Do Digital Mediators Create Positive Relationships between Museum Visitors and Museum Collections?

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Abstract. Digital mediators have been present for some time in museums. Often lumped in with other kinds of "interactives," digital mediators have become ever-present in exhibition galleries. But what effects do they have on the relationships made between the visitors and the objects (and exhibits) they come to see? This poster presents an early stage of a qualitative visitor experience study on the role of digital mediators in museums. Specifically, I ask: *In a museum setting, how does interacting with digital mediators affect a visitor's experience with the mediated objects.* Two museums will be the sites of the study, the the Cleveland Museum of Art and an, as yet, unselected, Scandinavian museum. The study is a part of a larger project with the Norwegian Research Council KULMEDIA that seeks to generate new knowledge about the connections between the role of cultural life and media in society and the economic and technological framework underlying them.

Keywords: museum experience, digital mediators, positive information behavior

1 Introduction & Background

The Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) has been a global leader in pushing the digital mediation envelope in museums. With the introduction of Gallery One in January 2013 [1], the CMA's original vision was to use interpretive technologies to engage visitors actively in new kinds of experiences with works of art. Considering Gallery One as more of a prototype than finished product, the CMA re-vamped and realigned their digital strategies, opening the newest version of digitally-enhanced experiences in summer 2017. Now called ArtLens, the suite of experiences and connections (mediators) includes Reveal and Zoom Wall, Studio Play, ArtLens Gallery, ArtLens Wall (formerly Collections Wall), and a newly designed ArtLens App. However, the new offerings include more than technology changes (eg. moving from touch to all gesture); they include a shift in thinking behind the scenes—from wanting to create more digital experiences for visitors, to wanting to elicit more connections to art through digital mediation (Alexander, personal communication)—that is, using digital media to connect people to collections. The CMA's digital strategy now more intentionally involves creating "relationships" between its visitors and its art; the technology is seen as an aid, *not* the experience itself.

My own research has focused on investigating human-object relationships, particularly in museums [3, 10-13] and especially those around lived experiences and deeply felt encounters with documents. CMA's shift in the latest ArtLens suite offered an ideal study site for investigating human-object connections through digital mediation. How does the CMA's implementation of digital technologies affect the relationship between museum visitors and the museum's collection? The CMA sets their goal to facilitate and enhance these relationships, inspiring visitors to explore the museum's permanent collection. Is it working? What is the impact of digital technologies on experiencing museum objects? Are digital mediators causing visitors to look more closely at actual art and forge "relationships" with objects in the galleries? What is the quality of these experiences, the well-being of the experiencers, and does the digital mediator help deepen the encounter with the mediated objects? My preliminary research question for the study is this: *In a museum setting, how does interacting with digital mediators affect a visitor's experience with the mediated objects* (in the CMA's case, original artworks)?

2   The Study

Starting in spring 2018, I will use a two-phased approach, involving observation, embedded evaluation [4], short gallery interviews, and in-depth interviews to seek answers to this research question. Phase 1 will include initial observation of visitors using the POEMS technique [8] as an exploratory tool in both the ArtLens galleries and the galleries with the artworks that are being mediated. In addition, I will conduct an in-depth literature review around positive information experiences [7], including: restorative experiences [5-6, 14], health and well-being [2], positive psychology [16], mindfulness [9]. Along with the preliminary observation process, this review will help me create my own observation tool which I will use to conduct a second round of observations that are more tightly aligned with the research question. Short interviews and satisfaction kiosks held in the galleries near the actual works of art will be conducted to find out more about visitors' connections between their ArtLens experiences and their gallery experiences and gauge their current affect. These methods of data collection, in turn, will help me design the second phase of research, which will involve in-depth semi-structured interviews with CMA museum visitors using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [17].

This study is part of a larger grant initiative called "ALM-pub" (referring to the public sphere in archives, libraries and museums), a Norwegian Research Council KULMEDIA supported project that seeks to generate new knowledge about the connections between the role of cultural life and media in society and the economic and technological framework underlying them. As such, I hope to do a second, comparative study on a Scandinavian museum that uses digital mediators to connect people with objects. In March, 2018, I will be traveling to multiple museums in Norway and Sweden in search of a second site.

This poster will present the study design as well as the most current status of the project as of the conference date. Presenting the study during the iConference will provide valuable feedback at the early stages of this project, helping to strengthen the focus and design.

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