Belonging in the Museum:

How Dutch Art Museums Can Brand Themselves for Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Young adults are the demographic least likely to visit art museums in the Netherlands, despite the sector's overall recovery since the COVID-19 pandemic (Berg et al., 2024, p. 30; Binnen Bij Musea, 2024). This trend is also observed internationally and is often attributed to perceptions that museums are elitist, irrelevant, or unengaging (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23; Batat, 2020, p. 109). While earlier research has examined programmatic and educational outreach, the role of museum branding and institutional identity in shaping young adults' perceptions remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by asking: *How can Dutch art museums brand and position themselves to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, fostering a sense of belonging?*

A qualitative research design was used, based on thirteen semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 19 to 28 living in the Netherlands. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to reflect a diversity of museum experiences, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 77–101) six-phase approach, with codes and themes developed inductively from the data and interpreted through a constructionist lens.

The study is informed by a multidisciplinary theoretical framework combining Customer-Based Brand Equity (Keller, 1993, pp. 1–22; 2003, pp. 7–20), social infrastructure and belonging (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191), Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509–523), cultural capital (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47–67), self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195–206), brand positioning (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616–2631), and audience development (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327).

Findings reveal that while many young adults perceive museums as exclusive, institutional, or difficult to relate to, they nonetheless express a strong interest in cultural engagement. A sense of belonging was fostered when museums communicated in accessible, inclusive, and emotionally resonant ways, offered diverse representation, and created space for peer-based connection and validation.

The study concludes that Dutch art museums can enhance their relevance to young adults by rethinking branding strategies to center identity recognition, cultural accessibility, and emotional connection. These insights offer practical guidance for museums seeking to become more relational, socially embedded, and meaningful across generations.

KEYWORDS: *Museum branding, Museum positioning, Dutch art museums, Audience research*

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1. Introduction

The Netherlands is home to over 400 museums, offering a wealth of culturally enriching experiences (Berg et al., 2024, p. 16). In 2023, 475 museums affiliated with the Museumvereniging recorded a total of 30.9 million visits, including 23 million by Dutch residents and 8 million by international visitors (Museumvereniging, 2024). Following a decline in attendance due to the COVID-19 pandemic, museum visitation rates have been steadily recovering, with the sector generating €1.26 billion in revenue that year and larger museums seeing the strongest return of audiences (Berg et al., 2024, p. 22; Museumvereniging, 2024).

However, young adults remain an exception to this trend, consistently representing the demographic least likely to visit museums in the Netherlands (Berg et al., 2024, p. 30; Binnen Bij Musea, 2024). The underrepresentation is not a challenge unique to the Netherlands. International studies indicate that museums often struggle to attract and retain young visitors due to perceptions of exclusivity, irrelevance, or lack of interactive experiences that align with their cultural consumption habits (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23). Although these patterns have been documented, much of the existing research focuses on programmatic interventions, audience segmentation, or specific educational tools (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–310; Batat, 2020, pp. 109–110; Mokhtar & Kasim, 2011, pp. 44–47). There is considerably less attention to how the overall institutional identity of museums, including their branding, perception, and positioning, shapes how young adults perceive, relate to, and engage with museums. As a result, an important dimension remains insufficiently understood: how museums can construct brand identities that resonate with the values, expectations, and emotional needs of younger generations, including their desire for recognition and sense of belonging.

Museums have increasingly recognized the importance of adopting visitor-centered strategies and responsive design (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 313–314). Still, strategic branding and positioning, well-established tools in the commercial domain, remain underutilized in museum practice (McNichol, 2005, pp. 243–246; Kraujalienė & Kromalcas, 2022, pp. 468–469). This gap is critical because branding is not only about logos or slogans; it is about constructing meaning, forging relationships, and communicating institutional identity (Keller, 1993, p. 17). For younger audiences, brand perception often precedes experience. If museums are to expand their reach and deepen engagement, they must consider how their identity is constructed and interpreted well before a visit takes place (Colladon et al., 2019, pp. 2–9). Museums that appear exclusive or irrelevant may be bypassed altogether, regardless of the quality of their programming.

In addition to issues of accessibility and relevance, the emotional dimension of museum engagement also deserves attention. A growing body of literature highlights the role of belonging in shaping visitors' perceptions and behaviors (Fortune, 2020, pp. 182, 184–186; Price & Applebaum, 2021, pp. 139–147). Museums function not only as educational spaces but also as social infrastructures that contribute to people's sense of identity, community, and recognition. Feelings of

inclusion or exclusion are shaped by the ways museums represent themselves, curate their collections, and interact with the public. When young adults do not see themselves reflected in institutional narratives, branding, or communication, they may feel alienated and disengaged (Bourdieu, 1991, as interpreted in Fyfe, 2004; Batat, 2020, pp. 109–131).

To address these issues, this study examines how Dutch art museums can better brand and position themselves to appeal to young adults. Rather than focusing on specific programs or temporary campaigns, the study investigates broader institutional strategies of identity construction and public perception. The aim is to explore how branding and positioning can foster not only recognition but also a sense of relevance and belonging. The research is guided by the following main question: How can Dutch art museums brand and position themselves to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, fostering a sense of belonging?

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

SQ1: What are the current perceptions of young adults towards Dutch art museums?

SQ2: What contributes to young adults' sense of belonging in cultural institutions?

SQ3: How can Dutch art museums effectively utilize offline and online tools to engage with young adult audiences?

This study focuses specifically on art museums because these institutions often play a key role in shaping cultural identity and are commonly perceived as exclusive spaces. Research has shown that public art galleries can evoke feelings of exclusion among young people (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, p. 21). In their study of the Auckland Art Gallery, Mason and McCarthy (2006) found that many young adults described the space as "cold" and geared toward "arty farty" or cultured visitors rather than people like themselves (pp. 26-27). These perceptions were not only based on the content of exhibitions but also on the institutional atmosphere and norms that made them feel out of place. Such affective responses represent early signals of non-belonging tied to institutional identity and highlight how art museums, despite their public status, often fail to resonate with the cultural preferences and social identities of younger audiences (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 26–27). Moreover, studies indicate that art museums tend to generate more emotional and cognitive barriers for infrequent visitors than other types of museums. These include unfamiliar labeling conventions, unapproachable institutional narratives, and implied expectations of prior cultural knowledge (Kluge-Pinsker & Stauffer, 2021, p. 66). By narrowing its scope to art museums, this study examines how branding and positioning strategies interact with these symbolic dimensions, aiming to critically explore how Dutch art museums can challenge exclusivity and foster relevance and a sense of belonging among young adults. To explore these issues, the study employs a qualitative research design, incorporating semi-structured in-depth interviews with young adults residing in the Netherlands.

1.2 Societal Relevance

       Museums serve as public spaces where diverse communities can engage with art and culture, reinforcing people's social relationships and shared identity (Coffee, 2008, pp. 261–263). Nevertheless, research indicates that young adults often perceive museums as places where they do not belong (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23). If museums fail to attract young adults, they risk becoming spaces that cater only to older, more privileged audiences, limiting their role as diverse hubs for the community.

       This study offers practical insights for museum professionals, particularly those working in branding, marketing, and audience engagement. It explores how Dutch art museums can reshape their brand identity and positioning to resonate with younger demographics. Specifically, it identifies how perceptions of exclusion are formed, which emotional and symbolic associations influence young adults' sense of belonging, and what communication strategies, both online and offline, can make museums feel more relevant and inviting. These findings can support institutions in designing audience-centered strategies that foster long-term engagement and intergenerational inclusivity, ultimately helping museums fulfill their role as socially embedded cultural spaces relevant to all generations.

1.3 Scientific relevance

       While much research has focused on museum programming and audience engagement, such as educational initiatives (Ayala et al., 202-, pp. 316–317), and inclusive exhibition design (Silverman, 1995, pp. 165-169). Existing studies have explored visitor experiences and motivations (Batat, 2020, p. 110). However, these tend to focus on short-term engagement or event-based initiatives rather than long-term brand perception or institutional positioning. As a result, there is a lack of insight into how young adults form judgments about a museum's identity and whether these perceptions support or hinder their sense of belonging and relevance.

       This study addresses that gap by examining how Dutch art museums can strategically position and brand themselves to better align with the values, cultural practices, and identity needs of young adults. Rather than evaluating the success of specific activities, this research focuses on how museums as institutions are perceived, what they symbolically represent, how they emotionally resonate with younger audiences, and how brand communication may foster or undermine feelings of inclusion. It brings together branding theory, audience perception, and the concept of belonging to explore this dynamic from a multidimensional academic perspective.

       Branding and positioning strategies are widely studied in business and marketing (Kraujalienė & Kromalcas, 2022, pp. 468–469) but remain underexplored in the cultural sector, especially in relation to art museums (McNichol, 2005, pp. 243–246; Xu et al., 2024). By applying these concepts in a cultural context, this study helps bridge the disciplinary boundaries between cultural sociology, audience research, and brand theory. It provides a framework that can inform

future academic studies on institutional identity, youth cultural access, and long-term brand perception in public cultural institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to explore how Dutch art museums can position themselves as relevant and attractive to young adults while fostering a sense of belonging. The framework integrates concepts from branding, media studies, sociology, and cultural theory to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how museums are perceived and experienced.

The framework is built on three central theoretical pillars. Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), developed by Keller (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20), provides insight into how museums can establish strong and resonant brand identities. The concept of museums as social infrastructures, as discussed by Fortune (2020, citing Klinenberg, 2018, pp. 181-191), helps to conceptualize museums as relational public spaces where people may feel either included or excluded. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), initially developed by Katz et al. (1973, pp. 509-523), serves as the framework for this study to explore how and why young adults may engage with museum content on digital platforms to meet informational, social, or identity-related needs.

These core concepts are supported by four additional concepts: self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206), audience development (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327), brand positioning (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616-2631), and cultural capital (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47-67). The additional concepts offer further explanatory power for how identity, strategy, and cultural access influence museum engagement

These theories complement each other by highlighting different aspects of how museums are perceived and experienced by young adults. CBBE (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20), and UGT (1973, pp. 509-523) focus on branding and digital engagement, demonstrating how young people form opinions about museums based on emotional associations and online communication. Theories of belonging (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181-191), brand positioning (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616-2631), and self-congruity (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206) add insight into how identity and inclusion shape feelings of relevance or exclusion. Finally, audience development (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327 and cultural capital (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47-67) help explain how institutional practices and structural inequalities can either support or limit access.

2.1 Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE)

The concept of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) was developed by Kevin Keller (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) to understand how consumers perceive and connect with brands. At its core, CBBE emphasizes that a brand's value lies not only in its functional offerings but also in the psychological and emotional associations it evokes in consumers' minds. Keller (1993) defines customer-based brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (p. 17), meaning that what consumers know and believe about a brand directly shapes how they react to its marketing. This perspective places the consumer at the center of

brand value, shifting attention from what organizations communicate to what audiences remember, feel, and believe about a brand over time.

Keller's (2003) CBBE model is structured as a pyramid (see Figure 1) with four hierarchical stages: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand resonance. These levels represent the depth of a consumer's relationship with a brand, moving from basic awareness to deep psychological attachment and loyalty (Keller, 2003, pp. 11-15):

- Brand identity refers to the consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand.
- Brand meaning encompasses both functional and symbolic associations. The things the brand stands for in the consumer's mind.
- Brand response involves judgments and feelings about the brand, such as credibility, quality, or emotional connection.
- Brand resonance, the pinnacle of the model, reflects a strong brand relationship marked by attachment, engagement, and loyalty.

Figure 1

CBBE pyramid
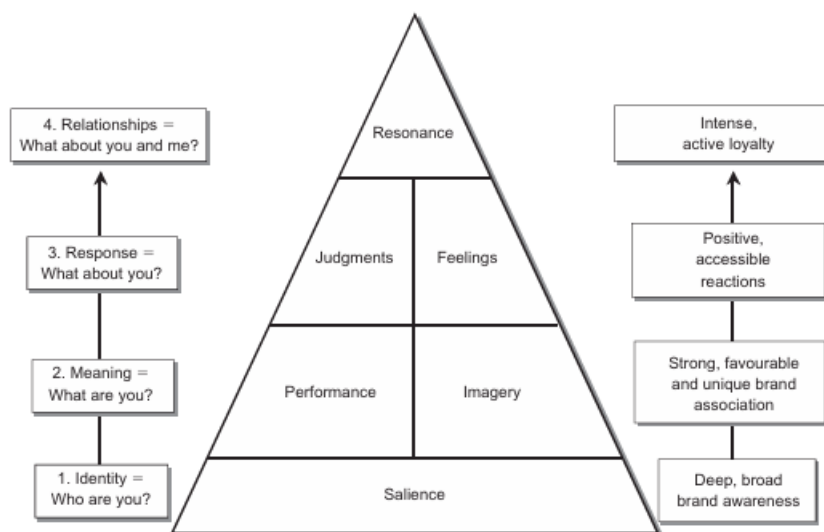
Note. From Keller (2003)

2.2 Applying CBBE to the Museum Contexts

Although CBBE has traditionally been applied in commercial contexts, its core principles are increasingly relevant to non-commercial cultural institutions such as museums. However, research in brand equity in the cultural sector remains limited. Most museum studies tend to focus on programming, accessibility, or education rather than on strategic branding (Batat, 2020).

By applying CBBE to museums, particularly art museums in the Netherlands, this research

explores how institutions can shape brand meaning to counteract perceptions of exclusivity or irrelevance among young adults. Each stage of the CBBE model offers a lens for examining how people engage with or fail to engage in museums (see Table 1).

Table 1

Application CBBE to the Museum Context

CBEE Dimension	Application to Museum Context
Brand Identity	Do young adults recognize Dutch art museums or distinguish between them? Low awareness may undermine all other brand-building efforts.
Brand Meaning	How do young adults interpret the symbolic and functional aspects of museums? Do they see them as enriching, inclusive, elitist, or outdated?
Brand Response	What emotional and evaluative reactions do young adults have? These might include admiration, trust, indifference, or a sense of exclusion.
Brand Resonance	Do young adults feel personally connected to a museum brand? Does this connection translate into engagement, identification, or a sense of belonging?

Closely linked to branding, brand positioning (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616-2631) refers to an organization's strategic effort to establish a distinct and meaningful presence in the minds of its target audience. It does so by shaping associations, values, and perceived relevance in contrast to other options in the cultural landscape (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616–2618). While not part of Keller's (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) original CBBE model, brand positioning is a complementary concept that helps explain how brand meaning and brand response are formed. This study uses brand positioning to explore how Dutch art museums may be perceived by young adults: whether they signal relevance, openness, or cultural distance through their public identity.

As Falk and Dierking (2013) highlight, visitors do not arrive as blank slates; they bring prior experiences, expectations, and identity-related motivations to the museum space (pp. 89–91). These factors influence how institutional messages are interpreted and whether young adults experience admiration, trust, indifference, or exclusion. In this sense, brand positioning (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616–2618) provides a useful lens for analyzing how strategic communication may affect symbolic interpretation and emotional response, two core dimensions within the CBBE framework.

The adaptation of CBBE to the museum context does not come without tension. Critics have noted that branding in cultural settings risks adopting market language that may conflict with public values such as inclusivity and trust (McNichol, 2005, pp. 243-246). Moreover, key concepts such as brand loyalty and preference require reinterpretation in non-commercial environments. In cultural institutions, where repeat visits and economic transactions may be influenced by convenience, habit, or contextual factors, such behaviors offer less reliable indicators of brand strength than motivations rooted in cultural engagement. (Brida et al., 2013, pp. 2818–2820). Therefore, in this study, brand resonance is not understood in terms of repeated behavior, as it is in Keller's (2003, pp. 15–17) original formulation, but rather as a sense of belonging, identification, and emotional closeness. This adaptation is grounded in research showing that emotional attachment, relational trust, and recognition are more relevant markers of deep engagement in museum settings (Price & Applebaum, 2022, pp. 139–141; Fortune, 2020, p. 185).

CBBE is particularly valuable for this research because it offers a focused structure for exploring how young adults perceive Dutch art museums. This theoretical lens provides the foundation for the first sub-question of this study: *"What are the current perceptions of young adults towards Dutch art museums?"* Through the CBBE framework, this question is explored through levels of awareness, symbolic associations, emotional responses, and a sense of connection and belonging.

2.3 Sense of Belonging and Museums as Social Infrastructures

Belonging is a fundamental human need that involves feeling valued, attached, and having a sense of "insiderness and proximity to people, activities, networks and spaces" (Hall, 2010, p. 56, as cited in Fortune, 2020, p. 181). It contributes to well-being and protects against loneliness, primarily when supported by regular and meaningful social interactions (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–182). In the museum context, belonging refers to whether individuals feel welcome, recognized, and emotionally connected to the institution (Fortune, 2020, p. 185). This relates directly to earlier discussions of branding and perception: while branding influences how museums are viewed from the outside, belonging shapes how they are experienced from within.

Fortune (2020) conceptualizes museums as social infrastructures, emphasizing their role as public spaces where individuals and communities cultivate a sense of belonging (pp. 181-182). Social infrastructures are institutions that facilitate regular social interaction, foster relationships, and strengthen community ties (Klinenberg, 2018, as cited in Fortune, 2020, p. 182). While museums are not always associated with this kind of community-building role, Fortune (2020) argues that they can fulfill it when they are designed to promote emotional connection, care, and ongoing engagement among diverse audiences (p. 182).

Research at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Fortune, 2020, pp. 183-189) indicates that when museums actively invite people from diverse backgrounds, they can challenge perceptions of

exclusivity and help visitors feel a sense of belonging (Fortune, 2020, p. 186). Rather than simply offering access, museums must make a sustained institutional commitment to inclusion through repeated recognition, emotional connection, and relationship-building (Fortune, 2020, pp. 184–186). Belonging in this context is not a static feeling, but a process that deepens over time through consistent care and acknowledgement (Fortune, 2020, pp. 186).

Fortune's (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181-191) study highlights several practices that contribute to this process. Invitations to participate were perceived not just as symbolic gestures but as meaningful acknowledgements of value and worth: "The fact that somebody had an idea to share the ideal of going to the museum made me understand the definition of the word 'belonging.' It's like someone cares here" (p. 184). Ongoing relationships and recognition were equally significant. One participant described feeling like they truly belonged only after being remembered by multiple staff across visits: "I didn't feel I belonged until one day this year when I ran into all three tour guides that guided us over the years, and they all knew me" (p. 185). These reflections demonstrate that belonging is not a static feeling, but a process that deepens through repeated recognition and trust.

Belonging in this sense extends beyond physical access, aesthetic appeal, or one-time programs. It involves sustained inclusion practices that affirm the presence and participation of diverse visitors (Fortune, 2020, pp. 184–186). Museums must consider how they present themselves to young audiences not only as places to consume culture but as spaces where visitors feel seen, respected, and emotionally included.

This understanding of belonging aligns closely with the concept of brand resonance in the CBBE model. At its highest level, brand resonance refers to a deep psychological attachment and a strong sense of connection with a brand (Keller, 2003, pp. 15–17). In Fortune's (2020) study, such attachment was reflected in participants' feelings of being remembered, emotionally acknowledged, and personally welcomed (pp. 184–185). When museums succeed in fostering these conditions, they are not only generating brand loyalty but also supporting the social experience of belonging. This perspective reinforces the idea that belonging is not simply an emotional response, but a process that can be supported through intentional, sustained institutional practices.

These theoretical insights provide the foundation for the second sub-question of this study: "What contributes to young adults' sense of belonging in cultural institutions?" Through the lens of Fortune's (2020, pp. 181-191) concept of social infrastructure and Keller's (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) model of brand resonance, this research investigates how emotional recognition, inclusion practices, and institutional care may foster belonging among young adult audiences in Dutch art museums.

2.4 Extending belonging through multi-dimensional frameworks

While Fortune (2020, pp. 181-191) emphasizes that belonging must be actively cultivated through institutional design and relationships, other scholars have sought to break down this

experience into more specific dimensions. Price and Applebaum (2022, pp. 135-160) propose a multidimensional framework for understanding how belonging operates in museums and cultural centers. Based on their research with museum visitors, Price and Applebaum's (2022) identify three interrelated dimensions of belonging:

- people fit (whether visitors feel personally included or excluded)
- place belongingness (a sense of connection to the physical and social environment)
- and the context of the visit, which includes the personal, social, and cultural meanings that visitors bring with them (pp. 139–141).

According to Price and Applebaum (2022), community-level belonging refers to how well visitors feel their cultural identity or background is acknowledged, and their findings show that this varies significantly across groups (Price & Applebaum, 2022, p. 147). While many visitors reported feeling personally welcomed, responses differed when participants were asked whether their communities felt represented. White guests were more likely to define community in terms of geography or neighborhood. In contrast, guests from Black, Latinx, and Asian backgrounds were more likely to link the community to shared race, ethnicity, and lived experience (p. 152). These findings highlight that inclusion cannot be treated as a universal condition; it is interpreted differently depending on one's identity and cultural background.

This model emphasizes the importance of tailoring branding and communication strategies to different identity-based experiences for Dutch art museums, aiming to appeal to younger, more diverse audiences. In branding terms, this means that strategies must evoke positive emotions and visibly and meaningfully acknowledge the diverse stories, values, and communities that shape their audiences.

2.5 Museums, Exclusion, and Established-Outsider Relations

While Fortune (2020, pp. 181-191) emphasizes belonging as a cultivated practice, Fyfe (2016, pp. 54-80) draws attention to the museum's historical and ongoing role in reinforcing social boundaries. Drawing on Norbert Elias's theory (Elias, 2008, as cited in Fyfe, 2016, pp. 57–58) of established–outsider relations, Fyfe (2016) shows how museums have long functioned as socially constructed spaces shaped by class distinctions, aesthetic hierarchies, and exclusionary norms (p. 57). In Elias's framework, dominant groups (the "established") maintain their status by subtly stigmatizing outsiders. They often stigmatize outsiders under the guise of taste, refinement, or civility. Applied to museums, this suggests that institutions may appear inclusive while reproducing symbolic boundaries that privilege those already versed in dominant cultural codes (Fyfe, 2016, pp. 57–59).

According to Fyfe (2016), museums are sites of social distinction where practices of exclusion can be internalized by visitors (Fyfe, 2016, pp. 58-60). The architecture, curatorial

language, and behavioral expectations of museums may all signal to young or marginalized audiences that these spaces are not for them. These signals are not always clear, but they shape the visitor experience through what Elias (2008, as cited in Fyfe, 2016, pp. 57–58) referred to as the concept of the civilizing process, which involves subtle norms that dictate who is deemed cultured, tasteful, or respectable (Fyfe, 2016, pp. 59-60). When young adults do not see their identities, interests, or cultural experiences reflected in museum narratives, they may experience alienation or symbolic displacement.

Importantly, this kind of exclusion is often not the result of individual prejudice but of institutionalized symbolic power. Fyfe (2004, pp. 47-67), drawing on Bourdieu's (1997, as cited in Fyfe, 2004, p. 49), framework, argues that museums function as gatekeepers of cultural capital, privileging dominant groups' knowledge, values, and aesthetic sensibilities. As defined by Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to the knowledge, competencies, and cultural fluency acquired through education and socialization (Bourdieu, 1997, as cited in Fyfe, 2004, p. 48). Since cultural capital is unevenly distributed across society, museum visitors are not equally equipped to decode and appreciate the symbolic meanings embedded in exhibitions (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47-49).

This insight is critical to understanding how branding strategies may inadvertently reproduce exclusion if they assume a level of cultural fluency that not all audiences possess. For young adults, especially those from non-traditional or less privileged educational backgrounds, museums may seem intimidating or irrelevant, not because of a lack of cultural interest but because the institutions reflect and reward specific cultural knowledge (Fyfe, 2004, p. 47).

2.6 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Digital Engagement

While the previous sections focus on how museums are perceived and experienced as physical and symbolic spaces, understanding how young adults engage with museums in the digital sphere requires a different lens. This study includes a focus on digital engagement because many young adults first encounter museums through social media or online platforms rather than through in-person visits (Falk & Dierking, 2013, pp. 82–83; Russo et al., 2008, p. 24). Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a framework for analyzing how individuals actively use media to fulfill their personal and social needs. Initially developed by Katz et al. (1973), UGT challenged the notion of passive audiences by asserting that media consumption is purposeful and driven by users' motivations (p. 510).

UGT identifies a range of motivations for media use, including information seeking, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 510–511). These categories are particularly relevant to museums seeking to understand how and why young adults interact with institutional content online.

In addition to these motivations, Shaw and Krug (2013) emphasize that digital communication is most effective when it supports dialogue, identity-building, and community

formation, rather than functioning as one-way broadcasting (pp. 239–242). Their perspective aligns with UGT's (1973, pp. 509-523) emphasis on identity and social connection, reinforcing the idea that digital platforms should invite interaction rather than simply transmit institutional messages. This suggests that young adults may be more responsive to digital strategies that facilitate self-expression and participatory engagement, especially when the content resonates with their values and experiences.

While scholars such as Shaw and Krug (2013, pp. 239-252) emphasize the need for dialogic digital practices, traditional museum engagement models have primarily focused on physical attendance and on-site interpretation, shaping expectations around prior museum experiences and repeat visitation (Falk & Dierking, 2013, p. 97). However, these models may overlook the importance of digital-first engagement. Russo et al. (2008) emphasize that social media tools, such as blogs, podcasts, and content-sharing platforms, allow participatory communication and museums to connect with audiences more collaboratively and dialogically (pp. 22–24). For many young adults, such platforms serve as entry points into the museum experience, offering space for exploration, expression, and interaction before they ever step into a physical gallery.

These insights provide the foundation for the third sub-question of this study: "How can Dutch art museums effectively utilize offline and online tools to engage with young adult audiences?" UGT complements the CBBE model by offering insight into the motivational drivers of engagement, helping museums build brand resonance and sustain long-term relationships through meaningful interaction. In this way, digital engagement becomes not just a marketing activity but a space where branding, identity, and belonging intersect.

2.7 Supporting concepts

While the previous sections addressed brand perception, belonging, and digital engagement, this final cluster of theories examines how Dutch art museums are perceived in relation to the self-concepts of young adult audiences. Rather than assuming that alignment or misalignment is already present, this section draws on theoretical frameworks to examine how museums may be perceived in relation to the identities and values of younger visitors. These frameworks help investigate why some museums may be perceived as welcoming and resonant, while others feel distant or unapproachable. Taken together, they offer tools for understanding how strategic communication, identity congruence, and cultural access might influence whether young adults experience a sense of belonging in cultural institutions.

2.7.1 Audience Development

Audience development (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327) refers to the strategic process by which cultural organizations cultivate and maintain relationships with their audiences over time. It goes beyond promotional tactics, encompassing outreach, communication, and participation to foster

long-term engagement (Ayala et al., 2020, p. 306). In museums, this often involves collaborative programming and cross-departmental strategies that acknowledge the evolving needs of different visitor groups (Ayala et al., 2020, p. 308). It also requires institutions to understand who currently engages with them, who does not, and why.

For Dutch art museums aiming to strengthen their relationship with younger visitors, audience development offers a useful framework to investigate potential structural or symbolic barriers to participation. Rather than presuming why young adults may or may not attend, this study draws on audience development to explore how museums can engage more meaningfully through inclusive and responsive practices. Ayala et al. (2020) stress that meaningful engagement depends on institutions creating platforms for dialogue, co-creation, and relevance (p. 313). These goals align with the CBBE model's emphasis on brand resonance and the concept of belonging as a relational and emotional process. Audience development also complements UGT by recognizing that audiences are not passive recipients but co-creators of cultural meaning (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 314–315).

2.7.2 Self-Congruity Theory

Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206) provides a valuable lens for understanding how individuals evaluate brands based on their alignment with personal identity. According to Sirgy (1985), people are more likely to engage with a brand when its image aligns with their actual or ideal self-concept (p. 195). This alignment, referred to as self-congruity, influences consumer attitudes, preferences, and loyalty (Sirgy, 1985, p. 196).

This concept is particularly relevant in the context of museum engagement. Research by Mason and McCarthy (2006) shows that many young people perceive museums as exclusive and unapproachable, describing them as institutions that reflect adult or elite culture rather than their own (p. 29). Drawing on Willis (1990, as cited in Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23), they argue that a misalignment may exist between the cultural values presented by museums and those held by younger audiences. In their study, museums were described as remote and unrelated to daily life, implying that perceived identity distance could discourage engagement more than physical or economic barriers (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23).

This study uses self-congruity theory to examine how young adults in the Netherlands perceive the fit between their personal identities and the public image of art museums. It provides a lens to explore whether associations with elitism, formality, or tradition influence how personally relevant or relatable museums are perceived to be by younger audiences. From a branding perspective, the theory also supports analysis of how brand meaning and resonance (Keller, 2003, pp. 13–17) may emerge when identity alignment is strong. It sheds light on how young adults interpret the symbolic values of museums (brand meaning) and how these perceptions may translate into emotional connection or distance (brand resonance). It also complements the concept of belonging by offering insight into how identity fit might contribute to feelings of recognition or disconnection.

Taken together, audience development and self-congruity theory emphasize that attracting

young adult audiences is not solely about increasing visibility or access. Instead, meaningful engagement may depend on how well museums reflect the identities, values, and experiences of these visitors. These frameworks complement earlier discussions of branding, belonging, and digital engagement by highlighting the role of personal relevance and identity fit in shaping perceptions. As part of the broader theoretical framework, this section provides tools for investigating whether and how Dutch art museums create the emotional, cultural, and relational conditions that support a sense of belonging among young adults. These theoretical relationships are synthesized in the conceptual model below (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Conceptual Model
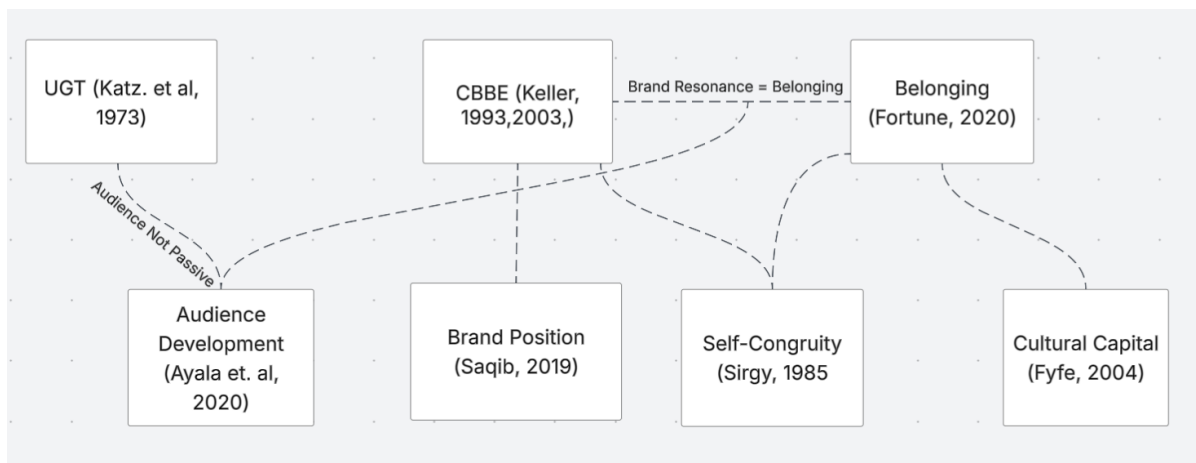
3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, enabling in-depth exploration of individuals' perceptions, emotions, and lived experiences in relation to Dutch art museums. Such experiences are best understood through methods that allow for rich, detailed accounts rather than predefined response categories (Johnson, 2001, p. 103). As museums are often experienced symbolically and emotionally and are interpreted through personal and cultural frames (Silverman, 1995, pp. 162–163), a qualitative approach is especially appropriate. This design enables the researcher to examine how meanings are constructed through engagement with museums in both physical and digital contexts.

Rather than testing hypotheses, this study seeks to uncover patterns of meaning and interpretation. It is guided by a constructionist epistemology, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is produced through discourse and interaction rather than discovered as an objective truth (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). From this perspective, the research focuses on how individuals construct their understanding of cultural institutions, including how these are shaped by social context and communicative practices.

In-depth interviews will be used to gather detailed personal narratives that reveal participants' perspectives and experiences. In-depth interviews are widely used to examine how individuals construct meaning from their experiences (Johnson, 2001, p. 104). This method allows participants to articulate their thoughts, associations, and motivations in their own words, which enhances the depth and authenticity of the data (Johnson, 2001, pp. 104–105). This flexibility makes them particularly useful for studying how young adults perceive brands and experience belonging in cultural spaces where emotions and symbolic associations play a significant role (Fortune, 2020).

3.1 Sampling and Recruitment

This study used a purposive sampling strategy, a widely employed approach in qualitative research for selecting participants based on their relevance to the research aims (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 653–654). Unlike random sampling, purposive sampling focuses on selecting participants who can provide rich and diverse insights into the topic under investigation, improving the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. It allows researchers to intentionally include individuals with particular knowledge, experiences, or characteristics aligned with the study's conceptual focus (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653; Jensen, 2002, p. 238).

To ensure relevance and diversity in the dataset, participants were selected based on three key inclusion criteria: age (18–28), current residency in the Netherlands (regardless of nationality), and their visitation patterns to Dutch art museums. The age range of 18 to 28 was chosen to reflect the transitional life phase of young adulthood, which includes students, early-career professionals, and individuals establishing independent lifestyles. Research suggests that this demographic segment is both crucial and underrepresented in museum visitation (Mokhtar & Kasim, 2009, p. 44).

Additionally, sampling across a range of museum visitation frequencies allowed for exploration of both engagement and disengagement patterns.

The final sample consisted of 13 participants, ranging from 19 to 28 years old. Of these, three participants identified as male and ten as female. To explore a broad spectrum of perceptions, the sample included both museum visitors and non-visitors:

- **Frequent or occasional visitors**, who could articulate what image they had of museums and what attracted them.
- **Infrequent visitors or non-visitors**, who could shed light on barriers and perceptions of exclusion that may prevent engagement.

All participants lived in the Netherlands, and the sampling strategy also aimed for variation in gender, educational background, and place of residence to enhance the richness of the data. These factors were considered during recruitment, following Jensen's (2002) emphasis on variation and contextual relevance over representativeness (p. 238).

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. While there is no universally fixed number for qualitative interviews, research suggests that thematic saturation in reflexive thematic analysis is typically reached with 9 to 24 participants, depending on the study's complexity and sample heterogeneity (Wutich et al., 2024, p. 3). In this study, the chosen sample size allowed for thematic richness and the emergence of nuanced patterns, while remaining manageable for in-depth, interpretive analysis. The sample was not intended for subgroup comparison, but rather to explore diversity in lived experiences.

Recruitment was carried out through personal networks and social media platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp. Posts were shared in relevant groups as well as on the researcher's personal feed. Some participants were recruited from the researcher's extended social circles, which may have introduced a degree of homogeneity in terms of educational background or cultural exposure. This is a known limitation in convenience-influenced purposive sampling but was addressed through deliberate variation across other key characteristics (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 654–656).

Interested individuals received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards. They were then asked whether they preferred to participate in an online or in-person interview, after which a session was scheduled at a time and format that suited them.

Table 2 includes an overview of participants. The participants were anonymized using assigned interviewee numbers.

Table 2

Participant Overview

Interviewee number	Age	Gender	Visitor Type	Residence Type	Education Level
1	25	Female	Occasional	Urban	MA
2	19	Female	Non-visitor	Suburban	MBO
3	24	Female	Frequent	Urban	HBO
4	24	Female	Occasional	Suburban	BA
5	23	Male	Occasional	Suburban	HBO
6	24	Female	Frequent	Suburban	MA
7	24	Female	Frequent	Urban	MA
8	24	Female	Non-visitor	Suburban	BA
9	22	Male	Non-visitor	Urban	HBO
10	28	Male	Frequent	Urban	BA
11	22	Female	Occasional	Urban	MA
12	22	Female	Frequent	Urban	MA
13	23	Female	Frequent	Urban	MA

3.2 Operationalization

This study will translate key concepts such as branding, belonging, and digital engagement into themes that structure the interview guide, ensuring the effective translation of theoretical concepts into interview themes. By grounding the interview themes in established theoretical frameworks, the study ensures that abstract concepts become concrete discussion points, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences and perceptions in a meaningful way (Johnson, 2001, pp. 105–106). Below is an outline of how each concept will be operationalized:

Table 3 provides an overview of how each concept was operationalized, including definitions, related sub-questions, and example interview questions. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Table 3

Operationalization of Concepts

Concept	Definition	Related Sub-Question	Example Interview Question
Brand Identity (Keller, 2003, p. 12)	Recognition and recall of Dutch art museums by young adults	SQ1	Which Dutch art museums come to mind? What do you

	(brand visibility and associations)		associate with them?
Brand Meaning (Keller, 2003, p. 12)	Symbolic and functional meanings assigned to museums (e.g., elitist, social, trendy, educational	SQ1	Do you think museums are artistic, educational, elitist, or social? What do they represent to you?
Brand Response (Keller, 2003, p. 13)	Emotional and evaluative reactions to museums (e.g., admiration, indifference, exclusion)	SQ1	How do museums make you feel? Do they seem open or exclusive?
Brand Resonance (Keller, 2003, p. 14)	Personal connection to a museum (sense of loyalty, identification, or belonging)	SQ1 and SQ2	Do you feel connected to any museum? Would you recommend it to someone else?
Inclusion (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191; Price and Applebaum, 2022, pp. 135–160)	Whether participants feel welcomed and emotionally acknowledged in museum spaces	SQ2	Do you feel welcome in Dutch art museums? Can you describe a welcoming or unwelcoming experience?
Interaction (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191; Price and Applebaum, 2022, pp. 135–160)	How participants perceive the social atmosphere of museums, including opportunities for connection	SQ2	Do you see museums as places where people connect, or are they more solitary?
Shared Experience (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191; Price and Applebaum, 2022, pp. 135–160)	The extent to which museums reflect participants' identities, backgrounds, and cultural values	SQ2	Have you ever had a conversation or shared moment in a museum?
Reflection of Cultural	The extent to which	SQ2	Do you think

and Identity Background (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47-67; Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191; Price and Applebaum, 2022, pp. 135–160)	museums reflect participants' identities, backgrounds, and cultural values		museums reflect your cultural or personal identity? Why or why not?
Information-Seeking (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509-523)	Following museums on digital platforms (e.g., seeking content for awareness or planning visits)	SQ3	Do you follow museums on social media? "Have you ever decided to visit a museum after seeing something online?"
Entertainment (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509-523)	Engaging with museum content for enjoyment, inspiration, or creativity	SQ3	Do you find online museum content entertaining or inspiring?
Social Interaction (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509-523)	Willingness to interact, co-create, or express identity through digital platforms	SQ3	Would you contribute something to a museum's digital platform? Why or why not?

3.2.1 Prompts for Reflection on Museum Initiatives

In the final section of the interview, participants were shown materials related to two museum initiatives aimed at engaging young adults: Kunsthal Friday Night Live (Kunsthal, 2024) and Vincent on Friday (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). Each initiative was introduced through its website (Kunsthal, 2024; Van Gogh Museum, n.d.) and a short video (Spraakuhloos, 2024; Goudenlijntjes, 2024). The Kunsthal event was presented using a professionally produced promotional video created by one of the event's organizing partners (Spraakuhloos, 2024), while the Vincent on Friday initiative was represented by a user-generated video filmed by an attendee (Goudenlijntjes, 2024). Screenshots from the websites and video clips are included in Appendix B.

These examples were included to explore how participants respond to different forms of museum communication and programming. Kunsthal Friday Night Live and Vincent on Friday were selected because they are recurring events at well-known Dutch museums that combine visual art

with live performance, music, and evening programming (Kunsthal, 2024; Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). Both initiatives reflect attempts to reframe the museum visit as a social and cultural experience beyond traditional exhibition viewing. Each initiative was introduced through a video that differed in production style: Kunsthal Friday Night Live (Spraakuhloos, 2024) was shown through a professionally edited, fast-paced promotional clip, while Vincent on Friday (Goudenlijntjes, 2024) was represented by a user-generated, informal recording. This contrast allowed participants to reflect on how tone, framing, and video quality influence their sense of authenticity, connection, and belonging. Including these examples brought an applied dimension to the interview, encouraging participants to move beyond abstract discussion and evaluate how museums communicate their brand and values in practice.

During two test interviews, participants showed strong reactions to the difference in production style between the two videos. Based on this, the final interviews included follow-up questions about how video quality, representation, and professionalism affected their perception of authenticity, accessibility, and belonging.

This stimulus section added a valuable practical layer to the study, grounding theoretical concepts in real-world examples. It helped participants articulate how branding and belonging are communicated not just through what museums do, but also how they visually and socially present themselves.

3.3 Data Collection

The 13 interviews were guided by a flexible interview guide organized around the key themes of branding, belonging, and digital engagement, derived from the theoretical framework presented in the previous chapter. This semi-structured approach ensured consistency across interviews while allowing for spontaneity and depth, enabling the researcher to follow relevant threads introduced by participants. As Jensen (2002) emphasizes, interviews are co-constructed dialogues in which meaning emerges through interaction, and the researcher plays an active role in shaping the data (p. 240).

Interviews were conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The Microsoft Teams interviews were automatically transcribed by the platform, while the in-person interviews were transcribed using Adobe Premiere Pro after recording. The researcher carefully revised all transcripts to correct errors and ensure accuracy. Transcription was not treated as a neutral step, but rather as an analytical process through which the researcher engaged meaningfully with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The researcher kept reflexive notes throughout the data collection process to document impressions, emerging themes, and potential biases. This aligns with constructionist principles, which emphasize that the research process is shaped by the researcher's positionality and the interactional context of each interview

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

3.4 Data Analysis Method

This study used thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.77-101) outlined, to analyze the data collected through interviews. Thematic analysis is a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset. It is particularly suited for studies grounded in constructionist epistemologies, where meaning is seen as shaped by discourse and context rather than objectively discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). This aligns closely with the aims of the present research, which explores how young adults construct their perceptions of Dutch art museums and their sense of belonging in cultural spaces.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 87-93) six-phase process:

1. Familiarization with the data: The interview recordings were transcribed using digital transcription tools. All transcripts were then carefully reviewed and corrected by the researcher to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the content. This stage was not just a technical step but a critical moment for immersing oneself in the data and beginning to observe potential patterns and areas of interest.

2. Generating initial codes: Coding began inductively, meaning that the researcher allowed ideas to emerge from the data itself. At the same time, the coding process was guided by the key concepts discussed earlier. Codes were applied to important parts of the interviews, capturing both clear meanings and, when relevant, deeper ideas related to emotions, identity, or institutions.

3. Once all interviews had been coded, the researcher sorted the codes and began organizing them into potential themes. These themes represented shared patterns across interviews that were relevant to the research questions and theoretical focus. This was done using open, axial, and selective coding, resulting in a hierarchical coding tree that is revisited and used to structure the Results chapter. An overview of the final coding tree is included in Appendix C.

4. Reviewing themes: This phase involved refining the themes to ensure they were coherent and well-supported by the data. A total of 132 initial codes were reviewed across the 13 interviews. These codes were examined for overlap and grouped into thematically coherent clusters. Some were combined, redefined, or discarded depending on their analytical relevance. Themes were checked both within individual coded sections and across the entire dataset to ensure they were distinct, consistent, and well-supported by the data.

5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was then clearly defined and named in relation to the research questions and theoretical concepts. At this stage, the researcher

also identified how themes related to one another and the broader interpretive narrative being developed. Reflexive notes taken during the research process helped guide these interpretive decisions.

6. Producing the report: In the final step, the researcher wrote the analysis by combining the main themes with quotes from participants and ideas from the literature. The goal was not just to summarize what was said, but to offer a thoughtful interpretation that connected the findings to key concepts. These findings are presented and discussed in the next chapter.

The software program ATLAS.ti was used to support the coding and organization of the data. This tool helped the researcher manage codes, write memos, and keep a clear overview of how the analysis develops over time. It also supported transparency by allowing for a well-documented process that others can follow or review if needed.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher remained aware of their own role in shaping the findings. As a young adult with a bicultural background who has lived in the Netherlands since childhood, the researcher brings familiarity with Dutch cultural institutions and everyday social practices. This positional context, along with a personal interest in visiting museums, may have influenced how certain participant responses were interpreted, particularly when local cultural references or museum experiences were discussed. Although not all participants shared the same background, this familiarity may have contributed to a sense of comfort and openness during the interviews, especially with those who also grew up in the Netherlands. Additionally, 11 out of the 13 participants were recruited from the researcher's personal network. While this helped create a relaxed conversational dynamic, it also required heightened reflexivity to avoid interpretive bias. As Jensen (2002) explains, interviews are not neutral accounts; the researcher helps shape what is said and how it is interpreted (p. 240). For this reason, key decisions during coding and analysis were carefully documented and critically reflected on.

Although the coding began inductively, meaning that patterns were drawn from the data itself, the analysis was also informed by the study's theoretical framework. While the researcher stayed open to new ideas, the final themes were interpreted using key concepts such as branding, belonging, and digital engagement. This combined approach allowed both participant voices and theory to shape the results in meaningful ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

3.5 Ethical considerations

This study follows the ethical guidelines outlined in the Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, as set forth by the Netherlands Association of Universities (VSNU). Before the interviews, participants received clear information explaining the study's purpose, the involvement required, and how their data would be used. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed

that they could withdraw at any time without explanation or consequences. Informed consent was obtained verbally in all cases, and participants' rights and consent were confirmed both before the start of the interview and again once recording had begun.

All personal data was anonymized during transcription to protect confidentiality and privacy. Interview recordings, transcripts, and related documents are securely stored.

This research involved only adult participants who were not in a vulnerable or dependent position. While the interview questions may reflect feelings of inclusion or exclusion, no harm is expected. However, the researcher was prepared to pause or stop the interview if necessary.

An ethics checklist has been completed and submitted to ensure compliance with the VSNU's Code of Conduct. This checklist confirms that no deception will be used, that participants are not in vulnerable positions, and that appropriate safeguards are in place for data protection and withdrawal rights.

<center>**4. Results**</center>

This chapter presents the study's findings, derived from a reflexive thematic analysis of thirteen in-depth interviews with young adults in the Netherlands. The chapter is thematically organized in line with the sub-questions guiding this research. Each section presents one central theme cluster that emerged in response to the respective sub-question.

Themes were developed not merely based on surface-level recurrence, but on their conceptual richness, explanatory power, and alignment with the research focus. Each theme, representing a selective code in the analytic structure, is broken down into axial codes and supported by illustrative open codes and carefully contextualized quotations.

Throughout the chapter, the findings are interpreted in light of the theoretical framework introduced earlier. While the analysis remains grounded in participants' experiences, concepts such as CBBE (Keller, 1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20), belonging and social infrastructure (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181-191), and UGT (Katz et al. 1973, pp. 509-523) provide a conceptual lens where relevant. The chapter does not aim to provide statistical generalizability but rather to offer rich, theory-informed insights into the perceptions, experiences, and expectations young adults hold in relation to Dutch art museums.

4.1 Young Adults' Perceptions of Dutch Art Museums

This section addresses the first sub-question: *What are the current perceptions of young adults towards Dutch art museums?* The findings suggest that young adults' perceptions are shaped by a combination of exclusionary access conditions and emotionally resonant experiences. On one hand, participants expressed frustration over financial, logistical, and communicative barriers that signaled a lack of inclusivity. On the other hand, some found personal meaning and emotional comfort in museum spaces, especially when those environments supported individual interpretation and familiarity.

4.1.1 Barriers to Access and Understanding

Many participants described museums as exclusive or difficult to access, both practically and symbolically. These issues collectively signaled that museums were not designed with younger or more culturally diverse audiences in mind. The reflections below illustrate how each of these limitations shaped participants' perceptions of accessibility and relevance in Dutch art museums. These findings echo previous research showing that museums can alienate younger visitors through institutional norms and symbolic boundaries that privilege cultural insiders (Mason & McCarthy, 2006, pp. 21–23; Fyfe, 2004, p. 47).

Financial Barriers. High admission prices emerged as a significant barrier for many participants, particularly students and young professionals. While participants generally expressed interest in visiting museums, several indicated that cost limited how often they attended. Participant

8 reflected on the contrast between her local and international museum experiences:

I think I've been to more museums abroad than I have been in the Netherlands. Which is crazy because I live here all my life. But I think a part of it is because in other countries it's so much cheaper... Here in the Netherlands, it's way more expensive. So I feel like it's not as affordable for a lot of people to maybe go there even if they wanted to.

Others described opting for special events like Museum Night, which they saw as offering better value for money. Participant 13 commented: "Because just like Museum Night, like for the same price, you could go to, you know, one night and then you could visit like six museums."

These reflections suggest that perceived value plays a crucial role in attendance decisions. Participants were not necessarily unwilling to pay, but their reflections suggest that affordability and perceived value strongly influenced their decision to attend. Special events, such as Museum Night, which offered access to multiple museums for a single price, were often seen as more worthwhile. This aligns with research on audience development, which emphasizes that affordability must be paired with perceived relevance and experiential richness to sustain engagement (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–308).

It is important to note, however, that only participant (P12) explicitly mentioned the Dutch Museumkaart, a low-cost annual pass that grants free access to over 500 museums (Museumvereniging, n.d.). This participant was among the most frequent museumgoers and appeared especially familiar with the arts and culture sector. Reflecting on the role of such initiatives, they remarked:

Definitely having a membership, it's really, really helped. When it's younger people interested in art... I think memberships and things like this are something they should really bring back because you're losing the young people's interest in culture and art and museums.

Participant 12 also expressed concern about the accessibility of these programs, noting that former systems like the or Icon Card were no longer available to them: "There's a museum card... also is not really accessible everywhere anymore... my bachelor degree wasn't acceptable anymore for it."

This participant's reflections indicate that while discount and membership systems exist, awareness and eligibility may be limited to those already embedded in the cultural field. The fact that no other participants mentioned these programs suggests that museums may need to better communicate their affordability options to younger audiences. Otherwise, the perceived high cost of admission continues to function as a symbolic as well as practical barrier to entry.

Scheduling Conflicts. In addition to pricing, art museum schedules were cited as a structural

barrier to access. Participants who worked or studied full-time felt that regular museum hours were misaligned with their daily routines. Participant 10 noted:

I think extending hours is a good point, you see. Because some people don't necessarily have the time to be around, and the moment they start to close at like 18:30 becomes very annoying because now I don't have the time after work to take a look.

Others viewed special evening programs as an effective way to accommodate different lifestyles. Participant 13 commented:

It's also like after I think not a nine to five. You know what I mean? The closing times. It also attracts more different events. Yeah, special nights and then all museums together so. They would see also just get to explore those other museums

These responses highlight the importance of flexible programming that considers the lived realities of younger adults. When an art museum's timing fails to reflect the rhythms of this demographic, even highly motivated individuals may be discouraged from attending.

Communicative Exclusion Through Insider-Oriented Language. Participants also raised concerns about how museums communicate with visitors, particularly criticizing insider-oriented terminology and an overly academic tone in exhibition texts. These communicative barriers often made them feel excluded or unsure whether the museum content was meant for them.

Participant 6 expressed this view while discussing why they felt Dutch art museums primarily targeted more elite or highly educated audiences rather than casual visitors: "So maybe because sometimes they go into very specific details ...... I think the lay people wouldn't care about as much as someone who draws themselves or studies art history or something."

Similarly, Participant 1, when asked directly how Dutch art museums could be made more approachable, emphasized simplifying the language to appeal to a wider audience:

I think maybe make their language a bit more simple to approach a bigger group. And yeah, maybe I think that most museums cater to art lovers .... I think there are also a lot of people who don't know much about art but love to get into it more. So maybe cater to them a bit more.

These reflections suggest that the presentation style of many exhibitions assumes a degree of prior knowledge or cultural fluency. This supports Fyfe's (2004) argument that museums often rely on coded language that privileges cultural insiders, thereby creating symbolic boundaries that may be difficult for newer or less experienced visitors to cross (pp. 47–49). By adopting communication styles that feel exclusive or overly intellectual, museums risk alienating young adults who are curious but less confident in navigating traditional art-historical language. The resulting communicative

barriers not only prevent understanding but also reinforce symbolic distance, suggesting that these institutions are primarily intended for insiders or experts (Fyfe, 2016, pp. 58–60).

4.1.2 Personal reflection and emotional grounding in museums

Despite the barriers described above, several participants expressed strong emotional connections to museum spaces. These connections were often tied to familiarity, calmness, or opportunities for personal interpretation, suggesting that museums can play a meaningful role in young adults' emotional lives when they offer space for reflection and self-guided discovery.

Familiarity Offers Emotional Stability. Despite barriers, many participants viewed museums as emotionally meaningful spaces, particularly in moments of personal uncertainty or reflection. These responses revealed a different dimension of museum experience, one tied less to education or aesthetics and more to emotional safety, familiarity, and grounding. This aligns with Fortune's (2020) conceptualization of museums as social infrastructures that offer support and care through stability, rhythm, and presence (pp. 184–186).

Participant 12 described this connection clearly: "Always calm. There's always a calm feeling, relaxed... A sort of like serenity and just connection to the human." In this case, the museum becomes more than just a venue for viewing objects. It offers an experience of peace and introspection. The same participant emphasized the emotional value of returning to a familiar exhibit:

Yeah, especially if there's like the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the museum, the exhibit that's always there. You know what to expect when you go, so sometimes if you're feeling a bit lost... Kind of helps you give a little more direction or at least feel a bit more grounded, like it's OK, like this is still here... Yeah, if you want to see a new perspective on life and if you're feeling super lost, I think a museum is a very good place to go.

These reflections demonstrate how museums can serve as symbolic anchors, providing a sense of emotional continuity and stability during moments of instability. Rather than functioning solely as cultural institutions, they offer an affective environment that helps visitors feel safe and grounded.

This sense of emotional grounding was not equally present for all participants. It appeared most often among those who were already familiar with museum environments and described themselves as regular visitors. For others, the potential for emotional connection was limited by earlier barriers such as pricing, language, or institutional tone. The same qualities that created calm and continuity for some, such as silence, structure, and reflective tone, were interpreted by others as cold, overly formal, or socially restrictive. The museum thus emerges as a space of both comfort and constraint, depending on the visitor's prior experiences, expectations, and ability to interpret its symbolic environment.

Interpretive Openness and Personal Relevance. Participants consistently voiced appreciation for museums that allowed for open-ended engagement rather than prescribing fixed meanings. Participant 12 described an immersive, unlabeled experience:

So you kind of just look at it and get lost in it, and you have to really go close and like stand back, and you can stand on this balcony and look at everything and interpret it all by yourself. It's so cool.

They emphasized the importance of accommodating different motivations for visiting: "I think you take what you want from it. Some people just want a nice evening to look at pretty painting. Some people wanna learn. Some people wanna visit their favorite exhibit for the millionth time."

This quote illustrates how museums can support varied forms of engagement without prescribing a single "correct" mode of interpretation. Rather than being passive recipients of information, participants positioned themselves as active users of the museum space. This aligns with UGT, which posits that individuals engage with media and cultural content to fulfill different psychological, social, and informational needs (Katz et al., 1973, p. 510). In this case, the museum functions as a flexible platform where visitors can seek inspiration, relaxation, reflection, or learning. Institutions that recognize and support this plurality are more likely to be perceived as relevant by younger audiences, whose motivations often do not align with traditional, didactic models of museum education.

At a deeper level, this desire for interpretive flexibility reflects a shift in how young adults perceive the role of museums. Participants implicitly resisted top-down narratives that appeared rigid or unrelatable, favoring instead spaces that supported autonomy and dialogic meaning-making. This aligns with the evolving conception of museums as participatory, visitor-centered institutions rather than authoritative sources of cultural transmission (Silverman, 1995, pp. 165–169; Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 313–314). As Silverman (1995) argues, contemporary museums are increasingly expected to function as places where meaning is co-constructed rather than imposed, inviting visitors to engage on their own terms. This rebalancing of authority is particularly relevant for younger audiences, who tend to reject hierarchical knowledge structures in favor of interactive, emotionally resonant experiences (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 313–315).

4.2 Belonging in the Museum Space

This section addresses sub-question 2: *What contributes to young adults' sense of belonging in cultural institutions?* Drawing on the concept of belonging (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181-191), self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206), and cultural capital theory (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47-67), the findings show that belonging is shaped through a combination of cultural recognition, emotional

safety, and perceived agency. These factors influence not only whether young adults feel welcome but also whether they are motivated to return.

4.2.1 Relatability and Recognition in the Museum Experience

Cultural and Peer-Based Connections. Participants described belonging not as an abstract feeling but as a response to recognition, whether they felt seen in the museum's values, audiences, or content. Rather than articulating belonging in theoretical terms, participants typically referred to specific cultural or social cues that made them feel acknowledged. Fortune (2020) explains that recognition in public institutions contributes to emotional affirmation, helping individuals feel acknowledged and included in the space (p. 185). When this recognition is missing, through curatorial choices, language, or tone, it can create emotional distance or discomfort and subtly signal that the institution may not be oriented toward them.

Several participants commented on a mismatch between their own background and what was represented in museums. Participant 7 reflected:

I'm from a Catholic country and different, language family, so not really, but for me, like, it really expresses the, the Dutch identity in a way, or I mean, what I know from Dutch people, but yeah, it's more yeah, it's not my cultural identity. But I do understand that and I appreciate it.

While the participant expresses appreciation, the fragmented and hesitant phrasing suggests internal negotiation of distance and inclusion. Their response indicates a respectful engagement with Dutch cultural narratives, while simultaneously acknowledging that these do not reflect their own identity. This ambivalence reflects a partial connection, one in which the visitor neither rejects the museum nor feels entirely situated within its cultural frame. According to self-congruity theory, emotional attachment to a brand or institution is stronger when the brand image aligns with the individual's self-concept (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195–196). In this case, the participant's appreciation of Dutch cultural expression does not necessarily translate into a personal sense of belonging, illustrating the limits of connection when alignment is only partial.

Participant 11 explicitly voiced a desire for broader cultural inclusion in museum curation:

In the museum in Rotterdam, for example, there is an exhibit dedicated to like Surinamese artists or just artists of other countries. Not necessarily people of color, but maybe just from Eastern Europe or from Southeast Asia, that would be nice as well.

This quote highlights the importance of cultural representation as a means of fostering a sense of belonging. When young adults do not see their cultural backgrounds or geographies reflected in exhibitions, they are less likely to feel that the museum is a space where they are recognized. This reflects how museums can unintentionally center dominant narratives while

sidelining others. As Fyfe (2004, pp. 47-67) explains, museums often reflect the values of dominant social groups and expect visitors to possess a certain level of cultural knowledge to engage with the content thoroughly. Building on cultural capital, Fyfe (2004) argues that those who share these dominant values are more likely to feel at ease in museums, while others may feel out of place (pp. 47–49). When museums primarily exhibit Western or Dutch art without incorporating more diverse or international perspectives, they may reinforce these symbolic boundaries. This can make young adults who do not identify with those traditions feel like outliers in these institutions, rather than part of them.

This structural exclusion also plays out in how individual participants experience recognition or its absence. Participant 11 expressed a forward-looking desire for more inclusive representation, in contrast to Participant 7, who expressed appreciation for Dutch cultural expression despite not identifying with it. While Participant 7 acknowledged a cultural distance but showed appreciation, Participant 11 actively called for broader inclusion of diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds. Drawing on self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206), this difference can be understood in terms of how participants respond to perceived incongruence between their own identity and the museum's projected image. According to the theory, when there is a lack of alignment between self-image and institutional image, some individuals may still engage from a position of respectful distance, as their need for self-consistency may not be strongly threatened. Others, particularly those more motivated by self-esteem needs, may require more substantial alignment to feel emotionally connected to the institution (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195–196, 200–201).

In addition to exhibition content, peer visibility was also important for creating a sense of comfort and connection. Participant 10 noted: "Generally, the audience, the people that go there to the Kunstinstituut Melly, they seem younger and more around my age group. So things that we talk about, they seem more relevant or related to my interest, yeah." The presence of like-minded peers shaped whether the museum felt socially inclusive. This illustrates that belonging is not only structured by content but also by audience composition and atmosphere. It confirms the visitor's presence as appropriate and expected.

Comfort and discomfort with institutional expression. Some participants tied their sense of belonging to value alignment. Participant 11 described their connection to the Moco Museum in these terms:

So we went there, but I would say that maybe only with the Moco Museum I reflect or see myself going to a museum similar to that purely because of just my personal standards and viewpoints perspectives…. But I guess it just aligns with my viewpoints, aligned with Moco museums, I would say.

This reflection highlights how belonging can be shaped by a perceived match between

personal identity and institutional expression. According to self-congruity theory, individuals are more likely to respond positively to brands when they reflect their own self-concept. This includes how a brand relates to a person's values, interests, or lifestyle (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195–196). In this case, the participant identified a specific museum as aligning with their worldview, suggesting that brand identity played a role in fostering emotional connection. When this sense of alignment is absent, young adults may still recognize a museum's cultural value but feel less motivated to engage with it on a personal or emotional level.

Participant 3 described discomfort with the way an art museum presented Dutch colonial history in relation to Indonesia: "Also, the words that they used were also a little bit like oh, can you still use it nowadays? I don't know." This quote reflects discomfort with language that feels outdated or culturally out of step. In this case, the participant's hesitation reflects a lack of emotional affirmation, as the terminology suggested that the museum was not attuned to the emotional and cultural complexity of colonial histories. According to Fortune (2020), belonging is fostered when individuals feel recognized, respected, and known within institutional spaces (pp. 185-189). When museums present complex histories in ways that overlook struggle or use language that feels disconnected from present-day values, it can erode visitors' sense of trust and inclusion. Fyfe (2004) supports this view by showing how museum discourse often privileges educated insiders, leaving others feeling out of place (pp. 47–49). Outdated or exclusive terminology can therefore function as a subtle but powerful boundary, affecting whether young adults perceive the museum as socially relevant and emotionally accessible.

4.2.2 Comfort and Co-agency in the Museum Space

While recognition played an important role in shaping young adults' sense of belonging, it was not sufficient on its own. Participants emphasized that emotional safety, informal social environments, participatory formats, and opportunities for co-creation were also key. Belonging emerged not just from seeing oneself represented, but from feeling at ease in the space, engaged in the experience, and empowered to contribute. This section explores how different spatial, social, and interactive features shaped participants' comfort and sense of agency within museums.

Welcoming Spaces and Peer-Inclusive Environments. Participants frequently described how the overall atmosphere of the museum influenced whether they felt emotionally secure and socially welcome. Participant 8 explicitly highlighted the emotional ease they felt:

I do feel like they're welcoming to people like me. They're very easily like, you know, you can easily find them. It's easy to navigate while you're there. They're very, straightforward, like when you go there, it's just it's easy. I don't know, it's just it feels safe.

This quote illustrates how spatial clarity, staff demeanor, and openness can foster a low-barrier environment that supports emotional comfort. According to Fortune (2020), belonging is

generated not only through identity representation but also through relational gestures and physical cues that signal care, accessibility, and safety, which are essential for fostering meaningful social connection (p. 181). She argues that museums, as social infrastructures, can create environments where individuals feel valued and emotionally anchored. When people interact regularly in spaces designed for inclusivity, these interactions promote a sense of belonging by reflecting shared humanity (p. 182).

Other participants emphasized the importance of informal, hybrid environments that allow for social interaction. Participant 10 described their experience at Kunstinstituut Melly:

So also for the Kunstinstituut Melly, there's actually a cafe that's attached to it… So you can sit down with coffee and you can read the books for free… now it becomes more like a space where people can come together and hang out… There's a social aspect to it also.

According to Ayala et al. (2020), audience development is no longer solely about attracting new visitors but increasingly focuses on cultivating emotional connection and sustained engagement through inclusive and responsive environments (p. 313). This includes adapting physical spaces to support comfort, dialogue, and social interaction, allowing museums to function more like welcoming community settings than strictly formal institutions (p. 308). The authors emphasize the importance of fostering meaningful links between visitors and heritage, promoting social dynamism and intercultural dialogue to make cultural experiences more accessible and engaging for diverse audiences (p. 307). They also emphasize the importance of community engagement strategies that foster deeper relationships with local communities and social actors, transforming museums into hubs for social interaction and dialogue (p. 309). This shift is essential for museums to respond to the cultural and demographic diversity of their audiences, as well as their motivations and barriers to engagement, thereby enhancing the overall visitor experience (p. 310).

Interactive and Active Engagement. Several participants made it clear that passive museum formats were less appealing to them. A preference emerged for hands-on or dynamic experiences. Participant 13 explained: "Like younger people want to do stuff instead of, like, just walking around." Participant 6 explained: "So Van Gogh, I would say it's not very interactive. I'd say it's mostly just looking at art. I view it as more of a mature museum."

These statements suggest that static exhibition formats may unintentionally signal a generational or cultural mismatch. In contrast, museums that offer participatory or exploratory engagement appear more aligned with younger audiences' expectations. This reflects Ayala et al.'s (2020) argument that contemporary cultural consumers seek participatory relationships with institutions that allow for self-expression and discovery (p. 313).

Participant 3 described how this was achieved in a more informal museum: "I think Moco Museum is also mainly focused on art, but it also wants you to participate in the art. It wants you to

have fun with it… be creative yourself."

While participatory engagement allowed young adults to interact with the museum in active and creative ways, some participants described a different kind of connection. Their experiences were shaped more by emotional and sensory immersion than by action, highlighting how atmosphere and affect also play a central role in fostering a sense of belonging.

Sensory and Embodied Immersion. In contrast to active participation, some participants described a different kind of engagement. One shaped by emotional and sensory immersion. These experiences were marked by atmosphere and movement, allowing them to feel fully absorbed in the museum environment.

Participant 11 described being drawn in by a performance: "So immediately when they show dance performances. I was like, Oh my God, I'm already. I'm locked in, you know."

Participant 3 expressed a similar reaction to a more festive and multi-sensory setting:

Yes, that was amazing… it really resonates with me because it's not only that you can enjoy the art, but it's really something festive as well… like people play music… that makes it even more fun because art is not only based on a painting or like a statue… that's also art.

These accounts reveal the emotional and sensory power of embodied engagement. Participants described becoming immersed in the atmosphere of live performances, music, and communal energy. Rather than passive observation, the museum experience became active, affective, and physically engaging. As Fortune (2020) emphasizes, such forms of engagement are part of how social infrastructures foster belonging, not only through representation but through opportunities for repeated, emotionally meaningful interaction (pp. 181–183). Similarly, Ayala et al. (2020) argue that multisensory and socially inclusive environments can strengthen the relationship between visitors and institutions by encouraging emotional resonance and participatory engagement (pp. 307–309). In this context, affective immersion became a pathway to connection and comfort, allowing young adults to engage both physically and emotionally with the museum experience.

Narrative Co-Creation and Symbolic Ownership. While immersive formats helped participants feel emotionally connected to the museum environment, others described a more reflective form of engagement. Their sense of belonging was shaped not just by how the space felt, but by whether it encouraged them to share their perspectives and interpret meaning for themselves.

Some participants described how being invited to contribute their perspectives or interpretive insights enhanced their sense of belonging. Participant 12 shared: "They have a wall where people can put their opinion afterward… They really involve the community in that." Another participant (P10) reflected: "I feel that maybe certain things you need to be left to the people to create their own narratives… lays out a space for you to be able to construct your own narratives."

This call for interpretive freedom reflects a shift in expectations, from museums as

transmitters of knowledge to institutions that acknowledge multiple ways of knowing. As Fortune (2020) explains, belonging in public institutions emerges through relational trust, where visitors feel that their presence and perspectives are not only acknowledged but valued (pp. 181-189). These spaces for narrative co-creation offer visitors the opportunity to emotionally invest in the museum space, not just as consumers, but as participants in its cultural meaning.

Co-authorship, in this context, enhances both emotional and symbolic connection. As museums open up interpretive frameworks and invite shared meaning-making, they allow visitors to see themselves not only in the content but in the structure of the experience. This aligns with Ayala et al.'s (2020) emphasis on community engagement strategies that foster reciprocal relationships between cultural institutions and their publics (pp 309-310). The museum, then, becomes a site of participation rather than instruction, a space where meaning is shaped with visitors rather than delivered to them.

For these participants, belonging in the museum was not a fixed outcome but an ongoing process shaped through interaction, emotion, and shared authorship. When museums offer spaces that feel emotionally safe, socially fluid, and open to contribution, they shift from formal institutions to participatory infrastructures. Such environments allow young adults not only to feel included but to imagine themselves as part of the museum's cultural meaning.

4.3 Communication and Engagement Strategies

This section addresses sub-question 3: *How can Dutch art museums effectively utilize offline and online tools to engage with young adult audiences?* Thematic findings emphasize that participants do not simply seek information or entertainment from museums. Young adults seek tools that enable visibility, connection, interaction, and cultural expression on their own terms. This reflects a fundamental shift in expectations among younger audiences and is best understood through UGT, which frames audiences as active agents who select content that meets personal and social needs (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 510–511). Additionally, audience development (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327) and brand positioning theories (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616-2631) help explain how digital and event-based tools influence perception and engagement over time.

4.3.1 Digital presence and messaging effectiveness

Lack of museum presence and visibility on social media. A consistent concern raised by participants was the lack of museum presence on social media platforms. Museums were not perceived as active or visible digital actors in participants' cultural ecosystems. Participant 9 bluntly noted:

I've never really seen anything for an art museum on my social media, so I would suggest maybe hiring a better marketing strategy, or strategies and trying to at least reach them more using

social media because these, kind of, initiatives that are being that are being done really would attract them a lot more. So maybe I would suggest, upping their social media game.

This suggests that museums are not failing due to disinterest from young adults, but rather because they are not actively part of the digital spaces where cultural relevance is constructed. The participant's language highlights an expectation that cultural institutions should be both visible and communicative in accessible, everyday formats. From a UGT perspective, audiences gravitate toward media that are present, socially embedded, and responsive to their habits and rhythms (Katz et al., 1973, p. 510). The absence of museums from these spaces results in more than low awareness; it undermines the potential for emotional or social connection. As Shaw and Krug (2013) argue, platforms that support interaction, social meaning, and identity expression are particularly valued by younger users (p. 241). If museums do not appear in these ecosystems, they are unlikely to be considered relevant or culturally engaging. Even when museums are present online, participants found their communication style outdated or uninspiring.

This absence of visibility was not only about lacking a social media presence but also about the failure to communicate timely and event-specific information. Participant 13 highlighted how small but clear updates could make a meaningful difference:

For example, on social media like a banner with like, in this day there's something special also not only for like their normal schedule but also with like, oh, something new today or like an evening or a small event that's nice to have, right? Also, for people who do come there more often.

This illustrates the importance of linking digital communication to concrete experiences. Participants expected museums not only to be visible online but also to provide updates that are specific, engaging, and relevant to both first-time and returning visitors. From a UGT perspective, the gratification of timely and specific information is central to digital behavior, as users actively seek content that responds to their immediate informational and identity needs (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 510–511). From an audience development lens, promoting regular, personalized updates can deepen emotional investment and foster long-term relationships, since engagement involves not just outreach but ongoing, reciprocal communication (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 314–315).

Lack of Engaging and Clear Value Communication. While low visibility was a major barrier to engagement, participants also criticized the quality and clarity of museums' messaging when it was visible. The issue was not simply that museums failed to appear in digital spaces, but that when they did, their content often lacked emotional depth, narrative structure, or a compelling sense of value. Participant 8 expressed confusion over what museums even represent:

I've never actually been [to the Rijksmuseum] I don't actually know what is in there. I just

know it's important. But what is important about it? Do you know what I mean? Like, you should tell people what is important and why I like make them more aware. Because like, the only way that I would know now is to specifically Google them.

They continued:

And look at their site and look at their information that's on their site. But not everyone is going to just Google around specifically for a museum, especially if you don't even know it exists. How would you know? So like make people more aware and like tell them why it's interesting. Like why would it be fun to learn more about something specific?

This quote highlights a missed opportunity for art museums to communicate their relevance in an accessible and engaging manner. The participant's tone suggests not apathy, but frustration with having to seek out information that they feel should be proactively shared. From an audience development perspective, this highlights how poor value communication can alienate prospective visitors. Visibility alone is not enough if institutions do not clearly convey what they offer, why it matters, or how it connects to visitors' interests (Ayala et al., 2020, p. 313).

A similar concern was voiced by Participant 9, who compared two different museum videos videos (Spraakuhloos, 2024; Goudenlijntjes, 2024):

The first one was the Van Gogh one, and it was by a woman that actually went to visit it. And the other one was the, the Kunstmuseum, but it was, really from themself or somebody that was working there. And for me, the first one from the photo, the video itself, it really made me actually look at it because it went step by step. What there is to do and the things to see. So it really interested me more than the other one, because the other one was just more video with music and just showed a few clips. It didn't really interest me.

Their language reveals a desire for guided, authentic storytelling. Terms like "step by step" and "things to see" emphasize clarity and structure, while the dismissal of the second video as "just music" and "just a few clips" points to a perceived lack of meaningful content. The participant does not reject digital formats outright but instead critiques how they are used. From a UGT perspective, this reflects a demand for content that meets both practical and emotional needs (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 510–511). Storytelling that feels real and informative fosters a sense of orientation and belonging, whereas vague promotional media can feel detached and unconvincing.

Together, these reflections suggest that young adults are not disengaged by default. They are willing to explore what museums have to offer, but expect clear, inviting, and relevant communication that resonates with their own lives. Museums that fail to articulate their value or rely

on uninspiring content risk being overlooked entirely.

Peer-driven exposure influences engagement. Beyond the need for visibility and clarity in digital communication, participants emphasized the unique influence of peer-generated content on their museum engagement. Rather than relying on traditional advertisements or institutional messaging, many were drawn to museums through the online behavior of their peers. This preference highlights the shifting media logic of younger audiences, who increasingly value content that feels personal, embedded in social networks, and emotionally resonant.

One participant (Participant 6) explained:

So from what I've mostly seen, because with the Pokémon thing, it was largely user content, so not necessarily from the museum itself. It was Instagram reels, and I would see that people were visiting. I sometimes get advertisements from museums themselves. They're a few short clips, usually of a walk-through of their exhibition. Not very engaging.

This critique highlights the importance of authenticity and interactivity in digital content. User-generated content was seen as more appealing because it felt organic, relatable, and embedded in peer networks. According to UGT, individuals actively seek out media that support identity expression, social interaction, and emotional connection (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 513–514). In this context, peer content is especially effective because it reflects lived experiences and familiar communication styles, making it more socially rewarding. As Russo et al. (2008) argue, traditional broadcast-style museum promotion limits dialogue and inhibits relevance. They advocate for participatory approaches that encourage "many-to-many" communication and foster public meaning-making (pp. 24–25). Rather than passively consuming art museum messages, young adults are drawn to content that helps them connect with others, reinforces their sense of self, and makes them feel part of a shared cultural dialogue.

Another participant (Participant 11) linked their decision to visit directly to peer exposure on TikTok:

I was gonna say better marketing, but then I was like let's be real. I haven't seen a single ad of this museum at all. I just saw someone on TikTok go there and I was like, OK. I'll go there too.

This statement reflects the credibility that peer-generated content carries. Instead of relying on an art museum authority, the participant responded to a familiar and trusted source: another young adult navigating culture in a shared digital space. In UGT terms, this illustrates how media gratification is shaped not only by content but by context and community (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 510–511). Museums that encourage visitor-driven narratives are more likely to become integrated into the media habits and identity-building practices of younger users. Shaw and Krug (2013) support this by arguing that platforms enabling interaction, identity display, and participatory storytelling are

especially effective in engaging users seeking cultural connection and self-expression (pp. 239–242).

Together, these accounts emphasize that relevance is not only about what museums say, but about who is doing the saying. Museums that lean into co-creation and empower peer voices are better positioned to build trust, visibility, and emotional resonance with younger audiences. Peer-driven content, rather than institutional messaging, is often what transforms museums from passive institutions into shared cultural experiences.

4.3.2 Reframing Museums Through Events

Events as tools to reframe expectations and broaden appeal. While digital visibility initiates awareness and emotional connection, offline events solidify engagement by transforming perception through embodied and social experience. Participant 12 illustrated this vividly:

They [the physical events organized by museums] attract people that would never go to a museum like I had my friends that do AI in computer science looking at the sunflowers by Van Gogh and like trying to understand it, you know what I mean. Like wow. Paint strokes. You know, like they would never. They would never have gone to that if there wasn't like a DJ event.

This quote illustrates how events can influence the way people perceive museums. By offering something unexpected, such as a DJ night, museums can feel less formal and more engaging or social. These kinds of experiences help shift how people think and feel about the museum, encouraging more positive reactions. Ayala et al. (2020) explain that creating events that are emotionally engaging and socially welcoming is an important way for cultural institutions to connect with younger and more diverse audiences (p. 318).

This insight was echoed by Participant 13, a self-identified non-visitor, who reflected on how non-traditional formats made museums feel more inviting:

I guess that is like them trying to make it more appealing because like I said like I wasn't I'm not a big fan of museums but like seeing this definitely does make it more appealing to me. For a person who doesn't like to go to museums. So I guess that they're making it more interesting for people.

These statements reinforce the value of reimagining the museum experience through strategic programming. According to positioning theory, effective repositioning involves altering the associations that target audiences hold about a brand (Saqib, 2019, p. 2628). If young adults perceive museums as silent, formal, or passive spaces, offering dynamic and socially oriented events can help shift these perceptions. Through carefully designed experiences, museums can present themselves as relevant and aligned with the lifestyles and expectations of younger visitors.

4.4 Reflections on Brand Equity and Museum Engagement: A CBBE Perspective

Across the previous themes, it becomes clear that young adults often hold contradictory perceptions of Dutch art museums. On the one hand, they express respect for museums' cultural legitimacy and intellectual value. On the other hand, they describe feelings of disconnection, confusion, or emotional distance. These tensions often emerge through institutional tone and modes of communication. While programming and campaigns may attempt to modernize or diversify the museum's appeal, young adults remain sensitive to inconsistencies between the image and the experience.

This dynamic reflects challenges in managing brand meaning. According to Keller's (2003) CBBE model, brand equity is built progressively across four dimensions: brand identity (salience), brand meaning (performance and imagery), brand responses (judgments and feelings), and brand resonance (attachment, community, and active engagement) (pp. 11–15). The findings suggest that museums often struggle at the levels of brand salience and brand meaning. Participants described low visibility, confusion about institutional value, and inconsistent digital messaging. These issues indicate limited brand awareness and difficulty establishing clear associations in the minds of younger audiences.

According to Keller (2003), brand meaning consists of two dimensions: performance, which refers to how a brand functions in experience, and imagery, which relates to the symbolic associations it evokes (pp. 13–14). These dimensions were reflected in participants' responses, not through direct marketing interactions but through curatorial and social experiences. Museums that offered sensory immersion, participatory elements, or relaxed environments were more positively evaluated. This suggests that these experiential qualities enhanced the perception of functional performance. At the same time, such environments supported the formation of more relatable and culturally relevant brand imagery. By contrast, museums that relied on formal, static, or institutionally distanced formats often failed to generate strong symbolic connections. These findings indicate that brand meaning in the museum context is shaped as much by the design of visitor experiences as by any overt branding or promotional efforts.

Resonance, the highest tier of the CBBE model, reflects deep psychological attachment and active community engagement (Keller, 2003, p. 15). Few participants described such enduring emotional bonds. Instead, connections were often short-term, event-based, or dependent on peer exposure. Only when museums created emotionally responsive spaces or invited visitors to contribute interpretively did participants describe a sense of investment or identification. This suggests that for young adults, brand equity is not built solely through recognition, but through experiences that are socially inclusive, emotionally relevant, and personally meaningful.

Importantly, this reflection on CBBE (Keller, 1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) does not interpret visitor feedback as a direct evaluation of branding strategy. Rather, it reframes branding as an institutional process shaped not only by marketing outputs but also by how museums curate

experience, build trust, and foster relevance over time. The model helps conceptualize how various elements of the museum encounter contribute to brand equity, even when these elements are not overtly promotional. In doing so, CBBE (Keller, 1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) provides a strategic lens through which institutions can assess how their values, practices, and experiences are being perceived by younger audiences.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how Dutch art museums can brand and position themselves to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, while fostering a sense of belonging. The research was motivated by a growing societal concern: despite the cultural richness of museums in the Netherlands, young adults remain the demographic least likely to visit them (Berg et al., 2024, p. 30; Binnen Bij Musea, 2024). At the same time, there is increasing academic recognition that branding in the cultural sector remains underdeveloped, with most existing studies focusing on programming or outreach rather than on institutional identity (McNichol, 2005, pp. 243–246; Batat, 2020, pp. 109–110). This thesis responded to both challenges by exploring not only how museums are perceived by young adults, but also how they might strategically reframe their brand identities to better meet the expectations and emotional needs of this audience.

The central research question guiding this project was: How can Dutch art museums brand and position themselves to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, fostering a sense of belonging?

To unpack this question, three sub-questions were formulated:
1. What are the current perceptions of young adults towards Dutch art museums?
2. What contributes to young adults' sense of belonging in cultural institutions?
3. How can Dutch art museums effectively utilize offline and online tools to engage with young adult audiences?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was employed. Thirteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with young adults aged 19 to 28 living in the Netherlands. A purposive sampling approach ensured diversity in cultural background, education, and museum familiarity. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 78–79), which allowed for the development of themes grounded in participants' lived experiences and interpretations.

The analysis was guided by a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, combining CBBE (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20), social infrastructure and belonging (Fortune, 2020, pp. 181–191), UGT (Katz et al., 1973, pp. 509–523), self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195–206), brand positioning theory (Saqib, 2019, pp. 2616-2631), cultural capital (Fyfe, 2004, pp. 47–67), and audience development (Ayala et al., 2019, pp. 306–327). This chapter now synthesizes the findings and reflects on their broader implications.

5.2 Key Findings and Synthesis

The findings of this study demonstrate that for Dutch art museums to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, branding and positioning must be understood not merely as promotional activities, but as institutional practices. These practices involve curatorial choices, spatial design, communication styles, and opportunities for emotional and social engagement.

Belonging, as described by participants, was not primarily shaped by marketing efforts, but by how the museum environment signaled care, inclusion, and shared culture.

Three interrelated insights emerged from the analysis. First, many young adults described Dutch art museums as inaccessible or culturally distant. Cost, restrictive opening hours, an academic tone, and a lack of cultural diversity in exhibitions contributed to perceptions of exclusion. Second, participants highlighted specific experiences that supported emotional grounding and personal connection. Museums that allowed for sensory immersion, informal social interaction, and interpretive openness were more positively evaluated. Third, visibility and social resonance were essential for sustained engagement. Participants emphasized the importance of peer-generated content and participatory events in shaping awareness and interest.

These findings address the central research question by demonstrating that branding and positioning for this demographic cannot rely solely on visual identity or promotional campaigns. Instead, they must be enacted through every layer of the museum experience, including ticket pricing, exhibition design, interpretive tone, programming formats, and digital communication. When museums align these elements with young adults' values, lifestyles, and emotional expectations, they are more likely to be seen as relevant and inviting. This shift requires art museums to move from targeting young adults as a demographic to structurally including them in the design of the museum experience.

This broader view reflects a shift in branding and positioning from surface-level communication to a deeper alignment with identity. By curating experiences that reflect the values and emotional needs of young adults, museums actively shape their position in the cultural imagination of this audience.

In this sense, branding becomes a form of cultural practice. It is not only about how a museum looks or advertises itself, but also about how it organizes space, speech, and interaction in ways that communicate who belongs and why. Dutch art museums that wish to strengthen their appeal to young adults must therefore position themselves not just as places of knowledge but as environments that offer emotional safety, cultural recognition, and meaningful participation. In doing so, museums become not only places where young adults feel welcome, but also culturally and emotionally relevant institutions that reflect their worldviews and offer meaningful forms of engagement. Attractiveness, in this context, emerges from authentic alignment with visitors' needs and values rather than from aesthetic rebranding alone. The task is to reshape the institutional conditions under which belonging becomes possible.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research makes theoretical and practical contributions by clarifying how branding and positioning strategies in Dutch art museums can foster relevance and a sense of belonging among young adult audiences. Through a qualitative and audience-centered approach, the study advances an

understanding of branding not as a narrow marketing tactic but as an institutional process rooted in emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions.

Theoretically, the findings affirm that branding strategies must go beyond visibility or promotional aesthetics to engage deeply with institutional identity. Keller's CBBE model (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20) provides a helpful framework when applied at the strategic level. Although the interviews did not directly focus on brand strategy, they illuminate how young adults respond to aspects of brand meaning and brand resonance in museums. Brand resonance, in this context, was shown to involve feelings of identification, relevance, and emotional connection.

Fortune's (2020) theory of museums as social infrastructures further explains how belonging is co-produced through institutional design, recognition, and emotional tone (pp. 181–189). Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985, pp. 195-206) helped interpret why participants resonated more with museums that reflected their own values and identity expressions. When misalignment occurred, whether due to tone, representation, or spatial form, it often undermined engagement, even among visitors who were otherwise interested.

Audience development theory (Ayala et al., 2020, pp. 306–327) also proved central. As Ayala et al. (2019) explain, effective audience strategies depend on collaboration across different parts of the institution and on creating environments that respond to visitors' emotions (p. 308). Participants in this study clearly responded to participatory and welcoming spaces more than to top-down or institutionalized messaging.

These insights yield several practical implications for the Dutch museum sector. First, institutions must adopt genuinely integrated audience development models, ensuring that branding, curatorial, and programming departments collaborate to deliver a cohesive and welcoming visitor experience. Second, museums should strategically pivot from top-down communication models toward empowering peer-to-peer advocacy by facilitating and celebrating user-generated content. Participants consistently viewed peer-produced media as more trustworthy, appealing, and emotionally engaging than official marketing.

More broadly, branding should be treated as an institutional commitment to care, relevance, and inclusivity. Practical steps include using accessible language, inviting co-authorship in interpretation, ensuring spatial comfort, and critically evaluating curatorial norms.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations shape the scope of this study. The research used a qualitative design with thirteen participants, offering deep but non-generalizable insights. The sample, while diverse, mainly consisted of urban-based Dutch residents and may not represent the experiences of rural youth, international visitors, or individuals without access to cultural institutions. Future studies could employ larger, more representative samples or longitudinal designs to track shifts in engagement over time.

While the study drew on multiple theoretical frameworks, its findings were particularly grounded in curatorial and spatial experiences, rather than direct evaluations of marketing strategy. Future research may more explicitly investigate how branding models, such as CBBE (1993, pp. 1-22; 2003, pp. 7-20), function when aligned with institutional practices and visitor perceptions. Comparative studies could also explore whether the patterns observed in art museums hold true for other cultural institutions such as historical, scientific, or hybrid spaces.

Furthermore, the concept of brand resonance in cultural institutions could be expanded beyond its commercial roots to encompass indicators of emotional trust, co-creation, and repeat cultural engagement. Exploring these dimensions could offer refined tools for institutions seeking to build long-term relationships with younger audiences.

5.5 Final Reflection

This study aimed to investigate how Dutch art museums can effectively brand and position themselves to foster a sense of belonging among young adults. Through a qualitative, audience-centered approach, the study uncovered how deeply interwoven emotional, symbolic, and institutional elements shape young adults' perceptions of relevance and inclusion.

One of the most striking outcomes of this research was the redefinition of branding as a cultural and social practice. While museums may approach branding through visual identity or marketing campaigns, young adults interpret institutional value through the totality of their encounters: spatial atmosphere, language, peer visibility, cultural recognition, and emotional tone. These moments of encounter are where museums either build trust and resonance or reinforce feelings of distance. This realization shifted the analytical focus away from isolated communication tactics and toward the institutional structures that enable or hinder belonging. What emerged is a call to reposition branding not as a function of the marketing department but as a shared institutional responsibility.

Conducting this research also raised deeper questions about inclusion and access in the cultural sector. Many participants were thoughtful, curious, and eager to engage, yet repeatedly encountered subtle barriers that made them feel peripheral to the museum's imagined audience. This suggests that museums may not be losing young adult visitors due to disinterest, but because of unexamined assumptions embedded in their design, language, and programming. These insights reinforced the urgency of critically reflecting on whose perspectives are centered and whose are overlooked.

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Interview Guide: Thesis Belonging in Museums, Valentina Boxma Favaron

Opening Section

Briefly introduce yourself and the study topic:

"This research explores how Dutch art museums can brand and position themselves to be relevant and welcoming for young adults. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm interested in your personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences."

Ask for verbal consent to record the interview.

Warm-up questions:

- Could you tell me a little bit about yourself (e.g., age, studies, hobbies)?

- How would you describe your interest in cultural activities, like art, museums, or festivals?

Section: Perceptions and Branding

Goal: Explore how participants perceive Dutch art museums using the CBBE model and positioning/self-congruity theory.

Brand Awareness & Identity

1. When you think about museums in the Netherlands, what names or images come to mind?

2. Can you name any specific Dutch art museums? What do you associate with them?

Brand Meaning And Response → Say to answer these question with museums they mentioned in mind or if others come up good too

3. When you think about a museum you know (if they didn't mention any, maybe mention Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Kunsthal), how would you describe it?

  - (If needed: Think about what kind of feeling it gives, or what kind of people you imagine visit it.)

- What kind of feeling does it give?

-What image or message does it give?

- How would you describe it?

4. What do you think a museum like that mainly offers to visitors?

  - (e.g., learning, relaxing, inspiration, entertainment, feeling part of culture?)

5. What kind of image or message does this museum project?

- (e.g., traditional, trendy, intellectual, fun, formal, relaxed?)

6. Would visiting it say something about you? like your interests, your style, or your values?
   - (If yes: What would it say? If no: Why not?)

Brand Response

7. What kind of people do you think typically visit these museums?

   - Do you see yourself reflected in those groups? Why or why not?

- If these museums wanted to feel more attractive to people like you what would need to change

Brand Resonance & Positioning

8. Have you ever felt a connection with a particular museum?

   - What made that connection happen, or what might help create it?

9. If a friend asked you whether to visit a Dutch art museum, what would you tell them? Why?

Section: Belonging & Inclusion

Goal: Understand whether participants feel a sense of belonging in museums and what helps or hinders that feeling.

Inclusion

10. Do you feel that Dutch art museums are welcoming to people like you?

   - Can you describe an experience that made you feel especially welcome or unwelcome?

11. What would make a museum feel more inclusive or approachable for you?

Social Experience & Shared Space

12. Do you see museums as social places where people connect? Or more solitary?

   - Can you recall a moment where a museum helped you connect with someone else?

13. Do you think museums reflect your cultural or personal identity? Why or why not?

Barriers & Symbolic Exclusion

14. Have you ever felt like museums were "not for you"?

   - What gave you that impression? Was it the building, the people, the language used, the way art is presented, or something else?

- What type of people do you think Dutch art museums are designed for.

15. In your opinion, what barriers (if any) might prevent young adults like you from visiting museums?

Section 3: Digital Engagement & Media

Goal: Explore how young adults engage with museums through digital platforms (UGT), and whether those interactions feel meaningful.

Information & Access

15. Do you follow any Dutch art museums on Instagram, TikTok, or other platforms?

  - Could you show me an account or a post you find interesting? (if comfortable)
   - What do you like or dislike about their online content?

16. Have you ever decided to visit an art museum after seeing something online?

17. What would make you more likely to visit a museum after seeing something online?

- What kind of museum content would catch your attention?

Entertainment & Enjoyment

17. Do you find museum content online entertaining or inspiring? Why or why not?

  - Can you think of a time you shared or liked museum content?

- if a museum posted content that aligned with your interest or identity would it change how you see them?

Participation & Co-Creation

18. Would you feel comfortable contributing something to a museum's online platform, like a story, opinion, or artwork?

  - What would make that feel inviting or intimidating?

Reaction to Specific Initiatives

Goal: Stimulate opinions using real-world examples.
Show 2initiatives:
- Kunsthal Friday Night Live & Vincent on Friday evenings

Discussion prompts:
- What is your first impression?
-What kind of person is it designed for?
-Ask them about the two different video formats and websites.
-Does this event feel for someone like you?

-Does this initiative resonate with you? Why or why not?

- Would this make you want to visit the museum? Why/why not?

- What could make this kind of initiative even more attractive for young adults?

-What would need to change for it(or museums in general) to feel more relevant and exciting to you?
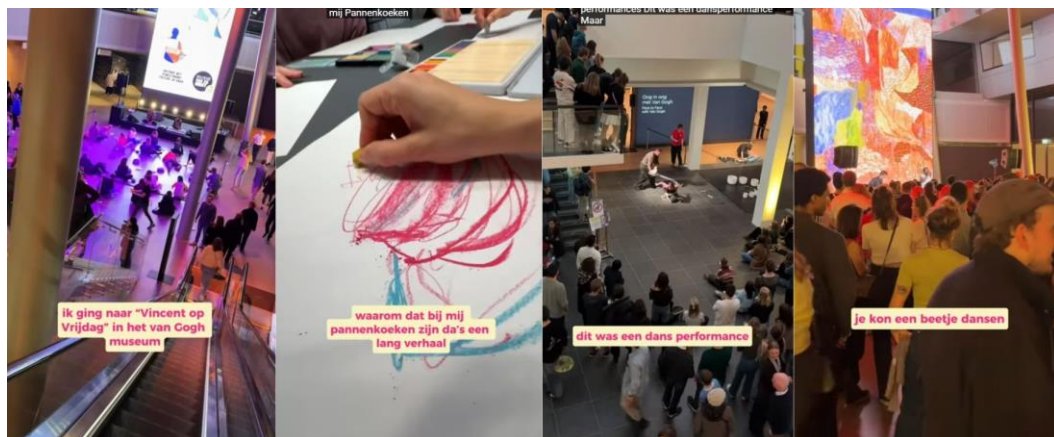
Appendix B

Figure C1

Visual snippets of the Vincent on Friday website shown to participants during interviews

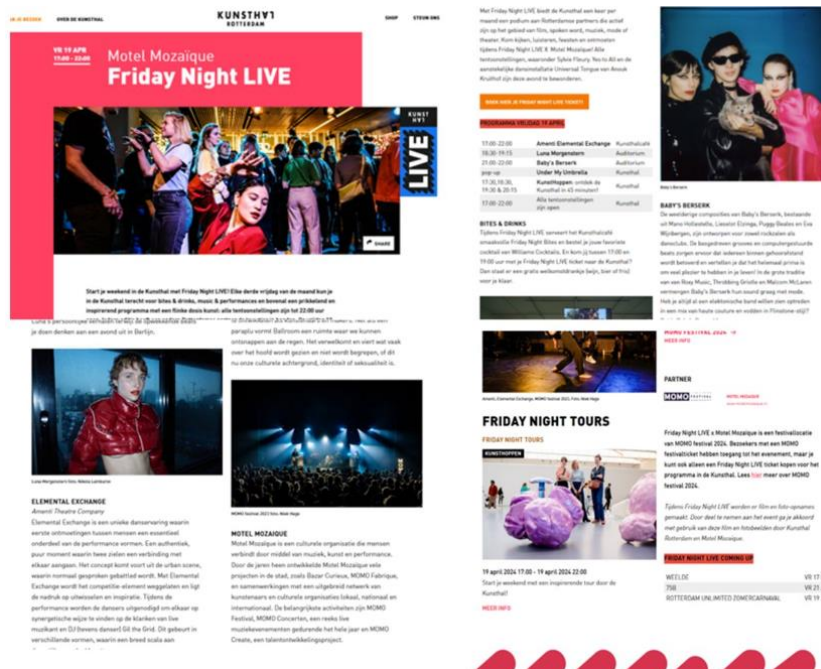*Note.* Images retrieved from https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/nl/bezoek/agenda-en-activiteiten/vincent-op-vrijdag

Figure C2

Visual snippets of the Vincent on Friday video shown to participants during interviews

Note. Images retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/shorts/jZ0hABYfcjQ

Figure C3

Visual snippets of the Friday Night Live website shown to participants during interviews

Note. Images retrieved from https://www.kunsthal.nl/nl/plan-je-bezoek/activiteiten/friday-night-live-april/

Figure C4

Visual snippets of the Friday Night Live website shown to participants during interviews

Note. Images retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPVLgAddYf0&ab_channel=Spraakuhloos

Appendix C

RQ:	**How can Dutch art museums brand and position themselves to be perceived as relevant and attractive by young adults, fostering a sense of belonging?**
SQ1:	**What are the current perceptions of young adults towards Dutch art museums?**

Theme 1	Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example
Young Adults' Perceptions of Dutch Art Museums	Barriers to access and understanding	Financial barriers	High ticket prices discourage museum visits	"I think I've been to more museums abroad than I have been in the Netherlands. Which is crazy because I live here all my life. But, I think a part of it is because in other countries it's so much cheaper, to like, go to museums to kind of do all the cultural activities. And here is the Netherlands. This is like it's not it's way more expensive. So I feel like it's not as affordable for a lot of people to maybe go there even if they wanted to."

			Cost forces priorization over exploration	"As I mentioned, it's quite expensive, so if there are a lot of museums and you don't have like the money, you would just pick one. Because just like museum night, like for the same price, you could go to, you know, one night and then you could visit like 6 museums"
			Memberships not accessible to all	""There's a museum card and a museum card. Also is not really accessible everywhere anymore. There also used to be an icon card, which is like for international museums and like I don't remember what the problem. I think they just don't. They just don't support the Netherlands anymore. So I I am. I'm not sure if that's what it was, but or maybe it was just our degree, like my bachelor degree wasn't acceptable anymore for it."
			Memberships lessen the financial barrier for young adults	"Definitely having a membership. It's really, really helped. When it's younger people interested in art and I think memberships and things like this are something they should really bring back because you're losing the young people's interest in culture and art and

			Scheduling Conflicts	Limited opnening hours exclude working visitors	". I think extending hours is a good point, you see. Because some people don't necessarily have the time to be around, and the moment they start to close at like 18:30 becomes very annoying because now I don't have the time after work to take a look"
					museums and things like events like those are really cool "
				Night events make it accessible and appealing	"It's also like after I think not a nine to five. You know what I mean? The closing times. It also attract more different events or. Yeah, special nights and then all museums together so. They would see also just get to explore those other museums"
			Communicative exclusion through insider-oriented language	Language limitations makes museum feel exclusive	"I think maybe make their language a bit more simple to approach a bigger group. And yeah, maybe I think that most museums cater to art lovers, which is totally understandable because that is their main audience, of course. But I think there are also a lot of people who don't know much about art but love to get into it more. So maybe cater to them a bit more."

			Museums primarily speak to art insiders	"So maybe because sometimes they go into very specific details and I do know that that is kind of the aim of a museum is to go into the nitty gritty. But yeah, I feel like laypeople don't care about a certain brushstroke that they used. Or maybe the specific like paints brands, I don't know. I know that sometimes mentioned on the cards or in the folders, sort of the very detailed information. I think the lay people wouldn't care about as much as someone who draws themselves or studies art history or something."
Personal reflection and emotional grounding in museums	Familiarity offers emotional stability	Calm atmospheres offer human connection		"Always calm. There's always a calm feeling relaxed. And well, I don't know if inspiring is a feeling necessarily, but. A sort of like serenity and just connection to the human.:
		Familiarity offer emotional stability		"Yeah, especially if if there's like an like the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam the museum, the exhibit that's always there. You know what to expect when you go, so sometimes if you're feeling a bit lost, I feel if you go to an exhibit that you regularly visit and then you can

				see this thing that you know, you know it's there, they change it up very slightly and it. Kind of helps you give a little more direction or at least feel a bit more grounded like it's OK like this is still here. This stuff remains like life. Is, you know it's going crazy, but there will be stuff that's still there that you can. Go back to but also just. Yeah, if you. If you want to see a new perspective on life and if you're feeling super lost, I think a museum was a very good place to go."
		Interpretive freedom and personal relevance	Visitors enjoy constructing their own meanings	"Just put all together and there's no descriptions at all. So you kind of just look at it and get lost in it and you have to really go close and like stand back and you can stand on this balcony and look at everything and interpret it all by yourself is you should really go. It's it's so cool."
			People visit museums for different personal reasons	"I think you you take what you want from it. Some people just want a nice evening to look at pretty painting. Some people wanna learn. Some people wanna visit their favorite exhibit for the millionth time"

				What contributes to young adults' sense of belonging in cultural institutions?
SQ2:				

Theme 2	Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example
Belonging in the Museum Space	Relatability and recognition in museum experience	Cultural and peer-based connections	Recognizes cultural mismatch but maintains appreciation	I'm from a Catholic country and different, language family, so not really, but for me, like, it really expresses the, the Dutch identity in a way, or I mean, what I know from Dutch people, but yeah, it's more yeah, it's not my cultural identity, but I do understand that and I appreciate it is because it's not like, yeah, I'm like, I'm not, I'm not from my Dutch colony
			Desire for broader cultural representation in curation	In the museum in Rotterdam, for example, there is an exhibit dedicated to like Surinamese artists or just artists of other countries. Not necessarily people of color, but maybe just from from Eastern Europe or from Southeast Asia, that would be nice as well"
			Presence of like-minded peers increases comfort	"Generally, the audience, the people that go there to the Kunstinstituut Melly, they seem younger and more around my age group.

			So things that we talk about, they seem more relevant or related to my interest, yeah"
	Comfort and discomfort with institutional expression	Personal values align with specific museum	"So we went there, but I would say that maybe only with the Moco Museum I reflect or see myself going to a museum similar to that purely because of just my personal what's the word? Standards and viewpoints perspectives. I don't know if I'm ideologies. I don't know if I'm saying it correctly. But I guess it just aligns with my viewpoints aligned with Moco museums I would say."
		Language choices can feel exclusionary or outdated	"Also, the words that they used were also a little bit like oh, can you still use it nowadays? I don't know. "
Comfort and co-agency in the museum space	Welcoming spaces and peer-inclusive environments	Feeling safe and comfortable in the museum space	"I do feel like they're welcoming to people like me. They're very easily like, you know, you can easily find them. It's easy to navigate while you're there. They're very, straightforward, like when you go there, it's just it's easy. I don't know, it's just it feels safe. "
		Casual social spaces support comfort and inclusion	"So also for the Kunstinstituut Melly , there's actually a cafe that's attached to it so and they also yeah, just next door to have a small cafe and a bookstore and a bookshop. So you can sit down with

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				coffee and you can read the books for free and and stuff. So I thought that was really nice also because now it becomes more like a space where people can come together and hang out and stuff. And there's also vouchers that you offer across the room because there's like a bar or something where you can actually get in 15% off if you were to buy the ticket to see the galleries. And you can also go across and you can get. So there's a social aspect to it also where we get others to come together and hang out, yeah"
		Interactive and active engagement	Young adults prefer active formats over passive viewing	"Like younger people want to do stuff instead of, like, just walking around"
			Passive museum environments feel less engaging to youth	"So Van Gogh, I would say it's not very interactive. I'd say it's mostly just looking at art. I view it as more of a mature museum."
			Hands-on participation fosters creative engagement	"I think Moco Museum is also mainly focused on art, but it also wants you to participate in the art. It wants you to have fun with it, I guess, and play with it, and be able to, I guess, be creative yourself.

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				They really want to draw the audience in, while the Rijksmuseum is more like, yeah, more like: look, this is what happened, this is stuff from that time."
		Sensory and emodied immersion	Performances increase emotional and sensory engagement	"So immediately when they show dance performances. I was like, Oh my God, I'm. I'm in. I'm I'm already. I'm. I'm locked in, you know."
			Multi-sensory environments enhance enjoyment and meaning	"Yes, that was amazing. I didn't know it was live music. Please put it in the interview. No, I'm shocked. I didn't know. It really resonates with me because it's not only that you can enjoy the art, but it's really something festive as well, I guess, like people play music, people having like what? Was it a poem? Poetry night? Spoken words or something like that. Like that makes it even more fun because art is not only based on a painting or like a statue outside. It can also be musical or with poetry. So that's yeah, love that. That's also art."
		Narrative co-creation and symbolic ownership	Invitation to share input increases connection	"I'm remembering now the Heritage museum, which they have quite a lot of colonial exhibits. And I think one thing they do that's really interesting is they have a wall where

				people can put their opinion afterward. Like, do you agree in the way that we've presented it? Like I don't know if you know the golden carriage. It was this big racist symbol in the past, and it's kind of gone around between different museums and they they ask for people's opinions on what they think they should do with it. So they really involve the community in that"
			Visitors want narrative co-creation	"I feel that maybe certain things you need to be left to the people to create their own narratives. Yeah, so the institution doesn't tell you the narrative or whether lays out a space for you to be able to construct your own narratives. Then I think that would be better."

SQ3:	**How can Dutch art museums effectively utilize offline and online tools to engage with young adult audiences?**

Theme 3	Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code	Quote Example

Communication and Engament Strategies	Digital presence and messaging effectiveness	Lack of museum presence and visibility on social media	Museums lack digital visibility among young adults	"I've never really seen anything for an art museum on my social media, so I would suggest maybe hiring a better marketing strategy, or strategies and trying to at least reach them more using social media because these, kind of, initiatives that are being that are being done really would attract them a lot more. So maybe I would suggest, upping their social media game."
			Lack of timely and promotional event content on social media	"For example, on social media like a banner with like, oh, and this, in this day there's something special also not only for like their normal schedule but also with like, oh, something new today or like an evening or a small event that's nice to have, right? Also, for people who are do come there more often."
		Lack of engaging and clear value communication	Content made by museums lacks authenticity and appeal	"The first one was the Van Gogh one, and it was by a woman that actually went to visit it. And the other one was the, the Kunstmuseum, but it was, really from themself or somebody that was working there. And the for me, the first one from the photo, the video itself, it really made me actually look at it because it went step by step. What, what, what there is to do and the

			things to see. So it really interested me more than the other one, because the other one was just more video with music and just showed a few clips. It didn't really interest me."
		Lack of clear museum value communication deters interest	"I've never actually been I don't actually know what is in there. I just know it's important. But what is important about it? Do you know what I mean? Like, you should tell people what is important and why I like make them more aware. Because like, the only way that I would know now is to specifically Google them." And look at their site and look at their information that's on their site. But not everyone is going to just Google around specifically for a museum, especially if you don't even know it exists. How would you know? So like make people more aware and like tell them why it's interesting. Like why would it be fun to learn more about something specific?
	Peer-driven exposure influences engagement	Peer-generated content drives interest more than museum content	"So from what I've mostly seen, because with the Pokémon thing, it was largely user content, so not necessarily from the museum itself. It was Instagram reels, and I would see that people were

				visiting.
				I sometimes get advertisements from museums themselves. They're a few short clips, usually of a walk-through of their exhibition. Not very engaging."
			Peer content influences museum attendance	"I was gonna say better marketing, but then I was like let's be real. I haven't seen a single ad of this museum at all. I just saw someone on Tiktok go there and I was like, OK. I'll go there too."
	Reframing museums through events	Events as tools to reframe expectations and broaden appeal	Events bring in new and diverse visitor types	"They attract people that would never go to a museum like I had my friends that do AI in computer science looking at the sunflowers by Van Gogh and like trying to understand it, you know what I mean. Like wow. Paint strokes. You know, like they would never. They would never have gone to that if there wasn't like a DJ event."
			Unexpected formats reshape expectations of museums	"I guess that is like them trying to make it more appealing because like I said like I wasn't I'm not a big fan of museums but like seeing this definitely does make it more appealing to me. For a person who doesn't like to go to museums. So I guess that they're making it

				more interesting for people, I guess."

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Valentina Boxma Favaron
Student ID: 533542
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Dr. Izabela Derda
Date: 11/02/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Valentina Boxma Favaron

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. <u>I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.</u>

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Valentina Boxma Favaron

Date of Signature: 26/06/2025

AI used:

Grammarly: for grammar and spell check

ChatGPT: for preliminary summary with the following prompt for all summaries asked: As a high achieving student, you are expected to make a summary of the

following readings focusing on the literature review,
methodology, and findings.