

MOBILE LEARNING AND ART MUSEUMS: A CASE STUDY OF A NEW ART INTERPRETATION APPROACH FOR VISITOR ENGAGEMENT THROUGH MOBILE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays Mobile technologies in Museums and especially in Art Museums are a popular way of communication with their audiences. These kinds of technologies have a high communicative potential and also could be a tool for marketing, information, engagement and learning as well. However with regards how these resources explain the meaning of works of art, generally they maintain the same language of the traditional and passive resources like texts, labels or brochures, especially when the involved audience is general public. This means that Art interpretation is still based on formal description. On the contrary, Mobile Media provide new opportunities of interaction with audiences; the visitors could visit a Museum from their couch; or even they could create content about a painting through their mobile devices. Therefore, if the media of communication with the audiences of Art Museums are changing, there must be a change of how art is explained.

Accordingly, this paper examines a case study developed in a wider research about Art interpretation and Mobile Media in which a new message to explain Art is explored. This new Art interpretation approach combines the contributions of Cognitive Psychology about Art perception and the possibilities of interaction of Mobile and digital technologies. The case study has been conducted in a local museum whose collection consists mostly of sculptures and paintings from the Nineteenth and the Twenty centuries, especially Catalan Art from this period. A blog called "A small exhibition of Deu Museum", tablets and QR codes were used for the development of the fieldwork. However, according to the conceptual framework of the research, the most important thing is the content that is behind the QR codes. Also the preliminary results are exposed in this paper.

KEYWORDS

Art Museums, Interpretation, Cognitive Psychology, General Public, Mobile learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Art museums represent traditionally the category less permeable to the introduction of museological innovations. Across the second half of the Twentieth century, museums of science or history changed the way they presented their content by creating interactive learning resources to decode the meaning of their collections to visitors. However, still in the early decades of the century, Art museums museology continues to develop largely an academic museology where the most important element is still the work of art and its contemplation. The curators of Art museums have rejected interactive resources in the exhibition, especially in the Mediterranean context due to the museology conception and its purposes (Gomez Martínez, 2006). This strong rejection in introducing interactive museology was justified with statements that Art museums could become an amusement place and that the existence of an interactive resource was an obstacle to contemplation of art (Prats, 2004). These reasons are the result of the traditional conception of Art museums as a "temple" unwavering and the work of art as an object almost sacred. In any case, Art museums only have introduced some innovations in two fields, namely the development of interesting educational programs addressed to specific minority audiences and the introduction of portable electronic devices such as the audio guides. In short, they are resources or activities supporting passive experience of the visit, nothing related to interactive and collaborative strategies.

However, the high degree of market penetration of Mobile technologies like Smartphones and Tablets, as well as the development of collaborative strategies due to the Web 2.0 and other digital resources provide Art museums a new way of intermediation to develop engagement elements through these channels and then bring their content in a perspective alternative to the passive contemplation of the work (Parry, 2010). Shortly, this technological development opens the doors to create a new form of communication between Museums and its visitors. In fact, the new resources that can be developed by these technologies do not create a physical barrier between the art work and the viewer. They can be used within museums but in a more subtle mode. Also these resources allow connecting with new audiences, such as young or adult Smartphone users. These kinds of audiences consider these means a closer form of dialogue with "the great temple of the Muses" as always Art museums were considered. This aspect does not prevent Art museums from continuing to develop an academic museology within their rooms, on the contrary it takes benefits from the opportunities offered by mobile technology resources to start talking through the same Media of the users who visit their rooms, access their web page or downloaded the application.

Also, it is remarkable that the most downloaded App of museums in 2011 was the Louvre Museum¹ and the first application for Smartphone launched was the Brooklyn Museum of Art in the U.S and in Europe the Vatican Museums, both dedicated to art². Last year the sixty per cent of the 10 most downloaded applications corresponded to museums and cultural heritage and museums art, mostly of them were Apps of Art museums³. Furthermore, the development of different resources based on Mobile Media for Art museums is in continuous progress, the presence of Art Museums in Social Media such as facebook or twitter is increasing; very often Art Museum develops Mobile Application; or they develop innovative projects as the last editions of the project *Veo arte por todas partes* called #Tagging Museums⁴.

2. CASE STUDY

2.1 The Theoretical Framework of the Case Study

Even the innovations on the use of technological resources for Art Museums and the opportunities of these media for speaking to new audiences or new ones, the "languages" used to engage audiences is not different to the language of the traditional labels or the exhibitions texts⁵. The passive resources deployed in Art exhibitions are characterized by an academic language based on the formal description of the works of art, written from the perspective of the curator, art historian or art expert. Consequently this language is not close to the knowledge about art of general public in Art Museums.

For that reason, this approach proposes to explore a new strategy for Art interpretation based on the distinguished Art feature, emotions that it provokes when is looked at. This aspect is which differ Art of others disciplines like History or Sciences. One of the most common reactions in front of a painting of any kind of person, especially, not art experts is to express whether it is liked or not. Accordingly, why do not engage visitors in Art Museums using resources based on emotional mechanisms of art perception?

Traditionally, there has been a lack of interest for the emotional aspects that art provokes on the viewer from the perspective of Art History and also from the perspective of Art Education in Museums. However, Cognitive Psychology from the sixties of the twenty century started to build a theory about Art perception in which emotions have an important role. The contributions of authors as Gombrich (1950, 1960), Goodman (1968), Gardner (1982, 1990) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) have been the base for the theory of Art perception, even now, is in an early stage of development. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this case study have been elaborated by the theories of these authors and others about Art perception, as well as the more recent investigations about Mobile learning as learning theory implemented in informal educational contexts (Sharples, Taylor, & Vavoula, 2010), (Kress & Pachler, 2007), (Traxler, 2009), to deploy and evaluate an alternative way for Art interpretation in museums using Mobile Media.

¹ <http://www.applicious.com/education/apps/102549-musee-du-louvre-musee-du-louvre> (Accessed December 2013)

² <http://mediamusea.com/2012/01/25/primeras-apps-museos/> (Accessed December 2013)

³ <http://www.brighthub.com/mobile/iphone/articles/117634.aspx> (Accessed December 2013)

⁴ <http://www.veo-arte.com/> (Accessed November 2013)

⁵ In the research which this Case Study comes from, an analysis of more than fifty Art Museum Mobile App has been developed. It demonstrates the language and resources of these media maintain an academic description of the art whose purpose is just to give information about the collection, the museum or the cultural events of the institution.

2.2 Museum Setting: Museu Deu

The research project was carried out in *Museu Deu* located at El Vendrell (Tarragona). The institution is a public museum but the collection comes from a private collector of the town who donated his collection to the local government in 1987. The museum was inaugurated in 1995 in a historical house called “Palau Rabassó”. The art collection of the museum is composed mostly by sculptures and paintings from the nineteenth and twenty centuries, especially Catalan painting from the second half of the Nineteenth century until the early avant-gardes. The exhibition starts on the second floor, the collection of paintings is displayed in chronological order. The most representative painters of the whole exhibition are Joaquim Mir, Ramon Casas and Ramon Sunyer belonging to Spanish Modernism and also Josep Mompou and Ramón Calsina, representatives from the Catalan avant-gardes (Payan, 2008).

This Museum shares the features of local museums in Spain. This means lack of departmental structure, small staff, low budgets and heterogeneity of a discrete number of users. In the case of *Museu Deu*, it has three permanent staff workers covering the administrative, educational and cultural activities, design and installation of exhibitions and administrative management. This museum offers stably educational activities especially aimed at school groups, temporal exhibitions and a small dynamic center of cultural activities for the city. Related to the number of visitors, the Museum registers around 10.000 visitors per year. The most part of the visitor are school students and tourists, especially elderly people.

2.3 Development of the Case Study

The activity developed for the research, titled “*Visit Deu Museum with Mobile Media*”, is based on the use of Mobile devices such as Smartphones and Tablets, as well as digital resources: QR codes and a blog called “*A small exhibition of Deu Museum*”⁶. In the exhibition rooms the twelve paintings selected have two QR codes, a black code and a red one. The content of each code forwards the interpretation of the paintings located on the blog. The black codes hold the academic interpretation of the work of art while the red codes hold an alternative interpretation of the art based on the emotional mechanisms of art perception. The visitors are able to use the Tablets of the Museum or their personal Smartphones with QR code App. Each visitor should use only one of the colours of the codes during the visit because the aim of the research is to evaluate the visit experience depending on the type of code used during the visit.

As it has been mentioned above the majority of the visitors of *Museu Deu* belongs to school students and groups of elderly people, however the target public of the research is general public. Consequently, it has been necessary to select control groups belonging to general public. For that, two collectives of visitors were used, one of them; adult members of social and cultural associations of El Vendrell and the other one; undergraduate students from the School of Education of the University of Barcelona. Therefore, before the visit, the activity and how tablets and QR codes App is used within the Museum are explained. During the visit, there was a person to resolve any kind of technical problems or doubts. Finally, after the visit the users have to fill an on-line survey as a method to evaluate the satisfaction of the visit experience. Also, to conclude the visit the users have been asked about their feedback of the activity. Since the level of the comments provided by the users was very informal, the feedback was not included as a research tool of the study. However, it was very helpful to collect the users’ comments for understanding the benefits and disadvantages of the project.

2.4 Discussion

The visitor satisfaction survey has been structured in four sections according to the variables considered for the research: knowledge about art, level of use of Mobile devices, visit experience and sociological profile. The results of the survey have been quantified and statistics techniques have been applied to analysis the results of the survey. Due to the characteristics of the study, the most appropriated statistics technique is the analysis of variance, (ANOVA) to analyze the differences between groups.

⁶ The URL of the blog is: <http://museudeu.blogspot.com/es/> (Accessed December 2013)

The preliminary results show that the level of satisfaction is higher when the knowledge about art and the level of use of Mobile devices is higher, whereas the satisfaction lowers when the knowledge about art or the level of use of Mobile devices is poorer. However, according to the purposes of the research the most important aspect is that regardless of the knowledge about art or the level of use of Mobile devices the level of users' satisfaction is higher when they carry out the activity using the red QR codes, which contains the alternative interpretation of the art based on the emotional mechanisms of art perception. Therefore, the preliminary outcomes of the research demonstrate that the use of emotions for art interpretation produce a higher level of engagement among general public in this case study.

Consequently, although the technological development of the research is not highly innovative according to the current possibilities of digital and Mobile Media in Museums, the most important contribution of this study is the use of Mobile Media for a new approach for Art interpretation strategies in Museums and its impact on visitor engagement. In that sense, this approach uses the digital and Mobile Media as a means and not as an end, but taking benefit of the positive aspects of these Media.

3. CONCLUSION

The preliminary results of the case study show some important advantages of this approach about Art interpretation. Firstly, according to the outcomes the most important aspect for engagement in museums is the message, more than the media because with the same media the visitor satisfaction is higher using the alternative way for art interpretation. Secondly, after the development of the case study, we assert that the use of Mobile media provides irreplaceable tools to explore deeper the engagement possibilities of this kind of Art interpretation resources. Finally, this case study demonstrates the high possibilities of the Art interpretation based on the emotions that it can provoke for visitor engagement.

Obviously during the development of the case study we could observe some limitations of the activity related mostly to the technical issues such as the difficulties of use of the tablets for some kind of visitors or connectivity problems. Also, another limitation is the language, the activity has been design just in Catalan, although the data collect has finished, the activity will be translate to Spanish and English in the next months.

To conclude, although the limitations mentioned, we consider that this case study could open de door to a new way of Art interpretation in Museums addressed not only to the art experts, but a wider public, using a new message and also a new media, the mobile media, which is already the current and future media of communication and even the media of learning.

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