Has social media changed the nature and dynamics of audience engagement within Midwest art museums?

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This thesis serves to explore the impact that social media has had on art museums within the Midwest. Through a comparison of how various art museums have made use of social media, I hope to outline the ways in which museum practices have been affected by the growing use of these technologies, for better or for worse. Specifically, I will consider the impact that social media has had on the ways in which visitors experience museum programs and exhibitions.

This thesis examines approximately 10 Midwest art museums with budgets of $10 million or more. These museums will have the resources and the capacity to engage in the usage of social media and social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, etc.

This thesis concludes that social media, indeed, has changed the dynamics of audience engagement throughout Midwestern art museums. Visitors now have the opportunity to connect with museums and artwork outside of the facilities themselves. Thus, museums have now become more accessible to their audiences.
Has social media changed the nature and dynamics of audience engagement within Midwest art museums?

This thesis intends to explore the impact that social media has had on art museums within the Midwest. Through a comparison of how various art museums have made use of social media, I hope to outline the ways in which museum practices have been affected by the growing use of these technologies, for better or for worse. Specifically, I will consider the impact that social media has had on the ways in which visitors experience museum programs and exhibitions. Thus, the overarching question that I look to answer is: Has social media changed the nature of audience engagement within art museums in the Midwest?

First and foremost, when discussing social media, it is important to give the term a definition. A broad categorization of social media would include sites that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration.¹ For instance, websites such as Facebook and Twitter would fall under this category. I felt that it was important to review the museums website and evaluate its online presence. To do so, I looked at each museum and what common social media sites they were currently using (See Appendix A). I considered the following sites to be common as they are popular and well known to

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the online community: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, having a blog, and
FourSquare.

Large, well-known art museums such as the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los
Angeles, California and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, New York are up-to-
date with current social media practices and trends. Both of these museums are
connected with what I have deemed to be the common social media sites. What is more,
these museums are also branching out into other social media sites and practices. For
instance, the Getty offers website visitors the opportunity to view an orientation video
that serves to acquaint them with the galleries and what they can expect to see when they
visit the museum. The Getty also has Whyville and ArtBabble pages.\(^2\) The MoMA has
numerous interactive videos on its website for visitors to view, e-cards of museum
artworks that can be sent to family and friends, as well as several mobile device
applications and an ArtBabble page.\(^3\)

Before beginning my research, it was important for me to establish a set of criteria
for the museums that I was examining. Since I live in the Midwest, I thought it would be
interesting to examine museums that I can easily gain access to. Compared to large,
popular museums such as the Getty and the MoMA, who are both well-known and it is
well-known that they are involved with current social media practices and trends, you do
not seem to here much about some of these Midwest art museums. So, I decided to
choose 10 of the art museums that are in the Midwest to examine. And to narrow my
search a bit further, I indicated that I wanted to look at museums with incomes of $10

\(^3\) Museum of Modern Art, “Online Communities,” last modified 2012,
million more (See Appendix B). With such large annual incomes, one would believe that these museums would have more resources to be up-to-date with current social media practices and trends.

The Columbus Museum of Art, located in Columbus, Ohio, is home to countless works of art. The museum draws in approximately 200,000 visitors each year. The mission of the museum is to “create great experiences with great art for everyone.”

The museum’s income was $12,148,648 this past year.

In addition to using the common social media sites, this past year, the Columbus Museum of Art has been trying to implement something new in conjunction with some of their new exhibitions – mobile applications. Available for iPhones, Droids, and Smartphones alike, these applications are intended to “whet [the] the appetites” of art-goers, allowing them to explore exhibitions on their handheld mobile devices. For a nominal fee of $1.99, audiences can purchase the application for the specific exhibition and gain access to exclusive material and gallery content.

For instance, the Columbus Museum of Art recently offered a mobile application for the Caravaggio exhibition that ran from October 24, 2011 to February 4, 2012 (See Figure 1). The application allowed viewers the opportunity to view an exclusive video that details the perspective of contemporary artists and critics on why Caravaggio is considered to be such an innovator in the art world (See Figure 2). Included is an artist biography and context explaining Caravaggio’s influences (See Figure 3). Furthermore,


all 11 images from the exhibition are included in the application, allowing the audience to experience the works anytime, anyplace.⁶

![Figure 1](image)

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Art critic Dave Hickey puts Caravaggio in context, and why the Italian master was such an innovator.
Figure 3
Even after the exhibition is over, the application is still available for purchase. So, those individuals who were unable to view the exhibition during its running time can still experience the works. This is something that is completely new to the way in which museums function. Visitors can gain access to the museum and the museum’s content anytime and anyplace.

To create and share this new mobile device application, the Columbus Museum of Art partnered with the multi-platform Toura. Museums such as the Getty, the Smithsonian Institution, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Andy Warhol Museum have also called on Toura to create applications available for users to purchase and download to further interact with museum exhibitions, collections, and content.

Toura’s mission is to enable content creators the ability to easily and efficiently reach their mobile audience. To accomplish their mission the company provides their clients with scalable, web-based solutions for creating mobile applications without any technical knowledge needed. So, for art museums wanting to try something new and experiment with mobile applications, Toura makes it easy to do.7

Located in Cleveland, Ohio, the Cleveland Museum of Art has a mission that involves reaching out to as many individuals as possible with the goal of generating understanding and art engagement, while honoring, at the same time, the “highest aesthetic, intellectual, and professional standards.”8 Like most museums in this study, the Cleveland Museum of Art offers an online tour of its collection. However, there are certain components of the online tour that set it apart from the other museums. Not only

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do viewers get to see the images and identification information of the works, but an audio discussion and description led by an expert is also provided.

More information provide by this means than just simply walking through the museum and looking at the artwork. Oftentimes, the item descriptions are overlooked or skimmed. And not everyone takes advantage of the audio tours or the curator-led tours that the museum provides. This is a whole new learning environment that the audience can engage in from the comforts of their own home.  

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is located in Kansas City, Missouri. The enjoyment and understanding of the visual arts are important to the museum. Thus, the museum stipulates that it is dedicated to being a visual partner to the educational and cultural life of the city. New Dimensions is a program offered by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The target audience of this program consists of students from grades 6 through 12. It is an innovative program, which emphasizes repeat museum visits with the belief that deeper and more meaningful connections with the artwork can be created in this way. Students enrolled in this museum program spend anywhere from 10 to 12 hours learning to look at, describe, and analyze the artworks that the museum has to offer. The conclusion of the program is marked by the creation of a multimedia project that compiles the student’s take-away thoughts and ideas. These projects are made by using

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traditional digital media as well as media and programs that are available on MacBook computers – iLife and iStopMotion.\textsuperscript{11}

By directly targeting students from grades 6 through 12, the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art is trying something new. Most other museums focus on targeting audiences that are already visitors. The New Dimensions program makes use of new technologies to interest students in the museum and its artwork. The goal is to generate enough interest so students will make valuable connections with the artwork that they see and will want to return to the museum.

Described to be a vibrant city, Omaha, Nebraska is home to over 800 thousand people as well as Nebraska’s largest art museum, the Joslyn Art Museum. Overall, the mission of the museum is to foster the enjoyment and appreciation of art for the residents and visitors of the city. This is accomplished by the museum through the collection, observation, and interpretation of works of fine art.\textsuperscript{12} For this past year, the income of the museum has exceeded $11.5 million.\textsuperscript{13}

Recently, the Joslyn Art Museum has partnered with SCVNGR, an interactive social media application that is available for mobile and smartphone devices. SCVNGR is described to be “a game about going places, doing challenges and earning points”.\textsuperscript{14} The application allows the user to more or less promote the various places that they visit. The places could range from clothing stores to restaurants, and of course, museums and art museums.


\textsuperscript{12} Joslyn Art Museum Omaha Nebraska, “About,” http://www.joslyn.org/about/.

\textsuperscript{13} “GuideStar nonprofit reports and Forms 990 for donors, grantmakers and businesses.”

\textsuperscript{14} SCVNGR, (2010), SCVNGR (Version 3.5.5) [Mobile application software], retrieved from http://itunes.apple.com.
When using SCVNGR, the first action the user takes is choosing their location (See Figure 4). Once a location is chosen, the challenges can begin. They can be as quick and easy as checking-in to the location and sharing their check-in on social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, or they could simply write something about the business to be seen on the SCVNGR page. Other challenges may consist of taking a photograph at the location, for instance the Joslyn Art Museum, and sharing on various social media sites – again Facebook or Twitter.
While challenges such as those are simple, others move the user to partake in activities beyond simply touching a few buttons on their mobile smartphone devices. These challenges vary depending upon the users’ location and the events that may be going on at the time – museum exhibitions, for instance. Once these challenges are completed, the user can earn points. The points allow for the user to unlock rewards at the place of business. The rewards can range from free times to discounted services (See Figure 5). Badges can also be earned through points.

Figure 5
Within the Joslyn Art Museum’s SCVNGR profile, individuals are encouraged to check-in to the museum’s different galleries. Some of the challenges that take place involve looking for various artworks with the galleries. Overall, SCVNGR serves as an interactive way for visitors to get involved with the museum and viewing its artwork. Overall, SCVNGR is a mobile application that provides incentives for sharing information about the museum and viewing artworks. It serves as an interactive way for visitors to get involved with the museum and its artwork unlike never before.\(^\text{15}\)

Located in Indianapolis, Indiana – the thirteenth largest city in the United States, with a population of over 800 thousand residents\(^\text{16}\) – the Indianapolis Museum of Art is deemed to be one of the oldest general art museums in the nation, as well as the largest, with over 150 acres of grounds and gardens and more than 50 thousand works that cover a vast span of eras and cultures.\(^\text{17}\) In addition to what is considered to be the common social media sites, the Indianapolis Art Museum makes use of several different alternative social media platforms and technologies, including those used by the Getty and the MoMA.\(^\text{18}\)

One such site is ArtBabble. ArtBabble is a social media site for sharing videos and generating discussion about artworks and art topics. Depending on the videos that the museum chooses to upload, the site may allow viewers to watch videos of artist performances and lectures that they might not get to see otherwise. Viewers can also


gain access to interviews with artists about their artwork and practices that can allow for a sense of insight to be gained.

For instance, one of the available videos on the Indianapolis Art Museum’s ArtBabble page provides as discussion with US Gymnast and Athletic Coordinator, Dave Durante, who performed the artists’ Allora and Calzadilla’s work “Body in Flight.” This work was featured at the US Pavilion in the Venice Biennale, thus many viewers may have not had the opportunity to see the performance as it took place, or they may not understand its significance. This video can facilitate more of an understanding of the work for the audience as well as an understanding of the exhibition itself.

On ArtBabble, the Indianapolis Museum of Art has numerous channels that can link the viewer to similar or related videos based on the keyword of interest that was chosen. This site functions as a way to learn more about artists, their artwork, and various exhibitions that simply cannot be done by walking through a museum and just looking at the artwork on the walls.19

Another social media outlet that the Indianapolis Museum of Art is using is First Impressions. First Impressions is a new online social tagging experiment that allows the viewer to evaluate how they view an artwork. It also allows they viewer to compare their experiences with a work of art to those of others who take part in the experiment as well.

When the viewer begins First Impressions, they are asked to look at a series of artworks and “click” on the first features that catch their eye. The areas that are clicked are noted, and at the end of the series, the viewers are shown the various areas that they indicated on the artwork with their “clicks.” Also, the viewers are shown where others

have clicked after viewing the image series. The colored areas on the image indicate the various “clicks.” The viewers “clicks” are highlighted in green, red identifies the most popular “clicks”, and blue indicates other “clicks” (See Figure 6).
Every-so-often, the museum will compile a new series of images – that relate to the museum’s happenings or what is going on in the community – for First Impressions. The new images will be announced on the museum’s blog, and clicking will last approximately a week. Afterwards, participants and other viewers will be able to see the areas of the works that caught their eye.

The First Impressions experiment functions as a way to share one’s perceptions of a work of art with others. Some may argue that this could be done while walking in a gallery – you look at a piece of art and simply comment on it. Well, with First impressions, you are sharing what you notice about the work with a vast number of others. The reach is simply much more expansive, and more connections are generated.20

Located in Detroit, Michigan, the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum has been around for well over a century. The mission of the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum is to assist each visitor in finding their own personal meaning in the artwork that they see throughout the museum. The collection of artwork at the museum, which comprises a “multicultural and multinational survey of human creativity from prehistory through the 21st century” and can be found in more than 100 galleries, is among the top six in the country.21 Last year, the museum’s income exceeded $32 million.22

Similar to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Getty, and the MoMA, the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum also implements the use of an ArtBabble page. On the museum’s page, visitors can watch videos that discuss some of the works of art that can

22 “GuideStar nonprofit reports and Forms 990 for donors, grantmakers and businesses.”
be seen within the museum’s walls. There are videos of the museum director who presents and discusses his favorite artworks. Also, behind-the-scenes videos of the museum are available for site visitors to watch. The content that is offered on the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum’s ArtBabble page provides more explanation than what one would simply experience just walking through a gallery space and reading the basic information that is given about an artwork. They are provided with an explanation as to why a particular artwork made into the museum and why it should be thought of as important. Furthermore, viewers now can get a behind-the-scenes look at the museum – something that has not previously been available.23

Founded in 1883, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts has strived to “inspire wonder through the power of art.” The mission of the institute is to collect, preserve, and generate accessibility of works of art, and by doing so, enrich the community of Minneapolis.24 The Minneapolis Institute of Arts has implemented several social media components to change and enhance visitor experiences. The Artist’s Toolkit functions as an educational tool to allow online visitors to explore the various elements and techniques artists use to create works of art. The concepts of line, color, and balance are examined, and elements are defined to enhance understanding.25

Unlike some of the other Museums in this study, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Toledo Museum of Art, and the Speed Art Museum do not offer unique experiences in conjunction with social media and technology uses. They make use of the standard social

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media and networking websites, but nothing more, and certainly not within the museum itself. Why are these museums not jumping on the bandwagon of reshaping audience engagement? Why is it that some museums only stick to using the “traditional” modes of social media that are available – Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, etc.?

Most likely, it is not an issue of funding. All of the museums observed have incomes upwards of $10 million.\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps their attendance rates have not suffered over the years, and thus they do not see a need for using and experimenting with new social media practices and trends to bring in new audiences and generate new experiences. All of these are probable reason as to why the dynamics of these museums have not changed with new and improved social media practices.

After examining my research, I had to ask the question, once again: Has social media changed the nature of audience engagement within Midwest art museums? And to that, I would have to answer that it does. Yes, social media it is changing the ways in which audiences are engaging with museums and their artwork. Seven out of the ten art museums that I looked at made efforts to go beyond using the common social media sites.

Like the Getty and the MoMA, both the Indianapolis Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum have implemented the use of an ArtBabble page. The Indianapolis Museum of Art is also experimenting with First Impressions. While the Columbus Museum of Art and the Joslyn Art Museum are trying out using mobile applications in conjunction with their exhibitions and the museum itself, the Cleveland Museum of Art is offering an extensive online tour of its collection that gives detailed descriptions of the work of art and its cultural context. Meanwhile, the Nelson-Atkins

\textsuperscript{26} “GuideStar nonprofit reports and Forms 990 for donors, grantmakers and businesses.”
Museum of Art is experimenting with the student program, New Dimensions, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts offers the Artist’s Toolkit. These 7 museums are experimenting with new sites and technologies, and more and more visitors are getting involved. It is evident that these new social media outlets are changing the ways in which the art museum audiences view the artwork.
# Appendix A

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### Appendix B

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http://www.artbabble.org/partner/indianapolis-museum-art.


http://www.clevelandart.org/about.aspx.


http://www.columbusmuseum.org/about-cma/.


