

visiting the museum for the first time.

Some visitors described their reasons for trusting the information in the exhibit as coming

from a position of assumed trust (23%, n=13). These visitors described having a general feeling

or sense that the information was trustworthy (n=5), having no reason not to trust the information

(n=5), and not detecting any signs of bias or skewing of information (n=4).

Another reason that visitors provided to explain their trust in the exhibit's information

had to do with qualities they found in the information's presentation (21%, n=12). Visitors said

that the information appeared balanced (n=5), clear (n=3), and well-organized (n=2):

> *"It had to do with that balance of positive and negative. If something were only trying to highlight all the great ways that we as Americans have treated different people from different Asian descent, I would say, huh, don't know that that's a really accurate or trustworthy way of representing things."*
>
> *"That goes back to where it was clear, because it wasn't just random adjectives thrown out there."*
>
> *"Everything was there and was put together well."*

Three visitors mentioned other attributes, specifically that the information was complete ("Nothing seemed cut out"), up to date ("The Ferguson thing"), and represented a diverse population ("it addressed race, status, and gender").

Seven visitors, representing 12% of all participants, said that they trusted the information in the exhibit because of a generalized trust in museums. Responses included, "…going into a museum, you take it as fact," "…first of all, we're in a museum, so I figured that it's probably true…" and "…just going into museums I feel like the information is definitely trustworthy."

Six visitors provided explanations for their trust in the information in the exhibit that did not fall into emergent categories. These included:

> *"I mainly said that because it didn't put the US in a positive light. And I'm really suspicious of everything just like, 'We're the best.' Clearly we're not. So in that perspective I thought that it was trustworthy, that we were willing to see the bad in ourselves."*

> *"From my perspective it was topics that I wasn't real informed about. So I trust in what it said."*

> *"The way they had different actors going through and presenting the various different scenes and settings of the area. So I think that gave it a little bit of trustworthiness or verification"*

> *".. a lot of it is documented well documented history… so it seems pretty legit."*

> *"Unless you were there…I can't doubt it."*

> *"I mean it's somebody's opinion and you just have to trust that the person that put that exhibit together is trying to give you a broad spectrum of everything."*

Visitors who did not trust the exhibit's information

Nine visitors (16%) provided reasons why they did not trust the information in the exhibit. Specifically, visitors mentioned needing to personally verify the information before trusting it (n=4), a generalized skepticism about information in general (n=2), or a belief that no

exhibit could be fully unbiased or complete (n=2). Three visitors explained their lack of trust in ways that did not match other emergent categories:

> *"I think I'd probably say that about any exhibit that is focusing on the prison today…I think it's hard it's hard for me to believe that something that is displayed as being so current is completely trustworthy. I trust that something that's been put in here from 200 years ago is trustworthy because that's had many people over many lengths of time explain why and how that information was come to. Currently, that is an opinion rather than fact."*

> *"Because it's not clear. There's not all the information that's provided… I don't think it's trustworthy because they need to be teaching these children everything…did you see how many cell phones were in there? Kids weren't even looking. Why? Why would you need to learn that information if it's all sugar-coated? So why would I trust that?"*

> *"Just because like I feel like it's one of those moments that it's coming from just politicians, it's not necessarily reflective of like the average person and these political parties are ran by specific people who are also sponsored by things…"*

<u>Why visitors trusted the museum overall</u>

When asked to explain why they trusted the museum overall, the most frequent response was that the museum provided evidence (35%, n=20). Visitors who mentioned evidence specifically talked about the presence of artifacts, documents, and pictures (n=7), the use of first-person narratives and quotes (n=6), the museum's use of research (n=6), and the presence of data and statistics (n=2).

One third of visitors described having an assumed trust in the museum (33%, n=19), including having a generalized trust in all museums (n=6), seeing no signs of bias (n=5), and seeing no reason not to trust the museum (n=4):

> *"Well I think that really any history museum, especially one that's open to the public, has to be trustworthy in general. I haven't seen the rest of these exhibits so I don't know any information from what was other than that section specifically. But I think that the museum has an obligation to display information that's correct…it would just be wrong for any museum to warp information, I guess."*

> *"I don't see any reason why it wouldn't be…I see no reason why it wouldn't be trustworthy."*

"They weren't trying to make you have an opinion, like they weren't trying to say force anything down your throat. So it was why I said trustworthy."

Visitors also mentioned trusting the museum because they perceived the information the museum presented to be accurate (16%, n=9), the people behind the organization (16%, n=9), their previous knowledge of or experience with the museum (16%, n=9), and qualities related to the information presented such as consistency and clarity (16%, n=9). Fourteen percent of visitors (n=8) said that they trusted the museum because of the museum's connections to its local community. Five visitors (9%) said that they trusted the museum because they believed that it was just presenting information and facts:

"... the biggest part of the museum is to get out the information. They're not trying to do anything but make sure you're getting information on what happened. And just the history of what Seattle's been through with Asian people here."

Summary of Research Question 2

Visitors most frequently cited the presence of evidence as a justification for both their trust in the exhibit's information and their trust in the museum overall. After evidence, visitors most frequently cited the information's perceived accuracy, their trust in the presenting museum, an assumption of trust, specific qualities of the information presented, and trust in museums in general. Visitors who said why they did not trust the information most frequently cited a need to personally verify the information presented.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of visitors' trust in museums that are actively addressing contemporary social issues in their exhibits. Data were collected through facilitated interviews with 57 visitors to three museum exhibitions that featured contemporary social issues. Quantitative responses to Likert scales were analyzed to determine the degree to which visitors trusted the information in these exhibits and what other information qualities correlated with trustworthiness. Open-ended responses were analyzed through emergent coding to identify what factors visitors considered when determining the trustworthiness of the exhibits' information. As museums increasingly address contemporary social issues in their exhibitions, this study contributes to discussions regarding how this trend may affect visitors' trust in socially-engaged institutions.

Conclusions

Overall, visitors reported having a high level of trust in the information presented in exhibits that address contemporary social issues. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that the public has a high level of trust in the information presented in museums overall (Ashton and Hamilton, 2008; Conrad, Letourneau, and Northrup, 2009; Dilenschneider, 2017; Griffiths, King, Pomerantz, 2008; IMLS, 2008; Museums Association, 2013; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

When explaining why they trusted both the information in the exhibits and the museums overall, visitors most frequently mentioned the presence of supporting evidence such as facts, artifacts, first person narratives, and research. This is consistent with previous research about the public's trust in history museums and historic sites, which found that trust was frequently based on the presence of authentic artifacts (Conrad et. al, 2013; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). It also

expands on these studies by showing that visitors consider not only physical objects as supporting trustworthiness, but other forms of information such as quotes, statistics and numbers, and research.

Visitors were more likely to find the exhibits' information trustworthy if they also found that it was clear, accurate, up-to-date, and balanced. Accuracy seems to be particularly important to visitors, as it was also the second most frequently mentioned factor when visitors explained why they found the information trustworthy. By contrast, only five visitors mentioned balance and three visitors mentioned clarity when explaining their reasons for trusting the exhibits' information. This is consistent with research exploring why people trust sources of news, which found that accuracy was the most significant factor that people considered when assessing the trustworthiness of a news sources (API, 2016). In determining whether the information presented was accurate, visitors frequently checked the information they encountered against their own past knowledge and experiences; the information was deemed accurate if it was consistent with what the visitor already knew.

When assessing the trustworthiness of an exhibit's information, visitors frequently factored in their perceptions of the presenting museum overall. Visitors were more likely to trust the information in the exhibit if they trusted the museum overall, and more than a quarter of visitors explained their trust in the information as stemming from a trust in the presenting museum.

While some visitors explained their trust in the exhibits' information as a reasoned process of verifying evidence and corroborating experiences, other visitors described trusting the information because of a position of assumed trust. Similarly, many visitors described trusting the exhibits' information because of an inherent trust in all museums as sources of trustworthy

information. Despite overall trends showing decreased trust in public institutions (Edelman, 2018), this study suggests that visitors view museums as inherently trustworthy even when they address contemporary social issues

At the same time, visitors who mentioned seeing something unexpected in the exhibit were less likely to find the information in the exhibit trustworthy. This suggests that some visitors go into exhibits with certain expectations about the kind of information they will encounter there, and that finding information that does not match those expectations can lead to a lower level of trust. Given this study's focus on museum exhibits that address contemporary social issues, it is noteworthy that four of these visitors specifically mentioned being surprised that there was contemporary information in the exhibition. There may be a disconnect between visitors' expectations that historic sites and museums present *only* historical information and these museums' goals of connecting history to contemporary issues (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, n.d.).

Implications

Given the value that visitors place on the presence of evidence when determining whether a museum or a museum exhibit is trustworthy, museums developing exhibits that address contemporary social issues should take care to provide solid supporting evidence for the information presented. It is likely that this implication stands true for museum exhibits in general as well, not only those that address contemporary social issues. Supporting evidence can take many forms, including authentic objects, artifacts, and documents, quotes and first-person narratives, and well-cited research.

The emphasis that visitors placed on accuracy in general and consistency with past knowledge and experiences specifically support a constructivist understanding of learning in

museum spaces. To increase or maintain visitor trust in museum exhibits, museums might incorporate information or objects that are likely to be familiar to visitors upon which they can build new knowledge. Front-end evaluation may help in this process, as it can help museums have a better understanding of what visitors are likely to already know about the information presented in the exhibition.

Museums might also improve or maintain visitors' trust in the information presented in their exhibits by preparing visitors prior to their visit and establishing what visitors can expect to encounter in the exhibition space. This might address the finding that visitors who encountered something they were not expecting were less likely to trust the information in the exhibit. Clear marketing, online information, and communication materials such as signage in the museums' entrance can help inform visitors and avoid potentially mismatched expectations.

Recommendations for Future Research

The three sites selected for this study all addressed historical topics, which necessarily affected visitors' responses to the questionnaire. Future research could explore visitor trust in other types of museums that address contemporary social issues, such as art museums or science centers. It might also be fruitful to study visitors across a larger number of museums, to increase the generalizability of the findings. In addition, future studies might utilize larger sample sizes in order to identify additional correlations between visitors' trust and other factors, such as membership status or visitation frequency.

This study specifically looked at visitors to museums that address contemporary issues. While this captured visitors' immediate reaction to a museum exhibit, on-site sampling meant that the results could not be generalized to the larger public. This is noteworthy because individuals who do not trust museums that address contemporary social issues may be less likely

to visit museums that they know address those issues. Future research might look at how the

general public trusts museums that address social issues more broadly, including non-visitors.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Part 1

First, please place these magnets on the whiteboard saying how much you agree with the statements about the information that you encountered in the exhibit you just visited. It might have been things that you read on labels, saw in a video, heard from staff or volunteers, [other museum-specific things].

1) Mark the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit was…"

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Clear							
Out-of-date							
Balanced							
Trustworthy							
Inaccurate							

Thanks! Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about the answers that you gave here.

1) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is clear." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

2) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is out of date." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

3) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is balanced." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

4) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is trustworthy." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

5) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is inaccurate." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

Part 2

[Flip over whiteboard.] Now I'd like to do the same thing, only this time I'm asking you how much you agree with the statements about [the museum] in general, as an institution. Please think about your overall experience with [the museum] as you answer these questions.

2) Mark the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

"In general, I think that [the museum] is…"

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Trustworthy							
Transparent							
Biased							
Neutral							

Thanks! Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about the answers that you gave here.

1)   You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that [the museum] is trustworthy." Why did you say that? (*Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?*

2)   You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that [the museum] is transparent." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

3) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that [the museum] is neutral." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

4) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that [the museum] is biased." Why did you provide that answer? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

Part 3

1) What kind of information did you expect to encounter during your visit to [the museum] today? (Probe: Were you aware that this exhibit was on view at [the museum]?")

2) Please look at this picture (*show picture of a "Museums Are Not Neutral" t-shirt*). Can you tell me what you think that means?

a. *(If respondent provides an answer other than "unsure")* Do you agree with that idea? Why or why not?

3) In general, do you think that museums should encourage people to take action on social issues? Why or why not?

Part 4

Is this your first visit to [the museum]?   □   **Yes**   □   **No**

If not, many times have you visited [the museum] in the past 12 months?

□   **0 - 1**   □   **2 - 3**   □   **4+**

Are you a member of [the museum]?

□   **Yes**   □   **No**

Approximately how many times did you visit a museum, zoo, aquarium, or botanic garden in the past twelve months? If you visited the same institution multiple times, count each time that you visited.

□   **0 - 1**   □   **2 - 3**   □   **4-6**   □   **7-11**   □   **12+**

Appendix B: Coding Rubric

The codes presented in this rubric emerged through extensive review of all of the data. A code was assigned to a theme or idea that was mentioned by at least three different visitors. Within some codes, responses were broken down into sub-codes that were mentioned by at least two different visitors.

6) You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that the information that I encountered in the exhibit is trustworthy." Why did you say that? (Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?)

CODE	CODE DESCRIPTOR	EXAMPLE
1	**Trust in institution**	
1a	People behind organization	"The Wing Luke museum, it's run by people with Asian American immigrant and refugee experiences… when a museum is founded by people like that you sort of trust that they can accurately represent what that viewpoint is."
1b	Government organization	"It's in my brain that a museum put on by Philadelphia should be trustworthy." "…it's a state run facility, I would trust the information they put out there."
1c	Institution-specific	"I love the Eastern State Penitentiary…I just think they have a reputation here of showing accurate facts…" "I trust the Missouri History Museum as an institution"
1d	Public scrutiny	"It would be pretty bad if they would make inaccurate data public" "They're not going to put out something [incorrect] in the field because knowing full well anybody could dispute it and prove it wrong."
2	**Trust in all museums**	"… we're in a museum so I figured that it's probably true" "I don't feel that an exhibit for a historic place like this would not be credited or credible information" "…going into a museum, you take it as fact."
3	**Accuracy**	

3a	Personal experience or knowledge	"… everything that was presented was everything that I've ever studied or heard about" "It's backed up by history classes that I've taken, so my own personal experiences."
3b	Unspecified	"I trust that what they're trying to educate the community on and visitors is accurate." "… it seemed accurate."
4	**Evidence**	
4a	Research	"It appeared that the research was very broad and deep so that makes me feel like it was trustworthy" "Based off the research that they did"
4b	1st person	"… all of the sources and first person…" "Hearing what [the prisoners] have to say makes me feel it was trustworthy."
4c	Unspecified	"…I thought they did a good job showing where they got their information." "To me it seemed to be from reputable sources…"
4d	Physical objects/attributes	"… they had a lot of antiques." "…there's physical evidence actually there…"
4e	Facts, dates, numbers	"There were facts and figures so you can trust that stuff." "…they sort of just presented the numbers."
5	**Content Qualities**	
5c	Clear	"That goes back to where it was clear…" "To me it's the same thing as the clear…"
5e	Well-organized	"…its organized so effectively and efficiently." "Everything was there and was put together well."
5f	Balance	"…presenting topics in just a respectful and typically balanced way." "…there seems to be a balance of type of speakers involved."

5g	Other	"…because it addressed race, status, and gender." "The court cases for sure… I did like reading about the universities."
6	**Assumed trust**	
6a	General feeling	"The feeling that I got from the exhibit was that it was trustworthy." "…just seems trustworthy, it seems like they know what they're talking about."
6b	No detection of skew/bias	"It didn't like it didn't seem like anything was skewed." "I didn't think the information was meant to lean one way or the other"
6c	No reason not to	"I have a general trust but no reason to doubt it." "I have no reason not to."
7	**Distrust**	
7a	Need for personal verification	"I have no way to fact check everything that they said. So I had no idea if it's trustworthy or not." "Without doing more research, I can't verify that everything is true and somebody is not trying to steer me down a path for a reason."
7b	Generalized	"I'm a very paranoid person in general. I question everything." "I'm always skeptical"
7c	Inherent bias	"It's been put there by someone and I highly doubt that it doesn't have a swing." "…they can't get all the information…"
7d	Other	"I think it's hard it's hard for me to believe that something that is displayed as being so current cannot have, is completely trustworthy." "Because it's not clear. There's not all the information that's you know provided… I don't think it's trustworthy because they need to be teaching these children everything."

| | | "…it's coming from just politicians it's not it's not necessarily reflective of like the average person" |
| 9 | **Other** | |

Part 2

1)   You said that you RESPONSE with the statement "In general, I think that [the museum] is trustworthy." Why did you say that? (*Probe: What did you see or hear during your visit that made you think that?*

CODE	CODE DESCRIPTOR	EXAMPLE
1	**Evidence**	
1a	Artifacts/documents/ pictures	"…the pictures, their stories. Just I guess it validated what I was learning." "You have the picture the visual aids to sort of really like submerge yourself in the setting and feel like you're there."
1b	1st person	"…they corroborate that with personal experiences." "…the fact that they put sources as well as plenty of primary sources that show you what they are talking about…"
1c	Research	"I thought they have a lot of good information, it shows that they've researched." "they've really done their responsibilities of like trying to find all the information…"
1d	Data/statistics	"…you have the visual aids that provide statistics, dates and all of that. So I think that really makes it very credible." "they're trustworthy to me because I'm an engineer, I like data. When I see data I think, "okay I can trust these guys.""
1e	Unspecified	"In general they try to produce like a historically accurate, I guess evidence base for their message."
2	**Just information**	"They're not trying to do anything but make sure you're getting information on what happened."

		"I think it's not really positioned in a way to try to influence anything other than providing historical context. This is what happened, exactly that." "I'm not sure how you even, a certain, how a museum can or cannot be trustworthy. You know other than sort of gathering information."
3	**Balanced**	"…I think they've tried to give a broader set of information from all angles…" "Because like as I said it gives both the prisoners, the guards side."
4	**Assumed trust**	
4a	No reason not to	"I have nothing to say that it's not trustworthy, you know" "I see no reason why it wouldn't be trustworthy."
4b	Trust in all museums	"…a museum wouldn't make inaccurate facts probably public." "…the idea that a museum should provide accurate data to the end user or viewer, it's always… that's my idea when walking in."
4c	No signs of bias	"I trust what they're telling me because they haven't tried to impose an opinion upon me." "Bias, I don't really see any bias."
4d	Other	"I'm not sure, so let's just assume that it's trustworthy." "…you get the feeling that you're getting information that's worthy of trust."
5	**Accurate**	
5a	Matches personal knowledge/experiences	"…it's because of what I have learned to be accurate history… And informal education, you know, personal readings about Asian history in America, the United States of America." "Similar to how I had the same experience in Ireland. How they talked about a lot of the same themes."
5b	In general	"I believe what is being presented is very accurate. So it's trustworthy for me."

		"…since we're in it like I feel like it would be more accurate that way."
6	**People behind organization**	"…the museum probably has more people who this is their field of study, professionals in their field." "…because of where it's funded from and supported by."
7	**Organization-specific**	
7a	Reputation	"Similar to the reasons I said before, just historical knowledge of the mission and the reasons behind the Wing Luke museum…" "Yeah probably the reputation, just because everyone is like oh you need to go there, it's so well known. That I just have trust in the facility."
7b	Past experiences with org	"I've been in the museum quite a bit…" "You know I've been here in the past, I've seen the people they brought in and you know the exhibits they've had."
8	**Connections to community**	"…it's like a built from community and people that are driven by either the local history or person or foundation then I tend to just trust it on that alone." "…for some reason the idea that they're invested in keeping the community alive it makes me trust them."
9	**Information Qualities**	
9a	Consistent	"That's basically where my trust comes from, the audio books and everything remaining consistent in their stories over the past few years I've been here." "I think they're consistent…"
9b	Other	"…for the most part, it was certainly displayed very trustworthily…" "…everything's well explained…" "Well again it's a lot of the information is very well compiled. It's well organized…"
10	**Not Trustworthy**	
10a	Need to fact check	"I have no way to like fact check anything."

		"With how information is accessible nowadays it's, again, I'm a skeptic and I want to do my research…"
10b	Other	"I don't think I would completely agree that it was trustworthy because I think there always is that element that may, that all is not what it seems." "I don't know if it's the whole truth, so that's the only reason I said somewhat agree."
11	**Other**	

Part 3

4) What kind of information did you expect to encounter during your visit to [the museum] today? (Probe: Were you aware that this exhibit was on view at [the museum]?")

CODE	CODE DESCRIPTOR	EXAMPLE
1	**The Exhibit**	"I came for the civil rights exhibit because I didn't know much about the history of the civil rights movement in St. Louis specifically." "I mean we came for this exhibit."
2	**Subject Area**	
2a	Local history	"I expected to see the history of Asian culture in Washington state, specifically, because it's in the international district" "I was hoping for more history like within like how it related to Philadelphia and the area and how it related to Philadelphia history as well."
2b	History, unspecified	"A lot of history information." "I kind of expected boring you know history stuff, things you've seen or read about in school."
2c	Topic - history	"Just the history of like Asians coming to America basically." "I was expecting a purely historical look into how prisons were in the past."
2d	Topic – non-history	"I guess there would be a lot of stuff about like Asia." "Information about the philosophy of incarceration for this

		particular penitentiary"
3	**Other exhibit**	
3a	Came for	"…we were driven to come here by the Bruce Lee, because the exhibit's ending on February 11…" "Today we came for the panorama exhibit."
3b	Aware of	"I mean I googled it a little bit before we came and I knew that was that was the Bruce Lee exhibition…" "I had heard about the panorama exhibit, photography is my hobby."
4	**Didn't expect**	
4a	Current/modern info	"I was surprised that there was more information about today's, the last exhibit about today's prisons." "…it was interesting to see more modern interpretations, more current events I guess that were included in the exhibit."
4b	Other	"I would say I guess I wasn't expecting as much focus on the Asian American aspect of it" "I didn't realize how rundown it was going to be. I thought it would be a bit more modernized."
5	**Experiential**	"I expected more, a little more text based about, like, why is this significant, sometime." "…they're just going to show artifacts and stuff like I definitely saw a lot of the robes and the dragon…" "I probably expected there to be more guided tours available…"
6	**Repeat Visitor**	"I didn't know it was still here because I saw it about a year ago here." "So, I've already been here before."
7	**Don't know/no expectations**	"I hadn't expected anything." "I didn't know what I was going to see. As a matter of fact, I didn't even put together a picture. I just said, let's see what they present to me."

8	Other	"What I would like to personally see on a day to day basis more of like the haunted kind of storytelling that came out of the penitentiary."
		"It was nice to have an audio guide that wasn't… I hate most audio guides, I find them really annoying."