INTERNSHIPS AS STRATEGIC ASSETS:

FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT AND TRUST IN MUSEUMS

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CASE STUDY OF THE PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

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CC4150 Master Thesis

13 June 2025

Abstract

This thesis examines the design of internship programs to foster intern engagement, establish mutual trust, and co-create institutional value within museums. It investigates how motivated interns enhance a museum's image in the eyes of its audience. However, the concept of trust is only researched from the intern's perspective, not the visitors.

To explore these concepts, this research uses the Peggy Guggenheim Collection (PGC) in Venice as a case study. The PGC's example examines how structured internship programs shape intern motivation, drawing on theories of employee engagement, value co-creation, trust, and internal marketing. The research is grounded in a qualitative methodology, based on in-depth semi-structured interviews that provide relevant findings to explore the research questions from both the interns' and the museum's perspectives.

Findings show that while interns are initially highly motivated, often drawn by the museum's prestige, this engagement is difficult to sustain without meaningful tasks, transparent communication, and opportunities for creative contribution.

Interns reported that giving public talks and interacting with visitors were the most fulfilling aspects of their role, enhancing both their sense of purpose and the museum's public image. These moments of agency illustrate how interns function as brand ambassadors and informal educators, actively participating in value co-creation.

The findings highlight the need for better alignment between internship structures and interns' academic aspirations and skills. Autonomy, timely feedback, and a transparent system for departmental placements emerged as critical for fostering engagement and trust. The museum introduced structural innovations in the past year responding to most feedback.

This study contributes to museum management literature by demonstrating that well-designed internships can serve not only as educational tools but also as strategic mechanisms for trust-building and long-term employee engagement. It concludes with recommendations for museums to reimagine internship programs as mutually beneficial partnerships that empower interns and enhance institutional relational value.

Keywords: intern engagement, mutual trust, value co-creation, structured internship programs, empowering tasks

Word count: 18, 665

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1. Introduction

Everybody knows how significantly museums depend on people, renowned curators, artists, and the director. However, we tend to overlook the role of less obvious positions, such as interns. In the fall of 2023, I had the opportunity to intern for two months at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. During this time, I supported the museum's operations each day by welcoming visitors, giving them guided tours through the galleries, and helping them connect with the stories behind the artworks. What struck me most during this period was how central interns are to the daily operations of the museum. We were often the first point of contact for visitors and played an active role in shaping their experience. This moment in my professional journey sparked the idea for this thesis. I began to wonder: What makes this internship program so effective? Where could it be improved? And more broadly, how can internship programs like this be designed to genuinely support young professionals while also benefiting museums and their visitors? This thesis investigates how museums design internship programs that foster intern engagement, build mutual trust, and enhance visitor experience.

My reflections about the internship program led me to explore what organizational and engagement theories tell us about how internships operate in cultural institutions and the role of interns in the museum environment. Interns at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, for instance, are integrated into departments such as Visitor Services and Education, where they have frequent, meaningful contact with guests. Yet despite their visible presence, interns are among the least discussed members of museum staff in both professional discourse and academic literature. As museums strive to stay relevant and visitor-focused, investing in the development of their workforce becomes increasingly important. Internship programs can play a central role, not just as training grounds, but as bridges between the institution and the public. A well-structured internship program can cultivate the engagement of motivated, talented young professionals and create opportunities for meaningful interactions with visitors.

What I experienced during my internship is not unique to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Across the museum sector, interns often serve front-line roles, greeting visitors, answering questions, and explaining the collection. Their ability to interpret artworks, facilitate conversations, and create a welcoming atmosphere positions them not just as learners, but as essential actors in shaping the visitor experience. These front-line roles are critical, as they are often the heart of a museum's public-facing image. Studies have shown that such interactions significantly influence how visitors perceive a museum's credibility, warmth, and professionalism (Federman, 2009;

Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). Because interns are in continuous contact with visitors, they gain first-hand insight into audience needs, expectations, and emotions, becoming active co-creators of the museum experience, whether it is formally recognized or not.

Interns are uniquely positioned in this dynamic. According to engagement theory (Macey et al., 2011), when employees, including interns, feel supported, empowered, and aligned with the organization's values, they are more likely to engage meaningfully in their roles. Engaged interns not only boost institutional productivity but also through their presence and performance they can also build trust within the institution and between the museum and its audience. The literature on staff-led value co-creation supports this view, showing that employees who go beyond their formal duties, such as interns offering thoughtful, personalized visitor interactions, can enhance the museum's value proposition (Merrilees et al., 2017).

Existing studies affirm that employee engagement is crucial to organizational performance (Macey et al., 2011; Erickson, 2009), particularly in experience-based settings like museums. Engaged staff members are more adaptive, enthusiastic, and proactive. They help build trust by embodying institutional values during their interactions with the public. Trust itself is foundational to all human relationships and is a key enabler of cooperation and long-term connection (Hurley, 2012). In the context of museums, this is especially vital, since exhibitions are experience goods, whose quality can only be assessed during or after the visit (Godson, 2009). Visitors' trust often derives not from curators or directors, but from the people they meet, frequently the interns.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helps explain why interns may or may not feel engaged in their roles. According to this theory, people are most motivated and committed when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Internship programs that provide meaningful responsibilities, autonomy, and a sense of community are more likely to foster this kind of intrinsic motivation, leading to stronger engagement and, consequently, more positive visitor experiences.

Despite this growing awareness, there are still significant gaps in the literature. Most studies on employee engagement focus on full-time, long-term employees. Few examine interns, who are often transitional, young, and underpaid, and even fewer explore how intern engagement shapes institutional outcomes like public trust or visitor experience. We still know little about how interns perceive their roles, what motivates them, and how engagement and trust are built during internships. Scholars like Foley & Jordan (2023) have demonstrated that well-structured internships, with academic support, reflection, mentorship, and professional development,

enhance engagement and long-term learning outcomes, but these findings stem largely from political science and public sector internships. In the museum context, particularly within arts institutions, there is a scarcity of research on how internship design affects engagement and what role intern engagement plays in shaping the museum's external relationships.

Furthermore, although the concept of staff-led value co-creation (Merrilees et al., 2017) has gained traction, interns are seldom included in this model, even though many of them go beyond their role to provide memorable service. They often suggest improvements and act as informal ambassadors. This raised further questions in me: How do institutions recognize and support this potential? And what happens when internships are poorly structured, unpaid, or disconnected from interns' values?

Internal marketing theorists such as Berry et al. (1976) and Ahmed & Rafiq (2002) emphasized the importance of treating employees as internal customers or fostering customer-oriented mindsets, but interns are not included in these models. Yet they are often the ones shaping the museum's public image during "moments of truth" (Carlzon, 1987), those key interactions that form a lasting impression on the visitor.

If they are well-supported, interns can become engaged contributors, co-creators of value, and even brand ambassadors. But if they are undervalued or poorly integrated, these opportunities are lost. What we need to understand is how engagement and trust can develop during internships, and how museums can structure these programs to benefit both interns and the museum. If these are achieved, internships might be used not just as training, but as strategic tools to strengthen institutional relevance, credibility, and long-term sustainability.

This makes internship programs more than just good career starting points. They are also tools for communication, trust-building, and engagement. Despite the increasing reliance on such programs, there's still limited research on how internships shape intern engagement and how that, in turn, affects interns' trust in the museum. Once that trust is established, it can extend to visitors as well. When visitors remember a meaningful interaction with an intern, they carry that memory, and its emotional imprint, well beyond their visit.

This thesis addresses that gap by exploring the link between the internship program design, intern engagement, and the development of mutual trust between interns and museums. Using the Peggy Guggenheim Collection as a case study, the research investigates how internship programs can be structured to foster commitment and create value not only for the interns but for the institution as a whole.

The core research question guiding this study is: **How can museums design and manage internship programs to foster intern engagement, build mutual trust, and co-create institutional value?**

To answer this question, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

1. How do internship structures and task allocations influence intern engagement within the museum environment?
2. In what ways can engaged interns contribute to the co-creation of institutional value, particularly through their interactions with museum visitors?
3. In what ways can museums strategically leverage intern engagement to co-create value and build reciprocal trust within the institution?
4. How can museums design internship programs that sustain long-term engagement and trust-building?

This research takes a qualitative approach to answer these questions, by conducting interviews with former interns, a former intern coordinator, and the current Coordinator for Internship Programs at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. These interviews explore the factors that support intern engagement, the way interns perceive their role, and the areas where improvements could be made. The aim of this research is to understand these questions in the context of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and combine it with the existing theory, to provide a clear view on engagement strategies in the case of museum internship programs, which help to build reciprocal trust between the interns and the organization.

While engagement and trust are well-researched topics in corporate environments, they remain underexplored in the context of museums, especially in relation to interns. In addition to its academic value, this thesis also offers takeaways for museum professionals and contributes to a growing conversation about the human side of museum operations. This is important since improving internship programs is not just about creating better opportunities for young people, it's also a cost-effective way for museums to enhance their public-facing services, build institutional loyalty, and secure their future.

To explore this topic, the thesis begins by building a foundation of the key ideas in Chapter 2. Here, the theoretical framework looks at concepts like employee engagement, staff-led value co-creation, and trust within museum environments. I also touch on the existing research around internships, a subject that remains surprisingly underexplored in academic literature, despite its growing relevance. From there, Chapter 3 explains how the research was carried out. It outlines the

qualitative approach used and includes a visual operationalization model that shows the connections between the core concepts introduced earlier. This model helped guide the interviews and structure the analysis.

Chapter 4 brings the voices of participants to the forefront, by discussing the relevant findings from the case study of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. It shares insights from former interns as well as the perspectives of the Intern Coordinator and the Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs. This is where engagement and trust come into focus, as the interviews reveal how these dynamics are experienced and understood within the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. The chapter also includes a discussion that ties these real-world insights back to the theoretical ideas. Finally, Chapter 5 wraps everything up. It reflects on the findings, proposes ways museums can better support and benefit from their internship programs, and concludes the research questions.

By exploring how intern engagement and trust develop within museum settings, this thesis sheds light on a part of museum life that is often taken for granted. As museums continue to evolve to meet the expectations of today's visitors, understanding how to use internships not just as training tools but as meaningful bridges between the institution and its public will be vital for their long-term success. The following chapter lays the theoretical foundation for this inquiry, exploring the concepts of employee engagement, trust, and internship programs.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Employee engagement

2.1.1 Understanding employee engagement

The emphasis on human capital as a source of competitive advantage has grown significantly in recent years. With technology standardizing many aspects of business, organizations are now viewing human capital as a unique advantage, which is difficult to imitate. This has led to a widespread focus on employee engagement, which is positively correlated with the organization's productivity and profitability (Osborne & Hammoud, 2019). This is because employees are more likely to dedicate effort toward activities that contribute to a company's success when they feel valued and receive positive feedback from the management (Macey et al., 2011). Therefore, understanding how to balance employee engagement with other factors influencing an organization's success (e.g., innovations and short-term profit goals) is critical.

Employee engagement is frequently confused with employee satisfaction. However, according to Macey et al. (2011), this assumption is misleading, as engagement and satisfaction are fundamentally different concepts. Employee satisfaction implies being content with what has already been obtained whereas engagement implies pursuit, actively seeking, and immersing oneself in work. Engagement is not about extracting more from employees at minimal cost, instead, it represents a mutually beneficial dynamic where both employees and organizations thrive. The distinguishing feature of engagement is its focus on energy and motivation rather than mere fulfillment. A well-designed engagement strategy can improve both the performance of the organization and employee well-being, creating a so-called win-win scenario (Macey et al., 2011).

This view stems from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985). According to them, the engagement level directly affects the productivity of an organization. In order to sustain a high engagement level, it is critical to foster strong motivation among employees, which stems primarily from their job satisfaction. Furthermore, employees' emotional state has a direct effect on their motivation level; thus, organizations must try to positively affect all factors contributing to employees' emotional well-being. Their main focus should be improving interpersonal relations among employees, since if it is negative, it will lower their engagement level, and thus negatively affect the organization. Therefore, not only is it critical to manage the relationship between the organization and the employees, but also their relationship with each other (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Nowadays, the general view among researchers remains that engaged employees contribute more and, as a result, organizations with engaged workforces tend to be more productive. As Tamara Erickson (2009) also noted, improving engagement is the most powerful way for organizations to improve their productivity (Macey et al., 2011). This concept is not only applicable to full-time employees but also to interns, whose engagement level can greatly impact the organization's productivity since often they are the closest contact with customers. However, assessing the effectiveness of HR initiatives, including engagement programs, is complex (Macey et al., 2011). The lack of objective measurability of engagement, and engagement programs is a limitation that will be considered in this research.

Macey et al (2011) noted that employee engagement encompasses two forms of energy. The first is psychic energy, which reflects an individual's internal experience, and the second is behavioral energy, which is not only an internal process but also visible to others. These two types of energy should be differentiated and through different sorts of initiatives encouraged and strengthened. The psychological dimension has to do with the employee's level of enthusiasm, focus, and intensity, while the behavioral dimension translates into persistence, adaptability, and proactive effort. In a museum setting, fostering both types of energy could enhance staff and intern engagement. Increasing the engagement level by focusing on these two forms of energy is beneficial for any organization, including museums, since according to Macey et al. (2011) employees who invest more psychic energy in their tasks are more focused, dedicating less attention to distractions.

Employee engagement is one of the greatest challenges in today's workplace, thanks to its criticality in maintaining an organization's vitality and survival. However, to date there is no single generally accepted term for it and different academic views have emerged to define employee engagement (Perrin, 2003). Deci & Ryan stated (1985) that employee engagement derives from their own ability to control personal behaviors and goals. Kahn (1990) defined work engagement as the extent to which employees connect with their work roles, expressing themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally when engaged, and withdrawing in these areas when disengaged (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). Farndale & Murrer (2015) agreed with Kahn's view on employee engagement, extending the state of employee engagement, to employees also harnessing themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally while completing their daily tasks. Saks & A. Gruman (2014) simplified employee engagement by dividing it into two categories: attention and absorption.

Contrary to these views, Macey et al. (2011) view engagement best thought of as a spectrum rather than stating that engagement can only mean the extreme moments. According to them, at its highest levels, it can resemble a "flow" state, but it is only relevant when it is sustainable in the long term. Understanding this for organizations is crucial, so they don't believe that as soon as some level of engagement is developed, their employees or interns will immediately reach the "flow" state. Rather, they should focus on determining the current state of engagement on the spectrum and come up with engagement programs that can improve it.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) further conceptualized engagement as a positive and fulfilling state of mind, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). Vigor involves high energy levels, mental resilience, and perseverance in the face of challenges. Dedication reflects a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and pride in one's work. Absorption refers to deep concentration and immersion in work, where time passes quickly and detachment from work becomes difficult. This study builds on their definition, emphasizing that engagement consists of energy (vigor), enthusiasm (dedication), and involvement (absorption), and should be viewed as an independent construct (Jose & Mampilly, 2014).

Engaged employees are proactive, eager to expand their skills, and are better equipped to navigate change (Robinson et al., 2004). Engagement is a combination of an individual's sense of purpose and directed energy, visible through their enthusiasm, adaptability, effort, and persistence toward organizational goals. It falls under the umbrella of talent management, as organizations seek to harness untapped employee potential and respond well to rapidly changing conditions (Macey et al., 2011). By responding better to changing conditions, an organization can appear more reliable and trustworthy, thus higher employee engagement is interconnected with the level of trust towards an organization.

There are four principles for creating an engaged workforce. The first is called 'capacity to engage', which implies that organizations need to equip employees with the necessary resources, such as information, training, and feedback to enhance their competence and through that their confidence. The second principle is 'motivation to engage', meaning that employees need compelling reasons to invest their energy into their work (Macey et al., 2011). This is because intrinsic motivation is mainly fostered when a job is challenging, meaningful, and provides autonomy. Additionally, treating the employees with respect, and aligning the organization's values with their values is equally crucial in increasing engagement. The third principle is 'freedom to engage', which is the ability to take initiative, and the fourth is 'strategic engagement focus', which is

meant to ensure that employees' efforts align with company objectives to make the engagement the most effective (Macey et al., 2011).

According to Perrin (2003), the top three drivers of employee engagement are the senior management's interest in employees' well-being, the employees' decision-making authority, and how challenging the work is.

Overall employees' desire to be trusted with their assigned tasks and have challenges in their daily work is critical (Shahid & Azhar, 2013). Their perception of their positive contribution to the organization's performance is also a great incentive for engagement (Hashmi and Naqvi, 2012). If these personal goals are met, it has a great influence on the employees' overall commitment to the organization.

Creating a culture of engagement requires a strategic approach, focusing on hiring practices, onboarding, training, and ongoing reinforcement of company values. When employees perceive that their needs are met and that they have a fair and reciprocal relationship with their employer, they are more likely to contribute at high levels (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Engagement, in this sense, is a form of reciprocation, where employees give back to the company in response to the support and opportunities provided (Macey et al., 2011). This desire to give back can be even stronger for interns since they are particularly thankful for their first work experience and the trust invested in them by the organization. Therefore, organizations can rely more on those interns who are more engaged, since they have more to give back, and thus will work with a higher dedication level. In the case of museums, interns are often the ones with the closest connection with the visitors, so their general attitude influences the visitor's experience and their trust in the organization.

There are various methods to establish a more engaged group of employees or interns. One of the most effective ways to increase engagement is internalization, where employees' personal goals align with those of the organizations they work in. When individuals identify with their company's mission and values, they are more likely to direct their energy toward strategic objectives, since they see themselves as shared identity with the organization (Macey et al., 2011). However, misalignment can lead to disengagement, which makes employees channel their efforts in directions that do not contribute to the company's success (Perrin, 2003). Therefore, engagement should not only be involved in daily tasks but also should be considered as a long-term commitment, being part of the organization's missions and values.

Once engagement is established, it doesn't mean that the organization's task is over as sustaining engagement over time is equally critical. Competitive advantage doesn't come from one-time efforts but from continuously fostering an environment that can sustain a level of energy and passion that people bring to work (Macey et al., 2011).

To achieve this, organizations must ensure that employees are placed in roles that suit their skills, have development opportunities, and are supported by the leadership to maintain an engagement-focused culture (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). One fundamental step to sustain employee engagement is to develop their trust in management, especially in direct supervisors, since those employees who trust their leaders feel safer taking initiatives, persisting through challenges, and contributing beyond their formal job descriptions (Yukl, 2013). Trust is built on fairness, so organizations that prioritize fair treatment foster environments where employees remain committed and engaged.

High-performing companies tend to have more engaged employees, and engaged employees, in turn, contribute to greater organizational success. However, balance is key, since too little emphasis on engagement can lead to disengagement, while excessive focus on it can cause burnout, so leaders must carefully manage engagement levels to ensure sustainability (Macey et al., 2011). If employees aren't engaged, they may end up spinning, wasting their time and talent on low-impact tasks, or settling, where they remain carrying on in their roles without real commitment, out of habit and comfort (Perrin, 2003).

If employees are properly engaged, they not only drive performance but also contribute to intangible assets, such as customer loyalty, intellectual capital, and customer trust (Macey et al., 2011). Therefore, we need to ask: What do engaged employees think and do differently from others, and how does this influence customer trust? According to Baumruk (2006), engaged employees advocate for the organization to co-workers and invest extra time, effort and initiative to contribute to the success of the organization.

Interestingly, in general, employees tend to be the most engaged when they first join an organization. In the beginning, they are eager to contribute, build meaningful relationships, and develop their skills (Macey et al., 2011). This observation is particularly relevant to internship programs, where early enthusiasm should be nurtured into long-term engagement. In fact, over time, engagement may decline if there is a lack of support, or the work is unchallenging. Organizations must address these needs to maintain long-term engagement over time (Macey et al., 2011).

Empirical research indicates that employee engagement is linked to various positive outcomes both at individual and organizational levels. Saks (2006) found that job engagement positively correlates with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee well-being, while it negatively correlates to quitting (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). Since employee engagement positively impacts organizational citizenship behavior, we can conclude that employee engagement is also positively correlated with successful interaction with museum visitors, and loyal attitude while representing the organization.

Another important factor in increasing employee engagement is employee empowerment, which is widely recognized as a key factor in organizational success (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). Research by Liden et al. (2000) suggests that psychologically empowered employees contribute positively to both individual and organizational outcomes (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). According to Niehoff et al. (2001), empowerment fosters employee loyalty also through job enrichment, which involves designing roles that provide meaning, direction, and insight into job outcomes. Additionally, Albrecht & Andreetta (2011) found that psychological empowerment is positively linked to both engagement and commitment (Jose & Mampilly, 2014). Based on these results we can see that to achieve a high engagement level organizations have to consider multiple factors.

Academics have developed various models trying to define the best ways to increase employee engagement, and how organizations can best benefit from it. One of these attempts is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model by Bakker & Demerouti (2008), which proposes that job resources, such as autonomy, initiate a motivational process that enhances work engagement (Macey et al., 2011). Autonomy is strongly interconnected with impact, which reflects employees' perceptions of their influence within the organization, so according to Spreitzer et al. (1997), it could also play an important role in the process of developing engagement (Jose & Mampilly, 2014).

2.1.2 Staff-led value co-creation

According to Lusch et al. (2008), customer co-creation has become a core principle in the service-dominant logic approach to marketing, since customer involvement has long been recognized as one of the fundamental characteristics of services (Merrilees et al., 2017). Merrilees et al. have pointed out in their research (2017) that an equally important counterpart to customer co-creation is staff-led value co-creation. While value creation is shaped by both management and

customer influence, employees also play a crucial role. Just as customers can contribute by providing ideas and suggestions, staff members can similarly engage in value co-creation.

Although service organizations emphasize staff engagement, Rich et al. have reported (2010) that its role in value co-creation remains largely overlooked in most of the literature (Merrilees et al., 2017). Staff-led value co-creation acknowledges the employee's role in mediating service value creation and positions them also as a key participant in a mainly customer-centric landscape. This statement can be applied not only to employees but also to interns as well.

Merrilees et al. explore (2017) three forms of staff-led value co-creation: (1) employees going beyond their defined roles to provide creative service solutions to customers, (2) contributing innovative ideas to improve service delivery processes, and (3) acting as brand advocates by recruiting new customers and staff in their spare time. Ultimately, all these forms of staff-led co-creation enhance customer value, either directly or indirectly. It is possible to develop an organization where all three forms are present. Museums and other organizations providing experience goods have an advantage since employees have a closer interpersonal relationship in such cases with the visitors, thus they have more room for applying creative approaches and engaging in co-creation.

Staff-led value co-creation can develop only under the right conditions. Organizations must provide a psychologically safe workplace to encourage their employees to take initiative (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). According to Dollard & Bakker (2010), the culture of psychological ownership can only begin when individuals feel satisfied and enthusiastic about work-related activities. This can be achieved when organizations develop adequate training programs that focus on skills to influence employee performance (Nasomboon, 2014).

When looking at staff-led value co-creation, it is important to understand what drives employees to engage in these behaviors, since staff-initiated co-creation is an extra-role behavior that exceeds regular job responsibilities. According to Snape & Redman (2010), when employees have job autonomy, they feel more accountable for outcomes and are more inclined to put in extra effort, which proportionately increases their engagement level as well. Organizations benefit significantly from having engaged, empowered, and committed employees since it leads to increased staff-led value co-creation (Merrilees et al., 2017).

Merrilees et al. (2017) identify two main pathways through which staff can contribute to service innovation. The first is the direct way, which entails improving services for customers through proactive engagement beyond their official roles. The second way is indirect, and it involves

participating in the development of improved service processes. In the case of the first approach, staff proactively help clients, beyond their normal employment role. While with regards to the second strategy, employees are motivated to contribute ideas for service innovation thanks to high engagement, empowerment, and sharing common values with the organization - the so-called values congruency.

Additionally, according to Podsakoff et al. (2018), beyond staff engagement, other organizational factors influence the value co-creation process as well. While empowerment has a positive effect like staff engagement, to a lesser extent, values alignment, and staff commitment play a major role in encouraging staff-led brand advocacy. However, these factors have little impact on employees' willingness to proactively assist clients. Due to this, I will mainly focus on employee engagement and its direct effect on client assistance, and increased visitor trust. Each type of staff-led co-creation operates through different mechanisms. Employees who advocate for the brand by recruiting new customers and staff demonstrate a strong commitment to organizational values, and they are also similarly driven by client interactions (Merrilees et al., 2017).

Therefore, we can conclude that organizations with a high level of staff-led value co-creation tend to experience better staff retention and an enhanced reputation (Merrilees et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant in the context of internship programs, where engaged employees can drive educational initiatives and contribute to long-term success. By being able to retain museum interns longer, organizations would not need to start the training process all over again constantly but could rely on the already trained interns as full-time employees. This would also positively influence a museum's reputation since the longer employees are working for an organization, the more chance there is for them to start feeling like ambassadors and talk about the museum to the visitors in such a light.

If organizations want to foster a proactive workforce that helps clients solve problems within service operations, then staff engagement must be a top priority. In conclusion, this further increases the importance of the focus on engagement, since higher engagement could enhance service innovation by giving space for more staff-led value co-creation (Merrilees et al., 2017).

2.1.3 Employees' internal treatment and its impact on the service

It is crucial to recognize how internal relationships influence the external market. Clark (2000) emphasizes that employees are an increasingly significant means of differentiation in

businesses, and they greatly contribute to the ability to gain a competitive advantage (Godson, 2009).

Internal marketing refers to strategies aimed at enhancing internal relationships to improve the organization's effectiveness in the external market. This concept is primarily attributed to Berry et al. (1976), who initially highlighted its role in driving service quality within retail organizations. Berry et al. later expanded on these ideas, arguing that an organization can only serve its external customers effectively if its internal employees are satisfied and can work cohesively (Godson, 2009). A series of academic work has also been developed on the positive correlation between the satisfaction level of employees together with their engagement level and the trust in the organization. Based on this we can further conclude that satisfied customers have greater trust in an organization.

To achieve a high level of employee satisfaction, Berry et al. proposed (1976) that organizations should treat employees as customers, introducing the concept of the 'internal customer'. Over time, this idea was developed by Piercy & Morgan (1991) into the notion that internal marketing could be used to communicate an organization's mission, objectives, and strategies to employees, securing their commitment and support (Godson, 2009). While some argue that these ideas extend beyond traditional marketing, Ballantyne (2003) and others maintain that employees can be seen both as internal customers and suppliers (Godson, 2009). The way internal relationships are managed can add value to exchanges within the organization, ultimately enhancing overall performance through a better relationship with customers and increased trust in the organization.

A slightly different approach to internal marketing was proposed by Grönroos (1990), whose focus was fostering a customer-oriented mindset among employees (Godson, 2009). His view was then further developed by Ahmed & Rafiq (2002). Unlike the previously mentioned view, this perspective does not treat employees as customers, but it acknowledges that managing employee relationships effectively is crucial for an organization to be able to meet its customers' needs. This approach is particularly relevant in industries where employees have direct interactions with customers. There, the way employees are treated internally has an impact on the service experience externally (Godson, 2009). Therefore, this approach is relevant for the scope of this research, since in the case of museums, direct interaction with visitors is a crucial factor in influencing the customer experience. During my research, I will apply this approach and acknowledge that managing employee relationships successfully is positively correlated with

customer needs being met, thus it also increases their trust level in the organization. Since visiting a museum is an experience good, because visitors cannot be sure of the value of the exhibition before experiencing it, factors that can positively influence customer experience are crucial. This gives great importance to employee relationship management and employee engagement.

So overall, these two primary approaches to internal marketing have emerged, the first one by Ballantyne (2013) viewing employees as internal customers and suppliers, and the second by Ahmed & Rafiq (2002) encouraging employees to adopt a strong customer-oriented mindset (Godson, 2009). As mentioned earlier, in this research we will take Ahmed & Rafiq's approach as a starting point.

Based on the second approach, beyond internal relationships, employees have a significant impact on external customers as well. Organizations strive to enhance personal service and customer interactions, making it essential to align employees' thoughts and behaviors with external customer needs. Therefore, managing internal relationships directly influences the customer's experience. Carlzon (1987) pointed out that employees act as brand ambassadors, particularly when they interact with customers, shaping how the organization is perceived (Godson, 2009). These customer interactions, known as 'moments of truth', define the company in the eyes of consumers. Thus, internal marketing plays a critical role in ensuring employees have the right attitude, knowledge, and resources to serve customers effectively (Godson, 2009).

Clark (2000) has suggested segmenting employees based on their level of customer interaction, allowing organizations to tailor training and rewards accordingly (Godson, 2009). Gordon (1998) supports this idea, advocating for the identification of employees who add the most value to customer experience and assessing their performance in that context (Godson, 2009). This approach helps organizations develop targeted training programs to address knowledge gaps and, if necessary, reassign employees to roles better suited to their skills.

Organizations can take several measures to ensure employees in customer-facing roles convey the right message. One such approach is implementing 'smile campaigns', which encourage consistent, customer-friendly behavior. However, these initiatives must be backed by a genuine commitment to staff development to be effective (Godson, 2009). Clark (2000) acknowledges that many front-line employees are low-paid and may lack advanced skills, making rigorous training programs essential for ensuring high service quality (Godson, 2009). The low payment and its impact on intern performance is one of the main concerns of this research, since

in the case of internship programs, a very low salary, or even unpaid work, is the standard tendency in the context of museums.

Beyond training, organizations must equip employees with the necessary resources to serve customers efficiently. This often involves empowering employees to make decisions and resolve customer issues without requiring managerial approval. However, empowerment comes at a cost. Ahmed & Rafiq (2002) noted that expanding employees' responsibilities may lead to demands for higher compensation (Godson, 2009). Additionally, allowing employees to personalize service may slow down overall delivery. There is also the risk that employees may be overly generous in resolving customer complaints or unintentionally discriminate when deciding whom to assist more favorably (Godson, 2009).

In addition, issues can also arise when employees become entrenched in a 'silo' mentality, focusing solely on their own goals without considering the broader organizational objectives. When departments operate in isolation, internal collaboration suffers (Godson, 2009). Internship programs can help address this issue by allowing interns to engage with various departments and gain a holistic understanding of the organization.

2.1.4 Employee engagement and customer experience

Until very recently most employers maintained the view that employees are an interchangeable part of an organization. Some have even started to refer to them as "assets" or "human capital", viewing them in an impersonal matter. But the long-term success of any organization starts with talented people, so the most important goal for a leader is to find a good workforce and then engage them (Maylett & Wride, 2017).

According to Federman (2009), everything an organization does should be focused on the customer, since customer-focused organizations gain more loyalty from their customers if they can provide a unique customer experience to them. That experience can be enhanced by the level of employee engagement and customer focus (Federman, 2009).

Nowadays thanks to digitalization, service is lacking more than ever. People are more and more tired of automated menu options and miss speaking to human beings in a non-scripted way (Federman, 2009). Museums could tackle these problems by setting up a strategic internship program, where interns can interact directly with visitors, thus improving their overall experience.

Solving customer problems requires being perceptive, personable, curious, and able to answer questions well and understand the customer's needs. Employees providing customer service should not control the conversation but only facilitate it (Federman, 2009).

These employees usually want customers to feel appreciated and valued, so they become excited when they are entrusted with customer relationships. If they feel useful in that regard, employees start feeling closer to their organization as a result, since employee engagement is directly related to customer experience (Federman, 2009).

Many museums require their interns to fulfill the role of front-line employees and have direct contact with the visitors. Front-line employees are those who have frequent and direct interactions with customers and normally play a key role in value creation by collaborating with customers and supporting their overall experience (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). Their unique combination of knowledge and skills positions them as valuable contributors to service innovation within organizations. Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011) emphasize that excluding front-line employees from service innovation efforts can hinder implementation and result in services that lack a strong customer focus (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014).

According to Ordanini and Parasuraman (2011), front-line employees enhance service innovation due to their frequent customer interactions and the practical insights they gain through experience. Their deep understanding of how processes could be improved enables them to suggest meaningful changes that enhance customer service (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). Additionally, Kesting & Ulhøi (2010) suggested that the involvement of front-line employees in the decision-making process can reduce the likelihood of poor attempts to innovation because their expertise allows them to align new services with customer needs (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). Thus, in the case of museums, making sure that their front-line employees are well-trained is a crucial factor, since they have a great impact on the visitor experience.

Melton & Hartline (2013) and Ordanini & Parasuraman (2011) further argue that front-line employees contribute to developing compelling value propositions by leveraging their customer knowledge gained through co-creation (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). Their role in innovation differs from their role in service delivery. While delivering a value proposition involves helping customers integrate a service into their value creation process, innovating a value proposition requires applying insights gained from customer interactions to shape new or improved offerings (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014).

Sundbo (2008) identified three key phases of innovation, which are idea generation, development, and implementation (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). While front-line employees are involved in all three stages, their engagement tends to be lower during the development phase. However, when they are empowered, these employees can contribute valuable ideas and knowledge-sharing, which strengthens the company's problem-solving capabilities and enhances the integration of resources into value propositions (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014).

The results indicate that front-line employees add significant value at every stage of the service innovation process by applying their expertise in customer interactions, products, and practices. Many front-line employees also recognize the importance of being involved early in the innovation process to help shape value propositions that effectively meet customer needs (Karlsson & Skålén, 2014). In the case of internship programs, interns are often positioned as front-line employees, thus having a direct effect on the customer experience and with that on the customer's trust in an organization.

2. 2 Trust

2.2.1 The concept of trust

The primary determinants of organizational effectiveness are job involvement and trust (Nasomboon, 2014). Although there is widespread agreement among scholars about the importance of trust in ensuring an organization's success, there is no uniform definition of the term (Chughtai & Buckley, 2008). For this research, we will apply Hurley's definition of trust (2012). He states that it is fundamental to human relationships, shaping how we meet emotional, physical, and material needs.

Without trust, individuals experience less happiness, and groups function less effectively. It serves as a form of social capital, enhancing interactions both on a personal level and within larger organizations (Hurley, 2012). Trust is a crucial factor in decision-making when both uncertainty and vulnerability are present, as it helps to overcome them. When circumstances are entirely predictable, trust is not considered an important aspect (Hurley, 2012). In environments where distrust is widespread, those who understand how to cultivate and maintain trust gain a significant advantage.

Leaders and organizations that successfully build high-trust relationships tend to attract and retain support, as people naturally gravitate toward those they perceive as trustworthy (Hurley,

2012). Trust is a key enabler to enhance employee engagement and build an exchange-based relationship between employees and organizations (Chen et al., 2025).

Employees' trust in their superiors depends on the quality of communication between them, discretionary effort, organizational citizenship behavior, and problem-solving approaches (Gillespie & Mann, 2004). The employee's level of trust towards their supervisors and the organization influences the level of their engagement. Trust can improve employees' motivation, cooperation, and organizational pride as well (Roberts & Davenport, 2002).

Trust and a sense of belonging also play a crucial role in enhancing value for customers, particularly in situations where customers perceive a level of risk in their purchase decisions. Reducing this risk is one of the most valuable benefits a strong relationship can offer through building trust (Godson, 2009). This is especially relevant for experience goods, like museums, which cannot be evaluated before being consumed.

To establish a strong market position, an organization must first invest in high-level publicity. Once that position is secured, the next critical step is to foster trust, ensuring a lasting and reliable relationship with customers (Godson, 2009). Once trust in their experience-based service has been developed, museums can maintain it by attaching the experience to the name of the organization. For example, a well-known museum's name acts as a form of currency, offering visitors confidence that they can expect high-quality exhibitions. It also attracts potential employees and interns by making them feel that they will have a highly respected and well-managed workplace.

However, trust is fragile and can be easily lost, making it essential for museums to continually invest in maintaining and reinforcing it.

2.2.2 Trust in museums

Every museum has a distinct and deeply embedded relationship with its community. Regardless of the breadth of its collections, research, or audience diversity, the local community serves as its foundation. This connection not only grounds the museum but also strengthens its mission, renews its sense of purpose, and expands its vision of what it can achieve (Mastering Civic Engagement, 2002).

To maintain a museum, it is crucial to achieve long-term visitor trust. However, developing trust between the museum and its interns and workers is equally important, as it strengthens

employee engagement, which is positively correlated with visitor trust. According to Cuno et al. (2018), visitor trust increases when the public sees that museum staff and interns are genuinely engaged, demonstrating a strong desire to learn and proactively explore new aspects of art history.

The key issue is not whether an art museum should be responsive to its audience, that should be given, but rather how it earns public approval through trust. Visitors must feel that their experience is authentic and not merely an attempt to cater to them superficially (Cuno et al., 2018). Such authenticity can be achieved through interns' interaction with visitors and how they communicate the organization's message.

Several studies involve employees or interns in brand identity management related to internal marketing and branding (Ferreiro-Rosende et al., 2022). To achieve this, reciprocal trust between the museum and its staff is essential. Museums can build trust with their interns by offering more autonomy, meaningful tasks, and timely feedback, factors that increase overall engagement (Ferreiro-Rosende et al., 2022).

Messages within a museum are shaped not only by curators but also by visitors, resulting in a continuous exchange where multiple interpretations coexist and compete. Both museums and galleries, and the artworks they display, not only reflect knowledge but also actively shape it (Petrov, 2012).

Younger generations consume information differently. They prefer concise, relevant content and tend to ignore anything that doesn't quickly capture their interest. Museums should rethink traditional engagement strategies to establish strong trust between the organization, the visitors, and the employees.

The size of a museum is a key factor in analyzing internal management. Institutions with more than twenty employees tend to have greater financial and human capacity to implement organizational changes (Ferreiro-Rosende et al., 2022). However, such changes cannot be successful unless an adequate level of trust has been developed between the museum and its employees.

2.2.3 Building trust through the experience effect in museums

To understand why museum experiences, leave such lasting impressions, it is crucial to consider that memory is highly selective. Only a small fraction of the experience becomes truly

memorable, while the rest fades quickly. The key to understanding what makes something memorable lies in the unique 'experiential filters' individuals use (Falk, 2016).

Though people may struggle to articulate exactly what well-being feels like, they can easily recognize its presence or absence in their lives. Falk (2016) concludes that the primary value museums offer is a sense of well-being, which is closely linked to employee trust and engagement.

Museums often fall into the trap of assuming they know what is best for their communities. To address this challenge, they should avoid top-down approaches and instead seek equal, collaborative relationships with community organizations (American Association of Museums, 2003). Internship programs can help here, as interns often have closer contact with the community and can use adequate jargon. Their direct communication with visitors can provide valuable feedback and increase trust.

The credibility of a museum is influenced by how employees interact with visitors. While directors may understand the institution's goals and needs, every staff member should act as an ambassador. Achieving employee engagement and trust is thus critical (American Association of Museums, 2003).

A museum's identity can be reinforced by establishing a unified message consistently communicated by all stakeholders, from board members to interns (Ferreiro-Rosende et al., 2022). A strong brand experience involves focusing on the experience effect, positioning it well, and aligning every organizational element with the brand.

A museum must have a clear identity, its unique look, feel, and personality. This identity should be expressed consistently across all consumer interactions. Interns can contribute to this communication through interacting with the visitors. Understanding the audience is fundamental. It involves analyzing consumer behavior, motivations, and lifestyles to determine what resonates with them. Personal experiences in a museum shape visitor perceptions and influence how they assess its value (Joseph, 2010).

Employee engagement is thus deeply connected to the experience effect, and with that, to building visitor trust towards the organization. Museums should approach brand development deliberately, designing visitor experiences to align with their brand image and ensuring consistency across all marketing and organizational aspects. This includes customer service, social media presence, and leadership behavior.

Every visitor interaction shapes the brand experience (Joseph, 2010). The goal of museum marketing is to fulfill a unique consumer need in a way no other organization can. This demands clear strategy, creativity, and the right media selection.

Some visitor interactions are immersive, while others are brief; however, both can be effective if they are designed intentionally. A consistent brand experience, online and offline, builds trust. Every touchpoint: ads, websites, staff, and social media, must reinforce a cohesive, compelling image.

The 'experience' is the emotional and practical connection a brand creates, and the 'effect' is the lasting impact on perception and behavior. A strong experience effect ensures all marketing elements work together over time to reinforce trust (Joseph, 2010).

Creating memorable experiences for interns boosts trust in the workforce and with visitors. A well-executed experience effect shapes how consumers perceive a museum. Intern engagement and enthusiasm influence visitor satisfaction and trust.

A strong experience effect fosters brand loyalty. Building trust requires recognizing how audience segments differ, by age, education, location, and more. Even within the same demographic, individuals vary. Internship programs that reflect this diversity help museums connect with younger audiences and increase trust. Engaged interns create better visitor experiences, strengthening both the experience effect and public trust.

2.3 Internship programs

2.3.1 The value and structure of internship programs

Students need greater access to opportunities both inside and outside the classroom that foster political knowledge, civic engagement, trust in government, and a sense of political efficacy. Public service internships have long been recognized as a valuable means of cultivating civic virtues among students (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

The central argument is that more structured programs lead to stronger student learning outcomes. In this context, structured or institutionalized internships refer to programs that provide substantial academic credit, faculty mentorship, networking opportunities, and a well-designed curriculum that integrates both practical experience and classroom learning to enhance students' civic engagement (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

Findings indicate that structured internships are associated with significant improvements in key learning objectives. Students enrolled in structured programs report gaining deeper insights into leadership, civility, and public affairs compared to those who complete independent practicums (Foley & Jordan, 2023). These findings highlight the role political science departments can play in strengthening civic culture through the implementation of structured internship programs (Foley & Jordan, 2023). This connection between structured internships and civic engagement could also be further explored in relation to student involvement in other professional settings. In the case of this research, the professional setting is museums.

The benefits of experiential learning in student development are well-documented. Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as a holistic process since it integrates learning that combines experience, cognition, and behavior (Foley & Jordan, 2023). This 'learning by doing' includes internships, which are considered a high-impact educational practice. Through internships, students apply their academic knowledge, reflect on real-world experiences, build professional relationships, and challenge existing assumptions (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

According to Coker et al. (2017), internships also promote collaboration and contribute positively to students' future academic performance (Foley & Jordan, 2023). However, there is considerable variation in the structure, intensity, and nature of public service internships. Some students, complete internships independently without earning course credit or receiving faculty guidance, while others take on structured internships that require significant weekly commitments, provide course credit, and offer direct faculty mentorship. At the highest level of structure, students may engage in intensive programs requiring 20 or more hours of fieldwork per week, integrated coursework, and substantial faculty support (Foley & Jordan, 2023). These factors should be considered when evaluating internship programs in the context of museums. Often in the art world, internship programs are financially not renumerated, even when the students work more than 20 hours a week.

A limitation of many internship studies is their reliance on self-reported student surveys conducted at the end of the semester. Research suggests that such post-hoc assessments may fail to accurately capture changes in student knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions over time. Additionally, self-reports are susceptible to biases, including question phrasing effects, recency bias, and social desirability bias (Yazan, 2015).

Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach (2022) found that students who were given the opportunity to take the initiative and engage in challenging assignments showed the most significant gains in

key learning objectives (Foley & Jordan, 2023). Their research suggests that the most successful internship programs align internships with students' academic backgrounds and career aspirations, offer meaningful professional development opportunities, and carefully select partner organizations.

For an internship program to be considered structured, it should require a minimum weekly commitment of ten hours at the internship site, include academic credits, offer professional development opportunities, and provide faculty mentorship (Foley & Jordan, 2023). In structured programs, faculty play a critical role by selecting students based on preparedness, helping them secure internships, guiding them through the application process, and offering support during challenges at their internship sites. Faculty also integrate academic coursework with fieldwork, facilitating reflection and deeper engagement. Structured programs often include guest speakers, networking events, and professional development workshops. Additionally, students benefit from sharing experiences with peers, fostering a sense of community, and exchanging insights about their internships (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

Programs that lack multiple structural components may be better classified as internship courses rather than full-fledged programs. Austin & Rust (2015) suggest that more institutionalized internships provide stronger pedagogical benefits and greater student support (Foley & Jordan, 2023). For instance, Coker et al. (2017) found that students with higher time commitments in internships demonstrated stronger critical thinking skills and reported more fulfilling educational experiences than those engaging in short-term internships (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

2.3.2 Accessibility and equity in unpaid internship programs

One barrier that prevents students from participating in internships is financial constraints. Unfortunately, many public service internships are still unpaid, making it difficult for low-income students, who stand to benefit the most from these experiences, to participate. Many students must prioritize paid employment options to support their studies. This makes internships an opportunity largely available as a privilege to those with financial means (Foley & Jordan, 2023).

Senat et al. (2019) conducted a survey, which revealed that unpaid student internships are more common in unaccredited programs and at institutions where a bachelor's degree is the highest level offered. Additionally, advisers at these programs are more likely to believe that academic credit is a suitable replacement for financial compensation (Senat et al., 2019).

Some argue that unpaid internships provide valuable experience and should not be restricted, since some students believe that in the current job market any internship is better than none, even if unpaid, to better their future employment prospects. However, others, including participants in NACE's 2010 survey, contend that unpaid internships are problematic, as they can lead to student exploitation by corporations and disproportionately disadvantage low-income students who cannot afford to work without pay (Senat et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Generational collaboration through internship programs

Generational gaps have always been present in the workplace, but according to Lancaster & Stillman (2002), rising life expectancy and delayed retirement have led to multiple generations working alongside one another more than ever before (Delcampo, 2017). Generations can be broadly understood as groups of individuals who share common attitudes, behaviors, values, memories, and life experiences that influence their approach to work and life (Delcampo, 2017).

Since older generations have been part of the workforce for a longer time, managers have developed strategies and techniques tailored to these cohorts (Delcampo, 2017). A generation is defined as an age cohort that has experienced distinct formative events and influences, leading to the development of unique core values and attitudes. According to Twenge & Campbell (2008), actors such as parental influence, peer interactions, media exposure, and popular culture shape the characteristics that members of a generation tend to share (Delcampo, 2017).

Understanding the cultural and social contexts that shaped each generation provides valuable insights into recruiting, training, and retaining talent within organizations. Each generation develops specific workplace expectations and aspirations based on their experiences. The stage of their career also plays a crucial role in shaping these expectations, since values that seem highly important at the start of a career may shift over time as professionals progress in their fields (Delcampo, 2017). This is particularly relevant to internship programs, where engagement strategies should be designed to align with generational preferences for maximum effectiveness.

In modern business environments, where collaboration is a key priority, teamwork has become an essential competency for building strong workplace relationships. Younger generations tend to thrive in group settings, suggesting that the workplace is shifting toward more teamwork-driven and project-based collaborations. As a result, developing skills that foster effectiveness in group environments is increasingly important (Delcampo, 2017). Effective professionals have the

ability to define a clear and compelling image of the organization's goals and what it stands for, and if needed, even make personal sacrifices for the good of the organization (Delcampo, 2017).

In today's highly competitive job market, organizations must adopt creative strategies to attract top new talents (Delcampo, 2017). Creativity is also essential in recruitment efforts for both permanent and internship positions (Delcampo, 2017). To attract the most desirable graduates, companies not only offer competitive salaries and benefits but also emphasize their corporate culture, commitment to social responsibility, diversity, and environmental sustainability (Delcampo, 2017). After attracting talent, retaining them is equally crucial.

2.3.4 Structured internships in the museum context

Museum educators continually discuss and refine best practices in teaching methodologies, including object-based interpretations, questioning techniques, and facilitating group discussions. Additionally, museum programs are designed to align with specific curricular objectives that support K-12 educators and are assessed using various evaluation methods. The structured internship approach found in some museum programs challenges the commonly held distinction between formal and informal education (Cuenca & Gilbert, 2019).

This research will show an example of a structured internship program through the case study of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

2.4 Takeaway from theoretical framework

In order to shape the visitor experience and strengthen institutional trust in museums, it is essential to engage the employees. This research emphasizes how engagement should take interns into account as well, as they are frequently the first point of contact with visitors. It draws on theories of employee engagement, staff-led value co-creation, and internal marketing strategies. Engaged interns are passionate, committed, and feel a sense of ownership over their roles. As a result, they can enhance visitors' experience in a museum. Iterns' involvement increases when they are given the freedom to take initiative, receive sufficient assistance, and support the goals and values of the museum.

The consistency and quality of the 'experience effect' created by museum staff, which also includes the interns, is closely tied to the trust level of visitors towards the organization. Museums that successfully create an engaged workforce can enhance not only employee satisfaction but

also the visitors' perception of credibility and authenticity of the museum. To achieve this, museums should develop a program which trains the interns, gives them autonomy, and creates a value-driven environment. By acknowledging the dynamic relationship between intern engagement and visitor trust, this study emphasizes the need for a 'strategic internship' program design, ensuring that interns feel invested in their roles, have mutual trust with the museum, and feel engaged, thereby strengthening the museum's long-term reputation and visitor trust and loyalty.

As has been explored in the literature review, trust and engagement are highly interconnected, so more engaged interns develop a stronger trust towards a museum, thus the museum can also trust them more. Interns are often front-line employees interacting with visitors; thus, their engagement and trust level directly influence the visitor's experience. Hence, it is crucial for museums to develop internship programs where interns achieve a high engagement level.

2.5 Conceptual model

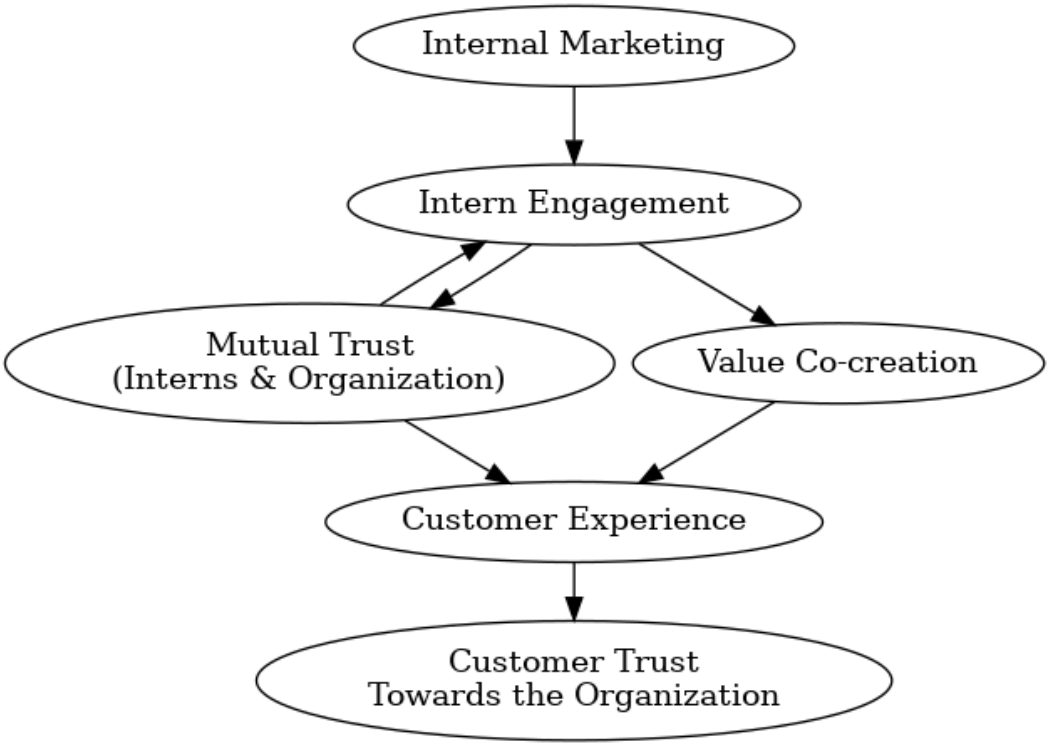
This conceptual model illustrates the positive relationships between key concepts explored in the theoretical framework. The arrows indicate directional, positive correlations, demonstrating how improvements in one area led to beneficial outcomes in another.

With Internal Marketing – consisting of training, empowerment, feedback, and value communication - it is possible to directly enhance Intern Engagement. When interns feel engaged, it is more likely that mutual trust between them and the organization develops, which is represented by a bidirectional relationship to show that trust and engagement coexist in a virtuous cycle.

From this foundation of trust, a chain of positive outcomes takes place. In the case of museums, enhanced intern engagement motivates the interns to Co-create Value and show positive attitude towards the visitors during their interactions. These factors lead to an ultimately improved Customer Experience. Thanks to these improvements the customers develop Trust towards the organization, reinforcing the institution's credibility and long-term success.

By tying together internal marketing, engagement, trust, co-creation, and customer experience, the model encapsulates the interconnected nature of the concepts discussed throughout the theoretical framework.

Conceptual model:



3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to observe how museums are managing their internship programs, and what engagement strategies they are employing to foster trust between the interns and the organization. Thus, the main focus was to find out how engagement is achieved within museum internship programs and how it contributes to building a trusting relationship from the interns' and the museum's point of view. It is important to investigate both the organizational and employee perspective as activities undertaken aimed at enhancing engagement might not necessarily have the desired effect. The scope of this research includes a case study on the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, located in Venice.

3.1 Research Strategy

Given the novelty of applying engagement and trust concepts to museum internships, the research adopts an exploratory qualitative case study approach, with exclusive use of qualitative data, since it is an effective way to generate theory. Qualitative research typically entails the intensive study of individuals sharing certain characteristics, in this case the fact that they all have been former interns at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Qualitative findings lack generalizability to other settings, but they can generate theory (Bryman, 2012). In the field of internal marketing theory is crucial, since it provides a general guideline that professionals can adapt for different cases and advance their methods.

A single case study does not allow full control over external variables such as motivation and autonomy, but it can provide in-depth insight into how internship engagement relates to trust within a specific organizational context. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection was chosen because of its well-established and structured internship program.

To collect data, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted: ten with former interns, one with a former Intern Coordinator, and one with the current Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs. To achieve the best result, an iterative approach was employed, weaving back and forth between data collection and theory to explore new concepts (Bryman, 2012).

Initial gaps in the findings, after the ten intern interviews indicated the need to arrange the two extra interviews with the staff. This cyclical process ensured close alignment between empirical data and conceptual categories, rooted in the view of interpretivism and sensitivity to

participants' varied backgrounds (Bryman, 2012). The theories presented in the findings were grounded in the systematically collected and analyzed data.

The core research question guiding this study is: **How can museums design and manage internship programs to foster intern engagement, build mutual trust, and co-create institutional value?** The ultimate goal of the research question is to provide insights and a model that can support museums in strengthening intern engagement through program design.

3.2 Research Design

The case study design, focusing on the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's internship program applied an idiographic approach, conducting an in-depth analysis of a specific example, elucidating its unique features (Bryman, 2012). The relationship between theory and research was explored through an inductive approach.

In the initial part of the research, the museum selection was guided by two criteria: (1) the presence of a well-established internship program, and (2) its strategic importance to the museum's operations. After a careful selection process, this study has been able to select and examine the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, since this museum known for having one of the most developed internship programs in the museum sector, met both criteria. Another factor that influenced this choice is that I have previously been an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, which facilitated access and informed my understanding of the case. On the one hand my connection with the museum helped me to arrange interviews not only with interns, but also with current employees of the museum, on the other hand it raises reflexivity concerns. It poses the potential bias of impartiality and increases the risk of leading questions in the interview process. To mitigate this bias, the interviews were semi-structured and designed to let participants lead the discussion. The structured yet flexible format allowed interviewees to express their perspectives freely, minimizing the risk of researcher-imposed framing.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection's International Internship Program, overseen by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, has run for over 40 years, training multiple professionals of the art world. This opportunity, specifically designed for current students or recent graduates in the field of arts or any related disciplines, gives them firsthand experience of the operation of the museum, and a deep knowledge of its extraordinary collection of 20th century artworks.

The International Internship Program is highly selective, accepting around 20 interns from all over the world every month for a period of 1-3 months. The activities carried out by the interns include helping the Visitors Services Department in the ticket office, interacting with visitors, guarding the rooms of the gallery, and answering art related questions during the opening hours. Interns are also assigned to collaborate with the Education Department through giving regular presentations to the public on the life of Peggy Guggenheim and the foundation, and on some of the artworks. Next to the daily tasks the interns also help the Events Department during inaugurations, and other institutional events. It places emphasis also on training the interns through various seminars, educational trips in Italy, and providing some of them with the opportunity to help out at other departments as well.

Notably, only international interns receive financial renumeration, a feature that potentially affects intern engagement and offers grounds for critical examination. The Italian interns can only receive university credits, which creates a differentiation between them, posing important questions.

3.3 Sampling

With regards to sampling the museum, convenience sampling, a common non-probability sampling approach, was applied since the Peggy Guggenheim Collection was the most available for this research, due to personal connection (Bryman, 2016). In addition, it also fits the characteristics of a critical case sample, since the museum was selected based on having a relevant and well-known museum internship program.

Interns were purposively sampled based on two criteria: (1) completion of the internship within the past two years, to avoid the risk of outdated data, and (2) a minimum two-month tenure to ensure adequate exposure. Ten interviews met these conditions. Theoretical saturation was reached after the seventh interview, affirming that additional interviews would not yield new insights and further emerging concepts (Bryman, 2012). So overall the 10 interviews conducted with the interns are adequate to provide relevant findings.

Two additional, purposively selected interviews were conducted, to fill the remaining gaps in the findings, by exploring the research questions from the museum's perspective as well. These interviews were also important, since they provide a different perspective on the same aspects as the former 10 interviews, with relevant people as they are closely involved with the decision-making

phases regarding the internship program. One with the former Intern Coordinator, and the other with the Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs.

The qualitative nature of the study required flexibility in sample size determination, since the development of theoretical considerations guided the selection process, based on the emergent insights rather than predefined quotas. The determination of the adequate number was only possible, once theoretical saturation was achieved, which is not an accurate and objective indicator known (Bryman, 2012).

3.4 Operationalization

The following table presents the operationalization of key concepts derived from the theoretical framework of this study. These concepts: *employee engagement*, *trust*, *employee empowerment*, *staff-led value co-creation*, *job enrichment*, and *structured internships*, form the analytical basis for exploring how museums manage internship programs to foster intern engagement, build trust, and co-create value. Each concept is defined and broken down into sub-concepts and defining elements, which guide the development of indicators for data collection and analysis. This structured approach ensures consistency between theoretical constructions and their practical application within the research context of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

Concept	Definition	Sub-concepts	Defining Elements
Employee Engagement	The level of emotional and cognitive investment employees have in their work, particularly in this context in the museum. The level of enthusiasm, focus, and intensity that employees or interns bring to their roles, which translates into persistence, adaptability, and proactive effort.	**Vigor** (energy, resilience)	Enthusiasm and focus on tasks
		Dedication (commitment, enthusiasm)	Commitment to museum's mission
		Absorption (focus, immersion)	Sense of purpose and role clarity
		Psychological engagement	Individual's internal experience, level of enthusiasm, focus
		Behavioral engagement	Proactive behavior in customer interactions
Trust	A fundamental factor shaping visitor-museum relationships, influenced by interactions with museum staff and interns. The confidence that interns place in museums as authentic and reliable institutions.	**Perceived authenticity** of museum experience	Visitor perceptions of credibility
		Trust in the **museum brand**	Influence of staff interactions Staff knowledge and approachability
Employee Empowerment	The ability of employees to make decisions and resolve issues independently, fostering engagement.	**Decision-making autonomy**	Ability to resolve visitor issues independently
		Training and resources	Access to necessary knowledge
Staff-led Value Co-Creation	The process by which museum employees contribute to visitor experience beyond their defined roles to enhance costumer experience and service process.	**Creative problem-solving for visitor**	Innovative contributions to service innovation
		Brand advocacy	Employees representing the museum positively
Job Enrichment	Enhancing job roles to make work more meaningful and engaging for employees.	**Skill development opportunities**	Expanding responsibilities beyond basic tasks
		Autonomy in tasks	Interns taking initiative in daily work
Structured Internships	Well-organized programs integrating academic learning and professional experience. Structured learning experiences that provide professional development for students and early-career professionals.	**Faculty mentorship**	Connection between academic learning and practice
		Internship time commitment	Balance between learning and workload

3.5 Data Collection

The gathered primary data was collected through twelve semi-structured interviews, guided by three tailored interview guides (Appendix A.): former interns, former Intern Coordinator, and the Current Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs (Bryman, 2008). It was ensured to exclude any leading or ambiguous questions in the interview protocol by means of peer reviewing.

The data collection phase successfully yielded a balanced sample of the former interns. Among the respondents were both Italian and non-Italian individuals, which was an important factor, as they received different renumerations. The sample data included interns from various academic backgrounds, age groups, experience levels, and career paths. There was also a balance between those who joined one of the departments during their internship and those who did not.

Interviews conducted with 10 former interns + Intern Coordinator + Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs:

Interviewee	Position	Nationality	Departmental Position	Previous Museum Job Experience	Internship Tenure (months)	Interview Length (min)
1.	Intern	Non-Italian	Social media, Communication	Yes	3	46
2.	Intern	Non-Italian	No	No	2	33
3.	Intern	Non-Italian	Education, Kids Day	No	2	35
4.	Intern	Non-Italian	No	No	2	37
5.	Intern	Italian	No (occasionally Events)	No	2	55
6.	Intern	Non-Italian	Education, Kids Day	No	3	32
7.	Intern	Non-Italian	No	Yes	2	33
8.	Intern	Italian	No (occasionally Registrar)	No	2	44
9.	Intern	Non-Italian	No	No	3	46
10.	Intern	Non-Italian	Social media, Communication	No	2	37
11.	Intern Coordinator	Non-Italian	-	No	3 (intern) + 8 (Coordinator)	53
12.	Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs	Non-Italian	-	Yes	3 years	57

The interviews were conducted online in English, lasting 35–55 minutes. As a limitation it is important to point out that online interviews leave more room for misinterpretation of the interviewee's answers to the questions at hand (Bryman, 2016). The interview was recorded via telephone; plus, handwritten notes were taken as well, to assure against potential data loss in case of technological issues. Six were voice-only calls, instead of video calls, limiting non-verbal observations. The interviews were conducted online, since the participants were located in different countries. Six participants were either uncomfortable with a video call, or had technological difficulties with their camera, that's why voice-only calls were carried out instead.

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences, while follow-up probing ensured clarity and depth (Brennen, 2017). This was particularly important when considering the highly subjective and partly subconscious nature of employee engagement. By creating a flexible interview space where they could depart from any schedule, rich and detailed answers were provided. But, by and large, all the questions were asked in a similar wording from interviewee to interviewee, while keeping in mind not to lead the interview entirely.

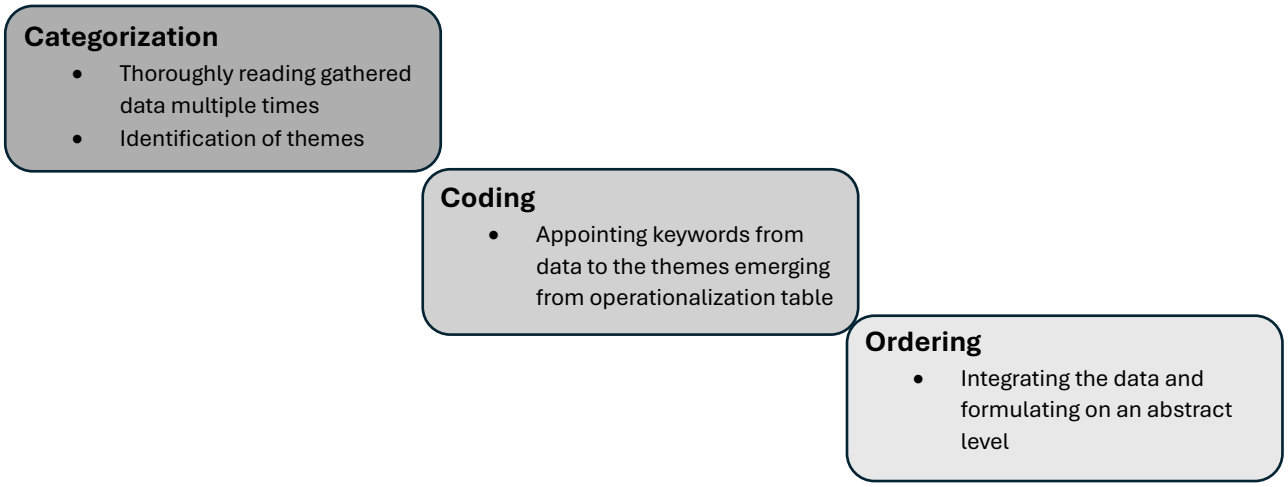
The first two questions focused on the interviewees' background, their connection to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and their initial expectations. The rest of the interview explored questions related to the interns' engagement level throughout the internship program, the aspects that influenced their engagement, their level of autonomy, and the factors that influenced their motivation. The data collected revealed relevant answers to the research questions both from the interns, the Intern Coordinator, and the museum's point of view.

The last interview with the Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs added a longitudinal element to the research, since it provided insights into the full lifecycle of the International Internship Program. The interviewee fulfills the role at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection of overseeing the selection process and adjusting the program from time to time to achieve a higher engagement level among the interns.

Participants were informed in advance about the study's purpose, data handling, and gave informed consent. Anonymity was guaranteed to all respondents to lower entry barriers and minimize socially desirable answers. The museum's permission was formally requested to interview current staff.

3.6 Data analysis

The data analysis stage was fundamentally about data reduction, to make better sense of it (Bryman, 2012). Primary analysis has been applied, meaning that the data analyzed was specifically collected for this research.



Data analysis followed a thematic approach and was iterative in nature (Bryman, 2012). All interviews were transcribed using my own transcription software that I coded with Python and then manually reviewed all of them for accuracy. Coding was conducted across all transcripts to identify recurrent themes and patterns relevant to engagement and trust.

The analysis applied both conversation and narrative methods. Conversation analysis revealed participants' emotional tones (e.g., enthusiasm, frustration), while narrative analysis provided context on how their different individual circumstances shaped their internship experiences (Bryman, 2012). The analysis clearly revealed how the interviewees experience varied based on their personal backgrounds.

The goal was not to determine causal links or to generalize findings, but instead to discover elements that show convergence and divergence between internal engagement and trust (Carrier et al., 2004).

3.7 Coding

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews are qualitative data, so non-numeric and not quantifiable. Therefore, it was required to classify the data into categories to conduct analysis using conceptualization. Via coding the data was reduced and organized.

The coding followed an inductive approach, drawing themes from the interviewee's answers, and the main concepts mentioned in the operationalization. The codes have been iteratively refined after multiple readings of the transcripts to ensure validity and reliability. The data was coded from the interviews by hand, according to 8 main categories: Motivations for engagement, Values of the internship program, Internship role perception, Engagement and motivation dynamics, Empowerment and autonomy, Challenges of the internship program, Learning outcomes and reflections, and Recommendations. This coding table represents the summary of these main themes and the corresponding codes. The extended version of the codes, with a more detailed description, is in Appendix B.

Coding table:

Theme	Codes
Motivations for Engagement	Personal interest in art
	Career aspirations
	Community aspect
Values of the Internship Program	Skill acquisition
	Institutional prestige
	Access to networks
Internship Role Perception	Expectation vs. reality
	Internship as labor
Engagement and Motivation Dynamics	Initial enthusiasm and its decline
	Factors sustaining motivation
Empowerment and Autonomy	Lack of autonomy in daily tasks
	Seeking empowerment through extra initiatives
Challenges of the Internship Program	Financial constraints
	Selection process
	Workload and emotional labor
Learning Outcomes and Reflections	Personal growth
	Professional identity formation
	Critical view on the sector
Recommendations	Empowering tasks
	Institutional support
	Developing institutional trust
	Inclusivity and diversity
	Transparency and feedback

3.8 Limitations

Whereas this research is expected to obtain relevant and reliable results, it does come with several limitations. The first limitation is conceptual ambiguity, due to the fact that the definition of engagement, and the categorization of behaviors that fall under this definition, may vary among the interviewees, complicating the analysis. A similar limitation is related to the concept of trust, which is only examined in this paper from the interns' and the museums' point of view, but not from the visitors' perspective. This leaves room for further research in this area, to achieve more precise findings.

The second limitation of this paper is that in the case of qualitative research the values represented reflect either the personal beliefs or the feelings of a researcher, called researcher bias (Bryman, 2012). This occurs, since I was also an intern at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, so I have a personal opinion about the different topics discussed in the semi-structure interviews. I attempted to overcome this limitation by making sure that the questions asked in the interviews were not leading questions but allowed the interviewees to freely express themselves about their own personal experience. However, my values did influence the choice of the research area, the formulation of the research question, the choice of method formulation of research design and the data-collection techniques (Bryman, 2012). So, it is important to acknowledge that this research is not value free, however I made sure that the incursion of values in the research process is self-reflective and exhibits reflexivity about the part impacted by such factors.

The third bias of this research is the language and technical limitations, since both the interviewer and most of the interviewees are non-native English speakers, which poses the threat of misunderstandings and miscommunication. The level of understanding was further limited, because the interviews were conducted via video calls, where the quality of the call was often poor, either due to connection difficulties or background voice, which made the transcription harder. The interviewees could choose between participating in the interview either via video call, or voice call, where their body language and mimics were not visible, which poses another limitation on the interpretation of their answers.

The sampling method for the interviews poses a self-selection bias. Multiple former interns were contacted to request an interview with them, and the research relied on voluntary participation, meaning that only individuals who were motivated to respond participated in the research.

In case of interviews, inevitably the social desirability bias plays a significant role, since interviewees often feel that they have to answer in a specific way, which hinders the honesty of their answers. This bias was mitigated by providing a safe environment for the respondents, where they could express themselves without any consequences.

Qualitative research generates a large amount of data; in the case of this research the transcribed interviews totaled over 100 pages. According to Bryman (2012), Miles (1979) has accurately described this limitation of qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance', because on the one hand its richness makes it attractive, on the other hand it also creates difficulty of finding analytic paths through the vast amount of data.

Finally, since the research method is a qualitative case study it comes with limited generalizability. The findings are specific to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and are not broadly generalizable to all museums.

3.9 Validity, Reliability, Ethics

The research is valid, to the extent that it is consistent and rigorous, focusing on a trustworthy and credible case study. This validity is achieved, thanks to the description provided about how the research was conducted and interpreted. Internal validity is high, since there is a close alignment between the data and the conceptual insights.

However, it is important to keep in mind that single case study research is not generalizable, thus external validity is limited (Bryman, 2012). However, the findings offer a practical foundation that other institutions might adapt to their own contexts to understand the practices related to intern engagement better.

All ethical considerations were respected. Interviewees signed informed consent forms, were briefed on their rights, and retained the option to withdraw at any time. Data was stored securely, and participants' identities were anonymized.

Now that the research methodology has been outlined, the next chapter presents the findings along with a critical discussion of each. The discussion draws conclusions by linking the data collected with the theoretical concepts introduced earlier.

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4. Findings and discussion

This chapter explores how the structured internship at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection fosters intern engagement, influences perceptions of institutional trust, and builds a strong relationship with their interns. The findings arise from the ten interviews conducted with former interns, an interview with a former Intern Coordinator, and one with the current Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs. The former interns finished their internship 1-2 years ago, and their responses refer to that period, however, since then the Peggy Guggenheim Collection introduced various changes to the structure of their program. The interview with the Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs provided insights into the museum's perspective on how it tries to adapt its strategy over time based on listening to the continuous feedback from the interns.

4.1 Internship structures and task allocations

One of the main findings of this research was that many interns began the program highly motivated, viewing the Peggy Guggenheim Collection as a prestigious step in their career. The International Internship Program is heavily operational, with tasks focused on visitor management, such as guarding rooms, helping the ticket office, and handling audio guides. Many interns found these duties monotonous and disconnected from the deeper educational or curatorial work they anticipated. Moreover, on the introductory day of the program, they were told that there would be the possibility to join a department, however in the end more than half of the interns couldn't join any department, even though they asked for it multiple times.

As one intern stated: "I moved across the country to learn, to have experiences, but I didn't find it that meaningful… I just felt like a very underpaid worker." These feelings point to a structural disconnection between the interns' academic aspirations and the limited scope of their assigned tasks.

The museum has recently addressed these concerns. Notably, the number of guarding hours has been reduced from 4-5 hours to only 2 per day. This change reflects the museum's recognition that task monotony discouraged engagement and undermined learning opportunities.

4.2 Task design and perceived value of work

Interns varied in how meaningful they found their tasks. Guarding the museum was consistently described as monotonous and not intellectually stimulating. On the other hand, guided tours and interactions with visitors were perceived as empowering and impactful. Overall, they felt that the possibility of giving talks to the public about the collection and Peggy Guggenheim's life has significantly improved their public speaking skills and made them feel like significant contributors to creating an engaging and memorable experience for the visitors. They have described this task as quite challenging and meaningful, however, most interns felt that the balance was not adequate between the hours of feeling valued by giving talks and the repetitive daily tasks.

However, the Coordinator for the Internship and Family Program expressed, that the intern's presence in the rooms, and them being able to interact there with the visitors, adds a lot to the museum's public image, and it is important to have educated professionals for this task as well, since this way, they can contribute to value-co creation, by engaging the visitors more.

Since the interns reported that guided tours and public talks were the most meaningful tasks, the museum acknowledged this by incorporating more time for the preparation and delivery of these presentations. Additionally, a private tour of the collection by museum educators is now offered early in the internship, helping frame expectations and strengthen content familiarity. These updates were designed to enrich interns' educational experiences and enhance their ability to represent the museum's identity and mission.

Additionally, personal background played a significant role in shaping how interns experienced the internship program. Younger or less experienced interns were generally more satisfied, seeing the internship as an opportunity to gain their first real exposure to museum work. In contrast, older interns with previous work experience felt they couldn't use their skills, which led to a sense of stagnation, which made their motivation to initiate interactions with visitors also lower. The absence of clearly structured opportunities to rotate between tasks or departments further strengthened this feeling.

Some felt that the program, while prestigious, was "oversold," particularly around opportunities to join museum departments. The rotating intern model was positively received, as it allowed senior interns to support newcomers, contributing to a sense of community.

4.3 Fluctuation in motivation level

One important finding was that the level of interns' engagement was characterized by ambivalence. The engagement and motivation dynamics show an initial enthusiasm, which often later declined, especially when interns realized their role did not align with their skills or interests. This pattern reflects Macey et al.'s (2011) observation that engagement tends to be highest at the beginning of a role and must be actively sustained. Theoretical models such as Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory underline the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for motivation. The onboarding process and early days of the internship did not fully support these needs. Interns who joined departments or received special assignments (for example, Kids Day) retained more motivation.

The museum has become more aware of the motivational decline many interns experienced. By recently starting to introduce a more structured schedule that balances operational duties with self-directed learning and public engagement tasks, the institution is fostering sustained motivation. While structural change takes time, the museum has implemented regular feedback sessions and mentorship mechanisms through Intern Coordinators, who serve as peer mentors and liaisons to the education department.

4.4 Meaningful work and emotional investment

On one hand, many interns spoke passionately about their connection to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and their sense of pride in contributing to a world-renowned institution. Descriptions such as "we were tired but happy" and "the museum stays in your heart" reflect deep emotional and psychological investment. These expressions align with the concept of absorption, a state where interns feel immersed in the museum's mission and cultural significance.

The difference among the tasks is reflected by different levels of behavioral and psychic energy (Macey et al., 2011). Tasks that allowed interns to express themselves, apply knowledge, and interact meaningfully (e.g., guided tours) stimulated both forms of energy. Conversely, tasks like guarding drained psychic energy and provided limited room for agency or creativity. According to the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), tasks should balance challenge and support; when this balance is off, engagement drops. A more thoughtful job design could mitigate this. The museum has done it since that.

The misalignment between tasks and skills can be interpreted through the lens of employee engagement theory (Macey, et al, 2011), which emphasizes the necessity of task meaningfulness and alignment with personal values to sustain motivation. Furthermore, the absence of structured departmental rotations left many interns unsatisfied. To foster engagement, internship structures must reflect task-person fit principles (Foley & Jordan, 2023), allowing for greater exposure to museum functions, not just operational tasks. Job design theories advocate role enrichment and autonomy to increase intrinsic motivation.

This raises the question of to what extent the museum is meant to serve the purpose of sustaining motivation and aligning tasks with personal values. Can these expectations be realistic? Overall, it is in the museum's interest to sustain a long-term engagement, since it is highly beneficial for the organization's profitability and performance (Osborne & Hammoud, 2019). However, since it is impossible to satisfy all expectations, due to various regulations, the main aim should be instead to place great importance on clear communication and to ensure that expectations are in line with reality.

In response to requests for more meaningful involvement, the museum has introduced new structured activities throughout the day. These include self-directed study sessions and the innovative Cultural Mediation Project, which allows interns to engage more directly with the public in intellectually fulfilling ways. The museum is also working to manage expectations more clearly, updating its website and recruitment materials to clarify the non-departmental nature of the internship and avoid false assumptions.

4.5 Feedback and recognition

The Intern Coordinators were consistently praised for their support, but feedback from other staff members was lacking. Multiple interviewees emphasized how empathetic the Intern Coordinators were. Since they were also in an intern position themselves, the relationship with them felt more equal than strictly hierarchical which made the communication easier.

Multiple scholars have expressed that recognition and feedback are critical to sustaining engagement (Macey et al., 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985). Most feedback centered around art talks, while other contributions went unnoticed. Building a culture of continuous, holistic feedback could strengthen psychological ownership (Dollard & Bakker, 2010) and staff-led value co-creation (Merrilees et al., 2017).

Some interns expressed frustration that their feedback was not always listened to or acted upon, which made them feel undervalued. A few reported being treated like “children” during guarding hours, especially when disciplined for minor infractions such as phone use. This experience weakened their sense of psychological safety and reduced their willingness to contribute creatively.

4.6 Interns as co-creators of institutional value

Interviewees mentioned the highest feeling of engagement during giving talks about the artwork and the collection to the visitors (Art Talks, and Peggy Talks) and guided tours. These were described as "empowering moments," offering interns an opportunity to share their research and knowledge directly with the public: “Visitors were more engaged in the Art Talks… They listened, asked questions, and clapped. I felt respected.”

During guarding duties, some interns took the initiative to approach visitors, explain artworks, and answer questions. This behavior shows that interns were seeking more empowerment through extra initiatives and skill acquisition. Interns effectively acted as informal educators and ambassadors, contributing to the museum’s perceived accessibility and hospitality. These behaviors exemplify staff-led value co-creation (Merrilees et al., 2017). Museums that foster such behaviors benefit from improved visitor satisfaction and organizational reputation. Yet, as interns noted, these contributions are often underacknowledged internally.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection has recently started to formally support interns' co-creative roles with the public. The Cultural Mediation Project, an institutional response to interns' desire for deeper involvement, has created a dedicated space for interns to engage with visitors using academic and personal insights. Interns now receive specific training in cultural mediation and are encouraged to participate after their initial training phase. This shift institutionalizes what used to be informal initiatives by motivated individuals.

These findings show that by sharing knowledge, engaging audiences, and representing the museum’s identity, interns influence how the institution is perceived and remembered. Thus, a direct connection can be detected between the interns’ level of engagement and the visitors’ trust in the museum.

Moreover, such engagement is critical for institutional trust-building. However, this co-creative potential initially mostly emerged from intern initiatives rather than program design. Thanks

to this the museum has noticed it, and started to actively support it, by introducing an extra task, the Cultural Mediator position, to encourage interns to co-create the organization's value more and act actively as ambassadors of the PGC. For sustained institutional value creation, museums should explicitly integrate such opportunities into internship frameworks, recognizing interns not just as temporary staff but as contributors to public-facing value creation (Merrilees et al., 2017).

4.7 Autonomy and empowerment

Interns often felt empowered during visitor interactions but reported low autonomy in their overall role. They felt their daily tasks were strictly defined, and they didn't have room to develop their own project or creative autonomous ideas. However, every interviewee felt they had autonomy in resolving the smaller visitor-related issues and managing visitor engagement. Those respondents who were also involved in a department or were assigned any special tasks or positions, like Assistant Intern Coordinator, felt more trusted and engaged.

While interns appreciated small degrees of autonomy, many felt the program did not allow them to fully explore their interests or apply their academic knowledge. Several voiced a desire for more creative projects or research-based tasks, such as contributing to exhibitions or content development. The rigidity of the program's structure was seen as a barrier to individual learning experiences. One suggestion was to lengthen the internship to three months to allow interns more time to adapt and meaningfully engage.

These drawbacks are significant since the feeling of empowerment is crucial for engagement (Spreitzer et al., 1997). Visitor service responsibilities gave interns situational autonomy, but structural limitations (e.g., limited access to departments, lack of real influence over tasks) hindered deeper empowerment. The interns' desire for more creative agency aligns with the principle of "freedom to engage", described by Macey et al. (2011). Opportunities to shape their internship experience would better foster their individual motivation, which would add to institutional value.

The PGC has acknowledged this challenge and started to provide structured study time and floating hours to allow interns to take on more small projects in those free time periods, for example planning the Kids Day for the education department. The museum is lately encouraging more initiative and self-directed work, promoting deeper autonomy.

4.8 Community and peer relationships

The intern community significantly influenced motivation and overall satisfaction. Interns repeatedly emphasized how peer relationships compensated for less satisfying work aspects. All of them described the network they managed to build throughout their time at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection as the most valuable part of the experience. A lot of them enjoyed that it is a very diverse environment, welcoming interns from all parts of the world, and some have pointed out that they would enjoy an even more diverse community. Italian interns expressed, that the opportunity of having many international colleagues helped them improve their English, however, the cultural differences made communication sometimes more difficult.

This highlights the importance of relatedness, a core need in Self-Determination Theory. Intern-driven community building contributed to a psychologically safe environment, reinforcing engagement and resilience. While this benefit emerged organically, structured initiatives (e.g., collaborative workshops or peer-led projects) could enhance its effects and better align with engagement theory.

Informal events, such as welcome parties, field trips, and intern-led gatherings, were cited as major sources of motivation. These activities created a life beyond the museum walls and made the experience feel more dynamic and socially rewarding. Many interns remembered their time at the PGC with warmth, describing the experience as life-changing, educational, and personally enriching.

According to the Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs, the museum places significant importance on fostering the intern communities. All the social activities listed above are part of the programs and are meant to strengthen psychological safety and intercultural exchange, instead of relying solely on spontaneous peer interactions.

4.9 Trust, hierarchy, and institutional integration

Interns generally trusted the Intern Coordinators, especially because they were former interns themselves. However, some perceived favoritism and a lack of professionalism due to blurred boundaries. Moreover, the interns' relationship with permanent staff was often described as distant and hierarchical. One interviewee reflected: "The Intern Coordinators listened but couldn't really change anything." This disconnect eroded trust, particularly when interns felt their concerns were ignored or when feedback was lacking.

Trust is a cornerstone of engagement and organizational citizenship (Yukl, 2013). While horizontal trust within the intern group and with Coordinators was strong, vertical trust in the broader institution was weaker. When interns feel excluded from institutional decision-making or siloed from museum departments, engagement and long-term affiliation decline. Increasing access to leadership and fostering transparent communication can build mutual trust.

4.10 Career impact and long-term value

Interns viewed the PGC name as prestigious and helpful for career advancement, even if they were critical of the program's structure. Several noted the museum's continued relationship with former interns through newsletters and reunions. The Coordinator for Internship and Family programs has expressed that the museum finds it important to strengthen its alumni network through various platforms and events. This supports the long-term goal of building institutional ambassadors.

This reflects the duality of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. While daily tasks may not have always been meaningful, the internship's long-term symbolic and networking value created delayed gratification. Leveraging this alumni network reinforces the museum's reputation and builds a lasting brand ambassadorship, aligning with internal marketing theory (Godson, 2009).

While some interns left the program feeling more motivated to stay in the museum world, others discovered through the experience that the art sector was not aligned with their personal aspirations. The program helped clarify career paths, even when the outcome was a pivot away from museums. Several Italian interns reported feeling especially motivated, despite the lack of pay, due to the prestige of the museum within Italy and opportunities to contribute more actively to events and tours.

4.11 Compensation and perceived fairness

Compensation was viewed differently depending on the interns' national background. International interns, who were paid, often found the salary insufficient by their home country's standards, though this didn't always affect motivation. Italian interns, on the other hand, did not receive pay but were granted university credit and a museum membership card. Many felt that a stipend would have increased their motivation and that the unpaid nature of the internship could be

unfair, especially given the museum's perceived wealth. While the financial aspect was not a primary demotivator, it did influence how interns evaluated the overall fairness of the program.

Interns who had to self-fund their participation often raised concerns about equity and accessibility. Although the salary was appreciated, it was frequently insufficient to cover basic living costs in Venice. Several participants stated that the internship is financially only affordable for those with existing economic privilege.

While compensation remains unequal between international and Italian interns due to legal constraints, the museum has acknowledged this issue. It now communicates more clearly about the structure and legal basis of these differences. Interns' economic concerns are understood, and while not fully resolved, the institution's transparency has improved. These steps are crucial since they are in the museum's interest, as the Coordinator for the Internship and Family Programs has described, to rely on highly motivated interns, since they create a lot of value for the museum's daily operation: "meaningful engagement brings all of these things together: offering a practical, formative experience to early-career individuals and they offer a great value to the museum because of their contributions to public programs, presentations, and general museum life."

So, the reason why the museum is not paying Italian interns and only provides a small salary to international interns stems from the structural issues typical for the cultural sector. Not to the fact that the PGC doesn't value its interns' contribution.

5. Conclusion

This thesis explored how museum internship programs are designed and managed to foster intern engagement, build mutual trust, and co-create institutional value, with a particular focus on the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's (PGC) International Internship Program. Through qualitative research involving interviews with interns and staff, and through the theoretical frameworks of employee engagement, trust, and value co-creation, this study aims to understand what makes internship programs meaningful for both the intern and the institution. This final chapter synthesizes the findings, answers the research questions, evaluates the institutional responses to feedback, and offers recommendations to improve the design and outcomes of internship programs in the museum sector.

The research was guided primarily by the question: **How can museums design and manage internship programs to foster intern engagement, build mutual trust, and co-create institutional value?**

To answer this question, the study will explore the following sub-questions:

2. How do internship structures and task allocations influence intern engagement within the museum environment?
3. In what ways can engaged interns contribute to the co-creation of institutional value, particularly through their interactions with museum visitors?
4. In what ways can museums strategically leverage intern engagement to co-create value and build reciprocal trust within the institution?
6. How can museums design internship programs that sustain long-term engagement and trust-building?

These questions were investigated through the lens of the PGC's internship model, supplemented by interviews with former interns and current staff.

5.1 Intern engagement conditions and constraints

The findings confirm that intern engagement is not automatically generated by institutional prestige or proximity to art. Instead, engagement is a cultivated outcome of structured, reciprocal, and meaningful program design. At the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, engagement is initially high due to the museum's brand, location, and symbolic capital. However, sustaining this motivation is

contingent on how interns are treated, what responsibilities they are given, and how much autonomy and recognition they experience.

Interns frequently cited monotonous tasks such as gallery guarding as demotivating, especially when these were not balanced with intellectually or creatively stimulating opportunities. Engagement theory, as articulated by Kahn (1990), identifies meaningfulness, safety, and availability as core psychological conditions for engagement. At PGC, meaningfulness often emerged during public speaking, Kids Days, or when contributing to educational programming. However, these opportunities were unevenly distributed, leaving many interns uncertain about how to access such experiences.

The short duration of most internships, 1-3 months, further limits sustained engagement. Interns often described feeling transient, unable to fully integrate into the museum or embark on substantial projects. Some interns expressed a desire for more dynamic, tiered programming that would offer increasing levels of responsibility over time.

Moreover, while the museum has recently introduced improvements, for example, the Cultural Mediation position and shorter guarding shifts, the gap between the ambition of a meaningful internship and its execution remains. A more dynamic structure, with clear creative tasks, individualized projects, and increased responsibility, would better support sustained engagement.

The PGC has implemented these changes since they realize that it is crucial to achieve high engagement levels among the interns, since that provides the possibility to retain these interns in other positions, such as Intern Coordinators, tour guides, or departmental interns. By establishing a long-term commitment, the museum benefits longer from the resources invested in the training program of the interns and also might develop a deeper connection with the interns, who could become brand ambassadors of the PGC.

5.2 Mutual trust: the ethical infrastructure of internships

Trust is both a prerequisite for and a product of a successful internship program. This research found that trust emerges when there is clarity, communication, and reciprocity between interns and staff. Trust is undermined when there is a power asymmetry, when communication is unclear, and when the way the institution is organized feels ambiguous or closed off.

The Intern Coordinators play a pivotal role in bridging gaps between staff and interns. Many interns described these individuals as their most immediate source of support and mentorship. However, this role is paradoxical: while coordinators carry significant emotional and logistical responsibility, their formal institutional status, compensation, and authority remain limited, since they are also interns. This misalignment creates structural tensions and may compromise the coordinators' ability to fully advocate for interns or initiate systemic changes.

Departmental access was another key issue. Interns who spoke Italian or stayed longer often had more access to curatorial or administrative departments. Others felt excluded, with little transparency about how placements were made or how they might participate more fully. The perception of a system where access was dependent on informal criteria like language, timing, or insider knowledge, undermines both trust and equity, especially if these expectations are not communicated clearly in advance. Museums must recognize that trust is not an entirely abstract concept, it is built and eroded through daily practices.

5.3 Interns as co-creators of institutional value

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which interns function as informal educators, communicators, and brand ambassadors. They deliver public talks, mediate visitor experiences, and represent the museum's values to the outside world. Through these roles, interns do not merely receive institutional value, but they also co-create it.

At PGC, interns shape the museum's atmosphere, affect visitor satisfaction, and extend the institution's reach both in person and online. By engaging in meaningful conversations with the audience they enhance the visitor experience and develop trust in the visitors towards the museum, which could improve the PGC's public image. Their influence on visitors' opinions of the museum is particularly significant because museums are experience goods, thus visitors can only assess the value of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection after their visit, based on the influences they encountered during it.

However, these contributions are often undervalued or underutilized due to structural limitations such as short program lengths, unclear project opportunities, and a lack of formal recognition. The interns' desire to contribute more substantively, propose projects, participate in cross-departmental initiatives, or share feedback, suggests that there is an untapped potential. A more participatory model of internship would allow interns to become embedded contributors to

the museum's mission, enhancing both their learning outcomes and the institution's capacity for innovation and relevance.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection has made several commendable changes in response to interns ' feedback in the past year, which shows a positive tendency in adapting the program to increase intern motivation. In the past year, the PGC has introduced the Cultural Mediation position as one of the tasks in their International Internship Program. They also reduced the guarding hours, put more effort into clear communication, and clarified the expectations of the possibilities regarding departmental involvement.

These developments demonstrate a willingness to evolve, aligning with the internal marketing perspective that views interns as internal stakeholders whose satisfaction is essential to institutional health. Since the museum focuses on establishing a significant engagement level and trust for its interns, it shows that it sees interns not only as temporary labor but as internal customers whose satisfaction and engagement matter to the institution's success. However, limitations remain, including financial and spatial constraints, reliance on unpaid labor, and the cultural inertia surrounding internships.

What is needed is not only structural refinement but also a conceptual shift, from internships as cost-saving measures to internships as strategic investments. This shift would require museums to reframe internships as reciprocal learning environments that offer value to both parties. Museums must commit to fostering a culture of trust, autonomy, and collaboration, where interns are treated as current contributors, whose ideas and well-being matter, rather than future professionals-in-training.

5.4 Recommendations for sustainable and equitable internship design

Drawing on the findings of this research, as well as theoretical models and intern feedback, this research proposes recommendations related to the PGC's International Internship Program. The Recommendation table (in Appendix C.) shows all the recommendations drawn from the case study. It incorporates points where the PGC could improve, but also mentions those aspects, that are already done well by the museum, but other similar programs could implement those as well and benefit from it. For example, as the PGC already does, it is important to focus on building an alumni network.

The recommendations regarding the PGC call for extending the internship duration to at least 2.5 to 3 months, allowing interns more time to contribute meaningfully and integrate into departments. A structured approach to responsibilities is encouraged, gradually introducing interns to more complex tasks. Department access should be made transparent, with placements based on individual skills and interests. Recognition practices, such as evaluations and reference letters, should be standard. Educationally, the program should include optional project-based learning, basic Italian language support, and intercultural training to help interns engage more fully and meaningfully with the museum environment. To improve equity and accessibility, the program should consider reducing the number of interns they accept each month to be able to create personalized mentorships. They should try to communicate role expectations more clearly in advance, and offer modest financial support, especially for international interns. Preferably they could emphasize on their website that the International Internship Program is designed mainly for students at the beginning of their career, instead of people who already have multiple experiences. For long-term engagement, building an alumni network, celebrating intern achievements, and involving former interns in ongoing activities, like recruitment and events, can help sustain meaningful connections and encourage continued contributions to the museum. However, the PGC already places a lot of importance on this aspect.

These recommendations aim to enhance both the intern experience and institutional performance. By actively fostering engagement, trust, and value co-creation, museums like the Peggy Guggenheim Collection can convert internships into strategic tools for organizational development and cultural relevance.

Although these recommendations are specific to the case study of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection's International Internship Program, learning from their example, other structured internship programs in the cultural field could also benefit from implementing some of these pointers to increase the engagement level of their interns.

5.5 Future research and broader implications

This study is exploratory and leaves several questions open for further research. Notably, it examines trust and engagement primarily from the perspective of interns and the institution. Visitor perceptions, particularly how engaged interns affect the visitor experience and institutional trust from the visitors' perspective, remain unexplored. Future research could investigate how

internships influence not just internal dynamics but also external brand perception and audience loyalty.

Additionally, broader comparative studies across multiple museums could contextualize PGC's practices within wider sectoral trends. Are similar challenges and innovations present in other institutions? How do variables like size, funding, and national policy influence internship design?

5.6 Toward a new era of museum internships

Internship programs are central to how museums nurture future professionals, build relationships, and reflect their institutional values. Internship programs are more than educational opportunities; they are ethical commitments. Museums that offer internships must do more than recruit talented young people, they must design systems that treat those people as partners in institutional growth. This requires trust, respect, communication, and adaptability. As this thesis has shown, interns are not just learners, but they are active contributors who mediate visitor experiences, extend institutional missions, and carry the museum's identity into the world.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection stands at a unique intersection of legacy and innovation. Its small size, prestigious identity, and international reach make it an ideal example for rethinking what museum internships can be. This research has shown that interns, when supported properly, can be enthusiastic ambassadors, creative collaborators, and vital contributors to museum culture. But this potential is only realized when institutions treat internships not as a way to cut costs, but as an opportunity to transform the organization's value into dynamic conversations with the visitors.

The Peggy Guggenheim Collection is both a good example to learn from and a reminder of the challenges that still need to be addressed. Its prestige attracts talent, and its recent reforms show institutional reflexivity. Yet unresolved tensions, between aspiration and execution, equity and hierarchy, and recognition and invisibility, point to a need for deeper, more systemic change. This challenge does not impact specifically the PGC, but the whole cultural sector's approach to internship programs could be redesigned.

Reimagining internships as collaborative, transparent, and reciprocal arrangements is not merely good management. It is a necessary step toward ethical and sustainable museum practice. Museums that embrace this challenge will not only cultivate engaged interns, but will also build a

resilient institution, grounded in trust, creativity, and shared purpose. In doing so, they will help redefine the museum not just as a place to showcase artworks, but as a living, evolving space of participation, learning, and collective stewardship.

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7. Appendix

Appendix A.

Interview guide - Former Interns

Introduction

1. Can you introduce yourself?

2. What were your expectations before starting the internship, and how was your actual experience?

Employee Engagement and Workplace Experience

3. How did the museum prepare you for your role? *(Was there a training program? Can you tell me a bit more about it? For example, did it give you instructions for visitor interactions?)*

4. What were your tasks and how did you feel about them? *(Did you feel that your assigned tasks were meaningful, matched your skills and provided opportunities for growth? Did you receive feedback related to your tasks?)*

5. Did the internship program encourage you to stay motivated and focused? In which way? *(Did your level of enthusiasm and your invested energy fluctuate during the internship? If so, what influenced these changes?)*

6. How much autonomy did you feel you had during the internship? *(Especially related to resolving visitor-related issues? Would you have liked to have more autonomy? If so - What- would have made you feel more empowered?)*

7. Did the internship contribute to your career, such as through academic credits or skill development or open up new job opportunities?

8. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisors and colleagues? *(Did it feel very hierarchical, or more equal?)*

9. Did you find the compensation appropriate for the workload and responsibilities of the internship? *(Did the salary (or lack of it) impact your motivation during the internship?)*

10. How do you feel about the museum when you are outside its doors? *(Did you feel like an ambassador for the museum?)*

11. Did you feel respected by the museum visitors? Can you recall any good and any bad experiences?

12. Do you consider this internship valuable? *(If so, what was the most valuable part of your internship experience,) (if you could change one thing about the internship program, what would it be?)*

13. If you think back to the internship after this conversation, do any specific images come to mind? *(If yes, what would it be)*

14. Is there anything that you would like to add or ask me? *(and thank you)*

(Possible follow-up questions:

- *How much teamwork was present in the program?*
- *Would you recommend this internship to other students? Why or why not?*

How did it make you feel, why, could you give examples?)

Interview guide - Intern Coordinator

1. Can you introduce yourself?

2. What were your expectations before starting the internship as an intern and later as Capi, and how was your actual experience?

Employee Engagement and Workplace Experience

3. How did the museum prepare you for your role of Capa (Intern Coordinator in Italian)?

4. What were your tasks and how did you feel about them? *(Did you feel that your assigned tasks were meaningful, matched your skills and provided opportunities for growth? Did you receive feedback related to your tasks?)*

5. Did the internship program encourage you to stay motivated and focused? In which way? *(Did your level of enthusiasm and your invested energy fluctuate during the internship? If so, what influenced these changes?)*

6. How much autonomy did you feel you had as Capi? *(Would you have liked to have more autonomy? If so - What- would have made you feel more empowered?)*

7. Did the internship contribute to your career, such as through academic credits or skill development or open up new job opportunities?

8. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisors and with the interns you were responsible for? *(Did it feel very hierarchical, or more equal?)*

9. Did you find the compensation appropriate for the workload and responsibilities of the internship? *(Did the salary (or lack of it) impact your motivation during the internship?)*

10. How do you feel about the museum when you are outside its doors? *(Did you feel like an ambassador for the museum?)*

11. Did you feel respected by the other workers of the museum? Can you recall any good and any bad experiences?

12. What was your favorite part of your role?

13. Do you consider this internship valuable? *(If so, what was the most valuable part of your internship experience,) (if you could change one thing about the internship program, what would it be?)*

14. If you think back to the internship after this conversation, do any specific images come to mind? *(If yes, what would it be?)*

15.Is there anything that you would like to add or ask me? *(and thank you)*

Interview guide - Coordinator for Internship and Family Programs

Introduction

- Can you please introduce yourself, and your role at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection? *(The responsibilities of your position and the daily tasks)*
- Could you please describe the PGC's overall vision and strategy in terms of the International Internship Program?

Intern Engagement Strategies

1. How do you personally define "meaningful engagement" in the context of the International Internship Program at the PGC?
2. What specific strategies or activities does the PGC use to help interns feel part of the museum community from day one?
3. How do you ensure that interns are assigned tasks that match both their interests and the museum's needs? *(How can the museum manage the different background and age of the interns, and design the internship program in a way to be as suitable as possible for most of them?)*
4. What are the strategies of the museum to attract new talents?

Trust and Relationship Building

5. What are the key factors you believe contribute to building trust between interns and staff?
6. Can you share a positive example when trust was successfully built during the internship, and when it was challenged? *(What were the outcomes?)*

7. Are interns given the space to express concerns or propose new ideas, and how are these typically received? *(Do interns play an important part in how the public perceives the museum?)*

8. How is confidentiality, responsibility, and autonomy negotiated with interns during their time at the museum?

Mutual Benefits and Institutional Impact

9. From your perspective, what are the most valuable contributions interns make to your department or the museum overall? *(How much is the internship program part of the museum's overall marketing strategy?)*

10. Have any interns influenced institutional practices or introduced new insights that had a lasting impact? *(Have there been any changes in the past two years regarding the internship program, are there any changes currently planned, or in the process of implementation? What is the process behind adapting changes based on the interns' feedback to improve the program?)*

11. In what ways does the museum consciously aim to benefit the intern beyond task assignments, (e.g., through mentorship, exposure, or career support)? *(Has the internship program promoted collaborations with different Universities, and contributed positively to student's academic careers?)*

12. How do you assess the success or value of an internship after it ends, both from the intern's side and the museum's?

Improvement and Vision

13. Have you noticed any patterns in which interns tend to remain involved with the museum long-term (e.g., as volunteers, staff, or ambassadors)? If so, why do you think that happens? *(How does the PGC make sure that the interns take their responsibility seriously and represent the museum in a positive light as ambassadors?)*

14. What improvements would you like to see in the way internships are structured or supported in your institution? *(Could it be somehow achieved that more interns could join departments?)*

15. Would you like to add anything to the interview or ask from me?

Appendix B.

Coding table - detailed version

8. Motivations for engagement

Code: personal interest in art

-Expressions of intrinsic motivation, passion, or personal connection to art and culture.

Code: career aspirations

-References to professional development goals, CV-building, university credits, or career opportunities in the art sector.

Code: community aspect

-Mentions of belonging, networking, or the desire to be part of a diverse artistic community.

9. Values of the internship program

Code: skill acquisition

-Statements about learning practical skills, like public speaking, competencies in visitor interactions, gaining hands-on experience about museum operations, or knowledge transfer among the interns.

Code: institutional prestige

-Importance attributed to the reputation of the hosting institution (Peggy Guggenheim Collection).

Code: access to networks

-References to professional networking, future job opportunities, or connections made during the internship.

10. Internship role perception

Code: expectation vs. reality

-Discrepancies between anticipated learning experiences and the actual scope of tasks (e.g., “I was expecting to be part of a department, but I ended up guarding rooms all day.”)

Code: internship as labor

-Interns’ perception of fulfilling roles similar to regular employees, without corresponding recognition or compensation.

11. Engagement and motivation dynamics

Code: Initial enthusiasm and its decline

-High initial engagement fading due to repetitive tasks and lack of meaningful involvement, too much time spent guarding the rooms, instead of academic work.

Code: factors sustaining motivation

-Elements that helped maintain motivation, such as peer support and personal research opportunities.

12. Empowerment and autonomy

Code: lack of autonomy in daily tasks

-Limited decision-making capacity in operational roles, leading to feelings of being undervalued.

Code: seeking empowerment through extra initiatives

-Instances where interns sought creative outlets beyond assigned tasks, such as volunteering for communication projects.

13. Challenges of the internship program

Code: financial constraints

-Difficulties mentioned regarding unpaid and underpaid internships, cost of living, or financial sustainability.

Code: selection process

-Comments on competitiveness, transparency, or fairness of recruitment and selection processes.

Code: workload and emotional labor

-Experiences of high workload, stress, or emotional challenges related to internship tasks.

14. Learning outcomes and reflections

Code: personal growth

-Insights about self-confidence, personal development, and soft skills improvement.

Code: professional identity formation

-Reflections on understanding their place in the art world, clarifying career paths.

Code: critical view on the sector

-Emerging critical perspectives on the art sector, including elitism, difficulty of finding jobs, employee exploitation.

15. Recommendations

Code: empowering tasks

-Expressions of a desire to do more academic work, having the opportunity to join departments.

Code: institutional support

-Suggestions for better mentorship, structured learning programs, or psychological support. Advising to develop a more personalized program adjusted to each intern's strengths.

Code: developing institutional trust

-Factors influencing interns' trust in the museum, including transparency and recognition.

Code: inclusivity and diversity

-Proposals to enhance diversity, equal opportunities, or accessibility for underrepresented groups.

Code: transparency and feedback

-Calls for clearer communication, feedback mechanisms, and transparency in internship practices.

Appendix C.

Recommendation Table

Area	Recommendation	Rationale
Internship Duration	Extend the International Internship to a minimum of 2.5–3 months.	Enables interns to complete meaningful projects, build relationships, and integrate into departments.
Intern Coordinator Role	Formalize and divide the role into 3 focused areas between 3 different coordinators (onboarding, scheduling, intern welfare). Clarify responsibilities to avoid favoritism.	Prevents burnout, increases effectiveness, and acknowledges the complexity of the role. Strengthens vertical trust.
Departmental Access	Create a transparent selection process and pathway into departmental internships. Add a "department rotation" model.	Reduces perceived favoritism, increases trust and professional development, and broadens exposure to institutional functions.
Task Clarity & Diversity	Provide clear, detailed descriptions of daily responsibilities. Balance operational duties with learning-oriented activities.	Sets expectations, supports motivation, and improves the educational value of the internship.
Feedback Systems	Institutionalize mid- and end-of-internship evaluations. Maintain regular one-on-one check-ins between interns and the supervisors.	Builds trust, validates interns' efforts, and allows for reflection, growth and course correction.
Empowerment & Autonomy	Allow interns to propose and lead micro-projects (e.g., visitor surveys, content creation). Include interns in brainstorming sessions or debriefs.	Encourages ownership, creativity, and active engagement with institutional development.
Peer Community	Encourage peer-led sessions, collaborative group tasks, intern-led newsletters. Organize regular social events.	Fosters community, connection, and shared learning.
Academic Integration	Expand project-based tasks and optional long-term contributions (e.g., research briefs, social media content). Add more workshops	Enhances intrinsic motivation, bridges theory and practice, and provides skill-building opportunities.
Compensation and Equity	Offer clear communication about pay discrepancies. Provide recognition for unpaid/extra roles. Evaluate cost-of-living pay scales.	Mitigates animosity, affirms institutional values, and supports economic accessibility.
Recognition	Publicly acknowledge value-adding behavior.	Reinforces appreciation and motivates high performance.
Leadership Access	Schedule informal Q&A sessions or coffee chats with museum leadership.	Humanizes leadership, builds vertical trust, and offers learning moments.
Multilingual Support	Introduce informal Italian language crash courses or pair interns for language exchange.	Increases accessibility to departmental roles and promotes inclusivity.
Alumni Engagement	Develop a formal alumni platform for networking and mentorship. Feature success stories.	Extends the value of the internship and builds a long-term community.