

ARTICLE

Harnessing Instagram's “platform vernacular” during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of Philbrook Museum of Art

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Abstract

Researchers have been documenting how museums used social networks during the COVID-19 global health emergency, however, to date there has been limited assessment of museums' uses of Instagram at that time. This article begins to address that gap with a case study of Philbrook Museum of Art's approach to that platform during the early months of the pandemic. We use a mixed-method inquiry featuring social media analysis and a series of interviews with staff at the museum to analyze the museum's use of Instagram to maintain a presence within followers' lives during this intensely challenging period. To frame our analysis we introduce Gibbs et al.'s (*Information, Communication & Society*, 2015, 18, 255) concept of “platform vernacular” to digital heritage studies, trialing its use to critically analyze the combination of affordances, practices, and communicative conventions that Instagram convenes for the museum. We find this approach to be both theoretically and practically insightful, with the potential to inform more meaningful, authentic, and transparent interactions between institutions and users within social networks.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, engagement, Instagram, museums, social media

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 global health emergency sent shockwaves through our social, cultural, and creative lives. During the early months of the pandemic, cultural institutions around the world closed their doors, embarking on an elaborate and unprecedented range of online interventions, including in social networks. We are only beginning to assess what the longer-term impacts of the pandemic might be on those institutions' digital strategies and ambitions. Although there have been several studies reflecting upon uses of social media at that time (Burke et al., 2020; Kidd & Nieto McAvoy, 2022; Kidd et al., 2022; Kist, 2020; Ryder et al., 2021), these analyses have primarily focused on Twitter (hereafter X) and Facebook, and there remains limited published scholarship on uses of Instagram during that period (aside from O'Hagan, 2021). This study begins to address that gap, reporting findings from an in-depth study of Philbrook Museum of Art's approach on that platform during the pandemic.

Some scholars have suggested that museums' uses of social media evolved during the pandemic such that they became in many instances more dialogical and spirited. Kist, for example, proposes that museums' output in social networks helped serve the public's "emotional needs" (2020, p.345) and Ryder et al. conclude that social media helped build "connections and communities" (2021, p.12). Such shifts in engagement patterns may not solely have been a consequence of the pandemic of course, coinciding as they did with other events, perhaps most notably the need for museums to respond to the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, something we also explore in this article. This study's contribution then is not only that it researches an under-explored platform for museum communications, but that it is one of the first to do so whilst accounting for this intensely difficult period.

Philbrook Museum of Art is an American Alliance of Museums (AAM) accredited art museum in Tulsa, United States, which has seen significant change in recent decades. Change was deemed necessary given that by the year 2000 the museum was widely regarded as "beautiful but 'sleepy'"; its Italian Renaissance Revival style villa primarily still catering to wealthy residents of Tulsa despite the city's changing needs and demography (Bergeron & Tuttle, 2013, p.44). By 2013, Bergeron and Tuttle reflect that the museum had undergone remarkable transformation as it carved out a role as a "vital urban asset," one "connected to the very fabric of the community" (2013, p.43). Since that time, the museum has become a champion for community engagement initiatives, including online, building a strong visitorship within its diverse local population. Philbrook Museum of Art now prides itself on playing a role in "building a diverse and creative vision of the city's future,"¹ at the same time as it commemorates Tulsa's past where "one of the most destructive riots in American history took place" (Chris et al., 2018, p.789). Between 2008 and 2010, in the midst of this transformation, minority ethnic participation at Philbrook increased significantly from 10 percent of overall attendance to over 40 percent, while the national average remained at only 9 percent (Bergeron & Tuttle, 2013), and the museum continues to make concrete efforts to serve its changing local population.² The museum's stated values and priorities are important context for the discussion that follows, as is an understanding of its audience and its commitment to diversity.³ Philbrook's reach and impact extend far beyond its geographical location however. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, Philbrook was well-known for its unique audience engagement opportunities. These have included, for example, its #MeTimeMonday initiative where a different person each month has the museum all to themselves for a day, and during the pandemic, Philbrook's podcast *Museum Confidential* also proved to be influential.

In this article, we turn to the concept of "platform vernacular" (Gibbs et al., 2015) in order to unpack the ways Philbrook Museum of Art mobilized Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic. To do that we draw on a targeted social media analysis of key Instagram posts by Philbrook Museum of Art alongside visitor responses to those posts, as well as data from five reflective semi-structured interviews with Philbrook staff who have responsibility and oversight

for digital strategy and content. We start by introducing the concept of “platform vernacular” before (in Section [Methodological approach](#)) outlining our empirical approach. We then present our findings and discussion (Section [Results](#)), structured around three analytical categories that our approach to platform vernacular suggests. To conclude (Section [Conclusions](#)), we reflect on our findings but also on the richness of this concept as a mechanism to examine museums' endeavors within social networks more broadly. Although oriented around one case study, our practical and theoretical insights are of broader significance as we emerge from the pandemic into changed, and increasingly challenging, political, social, cultural, and economic circumstances for museums.

INSTAGRAM'S “PLATFORM VERNACULAR”

It has been argued that each social media platform has its own “styles, grammars, and logics”; what we can call its “vernacular” (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.257). This vernacular emerges from both the architecture and affordances of a platform—which effectively determine possible actions and forms of participation—as well as the mediated practices and communicative habits or conventions of users which emerge over time (Gibbs et al., 2015).

Instagram's platform architecture lends itself to a vernacular oriented around photo and video sharing (not just any photos, but those with the recognizable Instamatic-inspired shape), as well as the use of tagging and filters (Gibbs et al., 2015). Manovich (2017) adds that a higher appreciation of and focus on aesthetic qualities is also particular to Instagram's discrete vernacular, more so than in Facebook for example (see also Suess & Barton, 2022). Another important aspect of Instagram's vernacular is how mobile it and its sharing functions are, meaning it fits into our lives in ways unprecedented in the history of photography. In terms of users' linguistic and communicative habits, Instagram's vernacular has come to be characterized by the use of hashtags and @user labelling conventions, and lends itself to forms of sociality which are oriented around the visual. This differs from the vernacular on X (for example) which is often organized around textual resources such as news items, or Facebook's expansive social communication which is often arranged within convergent or shared spaces/groups (Gibbs et al., 2015). In recent years, and as is demonstrated in this study, uses of emoji have also become a key aspect of Instagram's vernacular, as shaped by users. Emoji are everyday communicative symbols used to “display emotional as well as social meanings” (Fischer & Herbert, 2021, p.2), and their use within Instagram has been shown to blur the usual distinction between writing and imagery, in what Siever et al. call “iconographic communication” (Siever et al., 2019; see also Siever, 2019).

In our analysis, we explore these elements of Instagram's platform vernacular to establish how Philbrook Museum of Art did—or did not—make the most of their *evocative*, *communicative* and *affective* potentials during the pandemic. Committing to the concept of platform vernacular allows us to explore how Instagram's technological affordances and communicative conventions uniquely shaped its mobilization by Philbrook Museum of Art during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been argued in previous research that Instagram's vernacular amounts to a set of informal cues which can seem incomprehensible to cultural institutions (Zuanni, 2017). However, there has been evident growing interest in its possibilities, given its immense popularity (Budge, 2018), and in particular its marked reach into the lives of young people.⁴ The platform's unabashed centring of visual cultures has been key to its enduring success and relevance; it is both demonstrative of, and enmeshed within, a broader visual turn in social networks (Leaver et al., 2020; Serafinelli, 2018). Museums and galleries, which of course are also highly visual contexts implicated within discourses about aesthetics, have understandably been keen to explore the platform's potential to shape brand identity, increase visibility, attract attention and,

at least potentially, boost visitor numbers (Lazaridou et al., 2017). Leaver et al. propose that Instagram should primarily be understood as a “conduit for communication” (2020, p.1) and it is this potential too that underpins museums and galleries' uses of the platform (as well as their endeavors on other social networks). The promise that social media might enable a more “open dialogue” between institutions and users (Giaccardi, 2012; Gronemann et al., 2015), reducing barriers and enabling a sense of community, has been widely critiqued however,⁵ and questions have more recently been asked about the data practices that flow from institutions' uses of social media in these ways (Kidd, 2019; Prουλmann-Vengerfeldt, 2022). Indeed, much has now been written about the potentials—and pitfalls—of social media for museums. The theoretical position of our own contribution in this article sits within this tradition of digital heritage research, but is informed by insights from critical studies of digital culture more broadly, including the concept of platform vernacular.

Previous research studies have explored topics such as museum visitors' Instagram posts and placemaking (Budge, 2020), the interface between Instagram and museum objects (Budge & Burness, 2018), and how visitors communicate and share their museum and gallery visiting experiences on Instagram (Rhee et al., 2021; Suess & Barton, 2022; Villaespesa & Wowkoych, 2020; Weilenmann et al., 2013). These studies mainly focus on visitor-generated Instagram posts or how museums go on to use or feature those contributions. There are limited studies exploring Instagram content posted by museums alongside analysis of visitors' responses to those posts. In this sense too our study contributes a valuable perspective to the available literature. In the next section, we introduce and reflect upon our approach.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Previous research into museums' social media communications has often centered the experiences of cultural workers, or an exploration of content. In this study we have been able to work across these perspectives in two stages of empirical work. Firstly, we collated and analyzed a sample of Philbrook Museum of Art's Instagram posts from 2020—during what might be considered the early months of the pandemic—when closures and lockdowns were common in the cultural sector. We also collated and examined discussions and interactions that those posts instigated. In a second stage of the research, we carried out and analyzed five reflective interviews with Philbrook team members, all of whom had input into, and/or strategic oversight for, social media content. Ethical approval was received from Cardiff University. In the following sections we introduce both stages of the research.

Social media analysis

For this study, we have explored Philbrook Museum of Art's Instagram interactions with depth and richness to get beyond high-level statistics as a way of articulating reach or engagement (number of likes, comments, or shares for example).⁶ After initial scoping of Philbrook activities and discussions with the digital team, we chose to focus on Instagram which had received the most online audience attention during the pandemic as compared to other platforms (YouTube, Facebook, or X), and where the museum had noticed a big increase in the number of followers.⁷ As a result, museum staff were interested in better understanding Instagram's potential. Looking at output from March 1 to December 31, 2020, we decided to use the “Top Nine”⁸ posts and interactions around them as a sampling frame (posts are shown in Figure 1). Created for Instagram accounts to “reflect your 9 moments truly worth remembering,” the Top Nine tool uses a complex algorithm that is not only based on “vanity metrics,” for example, the number of likes, but other factors including its assessment of comments under posts

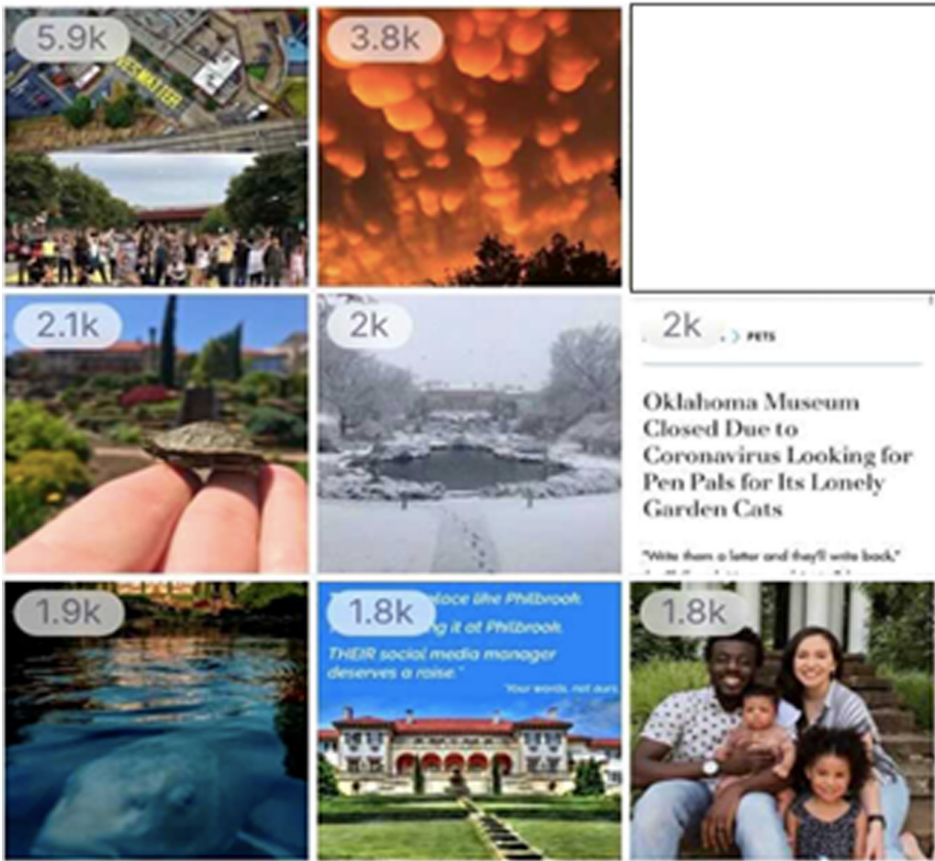


FIGURE 1 Philbrook Museum of Art's top nine Instagram posts of 2020. (The copyright owner of post 3 [garden wedding photo] did not respond to our request to re-produce the image. Therefore, it is not shown here in the article).

formed using sentiment analysis.⁹ This tool is used by millions of Instagram accounts as a way of reflecting upon engagement and Philbrook Museum of Art digital staff use it consistently to produce a post every year. The fact that many other cultural institutions globally use Top Nine as a way of reflecting their annual engagement on Instagram suggests that this sampling framework itself is worth examining.¹⁰ Although the data it surfaced does not represent all types of posts the institution produced throughout the year (e.g., there are no posts featuring artworks), it is an efficient sample for analyzing the museum's understanding of Instagram's platform vernacula, and responses from followers.

The detailed breakdown of posts and high-level statistics about engagement are as follows (Table 1). We accessed and archived these 9 posts from 2020 on July 7, 2021, and the number of likes and comments was recorded on this date.

The total social media sample thus included 9 posts and 470 related comments. Our approach in this study follows the “thick data” maxim, where “data abundance” does not in itself indicate research quality or insightfulness, and a smaller data sample is collected manually and analyzed deeply via human coding (Latzko-Toth et al., 2016). Thick data encourages attention to “the sticky stuff” of emotions, stories, and perspectives (Wang, 2016), and allows us to explore the uses of Instagram within a very specific social context, place, and time (Marwick, 2013). As is often the case with the thick data approach, we have triangulated our social media analysis with a further qualitative approach, the use of interviews (see overview in Section Interviews).

TABLE 1 Breakdown of posts and engagement metrics.

Post	Content	Date	Likes (n.)	Comments (n.)
Post 1	Black Lives Matter post	06/19/20	5865	97
Post 2	Clouds over the gardens	04/28/20	3756	54
Post 3	Garden wedding photo	08/14/20	3049	127
Post 4	Tiny turtle	05/01/20	2059	34
Post 5	Philbrook snow scene	12/13/20	1998	7
Post 6	People Magazine call for garden cat pen pals	04/13/20	1973	16
Post 7	Fish in the pond	04/10/20	1864	37
Post 8	Celebrating Philbrook's social media output	03/05/20	1777	55
Post 9	Family photo	06/17/20	1774	43

Once we had our social media dataset we carried out a systematic content analysis coding each comment for actor type (who was making a comment) and types of content (image, hashtag, emoji, and text). This was done manually according to protocols set out in Neuendorf (2017) and Krippendorff (2022). This first stage of coding was followed by a more detailed thematic analysis of the primary tone of each comment,¹¹ any implied emotional resonance,¹² and which themes or issues were being referenced.^{13,14} Whilst completing this detailed analysis we were mindful to explore each post, and each response, as a unique composition constituted of images, text, hashtags, and emoji, and to explore each comment in relation to the initial post, or other comments. We have taken care not to treat any one post or comment as a standalone piece of content but rather to understand it as “a part of a network of metadata that contribute to defining its meaning and social uses” (Caliandro & Graham, 2020, p.3). As a result, we can confidently identify, analyze, and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An analysis of Instagram content is necessarily limited. Most notably, it confines our investigation to users of that platform, and in particular, those users who have chosen to interact with Philbrook Museum of Art's posts. Instagram users are of course also not representative of the wider population, so findings are difficult to generalize to other social networks, or to a public more broadly defined. Nevertheless, such a community (if we can call it that) is a growing area of interest for museums, and one they should wish to understand better. Another limitation of our study is that it only includes traditional image posts. Instagram is a complex platform and one which is continually under development. In recent years it has gained popularity for other approaches (Reels, Lives, Stories), Philbrook's use of which does not appear in our sample.¹⁵ These approaches would be useful to explore in future studies, recognizing the temporal nature of activities within these contexts, and how a platform's vernacular—including the performative and communicative artifacts it produces—evolves over time. The narrowing of parameters was crucial however in order to keep the dataset manageable, especially given the emphasis in our study on detailed qualitative analysis rather than a top-level scrape of the engagement metrics.

Interviews

Although analysis of the Instagram posts and responses provided valuable insights, Philbrook Museum of Art's ambitions for using the platform could only be inferred from the above study. Therefore, to complement the social media analysis, we carried out five interviews with staff at the museum in both senior managerial positions and everyday operational roles who had been involved in overseeing, creating, and sharing digital content during the pandemic (these were our inclusion criteria).¹⁶ Interviews were semi-structured and carried out via the video conferencing platform Zoom in the summer of 2021. Questions explored priorities for digital work

during the pandemic—especially those related to Instagram—as well as overarching reflections on pivotal moments, successes, challenges, strategy, audience engagement, and analytics. These interviews were then transcribed and analyzed (following Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) using the same themes as the social media study.¹⁷ This has allowed us to connect findings from both analyses in our discussion (Section [Results](#)), providing context from the perspective of those working in the Museum.

Together, these datasets shed light on the Philbrook Museum of Art's uses of Instagram during the pandemic and responses to those endeavors from followers and their associates. In the next section, we present an overview of our findings.

RESULTS

As noted in Section [Introduction](#), Instagram is a unique amalgamation of qualities and conventions; a vernacular form of visual culture (Burgess, 2006) oriented around photo-sharing from mobile devices, with characteristic subjects, editing, and composition (Manovich, 2017). It also presents a unique set of communicative and linguistic possibilities for users and their followers at the intersection of text and image. In this section, we explore the ways Philbrook Museum of Art used Instagram's genres and stylistic conventions during the pandemic and the range of associations that were produced as a result. In particular, we focus on those that were *evocative* (of place), *connective* (of people), and *affective* (in their resonances). We demonstrate how Instagram's platform vernacular shaped the data in our sample, surfacing marked forms of participation and exchange as a result. Throughout this section we bring findings from the social media study into conversation with perspectives from the interviews, presenting an “analytic story” (Silverman, 2000) about the museum's uses of Instagram during this period.¹⁸

Evoking place: Harnessing Instagram's aesthetic and mobile qualities

As we noted in Section [Instagram's “platform vernacular”](#), an important vernacular element of Instagram is its emphasis on aesthetic qualities, including the use of filters. Indeed, this has been recognized as a main factor in the platform's quick domination of the mobile photography space (Manovich, 2017). Art institutions are enmeshed within debates about aesthetics and taste, and Instagram can be understood as a way of extending an institution's approach and communicating its identity in relation to these qualities. Philbrook staff were aware of that potential; “Instagram is designed like a gallery, a sort of art space,” but also mindful of where any similarities might end; [Instagram is] “very aesthetic and less informational.”¹⁹ Aesthetic conventions—which work across the affordances of Instagram's material architecture, but also the stylistic protocols that have evolved within it—were in evidence in Philbrook Museum of Art's posts. Photos were carefully crafted and composed, and those with a high level of design and professionalism gained the most traction among users.

It is noteworthy that so many of the museum's most liked and commented upon posts were images taken on-site, and in particular, those taken in the institution's gardens. Instagram relies heavily on images that are aesthetically dazzling or unusual, so atmospheric photos of natural surroundings (such as in [Figure 2](#)) are not remotely jarring in that context. Posts from the garden reflect the mobile vernacular of Instagram communications too, and by necessity, its reliance on connectivity (as well as interconnectivity).

In Gibbs et al.'s study of #funeral posts on Instagram (2015), they found that image sharing was used as a way for attendees at funerals to signify their presence, especially for the benefit of those who could not be in attendance. We saw this kind of signaling in evidence in our sample too, where the camera phone set in motion a form of “intimate co-presence” between users



FIGURE 2 Post 2 in full, Clouds over the gardens. Responses have been blanked out to protect identities.

and museum staff, which was “networked and visible” (Gibbs et al., 2015) through its interaction with the Instagram platform. This intimacy and proximity allowed for a re-presencing of the institution in users’ lives; a re-presencing that had spatial qualities, but temporal ones also. The instantaneous recording and sharing of experiences on-site gave them an immediacy and heightened their affective potential, as we go on to explore in Section [Affective resonance: harnessing Instagram's emotive and formative potentials](#).

This presencing was especially interesting during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the museum’s regular visitors simply could not come to the site. In that context images of the gardens and wildlife living within them connoted a sense of routine and regularity, offering what interviewees referred to as “a sense of normality,” and “making nature accessible.” Relatedly, one interviewee talked about the importance of what they called “slow content” during this time—in particular, slow content featuring the gardens—which they saw as even more impactful given that people were “feeling trapped” at home. These efforts used the material and stylistic qualities of Instagram to situate a remote audience within the environment and mood of the institution, whilst visits to the physical site were intensely problematized. Suess and Barton (2022: 646) note that the use of Instagram can be framed as a “multi-spatial practice” and we see this in our sample; the museum staff member (in posting) and the museum follower (in liking or commenting) negotiate multiple personal, physical, social and virtual spaces all at once. Museums and galleries clearly have discrete offline spatial practices that mediate the behaviors of visitors and staff, and these are not neutral (see Suess & Barton, 2022), but less is known about the spatial practices of museums’ outdoor environments. According to our interviewees, the gardens typically suggest different kinds of visitor experiences and behavioral expectations and mean that (whether online or offline) both staff and users can “have a little bit more fun.”

Within the context of extended periods of lockdown, many people began to re-connect with the natural environment where they felt better able to find safety and calm, and these sentiments were reflected in responses to the posts we studied:

I've seen these in Missouri one evening! They were so amazing I could not stop staring at them.²⁰²¹

When I woke up and saw the snow in Tulsa on my feed, I could wait to see photos of The Philbrook. I just knew they would be beautiful ♥ * Props to your social media team.²²

This tallies with findings from other research about the kinds of content that followers valued in social media during the pandemic (Kidd et al., 2022). Nature-based experiences have been found to positively impact well-being (Koay & Dillon, 2020; Sia et al., 2020) and there is evidence to suggest that people sought out and spent more time on such activities during the pandemic, including virtually (Robinson et al., 2021). In this sense, in posting this content, Philbrook was “really latching onto what other people [were] connecting to.”

Although produced for a digital platform, Instagram posts are in and of the physical world, and their materiality is also marked. Within museums, there has been a tendency to emphasize a dichotomy between physical and digital opportunities and approaches, but the pandemic has sparked more inventive ways of thinking about materiality, particularly in the digital environment (Galani & Kidd, 2020, Kidd et al., 2021). Gibbs et al. (2015) propose that Instagram posts have a “materiality,” and our sample shows evidence that museum colleagues understand this too; during the pandemic, the museum's digital team came up with several “physical and digital mashups” such as the cat pen pal project (captured in post 6). This project invited Instagram users to become pen pals with the museum's garden cats, Cleo and Perilla. They could write a letter to the cats and expect to hear back from them (in reality, from one of three Philbrook staff who were assigned to each cat). The scheme was launched on April 12th, 2020, and the museum received over 3000 physical letters from every state in the US and beyond. Philbrook frequently posted updates to the project on its digital platforms, for example, pictures of the latest letters. Here we see further evidence that, in Instagram, “the online and the offline, the digital and the embodied, are able to be hybridized in performative assemblages” (Gibbs et al., 2015). The cat pen pal project is also an example of how museum staff pushed at the limitations of Instagram's social and communicative conventions, as we go on to explore in the next section.

Connecting people: Harnessing Instagram's social and communicative affordances

Gibbs et al. note in their foundational work on platform vernacular that the sharing of images is often done in an effort to create a sense of sociality and connection (2015). Philbrook Museum staff posting images had similar ambitions, seeking to create moments of “escape, joy and connection” so that the minds of audiences could be “occupied in a creative way” during the pandemic. Meese et al. (2015) remind us that Instagram has no convergent or shared spaces, and so Instagram users (including those posting on behalf of museums) are restricted to posting materials on their own profiles. In this sense conversations—beyond those convened around hashtags or under posted images—tend to be more distributed and “rhizomatic” than those on other social networking sites. The cat pen pal project described in the previous section extended that rhizomatic logic, becoming diffused beyond Instagram to multiple platforms and formats (including traditional letter-writing).

In our data, we found many examples of sociality in communications around posts. Philbrook's Instagram followers wanted to extend their positive feelings about posts they were encountering beyond their own feeds, and tags sparked interpersonal communications between friends and family, generating a sense of intimacy and proximity. As Leaver et al. (2020) note, this is

something Instagram does well, fostering communities around aesthetics and practices of photography. Connectivity is important to this form of social sharing and reminds us of the network characteristics which underscore Instagram's business model. Through examination of these connections—between the Philbrook post and users, and between different users—we found evidence that the museum's Instagram account had become a focal point for a digital user community able to express a sense of belonging in the context of this unprecedented global emergency. Such interconnectedness, and even intimacy (Dobson et al., 2018), is not a given of Instagram's material architecture, but emerges instead in its communicative and social affordances, although never inevitably. In terms of our coding for tone of comments, there were many users thanking the team for their efforts during this period (24 percent of comments),²³ and it was notable that there were very few aggressive or defensive comments. Philbrook staff reflected that “people got a sense of who we were” and that “the way we communicated, it made sense to people.”

We noted in our sample a lack of hashtags appearing in user comments,²⁴ suggesting that conversations in response to posts were not in immediate interconnection with wider debates either within Instagram, or across platforms. This again demonstrates well the vernacular of Instagram as a platform; unlike on X, Instagram users tend only to use hashtags when they post, and not so much when they respond to posts. Responses on X can easily be reposted, but a comment on Instagram cannot be, thus making the use of hashtags less appealing in that context. Instead, debates were contained within threads under posts, and between those who were tagging themselves or being tagged by others (@ tags are a labeling convention in Instagram).

One post demonstrated particularly well the social and communicative mix we have come to expect in Instagram. The Black Lives Matter post (Figure 3) was the museum's most-liked post of the year in 2020 and featured a collage of 2 photos, one of a group of artists and community members, and another of a local street painting featuring “BLACK LIVES MATTER” in large yellow lettering.²⁵ In response to this post, we identified a majority of exchanges in support of the museum's anti-racist stance, but there were several rather tense interactions also. In this respect, our data demonstrate well the ambivalence of Instagram and other social platforms, which simultaneously enable both “solidaristic, mutual, collegial and parasocial relationships” as well as, on occasion “dehumanising, discriminatory, threatening and/or abusive messages” (Banaji & Bhat, 2022: 119). For Philbrook Museum of Art the sharing of Instagram posts is tied not only to its identity as an art institution, but, as we saw in the Introduction, also to the expression of its values and ambitions within the community. As can be seen in responses to this post in particular, these values were being negotiated and co-created with users in real time:

love this ♥♥♥♥♥♥

Thank you for this. It is beautiful♥

This is so incredible!!!

I believe this was organized and led by BIPOC artists in more of a grassroots style. I do not know if or how Philbrook assisted.

oh yes, good on them for defacing public property.

This is the hill you choose to die on? Go protest potholes if you are so concerned about the roads.

Love love love this post! Thank you for sharing & for shining some light on our day; it's greatly needed! Happy #Juneteenth!♥👏



FIGURE 3 Post 1 in full, Black Lives Matter. Responses have been blanked out to protect identities.

When reflecting on the Black Lives Matter post, one interviewee commented that as a “value driven organization,” they “do not shy away from talking about those incredibly important issues.” Another felt strongly that “We need to talk about the stuff that is actually happening in our community,” because “if we are not relevant, then the work we do does not matter.”

Social media's connective and community potential was being recognized by Philbrook Museum of Art staff as early as 2013, and they have been keen to nurture it (Bergeron & Tuttle, 2013). In our own sample of user comments (n.470), 89 percent were from members of the public, with 13 percent of comments exemplifying conversation between users. Although still a low figure, this is somewhat encouraging given previous research which has demonstrated how difficult it can be for museums to foster dialogue in social networks (Arias, 2020; Kidd, 2014; Manca, 2021). The content Philbrook created during this period did serve as a conversation starter in many cases, although the museum rarely participated in those discussions (there was only one instance of that in the sample). Suess and Barton (2022) note that sharing an image with an imagined audience on Instagram invites that audience into a dialogue, whether online or offline, and it is no doubt a missed opportunity not to respond.²⁶ Returning to the cat pen pal project discussed previously—where physical letters were received by the museum and many letters were written and posted in reply—it is intriguing to note this lack of museum response within the (arguably more direct and less resource intensive) digital environment. This tells us something about the significance of the cat pen pal project to museum staff themselves during this time of uncertainty. As one museum staff member reflected on Instagram 1 year on:

One year ago this week, still spinning from the speed of change and disruption, we announced a little project to help you/use get through the coming days, weeks, months, year. It seemed silly. We all needed silly. What we did not expect was your amazing (and global) response and the thousands of letters. Honestly, it overwhelmed our staff in the best possible way and provided a welcome distraction we

hope it did the same for you. It's a cliché of course, but little gestures often have the biggest impact. Thank you! 📸 #memorymonday.

The value of social exchange and communication for museum staff as well as users is self-evident here, as are the affective resonances and legacy of this particular project for them. We explore these, and their interaction with Instagram's platform vernacular, in the following section.

Affective resonance: Harnessing Instagram's emotive and formative potentials

According to Leaver et al. (2020, p.72) Instagram's aesthetic qualities help to establish their “affective appeal.” This applies not only to images shared of course, but to the overall aesthetic composition of elements in each post, including any emoji or hashtags used; an emoji can be “a creative tool for affective expression” (Abidin & Gn, 2018) or even an “emotional stimuli” (Fischer & Herbert, 2021).

When it came to coding for the tone of responses to posts we found that expressing emotion was common (in 55 percent of comments). Given how prominent emoji were in our sample this is perhaps unsurprising; 49 percent of posts used emoji as part of their communicative assemblage. The most frequently used emoji were ♥ and 😊 as users showed their appreciation for content and support for the institution (such as shown in Figure 4 below). Emoji are a rich element of the vernacular of varied social platforms, but they are especially prevalent within Instagram. Although emotions can be expressed through various linguistic devices such as capital letters or punctuation marks, emoji have become “an easy and intuitive way to express emotions” in digital communication, and an important part of our social media lexicon (Gesselman et al., 2019, p.56). They are “rich in social, cultural, and economic significance” (Stark & Crawford, 2015) and can enable international and intercultural communication (Danesi, 2016), “smooth[ing] out the rough edges of digital life” (Stark & Crawford, 2015). Here we are reminded that emojis are doing work; they are not neutral. In responses to Philbrook's Instagram posts emoji were



FIGURE 4 Post 9 in full, family photo. Respondents @ handles have been blanked out to protect identities.

overwhelmingly positive in tone suggesting that engaging with the images was experienced as constructive or was at the very least performed as such by users. This was no small feat against the backdrop of COVID-related restrictions and concerns. Across our dataset, one image in particular received a huge number of warm affective responses (127—the most in our sample); a photo of two people in wedding attire celebrating in the gardens of the museum, from August 2020. Such moments—of joy, but also of routine—clearly resonated for users, as one interviewee noted: “I think people look for consistency when there's moments of great upheaval... they want to know that things have not changed everywhere.”

Users often follow museums' Instagram accounts as a way of communicating their affinity for those institutions. According to Suess and Barton (2022, p.650), structuring affinity in this way is emotionally loaded and an important practice for galleries to recognize if they wish to “strengthen and deepen” connections with the communities they serve. Before the 2020 lockdown, Philbrook Museum of Art was already doing varied and popular work in the digital environment, and this proved to be an advantage when the museum closed its doors. According to previous Director of Communications Tricia Milford-Hoyt (quoted in Bergeron & Tuttle, 2013, p.53), Philbrook's online messaging and communications had intentionally set out from the start to emphasize “human interactions” (Bergeron & Tuttle, 2013 p.53), and this continued to be the ambition during the pandemic. The team wanted to maintain the institution's “role in the broader cultural life of the city” despite it being closed, and social media, including Instagram, was understood as a key mechanism for doing that. Interviewees reflected on the merits of Instagram for “reflecting our institutional identity and values”; “I think there's a lot of Philbrook's identity that has been shaped through Instagram.” Our analysis of user comments suggests that efforts on Instagram to thoughtfully build a brand identity can be successful: “this makes me proud,” “I for one am a Philbrookian.” The kind of presencing we noted in Section [Evoking place: harnessing Instagram's aesthetic and mobile qualities](#) is an important aspect of a post's affective appeal (Gibbs et al., 2015), enabling forms of “proximal immediacy” which in effect bring an institution into the palm of a person's hand (Fisher, 2016). Visitors use Instagram to build knowledge, understanding, and to make sense of art and institutions on their own terms of course, and in so-doing, can also evolve an aesthetic experience into a formative one, in relation to their own identity or their memories for example. Affective and emotional resonances no doubt have mnemonic affects which are worthy of note in relation to our sample, aiding everyday remembering in relation to Philbrook—whether personally and privately, or collectively and publicly—as well as convening a collective witnessing of the pandemic across social media.

In Section [Results](#) we have explored how Philbrook Museum of Art harnessed Instagram's unique platform vernacular during the early months of the pandemic, and the evocative, connective, and affective associations that were produced as a result. We have highlighted instances where the museum pushed at the limits of that vernacular, as well as moments where they might have gone further. In Section [Conclusions](#) we offer some concluding remarks.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have explored how Philbrook Museum of Art harnessed Instagram's unique vernacular to create a mood suggestive of its continued presence in people's lives during the pandemic. We have demonstrated—through diverse data entry points—that Instagram was a valuable way of maintaining cultural and social connections with audiences in real time, whilst the doors of the museum were closed. Visibly and confidently, the museum spoke to its followers using a shared language and visual style that reflected its values and priorities and, evidently, those of a majority of its followers. Even for an institution that was used to being experimental within social media contexts, the pandemic allowed for more openness and creative freedom to “embody” their mission. Whether this can be

maintained over time remains to be seen, and interviewees expressed some concern about whether this might already be “slowing down.” It is interesting to reflect again that none of the Top Nine posts from this art museum—in terms of traction within its online audience—were collections oriented. During the early months of the pandemic, emotional and social needs clearly took precedence for users, and the museum was able to go some way in supporting those. Instagram is a particularly interesting site within which to study the activities of an art institution however, and may in time be associated with an expansion in the visual tradition associated with museums; more idiosyncratic, deeply social, and more proximate, both temporally and spatially.

There are limitations to the insights presented here of course. These are temporal in that we only explore posts from 2020, and methodological in that our sample is further bounded, and includes photo posts rather than Instagram Reels, Stories, or Lives. Our approach is rich however in its qualitative insights and presents an empirical approach and theoretical framework that can underpin future such studies, including perhaps a revisit of Philbrook Museum of Art's output and interactions (say, in 2025), or a comparison with other institutions.

For museums, an understanding of platform vernacular—whether in Instagram or elsewhere—enables a change in perception such that social networks become sites not solely or even principally for “performative assemblages” (although that understanding is important), but for deeper learning about community too; about how to co-create value(s), and about how to be present for them, remotely or otherwise. For digital heritage researchers, the notion of platform vernacular can help us to examine museums' endeavors within social networks, and to chart how they change over time. As platforms evolve, it is critical that we remain attuned to their architectures and affordances, as well as the social and communicative conventions they produce.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Philbrook Museum of Art. Available online: <https://philbrook.org/about-us/> (accessed 12th Feb 2022).
- ² Work for example to open up the institution to the growing Hispanic community is reported by Guardiola Consulting online: <https://guardiolaconsulting.com/project/philbrook/> (accessed 12th Feb 2022).
- ³ A recent (2021) report assessing Philbrook's approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion can be accessed here: https://philbrook.imgix.net/docs/Philbrook-Assessment_FINAL_Exec%20Summary_2.28.2021.pdf (Accessed 18th Feb 2022).
- ⁴ Instagram has more than 1 billion users according to some estimations, and more than two thirds of Instagram audiences are aged 34 years and younger. See Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/> (accessed on 28 March 2022).
- ⁵ Pre-pandemic studies into social media interactions around museums have tended to conclude that two-way interaction or dialogue is difficult to inspire within these contexts, and that institutions have tended to use such platforms for promotional purposes. See Kidd (2014), Gronemann et al. (2015), Baker (2017), Arias (2020) and Manca (2021) for more on this.

- ⁶ Or insights gleaned through other metrics that might already be in use within the institution (eg Google Analytics).
- ⁷ The team shared data with us that demonstrated a 35% increase in the number of Instagram followers between January 1, 2020 and June 31 2021.
- ⁸ <https://topnine.co/>.
- ⁹ <https://creatorkit.com/blog/top-nine-algorithm/>.
- ¹⁰ For example, to list a few from a brief search on Instagram: Hadfield Fine Art (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm1znvJoQ-B/?igshid=NmE0MzVhZDY%3D>); Kimbell Art Museum (<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm2OwQYPP5-/?igshid=NmE0MzVhZDY%3D>); Museum of Contemporary Native Art (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B6vtTCFINDw/?igshid=NmE0MzVhZDY%3D>); Appleton Museum of Art (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BdcwbjAQF3/?igshid=NmE0MzVhZDY%3D>); Whistler Museum & Archives (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B61CYWlhUMW/?igshid=NmE0MzVhZDY%3D>).
- ¹¹ [1] Thanks [2] Reporting engagement [3] Expression of emotion [4] Humor [5] Enquiry [6] Irony/Sarcasm [7] Assertive [8] Aggressive [9] Defensive [10] Questioning [11] Explaining.
- ¹² Simply coded as Positive, Negative or Neutral.
- ¹³ [1] Philbrook visitor information/enquiry [2] Learning programmes [3] Philbrook's villa/building [4] Nature/the outdoors [5] Tulsa [6] Arts as a way of coping with Covid [7] The Cat Pen Pal project specifically [8] BLM/Arts as a way of coping with BLM [9] Meta-commentary about social media [10] Importance of family [11] Importance of community.
- ¹⁴ This approach was informed by Fugard and Potts (2019). The thematic analyses were carried out with an inter-coder reliability of over 80% in all cases.
- ¹⁵ There are to date no published studies of museums' uses of these other functions in Instagram.
- ¹⁶ Sample questions from interviews: (1) Could you tell us how your role at Philbrook relates to the work on social media that Philbrook does? (2) Can you talk me through these top 9 Instagram posts from 2020, what you were trying to achieve and how do you understand their success? (3) Would you say there has been a shift in understanding at your department about the value and importance of social media over the course of the pandemic? (4) What will you want to emphasize/prioritize/build on in the digital space going forward?
- ¹⁷ Given their small number this was done manually rather than electronically.
- ¹⁸ We use a number of quotes in what follows, but this article does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the interview materials. Our analysis and understanding of platform vernacular has been supported by those discussions however, and they underpin our key focus on Instagram's evocative, connective and affective potentials.
- ¹⁹ In this article, we do not refer to practitioners by name or position within the institution. This is in order to preserve their anonymity in line with the ethical protocols of the study.
- ²⁰ A user comment under post 2.
- ²¹ Social media data are indented throughout to distinguish from interview materials.
- ²² A user comment under post 5.
- ²³ Our analysis for Tone included a number of codes which were weighted as follows in our sample: Expression of emotion (55%), Thankful/Supportive (24%), Humor (4.5%), Reporting engagement (3%), Explaining (3%), Enquiry (2%), Other (3%), Not discernible/applicable (5.5%).
- ²⁴ 77 percent of posts featured text, 14 percent of posts tagged other Instagram users in responses, and only 1 percent used hashtags as connective devices.
- ²⁵ This painting was on the site of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, and had made the national headlines when it was revealed. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/30/us/blm-mural-tulsa-ordered-removed-trnd/index.html>, accessed 12 July 2022.
- ²⁶ A case made powerfully in Arias (2020).

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