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Instagram and Art Gallery Visitors: Aesthetic experience, space, sharing and implications for educators

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Abstract

Instagram is one of the world's most popular social media applications. For art galleries it is an important tool for promotion, marketing, interaction, participation and the enhancing of the visitor experience. For arts educators it is an opportunity to broaden the participation of people wanting to learn through art, and to consider how Instagram may contribute to an art gallery based learning program. There is limited research about the use of Instagram by visitors to an art gallery and the role it plays in their experience. This article is drawn from a research study into the use of Instagram by visitors to the Gerhard Richter exhibition at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (14 October 2017 - 4 February 2018). The research project, which was informed by spatial theory, found that the use of Instagram at the gallery engaged visitors in a manner that transcended the physical space and extended their aesthetic experience. This finding is significant for arts educators seeking to engage students through social media during visits to art exhibitions.

Keywords

Aesthetic experience, art education, Gerhard Richter, Instagram, Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, sharing, space

Introduction

The use of Instagram has generated much interest in the art gallery community (Budge, 2017). Inspiring this interest are the opportunities to connect galleries with new and younger audiences, improve visitor engagement, and deepen connections within the community (Barron & Leask, 2017). This article will highlight how Instagram connects to the evolution and extension of the aesthetic experience through its functionality; namely its photographic, spatial and sharing capabilities. There is little research into the aesthetic experience of art gallery visitors that takes

into account the mediation of smart device technology. Similarly, there is limited research that investigates implications for classroom practice. As this article will show, Instagram offers educators a valuable opportunity to further engage students during visits to art galleries.

The study on which this article is based explored the current practices of art gallery visitors using Instagram and their implications for arts educators. All participants in this study had visited the German artist Gerhard Richter's exhibition *The Life of Images* at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), and posted an image of their visit to Instagram. The GOMA hosted the exclusive exhibition of collected works between 14 October 2017 and 4 February 2018. The works included photographs, landscapes and abstracts offering a "detailed insight into the work of one of the world's most influential living artists" (Queensland Gallery of Art, Gallery of Modern Art, 2017). This article reviews the literature to position current understanding of art gallery visitors and Instagram. Following this, the background to the study undertaken, data collection methods, ethics, and data analysis are addressed. Finally, the findings, discussion and implications are presented in the context of arts educators seeking to develop art gallery visitation programs for their students.

Literature review

Instagram has over 800,000,000 users and is a pro-social mobile application that is particularly popular with younger people (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Instagram, 2018). Arts educators are challenged to attract new and younger audiences seeking learning experiences in galleries, and as Instagram is a popular practice in art galleries (Suess, 2015), it provides an opportunity to address this challenge (Mitchell, 2017). As part of the education economy, galleries are a source of learning outside of schools and Institutes of Higher Education (Luckerhoff & Falk, 2016). Such a role invites arts educators to comprehend how Instagram is used by gallery visitors and in what ways its use may align with their objectives. Social media practices are increasingly interwoven into many people's daily habits, and arts educators need to understand this changing dynamic in the ways people are knowing, learning and experiencing the world around them (Castro, 2012; Papacharissi & Easton, 2013). The study undertaken offers two major points of relevance for arts educators. Firstly, it focuses on examining behaviour at an important and popular place within arts education, the art gallery (Lemon & Garvis, 2014). Secondly, it examines the use of smart device technology in an environment, which despite the significant impact technology can make in arts education (Lemon, 2014), has historically underutilized and discouraged its use.

Instagram and the art gallery

Little is known about art gallery visitors' use of Instagram (Budge, 2017). Previous research at museums and galleries has found visitors used Instagram to *re-curate* exhibitions, and extend dialogue beyond the physical setting (Weilenmann, Hillman, & Jungselius, 2013), draw attention to exhibition objects (Budge, 2017), and assert visitor agency and authority (Budge & Burness, 2017). In related studies which examined digital photography rather than Instagram, participants were found to use photographs to extend their engagement and share experiences (Lemon, 2013). Stylianou-Lambert (2017) linked photographs to triggering memory, sharing, education, inspiration, self-identity and stimulating artistic creation.

Aesthetic experience

Visitors in an art gallery are encouraged to have an aesthetic experience (Consoli, 2014); this experience can be facilitated and extended by Instagramming (Budge, 2017; Suess, 2015). Art gallery educators in particular strive to use art to create deep and distinctive learning moments (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011; Pringle, 2009). This is achieved through pedagogical judgments and use of didactics to help visitors to make meaning and enhance their knowledge of art (Eisner & Dobbs, 1988; Lemon, 2013). Visitors are considered to be part of the creative process, with their engagement and experience realising the full value of the object (Dewey, 1934; Edmonds, Bilda, & Muller, 2009). Understanding the way visitors interact and experience art is clearly important knowledge for arts educators, as it helps them to connect objectives to outcomes, and shapes future practice.

According to Burnham (1994), a leading theorist and practitioner of art gallery teaching, an aesthetic experience is achieved through an "evolving visual experience" (p. 523). This is where Instagram may be positioned; in constructing an aesthetic experience, not in isolation from other factors such as gallery didactics, marketing, layout or co-visitors, but working in movement with them. Instagram also extends the aesthetic experience beyond the space and time of the visit to the gallery through its photographic and engagement functionality. Individuals take photographs to trigger reflection and memory (Pyry, 2013; Lemon, 2014; Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). An Instagram user who has taken a photograph of their visit to a gallery, may for a period of time after leaving the gallery creatively incubate and reflect on their experience before representing it in a post to Instagram, with their post becoming an extension of their aesthetic experience (Hjorth & Pink, 2014). Instagram also extends an aesthetic experience by placing it into a meta-representational structure which combines image with language, relationships, creativity, technology, and place (Consoli, 2014; Hjorth & Pink, 2014). It engages the user's imagination in image editorial, writing and conceptual thinking. The significance of this means that arts educators can understand how technology such as Instagram can assist in the development of aesthetic experience (Lemon, 2018).

Instagramming, space and the visitor

Spatial practices are an important focus in a study on Instagram, visitor experience and the art gallery (Roppola, 2013). Falk and Dierking (2013) suggest great art exhibitions are possible only through a deep understanding of “how people utilize and respond to physical space” (p. 129). Studies into the human experience and spatial conditions have included art gallery visitor movement (Tröndle & Tschacher, 2012), the practice of bike messengering (Kidder, 2009), parkour (Kidder, 2012), and skateboarding (Borden, 2001). There is almost a complete absence of any significant studies examining visitor spatial practices associated with the use of Instagram. Instagramming therefore may be better understood by framing it within spatial theory. Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) book *The Production of Space* is considered a monumental academic work, which theorises space in the context of social relations. Lefebvre’s trialectic of spatial practices, representations of space and spatial conceptions provide a useful entry point into an educational research inquiry into individuals’ use of Instagram (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuk, 2011). This study analysed Instagramming as an example of what Lefebvre (1991) referred to as lived spatial experience, adopting a similar process to Kidder’s (2009) research into bicycle messengers which illustrated how such events can be observed and reported. Kidder (2009) highlights that individuals determine how space will be lived through their material interaction within it, regardless of how the initial use of that space was designed. The research findings of the study being reported will show how some visitors *lived* the physical space of the gallery when using Instagram and how their material interaction with the gallery, art objects, and other people were represented in digital space.

Sharing

The art gallery may be viewed as a sharing network where visitors share “images, information and experiences throughout communities” (Russo, Watkins, Kelly, & Chan, 2008, p. 28). However, why visitors share their images, information and experiences on Instagram has not been clear (Suess, 2015). John (2013) argues that sharing as a modern concept online is under-theorised and the term overloaded. As John (2013) contends the distributional view of sharing is that I have something, I share it with you, and I am left with less than what I started with. This traditional understanding, when placed in the context of Instagram, is not concomitant (Kennedy, 2016). Instagram relies heavily on user sharing as a core proposition of its business model; it is central to participation within the application and is a major part of its popularity (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Sharing art gallery photos is linked to knowledge building and learning to value the contributions of others (Lemon, 2018). It also stimulates conversation and asserts a sense of identity (Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). These are all goals which arts educators value (Burnham, 1994).

The three identified areas - aesthetic experience, space and sharing underpin the focus of this study, in conjunction with the experience of Instagramming. These are

areas which educators can address during the pre-visitation, visitation and post visitation stages of a gallery visit which incorporates Instagram.

Background to the study

The setting of this study was the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, in Brisbane, Australia. Data was obtained from two participant groups, all members having attended the ticketed Gerhard Richter exhibition, *The Life of Images* and shared an aspect of their visit to Instagram. Group one comprised observations of posts to Instagram over a nine week period beginning at the commencement of the exhibition. These posts were publicly available and users within this group were not aware their posts had been observed. Group one users were anonymised and no copies of their posts were made; posts were read and summarised from within the Instagram application. Once coding and theming of Group one posts was completed, a simple random selection of 17 participants taken from Group one formed Group two. Group two were contacted through Instagram requesting their participation in the study and these participants consented to be interviewed about their Instagram post. This paper reports and analyses both the Group one data and Group two responses, and links direct evidence of the behaviour to the research question: Why do visitors to art galleries use Instagram?

Data collection methods and analysis

This study is qualitative in nature as it seeks an interpretative understanding of why visitors to art galleries use Instagram, and further what aspects of Instagram use could inform arts educational practice. Using a visual ethnographic-grounded theory method the researcher observed 550 Instagram posts that were made using the hashtags #RichterGOMA #thelifeofimages #qagoma or geo-tagged to Queensland Gallery of Art/ Gallery of Modern Art (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Roppola, 2013). Conceptualising the field using a combination of ethnographic-grounded theory is not unique to my research. Kidder (2009) combined ethnography and grounded theory in his research into bike messenger subculture. Bamkin, Maynard and Goulding (2016) also explored the choice of grounded theory with ethnography in a study on children's reading skills. They both found it was an appropriate combination arguing that the two methodologies provided a greater level of detail than either one alone, and that it is well suited to novel questions with limited previous empirical research.

In line with visual ethnography each post was examined and analysed visually; posts were observed online through the Instagram application on an iPhone 6™ (Konecki, 2011; Pink, 2013). The 550 posts were analysed by being coded - identifying key words and visuals, themed - grouping codes into relational connections, and forming categories from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Reece & Danforth, 2017). Analytic memos, a major component of grounded theory, were reflexively written for each post by the researcher serving as additional narrative data. Following this analysis,

a simple random subset of 17 users taken from the 550 posts consented to answering questions about their post and use of Instagram. All questions posted to these 17 users directly linked back to the research question. Open-ended questions were employed to ensure collected data had limited researcher interference (Roppola, 2013). Responses from participants were compared with the established codes and categories seeking validation of, or addition to, the code set. The data collection methods and analytic framework allowed the gathering and analysis of data that linked directly to the research question. Grounded theory evolves from the data through an inductive/deductive cycle that aims to discover theory within the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such the theory could be validated by future researchers following a similar research framework. This study does not, and cannot, account for all visitor perspectives nor could any study. The responses are positioned as valuable insight into these behaviours.

This study was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee, under the privacy condition that communication was conducted through Instagram's private messaging function, and obtaining prior informed consent before questioning. An important ethical consideration of this research was the privacy paradox (Barnes, 2006), as the publicly available posts comprising Group one were not aware their posts had been observed and analysed. Consensus has not yet been achieved in the research community on the treatment of publicly available data such as non-private Instagram posts, and whether informed consent prior to observation and analysis is required (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). Generally observing publicly available social media posts does not constitute research that requires prior informed consent and most researchers using this type of data do not gain consent from each user whose post is observed (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). Further research into the privacy paradox is needed as this issue is highly contextual and does not negate researcher considerations of harm, privacy, respect for persons, and justice (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018).

Data findings

The responses were identified as belonging to aesthetic experience, space, and sharing, not independent of each other but seen as existing together layering the gallery experience through Instagramming. A detailed explanation for each finding is covered below, with the discussion section examining the findings seen as inter-related.

Aesthetic experience

A number of respondents described how Instagram formed part of, or worked alongside of, their aesthetic experience in different ways:

(Instagram) actually added to the experience for me. I was more aware and more observant. (P1)

I posted the images and information that had the greatest impact on me. (P3)

Several respondents posted images of the artworks that included themselves, other people and/or artistic reproductions. For example, one participant chose a photo that included a blurred person walking in front of one of Richter's works, an adaptation of Richter's signature blurred painting style explaining that:

The posted images portray the diversity of the artist's (sic) work, style and subject matter. The 2 'walking man' images were selected for their composition in relation to the paintings - blurred man set against the blurred painting style. (P4)

A notable finding was that many respondents described how using Instagram extended their aesthetic experience beyond the space and time of being present at the exhibition location:

I uploaded to Instagram after the exhibition. I guess it gave me a chance to reflect on the exhibition afterwards. (P3)

I usually take pics of the works I like best and then I post later on. (P5)

I didn't post the photos straight away so that gave me time to think about what to post. (P6)

Aesthetic experience was further highlighted in some users' posts connecting an artwork to a personal prior experience. In one case the respondent captured Richter's *Seascape* (CR: 377) and posted it as it made them feel homesick:

Because it reminds me of my view from my home ... I had been away nearly a month. (P7)

Space

Analysis of Instagram posts also found connections between Instagram, gallery visitors, and the space of the exhibition and gallery. One aspect of spatial practice highlighted was the distances visitors chose to position themselves from the artworks when capturing images. A number of posts of Richter's tapestries chose a close up position showing the intricate detail of the work. One respondent explained how the gallery space, artwork, and their whole body placed in front of the art gave rise to the construction of their Instagram post:

The gallery setting is completely white (walls) and grey (floor) with one large grey painting, drawing focus to colours in the center of the photograph; a deep red dress, blue scarf, green bag, brown skin and hair so blonde it looks yellow. (P8)

The *ATLAS Overview* (Image 1) section of the exhibition is another highlighted relationship between visitor, Instagram, and the space within the gallery. *ATLAS Overview* was an extensive 400-panel extract of collected photographs, sketches, collages and cuttings. It was arranged along a long corridor in the exhibition room, with a reduced lighting effect creating an atmospheric environment much dimmer than the other works present.



Image 1: From *ATLAS Overview*, by Gerhard Richter, 2017. Image taken by Instagram user (P17). © 2017 by Gerhard Richter. Reprinted with permission.

A number of Instagram posts were of the *ATLAS* room taken as a space, as opposed to individual works or objects. Instagramming could be characterised through these posts as a reinterpretation of space (Borden, 2001; Kidder, 2009). Visitors represented the *ATLAS* room on Instagram not as 'looking at' separate objects, but 'being-in' a connected spatial, visual and embodied environment, an example of this can be seen in Image 1 (Tzortzi, 2017).

Sharing

Respondents described Instagram as a place for sharing their gallery experience, as is evident in one user's statement that:

I like to use IG (Instagram) to try and capture a magical moment by composing an image that I think expresses the essence of the experience I am sharing. (P10)

Respondents provided abstract explanations when further questioned on what they believed they were sharing on Instagram; people are often uncertain what exactly they perceive they are sharing on Instagram. This was highlighted by the response:

Sharing a special moment/feeling ... not contrived ... just what I see and experience in that moment. (P10)

A visit to the gallery was seen by these visitors as an experience worthy of sharing to Instagram. Respondents also described sharing their experience with others to promote the exhibition such as:

I hope my using Instagram helped promote the exhibition to a broader audience. (P11)

(Instagram is) a platform for me to share the experience, and raise awareness of Gerhard Richter's work. (P4)

Sharing was seen by respondents as beneficial for providing images for others to view and viewing images others had posted:

It did allow me to check out the exhibition beforehand easily by looking through the Hashtags. (P12)

I think that the #lifeofimages hashtag is also interesting ... providing a window into the exhibition through other's eyes. (P10)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate why and how visitors to art galleries use Instagram. Through the three categories - aesthetic experience, space, and sharing, this paper has shown that the way gallery visitors use Instagram amplifies, evolves and extends aspects of their experience. It also provided evidence to suggest a considered process that involved pre-visitation, visitation and post visitation stages. Previous research outlined in the literature review has only addressed single aspects of the experience such as what people do during a visit; the objectification of art; and how people might reflect on these experiences, but this current study was the first to examine the experience as a whole. Consequently, Image 2 illustrates how Instagram works alongside a gallery visit including each of the phases mentioned above. Activities such as sharing images of others who have already attended; physically attending and experiencing an exhibition; viewing and photographing objects and spaces; and, post-visit reflection and finally sharing one's own images and experience are all important stages in the process. This image frames the whole activity in movement, and connects Instagramming to spatial theory through highlighting how imagined (conceived) spatial practices become lived experience (Lefebvre, 1991).

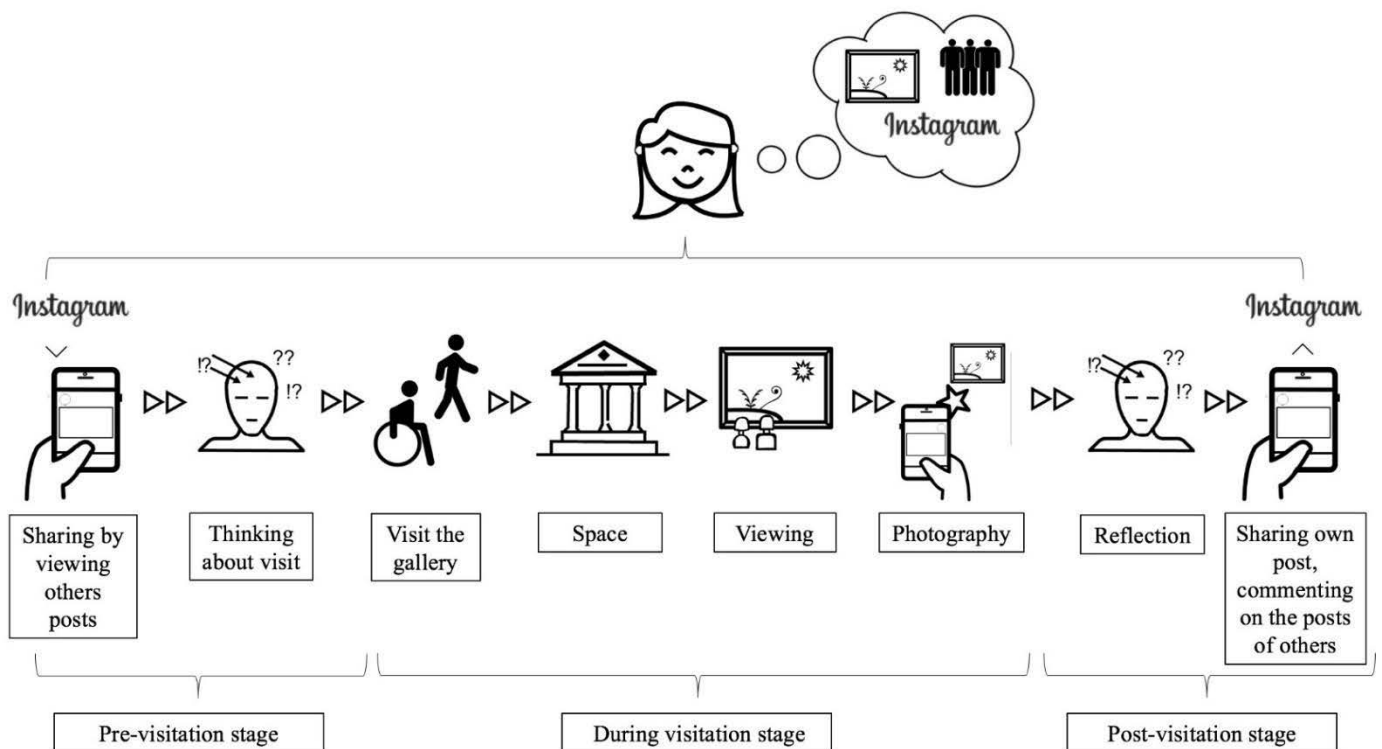


Image 2: Art gallery visitor Instagramming (Suess, 2018).

The relevance of Image 2 for arts educators is the way it positions an understanding of aesthetic experience constructed alongside Instagram use throughout an in-depth process across time and spaces, that is, what happens in the classroom prior to the gallery visit, what happens during the gallery visit and how the teacher and students reflect on this experience post visit. As noted in the introduction, traditionally galleries have been discouraging of technology (Lemon, 2014), but as shown in this study, for some visitors Instagram facilitated an evolved and extended aesthetic experience. Users' shared images, experiences, reported being more aware and attentive, and reflected on their experience, all of which are linked to positive educational outcomes (Burnham, 1994; Lemon, 2018; Stylianou-Lambert, 2017). This connects with Pink's (2011) concept of image creation as emplaced visibility, framing the images as produced in movement where the gallery, artist, visitor, Instagram, public and private spaces, time, places and so on, are all factors "implicated in the constitution of the image" (p. 8). This also aligns with Burnham (1994) and Consoli's (2014) understanding of aesthetic experience as evolving over time.

The present study has several potential implications for arts educators:

- Instagramming is a popular practice for many visitors to galleries, educators should feel enthusiastic about exploring novel ways to channel Instagram's popularity alongside their educational objectives.
- There are reflective functions within Instagram (photography, writing posts, commenting) that could be used alongside arts educational practices such as reflective writing (Consoli, 2014).
- Instagram's pro-social sharing dynamic could support social pedagogy elements within arts education programs; learning to appreciate the views of others (Serafinelli, 2017), and valuing subjectivity in art interpretation (Burnham, 1994).
- Instagram use in a gallery offers educators a way to position knowledge of spatial awareness and mediation of spaces, in relation to artworks, art spaces and other visitors.
- Photography triggers memory, conversation and post-visit sharing extending the experience of visiting a gallery (Lemon, 2014).

This article has focused on a close examination of visitor use of Instagram at an art gallery and the presentation of an overview of the research in this area and identifying significant findings. The findings and discussion presented the foundations of a critical understanding of Instagram use. It is recommended that arts educators should consider the research findings of this study when designing future gallery learning programs. Instagram offers educational benefits throughout the pre, during, and post stages of a gallery visit, it also suggests cross-curricular opportunities, such as English writing for example. It further frames future debate

within the arts education community over the usefulness of technologies like Instagram. With the continued growth of Instagram users, arts educators and researchers have a great opportunity to further uncover new knowledge and how it relates to practice within the gallery and learning environment.

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