Engaging Museum Visitors through Social Media: 
Multiple Case Studies of Social Media Implementation in Museums

Thesis

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Abstract

Involved in the visitor-centered paradigm shift and blurring boundaries of cultural participation, American museums are challenged to demonstrate their relevance to contemporary life and to meet the changing needs of visitors. Prior studies have experimented with the incorporation of social media into museum practices. Being aware of the disconnect between social media use and its potential, this research uses multiple case studies, set in the three major museums in Columbus, Ohio, to examine the rationales and processes of day-to-day social media implementation in museums. A mixed method of semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation are employed to collect qualitative data. By reflecting upon the social media implementation from the perspective of museums, the researcher conceptualizes the role that social media plays in engaging museum visitors and provides a strategic framework for social media use in museums.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

American museums have been constantly transforming since their inception, due to forces in the wider cultural climate. In order to remain part of the fabric of contemporary life, American museums have had to reshape their role in society and their relationship with the public. The prevailing assumption about museums today is that they are mission-driven public organizations that serve society by preserving collections and providing knowledge on human civilizations. During the last century, non-profit museums in the United States (U.S.) have undergone a paradigm shift from object-oriented to visitor-centered institutions, which manifests itself in expanded education and outreach programs, a growing awareness of marketing, and an increase of community involvement. The adoption of the visitor-centered approach has changed and enriched the role of museums in relation to their communities.

Lately, the complicated environment composed of financial restraints, competing leisure activities, and changing audience expectations has led to decreasing participation rates and consequently has forced museums to demonstrate their relevance to the community. This has compelled museums to apply innovative ways to engage visitors different to those that they traditionally serve. The extensive boundaries of cultural experience is considered a window for growth in participation, as observed by Keidler & Trounstine in the following excerpt:
The settings in which Americans choose to engage in arts activities have long expanded well beyond purpose-built arts facilities, moving into bookstores, community centers, schools, places of worship, and especially the home. The nonprofit arts and cultural sector has grown accustomed to these shifting boundaries of participation — a realization that takes in a larger swatch of the “cultural ecology,” including professional arts, personal participatory practice, and cultural literacy (cited in Novak-Leonard, Brown, and National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2011, p.15).

Arts and cultural participation can take place in many modes and situations, which means that museum visits are merely one option among a range of alternative settings for cultural experience. To remain relevant, museums must respond proactively to such shifting boundaries and provide opportunities for participation that extend beyond a simple museum visit. Rather than staying inside the institutional norms and physical walls, museums need to get involved and open up new territories and arenas for cultural participation.

Many museum practitioners have identified the Internet as a possible way to extend the accessibility of cultural experiences. As Mr. Campbell, the new director of Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met), commented on the Met virtual expansion plan that the transformation of the Met’s online presence was “less physical than philosophical and virtual: a change in the Met’s tone and public face, making it a more open and understandable museum, largely by thoroughly rethinking the way it uses technology” (“The Met’s Plans for Virtual Expansion,” 2011). He further stated, “It was a fundamental part of our responsibility to the audience” and “a way to demystify the museum through digital means.”

Among all the Internet applications and tools, social media has stimulated intense discussions along its exponential growth in the first decade of the twenty first
century. Besides those internationally well-known platforms such as Flickr, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter, there are many other platforms that enjoy regional popularity outside the U.S., such as Cyworld in Korea, and Weibo in China. To put the discussion in the context of museums, researchers and practitioners believe that social media presents an opportunity for audience development and potential in other areas of museum work. Plenty of case studies worldwide have been done to explore the behavioral pattern of online audiences, the link between general online users and the museum audience, the building of original knowledge with community engagement, and the use of social media as a forum of informal learning.

Social media is a useful tool to connect museums and audiences in addition to and in a different way from traditional channels, which offers a unique opportunity for participation building, in accordance with a visitor-centered perspective. Therefore, grounded in previous scholarship, this study uses multiple case studies of major regional museums to describe the actual administration of social media.

**Research Purpose**

While many museums have established their social media presence, comparatively little formal research has been done on its actual use in the particular context of museums. This study maintains that the examination of social media has to be done while considering the context of museums. Distinct from other industries, the mission is central to all aspects of museum management and activities (Anderson, 2004). This research aims to analyze social media activities in relation to the overall goals of museums with the understanding that museums are cultural institutions that serve a public purpose.
This study reveals the unique role that social media plays in museums by unraveling the process of implementation and the rationale behind the activities. The researcher hopes that the findings will inform the use of social media in museums, and ultimately advance the mission of museums.

**Research Question**

The overarching research question of this study is to what ends museums use social media and the processes of management by museum administrators. In order to present a more realistic picture, data are collected from participating organizations to illustrate their social media use at both the conceptual and the operational level. The former reflects upon how museum staff perceives the role of social media, including its goal, vision, the relationship with other managerial activities, the conceptual position where social media is placed in the entire organization, and the connection to the museum’s mission. The latter refers to the managerial process of implementing social media, including the selection of platforms, functions and activities, content and format, staffing and training, evaluation, and leadership.

In addition to the description of real-life practice and rationale, this study seeks to identify opportunities and challenges of social media in the unique context of the museum. In other words, the study places emphases on the interaction between museums and social media where museum work can be strengthened.

**Relevance of the Research**

The explosion of social media has prompted many experiments in large museums to determine how social media can be adopted by museum administrators. The results of these project-based studies advocate for the implementation of social
media in museums to create a more interactive environment. While the use of social media has been tested in marketing, exhibition development, informal learning, and community engagement, little conceptualization has been generated from the experiments themselves. Moreover, the majority of museums today use social media differently from the previously studied sample museums, indicating a gap between research and practice.

This study emphasizes a close look at social media from the museum perspective through reflection on prior literature and museum theories. In particular, the study attempts to conceptualize the role of social media in the relationship between the museum and audiences with rich empirical data collected from selected museums. It contributes to the research of social media by linking the perspectives of researchers and practitioners.

**Structure**

This research study is comprised of five sections. Chapter 1 outlines the study background, purpose, research question, significance, and structure. Chapter 2 reviews relevant scholarly literature that lays the foundation for the subsequent discussion of case studies. The literature review covers different material, including the evolving role of museums in public life, the diversifying modes of cultural participation, and the existing findings of social media and museums. Chapter 3 explains the rationale for both the methodology and the methods chosen to carry out this research. Chapter 4 starts with a description of each case study, followed by the cross-case analysis and discussion, where the researcher investigates the data from an interpretive perspective. Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the research and
concludes with the practical implications of social media and avenues for future research.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

As highlighted in Chapter 1, investigating social media implementation requires the consideration of the context of museum. The following review of literature links together several streams of scholarship to shape the multifaceted background of the museum and its interaction with social media, including the visitor-centered paradigm shift, the expanding boundaries of cultural participation, and the pioneering exploration of Internet and social media in museums. By critically examining these fields of study, the researcher attempts to gain a well-rounded understanding of the dynamics of museums of the twenty-first century in which the unique opportunities and challenges of social media are presented.

Paradigm Shift: From Object-based to Visitor-centered

European museums developed from collections owned by privileged individuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. They were private in nature and exclusive in admission. The Era of Enlightenment witnessed the emergence of the morn concept of the public museum and the establishment of what has become the archetypal art museum with palace-like architectures, a famous example being the British Museum (Bennett, 1995). By the end of the nineteenth century, a series of world fairs were held in the United Kingdom and the U.S., which also became an impetus for an intensification of the construction of art museums. While museums were partially liberated from exclusiveness by opening up to the working class, entrance to a
museum was nonetheless restricted and they maintained a Bourgeois, elitist cultural authority; a visit to a museum became part of the institution of civilizing and governing the broader public. As Thomas Greenwood stated: “a museum and free library are as necessary for the mental and moral health of the citizens as good sanitary arrangements, water supply and street lighting are for their physical health and comfort” (cited in Bennett, 1995, p.18).

On the contrary, while emulating their European counterparts in some aspects, American museums were said to be public-based civic enterprises, rooted in community life from the start. Theodore Low (1942) claimed that the educational aspects of American museums distinguished them from European ones. Skramstad (1999) also noted that American museums start with entrepreneurship combined with public education. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, American museums experienced a time period characterized by an “inward moving perspective” (Skramstad, 1999, p.121). While museums have made tremendous progress in knowledge expansion through accumulating collections, their educational ethos and concern for the public was largely missing until 1910.

As early as 1917 John Cotton Dana raised awareness of the public purpose of the library and the museum. He proposed that museums should be public institution and provide educational opportunities for all. When claiming education as the primary role of the museum, Low (1942) particularly underscored education as an overall organizational mission rather than a departmental goal. He also explicitly differentiated education in museums from that of universities. He argued that museum education needed “to abolish all efforts at scholarly teaching and to substitute that
kind of instruction which the museum can offer better than any other institution or organization” (p.37). Several decades later, two reports from the American Association of Museums -- *Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century* (1984) and *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992) -- reconfirmed the educational role of museums.

One can assert with confidence that the most fundamental change that has affected museums … is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. The old-style museum felt itself to be under no such obligation (Hudson, 1998, p.43).

It seems that the century-long debate on the superiority between collection and public education has ended with the triumph of the latter. Stephen Weil (1999) contends that instead of being about something, museums should be for somebody. The museum should be an educational resource accessible to people. Furthermore, he mentions that the criteria of judging the success of a museum should be whether the educational services to the public have shifted from a selling mode to a marketing one, which means meeting public needs and interests is the foremost objective that keeps the museum vital and relevant to the community (Weil, 2002, p.31).

The brief recapitulation of the development of the public role of museums demonstrates that the re-orientation to visitor needs has placed education and experience at the center of today’s museum work. In terms of the presentation of knowledge, the classification model that designed from object-centered perspective needs to be replaced or supplemented by the exposition and clarification that aimed to be comprehended by audiences (Cameron, 1971, p.18). As noted by Low (1942),
museums have a responsibility to provide a type of education different from that found in academia. The evolved concept of museum education has created a lot of synergy with constructivist theory. Theorists such as George Hein and John Falk are convinced that museums provide an appropriate environment for informal learning, where visitors from diverse backgrounds can voluntarily learn in a limited period of time with the facilitation of the museum. In a constructivist system, people primarily learn by connecting the known and the unknown. Museums are equipped with an appropriate infrastructure to link content with visitors’ experiences. John Falk (2006) advocated for the use of technology both on-site and online to enhance the visitor experience beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the museum so that learning could be more open-ended, multidimensional, and meaningful to the individual person. Falk also observed that:

While the museum’s collections, scholarship, and educational expertise provide content and experience, the museum’s greatest strength may be its capacity to cater to different ways of learning within a single institution – to invite and respond to the multiple styles and interests of so many kinds of visitors (Falk, 2006, pp.226-227).

Under this overarching philosophical shift, museums initiated many transformations internally to offer the services informed by visitor’s perspective, which might be as micro as a feedback sheet, or as macro as the entire communication structure. The more museums understand the community, the better services they can provide. As Anderson (2004) observes: “Today, museum leaders know that understanding visitors’ comforts, interests, and needs as well as engaging in market research are considered essential when making decisions and setting
priorities” (p.5). This view provides insight into the subsequent examination of the rationale behind social media use in museums.

**Cultural Participation: Blurring Boundaries**

A question integral to the paradigm shift is how to let more people become participants in the museum experience. Some museums adjust their opening hours to attract people at leisure time, or install disabled-friendly and family-friendly facilities to improve the experiences of visitors. Nevertheless, museums are still searching for more points of connection to engage audiences in meaningful museum experiences.

Primarily, two categories of research dominate the area of cultural participation. One is empirical survey of participation behavior and the underlying motivations. The other is sporadic case studies of audience engagement practices conducted by funding organizations or cultural institutions. Of the first type, the series of the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SSPA)* (NEA, 1982, 1992, 2002, 2008) provides the field with the widest range of data on participation in the arts. Researchers investigate the pattern of participation with pre-defined art disciplines and dependent variables that correlate with the participation choice, including demographics such as educational level, income level, gender, age, ethnicity, and so forth. Based on these surveys, some researchers have gone further to interpret the data within either sociological or economic frameworks. For the purpose of this research, this part of the literature review will focus only on various perspectives on the definition and demarcation of cultural participation that has appeared in recent studies.

The SPPA (NEA, 1982, 1992, 2002) designated participation as attendance, broadcast and recorded media, art-making and learning. In 2008, the SPPA for the
first time added “exploring arts through the Internet” to its range of arts participation.

Similarly for the Australian arts participation survey, the Australia Council for the Arts (2010) researched an extensive list of ways that one could use the Internet to engage with the arts, including accessing artistic content (from professional artists and non-professionals), posting their own content, learning arts skills, participating in online social networks about the arts, and other uses.

Evidence in the latest SPPA shows that online arts consumption is increasing. In 2008, forty-one percent of adults accessed the arts through media (NEA, 2008, p.3). More specifically, twenty percent of all Internet-users normally view visual arts online once a week and thirty percent were engaged with performing arts. And, one quarter of all Internet-users get information about performing and visual art programs online (NEA, 2008, p.41).

At the same time, recent research reflects the tendency to extend cultural participation to diverse non-professional settings. Regardless of the participation mode, the Urban Institute (2005) defines cultural participation as the “engagement of individuals and groups in cultural activities in a nonprofessional setting” (p.6). In the same vein, Novak-Leonard, Brown, and NEA (2011) elaborate upon a more inclusive concept of arts participation. The authors put cultural participation into three spheres, which are:

…centralized, attendance-based activity within the traditional structures of arts organizations and institutions; relatively decentralized personal practice in community contexts; and an awareness and appreciation of arts and culture in daily life, embedded in culture and daily activities, such as electronic media-based participation (p.27).
With the acceptance of diversifying participation modes, researchers have posed some concerns and doubts about whether the proliferation of mediated cultural participation would counteract the experience through direct participation. Novak-Leonard, Brown, and NEA (2011) maintain that the three modes of arts participation usually overlap and enhance one another. In another report: NEA Audience 2.0 How Technology influences arts participation (Bawa, Williams, Dong, BBC Research & Consulting, & NEA, 2010), it states that “electronic media can be a gateway and not a barrier to greater arts participation” (p.7) and “arts participation through media appears to encourage — rather than replace — live arts attendance” (p.14). The Australian survey (Australia Council for the Arts, 2010) states that the widespread Internet attributed to some increase in new audience because “people reported that all the typical obstacles to arts participation, such as lack of exposure, awareness, time and cost could all be mitigated through the use of the Internet” (p.6). They believe the Internet helps shape “a positive environment” for people to attempt to participate in the arts in a spontaneous casual manner (p.33).

With people spending more and more time online, especially with recent explosions of social media, the potential value of social media tools in audience engagement needs to be fully discovered by museum practitioners.

**Social Media and Its Role in Museums**

The prior literature review shows that the provision of meaningful experiences in cultural participation for visitors is a pressing task on today’s museum agenda. Internet technology is of growing importance in this area. It not only enables digital collections, virtual exhibitions, and online storage facilities, but also catalyzes
communication. Among countless IT innovations, social media has become pervasive in the daily routine of people and businesses across the globe, including museums and their audiences, with unparalleled speed. This part of the chapter examines existing research of social media in museums. It is not to be considered a “technical manual” of social media. Rather, it is to reflect upon how other researchers have associated social media with museum settings theoretically and practically and to clarify the gap in current research.

To start with, a brief definition of social media is necessary. Social media, social networking sites (SNS), Web 2.0, and user-generated content (UGC) are often used interchangeably in literature. Strictly speaking, they are not identical. However, they are significantly correlated concepts with respective emphases on technical features, ideological characteristics of communication theory, and content. To put it in a single sentence, social media are tools with Web 2.0 philosophy, such as SNS, that enable user-generated content (boyd & Ellison, 2007). To describe it in empirical terms, typical activities of social media users include co-editing entries on Wikipedia, commenting and sharing external links on Facebook, blogging and posting pictures on Wordpress or Tumblr, uploading and recommending videos on YouTube, discussing and tagging in groups on Flickr, and forwarding micro messages on Twitter, to name but a few. In spite of the diversity of platforms, the core function of social media is enabling instant public exchange of multi-media information among self-selected parties. In the words of Australian researcher Russo, Watkins, Kelly, and Chan (2008): “Social media can be defined broadly as those that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration” (p.22).
As a web-based application, social media share some traits with traditional websites while transcending basic websites with the unprecedented capacity for two-way communication and user-generated content. It is useful to view social media in reference to the changes that websites have brought to cultural institutions in the past. Approximately fifteen years ago, websites began to become increasingly popular with museums. Nowadays, official websites are almost universal in all trades, including museums. Anderson (1997) argued that the growth of internet-connected museums of all kinds might provide museums with better channels to attract a younger, more technology-savvy generation. The Internet has been of great benefit to museums, because it informs and provides access in a way other means of communications cannot (Wu, 2010). Websites create a new point of entry for the public to reach a museum. Compared to the days without the aid of websites, visitors can now get information about collections, educational programs, and logistics directly from websites with greater convenience, more control, flexibility of planning, and less cost. With the advances made in technology, websites have become increasingly sophisticated places hosting various electronic content and experience. Some of them allow visitors to take a virtual tour of the museum or a close look at the collection, as detailed as a single stitch and stroke. Marty (2007) found that visitors often use museum websites before and after museum visit to complement their visits to physical museums. The research suggests the need for studying the ways that visitors can form lifelong relationships with museums through website visits.

Audiences nowadays have more demanding expectations for museum’s online services: “Unless a Website is updated on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, information
goes out of date and turns off users who depend on accurate, current information” (Dixon & Barata, 1999, p.209). Web 1.0 or rather, the one-way communication model of websites no longer satisfies the requirements of audiences. Simultaneously, the Web landscape underwent a significant transformation “from the Internet as a collection of pages to the Internet as connections between people” (MacArthur, 2007). As the ubiquitous application of Web 2.0, more active and instant online environment can be engineered by museum, with the extra benefit of being able to revisit the conversation anytime according to visitor’s own schedule and location:

Social media gives people many ways to shape their own experiences and those of others, some through deliberate acts such as contribution, commenting, rating or re-mixing, others incidental to their use (i.e. through searching, subscribing, being counted toward most visited or other recommender systems)” (Russo & Peacock, 2009).

It is believed that museums should be self-motivated to reach out in the age of Web 2.0. Only if museums reach out into the world to the places where people are gathering together can museums participate in their conversations and make them aware of and interested in what museums have to offer. Parry, Pratty, and Poole points out that this is especially inevitable in the Web 2.0 internet-connected landscape where users transform from spectators to active participants and the virtual space becomes social venues (cited in Liu & Bowen, 2011).

Plenty of pioneering museums in U.S. have forayed into a variety of experiments with social media and participated in case studies since 2006. Alexander et al. (2008) collected the statistics of visits to the YouTube channels of five major museums, including the San Jose Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the
Exploratorium. The study acknowledged the potential of the YouTube channel in marketing, education, and audience engagement. Around the same time, Brooklyn Museum’s Manager of Information Systems worked in conjunction with the Interpretive Materials Manager to initiate pilot projects with Flickr and YouTube aimed at physical-virtual interaction, audience involvement, and community building, which turned out to be a statistical success in terms of the sheer number of visitors. Brooklyn Museum furthered this pursuit by integrating social media into organization websites and experimenting with other social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and mobile applications (Caruth & Bernstein, 2007; Bernstein, 2008). In 2010, the Liberty Science Center designed an experiment around an exhibition to test how social media might influence the exhibition development process (LaBar, 2010). These projects share some common characteristics. First, the hosting museums are comparatively large in scale. Second, the projects are all associated with a particular social media platform and exhibition. Also, their reports are mostly presented by numbers, which provides straightforward indications of the increase in online traffic through social media platforms and people’s willingness to participate. Besides, the results focus on the technical explanations and pragmatic tips specifically for the management of social media projects.

In parallel, a team of experts from major Australian Museums and Swinburne University of Technology have orchestrated a series of studies since 2006 that examine the impact of social media on museum practices from multiple perspectives, including informal learning, exhibition development, and institutional change. These studies pointed out the connection between social media and the role of the museum
as an increasingly open space of community cultural content.

Kelly (2009) argues that using social media enables the audiences to interact with curators directly. The process actually empowers audiences as content creators and curators act as facilitators. While the process deepens visitor’s experiences with the exhibition and museum, the inclusion of the audience’s voice in exhibition development raises a challenge to the autonomy of the curator. On the other hand, Dicker (2010) points out that from the perspective of a curator, social media is not among the priorities of the exhibition staff and is not yet considered as an extension of the museum’s content or experience.

While exploring the relationship between social media and constructive learning, Kelly (2009) compared the characteristics of constructivist exhibitions and social media (Figure 1). Their findings indicate that there exists a strong synergy between physical and social media participation. It is argued that the same principles apply to both experiences, including interactivity, open conversation, behind-the-scenes content, the fun element, and staff that can relate to young people who are knowledgeable in their field and are easy to talk with (Kelly & Russo, 2008).

Whether online activities impact the expectations and on-site visiting behaviors is an interesting question, and remains to be further investigated. Nevertheless, using social media for informal learning also raises some management issues, including the tensions between virtual and real, messiness and complexity around new ways of communicating and use of collections.

The Australian researchers have also discussed social media’s role in institutional change: “The use of social media marks a shift in how museums publicly
communicate their role as custodians of cultural content and so presents debate around an institution’s attitude towards cultural authority” (Russo, 2008). Besides the issue of authority, within an increasingly participatory online environment, the authenticity of electronic content has become a major concern. However, Russo et al. (2008) argue, “it is precisely because of this lack of reliable online information that museums should engage in participatory communication using social media” (p.23). Kelly found that visitors appreciated the role that museums could play as authoritative, trusted and credible sources of information, and that they were accessed by a wide range of people (cited in Russo, 2008, p.26). They maintain that museums should extend authority by providing audiences with a voice and allowing them to participate in cultural debate (Russo et al., 2008). By doing so, researchers believe that social media could help museums “move beyond information archiving and display and into content generation and more porous community interface” (Russo & Watkins, 2008).

**Conclusion**

“These debates have tapped a form of community intelligence and have created a path from modernist certainty and institutional centrality, to social networking and demand-driven intellectual engagement with culture. In turn, this has changed the ways that museums respond to the challenge of providing authentic and authoritative information within an increasingly participatory online environment” (Russo et al., 2008, pp. 21-22).

Today’s museums are challenged by some fairly complicated expectations from the public. On one hand, museums are seen as authoritative, scholarly stewards of our culture. On the other hand, people expect museums to serve the community’s interests. This double identity challenges scholars and practitioners to develop a viable way to fulfill both missions without compromising either one. At the intersection of the
visitor-centered paradigm, extensive participation modes, and an increasingly
technology-mediated society, social media proves to be a promising method to build a
new relationship between museums and the public. Researchers insist that social
media could be used to encourage audiences to respond to museums and relate their
experiences back to themselves, to other communities of interest and to the museum
itself in ways that are meaningful (Kelly & Russo, 2008). This view is suggestive of
the synergy between the visitor-centered shift in museums and the user-centric view
of the Web 2.0 within which social media can be used to create the personalized
experience proposed by John Falk.

Social media’s potential in facilitating participatory informal learning and
innovative exhibition planning still needs to be developed. Their findings suggest that
if museums try to take the opportunities of interactive communication, social media
cannot be viewed alone as merely a peripheral tool. Rather, a strategic integration of
social media into all parts of museum practice is required. As Russo et al. (2008) have
stated: “any such implementation should be part of a museum’s strategic approach to
communication that addresses changing cultural communication models; engages
communities in scholarly debate and knowledge sharing; and connects audiences to
museum content” (p.28).

When reviewing the obstacles of museums’ social media uses, Kelly and Russo
(2008) have stressed the importance of studying audience’s motivation for online
cultural participation. Russo and Peacock (2009) maintain that existing participation
models are too simplistic to analyze user decisions and experiences in Web 2.0
systems. They suggest museums formulate an investigation from a visitor-centered
perspective and “reconsider their relationships with the public and thoroughly explore user motivations and intentions for participation in social media activities” with frameworks “that are fluid, flexible and multi-dimensional rather than rigid and uni-linear “(Russo, 2009).

Researchers and practitioners from the world gather at the Museums and Web Conference every year to share new developments in the use of Internet technology by museums, where the significance of adopting social media is a consensus and a growing topic in recent years. In spite of the promising transformation anticipated in the studies of conference participants, few museums have brought such design into their day-to-day administration. As a matter of fact, the majority of museums rarely use social media as experimented in the above-mentioned projects. It would be an overstatement to view these studies of social media use as being a universal practice in the field. There seems to be a distinct disconnect between research and practice. It is useful to have a close look at how social media has affected museums in reality because it enables reflection on the fundamental conceptual and practical premises of social media use.
Chapter 3 Methodology

The researcher recognizes the need for rich qualitative data to portray a comprehensive image of the reality. In order to understand the practice and rationale of social media implementation in museums, this study approaches the issue at two levels. The first is the conceptual position that social media is placed, in relation to the entire organization. The second is the managerial aspect of social media implementation in museums. The former focuses on how people who work at museums perceive the role of social media, including its goal, vision, the relative status with other managerial activities, and the relationship to the museum’s mission. The latter refers to the process of implementing social media, including the selection of platforms, functions and activities, content and format, staffing and training, evaluation, and leadership.

For the purpose of this study, the investigator chose multiple case studies as the overarching methodology. The study is based in three museums selected by purposive sampling. Data is collected using a mixed methods framework, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations, in order to triangulate the evidence and ensure its internal validity. While the findings might not be generalized beyond the organizational context, the researcher expects the findings to shed light on the connection between theory and practice of social media implementation in museums.
This chapter explains the research design of this thesis, starting with the restatement of the research question, the methodology, the criteria for selecting participating institutions, the data collection procedures, the verification methods, and the discussion of the potential advantages and limitations of the study.

**Restatement of Research Questions**

The research question for the study is to what ends museums use social media and how it is managed in reality. In addition to describing the practices and rationale of social media implementation, this study also discusses the unique benefits and challenges for social media implementation in relation to the overall goal of the museum. The inquiry into social media implementation is placed against the backdrop of the shifting focus of museums and the changing cultural environment, to formulate the linkage among constructs.

**Rationale of Methodology**

The reason for choosing multiple case studies is because it allows for a holistic analysis of the richness captured in a natural setting. As stated at the beginning, this study aims to examine the role of social media within the context of museums. As Yin defines:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In other words, you would use the case study method because you wanted to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual conditions – because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study. (Yin & Davis, 2007; Yin, 2009, p.18)

The key to this study lies in the institutional context where social media interacts with other factors. The mission-driven museum sector has its own distinctive
sets of structures and activities. In order to uncover the links between social media and the essential goal of museums, it is important to study the issue within its “real-life” context. Therefore it is appropriate to use case studies to include the necessary context to articulate the transformations that social media bring into the world of museums.

Furthermore, this research is concerned with understanding the processes and rationale associated with social media use in museums. Case studies make it possible to collect data from multiple sources to provide a complete picture. The advantage of multiple sources of data is that the researcher can investigate the issue from more dimensions and increase the validity of the study.

**Selecting Participating Institutions**

The three case study organizations are the Center of Science and Industry (COSI), the Wexner Center for the Arts, and the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) in Columbus, Ohio. They are all prestigious museums in their respective areas. The number of cases is not significantly relevant to qualitative inquiry. Rather, the researcher prioritizes the depth of data in the particular setting over the quantity of cases. This study purposefully restricts the geographical area of cases in order to achieve a certain degree of comparability in terms of local cultural context. In order to obtain adequate data, the researcher narrows the cases to these museums for their leading role in framing the local cultural climate in addition to the credibility and authority they have established over years of service to the community. The researcher is convinced that museums with this kind of cultural stewardship in a local community are able to provide valuable insights into social media uses. The case
selection is also reaffirmed by the former Director Emeritus of the Ohio Arts Council, who possesses sufficient professional experience, academic expertise and the understanding of the local cultural environment to make a valid judgment.

According to the AAM Code of Ethics for Museums, American museums have a variety of types: "Their numbers include both governmental and private museums of anthropology, art history and natural history, aquariums, arboreta, art centers, botanical gardens, children's museums, historic sites, nature centers, planetariums, science and technology centers, and zoos." The Columbus Museum of Art is a typical fine art museum, the Wexner Center of Art is a university-affiliated contemporary multi-disciplinary art center, and COSI is a science center. The three case study museums share common traits in terms of their fundamental public purposes and their major presenting method (visual display). At the same time, they are also distinct from each other in terms of their programming focus and institutional history. The similarities among the cases help to frame a larger context while the distinct characteristics of each organization provide variant perspectives on the same topic. A detailed description of each participating organization is presented in Chapter 4.

Data Collection Procedures

Data is collected through semi-structured interviews with administrators, organizational documentation, and observations of the physical and online environment of museums. The interview is transcribed verbatim and used as the primary source of data. Organizational documents and observations serve as supplementary sources. Data is archived on the researchers’ personal laptop and is password protected for security purposes.
Semi-structured interviews are a suitable method to collect data from museum administrators because they offer plenty of flexibility for in-depth responses. They provide the interviewees with the opportunity to share their experiences, interpretations, and insights from the field. Meanwhile, the structure works to guide the interview process and ensure that the researcher covers important topics and to assist with the cross-case analysis later. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to take a somewhat direct role and understand the phenomena in a more holistic way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The researcher identified one interviewee from each organization. Interview participants are the staff directly in charge of social media at the case study organizations. Initial recruitment took place via e-mail correspondence. The researcher provided potential interviewees with the electronic version of the research protocol and the recruitment letter. After confirming participation and scheduling, the researcher then met the participants face to face. Two informed consent forms were presented to interviewees that described the identity of the investigator, objective, significance, methodology, methods, participant confidentiality, and the risks and benefits of this study. One consent form was signed by the participant and kept in the research database and the other was provided for the participant’s own records. Each interviewee verifies their voluntary participation. They also had the freedom to leave the interview at any time.

After consulting the literature in Chapter 2, the researcher structured the interview questions around the major issues that appear in existing research. Appendix A shows the general list of questions for the interview. During each
interview, the questions are tweaked according to the specific organizational context and information provided by the interviewee in the process. The questions were open-ended in order to encourage the participants to develop their answers freely. Particular focus was placed on discovering the areas of museum work where social media added distinctive value. Interviewees were also asked to assess the current situation and project future developments of using social media in the general cultural sector. The interview took place at the work place of the interviewee and was recorded with Garageband software. Interviews were later transcribed and returned to interviewees for validation. Follow-up email communication was used to request available organizational documents to illustrate certain information referred to in the interview transcription.

Besides interviews and document analysis, the researcher took additional notes when observing museum spaces during field visits, which demonstrated how participating museums perceive their mission and relationship with the public from another perspective. Altogether these data provided a holistic idea of the organization context.

**Strategies for Validating Findings**

The data collection process was conducted strictly under the guidance of the research protocol. The data were managed properly afterwards. Interview data was validated by interviewees and analyzed by the researcher in combination with documentation and observation notes because “any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a corroboratory mode” (Yin, 2009, p.115).
Advantages and Limitations

The advantage of the case study methodology is that it enables the collection of in-depth data and a contextual examination of social media in museums. Moreover, multiple case studies provide additional benefits compared to a single case study by generating more compelling evidence to support the overall study conclusion.

Meanwhile, the limitations of case studies are also numerous. By their nature, purposive sampling and qualitative data analysis may not be generalizable beyond the selected museums. However, generalizability is not a concern to this study since it is focused on uncovering the processes and rationale of social media use in particular museum contexts. As to the use of data, this study depends primarily on interview transcription with secondary support from documents and observation. The unbalanced weight of objective and subjective data has to be taken into consideration when evaluating the findings.

Conclusion

The methodology choice was based on the goal of the study and the nature of the research question. The researcher needed data that would be produced within a very specific context. Multiple case studies provided such a holistic approach to obtain rich data from three informative museums through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations. The data collection followed the research protocol rigorously in order to enhance the reliability of the study. Each step was documented and managed, and the study also used data triangulation to increase its validity.
Chapter 4 Case Studies

This chapter starts with a general description of the local cultural background. Next the researcher presents three case studies of social media use in museums separately. Each case study portrays the current role of social media in the organization with synthesized data from interviews, organizational documents, and observations. The case study starts with a background description of the organization. Then it continues with the discussion on the management of social media, including the selection of platforms, staffing, functions and activities, evaluation, policy, tactics, and leadership. The subsequent part is the conceptual role of social media perceived by the interview interviewee, including the goal, vision, the relative status with other museum activities, and the relationship with the mission of the museum.

Following the three case studies, a cross-case analysis is presented. The researcher compares cases to identify notable common threads. The analysis draws from the first-hand interviews and text data as well as the insights from the literature review to serve the overall research aim.

Cultural Organizations Background of Columbus, Ohio

Columbus hosts a diverse and vibrant arts community. The Center of Science and Industry (COSI), the Wexner Center for the Arts (the Wexner Center), and the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) each enjoy considerable reputations in the local
community. They share and advocate for the public value of arts and culture by providing the community with a wide range of programs and outreach opportunities. Collaboration is another common feature of the three organizations. For example, CMA and the Wexner Center allow free admission to the galleries on their Partnership Day. All three organizations are participants in Member Advantage, a collaborative program among seven Columbus organizations that provides the members of partner organizations with discounts and benefits.

Located in the same city, the three organizations and the community are the witnesses of each other’s history. They have been faced with many common external forces, though not identical due to their respective institutional history and internal factors. In general, narrowing the participating museums in the same geographical area provides a more comparable background to the case studies.

**COSI: Learning while Having Fun**

**Background** COSI is acclaimed to be one of the best science centers in the United States. Inspired by the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, Sandy Hallock founded COSI in 1964 with support from the Franklin County Historical Society. The vision of COSI is to be “known around the world as the organization that pioneers the most powerful blend of rich science learning and spectacular FUN (emphasized in the original text, www.cosi.org).” COSI aims to provide the best resource for science education and become a “world-class cultural destination.” COSI’s mission stated (adopted at 1964):
COSI provides an exciting and informative atmosphere for those of all ages to discover more about our environment, our accomplishments, our heritage, and ourselves. We motivate a desire toward a better understanding of science, industry, health, and history through involvement in exhibits, demonstrations, and a variety of educational activities and experiences. (www.cosi.org)

Education is at the core of COSI’s mission since its founding. It has been embodied in concrete programming for the community, including not only educational programs for children and families, but also resources for teachers. Meanwhile, COSI is devoted to outreach to make informal science learning accessible.

COSI moved to its current location in 1999 (www.cosi.org). The new building is simple, enormous, and modern while the signage font is playful. The colors of blue and white convey a neutral feeling of technology. The style of COSI’s website is consistent with its building. The web content is very comprehensive yet well-organized and detailed, containing information from organizational history to program offerings. It is structured for the outsider to navigate easily. Visitors’ information and recent exhibitions are at a prominent place on the homepage. The navigation bar contains the following tabs: visit, learn, share, join, donate, about, and shop. The “Share” section is where COSI integrates all of its social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, Youtube videos, Flickr pictures, Webshot photos, Wordpress blogs, Itunes podcasts, and Ning networks. Rather than just simply listing all of the platforms, COSI attaches brief introductions to each platform next to the link. At the bottom left of every single webpage on the site, COSI provides the option to connect via social media platforms (figure.1). Besides, the blog hosted by COSI’s CEO can be accessed from the staff directory through the link right next to the CEO’s
Concept of social media use in COSI  The interviewee, whose title is Public Relations and Social Media Manager, administers COSI’s social media. To spell out the goal of social media use, the interviewee stated: “it’s about connecting with our guests.” Overall, the whole interview indicated that COSI actively utilizes the feature of social media to solicit feedback from the community and presents “the inside track of an organization” in the purpose of building relationship with the audience.

There was a certain degree of “not-to-be-left-behind” motivation at the beginning of COSI’s adoption of social media. Like most organizations, COSI considers social media a marketing tool that fits together with traditional methods such as print, advertising, radio, and television. It is often related to the idea of “free advertising” in the marketing campaign. In addition, it offers audiences “the instant gratification that comes with social media and comes with the world of technology that we’re having today” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). As more and more new technologies keep emerging, such as the recent introduction of Google+, COSI first judges the compatibility between the tool and the organizational mission. Before adopting a particular social media for institutional use, COSI also considers whether it is accepted by their audience. Both the mission of the museum and the needs of the audience affect the final decision.

When everyone can post his or her opinion freely on the public page of an organization, the organization is faced with the risk of negative review. The interviewee thought that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages because
constructive criticism could potentially improve the services at COSI. The interviewee stressed that an important principle in social media strategy was to let the audiences know that the feedback reached COSI and was appreciated. Expressing this can be as simple as reading and answering people’s posts in a manner similar to the work done in “customer service.”

The interviewee identified another benefit of social media to be reducing the bias of audiences. As a traditional informal education destination in the community, people are well informed of the fact that COSI is a good place for children to learn science. However, compared to children’s education programs, people know much less about the other offerings at COSI, such as teacher’s resource fairs and various adult programs. Social media brings this information to the attention of audiences who might benefit from these other programs. It is more direct method to engage people than redirecting them to dig through the website. Another circumstance is that sometimes it can be confusing for a participant to determine whether she or he is suitable for the workshop or program simply based on the generic text description on COSI’s website or marketing brochure. Social media provides a place where people can consult COSI directly with their personal interests and receive the answer tailored to their particular concerns. In this way, clarifying COSI’s offerings in a flexible manner helps remove a barrier to participation.

The interviewee tied social media to the brand of COSI: “Our entire brand is all about encouraging curiosity. So I think that’s the most important thing to us when we do any social media and blogs” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). COSI accentuates fun as much as science. As described by the interview, “We will pour
nitrogen on the floor so you can walk through the cloud. But we also have something serious things that go on too” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). This perception of COSI’s brand image determines the vocabulary of social media, which “goes back and forth between silly and serious” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). The philosophy of the organization can be embedded in well-versed social media content.

When projecting the future agenda, the interviewee talked about the integration of social media into everyday life and organizational decision-making. She also mentioned the responsibility to “empower people” who work at or support COSI to participate in the efforts on social media. She found that some people are afraid to express their point of view for fear of saying something wrong, which applies to offline experience as well. And it is a barrier to genuine participation in culture. The museum should take the initiative to build a safe environment physically and virtually in which people feel comfortable to communicate their thoughts on culture.

**Operation of social media in COSI** The predecessor of the interviewee was a PR Manager. The change in job title reflects the increased responsibility related to social media. The interviewee believes that the combination of PR and social media help to ensure that the out-going message represents the right image of COSI.

While the action of posting is ultimately funneled to one person, the content creation process is open to the entire cohort of COSI. At weekly meetings, the marketing team discusses the general direction of messages to be sent out in social media. In addition to the marketing department, people in other capacities are also welcomed to contribute. COSI tries to utilize as much science/technology-related and
community-relevant information as possible to engage audiences. As the interviewee notes, the “marketing department knows almost 99% of everything going on here. But there is always a 1% doesn’t go through the right channel. That might be something I really want to post on Facebook” (personal communication, August 3, 2011).

Comparing the communication on websites to social media, the interviewee acknowledged that she used different tones. While the website is very structured and sounds like “proper speak,” she would post something personal with less formal language on Facebook, such as using contractions. The interviewee added that COSI’s website would be renewed in the near future. An important change on the new website would be a direct link to social media platforms.

The first social media tool adopted by COSI was YouTube, in 2007, followed by Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Using a wide range of social media tools involves the decision of whether or not to repeat the same content on different platforms. As explained by the interviewee, social media users have different preferences and reactions to the same message on different platforms. To match audience expectations, the interviewee uses tactics accordingly to organize each tool, including effective timeframe, voice, length, frequency, format, and content.

COSI places particular emphasis on blogs for their ability to provide the “inside track.” It is believed that audiences are engaged by inside information into an organization, as the interviewee perceives: “it kind of makes it a little bit more personal so you don’t think COSI is such a huge museum. You start to see it’s more about the people work inside that.” The content on the CEO’s blog combines personal life with the review of current science news. Another blog COSI hosts is called
“COSI on wheels.” The blog is managed by COSI’s educators who regularly visit many different schools. They use the blog to record interesting experiences on the road, which are “fun and playful” and appeal to “different age groups.” The anecdotes such as coming across Ohio State football celebrity Eddie George on the outreach trip certainly provide a point of connection with the community.

The interviewee noted that the popularity of social media and its marketing effect involved a lot of “word-of-mouth,” which is hard to track in a tangible way. Within certain limits, analytics help to assess the outcome by generating reports on the sources of traffic and the quantity and attitude of social media comments. The comment space under blog posts also provides a channel where COSI gets direct feedback from the community.

COSI’s leadership is highly supportive for social media implementation because they believe it to be important. Moreover, they are actively involved, as demonstrated by the regular updates on the CEO’s blog. The successful reception of social media inside the organization is attributed to the preceding PR manager who had done “proactive work” to cultivate the organizational environment. The staff is required to receive training about social media when going through “on-boarding”, which is part of COSI’s internal learning system. Besides that, COSI also has a “Social Media Plan and Policy” in place. It regulates the proper online behavior if the employee would like to act as a representative of COSI on social media.

According to the interviewee, it is difficult to associate social media audiences with specific tools. Social media users are diverse. Without clear audience segmentation, COSI ensures that the message speaks to audiences as broadly as
possible. The interviewee was particular about the content being “family-friendly” so that “the same video could be as enjoyable to a 6-year-old as it would be to an 85-year-old.”

Furthermore, COSI has already started to incorporate the opinions from the community to decision making on issues such as the choice of signage design. The interviewee was positive about gradually engaging social media audiences with both small and large decision making.

The engagement through social media is two-way. COSI not only integrates the community perspective into organizational practice, but also goes out there and enters people’s lives. For example, the interviewee usually sends out messages on Saturdays with deliberately set intervals and patterns “to coincide with what the audience might be thinking” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). By doing so, COSI embeds its offerings into people’s everyday consideration organically.

The Wexner Center: Deeper Integration into Everything

Background The Wexner Center for the Arts is a multi-disciplinary contemporary arts center affiliated with The Ohio State University. It was first opened in 1989. The mission of the Wexner Center is to be “the international laboratory for the exploration and advancement of contemporary art” (www.wexarts.org). It embraces both established and emerging artists as a forum of innovation and creativity. It connects diverse audiences and artists via visual arts exhibitions, film and video screenings, performances, artist residencies, and educational programs. It is a resource for cultural experiences and participation, with education and outreach at the center.
Located on High Street and the main college campus, the Wexner Center building stands out, especially the white metal “scaffolding” along the walkway between the main building and the Mershon Auditorium. The design becomes an inspiration for later on-site art projects. The interior space contains galleries, a performance space, a movie theater, a café, and a bookstore. The homogeneous decoration provides a feel of fluidity among areas. The marketing material of the Wexner Center, from the seasonal calendar to special event flyers, provides informative content through the use of visually appealing design. In addition, the official website of the Wexner Center employs the latest interactive web technology. More noticeable than the sophisticated visual effect is the fact that the website has its own mission statement. The Director states in her welcome note for the website that: “We're constantly enhancing our web presence to make your virtual forays a vibrant complement to your in-person visits. I hope you find both experiences rewarding, and invite you to return often to the Wex domain” (“About”, 2011). The “Interactive” section on the website contains various ways to keep in touch with the Wexner Center, including Blog, Podcast, Video, Newsletters, RSS Feeds, Live Video Streaming, FourSquare (a social media platform for cell phones), Facebook, Photos on Flickr, and Twitter.

**Concept of Social Media Use in The Wexner Center**

The Director of Marketing and Communications at the Wexner Center identified several aims of social media use. The first is to bring people to the Wexner Center to experience the arts. The second is to increase awareness of programs and engage with visitors. The third is to build a community. He further elaborated that the success of social media
was not necessarily dependent on physical attendance. The strongest motivation behind using social media is to engage audiences.

At the Wexner Center, social media plays a part in the big picture of audience engagement. It provides the organization with the platforms to develop a two-way communication flow with the audience, one that is different from the outdated one-way top-down model. The two-way communication model is also considered the major difference between the website and social media. It is difficult for the organization to have a genuine conversation with the audience on the official website with its given structure. However, social media provides the platform where the communication can be more dialogic. Speaking of differences between the website and social media, the interviewee added metaphorically that “We look at our website almost like our business card. You’ll always have your business card. It describes the events. Facebook page is kind of your personality and what you do, how you interact with people, on a more personal basis” (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

One of the changes that social media has brought to the organization is presenting a more approachable face of the Wexner Center. The interviewee pointed out that the change does not happen overnight. Rather, it has taken a long time to accumulate the effect of “a less elitist” image (personal communication, August 9, 2011). Built upon the more accessible organizational image, the Wexner Center is able to make deeper connections to the community.

Social media also facilitates audience participation in the programs of the Wexner Center. As mentioned earlier, the Wexner Center focuses on cutting-edge culture from around the globe. With the commitment to innovation and creativity, the
Center sometimes presents artworks that are more controversial than others. They challenge everyday perceptions and force people to think. The interviewee believed that the offerings of the Wexner Center sometimes require a lot of explanation. It may seem intimidating to audiences and thus potentially increase the barrier to participate in the arts. Challenging as it could be, the innovation and creativity of the Center’s programming was where the public value of the institution laid. The interviewee was proud to say that “Ultimately we all think it is a good thing, we are not in a business that merely entertaining… you’re gonna witness great art history but it’s a different definition of what great is” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). This exemplifies precisely how social media can be used to facilitate the delivery of public values. The way social media helps to reduce the obstacles and encourage participation is by not only offering the information on time, date, and price, but also explaining the significance and context of the program. The Wexner Center employs social media to share the background of the artist or concept in multi-media, as an alternative to chunks of text, so that people can learn naturally and “make informed choices about how they spend their time and money.” The interviewee emphasized the advantage of multi-media over text, especially video, when trying to reach audiences.

In addition to this, the interviewee perceived it as a form of cultural participation that people respond to and interact with the arts organization and its content. The factor that makes it a legitimate form of cultural participation is that the Wexner Center is “actively listening and responding” as a partner in the conversation.
In this sense, social media helps the organization to connect with the audiences in a meaningful way.

The interviewee’s vision of social media is that it needs to be “much more deeply engrained into everything that we do” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). He compared the current status of social media in the organization to the sidecar of a motorcycle. He believed that: “In the future, social media [will] have to be the motorcycle itself” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). In the process of integration, the organization will meet difficulties from the organizational legacy, such as the current website structure. The existing model restricts social media to become “second nature.” Engraining social media will involve the reconfiguration of everything in the organization. Part of that is to have more people in the organization share their knowledge via social media. The interviewee expressed his expectation for curators and people with expertise in their areas to be more active in using social media. He anticipates that if in the next three or four years social media can be integrated into the work of curators, there will be a huge transformation in knowledge building in the museum world as well as a tremendous benefit to the community.

While social media helps the organization to be more visible online, there is the risk of being too visible. The interviewee pointed out the importance of finding a balance. One way to avoid being ignored by the audience is to “build trust in people” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). It is important to make sure that audiences get responses to their comments and receive the content with the expected quality from the organization.
**Operation of social media in the Wexner Center**

According to the interviewee, the Wexner Center first started its social media presence on MySpace in about 2005. The interviewee mentioned that one of the priorities on his agenda after taking the job position in 2006 was to manage the Facebook page. The benefits of social media are well accepted in the Wexner Center. Staff members shaped a consensus of being present on social media to show the dynamic happenings at the Center.

The unique thing about the Wexner Center’s social media practice is that it manages three Facebook Fan Pages. One is the main page for the organization and the other two “sister pages” are dedicated to the Film/Video program and the bookstore. The decision to create three different pages is “driven by audience” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). The interviewee observes that the film fans of the Center are very specific in the information they want to get. This is also the case for the bookstore followers. Nevertheless, without adequate audience research, the interviewee used the terms “hunch” and “educated guess” to define the ways in which they learned information from audiences (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

He defined their core social media audience as “exclusive social media power users” who use self-selected social media feeds as the only channel for getting information (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

The management is “decentralized” as the staff in the Film/Video area and the bookstore respectively feed their own pages. The marketing department has trust in their own knowledge to create good content in their specialized area. Nevertheless, there is one staff member in the marketing department acting as the lead person on social media in general. However, rather than being a devoted “social media
coordinator”, he takes on social media as part of his job alongside the outreach responsibility. In a similar manner to COSI, the Wexner Center encourages everyone in the organization to create some “behind-the-scenes” stories. The Wexner Center also has a social media policy document. Its function is similar to the one at COSI, which is to set up employee responsibility in terms of social media usage.

The Wexner Center uses Google analytics and the built-in analytic feature of Facebook to get quantitative measurements of social media activities. The tracking systems provide information on the number of clicks and the time that readers stay on each single post and the trend of web traffic in a week, month, or other time period. The Wexner Center analyzes the numbers in reference to related content to find out the most effective way to solicit audience responses.

Columbus Museum of Art: Engagement and Education in the Museum of the Twenty-first Century

Background

Columbus Museum of Art's mission is to create great experiences with great art for everyone. Whether we are presenting an exhibition, designing an art-making activity, serving a lunch, or giving directions to a visitor, we are guided by a belief in advocacy, quality, community, integrity, and creativity. We believe that art speaks to each and every one of us in different ways. Art inspires. Art challenges. Art thinks (“About CMA,” 2011)

CMA’s mission statement outlines a very inspiring portrait of the role that a museum plays in the twenty-first century. The concerns for visitors’ experiences are conveyed explicitly. From curating and programming to customer service, CMA is trying to aid visitors to have a meaningful encounter with the arts. To support lifelong learning, the diverse education programs at CMA cover a wide range of audiences,
including the general public, schools, and children of all ages. In addition to this, it also extends to larger communities through Internet technology (virtual exhibition) and outreach programs that bring artworks into the neighborhood.

The CMA was founded in 1878. Its prestigious art collections and the Renaissance-style façade of the building gives people the impression of a typical art museum that sprung up during the nineteenth century. However, the bold color and industrial design of the “CMA” sculpture outside may be the clue of the fresh ideas that the museum bears. CMA underwent a major renovation during 2010. When it reopened in January 2011, the museum was fully equipped to take on a leading role to promote community engagement with the arts. The first things that draw the attention of visitors are the galleries. Rather than collections, the new configuration of galleries focuses on visitors, assisting visitors to shape their own narratives and experience with the arts. Collections have been reorganized in themes rather than the art history paradigm. CMA has broken the routine and painted the gallery wall with vibrant colors. More progressively, people now can find something additional to paintings and a sofa in the room. For example, in the “Love and War” room, visitors are provided with the option to play with battleships and puzzles, as well as to record their own messages in the video booth. All these changes help visitors develop a deeper personal connection with the artworks. In my fieldtrip to the museum, I was also impressed by the video artwork installed in the elevator. The thorough penetration of art provides participation opportunities everywhere in the building. The Center for Creativity is another thing under spotlight. It is more of a community-learning center than a traditional museum space. The Center contains a hands-on
interactive family room, media room, a meeting place for schools, an auditorium, and a well-decorated place open for wedding receptions and other events.

CMA’s official website has standard buttons for an art museum such as visiting, exhibitions, and collections. In addition, “learn about art” and “how can we guide you” sections provide a unique approach to presenting information to guide visitors through the website. Rather than the division of programs or collections, the layout follows the classification of visitors, including adults, families, teachers, students, and art enthusiasts. This is the embodiment of the transforming ideology in museums of the twenty-first century.

**Concept of Social Media Use in CMA** The Digital Communications Manager articulated that the main reason for supporting social media implementation was “to engage and educate” the audience (personal communication, August 11, 2011). She emphasized in the interview that social media was regarded as being an important part of the ongoing cycle of engagement that connects the audience and the museum with the onsite visit and the community experience beyond the physical museum space. She mentioned that the idea of using social media to engage the audience was similar to the design of the video booth and battleship in the gallery. For the visitors, they are all points of connection to the arts and the museum. The interviewee described the target audience for social media to be “young people between twenty and forty years old.” “If we didn’t have social media,” said the interviewee, “we would be missing the middle audience... that get themselves informed through social media” (personal communication, August 11, 2011).
The online engagement is a congruent part of the CMA’ philosophy, which is “engagement in every corner” (personal communication, August 11, 2011). As people nowadays tend to demand instant information exchange, social media has the unique advantage of being real time. In particular, the interviewee explicitly stated that for an institution like a museum, the goal of social media was more than free advertising, as stated by the interviewee:

Driving attendance is of course one of the things it can achieve. But it shouldn't be the number one reason. If someone does it only to drive traffic to museum, they are doing it to the wrong end... It is more about extending the experience of visitors with a twenty-first century museum. As I said earlier, it helped to connect and extend the experience in a cycle (personal communication, August 11, 2011).

The overall interview reflects that social media makes the relationship between the CMA and the audience more conversational. The interviewee still hoped for a more open environment in terms of who would post and what to post. She encouraged people inside and outside of the organization to be more involved in social media efforts.

The interview also reveals practitioner’s intentions to move social media use from a tactical level to a more strategic status. As the interviewee mentioned when talking about the policy document, “We have a guideline for employees... Right now the guideline is under revamping to … position itself in a larger picture” (personal communication, August 11, 2011). The interviewee believes that as social media obtains more significance in organizational strategy, it will be incorporated more into the decision-making processes in the future.
**Operation of Social Media in CMA** CMA first started using social media with Facebook and Twitter around 2009. The museum did not meet any resistance to its launch. When asked about the tactics used with the official website and the social media platforms, the interviewee noted that there was no particular difference to the message because they were both under the “same brand.” Links to the CMA’s page on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and blog are placed under “About,” next to other background information about the museum. According to the interviewee, the Digital Communications Manager, the CMA is planning to place the social media links in a more prominent location on the website. In a similar manner to other participating museums, CMA also uses analytics to track the performance of social media and test out the key words that work most effectively to engage the audience.

The researcher has observed the entire process of creating and publishing the content on social media during a site visit. The interviewee used her smart phone to take a picture of the crowd who were having fun with hands-on activities at the Center for Creativity and shared it online with an engaging message in real time. While the interviewee is in charge of the daily maintenance of CMA’s social media, other employees also contribute to the content on blogs. CMA’s blog touches upon diverse topics, from program-related information, such as reflections and thoughts on the museum field, to local and international cultural phenomena. For example, the blog has a post about Harry Potter, the “classic” literature for teenagers. The post reviewed the global phenomenon from a cultural perspective and concluded by advocating for creativity in the community. This type of content is appealing to
audiences from the younger generation and at the same time encapsulates the mission of the museum.

Cross-Case Analysis

Following the narrative of these three case studies, this part analyzes the data by comparing and contrasting the cases. It focuses on the common themes that emerge from the data. Some of these themes echo the insights in the reviewed literature while the others suggest new perspectives for further research.

The awareness of the changing environment and role of museum All interviewees from the three case studies convey their understanding of the environment that shapes today’s museum identity. In general, the action of using social media itself is one of the adjustments that these museums make in response to the environmental change and new identity. The CMA imbues the idea of a twenty-first-century museum into every detail of their work whether on the museum floor or virtual platform. They consider social media as part of a more open and relevant institution in the new cultural scenario. The interviewee at the Wexner Center talked about the competition for leisure time. In point of fact, with the increased pervasiveness of the Internet in everyday life, museums are surrounded by competition both online and offline. He notes that social media with good content is helpful for audiences to make decisions of participation in museum programs among many online offerings from various rivals. For similar reasons, COSI’s social media manager has to send out messages on weekends according to people’s daily schedule. Each message caters to the audiences’ possible needs and interests at different times
of the day. The use of social media helps museums to meet the demands of visitors in a contemporary context.

**Visitor-centered principle** The visitor-centered concept of museums is closely related to the changing environment. According to the data, most operational decisions of social media are “audience driven.” The interviewees have learned that the audience today has different expectations for communicating with a museum. Fundamentally, the interviewees “tried to build up [an] audience through those channels for people who choose to use those tools” (personal communication, August 3, 2011). If the audience were not using social media then neither would the organizations be. For example, when COSI faces the choice to adopt new social media tools, administrators take into consideration the preferences of its audience. These three organizations basically select the same range of tools, with Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Flickr, and blogs being the major ones, because of their popularity with the audience. The choice of platform is first and foremost based on the existing presence of the audience there. Museums are reaching out to where the audience is rather than the other way around. Furthermore, none of the museums use social media only to spread the word. They also seek to provide convenience and lessen the barriers for visitors to participate in their programs. The content in social media messages are not only expressing what museums need to say, but also conveying it in a form that visitors are able to comprehend and feel is interesting.

**Ambiguous social media target audience** The CMA claim that their target audience are young people from 20 to 40 years old who actively use social media. The interviewee refers this population to the “middle” section of the general museum
audience as a whole. However, COSI calls its audience “a mixture” and the Wexner Center uses practical experiments and “educated guess” to know their audience, as termed by the interviewees. Given the chance, the interviewee of the Wexner Center would also like to carry out more audience research to learn about their social media preferences. Nonetheless, there is an underlying assumption in all three cases that their social media activities serve the audiences who have experience with the tool. Meanwhile, museums provide the audiences who have no prior interaction with them on social media an option of connecting through social media, by including links on main websites, newsletter, and printed materials (Figure 2. “Connect with COSI”).

In terms of the content in social media, museums offer materials with funny and informal characteristics as well as serious ones. Concerning privacy issues, the statistics reported in the tracking software do not contain information that is conventionally used to classify audiences, such as demographic information. Rather than knowing audiences’ background data, museums know their online behavior first.

In order to seriously use social media to build relationships with audiences and provide personalized experiences, museums have to investigate audience motivation and the needs that are associated with various choices of social media tools. They need more specifically designed research to learn about their social media audiences and design appropriate approaches to categorize social media audiences of museums.

Engagement Engagement is the most critical thread underlying all of the case studies. It is not just reaching audiences but building relationships with them and linking them to museum offerings. One possible way to measure the success of engagement with social media is calculating the interactions between the museum and
the audience. The interviewee at the Wexner Center has used certain tactics to stimulate audience response rates: “I think you can generate what comments by the kind of things you post… There are different ways you can stimulate more responses, certainly doing things like contest and give-aways” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). However, the number of responses is not the only indicator of successful engagement. Most of the engagement effort on social media is difficult to translate in tangible terms. But the lack of visible index does not mean that they are not worth doing.

As shown in the data, case study organizations achieve engagement through four approaches: marketing, branding, education, and community creation. They are elaborated subsequently.

**Marketing** The marketing function of social media is substantial in the case study museums. At the operational level, the adoption of social media was initiated from marketing or public relations departments in all participating museums. The marketing team is usually responsible for the daily maintenance, the creation of content, and the interaction with audiences on social media. A lot of content put on social media is shared with other marketing materials. At the strategic level, social media is perceived as one integral part of an overall marketing strategy or mix. It functions more instantly and more approachable compared to other marketing channels.

In addition, in light of the theme discussed above, ambiguous market segmentation might keep marketing at a superficial level, because of the conflict between the one-to-one mode and the one-to-many mode. The former allows a
strengthening of the relationship with specific populations while the latter spreads the word wider at the cost of a flattened communication. The crux lies in how social media fits in the overall strategy and how it interacts with other marketing tools. To develop social media use in museums, museum administrators need to articulate the particular goal of social media and its relative place in the museum.

**Branding** Branding concerns the image building of the organization as a whole. Instead of a single product or program, the museum itself is the subject. The concept of the brand establishes coherence among all organizational activities. Having a well-managed brand will in turn make the management more effective. With an image that stakeholders identify themselves with, museums can attract more visitors and secure the support from donors (Wallace, 2006). All three case study museums note that social media represents the brand of the organization. The interviewee mentions that the Wexner Center need to build trust through social media so that followers tend to prioritize the message from the Wexner Center over other sources.

It is also acknowledged in all cases that social media presents a more personal face of the organization. The interviewees use words such as “human”, “approachable”, “less elitist” and so on. They are convinced that providing behind-the-scenes information will shape a more approachable face of the organization. Providing relevant content and “response in 24 hours” also brings museums closer to their audiences. As the interviewee from COSI declared, “Just by reading people’s feedback and answering their questions, that’s what makes people more comfortable with an institution because it shows that we care and we are listening” (personal
communication, August 3, 2011). This “human face” is rooted in the shift of focus in museums today and is an inseparable element of their brand.

**Education** This research defines education loosely because it is rendered with different foci in each case. Education refers to delivering information, whether program-related or not, as needed by audiences to connect to museums. For example, the education component is included in the blogposts written by the educators at CMA and COSI, which is an apparent form of informal learning and community building. Compared to regular exhibition visits, these blogposts have the advantage of being more approachable. It creates a less official entrance for people to access knowledge.

In another form, the Wexner Center consciously tapped the education element in the “explanation” it offers to visitors. As described earlier, some programs at the Wexner Center might not be easily digested by the general public. Social media embeds the information in casual multi-media formats to “connect the dots” for people. By linking new information with prior knowledge, the museum can eliminate people’s unwillingness to participate. Essentially it is very close to Falk’s concept of informal learning from the perspective of constructivist theory. Similarly, COSI uses social media to provide direct consultation for willing participants who have uncertainties about programs; much in the same way a college student consults a subject librarian to determine which is the most appropriate database for their research. This kind of activity can also be considered an alternative form of instruction on the better utilization of the resources museums have to offer.
**Community creation** Engagement is a reciprocal process. Not only is the audience engaged in the arts and culture, but also museums are involved in the building of communities. COSI’s example shows the irreplaceable merit of creating community memory by inviting visitors’ input, as the PR and Social Media Manager recalls:

For ‘Big machines’ we just had construction equipment outside, and I ask them I’d love to see your pictures, please post them here… It’s great to have a guest perspective or something like that. Because I can post so many pictures. But I will take the pictures with COSI’s logo in the background, and the details of the wheel or something like that. But mostly people who post back to us will post their kids. It’s great video and pictures (personal communication, August 3, 2011).

Similarly, the CMA has also involved visitors in a project that is combined with the online-offline experience. The exhibition *Stephanie Syjuco: Pattern Migration* left a lot of extra plastic fabric unused. The museum invited visitors to take home 5-10 yards of Syjuco’s fabric to make their own creations. Visitors took pictures of their own artworks with the free fabric pieces and uploaded them to *Flickr* and tagged them with “CMASyjuco.” The online gallery showcased these diverse creations made with the fabric, from a tailored dress to a flowerpot. The CMA shared and forwarded these images on *Flickr* and other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter so that more audiences could enjoy the creative products of community members. These projects exemplify how audiences’ personal histories and interests are blended with the offerings of museums. This process of creation makes it a unique meaningful experience with the museum for each individual participant.

**Integration** The meaning of integration is multi-faceted in this study. Firstly, social media has to be integrated with the website. Right now the websites contain
links to social media and they are governed in parallel as a kind of “two-headed beast,” as termed by the interviewee at the Wexner Center. However, the interviewee added that “our Facebook Page is more our website than our website. In the future, the website will look more like social media” (personal communication, August 9, 2011).

Secondly, social media has to be engrained into everything from educator’s work to visitor’s purchasing decisions. The interviewee mentioned that they were working on ways that people can buy tickets directly from a Facebook page. From the perspective of a visitor, it is possible to perceive just how frustrating it would be if a visitor gets personalized social media feeds everyday, shares individual opinions under pictures and blogposts, becomes interested in an upcoming workshop after watching a fun video, but finally has to be redirected to another website in order to buy a ticket.

Thirdly, the case study museums are looking to integrate social media into strategic planning. The data reveals that current social media policies in these organizations are only informative at the operational level. However, the interviewees all positively convey the intention to update the policy and plan so that it becomes a strategic guideline. The CMA’s strategy is already in process. At the Wexner Center, the interviewee perceived some obstacles. Although there are methods to equate the value of social media to tangible numbers, it is difficult to demonstrate the return on investment “because it is a little newer and a little more nebulous” (personal communication, August 9, 2011). However, with the advancement of analytic tools, the situation is changing.
Professionalization Despite the joint contribution to content creation from employees with various capacities, the museum needs a specialized social media manager to coordinate a range of social media platforms. In order to maximize the potential strength of social media, the manager needs specific skill sets different than traditional marketing techniques. The interviewee at COSI mentions that webinars and workshops designed for social media managers in cultural organizations are fairly useful. Moreover, the change in the job title, in COSI’s case, is a sign that professionalization is already in process.

Summary

The aim of this study is to understand the role that social media plays in museums and explore the areas where the use of social media serves the mission of museum. The research question inquires about the rationale underlying the current social media implementation in museums as well as the details of the social media practice in reality. In light of the literature review and the data collected from multiple sources, this study intends to combine a deep understanding of the contemporary context of museums and the substantial knowledge of social media practices.

The previous section identified and synthesized common themes that emerged from the case studies. These themes are interrelated with each other and reflect the conceptual and operational aspects of social media in museums. The purpose of this summary is to clarify the relationships between these themes and lay the foundation for the discussion of implications and future research in the concluding chapter.
As discussed in Chapter 2, museums are involved in the shift toward a visitor-centered paradigm. Museums nowadays are for the people (Weil, 1999). The case study museums have embraced and internalized the transformation in their organizational practice, which is embodied in the organizational missions, the wide range of education and outreach programs in their respective areas, the user-friendly facilities in museums, and the attitude of interviewed staff. They regard the extension of educational opportunities and cultural experiences to the community as an essential component of the work of museums.

Meanwhile, the channels of cultural participation and education become increasingly extensive. The literature indicates that more and more cultural participation is embedded in everyday life outside the institutions without even being noticed. With the advent of social media, museums have established their presence on major platforms in order to engage audiences in two-way communication and invite them to participate in cultural activities.

Museums in the study put social media under the administration of either PR or marketing departments. At the same time, everyone in the organizations is encouraged to be a contributor. At present, the performance of social media is measured with a wide range of software in quantitative terms. Managers experiment with various contents to test the most popular ones that trigger most comments from audiences. They try to keep a balance in the content, between community-relevant news and program-related material. Responding to visitors’ comments is considered a must. Museums look forward to having more dynamic conversation flows with audiences. They show the audience the inside track of an organization to build a more
approachable image and endeavor to be part of community life. Social media managers are working in the process of integrating social media into everything in the organization and raise its strategic significance. In general, this is how and why the organizations actively use social media to engage audiences with cultural experience.

The following framework shows the relationships among the key themes that have emerged in the case studies.

Museums and audiences are all immersed in a larger context. On visitors’ side are the needs and expectations of museums’ social media audience that have been identified by interviewees: having easy access to museum information, contributing feedback and input to the management of museums, and getting meaningful personal
experience in museums. Social media provides the platforms through which museums are able to meet the needs and demands of audiences and engage them with museum offerings. In other words, engagement is the critical motivation and goal for museums to implement social media. It provides the connection between the organization and the community. Moreover, engagement can be embodied in a broad spectrum of activities. Education, branding, marketing, and community creation are concrete ways museums use to effectuate engagement. They each represent a distinctive focus of social media engagement. Marketing caters to niche audiences. The accumulative effect of marketing creates the brand of the organization, which establishes the long-term trust of the audience. Education and community creation provide depth and personalized experiences of cultural participation in a meaningful way. In addition, community creation also empowers the representation of visitors’ perspectives in museum’s online sites. As grouped the museums’ side, there are three areas in museums that can be improved to achieve successful engagement with audiences through social media at different levels. Museums have to realize the professionalization of social media management, the integration of social media into the organization, and learn more about their audience through research.

**Conclusion**

The researcher believes that the power of social media is restricted by the underdeveloped integration of social media into strategic planning. How social media serves the museum is determined by how the museum perceives social media. If an organization views social media as merely free advertising, then it will not help informal learning and community-building. Alternatively, if museums articulate the
position of social media in the organization and embody its role in actual work, it
could be a strong means of connecting museums to their audiences. One can imagine
social media as an online docent who welcomes audiences at the digital lobby, offers
audiences information according to their personal needs, and guides the audience
through the cultural experience without the limit of time and space. Ultimately, it is
not social media that audiences interact with. The true partners in the conversation are
the museum administrators, educators, and curators, who face audiences with the aid
of social media. The end is to fulfill the mission of the museum in a contemporary
context.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

Chapter 4 provides an analysis of data from case studies and a framework with themes generated in the content analysis. The framework illustrates the relationships between museums and audiences, which are weaved around various types of engagement through social media. Building on the preceding analysis, this chapter presents the evaluation of research findings, and proposes practical implications and suggestions for future research.

Reflection on Literature

Overall, the research findings correspond with the major conclusions drawn from existing literature. The findings indicate that the urgency to connect with audiences in a contemporary context is a decisive factor in whether or not museums decide to adopt social media tools. Participating museums utilize social media in two-way communication features for program and event marketing, organization branding, and enhancing individual experience of community members through informal knowledge and opportunities of creation and sharing. With the implementation of social media, museums adjust their management accordingly, including enriched job responsibilities on marketing staff and planned integration of social media into strategic marketing campaigns. In general, the findings show that social media is taken as part of the museum’s new approach to engage audiences. The results also echo the important elements identified in the literature that contribute to
successful conversations in social media, including interactive experiences, open-ended topic and question sessions, behind-the-scenes tours, and fun content.

On the other hand, some of the results allude to challenges in the literature. It confirms that the adoption of social media in museums has largely remained tactical rather than strategic. The tactical use limits social media’s ability to extend cultural participation into the online setting with fluidity and multiple points of entry. Nevertheless, interviewees have expressed the intention to strategize the use of social media gradually. In tandem with the underdeveloped application of social media is that its use in curatorial practice or the learning community is not as prominent as previous studies suggest. Compared to the innovation with social media observed in prior literature, including online community and participatory exhibition development, case study museums use social media with more reservation, which is within the range of content publishing.

Advantages and limitations of this study

The goal of this study is to understand the role that social media plays in museums in the contemporary context. The study seeks to discover the rationale and process of social media implementation in museums through the approach of multiple case studies. The adopted methodology is one of the advantages of this study, as it prevents the research from oversimplifying the distinct environment of museums. As noted earlier, there is a need for in-depth data describing the actual scenario in the field of social media and museums. Qualitative case studies with mixed methods of data collection provide the research with a holistic view of interactions between social media and museums. The priority of the inextricable context differentiates this study
from others. It generates rich references when searching for future research directions and bridging the gap between research and practice.

Meanwhile the selected methodology has its limitations. Given the qualitative approach, the findings of case studies might be, alone, insufficient to generalize beyond the studied museums. Another limitation of the study lies in the range of participating interviewees. The optimal choice of interviewees would represent the point of view from both the strategic and operational levels. However, with limited access, the researcher only had a chance to interact fully with the staff at the operational level. Some interview questions regarding strategic decisions and visions are also worth further exploration with the input from the strategic level, such as the positioning and relative status of social media in the integrated marketing strategy. In case the data collected was incomplete or partial, due to the limit of interviewee’s knowledge, the researcher obtained supplementary data from organizational documents and observations for further reference.

**Implications of practical application**

As mentioned throughout the study, despite the popularity of social media, most museums today are not using it strategically. This study proposes several possible methods to optimize the impact of social media by linking the tools to the particular needs of museums.

Firstly, to unleash the potential of social media, museums have to change their mindsets and acknowledge its strategic value. Strategic thinking is the first step to allow for further assessment of social media. The strategic value of social media is manifested when rethinking the role of the museum with the fundamental centrality of
visitors. The conceptual acceptance of social media as a strategic tool is interrelated to the reassessment of the mission, participation modes, and strategic planning in museums. It is reported that one quarter of all Internet-users get information about performing and visual art programs online (SPPA, p.41). Museums need to be involved and take the responsibility to provide quality information as a trustworthy source of knowledge. In addition to actively posting rich content and being responsive to comments, they should envision social media with participation-building efforts. As a result, shifting audiences from passive participants to active content contributors means allowing challenges to museum authority, which requires extra mechanisms to manage it. It is suggested that museums be prepared for this thorough change in their relationships with visitors.

Secondly, the successful repositioning not only depends on the institutions’ attitude, but also the reception of the public. When museums reshape their connections to audiences, they should convey the message to the audiences so that their role can be well understood. Aligning expectations helps encourage audience involvement and create synergy. The mission statement of the Wexner Center’s website is a good example to emulate.

Thirdly, communication and collaboration with other entities in the community is inevitable: “Locally associated online communities have been cited as venues that promote involvement in neighborhood activities” (Horrigan, 2001). To generate original community knowledge, museums should also consider themselves as participants in community culture. Presumably, the social connections between users in the same vicinity will be easier to initiate and maintain due the local sharing of
knowledge and experience: “They need to seek out kindred organizations within their community in order to build mutually supportive collaborations of organizations that share their values and interests” (Falk, 2006, p.14).

Furthermore, research findings suggest that engagement with social media can be dissected into four categories – marketing, branding, education, and community creation - each with different concerns. It is important to specify the objectives and corresponding tactics in their implementation.

As illustrated in the framework, museums have to invest in three administrative areas: human resources, strategic planning, and audience research. Lewis and Martin (2006) stated “Our ability to explore these technologies and thereby engage with teens in a whole new way was seen as a key strength in connecting with this audience” (p.108). Therefore museums need a dedicated staff who possesses a keen sense of discretion and knowledge to meet visitors’ expectation of digital communications. Audience research can inform social media managers of visitors’ perspectives. “If museums are to succeed at being truly relevant twenty-first-century educational resources, they need to find new ways to respond to individual interests” (Falk, 2006, p.227). Museums can start with small-scale informal evaluation if rigorous research is not possible at present.

Last but not least, museums need to move beyond basic maintenance and carry out more experiments with social media, particularly with the involvement of community members. For instance, the Brooklyn Museum launched Istfans in January 2009 and discontinued it in November 2010. The manager of Information System and the staff in the Development Department at the Brooklyn Museum
(Bernstein, 2010) defined *1stfans* as “a socially networked museum membership,” which had two levels of meanings. One was to develop face-to-face relationships with museum staff and other museum members. The other was developing a strong, exclusive online relationship through social networking sites (such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter). *1stfans* was fundamentally centered on people. It was targeted at a niche online population who had already built relationships with the museum on social networking sites but were not yet members in the traditional membership program. In terms of the activities, *1stfans* combined in-person meet-ups, private groups on Facebook and Flickr, and a private Twitter feed featuring work by original artists. The membership benefits were designed from online user’s perspective and were unavailable elsewhere. In *1stfans* the foundation of the project was Twitter, the social media platform that used by the museum, rather than an exhibition or public program. The use of social media was central because it enabled the benefits and interactions provided in this membership i.e. it was the benefit itself (Twitter Art Feed). In the announcement of the discontinuity the program, Bernstein (2010) mentioned that they shifted focus to the in-person meetup and consequently changed to another online platform (Meetup.com) that better support the changed goal.

It has been argued extensively that effective utilization of social media requires more than just having a page on a social media platform. The Brooklyn Museum exemplifies that there are many areas that social media can be used to amplify the community role of museums. This research calls for more museums to experiment with the potential innovative uses of social media in all areas of museum work.

**Future research**
We are already immersed in palm pilots, distance learning, virtual exhibitions, and digitized collections. This can only grow, not because it is a fad, but because it really does make art more accessible and easier to study, aside from many other functions, such as preservation, security, and reproduction. (Robinson, 2006, p.162)

Future research should aim at accelerating the use of social media to provide access to cultural participation on a greater scale. Besides audience research, the relationship between online and offline activities is also an important research area. Museums have to investigate ways to validate the value of physical participation when cultural experience is extended into virtual space. The research findings are supposed to create a positive cycle between multiple modes of cultural participation. In addition, the increasingly interactive online environment presents challenges to the authority of museums. Future research should seek to articulate the respective strength of a physical visit to a museum and online participation as well as the balance between the double identities of the museum.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to look into ways to enrich individual experiences with social media. Although currently social media can provide personalized information that eliminates participation barriers, it would be more fruitful if the interactions between museums and audiences were recorded in a personalized database. As the database grows with time, museums will be able to build long-term and deeper relationships with individual participants.

Conclusion

In addition to the general economic downturn and shrinking public funding, museums are surrounded by growing competition from other alternative ways for people to spend their leisure time. At the same time, according to the most recent
Survey of Public Participation of Art and its ensuing reports, Americans’ participation in the arts has declined by 5 percent, compared to the previous survey in 2002 (NEA, 2008). Moreover, the traditionally granted authority and static presentation pattern is challenged by the expectation for interaction and collaboration between cultural organizations and visitors. Audiences today are demanding a different experience from traditional museum offerings. “In the twenty-first century, museums will need to invest in relationships, bringing to those relationships those things that they alone as institutions do best” (Falk, 2006, p.14). Social media’s accessibility, flexibility, and interactivity meets the current needs of visitor-centered museums, providing them with the opportunity to increase cultural participation and build stronger relationships with their audiences.

This study shows that social media is already part of the museum experience. In addition, social media has the potential to provide a meaningful personalized museum experience at multiple levels and possesses the infrastructure of community sharing and participatory experience needed in the creation of community-based knowledge.

Furthermore, it is precisely the tension between museum’s double identities that provides the stage for social media to perform. It was stated forty years ago that “while our bona fide museums seek to become relevant, maintaining their role as temples, there must be concurrent creation of forums for confrontation, experimentation, and debate, where the forums are related but discrete institutions" (Cameron, 1971, p.18). Forty years later, with the proper use of social media, museums are now able to manage both needs as a culture preserver and a mediator in community discourse. It is argued that museums with their collections and
infrastructure should maximize the points of connection between their resources and audiences, through the interactive space created by social media, enabling it to be really “for somebody.” Nevertheless, it will require considerable research and strategic effort before identifying the optimal way to use social media to engage audiences with museum offerings.
References


University of Tennessee. Retrieved from

http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/761
Appendix A: Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructivist exhibitions</th>
<th>Social media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free choice</td>
<td>Free choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many entry points</td>
<td>Many entry points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific path, no beginning, no end</td>
<td>No specific path, no beginning, no end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on prior knowledge and experience</td>
<td>Based on prior knowledge, experience and interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-controlled</td>
<td>User-controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually visited in own time and as part of structured educational experience</td>
<td>Usually visited in own time and place, may be part of structured educational experience as well as leisure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present range of points of view and perspectives, museum seen as authority</td>
<td>Present range of points of view and perspectives, yet authority can be questioned or unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide materials that allow to experiment, conjecture and draw conclusions</td>
<td>Interactive websites can provide programs and information that allow to experiment, conjecture and draw conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used for leisure, entertainment and learning</td>
<td>Used for leisure, entertainment and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be difficult to remain up-to-date</td>
<td>Usually up-to-date, constantly changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Comparison of constructivist exhibitions and social media (citation)

*Note: This chart is cited from Kelly, L. (2009, October) The Impact of Social Media on Museum Practice. Paper presented at the National Palace Museum, Taipei.*
Appendix B: Figure 2

Figure 2: “Connect with COSI” (“About,” 2011)
Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear ________,

I am a graduate student at the Ohio State University in the Arts Policy & Administration program. Under the guidance of Dr. Wayne Lawson, the Director Emeritus of Ohio Arts Council and Professor in the Department of Art Education, I am currently working on my Masters thesis research titled Social media as means to participation building: Case studies of using social media in cultural institutions. The goal of this master’s research study is to investigate how major cultural institutions in Columbus, Ohio implement social media, and to explore the potential of using Social Media to increase cultural participation. The research intends to clarify the rationale of using social media in cultural institutions, by examining administrators’ perceptions of this emerging technology in the cultural sector, and identifying the unique benefits it brings to participation building. It aims to use the result to inform administrators of ways to use social media for the building of dynamic cultural participation, and ultimately advance the mission of cultural organizations.

For the purpose of this study, I am planning to collect data on cultural institution administrators’ perceptions. As a prominent cultural mediator in the Greater Columbus area, COSI has extensive experience in building cultural participation in the local community. Your expertise pertinent to audience engagement and implementation of social media would provide insight to this study. I would like to
invite you to participate by allowing me to interview you. In return for your help, I believe the research findings can shed light on the effective practice of integrating social media in building cultural participation.

If you decide to take part in this research project, you will be asked to participate in an interview, lasting approximately an hour, during July-August 2011. Interview questions will be provided in advance for your consideration upon your request. With your permission, I will take notes during the interview and use my personal Macbook to record the conversation for transcription and validation purposes. Besides, before or after the interview, you might be asked to provide documents relevant to the interview to supplement, illustrate, or clarify the issue.

Participation in my project is entirely voluntary. Should you be willing to be part of the project, we will arrange for a convenient time and place for the interview and I will deliver the consent form in person when we meet. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (614) 558-5361 or gu.74@osu.edu, or my research advisor, Dr. Lawson at WPLDE@aol.com. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251. Thank you in advance for your interest and consideration. I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Co-investigator, Mini Gu
M.A. Candidate, Arts Policy and Administration

The Ohio State University
Appendix D: Consent Form

Research Title: *Social media as means to participation building: Case studies of using social media in cultural institutions.*

Dr. Wayne Lawson, Academic Adviser

Mini Gu, Co-Investigator

Arts Policy and Administration Program

The Ohio State University

You are invited to participate in a research project titled *Social media as means to participation building: Case studies of using social media in cultural institutions.*

The goal of this master’s research study is to investigate how major cultural institutions in Columbus, Ohio implement social media, and to explore the potential of using Social Media to increase cultural participation. The research intends to clarify the rationale of using social media in cultural institutions, by examining administrators’ perceptions of this emerging technology in the cultural sector, and identifying the unique benefits it brings to participation building. It aims to use the result to inform administrators of ways to use social media for the building of dynamic cultural participation, and ultimately advance the mission of cultural organizations.
For the purpose of this study, I am planning to collect data on cultural institution administrators’ perceptions. As a prominent cultural mediator in the city, COSI has extensive experience in building cultural participation in the local community. Your expertise pertinent to audience engagement and implementation of social media would provide insight to the study of using social media as means to increase cultural participation. I would like to invite you to participate by allowing me to interview you.

If you decide to take part in this research project, you will be asked to participate in an interview, lasting approximately an hour, during August 2011. Interview questions will be provided in advance for your consideration upon your request. With your permission, I will take notes during the interview and use Macbook to record the conversation for transcription and validation purposes. Besides, before or after the interview, you might be asked to provide documents relevant to the interview to supplement, illustrate, or clarify the issue. Participation in my project is entirely voluntary. Should you be willing to be part of the project, we will arrange for a convenient time and place for the interview and I will deliver the consent form in person when we meet. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (614) 558-5361 or gu.74@osu.edu, or my research advisor, Dr. Lawson at WPLDE@aol.com. For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
Please read and initial each of the following statements to indicate your consent:

_____ I consent to the use of audio recording and note taking during my interview.

_____ I consent to the potential use of quotations from the interview.

_____ I consent to the use of information I provide regarding the organization with which I am associated.

_____ I wish to have the opportunity to review and possibly revise my comments and the information that I provide prior to these data appearing in the final version of any publications that may result from this study.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you have received a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You have been given a copy of this letter to keep.

Print Name: __________________________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your interest and participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Mini Gu
M.A. Candidate, Arts Policy and Administration

The Ohio State University

614.558.5361 | gu.74@osu.edu
Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Instrument

I. Social Media in the context of other traditional communication channels

1. Could you please talk about what various tools does your organization use to connect with the audiences? Such as:
   a. Printed mail; E-mail newsletter; RSS feeds; Facebook; Twitter; Youtube; Flickr; Foursquare; Other
   b. Do they all have particular targeted segment?
      i. Is the target audience of social media different from others?

II. Facts and Development of Social Media in the institution

2. Could you please introduce how your organization started the implementation of social media?
   a. How was it brought to your institution’s consideration? When? By whom?
   b. What were the goals and objectives at that time/initially?
      i. How were they related to the broader organizational mission then?
   c. Have the goal and objectives changed?

3. Could you please introduce how social media is managed in your institution?
   a. The process.
   b. How do you decide which particular tool to use and what particular content to be published on those platforms?
   c. Staffing, training, tracking/evaluation, etc.
   d. How does social media fit in and interact with other organizational activities?
      i. Marketing, outreach, education, development, exhibition, etc.
      ii. Is there a synergy built among departments that perceiving social media as an integrated part in the institutional practice?
   e. Any debates or issues so far?
III. Why is social media worth/not worth doing?

4. In your opinion, what are the primary benefits to your organization by using social media? (Where does it add value?)
   a. Advantages compared to other tools of communication & participation building? E.g.
      i. hearing the voice from the audience;
      ii. speed of dissemination; spreading the words wider; network effect, reaching out to unexpected target;
      iii. interactivity;
      iv. attracting the audience to visit your space;
      v. recruiting volunteers;
      vi. deepening the relationship with audiences;
      vii. building a friendlier image of the organization, like an ambassador;

5. In your opinion, what are the primary benefits to your audiences by connecting with them using social media?
   a. Advantages compared to other tools of communication & participation building? E.g.
      i. Getting personalized news.
      ii. Learning something about a particular topic of one’s interest.
      iii. Expressing one’s own opinion.
      iv. Interacting with other audiences.
      v. Interacting with the organization.
      vi. Getting exclusive details that not available elsewhere.
      vii. Building deeper connection with the organization.
      viii. Other _______

6. Could you please talk about any changes (outcomes) that have happened after the implementation of social media?
   a. Inside the organization: Board, staff in various departments
   b. From the community: Feedbacks
   c. Intended and unintended consequences?
IV. Social media and Cultural Participation

7. How does your organization define cultural participation?
   a. Could you please introduce how participation building is represented in your organization’s mission and programming?
   b. What strategies and tactics have your institution used to build participation?
   c. What do you perceive as major challenges to participation building?
   d. How do you assess the effectiveness of social media in relations to the goal of participation building? Does it help address the challenges for cultural participation?

8. Do you consider the engagement with those activities on social media a legitimate type of cultural participation? (Including interactions with the cultural organization, reading/commenting/recommending materials published by the organization on social media and people’s opinions of them?) And why?

V. Projection of the strategic role of social media

9. Have you noticed the trend and innovative use of social media (e.g. Google+) in other cultural organizations (e.g. Brooklyn Museum) beyond the regional level?

10. If given the chance, what kind of changes would you like to make to the use of social media in your institution? And why?

11. In your opinion, what will be the future of social media like in your institution and cultural institutions generally?
Appendix F: Glossary

Cyworld: A South Korean social networking service that creates virtual rooms to meet friends.

Facebook: A social networking site that enables connecting with friends and families by status publishing, event creating, photo uploading, video and link sharing, and privacy settings.

Facebook Insights: A service offered by Facebook that generates statistics about Facebook Page.

Facebook Page: A public profile of an organization or interest. Facebook users can become fans and follow the activities of the page owner.

Flickr: A photo sharing and searching site that enables photo management by sets, galleries, tags, and groups.

Garageband: A software of Apple that can be used to record songs and podcasts.

Google Analytics: A free service offered by Google that generates statistics about website, including visits, views, bounce rates, and average time on site.

Ning: A service that provides platforms for creating customized social networks.

Podcasts: Free video or audio series downloadable from the Internet that can be played on your own device.

Tumblr: A platform with the combination of some features of Twitter and ordinary blogs.
Twitter: A social networking service that featured by the limit of 144 characters in a single message. It generates short links to photo and videos. Users can follow a person or organization and get their published information instantly. Users can also discover news from the streams of local trends.

Webinar: An online conference form that enables participation regardless of location.

Weibo: A Chinese version of Twitter, allowing 140 Chinese characters with one picture or video in each message.

Webshot: A photo and video sharing site.

Wikipedia: An online encyclopedia that can be updated by anyone

Wordpress: A blog service with a wide range of user-created plug-ins to choose.

YouTube: A free platform for user uploaded videos. Users can upload, subscribe, like, dislike, create playlist, share, and comment.