

New technology does not always enhance the gallery visitor experience

Home > Insights into arts and culture > Live and digital engagement in arts and culture

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Summary

This paper looks at the way in which galleries and museums have deployed technology in their exhibitions to support the aesthetic and educational experience of the public. The research specifically examined the use of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) at a contemporary art gallery and touch-screen kiosks in a decorative arts museum. The authors identify a 'fragile relationship' between exhibits and the interactive technologies and suggest that new technology be used to stimulate and facilitate interaction and a shared experience, rather than an isolated encounter with an object.

A PDA contains a small screen which can deliver a variety of content and audio through headphones attached to the device

The research is based on observations of 20 visitors to the gallery using PDAs. This was supplemented by observations of people engaging with an information kiosk in a decorative arts museum. The kiosk featured a 2-minute film about an artefact. The film began when a person touched the screen and continued uninterrupted.

The technologies offered a rich and interesting new perspective on the exhibits

But people frequently found themselves engaging more with the PDAs or kiosk than dwelling on the exhibits themselves. The PDAs were sensorily isolating

and the kiosk often disruptive to the flow of people through the gallery and approach to the exhibit.

Detailed observation allows museums to appraise the quality of the visitor experience

Conventionally the success of an exhibit is measured by its power to communicate a suite of information, and the time that visitors choose to spend interacting with it. By these metrics the use of digital interactives improved and enhanced the visitor experience. However, the research highlights that after taking a closer look, the quality of the visitor experience may not necessarily be improved by these technologies.

Keywords

UK **museum** **observation** **experience** **visitor**

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