

#MUSEUMTOK

HOW TIKTOK AND PLACEMAKING ARE CHANGING THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

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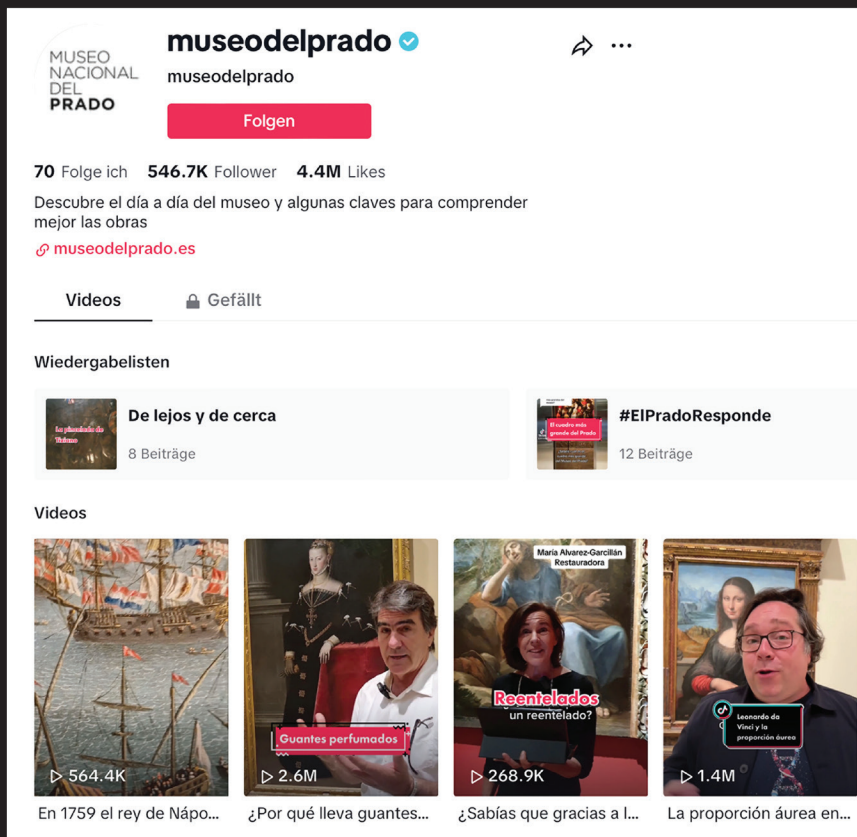


Fig. 1.

The Museo del Prado's TikTok profile page, as it appeared on July 23, 2023.

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The Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid boasts around 545,000 followers on TikTok. This number points to the museum's successful engagement strategies on the popular social media platform. While Javier Sainz de los Terreros, the Prado's digital communication manager, acknowledges the platform's management challenges, he emphasizes that its potential for virality and ability to reach audiences beyond the museum's usual demographic, including many followers in Latin America, far outweigh these issues. The Prado's TikTok strategy aims to democratize art appreciation by using its platform to give voice to a diverse range of perspectives, not just those of art "experts" (fig. 1). Sainz de los Terreros highlights the value of social media as a listening tool, providing the museum with instant feedback that it can use to guide its future initiatives. He states that TikTok's algorithm is unique in the way it shares content with unexpected audiences, some of whom may then enthusiastically engage with content they wouldn't have otherwise encountered.¹

During the 20th century, it was the new mediums of cinema and television that brought attention to museums and helped spark conversations among generations. Popular films and TV shows were effective not only in shaping the public's understanding of exhibitions and viewers' attitudes toward museums but also in introducing new and younger audiences to museums in the first place. And while cinema and TV are still relevant, it is social media that has emerged in the past decade as the new platform driving engagement: individuals can learn about museums on

social and, in turn, museums can engage new audiences, share their collections and exhibitions, and make themselves relevant to younger generations. Furthermore, social media platforms encourage younger generations to adopt an assertive role in shaping museums' relevance and offerings. These apps enable instantaneous worldwide critique and dialogue and are characterized by personal content creation and direct engagement – with one's peers and with institutions.

As the example from the Prado demonstrates, TikTok has the potential to be a powerful facilitator at the intersection of social media, cultural institutions, and communal belonging, enabling younger generations to recast their museum experience from one of passive consumption to one of active creation and generation. If museums can successfully harness TikTok and digital placemaking – a collaborative social design process that fosters community appropriation and shapes meaningful public spaces – they will finally be able to move beyond marketing and turn social media into a tool for global community engagement.

While providing some insights into TikTok's cultural impact on museums, this essay proposes a pragmatic approach to addressing the challenges and opportunities inherent in adopting this new and unpredictable platform. We'll begin with a discussion of digital placemaking and then critically examine museums' strategic use of TikTok to attract new audiences, foster excitement, and offer new ways to engage with collections and ideas.

#PLACEMAKING

Digital placemaking – a concept that investigates the use of digital media to cultivate a sense of place by encouraging community engagement and shaping public spaces into meaningful environments – has gained relevance in recent years thanks to the accelerating convergence of our digital and physical environments. Digital placemaking underscores how online practices facilitate the formation of connections and identity expression. A special issue of the journal *Convergence* notably explored this topic, emphasizing the role of digital media technologies in creating a unique sense of place within rapidly evolving urban landscapes.² The COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly transformed habitation and work patterns, underscored the importance of digital placemaking, as our reliance on digital technologies for everything from communication to personal mobility to connection increased.

Recent literature supports that placemaking can occur without formal planning and is not exclusively dependent on official authority.³ Such findings suggest that museums should acknowledge that placemaking requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach that navigates among various contexts, stakeholders, and objectives. Emphasizing this approach’s participatory and collaborative nature aligns with philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s focus on the collective social process of creating and appropriating space, hereafter referred to as collective placemaking.⁴ As younger generations increasingly engage with museums – and their collections, exhibitions, and programs – through social media, practical considerations emerge, namely: How can museums adapt to these innovative

methods to help maintain or increase their relevance, promote inclusivity, and navigate the evolving landscape of collaborative social interaction online?

The museum’s role in placemaking, both online and off, is one of moderation. Museums must mediate discrepancies between user groups’ differing conceptions of the museum space and its collections and programs, including those based on social, ethnic, age, economic, and other demographic categories. As one group of researchers pointedly describe the placemaking process:

The planning and realisation processes will be accompanied and moderated by the project team. Cultural backgrounds and different accesses to power, knowledge and capital can limit the possibilities of different stakeholders. Moderation is necessary to mediate in this situation, to arbitrate in conflicts between different “conceptions of place” of different user groups (e.g., ethnic or social groups) and to promote a collective place-making that brings the different interests together.⁵

By facilitating and moderating collective placemaking processes online, museums can unite these diverse interests and perspectives within their overarching frameworks, enhancing their significance as cultural institutions and becoming more welcoming places to and for many communities. While this is theoretically plausible and possible, the messy everyday practice of social media, specifically TikTok, presents challenges to museums as they take on the role of moderation to foster collective placemaking in the digital realm.

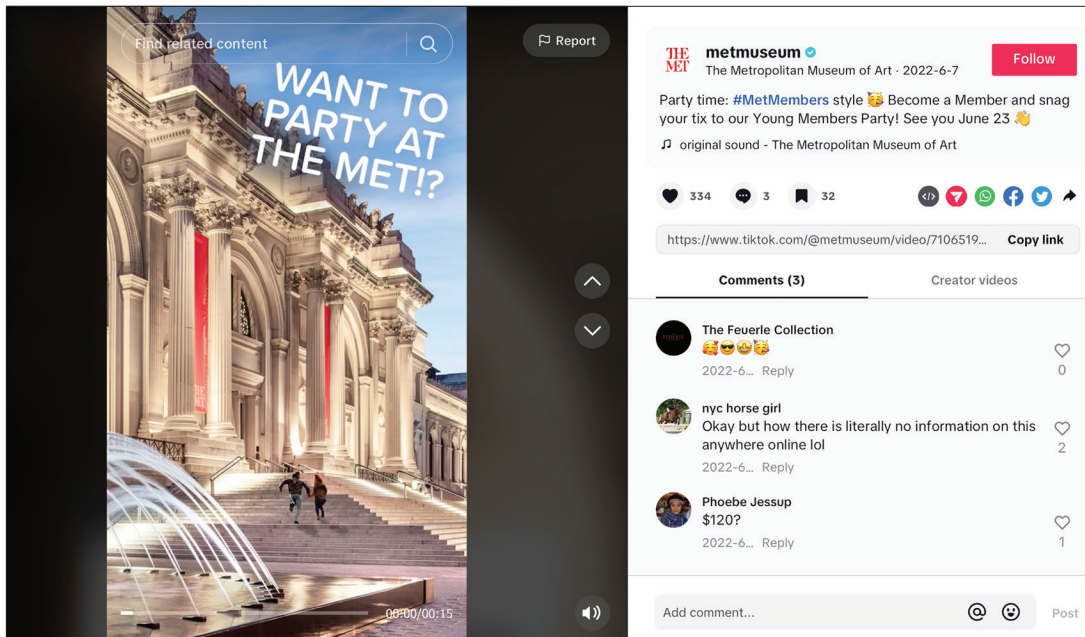


Fig. 2.

A post from the Metropolitan Museum of Art promoting a party shows limited engagement and negative comments from the community.

#LEARNONTIKTOK: CONNECTING CONTENT, COLLECTIONS, AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH UGC

Since its launch in September 2016, TikTok has quickly become one of the most popular social media apps, with over one billion users worldwide. Its algorithm-based feed and short-form videos have become increasingly influential: viral videos and trending challenges now have the power to shape everything from entertainment to education. Although museums and cultural institutions use TikTok for various purposes, including education, marketing, and entertainment, many have been slow to adopt the platform: only 21 out of the 100 most-visited art museums worldwide use it, and just six have more than 100,000 followers.⁶ These museums primarily use the platform for expository and didactic teaching practices or performative and entertainment practices, including collaborations with youth.⁷ But by far the biggest reason most museums use TikTok is marketing.

TikTok actively collaborates with and promotes its partnerships with cultural institutions through various initiatives, as highlighted by press releases on its news site.⁸ For example, in 2019, the Metropolitan

Museum of Art (the Met) and TikTok collaborated to launch several global challenges, including #SaluteToClassics and #MetGalaStyle, which spotlighted the Costume Institute exhibition *Camp: Notes on Fashion*; in Europe, museums including Florence’s Uffizi Gallery have opened their doors to the online community for virtual visits and live streams; and, in 2021, under the hashtag #MuseumMoment, TikTok hosted a global live museum marathon featuring exclusive virtual tours from 23 cultural institutions worldwide.⁹ These initiatives and collaborations made the museums’ collections and exhibitions accessible to a broader audience, while demonstrating the platform’s ability to promote and share immersive digital cultural experiences with a global audience (fig. 2).

Research suggests that the platform and its collaborating museums were successful in their efforts to promote cultural events and activities. The 2022 Ipsos survey, “Unlocking Culture in Europe: An Assessment of TikTok’s Cultural Impact in the EU,” draws on the responses of 8,000 users, and provides valuable data and insights:

- Three out of 10 respondents said they have learned about cultural events through the app; and

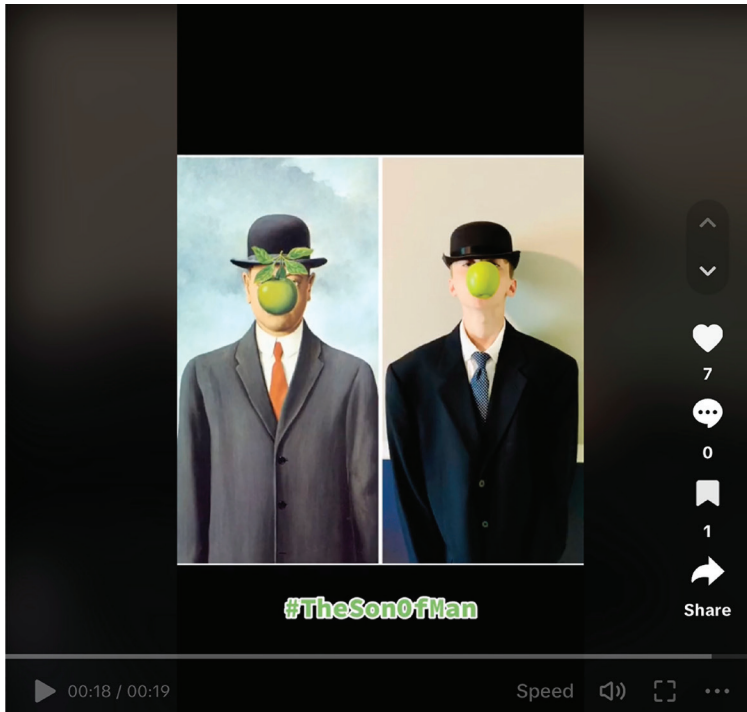


Fig. 3.

@twinzmmom's reimagining of René Magritte's *Le fils de l'homme* (*Son of Man*) as part of the #gettymuseumchallenge reveals the potential in UGC.

- Fifty-nine percent of respondents agreed that, “TikTok allows me to experience things I cannot experience live.”¹⁰

The report also highlights TikTok’s importance as a space where users can discover new forms of cultural expression, such as humor, food, music, dance, and art and engage with diverse communities. From a marketing perspective, the potential for free advertising when a video goes viral is huge. By leveraging its massive platform, TikTok can provide museums with access to a broader audience, while immersive online experiences and initiatives, like the #MuseumMoment Live Museum Marathon, demonstrate how technology can help promote and share cultural experiences at a global scale.¹¹

However, focusing only on marketing-driven factors is counterproductive from a placemaking and community-building perspective. Museums should refrain from replicating a top-down marketing approach in their social media strategy. Instead, the potential of user-generated content (UGC), which emerges from a bottom-up approach and fosters collective placemaking through

the participation of diverse individuals and communities in meaning-making, should be emphasized.¹² Museums could seek out and encourage UGC by inviting creators in and incorporating their content into institutional social media strategies. Such an approach would entail opening up space for community-led initiatives and learning to moderate the process. By giving members of the public a voice and incorporating their perspectives and experiences into the institutional narrative, museums can allow for collective placemaking and, in the process, create a more inclusive and diverse representation of their collections and exhibitions and foster a sense of ownership and investment in the museum among their audiences. For example, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, recently introduced the first TikTok creator-in-residence program in the U.S.¹³ Innovative strategies such as this, including implementing temporary residencies for influencers, could potentially achieve a balance between effective community moderation and the genuine inclusion of community perspectives, allowing for the cultivation of a true sense of community.

#CHALLENGE: RECREATING A PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCE WHILE MANAGING RISKS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

One of TikTok’s most successful features, its For You Page (#FYP), offers users a personalized content feed tailored to their interests. Like #FYP, museums must balance catering to diverse communities, addressing their specific interests, and allowing the public a lived space that contains elements of surprise and wonder and is open to multiple interpretations.¹⁴ Using #FYP as a

metaphor for museums' attempts to tailor their digital offerings to specific groups or demographics while incorporating UGC makes the opportunities and challenges clear. To ensure alignment with their values and standards, museums must moderate and curate UGC, which may require investing additional resources in active management and promotion. This part of the work is what the Prado's Sainz de los Terreros calls "tricky" and "not easy to manage." And so, the question arises: How should museums begin addressing their communities and visitors, allowing them a #FYP museum experience?

TikTok #Challenges may present one possible answer. Marked by designated hashtags, challenges are user-generated trends involving tasks or activities that encourage widespread participation and content creation. As one example, during the pandemic, the J. Paul Getty Museum launched #gettymuseumchallenge. Inspired by a previous campaign at the Rijksmuseum, the challenge invited participants to recreate a piece of art from the museum's collection using only items readily available in their home (fig. 3).¹⁵

The hashtag #museumdate, with over 190 million views, is not a challenge but a popular trend. It features videos of creators on their romantic dates in museums. The popularity of the hashtag is a reminder of how simple it can be to create a sense of connection and shared experience among individuals from vastly different backgrounds and locations (fig. 4). These challenges and activities hold global cultural significance because they generate worldwide engagement, influence popular culture, and facilitate educational and awareness initiatives. Research suggests that Gen Z is

highly motivated to participate in TikTok #Challenges, indicating that this might be one avenue for museums to explore in order to foster engagement within their physical spaces and beyond.¹⁶

However, such interactions require careful planning and need to take into consideration exhibition design, privacy, consent, and cultural sensitivity. For example, singing and dancing, essential practices on TikTok, are often perceived as illicit acts within museums, with users singing or dancing quickly before museum guards intervene.¹⁷

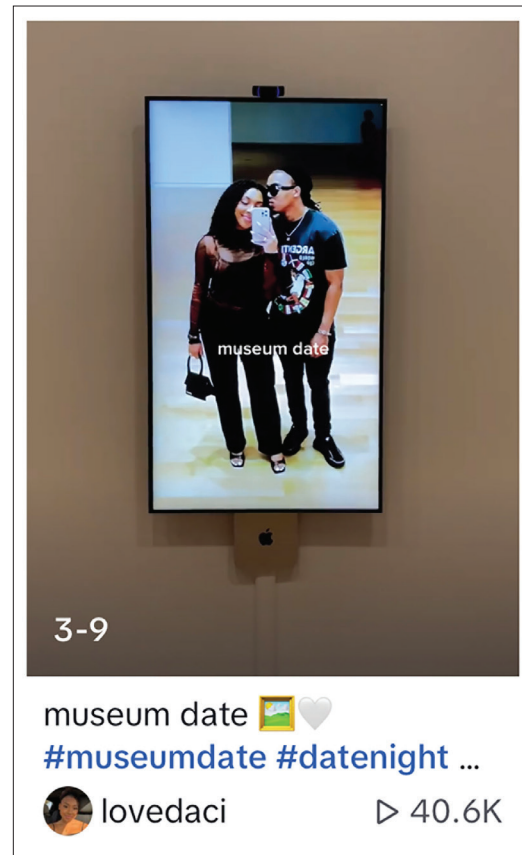


Fig. 4.

Screenshot from a #museumdate video by @lovedaci, "my favorite type of date??" posted August 16, 2022.

Fig. 5.

The Uffizi uses humorous filters and other strategies to increase its relevance on the platform.



As a case in point, Irish musician Cian Ducrot recently staged an unsanctioned flash-mob performance in the National Gallery in London. This impromptu performance sparked fun and unscripted interactions among Ducrot, the overwhelmed security personnel, and visitors, and left public opinion divided.¹⁸ The video went viral, however, underscoring social media’s power in catalyzing surprising interactive public events. In other cases, TikTok can spread problematic behaviors, such as destructive climate protests within museums, a viral trend of the past year.¹⁹ To meet these challenges, museums must generate an understanding of social media contexts and visitor behavior while designing effective installations that foster social interaction, promote diversity, and account for the needs of different communities, online and off.

The Uffizi is one example of a museum that has successfully adapted its traditionally serious profile for the social media world.

The gallery has attracted millions of views by using TikTok to present its collection engagingly and entertainingly, inviting TikTok influencers like the queer @sasycacciatore to present tours, and by using funny effects and filters on the historic works in its collection (fig. 5).²⁰ In this evolving context, it is unsurprising that the most famous New York City “museum” on TikTok is the Museum of Ice Cream, an interactive immersive experience and selfie destination that has amassed over 942 million hashtag views in the past 12 months.²¹ These instances underscore the potential of innovative approaches and interactive installations in fostering dialogue, promoting diversity, and engaging diverse online and offline communities.

And yet, while TikTok has the potential to help museums promote their events and activities and reach a more diverse audience beyond their local communities, it also poses risks, including legal issues with regard to content ownership, hostile comments or reviews, and the need for moderation and management of UGC. Museums must also consider recent efforts to ban TikTok over national security concerns, with the issue being intensely debated in the United States at both the state and national levels. Governments have expressed apprehension about the app’s Chinese parent company, ByteDance, potentially being compelled to surrender user data to the Chinese government or being influenced to manipulate content in line with China’s interests.²² This concern has led to the introduction of bills in Congress that would grant the president greater authority to ban TikTok and apps like it in the future.²³ Furthermore, a poll by the *Washington Post* found that 41 percent of Americans support a federal ban on TikTok, with 71 percent expressing concern about

Fig. 6.

SWOT analysis of museums' TikTok usage.

| STRENGTHS | WEAKNESSES |
|---|---|
| <p>High Engagement TikTok encourages user interaction.</p> | <p>Content Creation Creating engaging and relevant content that fits TikTok's unique format can be challenging.</p> |
| <p>Access to Younger Demographics</p> | <p>Time Investment Managing a TikTok account and creating content requires a significant time investment.</p> |
| <p>Viral Potential TikTok's algorithm can help content go viral with few followers.</p> | <p>Understanding the Algorithm TikTok's algorithm is opaque, changes regularly, and hence is difficult to leverage effectively.</p> |
| <p>Trend Participation TikTok trends can increase visibility and engagement.</p> | <p>Brand Safety There can be concerns about the type of content alongside which the museum's posts may appear.</p> |
| | <p>Legal and Regulatory Challenges Ongoing legal and regulatory challenges in the U.S. can create an environment of uncertainty.</p> |
| OPPORTUNITIES | THREATS |
| <p>Community-Building TikTok can be used to build and engage with various communities.</p> | <p>Online Cancel Culture Negative public sentiment can spread quickly on TikTok, potentially leading to a PR crisis.</p> |
| <p>Educational Content Museums can use TikTok to educate users about their collections.</p> | <p>Trolls Trolls can create a hostile environment and harm a museum's reputation.</p> |
| <p>Partnerships with Influencers Museums can partner with influencers or other institutions to increase their reach and credibility on TikTok.</p> | <p>Conflicting Community Interests Balancing the interests of different community groups can be challenging.</p> |
| <p>Promotion of Events and Exhibitions TikTok can be used to promote events and exhibitions.</p> | <p>Data Privacy Concerns Misuse of user data can lead to potential legal issues.</p> |
| <p>Global Reach and Visibility</p> | <p>Fast-Paced Platform The fast-paced nature of TikTok means content can be easily missed.</p> |
| <p>Virtual Tours and Real-Time Exchange</p> | <p>Risk of Alienating Core Audience The content style and user demographics of TikTok may not resonate with other audiences.</p> |

TikTok's Chinese origins.²⁴ For museums that receive state funding, a nationwide TikTok ban could have significant implications, necessitating a shift in social media strategy and building capacity on another platform popular with younger generations.

CONCLUSION

TikTok presents opportunities and challenges for museums seeking to promote their collections and exhibitions, engage with new audiences, and foster a sense of community and place (fig. 6, p. 115).

The platform's potential for education and learning and its capacity to showcase diverse perspectives and experiences allow museums to innovatively connect with younger audiences and foster a deeper appreciation for culture. However, as a new form of cultural expression, social media also challenges museums to learn to navigate and leverage UGC while maintaining their institutional values and encouraging visitor contributions to the ongoing narrative. Ultimately, museums' success in creating a sense of community and connection with visitors and followers calls for them to adapt and evolve, embracing collaborative and participatory strategies, which many museums have already laid out in their day-to-day activities but have not yet integrated into their online presence.²⁵ Seeing how TikTok and other social media platforms continue to shape the museum experience will be interesting as we move forward. Will these platforms become integral to museums, or will they remain supplementary promotion? ■

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