

Communicating Brand Identity: In-Person Experience in Art Museums

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Master Thesis

July 11th, 2025

Word Count: 22889

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In this thesis, I introduce and test a novel research design to study how art museums develop and convey their brand identity through their physical environment, with a focus on in-person experience design. Specifically, this process centers on the observation of sensory elements, spatial arrangements, architectural choices, curatorial practices, and commercial interfaces. The methodology is structured as a comparative case study between two Dutch museums: Rijksmuseum and Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam's Museumplein.

The central research question "How do art museums utilize in-person experience designs to craft and communicate their distinct brand identity?" is addressed by means of qualitative research. The methodology is composed of sensory ethnographic observation as a method to collect data, data analysis is conducted by means of thematic analysis.

Findings reveal an intricate interplay between explicit and implicit strategies. Rijksmuseum projects an identity based on institutional authority rooted in national heritage, while Van Gogh Museum conveys a more emotional identity based on empathy and authentic connections.

Theoretically grounded in a multifaceted understanding of the museum experience, and employing two established frameworks - Retail Experience Analytical Framework's dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) and the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) - this study offers insights into museums' strategies to leverage physical space with the aim to communicate their unique brand identity.

KEYWORDS: *Art Museums, Brand Identity, Experiential Design, Sensory Ethnography*

1. Introduction	3
2. Theoretical Framework	7
2.1. Museum Visitor Experience	7
2.2. Branding and Museum Brand Identity	9
2.3. Relational Dimensions	13
3. Research Design	16
3.1. Operationalization	17
3.2. Selection Criteria for Museum Case Studies	19
3.3. Sample Size and Data Collection Criteria	21
3.4. Data Collection Method: Ethnographic Observation	23
3.5. Data Analysis	26
4. Results	31
4.A. Van Gogh Museum	31
4.B. Rijksmuseum	50
4.C. Comparative Evaluation through Brand Identity Prism	68
Conclusion	73
References	79

1. Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive cultural landscape, art museums face growing pressure to develop recognizable brand identities, with the aim to be distinguished (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, pp. 67-68). This challenge is augmented by the proliferation of cultural institutions: UNESCO (Unesco, 2020) reports a significant global increase from 22,000 to 95,000 museums, throughout the last 50 years. This heightened the demand for cultural institutions to effectively communicate their unique value to stand out.

However, historical tensions complicate this imperative for museums: the intersection of art and commerce has often been perceived with skepticism (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 18; Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, p. 68). The reverence and the respectable objectives of art in society often conflict with the adoption of business strategies that are more commonly associated with commercial goals and entities. Nonetheless, art museums are called to adopt a business-like mindset, due to the decreasing public financial support for culture and the evolving societal expectations (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1). In this scenario, a recognizable brand identity becomes a priority for museums to signal their quality, engage broader audiences, and show their unique offerings (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 19). This strategy guarantees that museums reach financial sustainability, while fulfilling their societal role in cultural education and preservation. Therefore, comprehending how museums can navigate this tension to employ a branding strategy for organizational survival is critical for their sustainability and relevance.

Previous literature has mainly focused on the role of digital communications in crafting a museum's brand identity (Fait et al., 2017, pp. 177-179). This emphasis, while valuable, has overlooked the role of physical elements and in-person experience design in shaping museums' brand identity. Yet museums are inherently physical environments where branding is also communicated through architecture, atmosphere, and spatial design - dimensions that remain understudied despite calls for research in this area (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, pp. 72, 80). Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that visitors tend to remember the aspects of the experiences that they can connect to their personal lives, therefore "museums need to realize they are in the experience business" (Skramstad, 2004, p. 38, as cited in Kent, 2009, p. 68). The museum experience does not consist of a mere viewing, but it is about participating in a curated journey that conveys the identity of the institution and often resonates with visitors on multiple levels. While researchers like Ober-Heilig et al. (2014, pp. 72, 80) highlight the importance of the experience within the museum environment in enhancing their brands,

emphasizing how a complete understanding of the combination of architecture, atmosphere, and spatial design in communicating museums' brand identity remains understudied. The lack of thorough examination on the role of museums' most direct and tangible touchpoints in conveying their brand identity, represents a significant gap in current literature. Therefore, the academic relevance of this study consists in contributing with novel knowledge to the underexplored intersection between in-person experience design and brand identity communication in art museums. It contributes to existing theories on museum visitor experience (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 18; Nigatu et al., 2024, p. 5495), curation as a branding tool (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18), the role of the museum shop as an extension of the visit (Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75), the use of narratives as a design tool (Dal Falco & Vassos, 2007, p. S3980), the role of experiential design in museums (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, p. 79).

The practical relevance of this study consists of providing insights into how art museums shape cohesive and immersive brand identities in at least two different cases. This will help institutions enhance brand identity through physical elements and strengthen their competitive positioning in a fast-paced cultural landscape. Being cultural institutions, art museums contribute to the public perceptions of the history of art. In this context, effective branding not only helps them engage broader audiences but also serves as an indicator of quality (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 18).

This study seeks to bridge the identified literature gap by investigating how influential art institutions utilize in-person experience design to convey a distinctive brand identity. Therefore, the central question guiding this study is: how do art museums utilize in-person experience designs to craft and communicate their distinct brand identity? To answer this question, this study introduces a novel research design composed by a qualitative and comparative approach focusing on two prominent art museums located in Amsterdam's Museumplein. This location, characterized by the presence of a cluster of globally renowned art institutions (Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum, Moco Museum), offers a unique opportunity to explore how distinctive identities are built even in close proximity. The selection of the museums is conducted analyzing their funding models and primary approaches to brand identity, ensuring a robust framework to explore the influence of contextual factors on choices in the communication of brand identity through in-person experience design.

Within this physical realm, the areas that will be considered to explore a museum's brand identity crafted through in-person experiences include the entrance hall, the exhibition spaces, and the museum shop. Particularly, the features that this study will focus on are

sensory elements (lighting, sounds, color palette, and materials), spatial arrangement, overall atmosphere, narrative strategies (displays and texts), and the product selection in the museum shop. The latter emerges as a compelling touchpoint for a museum's identity (Kent, 2009, p. 74). Kent (2009, p. 74) describes it as a space that transcends retail to offer the visitors tangible souvenirs of the experience inside the museum. Moreover, the entrance hall of a museum also fundamentally contributes to the core experience of a museum's brand: its aesthetics, the atmosphere created by the sensory elements, sets the tone for the upcoming visit and serves as a "first impression". Finally, the exhibition spaces constitute the core of the museum's offering, where its narratives and curated collections are showcased. Pusa and Uusitalo (2014, p. 20) emphasize the importance of curatorial choices in these spaces, influencing the way the collection, central to a museum's identity, is experienced.

The choices made to craft in-person experiences are not arbitrary; they are influenced by a museum's operational model, particularly the revenue structure (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 4-5). Bernelot Moens (2013, pp. 4-5) explores how revenue models and the pursuit of financial stability influence a museum's approach to strategy, implicitly extending to how its brand is communicated. As non-profit entities, art museums continuously navigate the tension between their mission-driven objectives and the need for sustainability. This balance is often determined by the type of demand an institution is mainly addressing: Bernelot Moens (2013, pp. 6-7) distinguished between private demand, stemming from direct users generating revenue through ticket sales and purchases, and social demand, reflecting the wider societal value that a museum represents, often supported by public funding. An institution heavily relying on government funding, driven by a strong social mission, may craft a brand identity that prioritizes cultural stewardship values over commercial appeal. Conversely, an institution dependent on private demand income might give more emphasis to visitor experience and commercial appeal. This acknowledges that a museum's revenue model imparts the priorities that influence the communication of the museum's brand identity through in-person experience design.

This study employs a framework that was originally developed within the retail sector, to systematically analyze museums' use of in-person experience design to communicate brand identity. Paik and Lee's (2020) comprehensive review on relational experiences, that finally developed a Retail Experience Analytical Framework (pp. 483-484), was employed in this study's analysis by means of the six dimensions, reported by Paik & Lee (2020, p. 469): Social Role, Social Presence, Interaction, Identification, Formal-Informal, Intense-Superficial.

The application of this framework represents an innovative approach as it allows to bridge gaps between retail relational marketing and cultural communication, it explores a museum's management of in-person experience designs to build and communicate a specific brand identity, and finally it offers a structured approach to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of results.

Finally, a comparative evaluation of the two brand identities is conducted by means of the six dimensions of the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), allowing to systematically analyze different aspects of the museums' identities.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter delineates the theoretical foundation of this study, in order to comprehend how contemporary art institutions craft their brand identity through the deliberate design of in-person experiences.

It starts by defining museum visitor experience as a complex concept that includes the entirety of the visitors' journey inside the museum, influenced by factors like personal circumstances, physical space, and sociocultural context. It is also becoming more widely recognized through a "sensory turn" (Nigatu et al., 2024, p. 5496) that gives more emphasis to the museum's multisensorial nature.

The chapter then gives an overview of the role of branding strategies inside art institutions, highlighting the difference between brand identity and brand image, and the concepts of explicit and implicit branding attitudes.

To analyze how brand identity is crafted inside museums' physical spaces, two key frameworks are presented: Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) Brand Identity Prism, that provides a model to deconstruct the brand identity in six essential dimensions, and the Retail Experience Analytical Framework's dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), which examine the dynamics of brand experience.

Additionally, the chapter delves into the role of curation presenting it as a powerful branding tool (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18), which can be employed to communicate a museum's brand identity. Finally, the role of the museum shop is delineated and presented as a physical extension of the museum visit (Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75) shaping the overall experience.

These theories together provide a theoretical framework through which it is possible to analyze how a brand identity is constructed in a museum's physical space.

2.1. Museum Visitor Experience

Museum visitor experience is a multifaceted concept that includes the entirety of a visitor's journey inside a museum, beyond the learning experience, encompassing social, personal, emotional, aesthetic, restorative, awe, and reverence experiences (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016, p. 136). The museum visitor experience evolves from the cooperation of the visitors' individual tendencies and the museum's strategically designed physical environment. Falk and Dierking (2000, p. 137) identify three crucial aspects of experience: the personal context (a visitor's motivations, expectations, prior knowledge, and beliefs), the

socio-cultural context (referring to the sociocultural influences), and the physical context (the museum's design). This perspective acknowledges the museum visitor experience as a holistic idea comprising a range of dimensions, from intellectual engagement to emotional stimulation, social connection, active participation, and more (Nigatu et al., 2024, pp. 5495-5496).

Yi et al. (2022, pp. 15, 18) demonstrate the importance of the social dimension: the presence of and the interaction with other visitors can enrich someone's journey in a museum, contributing with new perspectives and enhancing overall satisfaction. Complementing these findings, Kent (2009, p. 69) argues that the physical contexts of the museum spaces are particularly important to visitors since elements like space, shape, colors, and textures influence exploration, curiosity, and evoke memories. Kent's (2009, p. 70) approach emphasizes the importance of physical spaces in the production of sensory experiences synthetizing leisure with knowledge acquisition. This approach encompasses the recreational aspects of the museum experience, focusing also on the crucial aesthetic and sensory ones that contribute to a holistic engagement.

There has historically been a deficiency in academic literature of empirical research into museum visitor experiences (Kirchberg & Tröndle, 2012, p. 436), despite the acknowledged importance of these complex interactions. However, the increasing recognition of museums as part of the "experience business" (Skramstad, 2004, as cited in Kent, 2009, p. 68), led to a focus on comprehending and designing strategies for the holistic visitor experience dynamic process. Therefore, aligning with Nigatu et al. (2024) idea of "sensory turn" (p. 5496) - which stresses the importance of visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile elements - this thesis understands the museum experience as a multi-sensory and holistic interaction within the museum's physical environment.

Furthermore museums are moving beyond static exhibition spaces into hybrid environments that integrate narrative-driven experiences, digital technologies, and interactive engagement strategies to create deeper visitor connections, as Dal Falco and Vassos (2017, p. S3979) argue. Embedding technology (e.g. Augmented Reality, Virtual reality) in museum spaces can enable rich interactions with visitors, moving towards a more personalized experience and interactive storytelling (Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017, p. S3979).

Considering the above, this study views the museum experience as consisting of the strategic implementation of sensory, architectural, interactive, aesthetic, and spatial elements that collectively craft in-person journey, ultimately shaping the institution's brand identity.

2.2. Branding and Museum Brand Identity

The museum's necessity to increasingly adopt branding and commercialization strategies leads to ethical criticism. As Pusa and Uusitalo (2014) state, historically it was considered "ill matched, almost unthinkable" (p. 18) to combine art with marketing. It is a perspective rooted in the idea that the pursuit of a market-oriented approach might lead to a degradation of the intrinsic value of art, favoring the most sellable and superficial.

Despite this tension, implementing branding strategies is becoming essential as the public funding for culture is declining (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1). Pusa and Uusitalo (2014, pp. 20, 22, 22, 28) describes branding as a holistic approach that goes beyond online communication to include physical elements, through which museums communicate their institutional mission and identity to visitors. Ortmann and Viholt (2021) argue that brands increasingly use physical space design as a "brand channel" (p. 5), by the employment of design, products and activities to convey their identity and values.

Particularly, this thesis studies brand identity: a brand's self-definition (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 19). It is important to note the distinction between a brand's identity and its image: the latter rather refers to the public's perception of the brand (Aaker, 1996, p. 68). Therefore, this difference lies in the fact that the identity is the sender's projection, while the image is the receiver's perception.

As mentioned, this study relies on the concept of brand identity in the field of museums, which, as Pusa and Uusitalo (2014, p. 21) point out, encompasses elements in the museum's communication and physical space like exhibitions, symbols, artists, design aesthetics, architecture, and logos, chosen by the institution itself to convey a distinctive identity to the audience.

The transmission of brand identity aims to enhance visitor familiarity and loyalty (Ajana, 2015, p. 328), expand audience reach, promote their exhibitions, and display confidence to gain funding (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, pp. 18-19).

Additionally, it is important to distinguish between explicit and implicit brand attitudes.

Explicit brand attitudes are deliberately designed and can be directly reported by individuals, while implicit attitudes are associative evaluations that might occur without conscious awareness (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2). In the museum field this translates to the presence of logos, consistent typography, and branded merchandising for explicit brand attitudes: direct cues referring to the museum's brand. While symbolistic design, curatorial choices, ambiance, and sensory elements are examples of implicit brand attitudes: elements that evoke associations indirectly through experience or emotional resonance.

The engagement of consumers' senses is extensively studied in sensory marketing: Krishna (2011) defines it as marketing that "engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgement and behavior" (p. 333). Precisely, the author studies and highlights how sensory marketing can be employed to lead consumers' in the self-generation of desirable brand attributes, through subconscious triggers.

In the context of this thesis, explicit attitudes in museum's brand identity constructions is translated into the presence of overt branding in the physical environment (e.g. logo presence, extensive use of art for branding purposes in the shop). Conversely, implicit branding is intended as the presence of sensory elements - lighting, acoustic, materials, and more - exploring how they are strategically employed by the museum to project its values and identity.

2.2.1. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (1992, pp. 43-49) provides a structured framework to systematically categorize brand identity strategies. Kapferer (1992, pp. 43-49) distinguishes six dimensions of brand identity: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image.

These dimensions are divided into two overarching perspectives: the constructed source (physique and personality) versus the constructed receiver (reflection and self-image), and externalization (physique, relationship, reflection) versus internalization (personality, culture, self-image), and understood as:

1. *Physique* refers to the physical and tangible features that represent the basis of the brand itself. It represents the elements that make the brand original and distinguished, from visual elements to any recognizable trait that differentiates the brand from competitors. In the field of museums, this dimension is translated in signature exhibitions (e.g. the Louvre's Mona Lisa), or specific architecture that makes the building iconic (e.g. the Guggenheim Bilbao's structure), but also any visual element (e.g. logo, color scheme, typography) that differentiates a museum's brand from the others.

2. *Personality* is a concept that is tied to the character of a brand; in many cases it is represented by a celebrity that has collaborated with the brand. The imagery tied to the person is transferred to the brand identity, by using a specific storytelling and narrative presentation, color scheme, or design elements. Briefly, it represents the character of the brand communicated through tone and style. Museums might apply it through the use of storytelling that conveys narratives aligned with the museum's mission. Moreover, they could adopt a scholarly tone to convey authority, an emotional tone to communicate the feelings of a

biography, or a playful tone to engage children. Finally, a collaboration with specific artists, influencers, or celebrities can also communicate specific traits embodying a museum's personality.

3. *Culture* refers to the system of values the brand is based on. It can be associated with the brand's or target audience's country of origin. For the museum's field, it is reflected in the core values and ethical standards, the institution's history, and its country of location, or the country of origin of the artists. Art institutions can communicate Culture by emphasizing historical roots, promoting values like inclusivity or sustainability, or aligning to local identity through their exhibitions and communication of brand identity.

4. *Relationship* refers to the kind of relationship that a brand tries to foster with its target audience. It can be created by customer service or emotional connections fostered by experiential marketing, for example. In museums this dimension can be observed in the interactive engagement fostered by physical spaces, or through guided tours, workshops, memberships programs, and so on.

5. *Reflection* is represented by the stereotypical consumer of the brand; it does not represent the whole target audience, but rather an aspirational figure that the brand resonates with. In the museums field, this dimension might be represented by the cultural sophistication associated with museumgoers.

6. *Self-image* is how consumers perceive themselves when connecting to a brand. It captures what a consumer imagines others will think of him if he owns a certain product of a certain brand. A Ferrari owner might feel like being perceived as wealthy due to owning such an exclusive product. Similarly, in the field of museums, it can be the feeling of a visitor's experience of being a part of a culturally rich community.

Kapferer (1992 pp. 43-49) emphasizes that the collaboration of these dimensions leads to the creation of a strong brand identity. It also enables brand managers to assess strengths and weaknesses of a brand by evaluating the six aspects of the Brand Identity Prism.

This study employs the above descriptive dimensions to analyse how they are implemented in the museums' brand identity crafted through physical spaces and to conduct a comparison between brand identities constructed in different museums through in-person experience design, allowing to identify the differences between the two selected institutions.

2.2.2. Curation as a tool to shape brand identity. Historically, curation was seen as a function for preserving the artifacts of an institution: it was considered a task for carefully selecting materials to develop a collection (Khan & Bhatt, 201, p. 1). This traditional

approach identified curation as a practice exclusively in the field of museums and libraries, whose professionals applied expert judgement to assemble and preserve collections of informative artifacts (Khan & Bhatt, 2019, p. 1).

Today, the concept of curation has evolved beyond tangible artifacts and cultural institutions, encompassing digital spaces, including social media, education, and commerce, with practices such as content aggregation and storytelling. Its procedure can be viewed as an act of knowledge creation (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, p. 1): a filtering process including gathering, managing, presenting information, and transforming it into knowledge that aligns with certain truths or beliefs. Curation has the power to shape narratives, influence people's opinions, even drive social change; if engagement is prioritized over accuracy, it can even spread misinformation and ignorance (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, pp. 1, 4).

As such a powerful tool, curation is also employed to convey an institution's brand identity, functioning as a branding tool. Nixon et al. (2014, p. 18) argue that curatorial practices are integral to a brand's storytelling thanks to their ability to enhance visitors' experience through the creation of emotional connections. It is a co-creative process of meaning-making between producers and consumers, precisely as a "chaordic system" (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 17) that balances structure with dynamic creative flow. This indicates that a museum's identity is actively shaped by the audience's interpretations: it is a co-creative dynamic that challenges the traditional unidirectional flow of knowledge from institution to visitor.

Such an expanded role of curation, driven by branding objectives, introduces intrinsic conflicts with traditional curatorial ethics and professional standards. As Preece and Kerrigan (2015, p. 1225) argue, curators are often involved in multi-stakeholders' decision processes that lead to the prioritization of multiple perspectives: negotiations that need to balance educational and cultural objectives with institutional branding goals. This results in a complex interplay between ethical standards and market-oriented goals.

This study analyzes a museum's effort to implement certain curatorial and design choices to influence a visitor's journey and communicate a specific brand identity,

2.2.3. Museum shop as an extension of brand identity. As mentioned, in the contemporary cultural landscape, museums and galleries are increasingly pressured to act as businesses due to the reduced funding from governments (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1). This dynamic is further generated by developments in technology and a market-oriented ideology (McPherson, 2006, pp. 52-53). Collectively, these elements impose different expectations on

museums, broadening their roles beyond traditional collection, preservation, and study purposes. These objectives have been joined by a commercial and managerial aim to sustain the business (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1).

The museum shop, in this context, can be understood as a brand extension of the museum. As Hennig-Thurau (2009, p. 167) defines it, it refers to the portion of a brand value that rises from the right of the owner to introduce new services or products related to the core brand. In direct application of this concept to cultural institutions, Kent (2009, pp. 68-69, 74-75) points out the museum shop's function as a physical extension of the brand identity itself, serving as a touchpoint where the abstract qualities of the museum are concretely expressed through the selection of products. It goes beyond retail to create a space of informal learning, offering the visitors tangible memories that enhance the connection to the museum experience. Every aspect of the retail experience in the museum shop, from the store design to the product selection, plays an important role in shaping the museum's identity (Kent, 2009, pp. 68-69, 74).

The shop acts as a facilitator of the learning process that visitors experience inside the museum spaces. In this context, the museum shop provides personalized interaction, sensory engagement, and purchases that facilitate learning. Providing a seamless transition from exhibition of artworks to retail, the shop ensures that the emotional and intellectual learning is not interrupted abruptly. It consequently creates a comfortable environment for the visitors to draw links between the previous visit and the products, deepening the connection with the museum and enriching the experience (Kent, 2009, p. 75). Kent's findings (2009, p. 72) demonstrate that visitors have intentions to go to the museum shop as a part of the visit, demonstrating the high significance of the shop as a destination itself. Moreover, the possibility to purchase represents a familiar activity that contrasts with the visit to art exhibitions that require more exceptional effort.

These elements are studied and discussed in this research, to better understand the role of the museum shop in contributing to the brand identity, whether it aligns or contradicts the broader identity constructed through physical design elements in the other spaces of the museums.

2.3. Relational Dimensions

Next to Brand Identity Prism, this study proposes to utilize an analytical framework that studies relational brand experience in retail (Paik & Lee 2020, pp. 483-484). The Relational experience analytical framework is extended in the museum field within this research. This

framework is particularly relevant given the evolving nature of the museum field in business-like environments (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1)

The authors Paik and Lee (2020) emphasize that a store, to be perceived as worth visiting, needs to become a “third place” for customers. The latter concept refers to a social place in which people spend time between home and the workplace (Oldenburg, 1999, p. xvii). Retail stores are actively applying this concept with store design (Alexander & Cano, 2019, p. 201), abandoning traditional techniques to create a multi-functional, hybrid, unique retail space. This parallels the contemporary museum, which seeks to create a feeling of community and emotional connection through experiential design to stay relevant in the field (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, p. 69).

Museums also use in-person experience design that reflect emotional connections, much like retail designers that are switching from an emphasis on their products (“what it has” and “what it does”) to an emphasis on “what you feel” and “who you are” (Petermans & Kent, 2017, as cited in Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 470).

REAF provides a comprehensive and methodical lens to analyze how museums employ in-person experience design elements to convey their brand identity, and how they foster connections on a more relational level. Its usability for analyzing the holistic museum experience, encompassing the entrance hall, exhibition spaces and museum shop, stems from its comprehensive dimensions, including:

- Social Role: the role a consumer or a brand plays in the relational experience.
- Interaction: the diversity, quality, content, and timing of interactions.
- Identification: the extent to which consumers see themselves as belonging to a group through perceived similarities and shared identities.
- Social Presence: the sensation of "being with another" characterized by engagement, sensory awareness, and psychological involvement of others.
- Formal-Informal: the level of formality vs informality of the consumer or consumer-brand experience.
- Intense-Superficial: strength of the relationship associated with the degree and nature (positive versus negative) of influence.

The dimensions composing the comprehensive review on relational experience that further developed the REAF, also include dimensions such as Temporality and Geography (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), which were not directly employed in this study’s analysis. The Temporality dimension refers to the “relationship stability” (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) over

time: it is less pertinent to the scope of this study focusing on the immediate designed encounters designed in the physical environment of the selected museums, rather than the development of the visitor relationships over time. The Geography dimension refers to the “geographical scope of a given community” (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), and it is also outside the scope of this research that specifically studies the localized, physical, and sensory aspects of the museum’s environment and experience.

The application of REAF dimensions as an interpretative tool for data analysis will be further operationalized in the methodological chapter of this study.

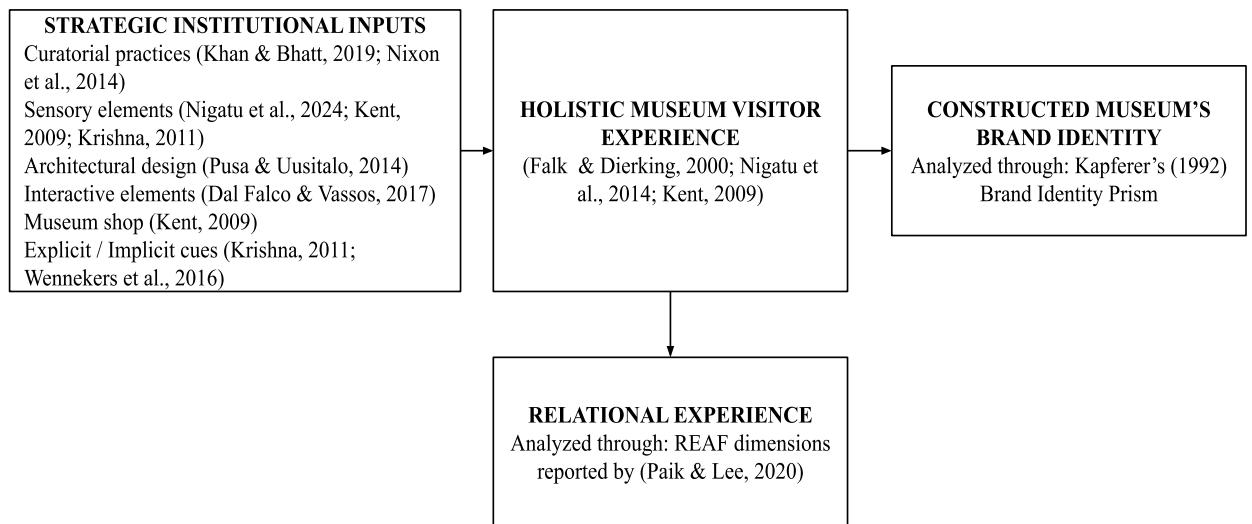


Fig. 2.1 Visual representation of the theoretical framework for this study

3. Research Design

This section details the methodological approach employed to answer the research question of this research project: How do art museums utilize in-person experience design to craft and communicate their distinct brand identity?

This research uses a qualitative approach - specifically, ethnographic observations - as it allows for an in-depth understanding of how physical spaces shape meaning and experience (Pink, 2015, pp. 25-49). Ethnographic observations offer fundamental tools to analyze how meaning is constructed on site (Pink, 2015, pp. 25-49; Dicks et al., 2011, p. 229), thanks to its immersive and context-specific nature. Ethnographic observation allows this research to directly engage with and interpret the physical elements that contribute to brand identity within the museum environment. A non-participant ethnographic observation is applied with the purpose of directly engaging with the museum environment to understand how museums communicate their identity through in-person experiences and the sensory qualities of the spaces. This method allows the researcher to engage with the environment in a non-intrusive way, making it possible to deliver a context-specific account of how the selected museums strategically design their physical and sensorial environments to craft a holistic experience (Nigatu et al., 2024, p. 5496; Kent, 2009, pp. 68, 74), that ultimately communicates the institution's brand identity (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20).

The rich data set is analyzed through thematic analysis. Particularly, textual data is analyzed through a systematic process of open, axial, and selective coding. Visual data undergoes a stage of semiotic analysis (denotation and connotation) to transform it into a textual format suitable for thematic analysis. All the identified codes are finally mapped into a code tree for each selected museum.

Coherently, this research employs an inductive approach in its initial stages of data collection and analysis. This approach involves the immersion of the researcher in museum spaces through ethnographic observations and allowing patterns to emerge directly from the rich dataset through thematic analysis, rather than testing hypotheses. The use of purposive sampling in the selection of comprehensive case studies and in the definition of the observed elements in the museums' spaces supports the inductive approach facilitating in-depth exploration. Moreover, this inductive aim is complemented by a deductive application of established theoretical frameworks in the final stages of data analysis. Specifically, the Retail Experience Analytical Framework (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 483-484) and Kapferer's (1992, pp.

43-49) Brand Identity Prism are employed as interpretative tools to examine and compare the codes in a systematic manner.

3.1. Operationalization

This section details how this research is operationalized, bridging the theoretical concepts with an empirical research design.

The selection of the areas in which the observations take place is grounded in previous literature to ensure representative and significant data collection. Thus, the following areas are selected: entrance hall, exhibition spaces (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20), museum shop (Kent, 2009, pp. 68, 74). As established in prior research, these locations are chosen because they represent the main moments of encounter between the visitors and the designed museum's brand identity (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20; Kent, 2009, pp. 68, 74): from first impression to content engagement, to memory-making through purchase.

The ethnographic observations are designed following the overarching theoretical concept that sees the museum experience as fundamentally multisensorial and multifaceted (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 137; Kent, 2009, p. 68; Nigatu et al., 2024, pp. 5495-5496). The data collection, therefore, involves systematic and focused noting and photographing of specific sensory elements that contribute to the experience: lighting, sound, smell, material qualities of the space (Kent, 2009, p. 69; Krishna, 2011, pp. 335-341). Additionally, characteristics linked to the spatial organization and architectural aesthetics of the building are noted, as part of the holistic museum visitor experience (Falk & Dierking, 2000, pp. 137, 123-28; Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20). Moreover, Dal Falco & Vassos (2017, p. S3978) point out the importance of interactive elements and interactive storytelling inside museum spaces as an element that creates emotional connections, ultimately shaping a museum's brand identity: therefore, the observations capture the presence and the nature of interactive elements in the museum space (e.g. touchscreens). This framework emphasizes the role of physical elements and spaces in evoking meaning, emotion, and memory, finally crafting a brand identity (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p.20). All these cues allow to study how the museums' implicit brand attitudes are embedded in the physical spaces, drawing on the principles of sensory marketing (Krishna, 2011, pp. 333-334). Finally, the products in the shop, their function, and their packaging are taken into consideration and noted during observation, as they are essential elements in extending the visitor's engagement with the themes presented in the museum, allowing them to recall the experience (Kent, 2009, p. 68). These elements, with the observation of the presence of logos inside the museum spaces, make it possible to decode

explicit brand attitudes (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2), as they can serve as powerful symbols that embody and communicate a museum's identity (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 22).

The dimensions informing the Retail Experience Analytical Framework (REAF) (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) provide an interpretative tool, based on: social role, interaction, identification, social presence, formal-informal, intense-superficial. The codes obtained by conducting the thematic analysis are interpreted through a lens constituted by these dimensions, enabling an understanding of how the in-person experience design cues create a relational connection with the visitor. To ensure academic rigor, each dimension is operationalized and adapted to the museum context, as follows:

- *Social Role* referring to the role the brand or the consumer plays in the relational experience (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), is interpreted by assessing how specific elements (e.g. tone of voice, narrative strategy, hospitality strategy) might position the institution towards the visitor, and what would be the visitor's expected role (e.g. active participant).
- *Social Presence* refers to the sensation of "being without another" (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), and is interpreted by considering the sensory cues, and the overall atmosphere created in the physical environment, focusing on the sensory awareness (e.g. do the sensory elements and the narratives foster a sense of shared experience?).
- *Identification* refers to the extent to which consumers see themselves as belonging to a group (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469). Therefore, in the museums' physical environment it is operationalized focusing on the cultural or personal belonging emphasis.
- *Interaction* refers to the quality and timing of interaction (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), therefore it is operationalized focusing on the presence of interactive elements.
- *Intense-Superficial* refers to the strength and nature of the relationship (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), and it is operationalized focusing on how deeply the overall experience would foster meaning-making and personal reflection (e.g. through subtle sensory elements that encourage contemplation, or through narrative strategies that require deep reflection)
- *Formal-Informal* this dimension assesses the level of formality of the experience (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), and it is operationalized by focusing on

the tone of texts, the rigidity or flexibility of pathways, the type of products in the shop, the hospitality strategies (structured or informal).

This approach ultimately gives insights about how various elements in the museum space contribute to the formation of a unique brand identity by fostering emotional and social connections with visitors.

Finally, Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) Brand Identity Prism is applied. Its six dimensions are employed as an evaluative tool of both museums' brand identities constructed through the analyzed physical cues. The Prism's dimensions include:

- *Physique*, that will be assessed by taking into consideration the striking elements (e.g. the logo usage, the materials, the design aesthetics) that make the brand unique;
- *Personality*, assessed by taking into consideration the color-palettes, the sensory elements, and the storytelling;
- *Relationship*, assessed by considering how the spatial layouts foster interactive engagement;
- *Self-image*, assessed by considering how the sensory elements and spatial layouts foster moments of emotional connection with the art;
- *Culture*, assessed by considering the values that the brand embodies, consequently evaluating the product selection in the shop, if the design aesthetics reflect a particular historical period, and the themes in the exhibition storytelling;
- *Reflection*, assessed by considering if the product selection in the shop could cater to a specific taste, and if the exhibition storytelling assumes some kind of prior knowledge.

This framework will enable a systematic comparison between the brand identities of the two museums, highlighting their unique traits and strategic approaches.

3.2. Selection Criteria for Museum Case Studies

The geographical setting for this study is Amsterdam's Museumplein: a widely recognized area of high cultural density attracting millions of visitors annually (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 39). In 2023, the area's major art institutions collectively welcomed around 6 million visitors (Rijksmuseum, 2023; Van Gogh Museum, 2024; Stedelijk Museum, 2023). Its uniqueness stems from the presence of world-class art institutions that make it a center of

Dutch heritage from different ages (Rijksmuseum.nl, n.d.; Vangoghmuseum.nl, n.d.; Stedelijk Museum, n.d.; Moco Museum, n.d.).

The institutions situated on Museumplein include the Rijksmuseum, which is devoted to Dutch art and history (Rijksmuseum, n.d.); Van Gogh Museum, exhibiting Vincent Van Gogh's and his contemporaries' masterpieces (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.); Stedelijk Museum, focusing on modern and contemporary art and design (Stedelijk Museum, n.d.); Moco Museum, a modern and contemporary art museum with a focus on street art (Mocomuseum.com, n.d.). This unique concentration of distinctive institutions offers an opportunity to select case studies that are characterized by varied features, while geographically proximate. This context also suggests that these institutions may be motivated to communicate distinctive identities to be distinctive.

Criteria are formulated to identify museums that are comparably influential yet presenting diversities in curatorial and operational dimensions. The criteria are established as follows:

- The selection seeks diversity in the collection of artworks. For instance, a broader and more encyclopedic collection in contrast with one centered on a single artist of a specific art historical period. This criterion is essential as the collection is at the core of a museum's identity and of the narrative potential of its in-person experiences (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20).
- Selected museums ought to have significant national and international visitors' numbers, showing extensive operational scale and brand reach. To define it operationally for this study, the selected institutions ought to exceed approximately 1.5 million visitors annually in a pre-pandemic or a post-recovery year. This criterion ensures that the selected case studies are engaged in communicating their identity to a diverse audience. Museums with more complex organizational structures and entrepreneurial leadership are more equipped to develop branding and marketing strategies.
- It was aimed to include institutions with contrasting funding structures: one primarily relying on public funding and the other with a more market-oriented revenue strategy. This criterion provides diversity in terms of financial frameworks and their impact strategies in experience design and brand identity communication (Bernelot Moens, 2013, pp. 44-48).

Based on the criteria, Van Gogh Museum and Rijksmuseum are selected as case studies. They are both leading institutions in the Dutch cultural landscape, attracting diverse and international audiences.

The Rijksmuseum showcases a representative overview of Dutch history and art from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, resulting in a wide variety of historical periods and artists (Rijksmuseum, n.d.). During 2023, it attracted 2.7 million visitors (Rijksmuseum, 2023), demonstrating its global appeal and its role in promoting Dutch national heritage. Concerning its financial structure, the Rijksmuseum has traditionally depended mostly on public funding. For instance, 60-70% of its income is received from government subsidies, only 25-30% of its revenues are self-generated (Bernelot Moens, 2013, pp. 44-48).

The Van Gogh Museum exhibits an extensive collection of Vincent Van Gogh's artworks, one of art history's most prominent figures. Its collection is intensely shaped by one single artist's legacy, therefore attracting visitors specifically interested in Van Gogh and late 19th century art (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). In 2023, the museum attracted 1.7 million visitors, according to its annual report (Van Gogh Museum, 2024), reflecting its appeal and extensive operational scale. Concerning its revenue strategy, the Van Gogh Museum operates with a different financial model, in contrast with the Rijksmuseum. A substantial portion of its income is generated through its own efforts on ticket sales and commercial activities: about 60-70% of its income falls in the category of earned income, while government subsidies account for 30% of the total income (Bernelot Moens, 2013, pp. 44-48).

A strong base for a comparative case study is created thanks to the selection of these two art institutions. Their different funding models (predominantly public versus market-oriented) and collection focuses (national history versus one single artist) while sharing high cultural relevance and geographical proximity, establish a strong selection.

3.3. Sample Size and Data Collection Criteria

Purposive sampling was employed to create the sample: a non-probability sampling method in which the observed elements are chosen a priori based on the specific characteristics of this study, and not randomly (Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 534). This sampling method aligns with the goal of investigating how designed in-person experiences in museums shape their brand identity, as it allows to identify specific elements to observe in the physical space, making sure they are information-rich and relevant.

This paragraph outlines the areas in which the ethnographic observations take place, guided by a strong theoretical grounding, to ensure to collect the most relevant elements for this research. Additionally, the sample size for the observations is assessed, in accordance with the methodological requirements for this thesis.

The observations are conducted in the following areas:

- the entrance hall (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20);
- the exhibition galleries (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, pp. 20, 25);
- the museum shop (Kent, 2009, pp. 68, 74).

The sample size for this study is set to approximately ten hours of observation, comparable to the Methodological Guidelines requirement of ten in-depth interviews for data collection. As illustrated in Table 1, the estimation of sample size was based on the time required to collect data for each observed object or design feature that is observed in a space.

	exhibition		shop		entrance	
	from [min]	to [min]	from [min]	to [min]	from [min]	to [min]
lighting	5	10	5	10	5	10
soundscape	1	3	1	3	1	3
material	5	10	5	10	5	10
palette	5	8	5	8	5	8
text panels' storytelling	1	3				
products			10	15		
logo usage	3	5	3	5	3	5
interactive panels	3	5	3	5	3	5
design aesthetics	5	8	5	8	5	8

Tab. 3.1 Time required for observed objects and design features

Based on the time allocations reported in the above Table (Tab.1), the total number of exhibition spaces that are required to meet the goal of approximately ten hours is six. Therefore, five hours are spent in each museum to conduct ethnographic observations in the entrance hall, exhibition spaces, and museum shops. This approach is rooted in ethnographic practice in which the contextual significant spaces are prioritized: it relies more on in-depth engagement with contextually significant spaces, where the multisensoriality of lived experience leads to understanding, rather than the accumulation of observed elements (Pink, 2015, p. 20). In the context of this research, the selection of key areas and observed elements ensures focused and iterative data collection that provides sufficient material to answer the

research question. This approach yields significant and saturated insights provided that key areas and design elements are attentively observed.

The sample for this study includes three main types of data collected across the key areas of each museum.

- Approximately 100 photographs are taken across the selected spaces to document the physical environment. From this set, 5 to 8 are selected for each museum for analysis, focusing on the ones that most representatively capture the spatial qualities of the museums' entrance hall, exhibition spaces, and museum shop. This approach ensures a manageable and grounded set for data analysis, comprehensive of the most illustrative examples.
- Fieldnotes are collected throughout ten hours of ethnographic observations, resulting in approximately thirty pages of detailed fieldnotes.
- Text panels and introductory panels are transcribed: a selection of 5 to 8 texts is chosen for analysis for each selected museum. These texts are included in the sample as they are the most representative of the museum's narrative: by focusing on key texts, the analysis is composed of the most contextually significant material mirroring the logic of purposive sampling.

3.4. Data Collection Method: Ethnographic Observation

3.4.1. Ethnography for observing space. This study proposes to use ethnographic observation to collect data inside the museums, focusing on the spatial and sensory aspects of museum contexts, rather than examining the actions or interactions of visitors. This approach is based on the understanding that places are active agents that shape meaning and experience rather than being passive backdrops (Pink, 2015, pp. 32-36; Dicks et al., 2011, pp. 230, 233). In particular, Dicks et al. (2011), discuss the importance of analyzing "material objects, places, spatial features, soundscapes and visual phenomena", considering that ethnographers have often tended to treat these as "background or context rather than investigating more fully how they give meaning to a given social setting and situation" (p. 230).

While ethnography is usually associated with direct engagement with a certain population, its advantage relies on the researcher's presence in the studied environment that allows to conduct a collection of data that would be difficult to capture in a more detached approach (Oranga & Matere, 2023, p. 7).

As reported, researchers argue for a more systematic approach to study how spatial elements can participate in the production of meaning. In the case of this research, this

method enables an understanding of the construction of brand identity through physical and sensory elements of the in-person experiences. Thus, ethnographic observations provide an appropriate framework to answer the research question that seeks to explore how museums utilize physical elements to craft and communicate the museums' distinct brand identity.

3.4.2. Sensory ethnography. Drawing from this broader ethnographic foundation, sensory ethnography offers a more focused lens to specifically collect data about the multisensorial and affective qualities of space.

Stemming from Pink's (2015) theories, sensory ethnography is a critical methodology with "a reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced" (p. 4-5). It is a methodology based on the understanding of the multisensorial nature of experience, moving beyond traditional textual analysis to focus on what is seen, heard, and felt in the space. In the case of this study, this methodology is applied to observe the qualities of space inside the museums and understand how physical and sensory elements are used to craft and communicate the museum's brand identity.

The methodology embraces an active engagement with the overall atmosphere of the research setting; the researcher must "be present" and engage with the emotional textures of the setting, stressing the importance of being open to unexpected encounters: fieldwork may reveal unanticipated insights. This flexibility is essential to capture the dynamic and emerging aspects of sensory environments, especially in settings designed to evoke emotional and aesthetic responses, such as art museums. During the data collection inside the museum's spaces—specifically the entrance hall, the exhibition spaces, and the shop—flexibility is applied to capture the changes in lighting, the different materials, more generally to not miss any detail of how the in-person experience is designed through the various sensory and physical elements.

Another key element of sensory ethnographic observation is reflexivity. Pink (2015, p. 58) encourages researchers to be aware of the potential limitations and leading interpretations that their own sensory experience may lead to, because sensory experiences are never neutral. The latter awareness helps to mitigate biased conclusions. In this methodology, the researcher is not passive but recognizes that their own embodied experience is a site of knowledge production.

Sensory ethnography provides specific rules for data collection that allow to engage with sensory elements, such as lighting, materials, sounds, and spatial layout to understand how they cooperate to create an environment that communicates the museum's brand identity.

3.4.3. Steps for ethnographic observation. In order to ensure depth of insights and methodological rigor, this study employs ethnographic observation through multiple procedures. This approach, rooted in the principles of sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015, pp. 25-49), includes:

1. Initial familiarization: exploring the websites and social media accounts of the selected institutions constitutes the preliminary step of this research. This stage is useful to provide contextual understanding and make sure to have an overall comprehension of each museum's institutional mission.
2. Fieldwork and observation: The immersive fieldwork consists of non-participant ethnographic observations, spending approximately five hours within the museum setting, particularly in the entrance hall, the exhibition spaces, and the museum shop.

Observations captured:

- Sensory elements: including lighting, acoustics, use of materials, and color palettes. These elements are crucial as they align with the multimodal coordination of meaning (Dicks et al., 2011, p. 230), Kent's (2009, pp. 68, 74) perspective on a holistic experience, and Krishna's (2011, pp. 332-339) argument about the importance of subtle and implicit sensory cues in influencing perception and behavior.
- Architectural aesthetics and spatial organization: the design of spaces, the overall layout, the aesthetics of architectural elements and what they communicate (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 22).
- Curatorial narratives: Curation is observed in a holistic manner collecting data about textual narratives (its tone, themes, and depth), and visual organization of displays and exhibits. This operationalizes the concept of curation as a branding tool (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18).
- Interactive Elements: Fieldnotes and photographs capture the presence (or absence) of objects that foster interaction with the narratives or the space, as they are integral to museum experience design, and consequently to their brand identity (Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017, pp. S3978-S3979).
- Overall atmosphere: The general "feel" of the spaces.

- Product selection in the shop: Finally, the curation and the presentation of merchandise is observed in the museum shop, operationalizing the role of the museum shop as a brand extension of the institution itself (Kent, 2009, p. 68).

3.5. Data Analysis

Following data collection, all gathered materials are systematically arranged to allow a thorough analysis. An Excel Sheet is organized with fieldnotes transcriptions to ensure clear readability. The texts are also selected and transcribed in the Sheet, as well as the photographs. This multi-modal dataset, comprising textual and visual data, forms the base for the next analytical step.

To systematically interpret the observations and address the research question, an analytical strategy is applied, consisting of qualitative thematic analysis and semiotic principles.

Thematic analysis is employed to analyze the textual data collected (fieldnotes and transcription of text panels). It is a suitable method as it allows a flexible yet systematic approach to identify patterns and themes within qualitative research (Boeije, 2009, pp. 94-118). Additionally, the textual data is accompanied by a collection of photographs.

The visual material is analyzed through a semiotically informed thematic analysis. This approach allows for a multi-layered interpretation of images (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 49-46). Following Machin & Mayr's (2012, pp. 49-56) semiotic approach, photographs are analyzed by identifying denotative meanings, describing objectively what is seen in the picture. Then, connotative meanings are explored uncovering the institutional, cultural, or emotional interpretations connected to the visual elements. This approach allows to transform the visual data into a textual representation that is suitable for thematic analysis: the coding process, consisting of open, axial, and selective coding, is applied. Moreover, a code tree is built to systematize data categorization in a hierarchical organization, also enhancing analytical rigor and transparency.

All data undergo a systematic coding procedure, encompassing open, axial, and selective coding (Boeije, 2009, pp. 94-118):

- Open Coding: In this initial phase, the data is broken down into small descriptive units. For example, “dimmed lights”, “simple educational tone”, “mixed materials”. Approximately 70 open codes are created during the Rijksmuseum's analysis, and approximately 60 during the Van Gogh Museum's analysis.

- Axial Coding: The previously created codes are grouped into broader categories to describe conceptual commonalities. For example, “Atmospheric Minimalism”, “Didactic Engagement Features”, and “Curated Commercial Zones”. This process results in 18 axial codes for Rijksmuseum, and 17 for the Van Gogh Museum.
- Selective Coding: Overarching selective codes and themes are developed from the relationships between axial codes.

Finally, a code tree for each museum is developed to systematize data and build a hierarchy (see Fig. 3.1., 3.2., 3.3., 3.4., 3.5., 3.6.).

The patterns identified through the analysis are, as said, discussed in relation to the six dimensions informing the REAF (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469). Finally, to structure the final evaluation of the patterns identified by thematic analysis, Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) Brand Identity Prism's six dimensions (outlined in the Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism paragraph) will be employed.

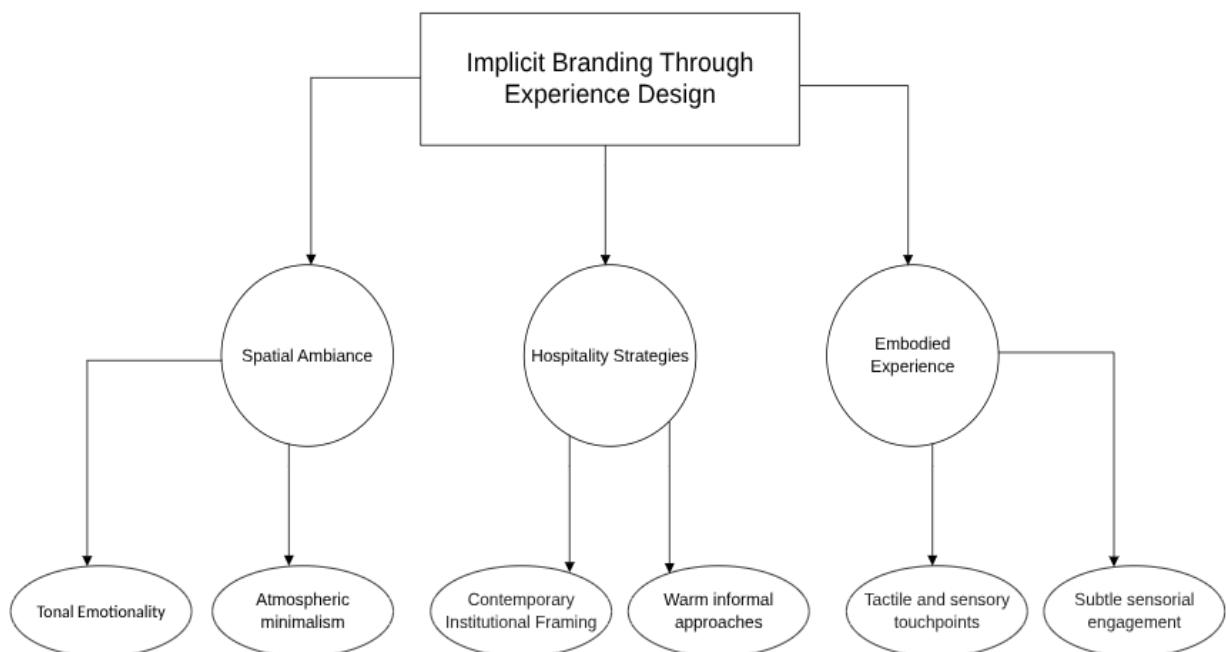


Fig. 3.1 Theme “Implicit Branding through Experience Design” in Van Gogh Museum’s code tree

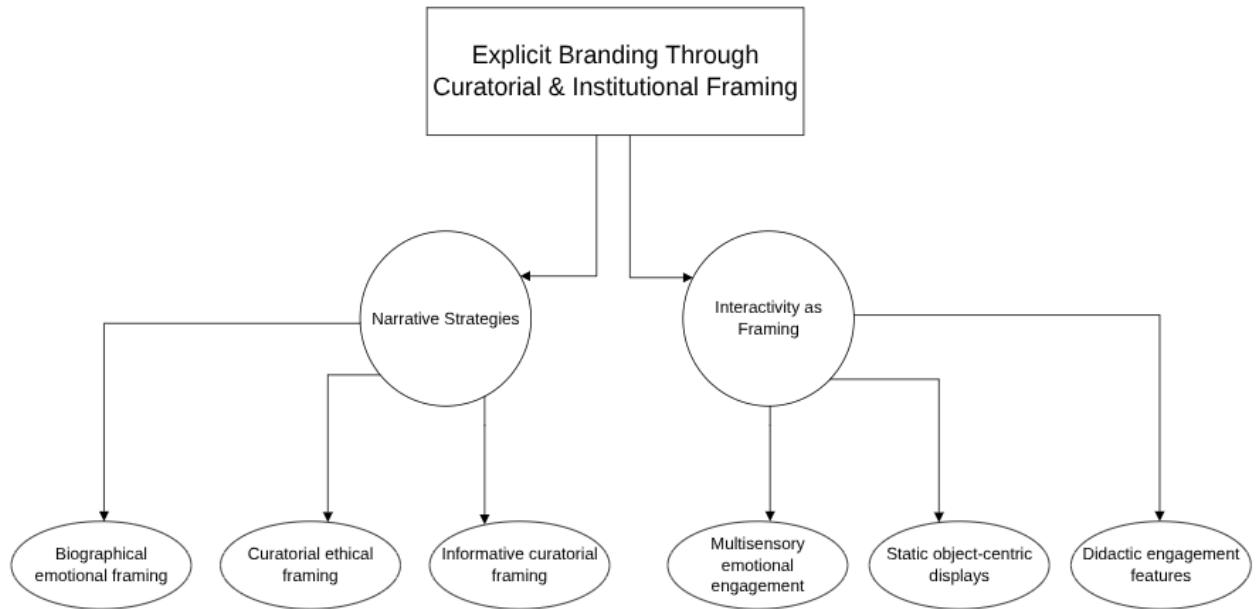


Fig. 3.2. Theme “Explicit Branding through Curatorial & Institutional Framing” in Van Gogh Museum’s code tree

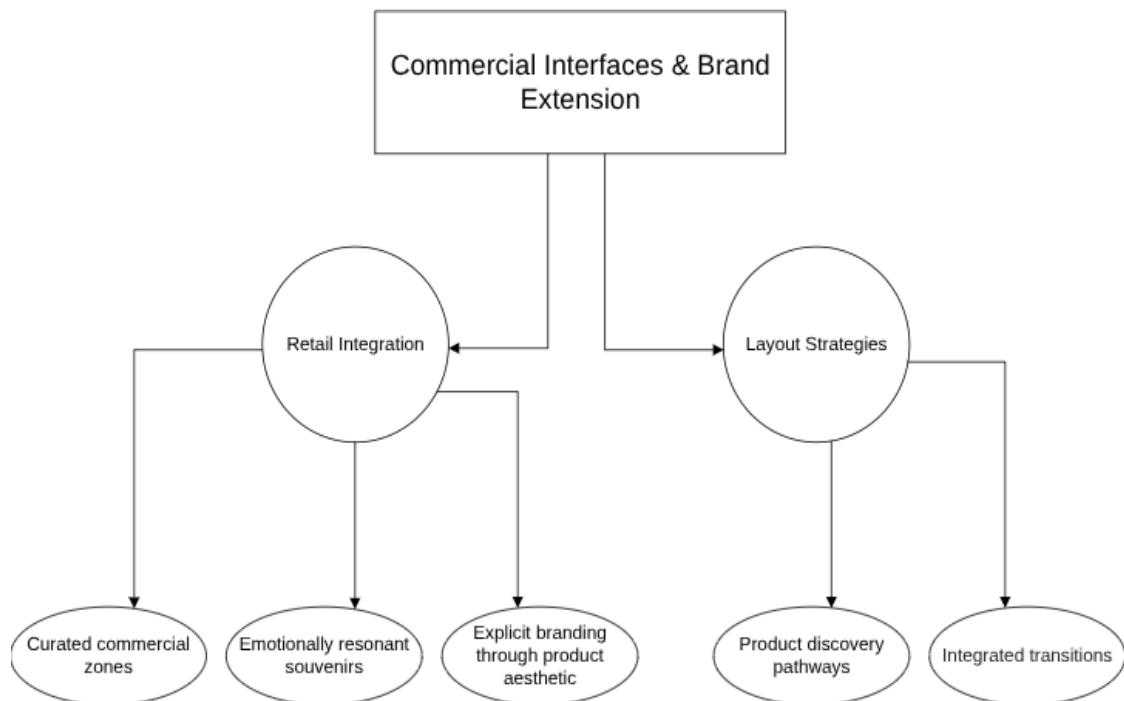


Fig. 3.3. Theme “Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension” in Van Gogh Museum’s code tree

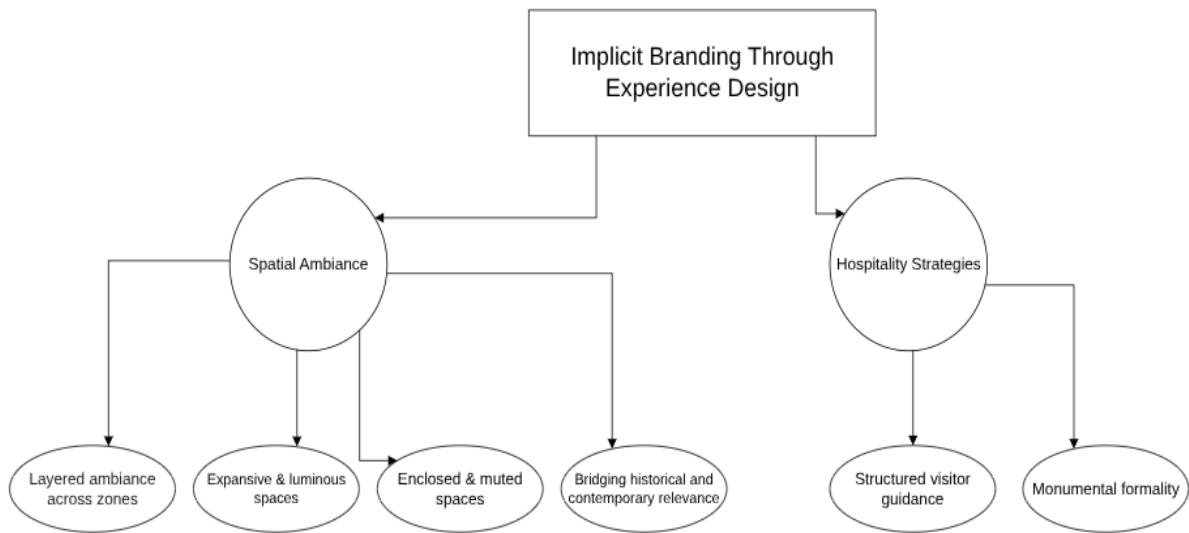


Fig. 3.4. Theme “Implicit Branding through Experience Design” in Rijksmuseum’s code tree

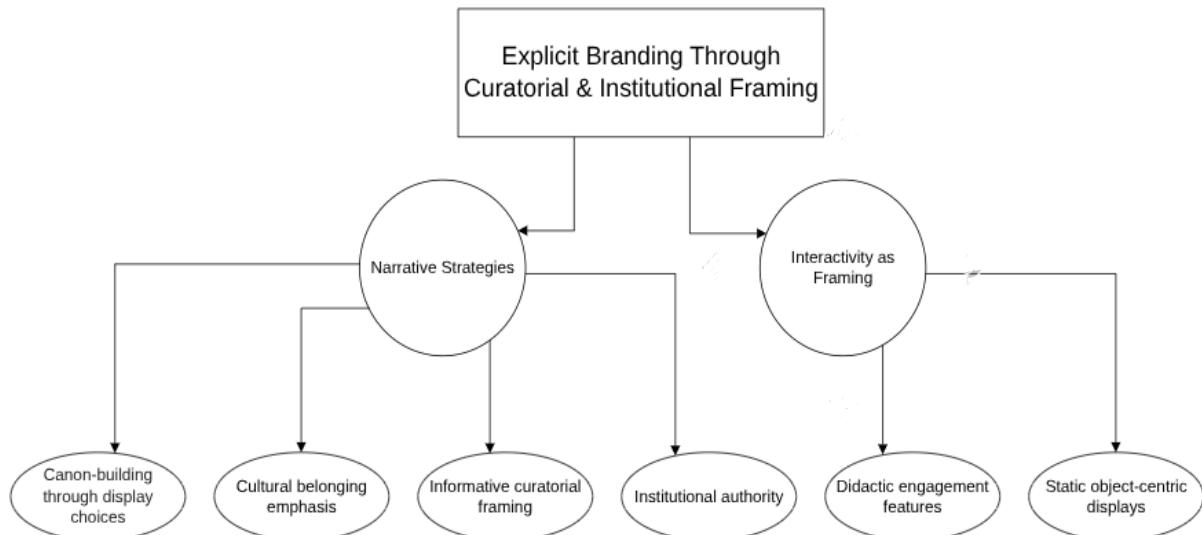


Fig. 3.5. Theme “Explicit Branding through Curatorial & Institutional Framing” in Rijksmuseum’s code tree

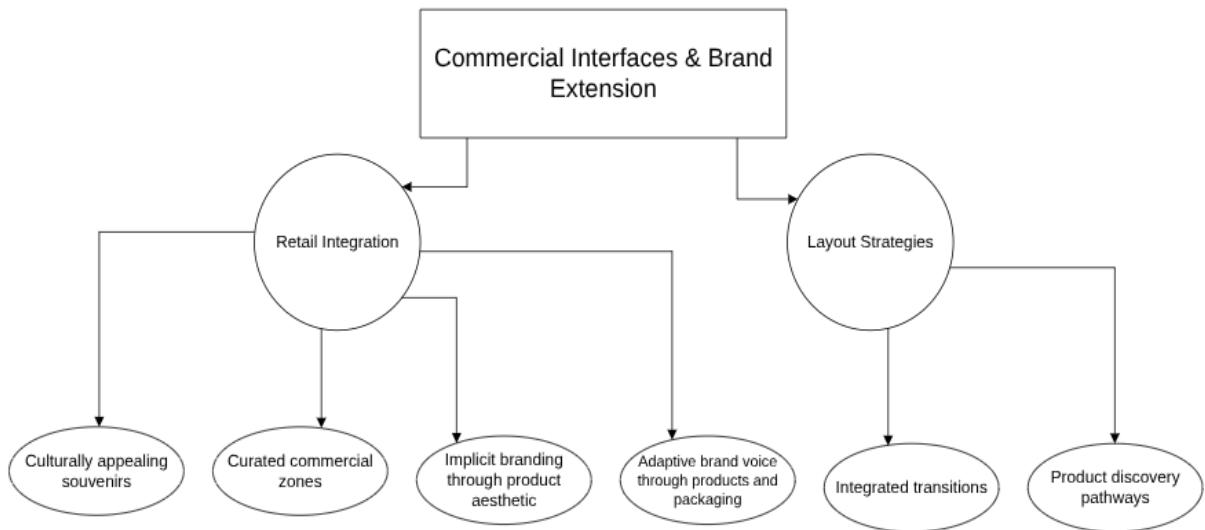


Fig. 3.6. Theme “Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension” in Rijksmuseum’s code tree

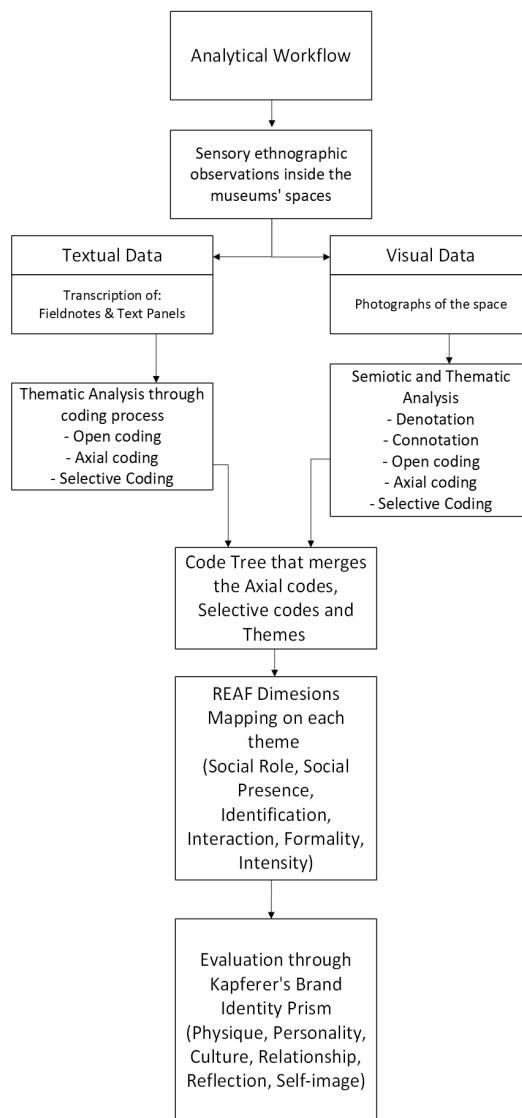


Fig. 3.7. Overview of the Research Design

4. Results

This chapter details the empirical findings of this study, in order to address the research question about how the in-person experience designs in Van Gogh Museum and Rijksmuseum develop and communicate their respective brand identities.

The thematic analysis, derived from the ethnographic observations across both museums, resulted in the formulation of three overarching themes:

- Implicit Branding through Experience Design,
- Explicit Branding through Curatorial & Institutional Framing,
- Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension.

Due to the inductive nature of this study, the themes are found to be consistent across both selected institutions. This commonality allows for the identification of shared categories of the phenomena, despite the distinct curatorial approaches, collections, and operational models of the two selected institutions.

The themes are systematically interpreted through the dimensions of Paik and Lee's (2020, p. 469) REAF (Social Role, Interaction, Identification, Social Presence, Formal-Informal, and Intense-Superficial) to add analytical depth in the explanation of how the museums' experience design contributes to brand identity, moving towards a structured and theoretical understanding of the brand's strategic identity crafting. The chapter concludes with the application of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (1992, pp. 43-49) to conduct a final comparative evaluation of both museums' brand identities crafted through their in-person experience design.

4.A. Van Gogh Museum

This section explains the findings for the Van Gogh Museum: showing how its in-person experience design communicates its brand identity. As mentioned, the analysis is structured according to three overarching themes:

4.A.1. In Implicit Branding through Experience Design, selective codes are *Spatial ambiance, Hospitality strategies, and Embodied experience*;

4.A.2. In Explicit Branding through Curatorial & Institutional Framing, selective codes are *Narrative strategies and Interactivity as framing*;

4.A.3. In Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension, selective codes are *Retail integration and Layout strategies*.

Each theme is explored by detailing its selective and axial codes, collectively revealing the museum's strategies to brand identity communication through its physical environment design.

4.A.1. Implicit branding through experience design. Van Gogh Museum strategically incorporates multiple spatial design features to foster a specific type of experience. These subtle and non-verbal cues lead to implicit branding, as they subtly engage consumers' senses affecting their perception, consequently communicating an identity (Krishna, 2011, pp. 333-334). They include what the museum implicitly communicates through sensory elements, atmosphere, and spatial design in general.

This section explores how *Spatial ambiance*, *Hospitality strategies* and *Embodied experience* build a foundational tone for the museum visit. The following selective and axial codes specifically show how implicit branding is realized.

4.A.1.1. Spatial Ambiance. The spatial ambiance in Van Gogh Museum implicitly shapes its brand identity through the strategic manipulation of sensory elements, architecture, and spatial arrangement. This section discusses the findings related to the axial codes Tonal emotionality and Atmospheric minimalism.

4.A.1.1.1. Tonal Emotionality. Van Gogh Museum's spaces consistently showcase a tonal emotionality in the strategic choice of pale wall colors, carefully controlled natural lighting, and quiet tonal environments. What communicates a tonal emotionality is a subtle sensorial approach based on symbolism, leading to implicit associations. As observed in Figure 4.A.1,



Fig. 4.A.1 Van Gogh Museum's exhibition: Self-Portraits

the strategic color choice of yellow for the wall fosters a sense of connection with the artist's world, particularly given the prominence of yellow in Van Gogh's art and its affinity for it, even noted by contemporaries like Gauguin (Gruener, 2013, pp. 370-371). The same type of color symbolism is integrated in the museum's café located in the entrance hall (Figure 4.A.2): as observed, the museum chooses to integrate the colour yellow in the chairs of the café, obtaining a symbolistic association with the artist himself.



Fig. 4.A.2 Van Gogh Museum Café

The museum's deliberate use of color relies on its capacity to profoundly shape human perception and emotion, as they are capable of "calling forth a vibration from the soul" (Ratliff, 2009, p. 22).

This emotional calibration contributes to the museum's Personality (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), communicating an empathetic character, connected to the inner artist's world.

4.A.1.1.2 Atmospheric Minimalism. Data reveals a consistent use of *atmospheric minimalism* throughout exhibition spaces. It recalls the muted sensory design that

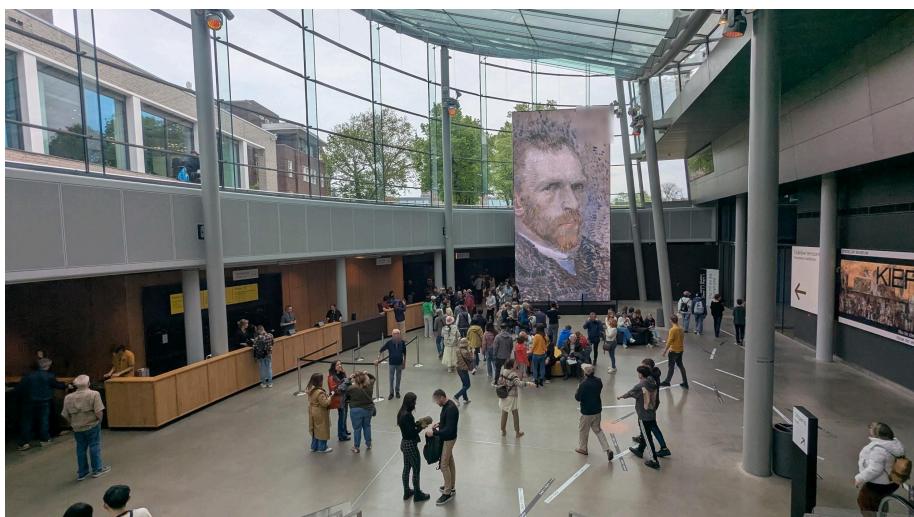


Fig. 4.A.3 Van Gogh Museum Entrance Hall

characterizes the spatial ambiance: clarity and calmness are achieved via reduction. The muted color palette (beige tones, pastel yellow, light blue are dominant), the soft ambient lighting, the use of materials that evoke warm minimalism and modernism (Figures 4.A.1 & 4.A.3) contribute to an environment that can be marked such as “calm,” “subtle,” and “uncluttered”. Particularly when paired with curatorial texts that emphasize reflection over instruction. As observed in Figure 4.A.4, the pale wooden flooring, the open space, and soft



Fig. 4.A.4 Van Gogh Museum Paesant Life

ambient lighting are used to eliminate visual noise. This sensory restraint appears to be a deliberate curatorial strategy that not only enhances functional clarity, but also sets the emotional tone of the visit - reducing stimulation to focus attention and invite contemplation.

Echoing Khan & Bhatt's (2018, pp. 1-2) notion of curation as filtering, the curatorial restraint practiced in Van Gogh Museum's spatial ambiance, can be interpreted as a type of editorial control - demonstrating brand discipline in the sensory domain. Rather than overwhelming visitors with multimodal experiences, it offers affective legibility through design silence. The result is not neutrality, but intentional emotional calibration — a sensory atmosphere that enhances the perceived seriousness and dignity of the institution.

The curatorial restraint conveying atmospheric minimalism shapes the museum's Physique (Kapferer, 2004, pp. 43-49), by communicating a distinguished visual: uncluttered and subtle.

4.A.1.1.3 Interpretation through REAF dimensions. When interpreted through the lens of REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), the combination of tonal emotionality and atmospheric minimalism leads to an influence on the perceived roles within the relational experience. The design elements involved in these codes, particularly the subdued and

symbolistic environment, present the museum's role in facilitating emotional connections and contemplation of Van Gogh's inner artistic world (Social Role). The emotional resonance that these characteristics collectively communicate and foster aligns the experience with the intense side of the REAF Intense-Superficial spectrum (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), facilitating a focused connection with art.

4.A.1.2. *Hospitality Strategies*. Beyond the spatial ambiance, hospitality strategies also play a role in shaping Van Gogh Museum's brand identity through in-person experience design. In this section, the characteristics of the museum's hospitality will be explored through the following axial codes: *Contemporary institutional framing* and *Warm informal approaches*.

4.A.1.2.1. *Contemporary Institutional Framing*. Data reveal the museum's strategic use of a contemporary institutional framing through modern and minimalist design elements of industrial materials, such as steel, glass, and concrete (see Figure 4.A.5. portraying the metallic industrial ceiling). Moreover, as observed in Figure 4.A.3. depicting the entrance

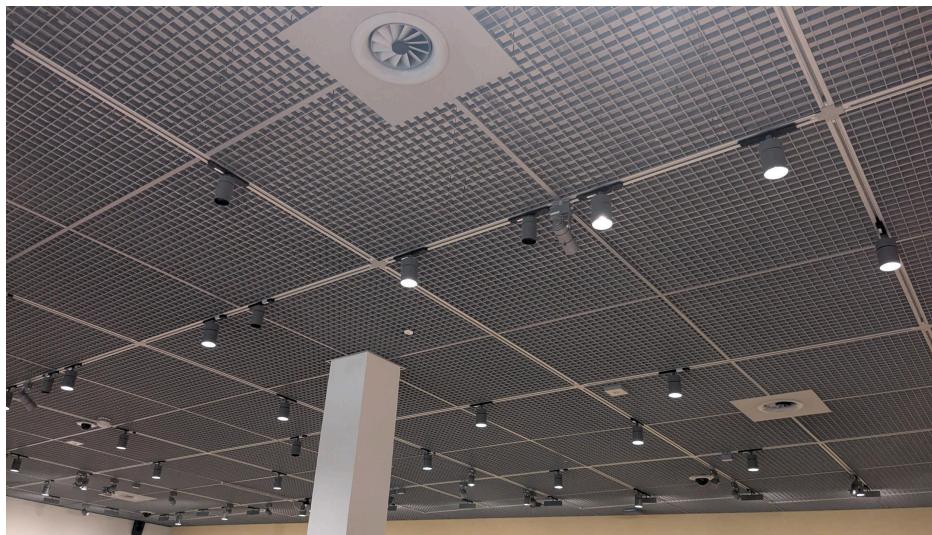


Fig. 4.A.5 Van Gogh Museum ceiling in exhibition spaces

hall, a sense of transparency is created by the glass ceiling that lets natural light spread across the room. Additionally, observing Figure 4.A.6, the exhibition spaces also reflect this approach. Clean lines, minimalist display structures, a mix of industrial materials, and the integration of a detailed timeline, recall a structured but simple presentation of information, further reinforcing the museum's contemporary educational approach.

As stated by Ortmann and Viholt (2021, p. 5, 26), physical space design can serve as a brand channel through which the museum's identity can be communicated via architectural

and material choices. These design elements position the museum as approachable, forward-thinking, rather than traditionally imposing. The emphasis on open spaces and minimalist aesthetics communicates modern sensibilities.

As the museum employs modern and minimalist design and materials, its Personality (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) is once again impacted, conveying an accessible institutional



Fig. 4.A.6 Van Gogh Museum Self-Portrait exhibition corner: glass case and timeline

identity.

4.A.1.2.2. Warm Informal Approaches. Complementing the latter code, the findings reveal the museum's use of warm informal approaches to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere across the areas. The presence of comfortable seating areas in the entrance (Figure 4.A.3.), open spaces, spread light from the ceiling, the provision of sitting areas, and simple industrial materials demonstrate a deliberate cultivation of a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere through its hospitality strategies that makes the museum accessible and informal.

This approach resonates with Kent's (2009, p. 69) emphasis on the role of physical spaces to influence curiosity and exploration: a more relaxed experience is fostered employing warm informal approaches. Additionally, these design elements - particularly, the open spaces and the provision of common sitting areas in the entrance hall - subtly encourage the "social dimension" of the museum visitor experience (Yi et al., 2022, p. 2).

The approachable connection fostered by these hospitality strategies shaped the museum's Relationship (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), fostering a relaxed atmosphere.

4.A.1.2.3. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions*, When interpreted through the REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) lens, these approaches in hospitality lean towards the creation of an informal (Formal-Informal spectrum) environment that breaks down traditional institutional barriers to foster a relaxed atmosphere. Moreover, the museum is presented, through these design choices, as a welcoming modern host (Social Role dimension), and the opportunity for subtle interaction fostered by the sitting areas directly influences the Interaction dimension by facilitating and encouraging shared moments of reflection.

4.A.1.3 *Embodied Experience*. The Van Gogh Museum incorporates elements fostering an embodied experience by the inherent sensory qualities of the environment allowing for a *subtle sensorial engagement* and the presence of objects that invite physical engagement (*tactile and sensory touchpoints*). This selective code shows the museum's approach that aligns with the understanding of the visitor experience as holistic and multi-sensorial (Nigatu et al., 2024, p. 5496).

4.A.1.3.1 *Tactile and sensory touchpoints*. Data uncovers the museum's strategic incorporation of *tactile and sensory touchpoints* into its physical spaces. Figure 4.A.7. shows an example of these elements: a microscope that allows visitors to examine brushstrokes.



Fig. 4.A.7. Van Gogh Museum exhibition spaces' interactive object: microscope

Additionally, the exhibition spaces present touchscreens to delve into detailed explanations of specific artworks, and old-style phones to listen to a recorded version of the epistolary exchange between Vincent and his brother. These objects contribute to the creation of a richer

and more tangible experience, aligning with Falk and Dierking's (2000, pp. 123-128) idea of how the design of the space design can influence the way it is perceived. By the provision of these touchpoints, the museum moves beyond a traditional, purely visual, engagement, fostering a more aware and active encounter with Van Gogh's art and inner world.

Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) dimension Relationship is further strengthened by this characteristic, enabling active participation and deeper sensory involvement.

4.A.1.3.2. *Subtle sensorial engagement.* Beyond the presence of touchpoints, the museum employs subtle sensorial engagement techniques. The subtle sensorial elements discussed above (pastel colors, controlled lighting, simple materials) stimulate senses beyond vision in a discreet manner, enriching the overall ambiance and intensifying the brand experience. Moreover, the lack of explicit branding elements (e.g. logos) also shapes the overall atmosphere, leading to a more subtle engagement rather than loudly drawing attention to the brand. This atmosphere supports a contemplative ambiance, avoiding commercial distractions to focus on the art.

These sensory cues represent a key mechanism to deliver implicit brand attitudes (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2; Krishna, 2011, p. 333), evoking associations through emotional resonance and the overall experience, without obstructing the experience with explicit and loud branding elements. They, additionally, contribute to the cultural institutions' "sensory turn", as stated by Nigatu et al. (2024, p. 5496), by highlighting the essential and pervasive role of the sensory environment on the visitor experience.

The museum's Physique (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) is strengthened by the subtle sensorial engagement: the use of subtle cues to convey implicit brand attitudes defines a unique sensory identity.

4.A.1.3.3. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* These codes, when interpreted through the REAF dimensions' lens (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), uncover how the in-person experience design fosters a relational experience. The combination of tactile and sensory touchpoints and subtle sensorial engagement influences the dimension of Social Presence. The presence of interactive elements and the subtle sensorial cues, creates a heightened sensory awareness and personal involvement that enhances the overall sensation of "being with another" (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), by the creation of a shared sensory landscape. The intensity of the experience is also influenced by these sensory cues, by the minimization of

distractions, and fostering a profound encounter with art (Intense-Superficial REAF dimension).

4.A.2. Explicit branding through curatorial & institutional framing. Beyond the subtle cues of the physical space, the Van Gogh Museum also employs curatorial and institutional framing strategies to build the in-person experience and communicate the museum's brand identity. These elements constitute a more explicit strategy to communicate the museum's brand identity, described by Wennekers et al. (2016, p. 2) as those deliberately designed, recognizable, and explicit. Through these strategies, the Van Gogh Museum directly and explicitly states its perspective on the artist's life and work, but also its didactic approaches, and its mission. This further aligns with Dal Falco and Vassos' (2017, p. S3979) idea of the museum's evolution into an environment integrating interactive and narrative-driven strategies that actively guide visitors through specific learning pathways and interpretations.

Data reveals two selective codes in this theme: *Narrative strategies* and *Interactivity as framing*. The axial codes are further discussed in this section.

4.A.2.1. Narrative strategies. The museum employs specific and coherently crafted narrative strategies throughout the exhibition spaces. Specifically, *biographical emotional framing*, *curatorial ethical framing*, and *informative curatorial framing* constitute the set of axial codes that describe the museum's approach in implementing the narratives in physical space.

4.A.2.1.1. Biographical emotional framing. The Van Gogh Museum's narrative strategy is primarily characterized by a *biographical emotional framing*, centering narratives around Vincent Van Gogh's life story and emotional journey, emphasizing human connection and empathy. This strategy invites visitors to understand Van Gogh as a complex figure, trying to move beyond the reduction of his figure to the "mad genius" he's always depicted like. For instance, the introductory panel of one of the final exhibitions in Van Gogh Museum states:

After his death, Vincent became the archetype of the 'mad, genius' artist, whose art was said to be a direct expression of his affliction. That image is false and reduces Vincent to his illness. His mental vulnerability was part of who he was. (field observation, June 23, 2025)

This strategy directly addresses a common misconception and contributes to delivering a nuanced portrait of the artist.

Another interesting detail of the manifestation of *biographical emotional framing* is the use of Van Gogh's quotes in every exhibition space. As observed in Figure 4.A.8., the quote is prominently, but very simply, displayed on a plain wall above the exhibits. This minimalist exhibit enhances the personal nature of the quote by avoiding visual clutter, letting it resonate with the visitor without distractions. This deliberate use of simple displays, coupled with the immediacy of Van Gogh's own words, created a sense of authenticity.



Fig. 4.A.8. Van Gogh Museum exhibition space: artist's quote on the wall

The careful management of the narratives highlights a commitment to crafting a high-quality experience, prioritizing emotional connections and authenticity over overwhelming and loud displays.

This narrative choice, emphasizing the artist's biography and using an emotional framing, shapes the museum's Personality (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) as focused on the human dimension of art. This potentially influences the Self-image (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) of the visitors, as compassionate individuals.

4.A.2.1.2. Curatorial Ethical Framing. Beyond the emotional nuanced framing, the museum shows commitment to representing Van Gogh in a sensitive and socially responsible way, through a curatorial ethical framing.

A striking example of the museum's ethical values and commitment is the provision of Suicide Prevention contacts in the panels describing the end of Van Gogh's life, to responsibly guide the visitors to an ethical appreciation of his story. The panels states:

Suicide often involves many factors, both internal and external. A complex story underlies every suicide, and this was no different with Van Gogh. Do you need help? Then please contact the 113 Suicide Prevention Foundation at 0800-0113 and 113.nl. (field observation, June 23, 2025).

This explicit statement shows social responsibility in addressing a very sensitive topic with a message of support. This curatorial choice facilitates responsible interactions with the narratives, fostering a safe and intimate engagement. It is a curatorial choice that aligns with the power of curation to shape narratives, influence opinions, and, eventually, drive social change (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, pp. 1, 4).

This commitment to ethical guidance directly reflects the museum's Culture (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), by showing its values.

4.A.2.1.3. Informative curatorial framing. A less prominent, but still very present, narrative strategy in Van Gogh Museum is characterized by a consistent *informative curatorial framing*. This strategy is focused on providing detailed and educational content to enhance the in-person experience with a deeper understanding of Van Gogh's practice and theoretical foundation. This approach roots the museum's brand identity in intellectual rigor: beyond the controlled emotional journey, the museum guides visitors through an explanation of his technique dissecting his unique artistic methods. A manifestation of this framing, as observed in Figure 4.A.9., is the inclusion of a dedicated wall featuring an extensive explanation of the theory of color, with examples of how Van Gogh employs it in his work. This panel is designed in a very clear manner, with diagrams and texts dissecting Van Gogh's

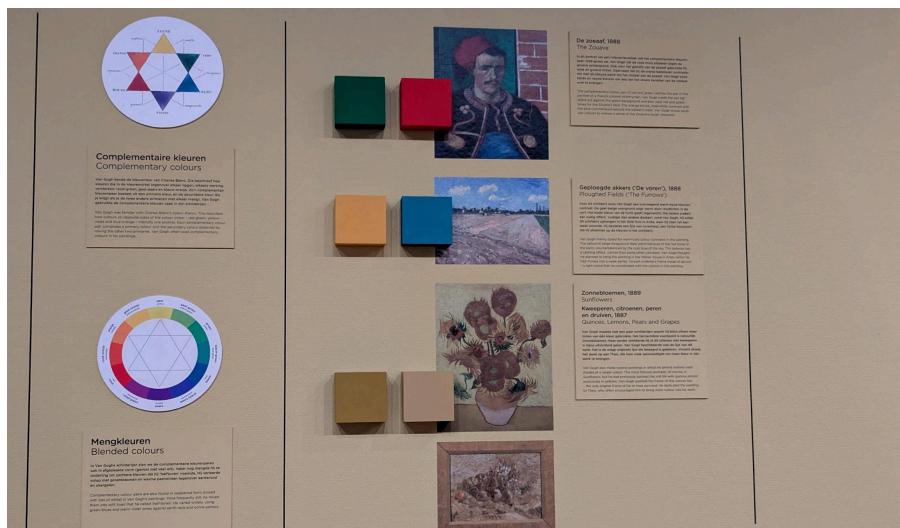


Fig. 4.A.9. Van Gogh Museum exhibition space: theory of colors explained on a text panel

deliberate use of complementary and contrasting colours in his work. This strategy allows one to appreciate the artist's technique beyond the emotional framing of his art and figure.

Such an approach aligns with Khan and Bhatt's (2018, pp. 1-2) perspective of curation as an act of knowledge creation, during which information is gathered and presented to deliver accessible knowledge. It also connects to Kent's (2009, pp. 69-70) emphasis on the role of physical spaces in leisure and knowledge acquisition.

Through these strategies, the museum communicates a brand identity that is both emotionally deep and intellectually enriching. It shapes the museum's Personality (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) by conveying an image of an approachable educator.

4.A.2.1.4. Interpretation through REAF dimensions. Through the interpretation by the REAF's dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) lens, it is possible to uncover deeper meanings and the relational experience fostered by the in-person experience design.

The facilitated access to the artist's inner world fosters a sort of identification. Particularly the emotional and ethical framing allows for a sense of identification with Van Gogh's struggles and triumphs, providing a nuanced and complex narrative of his multi-faceted personality. The informative framing might foster a sense of identification among art enthusiasts that appreciate the detailed description of his technique and legacy. The informative framing also contributes to positioning the museum as an educator, and the visitor as an intellectual explorer (REAF dimension: Social Role).

The awareness that this type of narrative creates fosters a compelling Social Presence. It's almost like the artist is present in the museum space: the narratives and the curatorial choices (e.g. the quotes displayed on the walls) make the artist feel almost tangible and intimately accessible.

4.A.2.2. Interactivity as Framing. The Van Gogh Museum actively fosters interaction by the use of interactive elements but also employs static object-centric displays which ensure a balanced approach, offering moments of active exploration and contemplative observation. This selective code explores how the museum employs in-person experience designs to foster a balanced interaction inside its physical spaces. This section explores the curatorial intent and structured design of the interactions created by the presence of multi-sensory objects, already explored in the Embodied experience section. It details *multi-sensory emotional engagement, didactic engagement features, and static object-centric displays*.

4.A.2.2.1. *Multi-sensory emotional engagement.* The museum employs explicit curatorial choices that foster interaction through the activation of multiple senses, designed to provoke emotional responses. This strategy extends beyond the provision of tactile and sensory touchpoints, to actively structure an interaction with the design elements and deepen the connection with Van Gogh's art.

This approach includes tangible objects like touchscreens and microscopes, or visual displays. The most striking example of this strategy is the presence of old-style phones that allow to listen to a recorded version of the epistolary communication between Van Gogh and his brother (Figure 4.A.10.), some of them also contain the comments of some of his contemporaries. These elements activate multiple senses and foster emotional connections with the artist, creating a holistic in-person experience that invites visitors to listen, see, and feel the narrative.

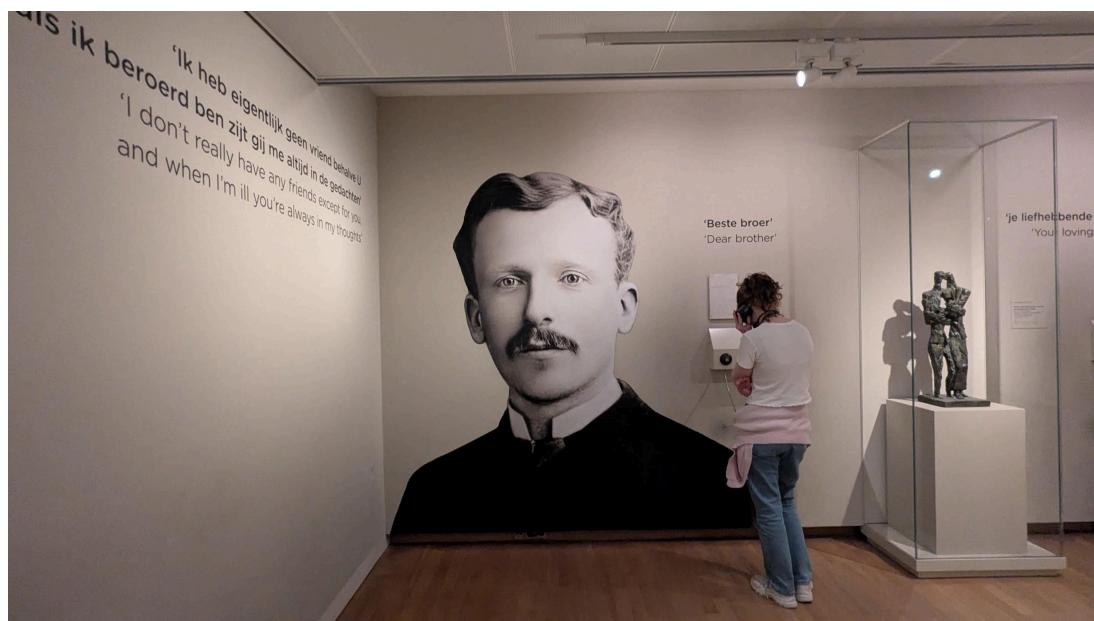


Fig. 4.A.10. Van Gogh Museum exhibition spaces: corner presenting the epistolary exchange between Vincent and Theo Van Gogh

The explicit multi-sensory approach aligns with Nigatu et al.'s (2024, p. 5496) emphasis on the importance of sensorial elements in shaping the museum's in-person experience. The museum, deliberately and explicitly fostering the activation of multiple senses, exemplifies the "sensory turn" (p. 5496).

The immersive connections that this characteristic encourages shape the museum's Brand Identity dimension of Relationship (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), creating deeper connections with the visitors.

4.A.2.2.2. *Didactic engagement features.* Beyond the features that foster emotional connections, the museum also adopts explicit curatorial choices within its physical environment that actively facilitate visitor learning and intellectual interaction. This approach is concretized by the presence of touchscreens that present details from the artist's technique and life, or the text panel dedicated to the explanation of the theory of color (Figure 4.A.7.).

Figure 4.A.9. depicts another prominent example of this characteristic: a microscope is placed in one of the exhibition spaces to invite visitors to closely examine the brushstrokes of some paintings. These features move beyond the passive reception to engage visitors in guided discovery. This characteristic also further shapes the Relationship dimension (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) of the museum, by building a guided intellectual exploration.

4.A.2.2.3. *Static object-centric displays.* As mentioned above, the museum employs static object-centric display choices: it refers to the museum's deliberate choice to use traditional exhibit methods where the primary focus is directed onto the artwork itself. In contrast with the interactive features, an object-centric display invites contemplation, and a reverent focused viewing of the art. This unmediated encounter with art creates a balance between the multi-sensorial interaction previously discussed and a contemplative direct observation.

This strategic inclusion of object-centric displays underscores the museum's commitment to the intrinsic value of Van Gogh's artworks. Additionally, it shapes the museum's Brand Identity dimension of Physique (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), defining a core presentation style as unmediated contemplation.

4.A.2.2.4. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* The interpretative lens provided by REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) helps to uncover the relational experience fostered by in-person experience design. In this section, it is interesting to connect the findings to the dimension of Interaction: the balance fostered by the interactive objects and the simple static displays offers a diverse interaction with the museum's collection. The incorporation of tangible objects, audio elements, and visual displays creates a "hybrid and complex space" (Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017, p. S3978) that integrates narrative-driven experiences, digital technologies, and interactive curatorial strategies. The blend of these strategies with a simple and static manner in displaying the artworks creates an interaction characterized by a more traditional, one-way exchange (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 17), inviting quiet observation.

4.A.3. Commercial interfaces & brand extension. In addition to the core exhibition experience, Van Gogh Museum utilizes commercial interfaces as an extension of the overall visitor journey (Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75) and reinforcement. The museum journey features three shops: one in the entrance hall, one on the first floor, and a bookshop on the top floor. These areas are carefully planned to complement and better express the museum's brand identity; they are not just transactional (Kent, 2009, p. 75). This section explores how the museum extends its brand narrative through *Retail integration* and *Layout strategies* within the commercial areas, offering visitors tangible connections to the exhibitions' visit and ensuring a cohesive brand experience.

4.A.3.1 Retail integration. Within the theme Commercial interfaces & Brand extension data reveal an emphasis on retail integration, composing the first selective code. Observations in the Van Gogh Museum reveal strategically designed and integrated commercial areas that reinforce the museum's brand identity and show its commitment to a market-oriented approach (Bernelot Moens, 2013, pp. 44-48). This section explores the set of axial codes, examining how retail integration is accomplished through *curated commercial zones*, *emotional resonant souvenirs*, and *explicit branding through product aesthetic*.

4.A.3.1.1. *Curated commercial zones.* Van Gogh Museum, as mentioned above, accomplishes a seamless retail integration through *curated commercial zones*. It refers to the strategic design of retail areas as a homogeneous continuation of the museum visit: an integral extension of the brand experience (Kent, 2009, p. 74). The Van Gogh Museum



Fig. 4.A.12. Van Gogh Museum bookshop

designs shops that are conceived to reflect the emotional narratives held in exhibition spaces, for instance Figure 4.A.12. depicts the museum's bookshop: the simple materials, muted colors and controlled environment echo the exhibitions' curation. This approach aligns with Kent's (2009, p. 69) emphasis on the prominent role that a museum shop's physical design has on the museum visitor experience.

The shop also demonstrates a market-oriented approach. The partnerships, exemplified by a big glass case containing a LEGO set of the Sunflowers, transform the artworks into tangible, branded consumer items. Such collaborations highlight the museum's will to extend the brand through marketing approaches, introducing new appealing products under its name (Hennig Thurau et al., 2009).

The museum's Personality dimension (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) is further shaped by the curated commercial areas as the partnerships communicate a dynamic and market-oriented personality.

4.A.3.1.2. *Emotionally resonant souvenirs.* The products in Van Gogh Museum's shop are found to be emotionally resonant souvenirs. The museum adopts a strategy of offering and re-evoking the emotional connection created during the journey throughout the exhibition spaces, serving as tangible souvenirs of the brand experience, that aligns with Kent's (2009, p. 74) vision. The products in the shop feature the artworks displayed in the exhibition spaces, which are deeply emotionally appealing, therefore designed to transfer an emotional quality for the art to the tangible object. However, not all items are designed solely to transfer emotion: the strategy is complemented with a highly evident market-oriented approach exemplified by the LEGO partnership, as mentioned above.

The purchase of these tangible memories may enhance the visitors' Self-image (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) as someone who values art and the connection with it. These two strategies collectively - market orientation and emotional connections - ensure the brand's pervasive presence and accessibility, crafting a dual brand identity that is both commercially strategic and intimate.

4.A.3.1.3. *Explicit branding through product aesthetic.* Observations indicate that the Van Gogh Museum prominently leans into highly recognizable imagery: *explicit branding through product aesthetic* is highly employed by the museum shop. Van Gogh's iconic paintings are printed on everything: the products feature his signature, self-portraits, and iconic paintings in a very direct way. This strategy directly and overtly uses the artist's

imagery on every product and aligns with Wennekers et al.'s (2016, p. 2) of explicit brand attitudes: deliberately crafted branding strategies that overtly recall the brand itself, using highly recognizable features.

This aspect transforms the artist's masterpieces into readily consumable aesthetic motifs, making the art itself a brand logo: it can be perceived as prioritizing commercial dissemination over reverence for the art itself. It suggests a strong emphasis on brand recognition, leaning towards a market-oriented approach.

Van Gogh's pervasive imagery shapes the museum's Physique (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) by making art a recognizable element of the brand itself.

4.A.3.1.4. Interpretation through REAF dimensions. This deliberate curation and market orientation of retail areas significantly impacts the museum's brand through its influence on REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469). The integrated transition between the physical space design in the exhibition spaces and the museum shop enhances the intensity of the retail experience by directly linking to the previous visit (REAF dimension: Intense-Superficial).

The accessible nature of the merchandise positions the museum experience align the Formal-Informal spectrum (REAF dimension) towards greater informality. While the core exhibition maintains a reverent and contemplative formality, the commercial areas introduce a more approachable and relaxed consumer-oriented experience. This approach positions the museum's shop as an extension of the visit, acting as an informal learning facilitator (Kent, 2009, p. 75).

The emphasis on deeply emotionally resonant souvenirs and the curated nature of the shop, fosters an intense transition and continuation of the journey (REAF dimension: Intense-Superficial). Conversely, the more commercial and market-driven items and the widespread explicit branding communicate a more Superficial connection, making the art a consumable item. This creates a tension between emotional depth and superficial commercial appeal.

In this context, the museum's Social Role (REAF dimension) is impacted by this aspect as it highlights the museum's intention to commercially spread the brand with the risk of diminishing the art itself. The institution presents itself through these characteristics as both offering a meaningful extension of the artistic journey, but also as a commercially savvy brand that transforms iconic artworks into consumer items.

4.A.3.2. Layout Strategies. Within the commercial interfaces, the Van Gogh Museum appears to deliberately design the spaces and the displays to influence product discovery. This section details the way the museum designs integrated transitions and product discovery pathways and how these elements influence a relational experience, consequently, subtly communicating the museum's brand identity.

4.A.3.2.1. *Integrated transitions.* As mentioned, the museum has three shops in total within its building, located in the entrance hall, the first floor, and the last floor as well. This distribution creates a disjointed retail experience that can also be described as "pervasive" due to the multiple locations.

However, data reveal a strategy of *integrated transitions* in the positioning of the main shop in the entrance hall, almost blending with the entrance spaces, strategically set as a central feature of the journey from the outset (Figure 4.A.11.). The immediate visibility of the



Fig. 4.A.11. Van Gogh Museum main shop visible from the entrance hall

shop communicates an integral role of retail within the brand and the artistic journey. This strategy makes the physical spaces of the museum act as a "brand channel" (Ortmann & Viholt, 2021, p.5), where the layout choices can convey aspects of the brand's identity and values.

By positioning the main shop directly in the entrance, the museum communicates the central role of retail within the museum visitor experience, yet avoiding positioning it as an obligatory passage. By offering visitor autonomy, the Relationship dimension (Kapferer,

1992, pp. 43-49) is further strengthened, empowering visitors in their commercial engagement.

4.A.3.2.2. *Product discovery pathways.* Observations in the museum's retail spaces reveal strategies for influencing product discovery that subtly communicate its values. This includes both the specific strategic ways the physical space and the displays in the shops are designed to facilitate visitors' exploration and discovery of merchandise, and the positioning of the shops in the museum's layout, which can reinforce the commercial orientation of the museum. Observations reveal a clear disposition of the shop displays, designed for easy navigation. They are characterized by a thematic organization that groups the items based on the artwork they are featuring. This intuitive arrangement creates an easy-to-navigate environment to discover the products in the shop, as they can be effortlessly located. Additionally, while the presence of three shops with the same product offering results in a redundant retail experience, this layout simultaneously allows a broad accessibility to merchandise in multiple points of the artistic journey.

Additionally, as mentioned, the prominent role of retail is evident from the outset: the main shop is part of the entrance hall, and it is immediately visible before the start of the journey in the exhibition spaces (Figure 4.A.11.). This highlights the integrated role of retail in the artistic journey inside the museum. Despite this clear commercial presence, it is important to note that none of the shops are positioned in an obligatory passage: the visitors are given the option to explore the shops or simply leave the building without a forced retail encounter. This aspect builds a brand identity focused on visitor autonomy, in which the pleasure of the artistic journey is prioritized over commercial pressures. It is linked to Falk and Dierking's (2000, pp. 15-33) emphasis on the personal context of the museum experience: visitors' control over the journey can contribute to their overall satisfaction. Therefore, a design (positioning of the shop in this case) that ensures a choice communicates a brand identity that values the visitor's agency, subtly reinforcing the respect for their in-person experience.

4.A.3.2.3 *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* The REAF dimensions lens (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) helps the interpretation of the Van Gogh Museum's layout strategies within its commercial touchpoints, understanding how they shape relational experience, consequently subtly communicating the museum's brand identity.

The above described layout strategies - encouraging product discovery, offering multiple retail points, without obliging the visitors' passage through retail areas - subtly communicate the museum's role (REAF dimension: Social Role) as commercially integrated. Ensuring no forced encounters, but still offering multiple commercial touchpoints, is a characteristic that communicates the museum's identity as a facilitator of a holistic experience that includes commerce, rather than only art.

The widespread presence of selling points can ensure accessibility to retail, but it also communicates and fosters a more superficial type of experience (REAF dimension: Intense-Superficial).

The integrated transitions between artistic journey and commercial touchpoint, particularly the immediate visibility of the main shop from the outset of the visit, initiate a pervasive retail interaction (REAF dimension: Interaction). These characteristic signals, from the start of the artistic journey, the integral role of retail in the museum visitor experience (Kent, 2009, p. 74).

4.B. Rijksmuseum

This section details the findings for the Rijksmuseum, delving into how its in-person experience design communicates its brand identity. As mentioned, the analysis is structured according to three overarching themes:

- 4.A.1. Implicit Branding through Experience Design, whose selective codes are *Spatial ambiance* and *Hospitality strategies*;
- 4.A.2. Explicit Branding through Curatorial & Institutional Framing, whose selective codes are *Narrative strategies* and *Interactivity as framing*;
- 4.A.3. Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension, whose selective codes are *Retail integration* and *Layout strategies*.

Each theme is explored by detailing its selective and axial codes, which collectively uncover the museum's strategies to brand identity communication through its physical environment.

4.B.1. Implicit Branding through Experience Design. Rijksmuseum includes implicit brand attitudes - subtle and non-verbal cues that might trigger automatic associations through sensory engagement (Krishna, 2011, pp. 333-334) - in its in-person experience design. This

section explores how *spatial ambience* and *hospitality strategies* create an underlying quality for the museum visit, implicitly shaping its brand identity.

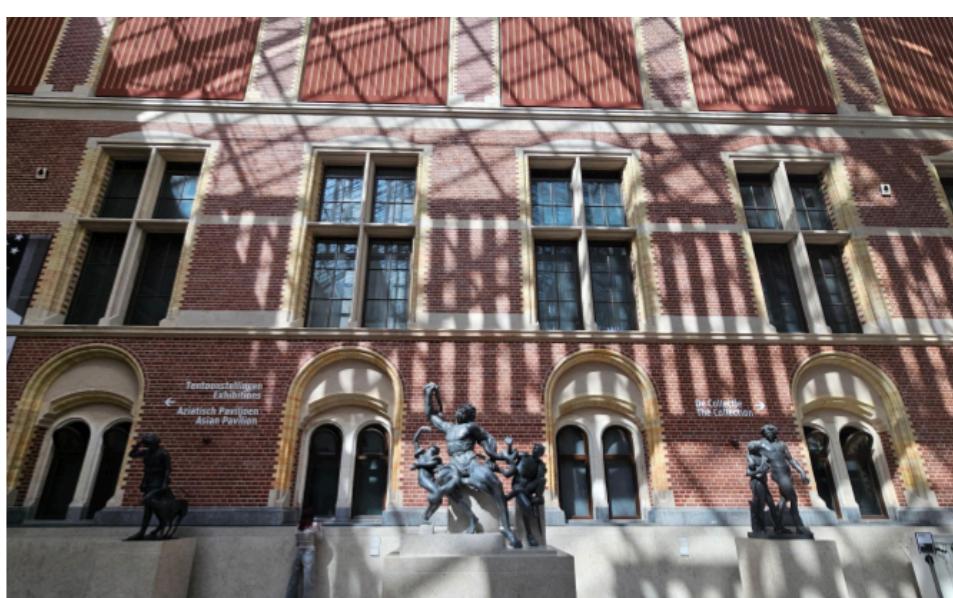
The following paragraphs, through the explanation of axial codes, specifically show how implicit branding is crafted in the Rijksmuseum's physical space.

4.B.1.1. *Spatial ambience*. The spatial ambience in Rijksmuseum implicitly shapes its brand identity through the strategic manipulation of sensory elements, architecture, and spatial arrangement. This section discusses the findings related to the axial codes *Layered ambience across zones*, *Expansive and luminous spaces*, *Enclosed and muted spaces*, and *Bridging historical and contemporary relevance*.

4.B.1.1.1. *Layered ambience across zones*. The field observations markedly reveal distinct layered ambience across zones in the museum's in-person experience.

The journey unfolds in a dynamic interplay of contrasting spaces. The entrance hall is characterized by a welcoming atmosphere that features natural spread light coming from the ceiling, bright and light colors, and a mix of materials that create an inclusive atmosphere (Figure 4.B.2.). This spatial quality is echoed in the exhibition spaces on the second floor of the museum (Figure 4.B.3.). This atmosphere prominently contrasts with the majority of the exhibition spaces on the ground and first floor, which are characterized by enclosed spaces, dimmed lighting, dark grey walls, and low ceilings (Figure 4.B.4.). This deliberate shift between bright and open spaces, to dark and enclosed environments builds a dynamic in-person experience.

It is interesting to note that, as observed in Figure 4.B.1., the play of light and shadow obtained by the natural light spreading from the ceiling and the imponent metallic structure, creates a visual representation of the contrasting layered ambiances subsequently visible in the journey inside the museum.



It is a strategy that speaks volumes about the Rijksmuseum's identity, implicitly indicating a balance between accessibility and reverence, but also contemporary openness and historical artistic depth. These characteristics, additionally, shape the museum's Physique (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) dimension communicating a brand identity that is both light-filled (in the expansive spaces) and solemn (in the enclosed spaces): its architecture and materials convey a distinctive Physique.

4.B.1.1.2. *Expansive & luminous spaces.* Rijksmuseum's spatial ambience is significantly characterized by the presence of expansive and luminous spaces. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, particularly the entrance hall and specific exhibition spaces on the second floor have this characteristic.

These areas are brightly constructed: the light is spread, often coming from high glass ceilings, the predominant use of light and bright colors, creates an unintimidating and welcoming atmosphere. As observed in Figure 4.B.2., the entrance hall showcases a vast area



Fig. 4.B.2. Rijksmuseum entrance hall

bathed in light that is filtered through a very imponent glass roof structure and a metallic sculpture hanging from the ceiling. Additionally, Figure 4.B.3., depicts how the latter spatial

ambiance is echoed in one of the last exhibitions: the second floor's gallery containing, among others, Vermeer's "The Milkmaid". This luminous ambiance is shaped by a big expansive gallery, with a colorful but sophisticated palette (e.g. celadon green, earthen red) and the light coming from the ceiling. This design choice creates an inviting environment that can facilitate a comfortable museum visitor experience, aligning with Kent's (2009, p. 69) emphasis on the influence of physical spaces on a feeling of curiosity and exploration, further contributing to a multisensorial experience (Nigatu et al., 2024, p. 5496) enhancing the richness of the environment making the museum feel more accessible and less daunting.

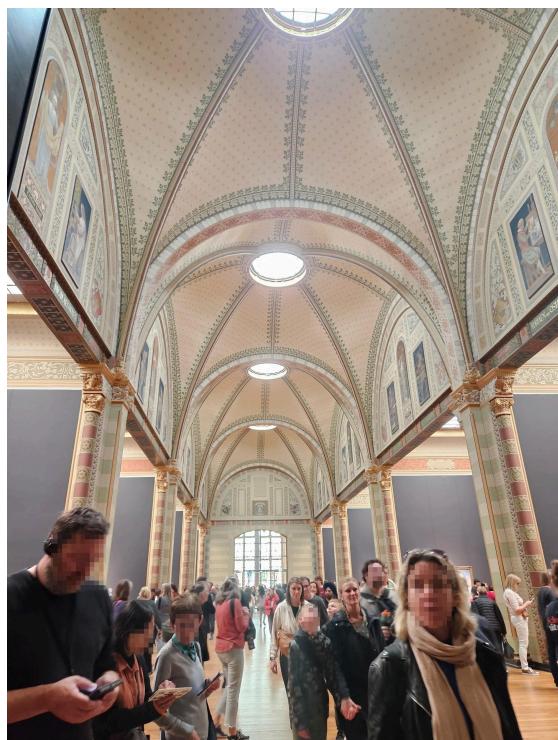


Fig. 4.B.3. Rijksmuseum second floor's hallway

4.B.1.1.3. Enclosed & muted spaces. In evident contrast with the mainly open, bright and welcoming areas previously described, a very significant portion of Rijksmuseum's exhibition spaces are characterized by enclosed and muted spaces. As illustrated in Figure 4.B.4., the exhibition space on the ground floor features a muted sensory design with vaulted ceilings. The lighting seems to create pockets of illumination around the specific art works. This darker spatial ambiance is shaped by dimmed lighting that precisely highlights artworks, dark grey walls that absorb light and minimize distraction, and lower ceilings that create a sense of intimacy and containment. This design choice fosters an atmosphere of solemnity, contemplation, formality, and reverence for historical authority.

A focused and reverent encounter with the art is created by managing the multisensorial nature of the museum experience (Nigatu et al., 2024, pp. 5495-5496), employing an implicit branding attitude that subtly communicates the museum's identity as focused on historical gravitas through sensory perception (Krishna, 2011, pp. 333-334).

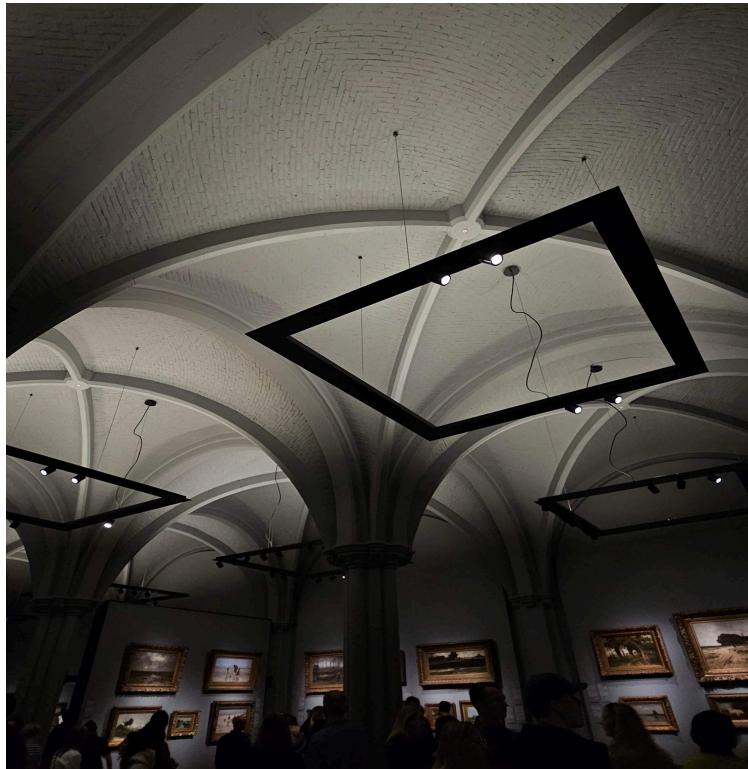


Fig. 4.B.4. Rijksmuseum dark exhibition spaces

4.B.1.1.4. Bridging historical and contemporary relevance. A deliberate mix of materials, colors and spatial arrangements delivers a key aspect of Rijksmuseum's spatial ambience: its successful bridging historical and contemporary relevance.

This ambience is prominent in the entrance hall, where a rich array of materials is mixed: traditional materials like stone, brick, and marble are juxtaposed with modern components such as a glass ceiling (see Figure 4.B.2.). A big metallic structure is also present below the ceiling, not only enhancing the contrast between materials, but also creating a play of light and shadow in the environment that confers a modern and distinctive atmosphere to the space. These design elements integrate the museum's long history with its contemporary role and aesthetics. These characteristics implicitly communicate a brand identity keen to respect and preserve the historical heritage, yet proportionately forward-thinking. Architectural and spatial features function as a channel to communicate the brand's characteristics (Ortmann & Viholt, 2021, p. 5), in this case expressing sophistication and timelessness. The Culture

dimension of the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) is influenced by this mix of material, finally communicating an identity that honors its historical roots, while embracing innovation.

4.B.1.1.5. Interpretation through REAF dimensions. The Rijksmuseum's spatial ambiance, designed through a layered ambiance across zones, luminous environments, enclosed spaces, and its ability to bridge past and present relevance, implicitly shapes a distinctive relational experience when interpreted through the lens of REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469).

The contrasting spatial ambiances described above, oscillating from luminous to enclosed and dark spaces, communicate a dual role (REAF dimension: Social Role). From a revered historical custodian to an accessible institution. This binary identity is further reinforced by the continuous dialogue between past and present in the physical spaces of the museum.

The dynamic nature of the visit, created by the layered and distinctive ambiance throughout the spaces, offers moments of reduced stimuli alternated with more uninhibited dynamic exploration, and prevents from creating a superficial experience (REAF dimension: Intense-Superficial).

4.B.1.2. Hospitality Strategies. *Hospitality strategies* are embodied in Rijksmuseum's spatial design, influencing the in-person experience and, consequently, the identity of the museum itself. Operating through subtle and non-verbal cues, these strategies contribute to the less overt and underlying feel of the museum visit.

In this section, the axial codes *Structured visitor guidance* and *Monumental formality* are explained to explore how Rijksmuseum embodies these strategies in the physical space.

4.B.1.2.1. Structured visitor guidance. Rijksmuseum implicitly and subtly orchestrates the visitor flow through its architectural design creating an atmosphere of *structured visitor guidance*.

This characteristic is notable in the entrance hall (Figure 4.B.2.) manifested by the three rectangularly shaped gates. Despite the general open space ambiance, the entrance hall is structured by the presence of the gates that create a sense of channeled movement.

Additionally, the exhibition spaces in the ground and first floor, characterized by the previously explored enclosed and muted spaces, further accentuate a structured space quality encouraging a focused progression through the narratives.

4.B.1.2.2. *Monumental formality.* A pervasive and layered characteristic of the Rijksmuseum's in-person experience is its monumental formality, conveyed through architectural and design choices fostering a feeling of grandeur, formality, reverence, and historical gravitas.

While welcoming, even the more expansive and luminous spaces (Figures 4.B.2. & 4.B.3.) communicate a monumental quality thanks to their grand architectural features, the presence of the gates in the entrance hall (Figure 4.B.5.), and the materials choice (e.g. bricks, stone, marble). The more enclosed and dark exhibition spaces overtly project a formality through their stone vaulted ceilings and the dark walls that foster formal contemplation of the art (Figure 4.B.4.).

The physical space is once again used as a “brand channel” (Ortmann & Viholt, 2021, p. 5), conveying what Rijksmuseum's institutional hospital strategies are.

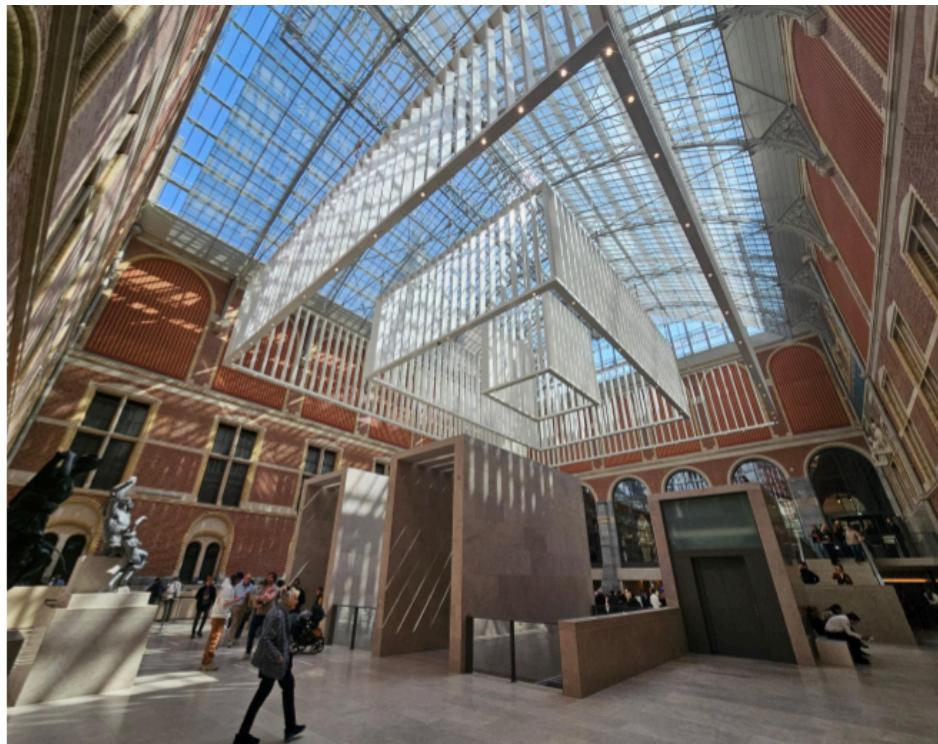


Fig. 4.B.5. Rijksmuseum entrance hall: grand architectural gates

4.B.1.2.3. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* To explore how hospitality strategies crafted in the museum's physical space impact the relational experience, the REAF dimensions' lens (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469) is used to interpret the findings. The REAF dimension Social Role can be applied to the museum's hospitality strategies, as a structured

guidance and monumental formality collectively communicate an identity of guardian of cultural heritage. Through specific design elements (e.g. use of mixed materials, the gates in the entrance hall, low ceilings in exhibition spaces), the museum implicitly positions itself as an authoritative place for cultural learning and engagement.

The pervasive monumental formality clearly communicates a relational experience that leans towards a formal and official encounter with art (REAF dimension: Formal-Informal). Collectively, the solemn ambiance, channeled movement, and weighty architecture communicate a sense of respect and historical gravitas that leads to a sense of formality.

4.B.2. Explicit branding through curatorial & institutional framing. The Rijksmuseum employs curatorial and institutional framing strategies to build the in-person experience and communicate the museum's brand identity. These strategies are considered explicit branding strategies as they convey a clear message about the museum's perspectives and its mission, drawing from the concept of explicit branding attitudes (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2) that refers to a brand's explicit attitudes that can be directly recognized. Rijksmuseum employs specific narrative strategies in its physical spaces and makes use of interactivity in peculiar ways that communicate its identity through the in-person experience.

This section details the findings in terms of *Narrative strategies* and *Interactivity as framing* to explore Rijksmuseum's explicit strategies communicating its brand identity through physical design.

4.B.2.1. Narrative Strategies. Rijksmuseum employs specific and coherently crafted narrative strategies throughout the exhibition spaces. Specifically, *canon-building through display choices*, *cultural belonging emphasis*, *institutional authority*, and *informative curatorial framing* constitute the set of axial codes that describe the museum's approach in implementing the narratives in the physical space.

4.B.2.1.1. *Canon-building through display choices.* Rijksmuseum consistently engages in *canon-building through display choices*. The exhibition spaces follow a traditional object-centric curation of the displays, each featuring a simple description of the artwork. While the extent to which this specific design choice fosters interaction will be addressed in the next selective code, this section emphasizes the museum's canon-building, creating a guided and structured explanation of what constitutes Dutch culture.

This choice creates a structured experience that gives prominence to the artworks: a method that aligns with traditional curatorial practices, emphasizing and focusing on preservation of artifacts to develop a collection and build a narrative around it (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, pp. 1-2). Rijksmuseum chooses to focus on building a canon through its narrative strategies, which is further strengthened by the formality of the environment discussed in the sections exploring the museum's hospitality strategies and spatial ambiance.

4.B.2.1.2. *Cultural belonging emphasis.* Observations indicate a persistent emphasis on cultural belonging within the museum's storytelling, adopted in the text panels in exhibition spaces.

The descriptions of the artworks and the introductory panels prominently feature references to Dutch identity, rural life, landscape, and heritage. For example, a text panel in an exhibition space displaying artworks from the 19th century notes: "The Hague School painters also did very well internationally. Their work established the still prevailing image of the Netherlands as green and flat with a low horizon, magnificent skies and radiant grey light." (Field observations, April 18, 2025).

This narrative strategy fosters a sense of shared heritage, demonstrating pride for Dutch achievements and art history. It is a characteristic that aligns with Kapferer's Culture dimension (1992, pp. 43-49), reflecting the system of values the brand is based on.

4.B.2.1.3. *Informative curatorial framing.* Rijksmuseum employs prominently informative framing in its text panels. Across the exhibition spaces, the text panels invariably adopt an informative and didactic tone, providing intellectual and historical details about the exhibitions. Examples of this narrative strategy, as mentioned, are evident all around the museum's exhibitions; therefore, below is reported one of the text panels describing a painting by Jan Verkade.

The Zaandam painter Jan Verkade was a member of Les Nabis, a group of French painters around Paul Gauguin in Brittany. They had a marked preference for subjects taken from traditional village life, and worked in a colorful, stylized manner. In 1892 Verkade left for Fiesole in Italy, where he would live for three years. His memories of Brittany and appreciation of 15th-century Italian painting resulted in this charming 'Breton Madonna'. (Field observations, April 18, 2025)

This text panel exemplifies the informative narrative strategy due to its description, rich in artistic and historical context. It provides comprehensive and factual information, aligning with broader intellectual objectives that represent a core component of the multi-faceted nature of the museum visitor experience (Nigatu et al., 2024, pp. 5507-5509, 5511).

4.B.2.1.4. *Institutional authority*. The institutional authority is a fundamental aspect characterizing Rijksmuseum's in-person experience design, mainly originating from narrative strategies. Particularly, the museum embeds an institutional authoritative tone in its text panels presenting the information with scholarly rigor. For instance, an example of a text panel describing Piero di Cosimo's diptych, states:

This exceptional diptych shows the leading Florentine architect Giuliano da Sangallo and his recently deceased father Francesco, who was an architect as well as musician. These are among the earliest portraits to characterize their sitters by profession: a pen and compass allude to architecture, the sheet music to music. Both disciplines are based on notions of harmony and proportion. (Field observations, April 18, 2025)

This text exemplifies the museum's authoritative voice using precise historical terminology (e.g. "diptych"), combined with a contextual explanation and an analysis of the painting's symbolism. Another example of a text panel showcasing the museum's institutional authority is contained in the introductory panel about Dutch impressionists.

In the last twenty years of the 19th century, Dutch cities experienced an explosion in growth, led by Amsterdam. The generation of artists who were active after the Hague School focused on the dynamism of the burgeoning city and its new way of life. Themes changed: poor fishermen made ways for tourists on the beach, and the countryside lost ground to new construction in the city. Young painters tried above all to render a 'mood' - what the French termed as impression. This is why they were called 'impressionists'. They were more interested in conveying the feel of the city than its realistic depiction. These artists, moreover, discovered the potential of the camera. They recorded each other, their models, and urban life. Sometimes they used photographs as preparatory studies for their paintings.

This comprehensive and rich in detail overview provides introductory information, detailing societal shifts, technological influences (the camera's role), and artistic evolution over the years. The depth of information and the explanatory tone reinforce the museum's position as a source of knowledge.

This characteristic subtly shapes the Reflection dimension (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) of the museum: the ideal visitor is positioned as intellectually curious.

4.B.2.1.5. Interpretation through REAF dimensions. Rijksmuseum's narrative strategies - including the canon-building through the display choices, the cultural belonging emphasis, the informative and institutional tone - build a relational experience that can be uncovered by means of the interpretation through REAF dimensions' lens (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469). These choices in in-person experience design subtly communicate the museum's brand identity.

The museum's narrative strategies, being informative and authoritative, enhance a relational experience based on formality (REAF dimension: Formal-Informal). The scholarly exhibition texts and the canon-building display choices, build an overarching presentation that fosters an environment of serious and formal contemplation.

These narrative strategies define and subtly communicate a Social Role (REAF dimension: Social Role) for both the museum and the visitor. Through a didactic presentation that details the artworks' historical significance, the museum communicates a role as an interpreter of Dutch heritage, engaged in defining the national artistic canon. Correspondingly, the narrative strategies encourage the visitor to adopt a role as a learner and observer, participant in the understanding of a defined cultural heritage. These strategies deliver an established narrative that the visitor is invited to appreciate, following the authoritative interpretation provided by the Rijksmuseum.

The cultural belonging emphasis, fostered by the continuous references to Dutch identity, invites visitors to connect with a sense of national pride, consequently influencing a sense of identification (REAF dimension: Identification). While the overarching presentation is focused on formal and intellectual contemplation, this cultural emphasis subtly creates an emotional resonance that might lead to a perception of a shared identity.

4.B.2.2. Interactivity as Framing. Rijksmuseum rarely fosters interaction in its in-person experience design. The lack of interactive objects, coupled with the prominent use of static object-centric displays, shapes an in-person experience based on contemplation and intellectual explanations. A significant exception to this approach is found in the exhibition of Rembrandt's Night Watch.

This section explores the museum's in-person experience design choices related to *didactic engagement features* and *static object centric displays*.

4.B.2.2.1. *Didactic engagement features.* Rijksmuseum mainly employs didactic features to engage visitors. The museum's strategy is based on traditional explanatory panels to



Fig. 4.B.6. Rijksmuseum exhibit of the *Night Watch* by Rembrandt

provide context and information. As a result, emotional engagement and interactivity are not broadly fostered through in-person design. The main and most prominent manifestation of *didactic engagement features* is found in Rembrandt's "Night Watch" exhibit. The latter is an exceptional exhibit inside the museum, a general departure from the static approach. The exhibit shows the painting behind a glass wall, making the visitors witness a process of restoration (Figure 4.B.6.). Furthermore, brochures provide details about the process held on the painting, engaging visitors in a didactic activity. This didactic approach further reinforces the museum's broader intellectual objectives.

4.B.2.2.2. *Static object-centric displays.* Rijksmuseum's in-person experience is mainly characterized by static object-centric displays. This choice prioritizes the artwork as the central focus, with minimal or absent interactive elements. Most of the artworks are displayed on walls, with glass cases, accompanied by textual information (Figure 4.B.7. & 4.B.8.). It is a method that allows for unmediated contemplation, inviting focused viewing. This choice, echoing a traditional idea of curation (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, p. 1), communicates an identity rooted in academic rigor and institutional authority, emphasizing the intrinsic value of the

masterpieces themselves. It also contributes to Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) Culture dimension, by showcasing adherence to traditional values.

As mentioned, Rembrandt's "Night Watch" stands out as a notable exception to this rule. The exhibit brings attention to the restoration process by showing how it is held through a big glass window. Interactivity is slightly fostered by the presence of a portable brochure that gives details about the restoration process, engaging visitors in discovering the findings of the research.

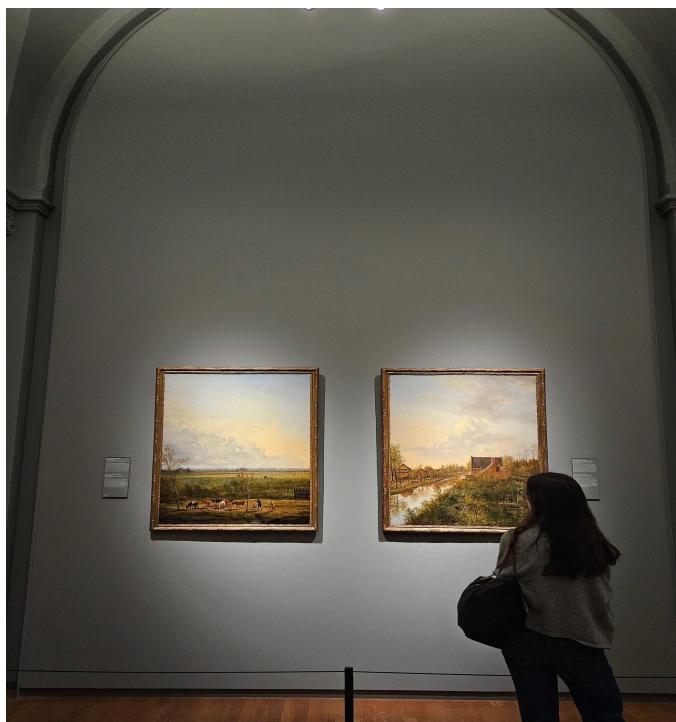


Fig. 4.B.7. Rijksmuseum static displays



Fig. 4.B.8 Rijksmuseum exhibit of a statue

This nuanced approach demonstrates an identity capable of modernizing its presentation to deepen visitor connection and highlighting essential aspects of stewardship, while still being rooted in tradition. Generally, the museum's design fosters an interaction with the museum's features and artworks primarily based on intellectual contemplation.

Dal Falco and Vassos (2017, pp. S3978-S3979) argue that a more interactive and hybrid museum experience leads to deeper connections: Rijksmuseum focuses more on static and traditional exhibits that foster intellectual arousal, without necessarily stimulating an emotional bond.

Lastly, this type of introspective encounter with art fostered throughout the museum's in-person experience aligns with Kapferer's (1992, pp. 43-49) Relationship dimension by reflecting the kind of connections a brand fosters with its consumers.

4.B.2.2.3. Interpretation through REAF dimensions. Rijksmuseum's approach to interactivity, shaped by an extensive use of static object-centric displays and didactic engagement features, fosters a formal relational experience which can be uncovered by means of an interpretation through REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469).

Rather than fostering a dynamic and participatory interaction (REAF dimension: Interaction), Rijksmuseum's in-person experience fosters a more intellectual and contemplative encounter with art. This approach encourages a one-way focused observation and cognitive processing of historical details that defines the quality of the interaction.

4.B.3. Commercial Interfaces & Brand Extension. This theme explores Rijksmuseum's shops, how they are integrated in the museum visit, the selection of products, and their role as brand extension, drawing from the concept articulated by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2009, p. 167). In this case, the museum provides a continuous retail experience: the main shop is positioned in the entrance hall, and it "hides" a bookshop. Retail integration and Layout strategies are the selective codes that compose the theme: in the next sections detailed insights about Rijksmuseum and its commercial interfaces will be explored.

4.B.3.1. Retail Integration. Ethnographic observations reveal Rijksmuseum's approach to Retail integration. The museum shop is integrated in the museum's visit, serving as an extension of the brand itself (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2019, p. 167) and of the museum visit

(Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75). This section explores how integration of retail is achieved through curated commercial zones, culturally appealing souvenirs, the museum's approach of implicit branding through product aesthetics, and the use of an adaptive brand voice through products and packaging.

4.B.3.1.1. Curated commercial zones. Data reveals the museum's strategic choice to design curated commercial zones. The physical design of Rijksmuseum's shop mainly



Fig. 4.B.9. Rijksmuseum main retail area



Fig. 4.B.10. Rijksmuseum bookshop

mirrors the design choices in all the areas of the museum. As seen in Figure 4.B.9., the retail space presents a balanced blend of an enclosed space with low ceilings, but with light colors,

mixed materials evoking tradition and quality (e.g. marble-like stone for the flooring, white laminated surface for the displays). The picture showcases a golden wall in the background, evoking a sense of elegance. The bookshop of the museum is only visible once entering the shop and its space presents the same materials and quality as the main shop (Figure 4.B.10.). This consistent aesthetic, that echoes the simplicity found in the physical spaces of the artistic journey, ensures that the retail space feels like a natural extension of the visit itself (Kent, 2009, pp. 69, 74).

Furthermore, the items selection in the retail areas is focused on Dutch masters, national history, and high culture. These choices collectively result in a curated commercial space that conveys a cohesive and prestigious brand identity, influencing and enhancing the museum's social presence: the consistent institutional atmosphere pervades even the commercial areas.

4.B.3.1.2. Culturally appealing souvenirs. The product selection in Rijksmuseum's retail space is mostly composed of culturally appealing souvenirs. It highlights the museum's strategy to provide visitors with tangible connections to Dutch heritage and artistic excellence, actively promoting the cultural, historical, and artistic qualities represented by the museum and its collections. The shop offers a wide range of books for all ages, promoting education; items like puzzles and painting sets are also displayed, fostering hobbies related to the museum's themes; postcards, a ubiquitous item in museum shops, attract visitors who choose alternatives to expensive souvenirs, functioning as versatile mementos. The product range also features high-priced items, like jewelry inspired by the museum's artworks, that promote a sense of exclusivity.

4.B.3.1.3. Implicit branding through product aesthetic. Observations reveal that Rijksmuseum's product selection in the retail areas emphasizes a strategy of implicit branding through product aesthetics. While the products feature the museum's most famous artworks, the refined and subtle product aesthetic emphasizes refined Dutch heritage, timeless design, and craftsmanship. Products often feature motifs inspired by the collection (e.g. Delftware patterns or Golden Age details) without overtly displaying the museum's brand and name. There's a strong focus on aesthetic quality, material choices, and design-led storytelling, which quietly reflects the museum's identity as a national cultural treasure. Its brand identity is consequently built on the celebration of Dutch heritage without being overtly market-oriented, even in the museum shop.

4.B.3.1.4. *Adaptive brand voice through products and packaging.* The products displayed in the Rijksmuseum's shop demonstrate an adaptive brand voice based on the audience that they are specifically targeting. This characteristic leads to a market-oriented approach, demonstrating a refined knowledge of consumer segmentation and the desire to expand the museum's brand reach. For example, products for children feature a more colorful design and packaging; conversely, products targeting intellectuals or art enthusiasts reflect the museum's rigor. This approach ensures a brand identity that, while still being rooted in sophistication and Dutch heritage, is also accessible, communicating effectively across different consumer segments. Moreover, the museum leverages partnerships with brands like Playmobil, Miffy, and Ravensburg. The collaboration with children's and family-oriented brands communicates flexibility to engage target audiences in a more playful manner. It is a characteristic that adds an innovative outlook to the institution, showing also a market-oriented approach aligning directly with the concept of brand extension (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2019, p. 167). The tailored engagement of a diverse audience through the adaptiveness of the brand voice influences the museum's Relationship (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) dimension, but also the Personality (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) dimension is shaped as flexible and innovative.

4.B.3.1.5. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* The Rijksmuseum's strategies for retail integration in the museum visitor experience shape a nuanced and balanced relational experience. This paragraph details an interpretation through REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469).

The museum's retail approach influences and shifts the role created throughout the artistic journey in the exhibition spaces (REAF dimension: Social Role). The museum demonstrates having roots in national values in the in-person experience, which is further strengthened by offering culturally appealing souvenirs in the shop. Moreover, the adaptive voice demonstrated in product selection and partnerships signal a shift. It demonstrates the museum's capacity to extend beyond the authoritative educator revealed in the exhibition spaces, to also be an accessible cultural provider for a broad range of consumers. As an extension of the visit (Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75), it showcases a flexible institutional identity.

Additionally, the museum's retail integration showcases a shift also in the formality manifested during the visit (REAF dimension: Formal-Informal). The shop's aesthetics, mirroring the museum's overall design, maintain a sense of formality in the commercial setting. However, the adaptiveness of the brand demonstrated through the product selection might reduce the perceived formality by offering playful designs.

4.B.3.2. Layout Strategies. The deliberate design of the shop's placement and display arrangements within Rijksmuseum's commercial touchpoints are included in the museum's layout strategies. Where the museum shops are positioned within the in-person experience and how the displays encourage the discovery of the products are discussed in this section.

4.B.3.2.1. *Integrated transitions.* The placement of the museum shop within the physical spaces of Rijksmuseum reveals a specific approach to integrate the transition between artistic journey and commercial touchpoint. While positioned in the entrance hall, the museum shop is not overtly visible from the outset of the museum visitor experience, and it is not placed on an obligatory luggage to the exit. This placement provides visitors with the option to explore the retail spaces. Furthermore, the bookshop (Figure 4.B.10.) is not immediately visible: it is only noticeable when entering the larger shop area. This approach ensures a seamless integration of commerce in the museum, without it being pervasive or intrusive.

4.B.3.2.2. *Product discovery pathways.* The inclusion of product discovery pathways in the Rijksmuseum's shop area is explored in this paragraph. The main shop is designed within a clear open space that allows for discovering the selection of products (Figure 4.B.9.). The simple disposition of the displays enables straightforward navigation, also facilitated by the thematic division of the products in the displays. The items are grouped based on the artworks they feature, reinforcing the narratives built in the exhibition spaces, and enhancing ease of exploration. Similarly, the bookshop (Figure 4.B.10.) is also organized with clear shelving and display tables. It is an intuitive arrangement that ensures visitors can easily locate items of interest.

4.B.3.2.3. *Interpretation through REAF dimensions.* Rijksmuseum's layout strategies in the shop area are interpreted by means of an interpretation through REAF dimensions (Paik & Lee, 2020, p. 469), to reveal how they foster a relational experience.

The ease of navigation created by the product discovery pathways and the non-intrusive integrated transitions defines the nature of interactions (REAF dimension: Interaction). The clear open spaces, and thematic division facilitate a self-directed interaction with merchandise. While the non-intrusive placement of the shop encourages voluntary integration with the retail areas. These characteristics ensure a high-quality interaction, aligned with individual predispositions.

4.C. Comparative Evaluation through Brand Identity Prism

This section provides a comparative evaluation of the Van Gogh Museum and Rijksmuseum's brand identities as communicated through their in-person experience design. It is an evaluation comprising all the empirical findings presented in the preceding sections, by means of the six dimensions of the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49): physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. The final aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the two selected museums craft their self-definition through the design of their in-person experience.

4.C.1. Physique: the tangible identity. *Physique* refers to the recognizable, fundamental, and tangible features that make the brand unique. It forms the basis of how a brand is recognized, consequently shaping its identity (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). It is a dimension that belongs to the "constructed source" of the brand as it reflects what the brand inherently is, and to its "externalization" defining its outward expression (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). In the case of the two selected museums, physique is explored in the way their architecture, spatial arrangement, color palettes, and materials make them stand out.

Van Gogh Museum presents itself in a modern and minimalistic aesthetic primarily achieved through an atmospheric minimalism in its spatial ambiance and a contemporary institutional framing in its hospitality strategies. Its physical environment is characterized by industrial materials (e.g. steel, glass, wood), a muted color palette that still evokes emotional symbolism (e.g. symbolism through yellow), and simple, light-filled, open spaces. While the museum employs static object-centric displays, this traditional practice is balanced by subtle symbolistic sensorial elements that prevent the perception of being uncommunicative. In the museum shop, the curated zones and the explicit branding through products' aesthetic contribute to a physique that is rooted in market-oriented visual identification. Collectively, these attributes of Van Gogh Museum's in-person experience design define its emotionally resonant, accessible, and contemporary visual brand identity.

In contrast, Rijksmuseum's physique is rooted in its monumental formality. Its architecture evokes grandeur with the use of weighty materials (e.g. stone, marble, glass, metallic structures). Its curatorial display choice to employ traditional object-centric displays communicates an authoritative identity rooted in tradition. The presence of three rectangular gates in the entrance hall (see Fig. 4.B.5.) subtly channels the movement and evokes a sense of structured guidance from the outset. Additionally, the layered ambiance across zones

defines a dynamic experience characterized by ambiance shifts. The curatorial choice to employ static object-centric displays contributes to the *physique* dimension by further strengthening the museum's connection with traditional practices. With the seamless transitions from the artistic journey to the retail areas, and the implicit branding on the products in the shop, collectively these elements craft a sophisticated and timeless *physique*.

Comparing the two museum's physiques, Van Gogh highlights a direct visual association with the artist, prioritizing emotional accessibility. In contrast, Rijksmuseum emphasizes historical grandeur and authority, projecting a physique rooted in national heritage.

4.C.2 Personality: the character. *Personality* refers to the elements that define the character of a brand: its "constructed source" that defines the brand as a singular entity (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). It refers to the core elements of the brand's identity, being classified as an element of "internalization" (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). The in-person design features in museums that can communicate its personality can be found in its narrative strategies, tone of voice, and more.

The Van Gogh Museum's personality is shaped by the prominent use of a biographical emotional framing which conveys an intimate and empathetic character. Moreover, the tonal emotionality and the atmospheric minimalism, while contributing to physique, also shape the brand's personality by establishing an emotional resonant tone. The welcoming ambiance fostered by the hospitality strategies and the adaptive voice demonstrated by the commercial partnerships (e.g. LEGO) frame an accessible and consumer-aware identity.

In contrast, Rijksmuseum communicates its personality through an informative and authoritative tone. The scholarly and didactic framing of the narratives, coupled with its monumental formality, communicates a purposeful and authoritative persona. Flexibility and accessibility are communicated through the adaptive brand voice visible in the museum shop's products and partnerships (e.g. Miffy).

To compare the two personas, Rijksmuseum communicates a knowledgeable, dignified but also accessible personality through its in-person experience design elements. Conversely, the Van Gogh Museum has an approachable character, centered around emotional connections and market orientation.

4.C.3 Culture: the values of the brand. *Culture* refers to the set of values a brand is based on. As an element of "internalization" (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), it is incorporated into the

brand's essence, often associated with its historical roots, alignment with local identity or ethical standards.

Van Gogh Museum constructs a culture deeply rooted in empathy and ethical standards. The choice to frame the narratives prioritizing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the artist's life; coupled with the ethical framing achieved through the provision of suicide prevention contracts, communicates a commitment to social responsibility. This empathetic stance is strengthened by the use of a subtle sensorial engagement that prevents overwhelming experiences, and allows for a personal and contemplative encounter with art.

Rijksmuseum builds a culture rooted in traditional authority and national pride. The object-centric approach to art displays and the canon-building curatorial choices in the exhibition spaces promote what constitutes Dutch culture in a prominently traditional manner. The pervasive references to Dutch identity in the text panels highlight an emphasis on cultural belonging, framing a culture that honors the past and its national heritage.

In comparison, ethical standards based on empathy and socially responsible framing of mental health issues characterize Van Gogh Museum's *culture*. Rijksmuseum's *culture* emphasizes an authoritative presentation of Dutch cultural belonging.

4.C.4. Relationship: the bond with the audience. *Relationship* is one of the prism's dimensions that refers to the social aspects that define the brand's external expression (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). As part of the brand's "externalization" (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49), it defines the bond the brand fosters with its target audience.

The Van Gogh Museum fosters a relationship based on emotional connection and an intimate connection with the artist. The multi-sensory emotional engagement and the subtle emotional embodied experience that characterize the exhibition spaces invite a personal dialogue with Van Gogh's art and life (e.g. old-style phones for listening to epistolary exchanges). The hospitality strategies, creating a warm and relaxed atmosphere, further reinforce a relationship based on calmness, encouraging visitors to feel at ease through a variety of design features (e.g. the sitting areas in the entrance hall). Furthermore, the museum shop offers emotionally resonant souvenirs that extend the emotional bond beyond the visit (Kent, 2009, p. 74).

Rijksmuseum primarily crafts formal relationships, emphasizing cognitive processing over clear interactivity. The didactic features to absorb the scholarly information (e.g. text panels) encourage an unmediated encounter with the art. While the offering of portable brochures in

the “Night Watch” exhibit represents a more interactive approach, the overall experience is characterized by contemplation, intellectual understanding, and a static approach to the exhibit displays. The museum’s hospitality strategy characterized by a structured guidance contributes to a relationship in which the museum is an authoritative guiding institution. Furthermore, the provision of culturally appealing souvenirs reinforces a bond based on admiration for high culture.

To build a comparison, Van Gogh Museum fosters a *relationship* focused on intimate and empathetic bond with its audience, inviting active participation. Rijksmuseum builds a more formal relationship through an intellectually guided in-person experience.

4.C.5. *Reflection: the aspirational consumer.* *Reflection* refers to the aspirational consumer that the brand resonates with. It is part of the brand’s “constructed receiver”, embodying how the brand sees its audience, and it contributes to the “externalization” as it defines the brand’s outward expression (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49). This dimension does not necessarily refer to the entirety of a brand's audience, but rather to an image of a stereotypically crafted consumer, created by the brand to influence the audience itself.

Van Gogh Museum’s in-person experience design implicitly frames the stereotypical consumer - through emotionally driven narratives, ethical purposes, and deeper intellectual details in art explanations - as an introspective individual, a modern art enthusiast, who appreciates a contemporary approach to art.

Rijksmuseum, conversely, suggests a more intellectually curious aspirational consumer, who is culturally refined and has a strong interest in and appreciation for national heritage. This stereotypical image of the consumer is cultivated through the panel’s authoritative and didactic tone, and the emphasis on cultural belonging through the narratives.

In comparison, the selected museums portray distinct aspirational visitors: Van Gogh Museum portrays an emotionally engaged visitor, while Rijksmuseum depicts a visitor that values an intellectually deep cultural experience.

4.C.6. *Self-image: how consumers see themselves.* *Self-image* also belongs to the “constructed receiver” (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) dimensions, but more specifically to the idea a consumer develops himself when connecting to the brand. This dimension is closely tied to *Reflection* as the audience’s self-perception might be influenced by the stereotypical consumer projected by the brand.

The Van Gogh Museum, projecting the image of an empathetic aspirational visitor, encourages visitors to see themselves as thoughtful and open-minded individuals. It fosters a self-image of being personally connected to art and receptive to the expressive qualities of it.

Rijksmuseum, projecting the image of an intellectually curious stereotypical visitor, promotes a self-image of being discerning and capable of understanding the scholarly presented material inside the museum. The in-person experience design at Rijksmuseum allows visitors to feel knowledgeable and part of a sophisticated community.

Brand Identity Prism Dimension	Van Gogh Museum	Rijksmuseum
<i>Physique</i>	Modern, minimalist, emotionally accessible visual identity	Monumental and sophisticated visual identity
<i>Personality</i>	Empathetic and intimate persona	Educational, authoritative and traditional persona
<i>Culture</i>	Ethically and socially responsible, rooted in human connection	Grounded in scholarly rigor and national pride, fostering cultural belonging
<i>Relationship</i>	Personal, authentic and participatory bond	Guided, intellectual, and contemplative relationship
<i>Reflection</i>	Introspective and empathetic aspirational visitor	Intellectually refined and culturally curious aspirational visitor
<i>Self-image</i>	Visitors perceive themselves as personally connected to the art, sensible human beings	Visitors perceive themselves as knowledgeable

Fig. 4.C.1. Museums' brand Identity comparison through Brand Identity Prism

Conclusion

This thesis set out to gain a better understanding about art museums' approach in developing and conveying their brand identity through in-person experience design, testing a novel research design composed by qualitative analysis and a comparative approach. The intentional design of physical spaces in art institutions - encompassing sensory elements, spatial layouts, architectural choices, curatorial strategies, and commercial touchpoints - is specifically explored to gain an extensive understanding of how physical spaces convey a distinct brand identity.

This research addresses a gap in literature, which has primarily focused on online brand identity communication (Fait et al., 2017, pp. 177-179), overlooking the importance of the role of physical spaces and museum visitor experience in brand identity developing and communication (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014, p. 80). The relevance of this research is represented by the increased competition in the contemporary cultural landscape, as highlighted by a sharp increase in the number of cultural institutions in the last five decades (Unesco, 2020). Art museums are also navigating evolving financial models that, in some cases, require increased self-sustainability (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, the articulation of a strong brand identity becomes essential for survival. By focusing on the tangible and experiential aspects, this thesis aimed to provide insights into how art institutions design physical spaces to communicate their unique value proposition.

The central question guiding this study was: How do art museums utilize in-person experience designs to craft and communicate their distinct brand identity?

The research has shown that art museums develop and convey their distinct brand identities through an intricate interplay of both implicit and explicit in-person experience design strategies.

Implicit strategies are integrated in the physical environment through subtle, non-verbal signals, frequently operating beneath conscious awareness to influence the receivers' perception (Krishna, 2011, p. 333). Van Gogh Museum integrates spatial ambiance features by applying a consistent strategy of tonal emotionality and atmospheric minimalism, quietly evoking intimate connections to the artist's world and artworks, contributing to the museum's multi-sensorial nature (see section 4.A.1.1.). Similarly, Rijksmuseum utilizes spatial ambiance elements, crafting a layered ambiance across zones that implicitly communicates a

balance between reverence and accessibility, but also between historical gravitas and contemporary openness (see section 4.B.1.1.). Furthermore, the museums' hospitality strategies also serve as implicit cues. Rijksmuseum's monumental formality and structured visitor guidance (e.g. grand architectural features like the entrance hall gates), implicitly convey a sense of solemn purpose (see section 4.B.1.2.). Van Gogh Museum employs a contrasting hospitality strategy, characterized by an informal approach and a contemporary institutional framing (e.g. light-filled open spaces, industrial materials, colorful sitting areas) that subtly communicates approachability, fostering curiosity and exploration (Kent, 2009, p. 69) (see section 4.A.1.2).

Explicit strategies are conveyed through the physical environment in a more readily and recognizable manner, being consciously held and acknowledged easily (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2). Narrative strategies and the way interactivity is encouraged serve as explicit cues (see sections 4.A.2. & 4.B.2.). Rijksmuseum employs narrative strategies characterized by object-centric displays, a scholarly institutional tone, and a cultural emphasis in the text panels. Furthermore, it does not generally foster interactivity throughout the artistic journey. These deliberate choices align with the idea of curation as an act of knowledge creation (Khan & Bhatt, 2018, pp. 1-2), crafting an identity based on a sense of historical gravitas and national pride.

Conversely, Van Gogh Museum employs narrative strategies that emotionally connect the visitor to the artist's biography, focusing on ethical standards and empathy (e.g. direct quotes from Van Gogh, suicide prevention information). Throughout the journey, interactivity is encouraged multiple times (e.g. through touchscreens). These explicit cues shape Van Gogh Museum's identity as a socially responsible and empathetic entity, demonstrating curation as a powerful branding tool (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18).

The museums' commercial interfaces can also be considered explicit cues, and they are understood as extensions of the museum's brand (Hennig-Thurau, 2009, p. 167). Both museums are revealed to have curated commercial zones, creating a seamless integration of retail in the artistic journey (see sections 4.A.3. & 4.B.3.). Rijksmuseum's shop offers culturally appealing souvenirs and implicit branding through the products (e.g. use of Delftware pattern), reinforcing the connection to national high culture. Van Gogh Museum presents emotionally appealing souvenirs and explicit branding through the products (e.g. overt and extensive use of iconic artworks on merchandise), demonstrating a more market-oriented approach and aligning with the concept of the museum shop as an extension

of the artistic journey and of the brand itself (Kent, 2009, pp. 74-75; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2009, p. 167).

While both selected museums apply the same overarching in-person experience design strategy categories, their specific emphasis conveys a distinct brand identity. Rijksmuseum presents an identity based on national legacy and institutional authority throughout its physical spaces, while Van Gogh Museum emphasizes emotional connections and authenticity. This distinction is strengthened by the analysis of their retail spaces, which reveals a less overt market-oriented approach in Rijksmuseum in its in-person experience design than in Van Gogh Museum. According to research conducted by Bernelot Moens (2013, pp. 44-48), the Rijksmuseum primarily relies on public funding, reflecting a focus on “social demand” (p. 6) and cultural stewardship. Conversely, the Van Gogh Museum relies mostly on the “earned income” (p. 10) through commercial activities, signifying a stronger orientation towards “private demand” (Bernelot Moens, 2013, p. 6). This fundamental difference in the museums’ financial models is visibly translated into their in-person experience design. In fact, Rijksmuseum prioritizes institutional authority, cognitive processing over emotional interaction, utilizes implicit branding on the shop’s products, and prioritizes cultural appreciation over overt commercialization. While Van Gogh Museum conveys an identity based on emotional connections, participation, overt and explicit branding on the products in the shop, reflecting its greater reliance on market driven revenue.

This study is theoretically grounded in a multifaceted understanding of the museum visitor experience by Falk and Dierking (2000, pp. 123-128, 137), Kent (2009, p. 68), Packer and Ballantyne (2016, p. 136), and Nigatu et al. (2024, p. 5507-5509), focusing on its multisensory and holistic nature. Integral to the framework are the elements and concepts that constitute the museum visitor experience itself: the evolving nature of curation as a powerful branding tool (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18), the role of storytelling and narrative-driven experiences (Dal Falco & Vassos, 2017, p. S3978), and the fundamental function of the museum shop as an extension of the visit and the brand (Kent, 2009, p. 74; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2009, p. 167). Alongside these elements, the theoretical framework includes the distinction between brand identity and brand image (Aaker, 1996, p. 68), and the nuances between explicit and implicit brand attitudes (Wennekers et al., 2016, p. 2).

This research introduces and tests a qualitative methodology utilizing a comparative case study design, concentrating on the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam’s Museumplein. This approach was particularly appropriate as it enabled a thorough, nuanced, and context-specific understanding of how physical spaces shape meaning and experience

(Pink, 2015, pp. 32-36; Dicks et al., 2011, p. 230) within the museum setting, directly engaging with the tangible elements of space. Sensory observation was employed as a data collection method. Particularly, observations took place in key areas of the museum (entrance hall, exhibition spaces, and museum shops), focusing on the collection of data about sensory elements, spatial layouts, architectural aesthetics (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014, p. 20), curatorial strategies (Nixon et al., 2014, p. 18; Khan & Bhatt, 2018, pp. 1, 4), and commercial spaces' design and products (Kent, 2009, pp. 69, 74). These elements were methodically recorded during the data collection process, through fieldnotes and photographs. This methodological choice was driven by the necessity to capture the subtle and multisensorial elements that often implicitly communicate identity characteristics. To analyze the data collected within the museum building, a thematic analysis is employed for textual data (Boeije, 2009, pp. 94-118), complemented by a semiotically informed thematic analysis for visual data (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 49-56). This approach allowed this study to identify the overarching themes that represent the museums' general approach to brand identity in physical spaces.

For analytical depth, two established frameworks were implemented during the analysis phase of this study. Paik and Lee's (2020) comprehensive review on relational experiences, that finally developed a Retail Experience Analytical Framework (pp. 483-484), was employed in this study's analysis by means of the six dimensions, reported by the authors (2020, p. 469): Social Role, Social Presence, Interaction, Identification, Formal-Informal, Intense-Superficial. These dimensions were applied as an interpretative tool, expanding their utility beyond the retail industry to the museum sector. The dimensions' application proved to be a suitable tool to methodically assess how museums design their in-person experience to convey a distinct brand identity, more specifically to promote a relational experience. Complementing this, Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 1992, pp. 43-49) was employed in the final analytical phase to conduct a comparative evaluation of the two museums' brand identities across its six dimensions: Physique, Personality, Culture, Relationship, Reflection, Self-image.

This comprehensive process proved to be suitable for providing a methodical and thorough approach to deconstruct and compare the two selected museums' brand identities, allowing for insightful findings and a holistic knowledge of their self-definition strategies implemented in their in-person experience design. The comparative case study design was particularly effective, enabling the identification of both similarities and differences in brand identity communication strategies between these two major institutions, thereby enriching the analytical depth.

The present research, despite its depth, is subject to certain limitations. First of all, the deliberate exclusion of digital communication for the analysis of brand identity formation, while being a conscious choice to address a significant literature gap, reflects a limitation to this study. In fact, excluding online communication, the findings do not represent a comprehensive picture of how the two art institutions communicate their brand identity. Moreover, considering the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are context-specific and not intended to be generalized; the sample size, limited to two museums, allows for an in-depth analysis, but restricts the diversity of curatorial choices that could be explored. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work offers valuable insights into the essential role of physical elements in conveying a specific brand identity in the museum field, where the in-person experience is fundamental. Finally, ethnographic observations are subject to personal bias: their inherent subjectivity requires thorough reflexivity to reduce potential biases (Pink, 2015, p. 58).

Recognizing these limitations, opportunities for further research emerge to build upon the findings of this study. Future studies should explore the museum's digital branding technique to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how their brand identity is constructed, and to explore the coherence between what is communicated online and its physical touchpoints. Visitor perception could also be integrated into further studies to complement this research and investigate their impression of museums' brand identities, thereby establishing the interplay between brand identity (self-definition projection) and brand image (receiver's perception). To enhance the applicability of the findings, further research could also include a greater range of museum sizes, types, or locations.

Ultimately, this thesis underscores the pivotal role that the design of spaces plays in conveying characteristics of self-definition, specifically highlighting the profound influence of in-person experience design on the communication of brand identity of art museums. It provides a foundational understanding and a novel research design, useful for both strategic application, and academic inquiry for further research.

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