

The unexploited potential of social media in museums

A study of the extent to which social media are used as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making in museums



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Abstract

Many are the studies that link social media and museums. However, the focus is mainly placed on the effective implementation and use of these new tools within a communication perspective.

Deepening the previous researches on the use of social media in museums, this thesis aims to investigate their specific use as a tool to gather information, especially on the audience and visitors, and whether the top management employs this information for strategic managerial purposes. Therefore, the research question is: *“To what extent social media are used as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making in museums?”*.

Social media are platforms through which users share their opinions, ideas, preferences, interests, emotional reactions and express also their approval or disapproval. Exploiting these data could help the actors in charge of the decision-making process to better direct and improve the strategic planning of museums.

The research has been conducted with a qualitative method, evaluating and analysing semi-structured interviews of communication and marketing staff members responsible for the social media of a subset of 13 museums based in the Netherlands.

The findings revealed that none of the museums specifically uses social media as a tool to collect data. Hence, the information they provide is not exploited in the strategic decision-making process. Even if social media platforms are more or less constantly monitored, the information acquired is mainly about the online performance and is therefore used to enhance the online activity itself. Only some of the museums are drawing data from their public through social media and only a couple of them is actually implementing this information in order to improve the offline offer. Audience research seems in fact to be more connected with other traditional collecting means. Thus, museums are not using social media as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making yet. Nonetheless, eagerness to enhance the data collection and analysis process, as well as the execution of information collected online with a strategic perspective have been observed in the majority of the cases.

Keywords: social media, social networks, museums, data analysis, strategic decision making

Frequently used terms and their definition

-Platform: used in the text within the meaning of social media platform;

-User: a person who uses any kind of social media platform, either with an active participation, creating content or through passive observation (Parsons, 2011; Waters & Lo, 2012);

-Social media strategy: “a formal plan of both short-term and long-term goals that should be developed to enhance SNS¹ effectiveness” (Chung, Marketti, Fiore, p.15, 2014)

-Museum: according to the most recent definition approved by the International Council Of Museums' General Assembly in Wien “A museum is a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment” (ICOM, 2007)

-Social media content: pictures, text, numbers, emoticons, audios or videos shared through posts online (Muninger, Hammedi & Mahr, 2019).

-Feedback: following the definition given by the Business Dictionary it refers to the “process in which the effect or output of an action is 'returned' (fed-back) to modify the next action”.

Specifically, “in an organizational context, feedback is the information sent to an entity (individual or a group) about its prior behaviour so that the entity may adjust its current and future behaviour to achieve the desired result”.

¹ Social Network Sites

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1. Introduction

Among the technological innovations of the 21st century, Web 2.0 and new ICTs (Information and Communication Technology), social media have completely reshaped the world as we now know it. Social media usage is so widespread within the population that in 2018 the number of social media users worldwide was 3.196 billion, with a penetration rate – in Europe – of 53% of the inhabitants (Global Digital Report, 2018).

Following the trend of people and businesses who have integrated social media in their daily activity, also a high number of cultural institutions, especially museums, have entered the social media era, in search of new ways to engage and communicate with the public (Proctor, 2010; Kidd, 2011; Kotler, 2001; Stein 2012). According to López, Margapoti, Maragliano and Bove (2010), 93% of museums in the developed nations employed social media at least as one of the means of their communication strategy already 9 years ago. However, as stated by Kidd (2011) and Byrnes (2015), museums are not fully taking advantage of the potential of social media: there is a gap between the possibilities and opportunities offered by this innovative tool and its actual use. Social media are indeed “hotspots” for collecting data (Forbes, 2017) as they are a “medium through which information or content is published or exchanged” (Proctor, 2010, p. 35). More precisely, the real unexplored added value of these online platforms is the accumulation of the information that users share (opinions, feedbacks, preferences, interests, emotional reactions) that could be processed and used by the management. Nevertheless, if all the data available online are not exploited and processed by museums’ management for inspiring and giving a direction to future interventions they are doomed to either uselessly nourish the Web or to be indirectly used by the online platforms themselves.

Embracing the idea that museums should not be anymore “about something” but “about somebody” (Weil, 1999) – an approach that leads to a visitor-oriented attitude – they should be able to use the information about the visitors in order to reshape the museum experience and to make it more suitable for their needs and expectations. In fact, as stated by Black (2012, p. 7), among the new challenges that the 21st century museums have to face there is the understanding of the “nature, motivations, expectations and needs of existing audiences, and to build an enduring relationship with them”.

The goal of this thesis is therefore to investigate firstly whether social media are used to gather data from and about the visitors online, secondly if these data gathered through social media are used and processed by museums, and thirdly, how this information is employed, if at all.

Previous studies on the topic (Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Marakos, 2014; Proctor, 2010; McGrath, 2018; Chung et al., 2014; Pett, 2012; López et al., 2010; Russo, Watkins, Kelly & Chan, 2008; Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013) have already analysed the overall social media usage by museums. The purpose of this thesis is to bring the research one step further questioning whether these institutions are actually gathering helpful information through their platforms, and whether, once collected and processed, the outcome is implemented in a strategic perspective by the management. After this investigation it should also be possible to determine if there is an effective connection between the top management and the social media activity. To achieve the previously stated goal, the research question has been formulated as follows: *“To what extent social media are used as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making in museums?”*

Additional sub-questions have been addressed in order to guide the study and to have a broader understanding of the topic:

SQ₁ To what extent are museums gathering data available through their social media accounts? Which kind of data specifically?

SQ₂ How are data collected through social media?

SQ₃ To what extent is information obtained through social media used in museums? Are the collected data analysed and the information processed? How? And what for?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative research process has been employed through semi-structured interviews with marketing managers or social media professionals from a subset of 13 small and medium-size local museums in the Netherlands². These interviews have been conducted face to face, via Skype video-call and eventually via e-mail. The results have been analysed afterwards and interpreted in consideration of the existing literature, providing critical insights on the topic.

The relevance of this study is due to its aim. This research is driven by the willingness to create awareness among professionals working in the museum sector on the actual untapped potential of social media. Given the subject of this thesis, the overall intent is to acknowledge that a bridge between social media and the top management would be advantageous. Such connection

² In the selection of the sample 3 of the most important museums in the Netherlands have been deliberately excluded because considered to be superstar museums and therefore not in line with the criteria of representativeness of the research. Further explanations with this respect can be found in Chapter 3 in the sample description.

could be built in order to better perform and to successfully meet the needs of the visitors, in an age of rethinking of the museum institution and role in the society.

The outcome of this research could have practical and managerial implications, providing helpful insights which could help museums' managers understand the impact of social media and to make them realize that social media can also be a useful tool to make and direct strategic decisions. The results could also be valuable for organizations similar to museums, which operate in the information, education and entertainment field. This study could be relevant for the academic world too because, as already stated, previous researches on the topic never deeply investigated data collection and analysis opportunities, going in the direction of decision-making and strategic management.

This paper is structured in 5 chapters. Chapter 2 develops an analytical framework on relevant literature considered as the background for the study and that is at the basis of the development of the research. The first section gives a general overview of innovation and technological change in museums, deepening afterwards, in the second section, the social media reality and its usage within museums. In the third section, it is outlined the Social Media Big Data scenario, with a focus on how social media can be used by businesses as means to collect and analyse data from the external environment. In the fourth section is assessed the general relevance of information, which could be gathered through social media, for grounding the decision-making process and for supporting strategic management. Finally, the expected results are summarized in the fifth section. Chapter 3 describes the methodology (sample and coding procedures) used in the study as well as data collection and analysis details. Chapter 4 presents the main findings, which are critically reviewed in light of the literature. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study, summarizing the obtained results. Limitations and further lines for research on the topic are discussed too.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

Structured in four different sections, the literature of this thesis merges two different perspectives. On one hand, it gives an overall view of the new technology – specifically social media – used in the museum sector, and on the other hand it describes theories on management (information management, decision-making process, strategic management), both based on the existing business academic literature and applied to the museum's sector. The last section of this theoretical framework is of particular relevance for the sake of the research since it constitutes the bridge that links social media activity to the top management's one.

2.2 New technologies and innovation within museums

New technologies and digital tools are being used by firms and society as a whole, filling their needs and requirements (Henten & Tadayoni, 2011). Creative industries are included in this scenario too, representing a segment of the market in which new digital technologies are leading development and transformation, enhancing the innovation process (Muninger et al., 2019) within the meaning of Dosi³. As a matter of fact, the creative industries, of which a consistent sub-group is represented by the artistic sector – which includes as a consequence cultural institutions such as museums too⁴ – have by now introduced new technologies in all the phases of the cultural experience: production, distribution and consumption. This application enables the creation of new cultural products, the elaboration of new means of distribution and of new ways of cultural reception (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012; Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013) as well as the definition of a new way of operating within cultural organizations. Such changes in cultural consumption and consumer behaviour led museums and cultural organizations to re-think both the institution itself and its position in the value chain (Anderson, 2012; Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012; Bertacchini & Morando, 2013) insisting on the relationship with the audience. As a consequence, this implies the possible reformulation of institutional values, business models, governance and strategies (Anderson, 2012; Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012; Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013) within a more visitor-centred perspective.

Digitalization and ICTs penetration are affecting the way museums connect, communicate and engage with their visitors. This happens both on-site, in the physical museum setting, through

³ “innovation concerns the search for, and the discovery, experimentation, development, imitation, and adoption of new products, new production processes and new organisational set ups” (Handke, 2010, p.194).

⁴ as stated by Bakhshi & Throsby (2012)

technological items such as virtual reality, sensors, 3D and mobile handheld devices and online (via Internet) through websites, digital collections, and social media channels (Kidd, 2011; Proctor, 2010; Kotler, 2001; Navarrete & Borowiecki, 2016). These new digital technologies are used to create sensorial, interactive and immersive experiences for the visitors, providing dynamic content and innovative learning and recreational solutions (Kéfi & Pallud, 2011). Notwithstanding, due to the societal significance and relevance that social media are acquiring, in this research the focus will be solely on them. Indeed, as Albarran and Moellinger (2013, p. 9) pinpoint, “social media have taken on greater importance by capturing the attention and interest of consumers, marketers, advertisers, and businesses”. As stated by the two authors, in nowadays society, social media have even taken the stage of new multimedia technologies. Almost everyone recognizes their business value, museums and cultural institutions among others.

There is no univocal definition of social media, therefore, for the sake of consistency in this study the one of Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) is considered. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010, p.61), social media are “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content”. Social media are indeed considered to be an application of Web 2.0, that is a set of tools which enhance participation and interactivity empowering users, who, (through them), from being passive observers become “prosumers”/ “co-producers”, having an active role in the development and generation of content (Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Henten & Tadayoni, 2011). This change is gradually contributing, on one hand to blur the boundary between producers and users (Henten & Tadayoni, 2011) and on the other hand to foster the relationship between the institution and its audience (volunteers, donors, visitors), whose presence is essential for the existence of the organization itself. Nair (2011, p. 45) too stresses the link and involvement that social media can create among different actors, arguing that “the core of social media is about relationships and connections between people and organizations”.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) divide social media into 6 different categories: collaborative projects, blogs content communities, social networking sites, virtual, game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Social media are therefore social networks platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, but also web-blogs and microblogs (Twitter), bookmark collections (Pinterest), wikis such as Wikipedia, video and music portals (Youtube, Vimeo, SoundCloud) and photo collection and/or visual image-oriented platforms like Flickr and Instagram (Hausmann, 2012). About social networks sites (SNSs), Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211) state that they are “Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”.

Altogether, all these new digital tools, especially social media, whose use is analysed in depth in the next section, enable the museums to enter a new paradigm, the one of the “‘responsive’, ‘transformative’, ‘connected’, ‘engaged’, ‘medialized’, ‘total’, ‘participatory’, ‘digital’, ‘virtual’, ‘exploded’,” (Holdgaard & Klastrup, 2014, p.191) cultural organizations. This demonstrates that these institutions, as hoped by Stein (2012), are able to change and adapt to the public’s expectations as well as to market forces – a fundamental aspect in order to compete over time (Handke, 2010) – becoming more and more consumer-centred.

2.3 Social media, marketing and museums

Social media are increasingly more prominent in the offering of museums. As highlighted by Kidd (2010), the online activity is becoming complementary to the one that takes place on site. Yet, as stressed by scholars in several empirical researches and theoretical studies (Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Marakos, 2014; Proctor, 2010; McGrath, 2018; Chung et al., 2014; Pett, 2012, López et al., 2010, Russo, Watkins, Kelly & Chan, 2008, Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013) many are the prevailing logics and reasons that push museums to proactively engage with social media. Even if positions and approaches in using social media slightly differ from museum to museum, in general social media are deemed to make value creation possible (Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013) and are primarily employed as one of the channels for marketing, especially for promotion and communication. Social media are increasingly integrated into the marketing strategy together with other traditional forms (Kolb, 2015) and are impacting the traditional means of communication (Fletcher & Lee, 2012). However, marketing is a rather vague and broad process that involves different aspects and that pursues different objectives and therefore strategies.

As stated by Kotler, Kotler and Kotler (2008) museums have gradually enhanced their marketing since it provides notions, means, and skills useful for broadening and increasing audiences, building and maintaining awareness and relationships with stakeholders, engaging with the community, networking and raising revenue streams. Cultural marketing allows organizations to reach “market segments likely to be interested in the product while adjusting to the product the commercial variables (...) to put the product in contact with a sufficient number of consumers and to reach the objectives consistent with the mission for the cultural enterprises” (Colbert, 2007, p.14). Albeit the product of museums cannot totally be changed, the services provided can still be

partially reshaped and redesigned and with this respect, marketing results to be essential in this action, placing the public needs, preferences and satisfaction as central (Cole, 2008). Kotler et al. (2008) as well witness that marketing within museums is related to the identification and satisfaction of the target market needs since it allows to understand what kind of consumers attend museums. On one hand, through marketing museums are creating value for the consumers, on the other hand consumers are producing an income for museums too. Thus, marketing could be considered as a process of exchange. (Kotler, 2011). Furthermore, “Museums need marketing because they face substantial competition in the leisure-time marketplace” (Kotler, et al. 2008, p.21).

According to Kidd (2010), social media practices do not only concern marketing. In fact, the author identifies three main categories in which the different social media activities can be grouped: the marketing frame, the collaborative frame and the inclusivity frame. Yet, his marketing perspective is quite restrictive. His definition of marketing fundamentally corresponds to the one of promotion, which is rather one of the several aspects embedded in marketing. In the marketing literature, promotion is one of the 4Ps of the marketing mix and it is mainly made of 4 elements: advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations, with social media having been added as a fifth channel (Kolb, 2015).

When the usage of social media is aimed at *promotion* (1) it means that the objective of the social media strategy is to build awareness and to inform people about activities, upcoming and past events and exhibitions, seeking to provide a better understanding of the organization and of its function (Cole, 2008; Kidd, 2010). In general, promotion through social media implies both lower costs comparing to the normal offline solutions required for radio, television and print (Cole, 2008), and a massive access and attention, which can potentially start a “viral marketing through word-of-mouth campaigns” (Muninger et al., 2019, Hausmann, 2012). Furthermore, social media allow more personalized communication and storytelling (Fletcher & Lee, 2012). As previously stated though, promotion is just one of the facets of marketing.

A further marketing aspect closely related to promotion is the activity of *branding* (2). Far from being just a promotional process, branding “embodies the mission of what the business hopes to achieve” (Kolb, 2015, p. 74) and uses marketing tools (social media included) to communicate the museum philosophy, its values, its goals, and the way to achieve them (Cole, 2008). Since in the general marketing theory the brand image recalls the existent picture that consumers have in their mind when thinking of the organization (Hede, 2007), branding is also essential to help museums in reinforcing and building a distinctive identity and reputation, enhancing their authenticity and

credibility (Marakos, 2014). Branding enables as well to “give individuals a real, personal connecting point with a previously “faceless institution” (Pfefferle, 2009). Moreover, museums that are still not well known can build a stronger reputation through social media, developing a strategy coherent with their mission (Cole, 2008). Being branding a further stage in solidifying audience support for museums (Kotler et al., 2008) it is an important means to foster the development of a loyal relationship between the public and the organization (Kolb, 2015).

From the visitors’ point of view, a successful branding activity reduces also search and information costs and the overall risk due to the fact that museums convey cultural goods that are experience goods and whose quality and utility cannot be verified before the consumption (Towse, 2010). Indeed, in shaping a strong brand identity through social media, museums can already provide visitors with an overview and a preview of the content and of the kind of experience that they can expect from the museum (Kolb, 2015). Finally, branding has also a fundamental role for winning public, corporate and private donations and in an audience development perspective. (Scott, 2007).

Alongside promotion and brand activity, marketing through social media can be aimed also to *broaden the audience* (3). Audience development is deemed as central due to the argument that social media enable access to a worldwide audience (Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Padilla-Meléndez & del Águila-Obra, 2013). Despite the numerous slightly different definitions, generally the term audience development refers to the activity of sustaining and meeting the needs of both current and potential audience, i.e. people who actually have no direct involvement with the organization. Specifically, in the cultural sector, audience development enables to keep the relationship with diversified audiences and between audience and the art itself. Social media result to be a valid tool for museums aiming to develop audience since, exploiting the online lack of physical barriers, they can reach a broader audience at first in the virtual space (Kidd, 2010). Next to it, through the personalized use of information and constant interaction with the public (Marakos, 2014), social media enable to customize features and therefore to better reach the existing and potential audience. Moreover, in the long run audience development allows to increase the access to art to a broader public (Hill, L., O’Sullivan, C., O’Sullivan, T., Whitehead, B., 2017) creating new potential attendees and participants and giving the opportunity to create a wider and more inclusive base of support for the arts. In other words, audience development increases the museum reach meeting a new audience (Fletcher & Lee, 2012). Audience development can therefore enhance enjoyment, understanding, skills and confidence across the art forms. (Rogers, 1998, Phil Cave qt in Maitland 2008).

Audience development goes often along with *audience engagement* (4), which is focused on “deepening the audience”, meaning that its goal is specifically to increase the audience involvement. Given the changing role of the visitors from passive actors to active creators, participators and prosumers (Holdgaard & Klastrop, 2014), audience engagement in the cultural field has its own roots in the concept developed by Nina Simon (2010). This author argues that museums have to be a participatory hub and “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content”. Audience engagement does not just facilitate a participative cultural experience in the museums’ venues (Russo et al., 2008), it refers as well to the possibility to keep the audience interested in the organization’s activity through the continuous share of information and such information can be released also outside the physical place of the consumption of the experience (McClellan, 2003). Social media are therefore an important space for interaction since they enable a straightforward connection with the audience (McGrath, 2018) and the online creation of a forum, namely a “place for confrontation, experimentation, and debate” (Cameron, 1971). In fact, promoting discussion then becomes a further form of engagement.

The involvement of the audience via social media in museums is typically achieved through the creation of a two-way communication that allows the audience to be more interactive in responding to the posts and sharing its thoughts (Cole, 2008), leading also the public to “shape the learning experience” (McGrath, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, in cultural institutions social media allow the engagement in the creative processes and experiences rather than simple communication (Watkins & Russo, 2007). Overall, recalling interaction, audience engagement could be considered as an intrinsic aspect of relationship marketing since it seeks to enhance the existing audience loyalty, augmenting its contribution and safeguarding the organization from other competitors in the leisure market (Cole, 2008). This last aspect underlines the relevance of engagement since the longevity of the museum’s activity depends also to a certain extent on its rate (Pett, 2012).

As previously stated, audience engagement aims to the involvement of the community, leading towards the incumbent phenomenon of “participatory culture”. According to the participatory culture, civic contribution matters and the line between artistic expression and public engagement is blurred (Stein, 2012). This inclusivity trend is however more strictly connected with what Kidd (2010) calls the “collaborative frame”. Such a framework according to the author is separated from the marketing one. Nonetheless, for other scholars, who represent the majority of the scientific community, this concept goes under the name of “*co-creation*” (5) and is embedded in marketing. Yet, the descriptions of collaborative frame and co-creation overlap. In general, co-

creation is defined as “any act of collective creativity” (Sanders & Stappers 2008, p.6) and when related to social media within museums it is often used as a synonym of “user-generated content”, when users contribute in developing museums’ projects (Grabill, Pigg, and Wittenauer 2009; Stuedahl 2011; Sandvik 2012). Similarly, the collaborative possibility, that Kidd (2010) ascribes to social media use in museums, is seen as the co-production of museums’ narratives and community consultation. Thus social media, allowing users to generate content, engaging in peer-to-peer conversations, collaborating, sharing, tagging, editing, or creating information (McAfee, Howe, Surowiecki, 2011) can enhance co-creation. Altogether, since through co-creation users produce content, they become both critics and creators of digital culture (Russo et al.2008).

Acknowledging the close link between social media and co-creation in museums, it seems that this cooperative trend is strongly emerging as a consequence of the new media tendency (Stein 2012). Moreover, within the collaborative framework Kidd (2010) differentiates between story-making and crowdsourcing, which is based on outsourcing tasks within curating and archiving to members of the audience through online platforms and the web.

In an inclusive perspective, through social media audience engagement and audience development are enabling museums to create a community, both online and offline. This aspect according to Kidd (2010) belongs to the “inclusivity frame”. In fact, in creating interactive activities social media allow to engage the individuals also in their communities (Cole, 2008), building and supporting audiences and communities around the organization (Kidd, 2010). Also Waters & Lo (2012) witness that through social media it is easier to overcome cultural boundaries and facilitates the reinforcement of communities all over the world. Moreover, Kolb (2015, p. 149) stresses the vital link between the community and social media, stating that “non-profit organizations need to use social media so that they can build support for the mission in the community”.

Overall, through their features and practices, social media enable potentially anyone to express opinions and enhance individual, as well as community, engagement. This implies that people are more involved in the museum’s online/offline activity and in the creation of content, meaning and experiences. Further consequences of this aspect are the lowering of the cultural consumption barriers and the easing of cultural participation and of information’s availability. Consequently, this creates social inclusion and gives everyone equal cultural opportunities and easy and open access to information (Sassen, 2002). Altogether, these elements can be seen within a democratization process of both art and knowledge. Specifically, the democratization of art means that everybody, even “those who would not normally have access to it” (Bailey, Miles, and Stark,

2004, p.49) can more easily engage, appreciate and understand art and culture, (Booth, 2014). Social media can thus be considered as “democratization facilitator in museums” (Kefi & Pallud, 2011, p.284). Nonetheless, the democratization theme is still controversial and questioned, mainly because the Internet is still the privilege of an economic and cultural elite (Moreno, 2007).

In conclusion, museums seem to rely more and more on social media, not only with promotional and communication purposes. As a matter of fact, through them it is possible to achieve different objectives and have different strategies: branding, audience engagement, audience development, inclusivity and community creation. The observed intention in using social media can be summarized as the creation of value through a dialogue, namely a many to many communication, which stimulates the interaction of both organizations and their public. This usage is coherent with the general trend of sociable and participatory experiences that museums are trying to develop fostering the relationship with their audience (Kotler, 2001). In fact, social media allow personalizing the offer (Kidd, 2010), enhancing museums to move towards a more customer-based approach. However, none of the analysed studies specifically brought to light the actual or potential use of social media as a tool to gather information, especially on the museum’s audience and public. This outcome induces to believe that this practice is not yet widespread as a museum’s marketing activity, nonetheless this data collection feature is investigated in the next section.

2.4 Social media as an information gathering tool

In a scenario that is more and more visitor-oriented, for museums it is useful and necessary to know and understand the audience and its needs in order to refine the offer, the overall museum’s activity and the strategy. In various cultural institutions, audience analysis is becoming more relevant strategically-wise since it is now clear its importance and deep connection with the institutions’ sustainability and existence itself (Jones, 2015).

Many are the sources that can be used to collect data and to obtain information about the audience: focus groups, surveys and questionnaires, both on paper or online, face to face or by phone short interviews, interactive stands in loco and newsletters/emails (Byrnes, 2015). Also ticket sales (directly in the venue or through the website) and “the IoT/Indoor Location tracking (visitor heatmaps and user flow)” can offer useful data in this perspective (Museum Trends: How Your Museum Can Collect and Use Data, 2018). Besides these options website visitor analytics, which tracks the website traffic, and social media analytics (SMA) are emerging research fields (Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, Ross, Neuberger, 2018). Balbi, Misuraca, Scepi (2018) have acknowledged that great is the attention shown for the discovery, collection, organization and analysis of these online data.

Indeed, as a consequence of the increase in the usage of social media, also the amount of data that can be collected through them is growing. Therefore, social media are rising as an important means for data collection, monitoring and analysis, (Bright, Margetts, Hale and Yasseri, 2014) and are expected to generate, spread and provide information in different domains (entertainment, science, politics, crisis management, business, public administration, consumer decision- making) (Stieglitz et al, 2018; Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, Bruns, Neuberger, 2014; Tajudeen, Jaafar, Ainin, 2018).

Data available on social media belong to a big data frame (Balbi et al., 2018) called Social Media Big Data (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Such data have different natures (Balbi et al., 2018) and can be mainly divided into two categories: structured (meta-data) and unstructured data (Baars & Kemper, 2008). Considering social networks, “textual content is an example of unstructured data, while the friend/follower relationship is an example of structured data” (Stieglitz et al, 2018, p. 156).

Being social networks platforms where the users can share opinions, impressions, reactions, new ideas, feedbacks and approval in different ways (Lee, Olson, Trimi, 2012; Fletcher & Lee; Muninger et al, 2019), they do not just offer personal demographics about users such as their gender, their native language and nationality. User-generated content and social interactions provide as well more specific data about people’s interests, preferences and habits (Fjeldstad, Snow, Miles, & Lettl, 2012; Friedrichsen & Muhl-Benninghaus, 2013). From the analysis of these data pieces of information can be acquired: the coverage, reach and popularity’s volume; the negative or positive sentiment; the rate of public attention and awareness; the most recurrent words and subjects; the engagement’s percentage (measured on the computation of posts on a specific subjects, likes, comments and favourites); data and time of release of the posts (which allows to check the gradual progress); the conversation’s volume and the trust, satisfaction and commitment percent growth (Wiewiórowski, 2018; Fletcher & Lee, 2012). In addition, organisations through social media can monitor the news and trends and learn who are their main online contributors as well as their potential risks and chances (Stieglitz et al., 2018, Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan et al., 2014; Bi, Zheng, & Liu, 2014). They can appraise the results of their campaigns and constantly monitor possible issues (Dhawan & Zanini, 2014).

According to Zha and Li (2013) and Stieglitz et al. (2014) significant is the attention that business organizations are already showing for extracting detailed information from some of the previously mentioned data. As a matter of fact, such knowledge allows the organizations to quickly gather relevant implications and strategic insights, opinions and feedback from the market, especially about the consumers, which eventually can be useful for customer relationship, marketing, PR and business and reputation management. More specifically, it can serve to create

value for the organization, to improve the product/service development, for the innovation process, to enhance the marketing research, for the understanding of the latent users' needs, for audience segmentation, for advertising and campaign development (McAfee et al. 2011; Muninger et al. 2019; Maruggi 2008; Grüblbauer & Haric, 2013; Roberts, Piller, Lüttgens, 2016). Overall this information can be employed to create a stronger link with the audience, with the general aim of better meeting its expectations.

Since data are made available in different ways (they can be structured and unstructured and their format sometimes also differs from platform to platform) and social media is a new and very fast changing area (Dhawan & Zanini, 2014), it is hard to elicit, structure and comprehend the information wanted and needed. (Balahur & Jacquet, 2015, Petz, Karpowicz, Fürschu, Auinger, Stř. teský, Holzinger, 2013). Therefore, in order to seize data collecting opportunities, organizations need the competencies to recognize and process meaningful data (Bright et al., 2014). Besides technical capabilities also an IT infrastructure, adequate tools and procedures are required for monitoring the customers' information (Bright et al., 2014). These tools sometimes happen to be free and provide basics metrics (Dhawan & Zanini, 2014), helping institutions to deepen their knowledge on their public. Among the most common ones there are Yomago, Ubervu, Hootsuite and Vocus (Dhawan & Zanini, 2014). Often also the platform provider itself has its own native tools, i.e. Twitter Analytics, Facebook Analytics, Instagram Analytics. Furthermore, many are the typologies of analysis that can be carried out with social media data. Next to it, according to the type of data and information sought, also the tools and the technique and typology of analysis change (Friedlein, 2016). Given that nowadays rather than on the quantity the interest is moving more towards measuring the quality of social media channels, in other words from numbers the attention has shifted on the value of engagement and interaction (Pett, 2012), among the various analysis options social media analytics (SMA) stands out. Through SMA it is possible to analyse and convert raw data such as “user-expressed subjective opinions, views, emotions, evaluation, and attitudes, the manifestations of which are pictures, videos, ratings, tags, user profiles, and other spatial, temporal, and attention-related data” (Stieglitz et al., 2014, p. 90) into information significant and relevant in a strategic perspective. This makes SMA a useful tool for grounding the decision-making process. In a more practical view, SMA allows developing three analysis methods: social network analysis (SNA), trend analysis and text mining (Stieglitz et al., 2014). An emerging relevant subfield of latter is sentiment analysis (SA) (Petz et al., 2014, Bright et al. 2014, Stieglitz et al. 20014). Through sentiment analysis “the content is analysed by software and interpreted to identify if positive, negative, or a neutral sentiment is being expressed” (Cowper, 2016). This is an incumbent domain that bonds together information collection, text retrieval and computational

linguistics (Pang and Lee, 2008). SNA is based on the assessment of the connection among individuals, organizations and interest groups whilst trend analysis makes the forecast of emerging themes, namely trends (Stieglitz et al, 2014). Nonetheless, this thesis does not aim to address all the different tools and social media analysis procedures.

Overall, the analysis' methodologies differ mainly on the context and on the depth of the analysis, and this depends on the aims of the research but also on the availability of the resources (time and money) (Friedlein, 2016), since "automatic processing also requires a huge computational effort" (Balbi, et al. 2018, p. 675). The depth of analysis refers to the sophistication of the study, that can be just a streaming's data descriptive statistics, an ad hoc analysis or even a deep analysis based on accumulated data (Friedlein, 2016).

Despite the rising number of social media users, which allows having a large sample of data for the analysis, there must be caution in interpreting and eventually generalizing data collected through social media. These data cannot be considered as entirely representative of the population at large (Bright et al., 2014). Firstly, because social media allows obtaining only information made available from the users who decided to be public. Secondly, because social media are not equally distributed among the population. Thus, a first step to make these data be more reliable is benchmarking data collected through social media with data gathered through more traditional and trusted sources. Notwithstanding, generally through data collection and analysis the intention of the museums is not always to have an overview of the entire population and this can be also the case for data gathered through social media. Therefore, the obtained sample can still be useful representing a portion of the visitors and/or people interested and involved in the museum's activity (Bright et al. 2014). Thirdly, tools which automatically analyse and extract data from these platforms are still developing (Bright et al., 2014). Finally, also some privacy and ethical related issues arise when dealing with such data (Stieglitz et al., 2014), which however, will not be discussed in this research.

Altogether, because of the significant advantages such as rapidity of availability and collection of data as well as monetary convenience and scale of the results, considered that those same restrictions on the representativeness of the sample occur also using other classical methodologies (Bright et al., 2014), employing social media as a source of information may be useful to ground strategic decision making and to support the management, as described in the next section.

2.5 Information, social media and strategic decision-making

Cultural organizations, perform within multiple external environments, from which they receive inputs and information (Byrnes, 2015). According to Shajahan and Priyadharshini (2004), the information provided by this system of forces outside the organization can be described as “data that have been put into a meaningful and useful context and communicated to a recipient who uses it to make decision”. Byrnes, referring to information generated from the external environment, and more specifically from the audience, assesses that “information capital” can help shape the future of an organization” (2015, p.131). Also Colbert (2011) and Balbi et al. (2018) recognize that information collection is a key element required by managers for supporting and making efficient decisions and which can bring to significant implications. Altogether these scholars stress the relevance of information and its fundamental role for the overall activity of cultural and non-profit organizations, stating that once organized, information is the ground for inspiring decision-makers for designing strategic and operational plans and in taking action. In fact, according to them all the managerial activities and tasks (planning, organizing, leading, coordinating, staffing, decision making and controlling) should find their roots in the information gathered from both, the external and internal environment, i.e. the inputs.

In accord with Shajahan and Priyadharshini (2004) organizations need an information collecting and processing method. With this respect, as argued in the previous section, IT, new technologies and new multimedia innovations have on one hand increased the rapidity and precision in gathering, storing and analysing huge amounts of data, on the other hand they have lowered the collection costs, allowing to have more inputs available to consider when making decisions (Shajahan & Priyadharshini, 2004; Byrnes, 2015). Also Garrigos, Alcamí and Ribera (2012) and Kolb (2015) affirm that new technologies, especially social networks, being more and more legitimized as information gathering tools, are emerging as means which enable managers to affect, facilitate and support decision making.

Improving decision making implies as a consequence to enhance the overall strategic management process, which is as a matter of fact “based on information on the organisation’s contextual conditions and relevant trends and development” (Ebewo and Sirayi, 2009, p. 285) and which is aimed to successfully deal with competition and dynamic environments in the long run (Thompson & Strickland, 1993; Hill and Jones, 1995). Since having a strategy means to respond to the current environment, inputs coming from the stakeholders are essential in the strategy development and in a strategic analysis perspective (Allison & Kaye, 2015).

Social media tools which enable to support decision-making process can be identified in reports, developed on the basis of ex-post or key performance indicators, alternatively also a

dashboard of real-time data or data rooted in the on-going analysis (Tsou, Jung, Allen, Yang, Gawron, Spitzberg, Han 2015).

Besides the collection of raw data from the external environment, what is altogether important is to evaluate, convert and process them into useful information, namely knowledge, in order to ground an effective and timely decision-making process for all the activities of which management is responsible. The inputs, to be useful and valuable must be processed and eventually become outputs. Only through this procedure organizations can become responsive and more efficient in a dynamic environment (Byrnes, 2014).

Inputs coming from the outside allow to evaluate opportunities and threats and have to be weighted with the internal mission and vision of the institution, seeking coherence (Byrnes, 2014). This is why getting the right kind of data at the right moment in time is essential too (Shajahan and Priyadharshini, 2004). Moreover, the monitoring and analysis of the information available on social media should be a practice in order to understand whether the results are coherent with the objectives of the strategy and to eventually respond with corrective operations (Colbert, 2011).

Given the fact that adequate information can assist management to enter the market, as pinpointed by Tsou et al. (2015), Garrigos et al. (2011) Muninger et al. (2019) and Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith (2011) several companies are already exploiting the significant strategic value of data collected from social media for different purposes: to develop products, brands and/or services, facilitating the personalization in order to better meet the needs of the public.

Nonetheless, to use efficiently and strategically social media, acknowledgement as well as support from the top management is essential (Muninger et al., 2019). Next to it, to be successfully leveraged information through social media has to involve people from various departments and levels within the organization (Muninger et al., 2019). Thus, there must be a connection between the use of social media, the middle management responsible for it and the top management in charge of strategic decision-making (Shajahan & Priyadharshini, 2004). The top management must be updated and has to be aware of the implications and values of social media. This could bring to be able to use this information to elaborate on new ideas and develop strategies (Colbert, Yee, & George, 2016). However, sometimes even if managers know the potential and relevance of collecting and processing such information, they face the issue of time constraints, which do not allow them to efficiently assess the impact of the information. (Fletcher & Lee, 2012).

Organizations cannot perform without information (Byrnes, 2015). As described previously in this section one of the emerging techniques for gathering and analysing data is new media, especially social media and social networks among them. These means through their outputs can

help organizations better exploit the available resources, meet and satisfy the stakeholders and build a stronger strategy. Thus, cultural organizations – and museums among them – could rely more on social media to base a more informed and grounded decision-making process. This would allow as a consequence to improve results and performance, keeping alive such organizations and fostering their positions within the leisure market. Strengthening this vision, in this new era the “gainer of the evolving social media landscape will be organizations with the ability to adopt and integrate relevant areas of social media for their business quickly with a strong focus on business objectives within their strategy” (Albarran, & Moellinger, 2013, p.45).

2.6 Expectations

As argued in the previous chapter the potential of social media as a means to collect information from the external environment has already been widely recognized and exploited by different types of businesses. Hence, at the beginning of the thesis I was hoping and believing that museums were, at least partially, collecting, processing and implementing within a strategical perspective the vast amount of data available through their social media. However, taking into consideration the knowledge acquired through the study of the literature on the subject matter, and the outcome of a first disinterested interview on the topic with Dr. Trilce Navarrete, professional and expert on the field, the expectations were lowered.

As far as I can tell, none of the previous empirical researches on the usage of social media in museums has raised their use as tools for the collection of information. On the basis of these studies, cultural institutions seem to largely focus on one-way messaging, meaning that they use social media for communicating, announcing and promoting events and their activity. Such outcomes might also be due to the intrinsic aim of these researches, which were not specifically directed towards this type of analysis. Nonetheless, as stated by Navarrete, unlikely in other fields, development in social media in the museum sector are still slow.

Bearing in mind all these aspects and considering the sample, I expect three possible scenarios from the results of the research. In the first scenario (1) museums are not aware of the potential of social media as information gathering tools, acknowledging only the importance of using these tools for being present online and for other additional purposes. A second possible scenario (2) is that even if museums are recognizing the relevance of social media as a data collection tool, they are not able and do not have the required resources to use them in this perspective. Lastly, in the third scenario (3) museums are aware of this possible usage of social media, but they do not consider this feature as an added value for improving the museum’s activity and as a consequence, they do not invest on it.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As far as I can tell, despite the numerous academic literature on social media and their usage in museums, no research on the field is exploring their potential as data collection tools. Thus, considering the research question as a starting point, the literature laid out above in the theoretical framework has been used as analytical groundwork for raising familiarity with the topic. Yet, in the following chapter the method, which includes the research design, the description and size of sample, data collection and analysis details, will be outlined. This chapter will be structured in nine sections with the aim to provide explanations of the methodological decisions at the basis of this empirical research.

3.2 Research aims

This entire study has been built in order to give an answer to the following research question: *“to what extent social media are used as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making in museums?”*. Further sub-questions have been defined as well in order to provide a deeper comprehension of the subject matter and are the followings:

SQ₁ *To what extent are museums gathering data available through their social media accounts? Which kind of data specifically?*

SQ₂ *How are data collected through social media?*

SQ₃ *To what extent is information obtained through social media used in museums? Are the collected data analysed and the information processed? How? And what for?*

Firstly, through the sub-question SQ₁ the study explores the extent to which museums gather data through their social media accounts and the type of data that are collected. Secondly, the sub-question SQ₂ is aimed to analyse how data are collected through social media. Thirdly, SQ₃ investigates the extent to which and how information obtained through social media is used and processed in museums, with a focus on the purpose of such activity.

In addition to the sub-questions, it has also been necessary to explore the general use of social media, which allowed to have a more complete overview of the social media scenario in museums.

Bearing in mind the research question, the sub-questions and what stated in the previous chapters, the aim of this thesis, is overall to investigate whether social media are used in museums to gather information on and from the public, to assess to what extent this information is made available to the top management and if it is eventually exploited in a strategic perspective.

Yet, in order to better understand the questions at the basis of this research, it is first necessary to give operational definitions of the concepts they refer to. (Bryman, 2015)

3.3 About the RQ and SQ

The concept of social media has already been explained in the previous chapter in the dedicated section, however in the empirical research the attention has been focused mainly on social networks since they seem to be the most commonly used platforms by museums and with the widest penetration rate. Also the definition of a museum which I refer to has already been stated in the glossary before the introduction.

Further concepts that need a deeper explanation are: *strategic decision making*, *information gathering tool*, *data analysis* and *data processing*.

Information gathering tools are means which allow grasping information, namely “any useful data relating to your museum operations, guests, and their relationship with your museum; anything that can be measured, recorded and analysed to make judgements or decisions to improve your museum” (Museum Trends: How Your Museum Can Collect and Use Data, 2018).

Mentioning strategic decision making I refer to the process of definition and identification of strategic decisions which are top management’s responsibility (Shajahan & Priyadharshini, 2004) and which are essential to act and guide the overall institution activity, pursuing the organization’s objects.

Data analysis and processing are together the procedures of collecting, selecting, examining, converting, manipulating and translating data into relevant insights and information with the aim of obtaining useful knowledge to support decision making.

3.4 General research methodology

In conducting empirical research two are the possible methods to be selected: qualitative method and quantitative method. These two methodologies are rooted in two different approaches, which are respectively inductive and deductive reasoning (Hyde, 2000, Bryman, 2015). The former has as a starting point the observation of specific instances and seeks to establish generalisations. In fact, a theory is not tested through the research, it is rather the result of the overall study (Muninger et al., 2019). With inductive stances formal hypothesis do not have to be deduced, nonetheless expectations can still be identified (Bryman, 2002).

Being the main topic of this thesis still an unexplored phenomenon, which can be best addressed developing inductive research (Bryman, 2015), the methodology that has been identified

as the most appropriate is the qualitative one. Next to it, through a qualitative method it is possible to collect in-depth information on the subject matter and emphasize “words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2015, p.36). This is of particular importance on one hand, to have a complete and clear overview of the nuanced context in which this research takes place and on the other to comprehend the developments and progressions in the use of social media in museums, with a specific focus on information gathering, processing and analysis.

Several are the strategies that can be employed for data collection in qualitative empirical researches: ethnography, qualitative interviewing, discourse and conversation analysis, text analysis, content analysis and focus groups (Bryman, 2015). Willing to achieve the best outcome within this study, data have been collected through qualitative interviews, specifically, semi-structured interviews. Through the conversation with the interviewees, semi-structured interviews allow gathering rich and valuable insights on the topic investigated (Esterberg 2002; Kvale 1996, Bryman, 2015). Compared to the other options, implying semi-structured interviews a flexible process (Bryman, 2015), they enable the interviewer to expand certain topics through follow up questions on the basis of given responses, inputs and comments brought up by the interviewees. Indeed, this type of interviews are only based on a guide [APPENDIX 1], and additional questions can be asked. Also the sequence of the questions is not that strict, questions can change the outline following the direction of the conversation. Although the process is quite flexible, in order to obtain more structured outcomes, it is important that the phrasing of the question does not differ too much from interview to interview and that same concepts and similar terms are used. This can facilitate the coding and guarantee a coherent outcome.

The thesis has been developed through a cross-sectional research design. In fact, the study focused on “more than one case” (Bryman, 2015, p.59), specifically 13 museums have been involved; the data have been collected in a two and a half months’ period, i.e. “at a single point in time” (Bryman, 2015, p.59), depending on the availability of the interviewees. Moreover, through this design, in analysing the data gathered, it has been possible to define “patterns of association” between the different responses obtained, drawing valuable and objective connections, making comparisons and identifying the main shared topics and issues.

Following the direction purposed by Bryman (2015), the criteria considered to assess the quality, coherence and consistency of this study have been *reliability* and *validity*.

Reliability refers to the possibility of repeating the results of the research, seeking to define stable measures (Bryman, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2003). Two different types of reliability can be identified: *external reliability*, which deals with the level of replicability that can be expected by undertaking the same study in different circumstances, and *internal reliability* that refers to the extent to which evaluations, esteems and interpretations done on the basis of the analysis could be shared among different researchers (Bryman, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2003). Difficulties in reaching external reliability are mainly due to the natural and unpredictable changes in the research setting, that are very fast in the technological field. In order to lower the margin of error and to enable replicability, the research's protocol needs to be explained in detail and all the implemented procedures have to be clarified. This is what I tried to do in the following sections. Also internal reliability often represents an issue in qualitative researches, therefore, adopting a neutral approach in the process could at least reduce limitations and biases due to the subjectivity and personal experience and thoughts of the researcher.

Validity is a concept that mainly stands for the accuracy and precision of the study. (Ritchie et al., 2003). Just like reliability, also validity can be divided into an external and an internal dimension. *Internal validity* "is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research" (Bryman, 2015, p. 47), therefore comparisons between literature and phenomena observed have been constantly carried out throughout the analysis and evaluation of the findings. *External validity* concerns instead the extent to which the outcomes of the research can be generalized and applied to a broader and comparable population and social context (Bryman, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2003). Dealing qualitative studies mainly with small samples, this criterion is the most complex to overcome and represents a limitation also in this thesis.

3.5 Sample description and size

In line with the goals of the study and the main research question, the sample of participants has been created through *purposive sampling*, mainly following *criterion sampling*. Thus, the museums have been found and selected doing research via the Internet, specifically browsing their websites and checking their main social media channels. Three were the criteria of museums' selection: (1) they had to be geographically based in the Netherlands (*context sampling*), (2) they had to be present and active online on social media and (3) they could be of any type: art, natural history, ethnology, technology, anthropology craft (*participants sampling*). The context sampling has been selected for practical and logistics reasons, being I based in the Netherlands and willing to be able to carry out most of the interviews face to face. Furthermore, in the Netherlands the use of social media by museums is very common and widespread; some museums do not even have an

own website, since they favour to be present online through their Facebook accounts (Wapenaar, 2017). Next to it, on one hand, analysing museums within the same macro environment guarantees consistency and uniformity within the research and on the other hand, being the museums of different types and located all around the Netherlands, such sample ensures a higher level of representativeness and inclusivity. In the selection process, no distinction has been done between major and small museums, nonetheless, to strengthen the degree of representativeness and coherence of the data and of the overall study, the Van Gogh Museum, the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam have been deliberately excluded because considered to be superstar museums⁵. Being those superstar museums their activity cannot be considered in line with the general trend in Dutch museums, since they stand out for their peculiarities in this field.

Moreover, one museum has been included in the sample on the advice and thank to the connection of one of the interviewees, procedure which is better described by the *snowball sampling*.

Between the first (04/03), second (11/03), third (18/03), fourth (3/04) and fifth (24/04) round of emails, 55 either marketing departments within museums or general information addresses were emailed and asked if they were willing to participate to the research. Due to the limited availability of museums and the lack of willingness to cooperate, 13 museums have shown their interest and 13 interviews have been therefore conducted. Being the overall number of museums in the Netherlands, according to the different sources (CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiekvaries), Museum Vereniging (NMV)...), ranged between 420 and 1254, the museums of the present sample represent a subset of local small and medium-size museums in the national museum's scenario.

As far as I can tell, through the outcome of 13 interviews, it has been possible to acquire knowledge and insights likely to give and to support relevant conclusions. Notwithstanding, a broader sample would have allowed a more extensive and representative analysis of the topic. More into details, the 13 museums consisting in the sample are:

1. **Groninger Museum** (Groningen): after having been reopened in 1994 it has become one of the main museums of art and art history in Groningen, whose rich and intriguing collection includes paintings, design, photography, fashion, installation art, applied arts and archaeology. The Groninger Museum is renowned for its original and colourful building

⁵ According to Frey & Meier (2006) superstar museums differ by the others because of 5 specific features. They are considered by the tourists as a must seen attraction, they have “large numbers of visitors”, their collection hosts “world-famous painters and world-famous paintings”, they have an iconic and world-famous architecture, their commercial activity represents a consistent part of their revenues.

- designed by Alessandro Mendini and several architects: Philippe Starck, Michele de Lucchi and Coop Himmelb(l)au (retrieved from <https://www.groningermuseum.nl/en/>).
2. **TropenMuseum** (Amsterdam): defined as the museum of world cultures, its venue encompasses one of the most scenographic and monumental halls in Amsterdam, the Great Hall. Since 2014 it is part of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures) together with the Afrika Museum and Museum Volkenkunde (retrieved from <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en>).
 3. **Street Art Museum Amsterdam** (Amsterdam): the SAMA is an open-air contemporary eco-museum, with a unique collection of over 200 pieces of street art located around Amsterdam Nieuw-West, Amsterdam West, and Schiphol Airport. Thank to its deep connection with the environment it seeks to establish a shared identity and to strengthen the connection with the local community “using art as a tool to a social dialogue” (retrieved from <https://www.streetartmuseumamsterdam.com>).
 4. **Museum Boijmans van Beuningen** (Rotterdam): this multifaceted museum has a comprehensive and diverse collection of the Western art which covers a period of time that goes from the Middle Ages to modern and contemporary art, including as well design and applied art. In 2019 it has begun a process of renovation that will be concluded in 2021 with the realization of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Depot (retrieved from <https://www.boijmans.nl/en>).
 5. **Rijksmuseum Muiderslot** (Muiden): the national museum Muiderslot has been established in 1878 in the beautiful setting of the Amsterdam Castle Muiderslot, a building over 700 years old. Since then the museum has broadened its collection, following the development of the castle’s history, displaying the castle’s institutional memory which goes from the Middle Age to Golden Age and from the 19th century until today (retrieved from <https://www.muiderslot.nl/en/>).
 6. **Het Nieuwe Instituut** (Rotterdam): within this organization a central role is played by the Museum for Architecture Design and Digital Culture, besides it however the institution also hosts the State Archive for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning and the Agency for Architecture, Design and Digital Culture and a centre for Research and Development. Having innovation a relevant role, the Museum for Architecture, Design and Digital Culture aims to “examines the designed world and how it is constantly being changed by new technologies, new ideas and shifting social priorities” (retrieved from <https://hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/museum>).

7. **Kröller Müller** (Otterlo): this internationally leading museum boasts one of the richest Van Gogh collections in the world next to several masterpieces of artists such as Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondriaan. In its venue is located also one of the largest sculpture gardens in Europe (retrieved from <https://krollermuller.nl/en/unique-in-every-season>).
8. **FOTODOK** (Utrecht): even though this reality is not exactly a museum, it is rather an “international space for documentary photography”, FOTODOK has been included in the sample because of its similarities with museums in the carried out activities and in the set up of the institution. As a matter of fact, its programme includes exhibitions, critical lectures, debates, education and international cooperation and exchanges (retrieved from <https://www.fotodok.org/en/>).
9. **TextielMuseum** (Tilburg): described as a “working museum” it is the leader in textile knowledge and expertise. It organizes design and art exhibitions together with exposition of the permanent collection. The museum offers as well educational programs and workshops in an original venue, a former textile factory. TextielMuseum owns also a fashion brand of textiles created by top designers (retrieved from <https://www.textielmuseum.nl/en/>).
10. **Nederlands Mijnmuseum** (Heerlen): aiming to keep alive the story of the mining past of the Oranje Nassau I coal mine, this museum holds a singular collection of heavy equipment, textiles, paintings and mine lamps, namely everything that belonged to the underground work (retrieved from <https://www.nederlandsmijnmuseum.nl/museum/>).
11. **Royal Delft** (Delft): it is “the last remaining earthenware factory from the 17th century”, where the Delft Blue is still produced following the original tradition. Albeit its core is the creation of craftsmanship – indeed it is mainly a factory – through the Royal Delft Experience visitors can learn the entire history and manufacture process of Royal Delftware thanks to painting demonstrations and can contemplate as well the Delftware museum collection (retrieved from https://www.royaldelft.com/en_gb/explore-the-experience/item1054).
12. **Natural History Museum of Maastricht** (Maastricht): buried in the historical part of the city, the NHMM is the richest keeper of knowledge about “the wonders of the Limburgish wildlife and landscape on the planet” which shares with the public through its extensive collection exposed in permanent exhibitions, as well as through temporary exposition, workshops and other activities (retrieved from <https://nhmmaastricht.nl/english.html>).
13. **Teylers Museum** (Haarlem): following the museum tradition of the age of Enlightenment, with its collection of fossils, minerals, coins, medals, books, physics tools, illustrations and

paintings, it is the “Museum of Wonder” since 1784. Teylers is the institution of public knowledge better preserved for art and science in the world (retrieved from <https://www.teylersmuseum.nl/en>).

Almost all the respondents belonged to the marketing and communication department and were somehow connected and aware of – if not responsible for – the social media activity of the museum. Moreover, three interviewees represent also the top management within their organizations since one of them is the founder, one is the director and one named herself as the company leader.

Below, Table 1. gives an overview of the participants interviewed and their role. For privacy reasons only the names of the museums have been clearly mentioned. The interviewees rather than with their real names have been identified with fake ones.

Museum	Role	Fake name
Groninger Museum	Head of Communications, PR & Marketing	Fabio
TropenMuseum	Online Marketing Manager	Lorenzo
Street Art Museum Amsterdam	Founder	Eugenio
Museum Boijmans von Beuningen	Online Marketer	Susi
Rijksmuseum Muiderslot	Responsible for communication and marketing	Bea
Het Nieuwe Instituut	Online marketing and social media manager	Rozie
Kröller Müller	Senior online communication and publicity officer	Gio
FOTODOK	Director	Giudi
TextielMuseum	Social media manager and assistant in the marketing & communication department	Arthur
Nederlands Mijnmuseum	Manager-Company leader	Geya
Royal Delft	PR & Communication advisor	Rita
Natural History Museum of Maastricht	Responsible for communication and marketing	Gb
Teylers Museum	Digitalization and new media manager	Alessia

Table 1. Interviews respondents

3.6 Data collection

Data have been collected over a period of two and a half months, from the 15th of March, date of the first interview to 6th of May 2019, when the last interview guide was received via email.

Even if the best scenario would have been to conduct all the semi-structured interviews face to face, due to lack of time and limited availability of several interviewees, some of them have been interviewed either through Skype or via email. As a matter of fact, out of the 13 museums contacted, just 2 interviews were held face to face and six of them have taken place via Skype. 5 additional interviews have been carried via email, both, for facilitating the interviewer and to meet the needs of the interviewees. Even though this last approach mines the advantages proper of qualitative interviews such as flexibility and the spontaneity of the responses, restraining as well the opportunity of asking follow up questions, it has been necessary in order to broaden the sample. Nonetheless, it might have made the interviewee feel more relaxed and comfortable in the answering phase. At the same time, giving this procedure more time to reflect on the questions, it could have brought to more concise but complete and reasoned responses. Furthermore, one Skype video-call has been interrupted and continued via phone, because the line was poor.

The interviews averaged 40 minutes in length, lasting from a minimum of 35 minutes to a maximum of 1h.10 and were recorded. After that, they have been transcribed verbatim.

3.7 Interview procedure

Before starting with the interview the respondents were first informed about the topic and the academic aim of the research, secondly about the interviewing procedures, thirdly about potential risks and discomforts of participating in the research and finally about the policy treatment of their data. All the interviews have been recorded with the authorization of the respondents and the recordings and transcripts are available upon request.

Each interviewee was asked to answer several queries on the basis of an interview guide of 15 central questions, which served mainly as a general framework for the interviewer. The first couple of questions were aimed to make the two parties feel comfortable establishing a link. After this ice-breaker, a series of questions investigated the role of the interviewee, the level of expertise and knowledge as well as the overall activity done with social media, its relevance and its purpose, focusing especially on the social network platforms where the museums are available on. The following questions were instead more focused on addressing whether museums are monitoring their platforms, if they are keeping track of the activity and performance and with which perspective. The last part was more based on verifying if museums are collecting any type of data about their audience from their social media and what they are doing with it. Specifically, the

purpose was to assess if such information is the ground for making choices and if it reaches the top management, which is responsible for the strategic decision-making process. In conclusion, additional questions about the alternative tools for collecting data and the implementation of such information have been asked too.

During the entire procedure interviewees were left free to add any further relevant remark and they were encouraged to stress anything they believed to be important. This allowed gathering information and insights directly with the eyes of the interviewee, according to their experience and professionals' opinions.

3.8 Limitations

Among the limitations of the defined methodology, as stated in the previous section, external validity is the most explicit. Being the sample of this study narrow and belonging it to a specific environment, the results cannot easily be translated into different social settings and applied to a comparable and broader population.

Moreover, as mentioned before, the degree of reliability is weak in qualitative methods, but as pinpointed in the last paragraph of the general research methodology some expedients have been implemented to strengthen it.

3.9 Data analysis

Conversely to quantitative researches where precise methodologies are available to analyse statistics results, with qualitative data there are no strict analytical procedures (Bryman, 2015). The analysis process depends as a matter of fact on the epistemological assumptions at the basis of the research and on the goal and analytical direction that the researcher wants to pursue in the study. (Ritchie, Lewis, & Mc Naughton, 2003). Therefore, in light of the outlined literature, the research question and the sub-questions, *grounded theory* has been identified as the strategy for the data analysis. *Grounded theory* is believed to be the most suitable approach for this research since it is a procedure where there is no clear distinction between data collection and analysis, it is rather a continuous interaction between these two phases (Bryman, 2015). In fact, a first analysis of the results at an early stage, during the data collection itself, allowed to reshape, design and improve the following steps for data gathering and for expanding the sample. Moreover, as far as I know, no other studies on the use of social media as tools for gathering information have been found in the cultural field. Thus, with this regard, using grounded theory could be beneficial since it allows to construct, develop conceptual frameworks and add new insights to “theories grounded in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p.2), giving an in-depth perspective and going beyond simple

description.

Key process of the grounded theory is the coding procedure, which follows the transcriptions of the interviews and which is the direct result of the information obtained during the data collection (Bryman, 2015). Coding the semi-structured interviews is fundamental in the development of the analysis of data emerging within qualitative research. Indeed, having as a starting point the transcripts of the different and subjective interviewees' responses, willing to keep the meaningfulness and the value of each individual answer, it is essential to find objective, structured and cross categories, topics and themes.

As suggested by Saldana (2012), being the research a small-scale study, the analysis has been carried out coding manually on the hard copies of the transcripts, without the support of any electronic device or program. The coding has been developed on the basis of the research question and sub-questions and it followed an inductive approach, thus without using any previously formulated coding framework. Nonetheless, an operationalization of the questions has been useful to facilitate and enable the coding process.

The coding procedure has been conducted firstly through colour coding and has been structured secondly in three different stages, starting with *open coding* and moving after that towards *axial* and *selective coding*, reaching the theoretical saturation. (Bryman, 2015). Through different colours different themes, topics and phenomena have been highlighted. This facilitated the labelling of salient concepts (codes) in the open coding phase (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The interconnections and relationships among concepts have been then developed using axial coding and led to the identification of categories. The final result was given by selective codes, which allow to build up a story, a pattern, finalizing the process and enabling to answer the research question through the generation of a substantive theory.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

For the best comprehension and discussion of the interviews' results, this fourth part has been structured according to the categories emerged from the data analysis' scheme [APPENDIX 2]. Considering the outcome of the interviews such scheme grouped the findings in open, axial and selective codes outlining several topics relevant for answering the sub-questions and the research question. *Social media scenario, monitoring and collection of data, information analysis and implementation, connection with the top management, other sources of information* are the categories which summarize themes and codes connected one to another and are described in the different section of this chapter. Specifically, this fourth chapter has been organized as follows: the first section provides a portray of the general social media scenario (relevance, platforms, aim, use). After that, the monitoring and collection of data and metrics by social media managers are explored and examined. This led to the section that is deemed to be the most relevant, which is the discussion of whether there is a connection with the top management and if there is an eventual strategic implementation of such information. Finally, also other alternative sources of information are evaluated and their execution is analysed.

Despite all the findings have been outlined creating associations and comparisons (similarities and divergences) with the background literature of the second chapter, and are mainly covered by it, additional aspects have been added in line with relevant insights emerged from the opinions and experiences of the respondents.

4.2 Social media scenario

Through the analysis of the codes and of the responses of the interviewees, it has been confirmed that social media are becoming more and more relevant in museums, both for strengthening the position of museums in the market and to enhance their visitors' orientation and connection, confirming Kidd's (2010) appraisal. As a matter of fact, as it has clearly been stated by some of the respondents:

“people are ‘living’ a lot more online now, so you need to be there as well as a company” (Bea)

“social media is getting more important right now” (Arthur).

“it's a channel to the outside world. So we do need to be present” (Eugenio)

Even though for many museums the process of going online has been led by external pressures – mainly societal trends and other museums' influence – yet, several reasons still push

these institutions to use social media. Among those practical advantages stand out. Social media, especially social networks, are indeed considered by the interviewees to be useful and efficient tools because cheap, fast, handy, easily available, because they allow to produce ad-hoc content and guarantee free publicity. These findings confirm what has been stated and described in the theoretical section by Cole (2008), who acknowledges the low cost of social media, Fletcher & Lee (2012) who emphasize their personalized communication and storytelling and Muninger et al. (2019) and Hausmann, (2012) who highlights the word of mouth viral marketing power of social media.

Despite their increasing relevance, if on one hand social media are considered by some museums as “*the most important way to reach the visitors*” (Bea) for the majority of museums they are still seen as residual and as “*additional tools*” (Giudi), which are more or less formally insert in the marketing mix and in marketing strategies, when present.

4.2.1 Future improvements and limitations

Almost all the interviewees acknowledged that besides the enhancements and the rising importance that social media are acquiring in the sector, there is still room of improvement in their usage. In fact, the majority of respondents affirmed that they are not following a social media strategy – “*it’ not feasible by far*” (Arthur) – and that therefore they do not have formal goals to achieve and performances to evaluate. Next to it, many respondents claimed also that investments on social media are still too low to enable a satisfactory social media use and that thus they are currently either looking for more resources, seeking for more professionalization or are in the middle of the development of social media strategies and reorganizations. Furthermore, Rozie witnessed that there is still unexploited potential in the usage of social media by her museum and overall in the field. Only one interviewee claimed to be completely satisfied with the online activity of his museum and referring to the possibility of further developments and potential professionalization affirmed that “*I don’t see how being the way we are right now what we could do with it. It would be like trying to buy a giant engine to dig a small garden. It’s just that it doesn’t really fit right now with our organization*” (Eugenio).

According to all the interviewees, partial social media exploitation and underperformance are however mainly due to lack of resources, i.e. staff, money and time. Next to it, as demonstrated by the empirics and by Muninger et al. (2019) also the managers’ and colleagues’ lack of support and awareness of the opportunities and possibilities embedded in social media is a limitation to the full feat of social media.

Altogether these elements acknowledged by the interviewees, seem to confirm the presence of a first gap between the actual and the potential use and the activity of social media as stated by Kidd (2011) and Byrnes (2015).

4.2.2 Current developments

Nowadays social media are not just used for one-way messaging, namely for static communication and promotion, as demonstrated in the study by Fletcher, & Lee (2012). As emerged from the interviews some changes have already been made in new directions. *“Right now I’m focusing more on a narrative and ways to interact with the audience”* (Alessia). As acknowledged by Pett (2012) in the theoretical background and confirmed by the interviewees, in fact museums are gradually moving towards engagement’s creation and are increasing the interactions with the audience.

Overall the activity has already shifted *“from being aimed to the good of just one department, to be for the greater good of the whole company”* (Rita). Next to it, also according to other respondents *“it’s not the voice of a person anymore, but the voice of the museum”* (Alessia), *“before it was more just us, looking inside, now we are more open”* (Geya).

Moreover, willing to understand society and its trend, aspects perfectly mirrored in the online world, museums are gradually using social media as a means to gather information and knowledge and to always be updated with this respect,

“I think it is important to be aware of the things that are in the news so that you can actually work with them” (Alessia)

With this perspective, museums are being inspired more and more by hip values such as inclusivity and diversity, trying to satisfy the audience and connecting with the widest range possible of users.

These first sub-sections already briefly depicted the reality of social media in museums. Although social media are deemed to be relevant in the marketing activity and significant changes have already been brought about in this field, it has been observed the eagerness to enhance even more social media in order to take full advantage of their potential. However, lack of both, peer support and resources represents a threat to this willingness to improve.

4.2.3 Social media platforms

In the literature outlined in the second chapter, there is no such part that explores exactly the characteristics of the singular social media platforms and which compares their audience, content

and their general use. Since these insights emerged from the analysis are deemed to be valuable and add information relevant in the understanding of the social media scenario, they are described in the next paragraphs.

From the evaluation of the results the main platforms on which museums are available on are Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, although the attention is gradually shifting towards the former to detriment of the latter. Other social networks museums are more or less actively using are LinkedIn, Pinterest and Google Plus, whilst additional social media used are YouTube, Vimeo, SoundCloud and TripAdvisor. Some of the museums of the sample have also a profile on Google Arts&Culture, Google Business and Google Grants.

Albeit when asked the interviewees rarely affirmed that they follow a social media strategy or have a structured plan to use and implement in their online activity, the totality of them claimed that they differentiate and use the diverse platforms to share ad hoc content, with a different tone of voice and with a different perspective. Overall, no huge discrepancy has been noticed between their use in museums. Therefore, in the following lines an overview of the general use of the platforms has been delivered.

All the museums use Facebook and Instagram to mainly address the general public of consumers and visitors, whilst LinkedIn and Twitter are focused especially on professionals, governmental institutions, other organizations of the field and are more business oriented. In addition to the audience, also the content slightly changes from platform to platform. Facebook allows to share both visual content and background information, and is used to communicate to the public expositions, events, special activities and education programs. It also enables to share and promote user-generated content. Instagram is instead primarily used to post high quality and eye-catching pictures of the collection, of temporary exhibitions, events, educational programs and of all the other activities of the museum. Moreover, the audience targeted is younger, as also the average age of Instagram users is lower than the one of other platforms, *“I'm more focusing on the younger audience because I think we have the other like...advertising, newspapers and other traditional stuff to reach other audiences. But somehow I really think you have to connect those roads”* (Susi). Instagram audience is as well more international, thus almost all the accounts –but two- are managed at least both in English and Dutch, if not only in English. Interestingly, an additional feature of Instagram mentioned by Arthur is also the possibility to sell the items of the museum label. Another visual platform is Pinterest. However, only three museums still have and use this bookmark collection's tool and mainly *“as a referral channel to the website”* (Alessia).

Five out of 13 are the museums which have also a channel on either YouTube or Vimeo, or on both of them. Such tools are deemed to be residual because creating the proper content, namely videos, it is considered to be too expensive and requires specific knowledge and skilled personnel. Similarly to Instagram and Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo aim to meet the general public and the content regards expositions, educational programs and events. Furthermore, only one museum mentioned SoundCloud and another Google Plus. As a microblogging tool Twitter is employed to share academic researches and to deal with corporate topics with a formal and more institutional tone of voice and language. LinkedIn, Twitter likewise, is mainly intended for posting vacancies, job and collaboration's opportunities. Next to it, it allows also to share sectorial knowledge as well as information such as reviews, press releases, research publications, and to do corporate communication.

In general, the platforms that are considered to be the most suitable for receiving and analysing feedbacks, comments and to enhance interaction from the users are Facebook and Twitter.

In the majority of the cases the respondents affirmed that they are not following a social media strategy, inducing to think that their use is more or less intuitive. However, through the differentiation among platforms of content, purpose and audience, the online activity seems to be structured and well organized, even if not formalized yet. Moreover, such framed use allows to take advantage of each means and proves that there is awareness and sensitivity towards the different tools, their features and opportunities.

4.2.4 Aims of using social media

According to the background theoretical framework the use of social media, within a marketing perspective, can have different purposes. What is overall shared is that social media are a valuable means for promotion. Confirming what Fletcher and Lee (2012), Kidd (2010) and Cole (2008) state, all the interviewees are using social networks for “*communicating about the events, about the exhibitions and about the museum itself*” (Fabio), sometimes with educational ends, but mostly to enhance the museums' visibility. As a matter of fact, “*sharing what we're doing is a very important focus... communicating on what we are doing and developing is very important. You don't want to make an exhibition when nobody sees it*” (Giudi). Even though the distinction can be really subtle, often rather than communicating the aim is to inform. Indeed, according to some of the interviewees informing implies an educational purpose. With this respect, two among the museums also stated that educational department often cooperates with the marketing and

communication one in the creation of social media content, since *“when you bridge education and marketing you have the strongest content”* (Susi), and it is *“hugely important to inspire, influence and educate our visitors”* (Gio).

Another common aspect emerged by the study and pointed out as well by Cole (2008), Kotler et al. (2008) and Marakos (2014), is the usage of social networks for branding and for strengthening or even creating brand reputation and awareness. Specifically, Geya and Giudi mentioned that their institutions (FOTODOK and Nederlands Mijnmuseum) are not really known, therefore their main goal in using social media is to *“let people know that we exist”* (Geya). Next to it, developing special posting formats and ad hoc contents, especially on Instagram, museums are trying to translate their identity online, to express their philosophy and to communicate their values, believing that *“your page it’s like your online exteriors: you have to make sure you put your own branding and then you can really transmit your identity”* (Susi). More in depth, being online can provide to the public a concrete picture of a previously faceless organization (Pfefferle, 2009) as acknowledged as well by Arthur who affirmed that *“social media allow you to have a face online, which is necessary otherwise you will be forgotten quite soon”*.

Through both, an efficient branding as well as campaigning activity it is possible to *“give people a glimpse of what they can expect”* (Susi) reducing the information cost for the audience and sparking its attention and willingness to be involved. As stated by one of the interviewees a further aspect that goes along with making museum’s values and identity explicit, clear and transparent for the public is to allow people to recognize themselves in the museum, in its values and collection itself. Such recognition and personification of the audience with the museums’ identity recall Kidd’s (2010) inclusivity frame. Indeed, another element that has been brought up by several interviewees and which confirms Waters & Lo (2012)’s opinion, is the creation of a community, both online and offline. This helps also give people *“the feeling that they can be ambassadors for the museum”* (Alessia). However, unlike in the literature, such sense of community does not seem to be created by fostering audience engagement and involvement, it is rather developed through the sharing of the same values.

Notwithstanding, Susi specifically affirmed that she is not interested in creating an online community *“rather than having an online community I’m more interested in working with people and bringing them to the museum and they bring their friends and so on...”*. On the contrary, for other respondents creating a virtual community of supporters, together with a more persistent advertisement (online and offline), is the first step to physically bring people to the museum. This can also be one of the pursued aims of social media activity, the most commercial goal, since it directly implies increasing the ticket sales and returning the visitors. *“We want to make sure that people will find us*

and will come. As a final goal there is also implementing the increasing number of ticket sales” (Giudi), *“we use social media storytelling to encourage people to come here”* (Arthur). Though, as far as I can tell, the commercial aspect is not deemed to be one of the most relevant goals present in the literature.

Social media, through their informal, dynamic and immediate structure allow to bring people closer to the museums, as well as to *“lower the threshold. People still think that museums are a bit scary. However, it is actually true that in the last years with social networks, people are actually more easily reaching out to museums, even though they still believe that you are an authority on your collection and that you own the knowledge. Social media make it easier I think to reach out a museum”* (Alessia). A resulting reflection that comes directly from this aspect is the democratization of knowledge and of cultural participation because *“now it's easier to go to a museum because of Instagram. Because people experience that they don't need to have knowledge anymore to go there. Which I think is a good thing because it democratizes the institution”* (Susi). Both these aspects of democratization, reducing the gap between museum and visitors and providing more easily available information (Sassen, 2002), match with what has been highlighted in the literature review. However, in the realization of the democratization process, engagement, involvement and participation are given more relevance in the theoretical framework analysed in the second chapter. Even if democratization of art through social media is still quite debatable, as stated by Moreono (2007), this is an actual and emerging topic. Yet, the attention is not only on social networks, but on all the other virtual museum’s outputs, that can *“reach a far wider audience than is possible via the turnstiles”* and *“which make virtual access to museums more common”* (Johnson & Thomas, 1998, p.77). Tools such as Google Arts & Culture and online museum’s collections belong to this category.

A further function of social media that has been pointed out by employees of three museums, is to be the main referral to increase the traffic of the website, which for many of these organizations is still the central channel with the outside world.

“Social media are our most important source to reach customers.” (Bea)

“Yes of course it is also broadening the audience” (Fabio)

“As an institution we mainly use social media to create a broader audience, to reach more people”

(Alessia)

“social media are really important too to target our actual and potential audience” (Rozie)

Attesting the connection that has been made in the theoretical framework, the analysis of the interviewee's responses validates that, next to promotion and branding, social media are also used for audience development. Overall, this can be something implicit since *"social media brought up a much bigger world as well"* (Giudi), which confirms the belief that social media allow having – at least potentially – access to a worldwide audience (Fletcher & Lee, 2012, Padilla-Meléndez, del Águila-Obra, 2013). Nowadays audience development is mostly focused on the millennials and the young audience, especially through Instagram, which is a *"quite important social network because you can reach a new target group, a younger target group"*. (Rozie)

For increasing the audience engagement only one interviewee mentioned a specific strategy and activity. In fact, Arthur and his team are now working with *"art quizzes where you ask about certain artworks, like for example who is the artist? And you give them two options and they can click on either one... This is really something to beat the algorithm and to increase audience participation"*. Nonetheless, he was not the only one assessing the importance of audience engagement: *"I really think that social are really important for engagement as well"* (Rozie), *"Becoming more inclusive and being inspired by diversity we are and trying to reach a broader audience"* (Susi), *"Social networks are a great way to engage with visitors... On FB for instance there is the possibility to create a conversation with the public"* (Bea). Besides the art quizzes case, according to what has been observed in the majority of the museums, audience involvement is generally pursued keeping the public updated about the organization's activity and sharing continuously information (McClellan, 2003).

Conversely to the theory, where the co-creation aspect plays a relevant role, none of the interviewees mentioned co-creation or, using the definition by Kidd (2010), the collaborative frame. However, two of the interviewees briefly mentioned that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can also be used for user-generated content. Therefore, it is possible to assume that partially also some co-creation is done, but it is not one of the main purposes in using social media.

Altogether, besides the different nuances in the use of social media all the interviewees recognize the importance of being coherent with the museum's mission, vision, identity, being responsible for the collection. Moreover, having an efficient and persistent virtual activity *"It's a way to stay relevant and hopefully top of mind"* (Alessia).

Surprisingly, all the goals pursued through the social media activity described in the theoretical framework have also been observed in the findings, which however outlined a couple of additional aspects and/or slight divergences, that need to be acknowledged.

Firstly, in the previous studies on the topic, little has been said about the educational purpose of the social media activity and about the link between the communication department and the educational one. This aspect has been brought up only by two of the respondents but is deemed to be important. Indeed, having an educational perspective in the online activity is not only something that refers to the sharing of knowledge per se, but it is for the sake of society and its development. More fundamentally, it is an aspect embedded in the mission of the museum institution itself, since a museum “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment” (ICOM, 2007).

Secondly, among the purposes of social media activity, commercial goals such as increasing the ticket sales and returning and bringing visitors in the museum, have not been observed as the primary concern in the previous researches examined in the literature. Nonetheless, aspects that embody a commercial side like advertising, promotion and communication have been pinpointed. Even though these aspects seemed to be more related to enhancing online visibility rather than being aimed to have implications and consequences on the activity that takes place on the museum’s venue, this is something implicit. In other words, communicating programs, sponsoring expositions and giving an overview of what can be found in the museum, can be considered as instrumental for catching the attention of the online public and to encourage it to go visit the museum. Acting in order to enhance this transition from the virtual to the offline reality demonstrates that there is recognition in the sector of the strong link between the online and the offline world, and that social media can be essential for the survival of the institution itself and for the support of its activity.

4.3 Social media as information gathering tools

Nowadays social media are obtaining more and more recognition – and are actually used – by businesses as a source of data collection, monitoring and analysis (Balbi, Misuraca, Scepi, 2018). As a consequence of the increase in the use of such media also the amount and variety of data available online are growing, making these channels even more valuable for generating useful information in different fields (Bright et al., 2014). Apparently, this is not the case of the museum sector, according to the analysis of the answers of the sample interviewed.

4.3.1 Platforms' monitoring

Although the totality of interviewees stated that they are monitoring their platforms, they are mainly doing it for evaluating their online performance, to know their effectiveness and to track their activity and social media's effort, aiming afterwards to improve it.

"we want to see what we are doing good and what we are not" (Fabio)

"It's more to keep track of our activity and results, for understanding what works and what does not. It is also to be able to share outstanding results" (Rozie)

"we see what platforms work and which one does not, and how people react on it. So more on a daily basis we actually work on it and do act on it. And if we see that "hey, this work really good", this kind of image, then we use it more often and this is more on a daily basis, but not yet ...not on a large or yearly strategy" (Fabio)

"it's for monitoring our brand online" (Rita)

"We check our total reach every month to see if our audience has grown and how much. We check our campaigns and look for posts that worked and those that didn't, trying to find an answer for the ones that didn't" (Gb)

"it's to analyse how the posts are doing and...and listen to pieces of advice in order to know how we can improve future posts" (Giudi).

"We monitor to have the empirics which prove the performance and the results" (Alessia)

As coming to light from these citations, data available through online platforms seem to be collected and analysed to support solely the virtual activity; it does not seem to be any connection between the online deduced knowledge and the offline world. In other words, everything gathered from the monitoring online is primarily used within social media to improve: the upcoming campaigns, the messages posted in the different platforms, the posts, to increase the accounts' reach and also to improve the website itself. More in depth the metrics being monitored and checked are for almost all the respondents the same: likes, comments, the number of followers, the number of online visitors, the posts, the reach, the views, the campaigns, the website traffic.

In general, the monitoring process takes place at the end of each campaign and periodically for single posts, whilst for the overall platform's performance either weekly or monthly for the most active users, and once a quarter or once a year for the rest of the interviewees. Some of the people interviewed said that they are collecting all the information gathered through social media in formal reports which they regularly share with their colleagues and send to their direct manager, i.e. the marketing manager. Albeit the respondents do not know what their managers are exactly doing with

that information afterwards, two of them stated that they are also merged with other data and delivered as documents for government and funds institutions.

4.3.2 Data collection and analysis

Next to monitoring the trends and performances of the accounts, two interviewees affirmed to also collect data about the demographics (age, gender, nationality...) of their audience. If on one hand one person specifically claimed that she has never thought about social media as a tool to collect information about the audience, on the other hand another interviewee stated that altogether such information allows his team to get a better understanding of their audience, which is fundamental for the development of their activity, both, online and offline. The rest of the interviewees do not collect information from the external environment (stakeholders) and specifically about the audience through their social media platforms. Nevertheless, through the analysis of their accounts two interviewees managed to recognize to have a “community”, a base of ambassadors that become useful and advantageous especially in difficult circumstances since they are the best promoters and supporters of the museum. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge their presence in this perspective, also according to Stieglitz et al. (2018), Stieglitz et al. (2014) Bi et al. (2014).

Next to these functions, data available on social media are also examined to have information of both the online and offline museums’ reputation.

As stated by Bright et al. (2014) collecting data and deducing meaningful information from social media do not only require specific knowledge, but also specific methodologies and tools. The totality of respondents uses primarily the statistics and the analytics provided directly by the platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter Analytics) as online means for the data collection, analysis and also for the monitoring of the accounts. Next to it, almost all the organizations reported to have also a look at Google Analytics and some of them mentioned specific platforms too (Hootsuite, Later, Buffer, tagboard, Tweeddeck). Nonetheless, two interviewees stated that they are collecting and analysing the data personally and intuitively, and since they are the only people managing and analysing the accounts of their small organizations they do not need additional tools or analysis strategies for doing it.

Besides using these mediums none of the interviewees said to be following a specific strategy and methodology neither to collect nor to analyse the gathered information. Indeed, only three of them mentioned to be aware of the sentiment analysis’ possibility. One of them is able to develop it virtually, thank to the help of a volunteer who is an online expert, while another one is

more or less doing it manually. However, from what has been observed, more or less all the interviewees are carrying out SMA. Indeed, even if without being aware of it, respondents have been transforming raw data available on their platforms into information meaningful for their internal purposes and are after that evaluating it. This process is at the basis of SMA as stated by Stieglitz et al. (2014).

4.3.3 The value of feedback

One of the most important aspects of social media is that they allow users to share their opinions, reflections, impressions, reactions and new ideas (Lee, et al. 2012, Adrienne Fletcher & Moon J. Lee, Muninger et al, 2019). Also from the majority of research's respondents this feature has been recognized as valuable. In fact, in addition to the metrics above mentioned, feedbacks are overall deemed to be important, when present.

“We listen and answer to feedbacks, and we discuss them during our meetings” (Lorenzo)

“for us feedback is really important! We have to listen to it” (Rita)

“We do listen to feedbacks, is the only logical thing to do. If we don't listen to our audience, we have no future. We need to interact, to listen and to evolve, together with our audience” (Gb).

“Social media is the perfect medium to also hear from people and get reactions” (Fabio).

Following the suggestions of the users the NHMM even created a new and ad hoc hashtag, #FossilFriday. Again though, this is something that concerns the online activity. Notwithstanding, several interviewees stated that they are not receiving any useful feedback from their online platforms, either because they are not really asking for it, because they do not post anything about their collection and events online, or simply because users are not delivering them. With respect to the last remark, Alessia and Giudi have noticed that in the last few years there has been a general trend not to comment anymore, *“you just see people liking things they are not commenting anymore”* (Alessia).

Finally, on one hand some of the interviewees are not interested in collecting data from the online public and listening to the online feedbacks, on the other hand some of the museums do not know how they could use these data and how this information could be fruitful for them.

4.3.4 Limitations to data analysis

Although all the people interviewed are collecting some data from their social media and are gathering feedbacks, acquiring somehow knowledge from it, this process is not that established and formalized yet. This is mainly due to time constraints, which go along with lack of money and staff. As a matter of fact, many of the interviewees stated that they would like to have more time and

more occasions to check and monitor their platforms and that they wish they could do more with their inputs. In the majority of the cases, there is the willingness to move towards a more effective collection, analysis and implementation of such information.

“we have a look at all the information but we do not act on it yet. I would like to have more time to have a look at the results and after that to make new strategies on it. But that’s more an ambition for the future.” (Fabio)

“Maybe we could improve this aspect with our new plan. But I’m not sure if we constantly will be able to look at those results, you know? Because analysing does take quite some time. So I think it is something that has to be done, but I’m not sure if in real life.” (Arthur)

However, next to time, staff and money constraints, as mentioned in the second quote by Arthur, also the practical feasibility is seen as a limitation and has been questioned. Next to it, a further element witnessed by a couple of respondents, which could justify the lack of interest in doing online analysis on the public, is also that according to them, there is an inconsistency between the audience online and the offline public. In other words, there is a difference between the online audience and the museum’s visitors, therefore *“you cannot really use the information collected through our social and fuse them for our strategy and to get people to the museum”* (Alessia).

4.3.5 Offline implementation of information

As previously highlighted, the majority of the information collected by museums via social media, since it measures mainly the performance of the online platforms, is used to enhance such activity. However, some of the interviewees that are collecting also information from and about the audience and that are listening to its online feedbacks, stated that they are trying to implement what learned from the virtual world also to improve and shape their offline offer. For instance, Giudi said *“we learn from online comments also for the offline world. There is a wide range of things we learn from the feedback we get, but we are still in that phase of learning how we can process relevant feedbacks in a way that makes us better as well”*. Next to it also Bea stated that *“On FB there is the possibility to be in conversation with them as well or we can see conversations between visitors, so in that way we can see what they like/want and in that way we can adjust what we offer”*. These actions represent the first attempt to make knowledge gathered through data available online useful for the organization as a whole and for supporting the strategic decisions regarding the general museum’s activity. Coming this information from and being it about the audience, its preferences and its needs, this attitude represents also a step towards a more visitor-oriented approach. Nonetheless, in this regard, one interviewee demonstrated to be against the development of a visitor-oriented reality, since she does not believe that taking more into consideration public’s

opinions, will and needs within a strategic perspective is the direction to take. Even if she thinks that it could be useful to collect more data about the audience through social media, according to her such information cannot be used to reshape and rethink the museum's activity and position in the leisure market because *“you cannot really change the core, you know? It's impossible for me. Also because people maybe don't know yet what they like and what they really need [...]for example what I see in the X Museum, they're really moving towards the public and you see that in their marketing and in some exhibitions they do. But for me it becomes less authentic. So then no, I would not a device to change it”* (Susi). However, trying to satisfy the public's demand and trying to implement valuable suggestions coming from the customers, does not necessarily imply to give away authority, integrity and consistency, what should be not be negotiated is the coherence with the mission.

4.4 Management, social media and decision making

The literature about social media as a tool for gathering the information that could ground, support and ease decision making is rich and has been presented in the second chapter. Yet, none of the respondents when asked mentioned that there is a strict connection between their work, the information collected through social media and the top management and its activity. Some of the interviewees who collect data from the museum's accounts do not even share them neither with their direct manager nor with the top management. This is already a meaningful insight in the attempt to answer the RQ, as providing the management with such formal documents and data is considered to be the essential to support the management in the decision making (Tsou et al., 2015). Only one out of 13 respondents stated that she is actually giving the marketing management a structured Sales and Marketing report whilst other two interviewees are giving the management their “numbers”, i.e. likes, followers, total online visits, the score of the weekly results, views, website traffic. Moreover, two people although stating that they have not many connections with the top management are notifying it – besides their numbers – also the biggest questions, issues and remarks, positive as well as negative feedbacks and comments coming from their social accounts. What is necessary to acknowledge though is that three among the people interviewed represent also the top management in their small organizations. Therefore, in these circumstances, the connection between social and management is implicit and unavoidable. Notwithstanding none of them is neither using information collected from social media to ground their decision-making process nor letting it inspire them.

“also for us, it is important to let the management know that social media is getting more and more important for the museum, this could allow us to receive also more resources and to improve our activity” (Fabio)

“people who work here don't really know how social media work and how they can be related to the rest of the museum's activity. So I'm thinking of ways to connect social media to the essence of our museum and let them know what I know and I deem as important” (Susi)

“the management does not realize what the impact is, what the lack of impact is here and there, since there is no real communication about the strategy, the aims and the purposes of such activity” (Alessia)

As mentioned by Colbert, Yee, & George (2016) and as witnessed by some of the interviewees, in order to best exploit the potential of social media the top management needs to be aware and updated about social media activity and must recognize the useful features and the overall significance of them. Hence, the above-cited respondents are now trying to “educate” their top management, making them understand the role and the power of social media, which is not only related to numbers and quantitative aspects. Indeed, if on one hand sharing with the top management the information collected should be the first step to create a link with it, on the other hand, if the top management is not asking for this information because it is not aware of its relevance, it is more likely that it will not receive it. Therefore, providing the top management with new insights on social media and their use results to be quite urgent since, as emerged from several interviews, sometimes people responsible for social media and the top management are not even on the same line in the identification of valuable aspects, targets and performances. *“I think different numbers are important than the one deemed to be relevant by management”* (Alessia). As a matter of fact, the top management still seems to have a quantitative focus. The management is apparently more interested in numbers that enable to attest the results achieved and to evaluate and compare the overall performance. On the contrary, people in charge of social media are gradually recognizing that rather than quantity, what really counts in the online world is quality, altogether with interaction and engagement.

Yet, trying to create a link and a connection with the top management, according to one of the interviewees *“it is still difficult to understand what the management wants to know, also because they do not generally ask for information”* (Rozie). Therefore, sometimes a further limit in the development of this bond is also the complexity in understanding what managers want and what is the information needed. Moreover, she even mentioned that one of the constraints she is facing, is the complex structure and the size of her organization, which makes it more difficult to communicate information.

Even though almost all the interviewees stated that there is no strong connection with the management, in several cases it was the top management to push for the creation of the first social network account of the institutions. Moreover, in some museums the top management is even giving some inputs to the communication department or to the social media for their online activity. According to two interviewees, it is specifically the head of collection or the creative director who is creating a bridge with the social media area. Often the top management advises the people responsible for social media, but it may happen the other way around. As a matter of fact, in some museums the marketing and communication department advises the management, *“I do advise the management and the curators of course for our exhibition planning. For instance, if there is an exhibition that I expect is not that quite instagrammable and not really nice for visual socials then we have to think about another exhibition next to that one that is instagrammable. So in that case we advise the director. More generally though we think of engaging campaigns to overcome this “issue”. And of course, they are not always taking into consideration our advice, but still”* (Fabio). Furthermore, in one museum the person in charge of social media specifically gives pieces of advice on how to better target the audience, especially the younger one.

When questioned about the link with the management and about a possible scenario where relying more on social media information to ground the decision-making process, different were the interviewee reactions. According to Rita *“there is not enough connection at the moment. Though there are organisational changes taking place at the moment which I hope should increase this connection.”*. For her this lack is also the reason why the top management has not seen the necessity yet to ground strategic decisions with social media information, since *“other matters were deemed more important”*. Nonetheless, she stated that this is something that she wants to implement in the future. Similarly, to her position also Giudi claimed that for her organization implementing strategic changes through social media is the new challenge. In Gb’s perspective *“Social media are important, but the top management doesn't yet fully see the need for a larger approach online”*. Hence, his wish is that social media will be more relevant in the future, depending on the new social media strategy. Alessia instead believes that having more information from the social media to grounding strategic decision making could be useful, but she sees her museum as a traditional one, that wants to be the absolute authority. There must be still a top-down process in deciding what the audience has to see.

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that even if in some cases the top management was the first promoter of the online activity, currently rather than with the top management, people

responsible for social media are connecting and sharing their information with the middle management, i.e. marketing managers and marketers. In fact, it has been observed that often the top management does not even receive this information. This explains also why the decisions driven by information collected through social media concern mainly the marketing and communication sphere and the overall online world and not really strategic and long term ones, which is instead direct responsibility of the top management. Nonetheless, since managers are deemed to lack of knowledge about the potential of social media and being the people in charge of social media willing to improve this condition and enhance their awareness, they are now trying to inform the top management in order to pursue a more efficient use of these platforms.

However, since as acknowledged by Byrnes (2014) organizations cannot work without information, they must collect it through different sources, this is why in my research I investigated also the other tools used.

4.5 Other tools?

Only a minority of interviewees, as pointed out in the previous paragraphs, are using social media to collect information about the audience, therefore in this section the other alternative means that are used with this purpose are examined.

The most cited methods are surveys, both online and offline, and face to face interviews. Many are also the institutions that carry desk researches directly in the museum's venues, where employees ask to visitor's for more or less structured feedbacks, which sometimes come spontaneously from the public itself. Only one respondent mentioned that the museum she works for is gathering data from focus groups. Moreover, when data are collected online, the process takes place mainly via emails, e-newsletters or media researches (online panels or sources such as CBS...). Next to these approaches, especially in small size museums, tools such as guest books, paper cards and feedback forms are still used to collect information and are still proving valuable and interesting insights, though old-fashioned.

“The data we receive is used to improve the visitors' experience” (Rita)

“We use the outcome to make more targeted campaigns, to adjust what we offer and to improve our marketing tools” (Bea)

“my colleagues use the feedback to implement in all the changes, they are like changing the museum” (Arthur)

“so then based on the feedback we improve or try to do something different...we improve the process” (Eugenio)

Hence, the information drawn from these methods, unlike the data that are gathered through social media, are used mainly to improve offline aspects and the overall museum's activity, with the purpose of satisfying the needs of the public and to better meet the audience demand.

Several interviewees affirmed that starting from feedbacks received during the exposition in its progress it has been possible to improve the exhibition itself. As a matter of fact, Alessia stated that *"We had a big exhibition and in the first two weeks we had really difficulties to show people the way through the museum. 'Cause it's quite a complex building. So we took also all the comments and we improved that, so later the all routine went more smoothly than before"*. Yet, in this case, the changes implemented seem to be more practical and to involve even material and physical aspects.

Giudi mentioned instead that learning from the 5% of very critical and negative feedbacks of a past exhibition, when designing and preparing new exhibitions, they now always *"make sure that more perspectives are included, that we are more thoughtful on the content and the representation, that we spend more time and energy in perfectly defining the context"*. This demonstrates that in some realities valuable feedbacks are even employed to improve the curatorial process and to increase the artistic relevance of the institution's activity.

Furthermore, according to Rozie *"the point of these feedbacks is that we can use that information to inform the ones internally responsible. For example, if there are many complaints about a certain project, you can inform the project leader. He can look into that, at all the complaints and then he can consider those to improve the production"*. Thus, in this case again the connection is more with the middle management rather than the top management and the improvements are made on practical and immediate aspects, not strategical and long term features.

In contrast to what emerged from the analysis of data collected and analysed from social media, which are primarily used to enhance the online activity, what has been highlighted in this section is that information collected through other tools is used mainly to bring about changes and improvements in the offline museum's activity, namely the overall cultural offer and the visitors' experience. Listening to the audience, its suggestions and feedbacks in the attempt to better meet the demand's needs seems to be in line with Jones' (2015) opinion about the growing importance of audience analysis in cultural organizations.

5. Conclusion

In this fifth and last chapter of the thesis the most relevant results obtained from the data analysis are outlined and examined, seeking to answer the sub-questions and the main research question: *“To what extent social media are used as an information gathering tool for grounding strategic decision making in museums?”*. In light of the findings, the role of social media as tools to gather information useful for strategic decision making in museums has been clarified and is described as follows.

The analysis of the data suggests that all the respondents are actually gathering data from their social media, even if not constantly. However, the collected data mainly provide information about the usage statistics of the museum-owned social media accounts to track and improve their performance. Moreover, only some museums are also gathering specific data about the audience and some of the respondents are listening to the public’s feedbacks and opinions available online. Additional information obtained from social media regards general society’s trends and the museum’s reputation.

Data are collected generally using the analytics and statistics programs directly available on the platforms. Additional ad-hoc tools are used, but by a minority of museums. Personal analysis without any type of digital assistance is carried out by two interviewees.

Data are rarely processed, transformed into knowledge and implemented for the offline offerings of the museums, and sometimes are not used at all. Almost all the museums that are using data emerging from the monitoring of their platforms are implementing them to better design and enhance the content shared online (campaigns, posts, messages) trying to satisfy the audience’s preferences. Only some of the museums that are dealing with data about their public and feedback from their audience are implementing this information into the offline activity. However, the willingness to improve and enhance these procedures has been shown by the majority of the interviewees.

The lack of constant data collection, investigation and processing, according to the interviewees, is mainly due to both practical and systematic aspects. The practical aspects concern lacks of time, of money and of a sufficient number of skilled staff, whilst the systematic aspect refers to the belief that there is a gap between the online audience and the attending public offline, namely the visitors. This inconsistency is deemed to render the data collection and analysis irrelevant to improve the offerings, since the online and offline customers are seen as distinct and separate target groups that do not have the same demands. Nonetheless, an analysis of these social media data could be helpful to address a new market segment that is not served by the current offerings yet. Furthermore, to be useful data do not necessarily have to be representative of the

entire population, their relevance depends on the goals that museums want to pursue. Finally, a lack of interest has also been observed in a minority of the sample as a justification to not invest in data collection, investigation and processing.

Interestingly, whereas businesses are demonstrating to be more and more focused on developing strategies to exploit the social media data, primarily to adjust their offer according to customers' preferences and needs, museums are lagging behind enterprises with this respect. In fact, coherently with what emerged in the previous researches, the findings demonstrated that social media in museums are still mainly used for purposes such as communicating, promoting and engaging, all activities which are somehow aimed to create a connection with the audience. Through these practices, social media should enable museums to become more “‘responsive’, ‘transformative’, ‘connected’, ‘engaged’, ‘medialized’, ‘total’, ‘participatory’, ‘digital’, ‘virtual’” (Holdgaard & Klasttrup, 2014, p.191). Yet, a further step in lowering the threshold between the institution and its public and creating a stronger bond between the two parties could be using their data derived from the organization's online platforms. These data are indeed more or less easily and rapidly accessible online and to a certain extent they are already collected and intuitively analysed from the institutions. Processing them in a more structured way could lead to better understand the audience and its needs. This is essential to refine the offer and to redesign the museum activity and strategy. Overall, this is a main value add of marketing, partially adjusting the consumer experience and the offered service according to the public's preferences and needs, helping museums create more solid value for their public. Exploiting the advantages of social media could be a further element to support, structure and guide strategic planning.

Nonetheless, albeit museums are not using social media to collect that much information from the environment, it has to be acknowledged that museums do collect information about the stakeholders, but through surveys, interviews, focus groups and various other more traditional methodologies. Often such information is used to strengthen the museums' position, to improve the museums' activity and offer, keeping the organization relevant, even though conversely to the literature, not all the museums have demonstrated to implement a visitor-oriented approach. In general, even if the museums are interested in the public's opinion, from what has been observed, they do not seem ready yet to really implement it. Even when they do act on it, it is still something residual.

Finally, in answering the Research Question, overall, the results of the interviews demonstrate that in the museums, the information drawn from social media is not used to ground strategic decision making yet. Besides the lacks and limitations already described, this happens partially because the management does not seem to be aware, and even when aware it does not

seem to be interested, in this social media feature. Collecting, processing and using information derived from the online activity is not considered urgent and is not among management's priorities and main concerns. Besides, social media are not seen as a means to collect valuable and reliable information yet, if not only for improving the online performance itself. Information about the public, which could be used strategically by the museums, is already collected through other more traditional and known tools. Another important finding is the lack of information sharing and information accessibility for many museum top managers. As a consequence, this prevents the use of information derived from social media from a strategic perspective. Only in the communication and marketing department of two museums people responsible for social media are trying to take the first steps to improve and better adapt the offering according to the information collected online.

Altogether, considering the findings about the social media activity in museums, there is still that gap between their potential and their actual use that Kidd (2010) and Byrnes (2015) acknowledged in their works.

In conclusion, the output of this research is a substantive theory in its early stages and can be expressed as follows. Social media in museums are not yet used for collecting information as they could be and as they are in the other fields. This is mainly due to both lack of awareness and interest and of shortage resources (money, time, staff).

5.1 Limitations and implications for future research

Although this study has been carefully designed and organized seeking to lower errors due to the methodology and biases that might have been caused by the author's subjectivity, some limitations must be acknowledged.

The qualitative method of this study has allowed to develop a fruitful discussion on the subject matter, leading to the identification of a substantive theory. However, this is just a first attempt to investigate such a complex and rapidly changing phenomenon, since the study itself has been limited in the scope by the focus on a sample of only 13 institutions. This sub-sample, even if considered to be appropriate for the type of research, is narrow and belongs to a specific environment. Thus, the results cannot easily be generalized, lowering the overall degree of representativeness. Nonetheless, broadening the sample could be the purpose of a future research.

A further limitation in the methodology of the present research concerns the interview procedures, which might have had an impact on the responses of the interviewees. Indeed, interviews have been conducted either via Skype, or via e-mail or face to face. These are all different procedures with different pros and cons, as highlighted in the third chapter. Therefore, the lack of a unique approach could have affected the consistency of the results. Next to it also the

language could have been a barrier and could have compromised the communication and exchange of information during the interviews.

Yet, bearing in mind these limitations, starting from this study, a broader academic research could be developed following a quantitative method. A quantitative method would allow to gather more transparent and measurable data, minimizing errors and biases due to the authors subjectivity. Using a quantitative approach would enable to enhance the reliability and would imply having faster and more standardized responses. Moreover, it could be useful for testing the substantive theory emerged from this study.

Lastly, extending the investigation to the top management could be the starting point for a further future examination. This could bring to valuable insights and interesting outcomes and to have a broader overview of all the actors involved in this scenario.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Interview Guide

1. To what extent are social media relevant in your organization?
2. When did you start using social media?
3. As an institution, on how many social media are you available? Which one do you use the most? What kind of content do you share online?
4. Are you and/or your colleague(s) satisfied with the activity that you are conducting on the social media? Do you think you are exploiting the overall potential of social media?
5. Are social media a tool that is embedded with the marketing and communication plan of your institution? Are you employing a social media strategy?
6. Why and how do you use social media as an institution? What do you want to achieve through social media?
7. Do you monitor your accounts and their outputs? Why? Which kind of data do you monitor and collect? How? What about users' feedbacks?
8. Do you analyse the information collected?
9. What do you do once you have processed the info gathered?
10. Who is aware of this information?
11. Who does elaborate and deal with them?
12. Do you share this information with the top management? Do you inform it with the insights that you have obtained? Is there any kind of connection between the work done on social media and top management?
13. Is somehow the information gathered through social media affecting the decision-making process? Is the top management involved in decisions driven by data collected through social media information or by social media insights?
14. How do you alternatively collect this kind of data and feedbacks, if at all? How do you look at what consumers/public want?
15. How do you use this information?

APPENDIX 2: Coding Table

Open code	Axial code	Selective code	
Reach the audience	Visitors orientation	Relevance of social media	
Inspire visitors			
Influence visitors			
Educate visitors			
Connect with audience			
Understanding trends and society	Museum perspective		
Face online			
Brand awareness			
Museum's reputation			
Commercial			
Communication			
Channel to the outside world	Practical Advantages		
Free publicity			
Powerful			
Handy			
Easily available			
Ad hoc			
Fast			
Cheap			
Lack of Professionalization	Improvement		
Additional tool	Purpose	Changes in social media usage	
Advertisement			
Interaction			
Engagement			
For museum's image			
More Instagram			Platform
Museum's voice			Point of view
Open perspective			Content
Storytelling			
Specific	Values		
Diversity			
Collection's responsibility			
No government pressure	External pressures	Reasons to go online	
Digitalization process			
Societal pressure			
Trends			
Inspiration			
Marketers 'influences	Internal pressures		
Communication's department pressure			
Management's input			
Facebook	Social networks	Social media scenario	
Instagram			
Twitter			
LinkedIn			

Flickr		
Google Plus		
Pinterest		
You Tube		
Vimeo	Video/music sharing	
SoundCloud		
Google Business		
Google Grants		
Google	Internet	
Google Museums		
TripAdvisor	Reviews	
Upcoming/ past/ partner's events		
Education programs	Content	Facebook
Expositions		
Background information		
Storytelling		
Pictures		
Special activities		
User generated		
Consumers	Audience	
Visitors		
Collaborations	Content	LinkedIn
Knowledge		
Reviews		
Press release		
Corporate communication		
Research publications		
Formal		
Municipalities	Audience	
Professionals		
Business		
Consumers	Audience	Pinterest
Visual	Content	
Pictures		
Referral to website	Aim	
Visitors	Audience	Instagram
Consumers		
Young		
Education programs	Content	
Beautiful		
Collection		
Pictures		
Events		
Expositions		
User generated		
Shorter posts	Features	
Visual		
Selling items		
Visitors	Audience	You Tube

Consumers			
Residual	Tool		
Expensive			
Expositions			
Education programs			
Events	Content		
User generated			
Videos			
Academic research	Content		
Corporate topics			
Business	Audience	Twitter	
Formal	Tone of voice		
Institutional			
Education programs			
Video	Content	Vimeo	
Exhibition			
Education purposes	Content	Sound Cloud	
Increase involvement			
Increase reach			
More differentiation			
More solid content			
professionalization			
New formats			
More connection with the audience			
Advertisement			
Colleagues/management recognition		Recognition	
Outside recognition			
Unexploited potential		Awareness	
Work in progress			
Lack of time		Limitations	
Lack of staff			
Not feasible			
Towards professionalization			
Useful to set goals			
Unformal			
In the future			
No specific goal			
Content based			
In phase of development			
Fulfilling the mission			
How?			
In line with mission, vision and values			
Necessary			
In the language			
In the tone of voice			
Not a concern			
Audience Engagement			
Conversation with visitors			

Younger audience	Connection with the audience	Aim of social media usage
New target markets		
Find/broaden/reach out the audience		
Activities	Communicate	
Products		
Events		
Exhibitions		
Collection		
USP		
Museum		
Spread the knowledge	Inform	
Education	Commercial goal	
Returning visitors		
Advertise		
Increasing ticket sales		
Traffic to the web site		
Diversity	Values	
Sense of community		
Inclusivity		
Lower the threshold		
Increase brand reputation	Public's awareness	
Branding		
We exist		
Stay relevant		
Brand awareness		
On top of the mind		
Inspire		
Listen	Aim	Monitoring and collection of data
Respond		
Discuss		
Improve		
Effectiveness	Information	
Visitors' Identity (demographics)		
Visitors' preferences		
Visitors' needs	Metrics	
Everything interesting		
Likes		
Comments		
Followers		
Visitors		
Posts		
Campaigns		
Manually		
Twitter Analytics		
Buffer		
No method		
Statistics		
Google Analytics		

Hootsuite	Tools	
Later		
Instagram Analytics		
Tagboard		
Facebook Analytics	Limitations	Information analysis
Lack of knowledge		
Lack of useful feedbacks		
Lack of time		
Lack of staff		
Time consuming		
Lack of money	Analysis purpose	Implementation of information collected
Audience understanding		
Content efficacy		
Audience age		
Results' tracking		
Museum's performance		
Benchmark	Offline Improvements	
Production		
No collections/events' changes		
Offer	Documents	
Report for Sales& Marketing		
Report for government and funds		
Report with monitoring numbers	Improvements online	
Campaigns		
Messages		
Website		
Reach		
Posts		
Followers suggestions	Inform	
Internally responsible		
Management	Inform management	Connection with the top management
Big issues/questions/remarks		
Report of monitoring data		
Tracking links		
Feedbacks		
Visits	Management's reaction	
Inputs		
Feedbacks		
Organizational changes		
Advising management	Lack of management involvement	
Approval		
No awareness		
No connection	Obstacles	Grounding decision- making process
Lack of money		
Lack of time		
No visitor oriented	Action	
Online approval		
Visitor survey		

Visitors Feedbacks forms	In the venue	Alternative sources for collecting information
Focus groups		
Talking and asking visitors		
Desk research		
Visitors' research		
Paper cards		
Guest book		
Direct feedback		
Emails	Online	
Direct messages		
Media research		
For targeted campaigns	Marketing actions	Implementation of information from alternative sources
Enhancing marketing tools		
Visitors' satisfaction	Better meeting visitors' needs	
Visitors' experience	Improving the offer	
Changes in the museums		
Improve the process		
Doing something different		
Consider more perspectives		
Adjusting the offer		