

Self-Representational Photography at the British Museum

Charlotte Simpson¹

Jonathan Hale²

Laura Hank³

Abstract:

Historically, personal photography wasn't allowed in museums, but today, visitors armed with smartphones share their experiences alongside images of museum artefacts and spaces online. Museum policies regarding personal photography have shifted dramatically, but there remains an element of 'moral panic' whenever a visitor is seen taking a selfie. These types of photographs combine a person's communicative nature with their environment's cultural context. They are semiotic materials; they associate person, space and object, and once shared online, are understood alongside captions and 'tags'.

¹ Charlotte Simpson is an architect and PhD student in the Architecture, Culture and Tectonics research group at the University of Nottingham, where she teaches in a design studio. She leads a design studio at the University of Sheffield and is an associate lecturer at Nottingham Trent University. Charlotte's PhD thesis explores visual communication, the self, and the museum, using a case study to explore the use of postcards and social media by museum visitors.

² Jonathan Hale is an architect and Professor of Architectural Theory at the University of Nottingham, UK. He holds a PhD from Nottingham and an MSc from the University of Pennsylvania. Publications include *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design* (Routledge 2018), *Merleau-Ponty for Architects* (Routledge 2017), and *Rethinking Technology: A Reader in Architectural Theory* (Routledge 2007). He was the founding Chair of the AHRA.

³ Laura Hanks is an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Nottingham, UK, where she teaches across the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Her research interests include contemporary museum design, the architectural expression of identities and issues of narrative place making. She has published chapters in *Architecture and the Canadian Fabric* (UBC Press, 2012), *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design* (Routledge, 2018) and *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Routledge, 2012), which she also co-edited. Notable among her other publications are *Museum Builders II* (John Wiley and Sons, 2004) and *New Museum Design* (Routledge, 2021).

The British Museum case study explores the methods and motivations behind this communication via the museum selfie. A random sample of selfies shared on Instagram during a 7-day period, at the Museum in 2022, were analysed using grounded theory, with Barthes' ideas of connotation and denotation applied to open up and assess the meaning of these photographs. The analysis considers how these photographs, captured at a national museum, may contribute to the development and presentation of an individualised sense of self. This is supplemented with evidence from museum policy, revealing shifting attitudes towards personal photography.

Research shows that visitors use a variety of tactics to communicate personalised messages, inscribing notions of authenticity and experiential narrative while projecting images of both the self and the museum.

Keywords: *Instagram, selfie, British Museum, impression management, identity.*

Fotografia autorrepresentativa no British Museum

Resumo:

Historicamente, a fotografia pessoal não era permitida em museus, mas hoje, visitantes armados com smartphones partilham online as suas experiências juntamente com imagens de artefactos e espaços de museus. As políticas do museu relativamente à fotografia pessoal mudaram drasticamente, mas permanece um elemento de “pânico moral” sempre que um visitante é visto a tirar uma selfie. Estes tipos de fotografias combinam a natureza comunicativa de uma pessoa com o contexto cultural do seu ambiente. São materiais semióticos; associam a pessoa, o espaço e o objeto e, uma vez partilhados online, são compreendidos juntamente com legendas e ‘tags’.

O caso de estudo do British Museum explora os métodos e motivações por trás desta comunicação através da selfie do museu. Uma amostra aleatória de selfies compartilhadas no Instagram, durante um período de 7 dias no Museu em 2022, foi analisada usando a teoria fundamentada, com as ideias de conotação e denotação de Barthes, aplicadas para abrir e avaliar o significado dessas fotografias. A análise considera como estas fotografias, captadas

num museu nacional, podem contribuir para o desenvolvimento e apresentação de um sentido individualizado de identidade. Isto é complementado com evidências da política do museu, revelando mudanças de atitudes em relação à fotografia pessoal.

A investigação mostra que os visitantes utilizam uma variedade de táticas para comunicar mensagens personalizadas, inscrevendo noções de autenticidade e narrativa experiencial, ao mesmo tempo que projetam imagens de si próprios e do museu.

Palavras-chave:

Instagram, selfie, British Museum, gerenciamento de impressões, identidade.

Introduction

Every day, museums and their visitors actively engage in social media, constructing, presenting, and projecting online identities through shared images in digital, social environments. It is difficult to ignore people taking selfies in museums and art galleries, and selfies are complex and contentious modes of photography, particularly in the museum environment.

The public flock to big-ticket artefacts and exhibitions to take photographs to share with others, and there are heated debates about the validity of these types of images and their role in contemporary culture. The value of visitor photography, or presumed lack of, particularly with regards to selfies, and the social outrage associated with these types of activities in museums and galleries is well documented on popular websites and newspapers, with commentary also provided in some academic papers.

This paper explores the relationship between museums, as institutions, and their visitors, positioning the photograph as a communicative mediator, that is, an object which allows museums and visitors to create and project a sense of their own identity in the world.

The British Museum is used as a case study with images shared to Instagram by its audience during 7 days in 2022 forming the dataset.

Visual content analysis and grounded theory are applied to the data set to gain insight into the role of a photograph in contributing to, or crafting a presentation of self-online, and the

effects shared visitor photography may have regarding the identity of the British Museum, on Instagram.

The Selfie Context

Museum visitors have been photographing their museum experiences for well over 100 years, yet people continue to discuss the impact of hand-held portable cameras in museums and galleries. At the British Museum, as early as 1898, there was concern regarding the impact of amateur photography in the Museum. Museum visitors armed with cameras were frequently referred to in meeting minutes and reports by the British Museum Director and the Board of Trustees as, “Kodak visitors” (British Museum Trustee Meeting Minutes, 1898, p.714) and there are several examples of the management discussing the implications of amateur photography, in terms of time and money exhausted by the Museum to facilitate the photography.

In the early 20th century some museums and galleries restricted photography, but at the British Museum, rather than implement a ban, in 1898, the Director ordered that the use of portable cameras be *allowed* in the Museum, providing that no obstruction to the free circulation of visitors was caused (British Museum Trustee Meeting Minutes, 1898, p.714), and that visitors were “decent and orderly in their appearance and behaviour” (British Museum Statutes and Rules, December 1898).

Personal photography remained contentious in museums and galleries, but towards the mid-20th century, institutions became more lenient with their rules, allowing more people to capture their own experiences via film.

The British Museum continues to allow personal photography, adopting a similar position to that of the late 19th century, with rules and regulations asking visitors to respect one another when using cameras. However, whilst the British Museum *reluctantly* allowed personal photography in the early 1900s, today, it encourages it, creating hashtags for specific

exhibitions, such as #FeminePowerExhibition⁴ and displaying signage asking people to “Share your photos”⁵, using the logos of popular social media to suggest avenues for sharing alongside verbal messaging.

Photographic technologies continue to advance; the speed and quantity of photographs a visitor can take has significantly increased, and consequently, so too has the volume of photographs captured. Today, at the British Museum, a visitor is allowed to photograph and video using flash, with permission also granted to use 3D imaging software. There are few limitations imposed on the visitors, besides authorising the above providing no stands are required, and that selfie sticks are not permitted within the Museum (British Museum 2021, British Museum visitor regulations).

In 2019, the Guardian ran an article which reflected on and criticised selfie culture in galleries. Readers responded in the letter section with stories of irritation, and calls for phone-free sessions, with one person describing exhibitions as “blighted by phone snappers posting their visit on social media” and another proclaiming huge satisfaction at photobombing selfies.

In academia, whilst less subjective, there are critics of the selfies. Goodnow (2016, p.124) reflects on the ‘impulsiveness’ of selfies, arguing that technological advancements reduce barriers between a person and their desire to photograph, and consequently, “there is no barrier to the impulse to take random, seemingly meaningless photographs”. McCain and Campbell (2018, p.309) evidence “grandiose narcissism”, that is, an “extraverted, grandiose and callous form of narcissism” as being associated with social networking (p.322). Bowen (2016, p.361) also notes narcissistic tendencies are a reason to take a selfie, but does so alongside other motivational factors, such as a desire to create art, and to define social connections.

⁴ The Citi Exhibition, “Feminine power, the divine to the demonic” ran 19th May 2022 – 25th Sept 2022, with signage on the entrance door which said “Photography is welcome in the exhibition” “Share your experience using #FeminePowerExhibition”

⁵ “Share your photos” was largely displayed on a sign in the Great Court for “The Great Wave”, alongside the caption “Get up close to *The Great Wave*” and an image of the artwork (11th November 2021)

Burness (2016, p.93) explores the function of self-representational photography in museums, opting to use the term “self-representational” rather than “selfie” in her discussion to progress and refocus arguments on the communicational aspects of these types of images beyond ideas of the selfie as something which is self-oriented and obnoxious.

Contrary to the arguments that self-representational photography is impulsive and reactionary, Katz and Thomas Crocker (2016, p.134) discuss the intentionality of selfies, and argue that some are “carefully staged”. In their study, they interviewed students and found that those who agreed that selfies should be informal, were also most likely to agree that they staged selfies, which suggests then, that the ‘impulsive’ or ‘reactionary’ aesthetic of selfies commented on by Goodnow may just be that; an aesthetic consideration and staged behaviour.

By removing themselves from moral debates and the implications of selfies, and focusing on the communicative aspects of selfies, Burness (2016), and Katz and Thomas Crocker (2016), reveal that selfies can be purposeful; they’re images which have layered meaning and value.

Consequently, this paper explores the communicational aspect of selfies, it reflects on Burness’s use of the term “self-representational photography” and expands the traditional definition of selfie beyond that of an image taken at arm’s length, incorporating, and considering portraiture and other images of a person amongst this definition. This does have implications regarding the application of insight from Goodnow, who described selfies as often being without context, and predominantly facial (2016, p.127), and therefore presumably concerned with ‘typical’ selfies.

Material Identity

Miller (2009) argues that things make people just as much as people make things; people learn to become themselves in society through the use of ‘things’ and the systems these things are part of; objects don’t represent us, rather, they come to create us. With this approach and noting that museums, in general, are comprised of a multitude of things; artefacts, architectural spaces, pamphlets, and advertising etc, we can suggest that the identity of a

museum is not just formed from the objects in its collection, but it is made from the totality of its presentation of ‘things’, when visiting.

On Instagram, the British Museum, as other museums and galleries, can be selective concerning shared content. The British Museum can and does curate its feed, and this process recalibrates the presentation of the ‘things’ it chooses to share. Object hierarchies evident in display cases and sequential layouts aren’t apparent online; an artefact from one collection may be displayed alongside artefacts from a broad range of other collections with little or no association. Often, artefact information is provided in the caption, and the traditional labels seen in museum space aren’t apparent online. This culmination of artefact selection, feed curation and a consideration of the aesthetic of the image results in the British Museum’s digital identity, at least on Instagram, differing in character from that informed by its physical and material manifestation during a visit.

Objects in museum collections, which often are ‘out of reach’ become hand-held through photography. With photographs of objects being stored in or accessed via portable handheld devices, photography provides pseudo-ownership to the photographer. Noting that photographs are objects (Sontag, 1977), and Miller’s argument that things make people, just as much as people make things (2009, p.135), we can suggest that the same modes of digital identity formation are afforded the visitor as the Museum. In essence, both entities may use a photograph of the same object or space, but through the exhibition on personal profiles, these objects communicate different messages as they are presented alongside differing photographic objects.

Continuing to reflect on photographs as objects and the various methods an Instagram user may search for the British Museum, such as hashtags, we see that the institutional identity begins to incorporate images of its audience. The majority of posts linked to the hashtag #BritishMuseum are created and shared by visitors and people operating independently of the Museum, and they do include self-representational photography. The #BritishMuseum hashtag returned 671K posts in a search performed in January 2024, and of the first 20 selected posts selected by Instagram, 25% were self-portraiture, and this presents a wholly different identity to the Museum than presented by the British Museum on its page.

In its broadest application, the British Museum is seen to use images of spaces and elevations to accompany captions which provide their digital audience with non-collection information, such as details of closures, commentary on current events or to highlight and celebrate its own birthday, whilst a museum visitor primarily uses these types of views to locate themselves. And, as a Museum ‘exhibits’ content, so too does the participant.⁶ The merging of these images through ‘shared’ identifiers, such as hashtags and geotags induce the authoritative voice of the Museum, with personification, visitor stores, and makes the museum’s audience public.

Method

Data was collected from Instagram during a 7-day period, using the hashtag #BritishMuseum and the British Museum geotag to identify data. This was then manually filtered, removing data which lay outside of the focus of this study, examples being advertising, posts which don’t convey visitor photography and images shared by the British Museum itself. A random sample of 10 posts per day was then identified and this formed the primary data set.

Posts were treated as semiotic objects and ‘transcribed’ using Barthes ideas of denotation and connotation. Essentially, each post was asked a series of questions, which considered the angle of view, contrasting colours, scale of image, and these reflected the meaning potential for visual attributes, as informed by Ledin and Machin (2018) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

This process opened up images beyond the initial response to image-meaning, and translated the image to text, allowing it to be coded alongside other information, such as captions and hashtags and transformed a visual-text object to a single text unit, enabling each post to be considered in its entirety.

⁶ Hogan (2010) considers shared content, such as photographs, as curated exhibitions of past performances, and this study shows that participants have reflected on and deleted/archived content after first sharing it with others online.

Grounded theory was applied to the ‘transcribed’ dataset to explore what is communicated and how museum images may support and inform personal messages. An iterative process of moving between open, axial and selective coding was applied, and this process developed key theoretical insight. This process was applied to all sampled data to determine the following categories and phenomenon evident across all shared photography at the British Museum.

This paper applies the above method to self-representational photography at the British Museum, to better understand the relationship between person-photograph-museum, and additional insight from visual content analysis is applied to the categories realised through grounded theory.

Analysis and Discussion

In total, 919 individual posts were collected from Instagram during the 7-day period, and these posts contained 4,768 individual images and/or videos. The sampled data comprised 10 posts per day, totalling 70 posts and 239 photographs. Within the sampled data, 62 (25.9%) of the photographs included portraiture and selfies, with this categorised ‘type’ of photographs being the second most frequent, behind images of objects-only.

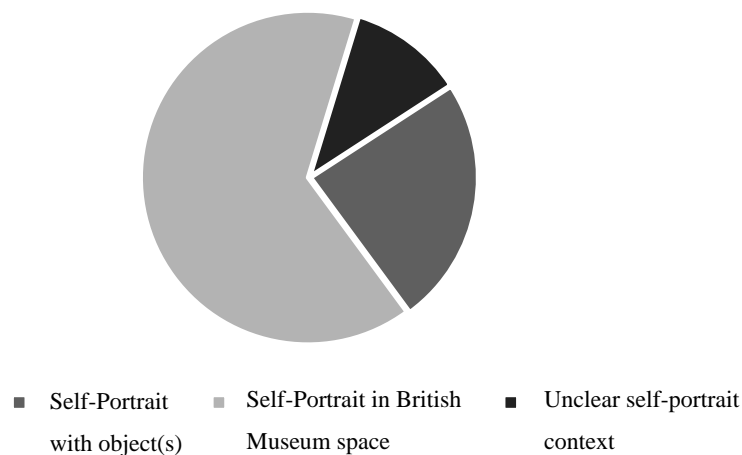
The application of grounded theory identified that shared photographs communicate and help develop ideas of the self, they show ideas of authenticity, they are used by museum visitors to craft personal narratives, they present cultural value and demonstrate social competence. No one idea works in isolation, rather, each post utilises a culmination of these ‘tactics’, with the presence of each determined by the content of the post and caption.

Regarding dominant categories, if we consider an image of a person visually representing them, and therefore signifies that person, arguably, with self-representational photography, the most visually evident code is that of self-presentation, as a person is presenting a representation of themselves online. However, there are several examples of participants knowingly, or unknowingly, ‘staging’ or impulsively using other codes, objects, and spaces,

to craft and support their message, and collectively these attributes work together and contribute to impression management online.

In the sampled self-representational photography, participants are evidenced taking photographs within or besides British Museum spaces and/or elevations (64.8%) or with British Museum artefacts (24.1%). When a single photograph is analysed, 11.1% of shared self-representational photographs have an unclear context, however, when considered as part of an uploaded carousel, the majority of locations can be identified from common features in the background.

Fig 01: Pie Chart showing ratio of participant self-portraiture and the visual context.



To explore the meaning-potential and communicative aspects of shared self-representational photography, the following section considers each ‘type’ of ‘selfie’, introducing and describing each category, where applicable.

Selfies in Museum Spaces

The most frequently used space in participant self-representational photography is the main entrance and forecourt of the British Museum, and this is present in 36.6% of sampled participant photography. The Great Court has a similarly high yield of self-representational photographs, with this space evident in 29.3% of ‘selfies’.

In both environments, visitors are frequently positioned in ways which do not dominate the view. When the proportional image space occupied by both entities is considered, that is, the British Museum and the Participant, only one participant opted to present themselves as visually ‘dominant’ to the British Museum, occupying a large proportion of the image space. In all other shared person-space images, the participants were seen as significantly smaller than their environment. Participants are frequently visually aligned with architectural features in these photographs, such as the pediment of the main elevation, and these photographs represent a culmination of work between the participant, another visitor, and the British Museum.



*Participant Caption: Responsible cultural trip to the British Museum*⁷

Fig 02: Example Instagram post with a user sharing self-representational photography at the British Museum main entrance and elevation.

If we consider the above Instagram post, we can see that whilst the participant, on plan, would not be centrally located, the photographer has positioned themselves and their photographic device so the participant is aligned with the pediment, and the participant responds to the photographer, aligning their body between the Museum and the camera. We can see then, that whilst the image appears to be ‘reactive’ or ‘impulsive’, the image must be ‘carefully staged’; the participant responds to the photographer, and the photographer to their environment, namely, the British Museum. Both participant and photographer are making

⁷ To retain participant identity, the participant’s caption is paraphrased to prevent back searching.

creative decisions, situating the photograph as a mediator between, participant, fellow visitor, and the British Museum.

As the Museum visually supports the subject in these shared photographs, so too do other visitors, or the apparent lack of them: fellow audience members are frequently not visible, or if they are present, are much smaller and visually less significant than the participant, rendering the museum visitor the focus of the photograph, as suggested by Goodnow (2016). However, the museum visitor does not dominate the image, and the scenes are heavily contextualised⁸.

Cumulatively, through visual alignment, the participant-Museum relationship is enforced and consequently, ideas of **cultural capital** evidenced through representation of the British Museum are associated with the participant. This is enhanced by suggestions of ‘exclusive’ experiences. When considering how the photograph was taken, the participant demonstrates **social competence** in a very subtle way as it becomes evident that they attended the British Museum with at least one other person.

Images of the British Museum, regardless of participant behaviours and visual alignment communicate and support ideas of **authenticity** and this can be achieved simply through the inclusion of key spaces in the backgrounds of images, with the Museum literally supporting the subject in a scene. Some spaces, such as the Great Court, are visually identifiable by a broad audience with such spaces coming to be symbolic of the Museum⁹. This knowledge of place and cultural association helps substantiate the value of the shared image through connotation with the Museum, but equally, the characteristics of the architectural spaces and

⁸ Self-representational photography in the dataset was highly contextualised, which differs from Goodnow’s (2016) description of a typical selfie. Photographs in this paper’s dataset include all portraiture as well as traditional selfies taken at arm’s length. Traditional selfies may limit the photographs’ ability to include contextual information.

⁹ The Great Court and Russel Street elevation are considered to be symbolic of the British Museum as a result of their dominance when searching “British Museum” through Google Images. Images of the Great Court are also dominant on the British Museum homepage and printed material, such as visiting maps.

the muted tones of stonework support ideas of authenticity, and this contributes to the meaning of shared personal messages.

Ideas of authenticity are also relayed through participant behaviour. With the previous example, we see a museum visitor engaging in non-traditional museum behaviour; jumping inside a museum may be described as reflective of an ‘inauthentic’ experience, however, if we consider the participant’s behaviour in a new environment, Instagram, we may argue that the behaviour they are portraying *is* authentic, in this case, to a digital environment, to their social group and to their values. Additionally, this behaviour may communicate British Museum rules and regulations; there are no examples of visitors jumping within the walls of the Museum, and whilst not a particularly dominant activity externally, several examples are evident in the dataset at this location. The visitor may unwittingly be providing visual commentary on expected behaviours at the Museum, in particular locations.

This participant opted to share the above photograph as part of a carousel, with 2 other similar images which, when you swipe through the images shows the participant running towards the camera and jumping. These images are extremely similar, and this may lead critics to consider them as narcissistic displays of self, but again, if we consider these images in use, that is, observed sequentially, we see that engaging with and scrolling through the images online extends the duration of this singular lived-museum moment. Again, we see a narrative communication, with movement enforcing ideas of fun and joy, which compound the participant’s message.

Noting that Instagram posts are semiotic objects, that is, they are more than just a representation of a person, the supporting caption reads, “Responsible cultural trip to the British Museum¹⁰”, and this succinctly, and ironically, describes more than simply entering the museum, as seen in the image. The moment captured by the camera comes to reflect an entire days’ worth of activity, it provides insight into the participants locations, activities, and through humour, the participant’s personality. The British Museum is being used by the participant to craft and communicate to their digital audience.

¹⁰ Caption paraphrased to prevent back searching, and to retain participant identity.

Selfies with Museum Objects

24.1% of self-representational photography incorporates museum artefacts or collections, and visitor behaviours are varied; some people stand beside objects, others in front, whilst others mimic poses of statues or other artworks and in total, 72.2% of participant-object ‘selfies’ show the museum visitor facing the camera. ‘Traditional’ engagement, with participants captured observing artefacts is evident in the remaining object-person photographs.

Whilst 66.6% of object-person photographs include artefacts from the Greek and Roman collections, it is difficult to identify individual ‘popular’ items due to the sample size. Objects from these collections are identified by the British Museum on their blog post, “14 things not to miss at the British Museum”, and this kind of ‘instructional’ literature not only identifies objects of significance, but it certifies cultural value and likely influences visitor behaviour.

Urry and Larsen (2011) present the “Tourist Gaze” as a vision-focused touristic reaction, a process whereby tourists are influenced by mediated representations, with these images influencing a desire to see, how to act, and what to photograph. It may be that the popularity of these collections is in part informed by such advertising, be that via the British Museum or other external sources, such as organised tours or blogs online.

If we reflect on the supporting captions compiled by the participants, we see additional reasons for selecting objects from these collections, beyond certified value, with participants reflecting on the artistry of objects, communicating personal reactions¹¹, and sharing positive experiences.

Participant 4052 shared several group selfies in front of and beside objects from the Greek and Egyptian sculpture galleries, in addition to one ‘group’ selfie at the entrance of the British Museum which followed the conventions described in the previous example, and an additional group selfie which was devoid of context. This participant describes their British Museum as “a feast for the eyes”, using the hashtags #wow, #artwork and #sculptures. We see

¹¹ Captions which provide commentary on personal reactions frequently reflect enjoyment. Participants do discuss the repatriation of artefacts, but these posts are object focused, and are not evident in participant portraiture, consequently, these debates lie outside of this study.

that whilst the participant is not visually dominant they are consistently represented through shared photographs, but, with the use of the caption, they resituate their communication, emphasising the characteristics of the British Museum and their museum experience, which emphasises the museum-participant relationship.

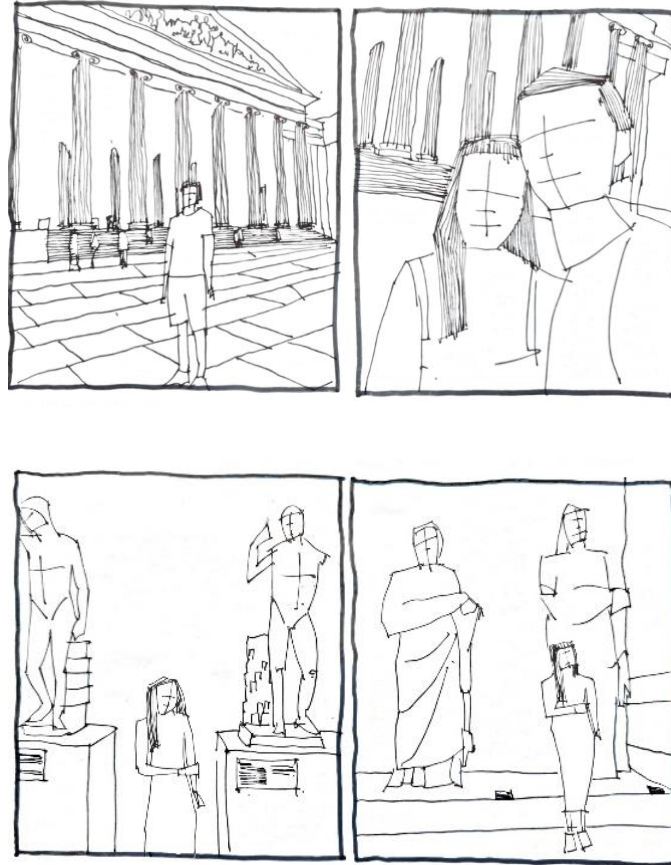


Fig 03: Participant 4052 image selection, sharing a combination of self-representational photography as part of a larger carousel of images.

Sharing self-representational photography where the participant is positioned near these objects visually communicates an association with objects of certified value and **cultural capital**, and through association, this contributes to the **presentation of self-online**.

Again, as with participant 4052, there is repetition in the photography; two photographs are taken with the same artefacts and this extends the moment of engagement with those particular objects. The photographs are presented in a carousel, moving firstly from an external view of the British Museum through into the gallery; these images may be presented sequentially and used to visually narrate their British Museum journey, situating and

providing context to their self-representational photography. The use of colour and tone across all photographs are consistent and whilst the focus of these images is the participant and the objects, the muted tones of the surroundings, the visibility of plinths and barriers help communicate the ‘serious’ experience of the British Museum, which is visually juxtaposed with the smiling faces of the participants, amplifying the perceived enjoyment of the experience, and the authoritative nature of the museum.

Similar to self-representational photography in museum space, this artefact-focused ‘selfies’ achieve much of the same for the participant when images are shared online; the participant is able to communicate their museum experience, the use of objects, particularly if popularised and known to their audience, provides and evidences **cultural capital** and through physically being near these objects, visually, there is an association between person and artefact. Museum spaces provide context to artefacts, and ideas of **authenticity** evident in person-space photographs remain in person-artefact imagery. Carousels are frequently used with these types of images, and the ordering of such images demonstrates a curatorial eye, with users able to create stories through a combination of image and caption. Particularly with example 4052, **social competence** is evident through the visibility of social groups in the images, but even images which show just one person communicate the same competence when considering the majority of people likely rely on someone else taking a photograph¹², rather than moving through the Museum with a tripod.

‘Contextless’ Selfies

11.1% of shared self-representational photography in the dataset is described as ‘contextless’, this is largely due to the scale of the participant(s) in the image, rendering their environment secondary, out of focus, and unclear. Considered as individual photographs, these types of images promote the self; all show people having a good time, smiling and appearing to be enjoying themselves, with attention very much focused on the presented participant.

These types of self-representational photography again, afford the user with the similar attributes; whilst not visually evident in the photograph, the use of #BritishMuseum or the

¹² Informed by general observation at the British Museum during archival visits.

British Museum geotag locates the user, generating an association with the Museum and ideas of cultural capital, although with less emphasis than previous examples. These types of self-representational photographs may be common amongst their digital audience, if so, the behaviour then is authentic to the user. Unlike the previously discussed ‘selfies’, these types of close-focus images are often taken at arm’s length, so we cannot assume the participant has attended the Museum with another person, however, Instagram is an inherently social application. Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020, p.1) argue that Instagram isn’t primarily a photo-sharing application, rather, it is a tool for communication, and they conclude that “all Instagram users co-create each other...” (p.6).

These ‘contextless’ selfies largely feature the participant centrally, as the focus of the image. Using Goodnow’s definitions, this ‘type’ of selfie becomes categorised as a “facial selfie”, which sits under the broader category of selfies which are characterised by “attractiveness”. Goodnow (2016, p.128) argues that these types of self-representational photographs are incapable of providing a narrative, saying “Without context, the facial selfie can only be about the self.” Perhaps when uploading as singular images this is true, however, at the British Museum, all of these types of ‘selfies’ were presented as part of larger carousels and when considered ‘in use’, alongside other posts and with supporting captions, it is possible to establish the locations of the majority of these images and the experiences had by the visitors; ‘contextless selfies’ are contextualised when experienced alongside other supporting images, captions and metadata, considered as part as a larger communication, rather than within the singular image.

Impression Management

Hogan (2010) considers impression management on social media, making a key distinction between ideas of performance, and exhibition, opting to use the metaphor of exhibition rather than stage play to broadly apply Goffman’s theories of dramaturgy to social media, introducing a new role; the virtual “curator”. Hogan (2010, p.380) asks whether online content can be considered a performance, he argues that exhibitions are forms of presentation of self, and notes that “people take their choice of what to display personally and consider it a form of impression management” (p.384).

In this way, we can see that all content shared comes to signify the participant and that ideas of self-presentation and self-development, cultural capital, narrative construction, authenticity, memory making and social competence all contribute to the presentation of the participant online; or how the participant manages their digital impression.

Implications for the Museum

The digital impression of the British Museum is informed by its own social media profiles and website, but it is also informed by the curated content uploaded by its audience, and this process personalises the Museum. As the British Museum is used in photographs to support the presentation of a participant, these photographs, cumulatively, support the presentation of the British Museum online, with representations of its building and collection shared, alongside participants, reflecting the visitors' experience.

Photography allows people to pseudo-own all that they photograph within the British Museum, repositioning it and exhibiting it within a “domesticated” environment, and whilst selfies at the national museum inherently communicate place, culture, leisure activities and tourism, the nuances of images, selection of objects and specificity of backgrounds reflect and construct an individualised sense of self. We have seen that participants utilise a variety of tactics in their images and captions to communicate ideas of authenticity, cultural capital, narrative development and presentation of self, online, which co-produces digital identity *with* the Museum.

Processes of visitor sharing contribute to the digital presence of the British Museum online; searching the #britishmuseum hashtag, at the time of writing, the top posts are all user-generated, that is, they were not created by the British Museum. Ideas of pseudo-ownership have also been encouraged by the British Museum; in a post shared in September 2016, the Museum encouraged Instagram users to use the hashtag #mybritishmuseum with their photographs, with the prospect of their image and account being shared with their audience if they were selected for a ‘regram’.

The actions of ‘regrams’ involve one profile sharing the content of another profile and crediting the original poster, this process allows the British Museum to incorporate visitor

photography amongst ‘certified’ imagery created by the British Museum on their page. The language of hashtag also promotes ideas of pseudo-ownership of the Museum through processes of photography, it helps promote the Museum’s collection as truly public and encourages engagement in non-traditional ways.

Through shared photography, regardless of supporting hashtags, users are seen ‘domesticating’ the British Museum; objects which were once out of reach are reproduced through photography, and shared in personal, and domestic spaces, away from the British Museum.

The digital impression of the British Museum is in part informed by the self-curated content uploaded by its audience, and this process personalises the Museum. As the British Museum is used in photographs to support the presentation of a participant, these photographs, cumulatively, support the presentation of the British Museum online.

Conclusions

This research reflects on Katz and Thomas Crocker’s (2016) argument that selfie studies don’t give sufficient regard to the communicational aspects of selfie production, consumption and co-production. By considering how participants and fellow audience members behave when staging photographs, the types of messages conveyed through shared images of the British Museum, and, the curatorial decisions made by participants inherent in all sharing, and editing after uploading, we see that self-representational photography at the British Museum provides nuanced communication for the participants, *and* the Museum, and these posts do have meaning potential.

We can suggest that Museum spaces and artefacts direct the actions of the participant in material Museum space, and through the curation of their British Museum self-representational photographs, participants are able to craft their digital impression. For Hogan (2010, p.377), shared content such as photographs aren’t performances in themselves, rather, they are curated exhibitions of past performances, and we can show that curatorial decisions

extend beyond the moment of upload, with at least four posts¹³ in the entire sampled dataset now deleted or archived, perhaps reflecting back-and-forth adjustment of presented behaviour in response to digital audience reactions.

Images of the Museum and its collection support whatever message the participant wishes to convey. These messages are multifaceted and layered, a person may communicate a positive experience, boredom, or simply that they attended the museum, but all posts incorporate the same ideas when observed by an audience; ideas of cultural capital, authenticity, narrative development, social competence, and self-development are evident in all analysed data. All of these terms may be considered collectively as attributes of digital impression management, with the proportionality of each 'term' differing in significance as participant messages vary.

Regardless of whether a participant has a positive or negative experience, shares images of themselves besides objects which are important to them personally, a souvenir, or artefacts which are widely considered culturally significant, whether a participant opts to share an image of themselves in Museum space, besides an artefact or a 'traditional' selfie with minimal visual context, each post allows a participant to construct and present a representation of their own self which is authentic to them and their audience, and this process domesticates and personalises the British Museum online.

On Instagram, the digital identity of the British Museum is in part crafted by the shared photographs of its visitors, and equally, the participant's identity is in part informed by characteristics of the Museum and its collection. The photograph mediates between and works for both entities.

Social media offers new opportunities to think about what museum engagement might look like, with the potential to incorporate visitor photographic habits in new ways to co-produce digital identity online.

¹³ Correct as of 21st August 2023

References

Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of Semiology*. New York, Hill and Wang.

Bowen, J, S. (2016). The Selfie Factor: Developing and Engaging Audiences with Popular Social Behaviors. In: Stylianou-Lambert, T. (Ed). *Museums and Visitor Photography*. Edinburgh and Cambridge: MuseumsEtc Ltd.. pp.338-373.

British Museum. (2018). *British Museum Visitor Regulations*. [Online]. Retrieved from https://www.britishmuseum.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/British_Museum-Visitor_Regulations.pdf

British Museum. (2020). *14 things not to miss at the British Museum*. [Online]. British Museum Blog. Last Updated: 24 August 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/14-things-not-miss-british-museum>

British Museum (1898 - 1925). *Original Papers Record Series*. London, British Museum.

British Museum. (1898 - 1925). *Trustee Meeting Minutes*. London, British Museum.

British Museum (1898, 1908, 1922, 1932). *Statute and Rules Volumes*. London, British Museum.

Bowen, J, S. (2016). New Ways of Looking: Self-Representational Social Photography in Museums. In: Stylianou-Lambert, T. (Ed). *Museums and Visitor Photography*. Edinburgh and Cambridge: MuseumsEtc Ltd.. pp.90-127

Goodnow, T. (2016). The Selfie Moment: The Rhetorical Implications of Digital Self Portraiture for Culture. In: Benedek, A. and Veszelszki, A. (Ed). *In the Beginning was the Image: The Omnipresence of Pictures. Time, Truth, Tradition*. Oxford: Peter Lang AG. pp.123-130.

Hogan, B. (2010). *The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online*. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30(6): 377-386.

- Katz, J, and Crocker, E, T. (2016). Selfies as interpersonal communication. In: Benedek, A. and Veszelszki, A. (Ed). *In the Beginning was the Image: The Omnipresence of Pictures. Time, Truth, Tradition*. Oxford: Peter Lang AG. pp.123-130.
- Kress, G. and Leeuwen, T, V. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London, Routledge.
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., and Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Ledin, P. and Machin, D. (2018). *Doing Visual Analysis, From Theory to Practice*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi and Singapore, SAGE.
- McCain, J, L. and Campbell, K. (2018). Narcissism and Social Media Use: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. 7(3), pp.308-327.
- Miller, D. (2009). *Stuff*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. London, Penguin Books
- Twenge, J., M. and Campbell, K, W. (2010). *The Narcissism Epidemic. Living in the Age of Entitlement*. Free Press, London.
- Urry, J. and Larsen, J. (2011). *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. London: SAGE.
- Various. (2019). Switch off your phone and get lost in a gallery. *The Guardian*. 23 August 2019, pp.6-7