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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# MUSEUM VISITING PATTERNS AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### ABSTRACT

How do people visit museums and inspire themselves? Existing papers focus almost entirely on the digital exhibition or marketing perspective, while other researchers have studied social media with a specific focus on how to increase the number of followers. Unlike these papers, this work puts emphasis on the digital-familiar generation, whose social media usage is among the top across age groups. With Covid-19 widespread, online information influences offline behaviors, possibly indicating the role of social media as an alternative to museum visits. To examine this idea, we provide survey evidence that consists of four parts - demographic, social media usage, museum visiting during Covid-19, and others. In short, Covid-19 has influenced museum visiting patterns but did not have much impact on the followings of museums' social media accounts. Specifically for students whose majors are art-related, they find it necessary to visit the museum in-person, suggesting that the role of social media as an alternative to museum visits is insufficient.

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## INTRODUCTION

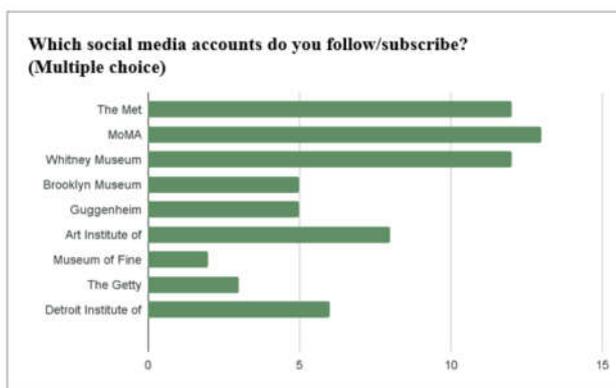
With the growing popularity and the user engagement in the use of Social Media (e.g. Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), Museums are viewing these Social Media as an exciting/lucrative/viable platform through which museums can share news, advertisements, and achievements. On November 25th, 2021, Museum of Modern Arts (MoMA)'s official Instagram account reached 5.6 million followers, setting a new record as the most-followed museum in the world. Likewise, The Metropolitan Museum (The Met) reached 4 million followers, Tate Museum has 4.1 million followers in January 2022. Globally, Musée du Louvre has 4.8 million followers, British Museum has 2 million followers, and Seoul Museum of Art has 133 thousand followers. Figure 1 illustrates the increase in subscribers for each museum in detail. Across museums, we see a clear pattern that the number of subscribers has increased significantly over the past two years. The museum's ability to attract potential visitors is further tested by the sudden rise of Covid-19 and its effects on visiting capabilities. After the first known outbreak of Covid-19 cases in December 2019, the surge of Covid cases has forced museums to temporarily close or reduce capacity.

Therefore, to investigate the relationship between Covid-19 and Social media's increasing popularity, I attempt to examine audiences' museum visiting patterns in relation to their social media usage (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube) in this paper. The paper's focus is on the motives of following social media accounts and their effectiveness in providing what the audience is looking for. This research uses survey data designed to understand the social media account usage in relation to museum visits and the survey respondents' interest in specific forms of art. We are interested in the impact of Covid-19 in museum visiting patterns as well. I have specifically focused on the museums located in the United States as English-speaking countries are taking the lead in embracing social media (Marakos, 2014). While the method used in this research has some limitations, such as not considering museums located outside the United States and the majority of survey respondents being art major \*(i.e. our sample consists of 64% students, 74% of whom majoring in art or art-related topics), I believe this survey result helps explain the impact of Social Media on museum visits in a meaningful way. As it turns out, despite the recent overall popularity in social media and active usage of SNS from museums, respondents typically

believe that SNS platforms are insufficient alternatives to museum visits.



**Figure 1. Increase in Instagram Followers in Museums (Retrieved from internet website, <https://intrack.app/>)**



**Figure 2. Museum's social media followings**

## Literature Review

**Museums' usage of SNS platform:** Museums not only serve the purpose of exhibiting works but prompt meaningful contact and communication with the public (Marakos, 2014). Therefore, the era of digitalization has provided an effective means of having significant communication in an unprecedented way. Nowadays, museums are progressively incorporating digitized methods to reach a broader audience with immersive activities, keeping up with the era of digitalization (Özdemir and Çelebi, 2017). The digitized methods of communication that the museums have used include social media and websites, the use of social media being on a rise especially amid Covid-19 lockdown.

Among various platforms, the most viable and prominent social media to communicate their activities and exhibitions, debates, gain global audiences and potential visitors are Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, among others (Kidd 2011; Spiliopoulou et al., 2014; Villaespesa 2019). After finding out the limited research on the field of social media's appeal in museums despite social media being increasingly accepted, Zafiroopoulos et al. (2015) examined the effective use of Facebook and Twitter in museums, the study finding an astonishing result that intense use and popularity in social media do not go along with activity and popularity of the other due to the cases of some museum using them poorly or having activities without specific strategies.

Therefore, to build upon previous papers, my study examines social media accounts and their effectiveness, and more importantly, the pandemic's impact on social media usage for both museums and visitors.

**Changes in visiting patterns during Covid-19:** Due to the recent global pandemic bringing unprecedented challenges, the museums had to close the buildings. The inability to access the artworks physically had left the museums with the task of handling the artworks digitally. In order to seek public access to their resources, museums have found a way to go remote by relying on digital infrastructures, accelerating digital projects, and trying new online behaviors (Clerkin & Taylor, 2021). This rapid adjustment in digitalization has demonstrated museums' relevance even in crisis through their versatility of an engaged, responsive, and participatory museum service (Crooke, 2020). However, other research has shown that while museums made vigorous digital efforts, the 'regression' in the visitor experience has come to light (Tranta et al., 2021). According to the study by Resta et al. (2021), the survey questionnaire of the level of engagement in virtual tours resulted in evidence of the need to enrich the technology and additional multimedia content of virtual tours. Furthermore, in the process of practicing the varying practices to the relationship between analog and digital data, institutions such as Smithsonian Institution had issues of trust handing over external parties for remote digitization (Lukas et al., 2021). In order to provide a response and an expansion on the mentioned previous papers, I will not only examine personal experiences in museum visitings but will also focus on the young students in order to reflect the museums' organizations particularly focusing on the services that they offer young people.

**Art students' museum visiting patterns:** Nowadays along with the digitalization and Covid-19, museums have made various efforts to keep the audience engaged and informed. Museum's social media usage has allowed the museum to reach more people, create awareness, increase participation, and inspire visitors (Özdemir & Çelebi, 2017). On the other hand, the efforts in digitalization have not always been successful. The study of Resta et al. (2021) revealed that there were limitations that could be improved by refining the quality of representation and immersive features to increase engagement. As such, the exploration of social media's efficacy and satisfaction within the use of SNS can be beneficial to both people who seek sufficient information or resources, and the museums who intend to understand what followers like, want, and need. However, contrasting from other previous findings, this paper will hone in on the perspective of followers who interact with social media rather than that of museums to understand how the museum's social media is being seen and used by the public.

**Data:** I utilize survey data to investigate the motives and outcomes of museums' usage of social media. The survey data was gathered in the following manner: In January 2022, I created an English Google survey and sent it to responders online. A total of 50 people (N = 50) responded to the survey. The representative respondents were students born around 2000 to 2003 who study in New York City. but our sample of respondents also includes diverse backgrounds - for instance, some were born in 1990, others have lived in countries such as Brazil, Thailand, and Taiwan. Section 4 further provides a more in-depth analysis of this issue. While most of the questions are multiple-choice questions (single and

multiple answers), there are short answer questions that we expect to unveil personal reasons for not following museum's social media accounts and further opinions on the museum's use of social media. But most importantly, our survey utilized such questions to gauge the impacts of social media and how they were utilized during the Covid pandemic. It is from this that we are able to deduce the impact social media have on museum visiting behaviors and motives. Those surveyed also provided information regarding their demographics and locales, allowing us to understand whether or not they had experienced museums in the United States. Due to travel limitations, this may have an impact on the outcomes for international students, perhaps preventing them from visiting not only the museums in the United States but also from entering the country. To the best of my knowledge, most existing works on museums' social media usage measure the overall impact of digitalization, whereas this paper keeps track of how survey respondents use different media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) in making a decision to visit museums.

## EMPIRICAL RESULT

**Summary of the respondents:** In order to have an understanding of who the survey respondents are, the survey starts with questions regarding gender, age, demographics, occupation, and college majors. Table 1 presents each category with the description of the percentage of respondents that fall into each category. The demographic questions were asked to the respondents in the first section.

**Table 1. Demographic Profiles for the Survey Respondents**

Variable	Percentage (%)	Variable	Percentage (%)
Gender		Country of Residence	
Male	46	South Korea	44
Female	54	United States	34
Prefer not to say	0	Others	22
Birth Year		College Major	
Before 2000	12	Fine Arts	24
2000	20	Communication Design	12
2001	12	Fashion Design	12
2002	26	Photography	8
2003	24	Other Art Majors	14
2004 +	6	Non-Art Majors	30

The survey was mostly done by people who were born in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003, each respectively representing 20%, 12%, 26%, and 24%. This result has shown that this survey was mostly done by those who currently attend college. The survey shows quite an even distribution in terms of gender, 46% that of men and 54% that of women. Those surveyed mostly live currently in the U.S. North-east coast, occupying about 54% of the survey respondents, while 18% lived in the non-U.S. While a concern could arise as the majority of respondents are located in a specific area, I believe that this is in fact beneficial in the sense that most museums are located in the northeast area. The rest of the survey respondents live on the West coast, midwest coast, and south coast, being 14%, 10%, 4%, respectively. The sample imbalance in the region of their school or college is indeed visible in this survey: 55% of students study in NYC, 4% study in the Tri-state area, 46% study elsewhere in the United States. However, due to the majority studying in NYC, the survey showed great participation in museum visitings and the Covid-19 impact.

Following demographic questions, I specifically asked the respondents' college majors in order to discern their interests and motives behind their decision-making in following the social media accounts of museums and museum visiting. While most of the students were art majors (56%, consisting of 24% fine arts, 12% communication design, 12% fashion design, 8% photography), there are non-art majors taking up 44% of the survey respondents. Because of the broad range of college majors collected, museum visits and social media account following are not heavily skewed toward art students, allowing the findings recorded in this research to be generalized.

**SNS usage and the museum visiting patterns:** Among the survey recipients, only 38% of people out of the 50 respondents were following the museum's social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and/or Youtube). They had the option to choose multiple answers, and MoMA was the most followed social media account, which took up 68.4%. In what followed, The Met museum took up 63.2%. Other museums such as Guggenheim Museum, The Getty Museum, Whitney Museums, Brooklyn Museum, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Art Institute of Chicago, and Detroit Institute of arts were chosen by 42.1%, 31.6%, 26.3%, 26.3%, 15.8%, 10.5% of the respondents, respectively. The reason for MoMA and the Met having the most followed counts was mostly because people only follow/subscribe to museums that are closer to their personal, academic interest, which 84.2% have claimed to be.

Other reasons such as following museums that are geographically closer to where they live and following museums that are located in cities of their interest were each chosen by 5.3% of the respondents. The survey respondents claimed that through following their social media accounts, they found inspiration for themselves the most, chosen by 13 people. Beyond inspirations, the followers were able to understand recent trends in the art world, information about current and upcoming exhibitions, knowledge about specific artworks or history, and view artworks without having to go to the museum physically. Despite gaining various information from the social media accounts, 52.6% of people believed that they were helpful, but visiting the museum would further deepen the understanding of the contents. 31.6% found the Social media account helpful enough to skip visiting the museum, and 15.8% of the people found Social media accounts not helpful, which they had to plan on a museum visit.

**Those who do not follow SNS:** Despite the rise and impact of the museums' Instagram accounts, only 38% of the survey

respondents have answered that they follow the social media accounts of U.S.-based museums. For people who responded that they do not follow museums' social media accounts, the survey contained a follow-up short-answer question, asking if there were any specific reasons for not following their social media. Due to the reasons that 30% of the survey respondents were non-art major students, they have answered that they don't find their content fitting to their preferences as to their social media consumption and did not find them interesting. However, there were some respondents who stated that they did not even know museums had Instagram accounts as their advertisements never came across their social media. In line with this answer, the respondents believed that they would not gain much from following their social media as they thought it was more about repetitive advertising posts rather than some essential knowledge of arts that they might get exposed to. Thus, in order to understand how they attain information on museums and exhibitions, the following question asked if the respondents obtain information through advertisements in streets, verbally from friends or family, social media posts who visited the museums, email, internet reviews, websites, or actually visiting the museum themselves. The respondents could pick multiple answers, and about 71% of the respondents answered that they attain information verbally through their friends, family, and professors. Following the respondents who acquired information verbally, 58.1% of people actually visit the museum themselves to acquire information, and 54.8% of people attain information through others' social media posts. In an effort to unveil whether their way of gaining information was helpful or not, I have asked if the information obtained through the different methods above was helpful. 64.5% of the respondents have answered that it was helpful enough in a way that they don't feel it's necessary to follow/subscribe to the museum's social media accounts, while 32.3% of the people responded that it was helpful, but following/subscribing to museum's social media accounts would further deepen their understanding of their contents. Apart from these answers, 3.2% of the respondents have answered that the information they acquired through the methods was not helpful, which they are planning to follow/subscribe to social media accounts in the near future.

**Museum Visits and Covid-19:** In order to understand if the occurrence and the surge of Covid-19 have made a difference in museum visiting patterns and social media account usage, I have asked questions regarding their vaccination status, their difficulties in museum visiting, and other related questions. Among the 50 people who have responded to this survey, 96% were fully vaccinated with 2 doses or more of the Covid-19 vaccine. While the majority of the people were vaccinated, only 2% of the respondents have received a single dose, and 2% of the respondents were not vaccinated at all due to personal reasons, which would include medical concerns, religious objection, and personal reasons. This indicates that, at least in my sample, respondents did not have any legal restrictions to visit the museums whenever they wanted to. Following the vaccination question, I have asked if people experienced difficulty in visiting museums in person due to Covid-19. Despite the high rate of vaccination among the respondents, 48% of the people still experienced difficulties visiting the museum while 52% of the people did not have difficulty visiting. The reasons for the difficulties in visiting museums were outlined in the subsequent question, where respondents were allowed to pick multiple answers of what has made the museum difficult. 54.2% of the respondents have reported that

the fear of getting Covid-19 has hindered them from visiting the museums (in other words, it was more of a personal restriction rather than the legal one that prohibited their museum visits). Followed by the fear of getting Covid-19 was the closure of museums, reluctance to take public transport, mask mandates, vaccination requirements, and a limited amount of tickets and availability, taking up 45.8%, 16.7%, 16.7%, 8.3%, and 4.2% respectively. The way that the respondents have dealt with this inability to visit museums is shown in the following question. Being able to pick multiple answers for the four questions, which included visiting the museum websites, checking social media accounts, searching up online, and reading magazines, or booklets, the respondents have searched online the most, taking up 66.7% of the responses. Visiting the museum website followed next, taking 54.2%, checking social media accounts, 41.7%, and reading magazines or booklets, 8.3%. The majority of the respondents (66.7%) have reported that the information obtained through the different methods above was helpful, but visiting the museum would definitely help further in the future. However, 20.8% of the respondents have answered that it was helpful enough to skip the museum visit, and 12.5% of the people have answered that it was not helpful so they expected to plan on a museum visit one Covid-19 subsides. Overall, it seems clear from this section that respondents were able to visit museums but could not do so in fear of catching Covid-19. To cope with this unprecedented situation, they relied on online formats such as SNS and websites, but that was not sufficient enough to skip the museum visit.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the recent digitalization and Covid-19 have led the museums to utilize various platforms in order to provide information regarding their exhibits, to communicate with potential visitors, to compensate for the museum closures due to Covid-19, and more. However, according to the survey results, it has been shown that Covid-19 has influenced museum visiting for various people but did not have much impact on the followings of museums' social media accounts. Despite the recent overall popularity in social media and active usage of SNS from museums, people still believe that these platforms are currently not sufficient to replace the museum visiting process for the public and did not fully fit their interest. While this paper's survey is limited to students majoring in arts, I believe the main implication in this study generally holds true for the general public. This research leaves room for further directions. Social media is not just about opening up another marketing channel, but it enables the audience's participation on many different levels. This study has shown that museums consider and use social media to a high degree, as a means to attract more visitors to onsite museums. Despite the fact that online museum communities for both visitors and professionals are not yet very well developed in general, the examples in this paper illustrate a number of important first steps, whereas personalization will be an important aspect of most such efforts.

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#### SURVEY QUESTIONS

[A survey on the relationship between museum visiting patterns and social media usage]. This survey is intended to examine audiences' museum visiting patterns in relation to their social media usage (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube). In each section of this survey, we ask multiple - choice questions where you can pick one or more answers. A few are short-answer questions.

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