Young people’s own museum views

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Abstract

Taking a mixed-methods, visitor-focused approach to views on museums, this article examines what views young Danes aged 13–23 years (n=2,350) hold on museums and how these views can be categorized and articulated. Arguing that studying views of museums as socially situated meaning-making practices adds theoretical and empirical depth to existing research and practice, we apply semantic categorization, speech-act theory, and cognitive linguistics as analytical tools. Our results demonstrate that respondents’ most prevalent semantic categories are ‘exciting,’ ‘educative,’ and ‘boring.’ Their responses fall into two main types: assertive speech acts providing factual descriptions and expressive speech acts providing more evaluative judgments. In general, young Danes make sense of museums along three different routes. One group wants museums that expand and challenge prior perceptions and knowledge, another group prefers museums that cater to existing interests, while members of a third, smaller group take it upon themselves to make museum visits enriching experiences.

Keywords

museum views, young people, museum visitors, speech-act theory, cognitive linguistics
Introduction

Museums have always interacted with the world around them. They are emergent, relational entities constituted by the socially contextualized interactions among people and between people and objects (Bell 2012). Museums’ longstanding exchanges with various segments of society create a deep and continuing interest in knowing more about all these segments at any given time.

In recent years, a number of factors have catalyzed a scholarly and practical interest in people who might or might not visit physical museums, who engage with such museums online, or who access and use online museums. Museums around the world are becoming icons of urban tourism, heritage performances, and digital attractions (Carey, Davidson, and Sahli 2013; Haldrup and Bæhrenholdt 2015; Mateos-Rusillo and Gifreu-Castells 2017). A complex constellation of discourses on knowledge societies, experience economies, and digital technologies serves to push museums’ interest in what are variously termed visitors, customers, audiences, users, and publics (Runnel and Pruulman-Vengerfeldt 2014). This article takes this interest as the point of departure to address how people view museums. Specifically, we ask: how do young people describe their views on museums, and how can these descriptions be categorized? In many countries, young people are among the segments of society under-represented as museum visitors, so studying this group might be of particular relevance to unraveling the potentials and pitfalls in museums’ means of visitor engagement. We study young people’s views as meaning-making practices, so our research results are of key importance to museums that wish to build on people’s voices for social inclusion as a means to achieve wider societal impact.

How to study museum views

Actual and potential visitors’ views on museums are generally studied from either a museum- or a visitor-focused approach, of which the present study adopts the latter. By a museum-focused approach, we mean an emphasis on how museums view visitors beyond simple statistics on through-put. In a classic article, Zahava Doering summarizes how museums view visitors. Based on her experiences as director of the Institutional Studies Office at the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, Doering (1999) categorizes views of visitors as ‘strangers,’ ‘guests,’ and ‘clients.’ The category of strangers, she argues, arises ‘when the museum maintains that its primary responsibility is to the collection and not to the public.’ The category of guests is based on the museum’s goal ‘to do good’ for visitors primarily through ‘educational’ activities.’ Finally, the category of clients views the museum’s ‘primary responsibility [as] to be accountable to the visitor’
(1999, 74). Doering (1999, 78) suggests that museums increasingly must treat visitors as clients, acknowledging that ‘the idea that a museum could be accountable to a visitor in the way that a professional is accountable to a client probably originates in the corporate world.’

More recently, authors suggest that museums need to view visitors in more nuanced ways as digital modes of communication and interaction influence museum practices regarding actual and potential visitors. Mark O’Neill and Lois H. Silverman (2004, as cited in Anderson 2012) argue that museums traditionally view visitors as either ‘dependent’ or ‘autonomous’ but now need to eliminate these binaries in favor of more complex views based on studies of actual visitor behavior. Museum studies scholar Amelia Wong approaches museums’ views on visitors from a social rather than an individual approach. Tracing the genealogy of the term community, she argues that pervasive discourses regarding social media make many museums idealize their views on community based on ‘frequent, public, and immediate communication’ (Wong 2015, 303). Evidently, the museum-focused approach to museums’ views on visitors follows actual changes in museums’ means of communicating and interacting with the world around them.

Other studies take a visitor-focused approach to views on museums. By this, we mean an approach that studies how people view museums, irrespective of their actual visits to particular museums or their on-site or online experiences. Notably, the type of visitor studies investigating museums’ image is important here. For example, Laurie Hanquinets and Mike Savage study visitors to art galleries. Based on a structural equation model derived from a survey of 1,900 visitors to the six main galleries of modern and contemporary art in Belgium, the authors demonstrate that, across sociocultural divisions, visitors tend to share the same conceptualization of what museums signify, namely, a kind of ‘educative leisure’ (Hanquinets and Savage 2012). Also focusing on art museums and galleries, Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert takes a more qualitative, cognitive approach, using in-depth interviews with 60 Cypriot participants to investigate their museum perceptions, or what she terms their ‘museum perceptual filters.’ She identifies eight types of filters: professional, art-loving, self-exploration, cultural tourism, social visitation, romantic, rejection, and indifference (Stylianou-Lambert 2009, 146). Relating these filter types to visitation frequency, Stylianou-Lambert (2009, 154) concludes that, for people, ‘the way in which museums are perceived is just as meaningful as the choice of visiting or not visiting.’ Other studies focus more on public associations in relation to particular museums. Danish science researchers Hanne Strager and Jens Astrup (2014) study the public image of natural history museums and find that they are seen as aimed at children and
families with children. Strager and Jens Astrup (2014) also discuss the challenges in visitor communication resulting from these associations.

In our study, we also take a visitor-focused approach to views on museums. Here, we follow claims made by, for example, Hilde Hein (2000, 66) that museums have become more ‘people-centered,’ so research needs to be attuned to this perspective. Unlike existing studies, we combine an interest in studying what views on museums people hold with an interest in how people articulate these views. This dual analytical focus is chosen to treat people’s views on museums as socially situated modes of meaning-making encompassing both substance (what they say) and form (how they say it).

**Studying museum views as meaning-making: Research design and methodology**

Data for our study are drawn from a national online survey on the media and museum uses (Kobbernagel, Schrøder, and Drotn 2015 of a random representative sample of 13–23-year-old Danes (n=2,450 responses, data collection: 3 November–7 December 2014). The purpose of the survey is to study museum uses as part of wider cultural practices in which media play key roles. The questionnaire consists of three parts covering the respondents’ demographic background and media and museum use. The museum section of the questionnaire begins with a general introduction to museum types (art, cultural history and technology, natural history, science museums and science centers) and proceeds to ask about the respondents’ views on museums. The respondents use a Likert-type scale to indicate their agreement or disagreement with four statements drawn from existing research (Gil and Ritchie 2009; Hanquinet and Savage 2012; Packer 2008): a museum is boring, a museum is a place where you can relax, it is fun to be in a museum, and a museum offers exciting experiences. Next, an open-ended question asks: ‘we would like to know more about what a museum is in your opinion. Write here what you think.’ The survey ends with a series of questions related to the respondents’ latest museum visit. Our data consist of 2,350 valid, free-text responses to the open-ended question.

To achieve our dual analytical goals, we followed a research design inviting analysis of both substance and form. First, we identified and categorized the broad, overall semantic aspects of substance to get an overview of the types of responses made by the participants. Second, we applied linguistic theory (speech-act theory and cognitive linguistics) to address aspects of substance and to dig deeply into the most prevalent semantic categories identified in order to study the respondents’ meaning-making practices.
To get an overview of the response types, one co-author pilot-coded 300 responses in an open coding process, resulting in a list of thematic content categories and determining that the responses consisted of two classes of speech acts (see next paragraph). We proceeded with the open coding, categorizing the responses by class of speech act and supplementing the list of thematic content categories when necessary. Each article author coded a third of the remaining dataset and then reviewed the coding performed by the previous coders, adding any new thematic categories and ensuring intercoder reliability (Krippendorff 2004: 216f.). Finally, we conducted an aggregate count of the two response types and thematic categories and identified the three most prevalent categories: ‘exciting,’ ‘educative,’ and ‘boring’ (see Figure 1). We discarded 100 invalid responses, leaving a data corpus of 2,350 responses for further analysis.

For our analysis of the response types, we applied speech-act theory to facilitate attention to texts (in this case, the respondents’ answers) as meaning-making practices. People do something when they write, as indicated by the title of the classic book *How to Do Things with Words*, in which John L. Austin (1962) first formulates speech-act theory. This theory also allowed us to provide empirical documentation to support claims of a perceived shift in museology toward practice and performance (Kidd 2014: 6). By defining meaning-making as practice, speech-act theory offers a view of language as dialogic communication involving both speakers and listeners. Any utterance, such as responses to the open-ended question in our survey, can be defined as the speaker’s or writer’s intentional action which influences its prospective listener or receiver. Austin defines three types of utterances: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is simply the speaker’s act of making a meaningful utterance. An illocutionary act is the speaker’s act expressing something which has a certain function, while a perlocutionary act is an act which influences the receiver’s feelings or actions. As noted, our pilot coding identified two classes of illocutionary speech acts as defined by Austin’s colleague John R. Searle—namely, assertive and expressive speech acts—and the remainder of our coding confirmed these to be the two main response types. Assertive speech acts describe phenomena in the world through, for example, definitions and examples, whereas expressive speech acts provide evaluative judgments. To better understand these judgments, the expressive speech acts were coded as negative, positive, or conditional. Often, both assertive and expressive speech acts were present in a single answer. In that case, we counted the answer in both response types because we considered the two classes of speech acts to be non-exclusive and, therefore, did not assign them a primary class.
For the analysis of how respondents articulated the three most prevalent semantic categories, we applied cognitive linguistics to gain deeper insight into the respondents’ categories as expressions of socially situated experiences. Relating the respondents’ museum categorizations to their everyday lives was found to be of particular relevance when studying age groups to whom conceptual abstraction might not come easily. We drew on American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). In particular, we used their notion that metaphors are expressions of embodied constructs in order to flesh out nuances in the respondents’ categorizations: when the respondents defined a museum in a particular manner, they often used concrete conceptual metaphors related to space (e.g., high/low), time (e.g., fast/slow), or the body (e.g., backbone/heart) to make sense of abstractions. It was evident that all three response categories to characterizing museums—exciting, educative, and boring—were themselves personifications, and our coding scheme focused on substantive aspects, so we paid particular attention to the metaphorical qualities of codes in this part of the empirical analysis.

**What is a museum? Types of responses**

In answering the open-ended survey question, the participants gave two types of free-text responses (assertive and expressive speech acts), indicating fundamental differences in the meanings they inferred from the question. The assertive responses focus on describing what kinds of phenomenon museums are and provide definitions, descriptions, and concrete examples of museums and their functions. The expressive responses offer personal opinions, evaluative attitudes, and judgments about museums.

Of the 2,350 valid responses, 1,495 are of the expressive type, and 1,404 of the assertive type. Thus, a narrow majority of the respondents interpret the question as an invitation to express their opinions on museums rather than, or in addition to, describing what a museum is. Thus, museums clearly are phenomena about which many young people have formed opinions, although it should be remembered that responses might be colored by the fact that the close-ended question inviting the respondents to think about museums in evaluative terms preceded the open-ended question.

Table 1 shows the results of the cross-tabulation of the two response types with the prevalent thematic-content categories and identifies various subsets of responses indicative of data trends. The assertive responses primarily relate to different kinds of museums and their functions. The respondents mostly associate museums with history and the past (654 instances) and then art
(377 instances), followed by nature (158 instances). Even more frequently, museums are characterized as places of learning and knowledge, corroborating Hanquinets and Savage’s findings (2012) that visitors conceptualize museums as ‘educative leisure.’ According to Alexander and Alexander (2008), most museum definitions center on their important roles as repositories for objects and as places of learning. In our data, the view of museums as places of learning and knowledge (756 responses) occurs twice as often as the view of museums as places for the display of objects (309 responses). Furthermore, experiencing the museum visit as an instructive learning experience is often correlated to positive evaluations of museums. Of the 520 positive expressive responses, 307 associate museums with knowledge and learning.

Table 1. Response types to the question “We would like to know more about what a museum is in your opinion,” 13–23-year-old Danes (N=2,450), 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertive Response Type</th>
<th>Expressive Response Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place for displaying objects (309)</td>
<td>Boring (194)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependent on personal interests (320)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exciting (188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place for learning and knowledge (756)</td>
<td>Involuntary visit (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning experience (307)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling of exclusion (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The expressive response type includes three groups of museum evaluations: positive (520 responses), negative (329 responses), and conditional (646 responses). The positive expressive responses describe museums as, for instance, exciting (188 responses), while most negative responses simply dismiss museums as boring (194 responses). In the conditional group, positive and negative judgments are conditioned by museum type and other factors. The conditional group might be the most interesting because they indicate reflections on the conditions prompting the respondents’ evaluations. Many of these responses include conditional clauses: ‘museums are
exciting if/provided that X’ or ‘museums are boring if/provided that not-X.’ The prevalent condition was personal interest (320 instances).

The majority of expressive responses fall within the conditional and positive groups, the latter accounting for more than a third of expressive responses. This is a noteworthy result given the widespread notion that young people generally find museums to be boring (Bartlett and Kelly 2000; Mason and McCarthy 2006). The majority of positive evaluations of museums are also evident in the quantitative survey from which our data are drawn: only 26 percent of respondents agree with the negative statement ‘a museum is boring,’ while 62 percent agree with the positive statement ‘a museum provides exciting experiences’ (Kobbernagel, Schröder, and Drotner 2015, 50).

The negative expressive responses can also be further distinguished. One subset conveys personal exclusion or distance from museums (57 responses), corroborating the results reported by Mason and McCarthy (2006). Another subset notes the involuntary nature of many museum visits (31 responses), mostly required by schools, a result that indicates a challenge to museums’ educational outreach efforts. So far, the analysis has addressed what respondents say about museums. In the following, we turn to how respondents formulate their answers.

**How young people articulate their museum views: Three categories of meaning-making**

In analyzing how respondents articulate their views in the educative, exciting, and boring categories, we focus on respondents’ use of metaphors related to these categories to unravel the relations between the respondents’ meaning-making practices and everyday experiences. In general, responses in the educative category are assertive. The respondents describe what kinds of knowledge and which learning styles are found in museums, as we later describe further. However, in some cases, learning is regarded as a positive factor of museum visits: ‘it’s educative to visit a museum, and I like that.’” The characteristics of museum learning are not elaborated in this statement; rather, *educative* is itself used as a keyword to signal a positive evaluation of museums. The response types of exciting and boring are both categorized as expressive responses and, within that type, naturally fall into positive and negative expressive response types, respectively. In addition, as noted, many expressive responses can be defined as conditional, indicating that the respondents widely recognize the diversity of museums and their audiences.
Museums as educative spaces

The data material characterizing museums as educative spaces is divided into two analytical subcategories. One subcategory focuses on how the young respondents label the various types of educative knowledge that they find in museums. The second focuses on the respondents’ articulations of how they learn, that is, their descriptions of how their learning styles and other factors influence their museum learning experience.

Labeling museum learning

The respondents describe museums as educative spaces, calling their content ‘new knowledge,’ ‘professional knowledge,’ ‘information,’ and ‘scientific,’ and identify museum knowledge as related to scientific collections or exhibitions that fall into several categories of topics. For instance, one respondent describes the museum as a ‘collection of noteworthy historical, artistic, or scientific objects on display to the public,’ and another as ‘exhibitions of historical objects from many categories, archaeology, history of society, technology, and war.’ The respondents thus, to some extent, articulate a significant relationship between museum knowledge and museum artifacts when describing museums as places ‘gathering knowledge about objects in their collections’ and as sites ‘where one can see different objects, which are important for certain groups.’ The respondents articulate awareness of the proximity between the objects and knowledge domains in museums. Topics such as ‘culture,’ ‘people,’ ‘world,’ ‘nature,’ and ‘technology’ are mentioned by the respondents, and broadly speaking, the responses cover the three types of official museums in Denmark (art, cultural history, and science).

The respondents mention museum topics in art, natural history, and science, such as ‘the talent and history of the artist’ and the ‘building blocks the body is made of.’ Still, history remains a dominant, broad component of museum knowledge in the respondents’ articulations. Accordingly, when mentioning museum objects, many respondents focus on the historical knowledge and value of objects, describing museums as containers of ‘prehistoric objects which give an idea as to how the past was experienced by those living then’ and ‘a place where you can see objects that bring a history with them’ or may view ‘old, irrelevant objects.’ The respondents also, to some extent, articulate the objects as communicators of historical knowledge: ‘museums exhibit objects that are meant to give the public an understanding of culture, present and past, and also educate the public.’ In this way, the respondents describe objects and materiality as capable of explicitly communicating and connecting historical and contemporary issues.
Within this object-centered understanding of museum learning, history is primarily described as learning about factual and encyclopedic content, such as the biographies of kings and ‘significant persons,’ or about developmental processes, such as ‘world cultures through the ages’ and ‘development within given areas, such as the production of cars.’ This understanding correlates history to abstract terms, such as ‘historical periods,’ ‘development,’ ‘something prehistoric,’ and ‘the past,’ and to relatively concrete terms, such as ‘old stuff’ and ‘what things looked like in the past.’ Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the use of conceptual metaphors as unidirectional as the abstract domain is translated into concrete, physical concepts, not vice versa. Although our analysis demonstrates that many respondents focus on objects in defining museum knowledge, we also find that the respondents speak in abstract terms about the historical knowledge presented in museum, defining it as about ‘the past,’ ‘development,’ and ‘something prehistoric.’ These rather abstract articulations of history might be based on the respondents’ prior perceptions of history and possibly limited experience visiting historical museums that could serve to ‘materialize’ history in concrete terms. The nature of the survey may also discourage more concrete elaborations by the respondents.

Interestingly, a small number of respondents state that learning about the past in museums offers the ability to experience movement across time. For instance, the respondents describe museums as places where one may ‘take a time capsule back in time’ or ‘move into a completely different world.’ Movement and even time travel are explicitly used as metaphors to describe the historical learning experience offered by museums, indicating that the respondents see the transgression of bodily and everyday boundaries as a significant, positive element in museums as educative spaces. Here, it is noteworthy that the respondents metaphorically include their own bodily movement as part of knowledge acquisition even as they emphasize the subject matter of the educative experience.

Further, a small minority of the respondents describe museum learning as learning about contemporary issues: ‘museums are about things from the past that can tell us about the world today.’ They ‘teach us to connect different elements in history’ and thus provide the ability to understand, investigate, and develop own knowledge, ‘A museum is a place where one can learn about how things were once done and in that way puts in perspective my own everyday life.’ These respondents describe museums as places that help visitors gain new perspective on everyday life and change their views on different matters. Change is also an important element when the respondents state that museums ‘expand one’s horizon,’ help one ‘see things differently’ and ‘look more into myself,’ and catalyze a ‘change of perspective.’ By using metaphors of new forms of
visibility and perspective, the respondents point to museums’ ability to equip the general public with new intellectual and emotional skills but equally stress that museums provide options for self-reflection and study of one’s self: ‘a museum is a place where you look more into yourself.’

Unsurprisingly, the respondents’ comments regarding museums as educative spaces reveal that the learning outcomes are considered to encompass both subject matter and self in a variety of ways. Interestingly, the participants’ responses largely correlate with different knowledge types described in the museum literature. The respondents describe museums as informative spaces which transfer cumulative knowledge (Illeris 2006b) and repetitive, encyclopedic knowledge (concerning ‘historical periods’ or ‘biographies’). The respondents, though, also often simultaneously see museums as exploratory spaces, allowing visitors to appropriate more accommodative and transformative knowledge (Illeris, 2006b) in relation to their personal values, attitudes, and skills (Hooper-Greenhill 2004). In this way, the respondents’ view can be seen to align with professional approaches to knowledge and learning. It is noteworthy that the respondents who describe museums as educative by providing encyclopedic, historical facts and the respondents who describe museums as educative by providing reflective skills both tend to use conceptual metaphors signaling physical movement (such as time travel). However, as described, the latter group also points to a correlation of physical and spatial changes in self (i.e., ‘change of perspective,’ ‘expansion of horizon’). The use of such linguistic metaphors indicates that these respondents see themselves as somehow transformed on a personal level through their learning experiences in museums.

*How to learn in the museum*

Interestingly, the responses in the educative category focus not only on what can be learned in museums but also on how learning occurs there. The majority of respondents describe learning in the museum as ’receiving’ knowledge or ‘being enriched by’ knowledge. The use of such passive language indicates that learning is something that occurs to them and they do not actively generate. Fewer respondents describe museums as places where one can seek specific information, implying that museum learning is a proactive process: ‘a museum offers the opportunity to obtain information,’ and a museum is ‘a place where you can get knowledge on several themes.’

As seen, many respondents refer to the senses when describing learning styles in the museum, and sight is expressed as predominant, as seen in the following statements: ‘I think a museum is a place where you can usually see and learn about things from the past or look at very
precious artworks.’ ‘A museum is the visual version of a history book.’ Many respondents refer to the visual aspects of museum learning very positively, noting that seeing objects and issues is better than only reading about them: ‘I think I learn more by seeing objects and not only reading about them.’ A museum is ‘a place that exhibits objects and not something you have to sit and read. To me, that is a much easier road to learning.’ Here again, movement (‘road’) is applied as a metaphor for knowledge acquisition. This focus on sight as a route to learning also corresponds well with how most museums work as the exhibition format is a predominantly visual form of display. The visual sense is often defined as a faculty enabling us to objectify and review matters (Bennett 2007; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Ong 1982; McLellan 2003; Illeris 2006a). Thus, the respondents’ heavy use of visual metaphors indicates that they regard learning in the museum as a means of systematizing and even gaining control of their immediate experiences.

Still, several respondents describe museums as educative spaces where both visual and physical aspects lead to learning: ‘being able to see and sometimes touch objects relevant to the subject matter, and even listen and read, gives me a better understanding and is more exciting than reading in a book.’ These responses emphasize that practices involving physical activity hold a particular advantage for museum learning: ‘some museums have made some kind of learning experiences so that you don’t just stand still and read but do something.’ Thus, concrete physical activity and movement seem to be significant factors in some respondents’ positive views on how museums frame learning processes. Such priorities correspond well with several theories on museum learning that view physical and interpretive forms of interaction as keys to museum learning (Falk and Dierking 2000; Einsiedel and Einsiedel 2004).

Regarding the manner of learning, a number of respondents also make favorable comparisons of the museum educative environment to other types of education, especially conventional classroom learning. In particular, the respondents emphasize that physical objects mediate learning in museums: ‘a museum is a place where you can get knowledge about different things and see/try things, depending on the type of museum. If it is technical, you can try and test how it works.’ The respondents note possibilities of testing physical objects and touching and possibly manipulating materials in museums as distinctive advantages over classroom learning. Also, the respondents mention that exhibitions offer potential for easier, or different, types of learning than books and texts: ‘a museum is a good option for easier learning because you get out and see things [that] you usually sit in class or at home and just read about.’ This explicit focus on
touch as an entry point to learning serves to deepen the insight, noted earlier, of bodily movement as a metaphor for knowledge acquisition.

A number of respondents use the metaphor of ‘grabbing’ to signify that museums need to prioritize communication resources that direct, or grab, users’ attention. For instance, one respondent claims that ‘a good museum should grab your attention in an innovative way so that you really want to learn and read on about the themes at hand.’ This metaphor creates the image of museums as enticing entities, almost luring users’ attention toward joy and entertainment as motivations for learning. Some also see museum guides as ‘attention grabbers’: ‘it is absolutely critical for whether I learn something by visiting a museum or not: how the museum guide grabs my attention.’ Other respondents relate the entertainment value of museums to the social context of visiting: ‘it’s fun to visit museums because you learn a lot while having fun and enjoying yourself with friends/family.’ In the respondents’ metaphorical descriptions of museums as educative spaces, we thus find references to different types of knowledge and learning styles, along with metaphors signaling movement, transformation, sight and the feeling of being grabbed.

**Museums as exciting and boring spaces**

The expressive response types of exciting and boring are analyzed jointly because the respondents often articulate and define them in relation to one another. In analytical terms, the data material across the exciting–boring dichotomy falls into three parts. One part describes how the respondents characterize museum visits as either exciting or boring encounters, a second describes factors that the respondents claim lead to either exciting or boring museum experiences, and a third describes how the respondents conceptually relate to exciting and boring museums.

**Characteristics of the exciting museum and the boring museum**

The respondents use a wide vocabulary to describe museums as either exciting or boring. They express that the exciting museum is a place where users become ‘wiser,’ ‘enlightened,’ ‘inspired,’ ‘have fun,’ ‘find comfort,’ ‘explore new things,’ ‘immerse themselves,’ and ‘are engaged’ in a topic either that they know already or that is new to them. This metaphorical language implies being enlightened and lifted and also immersed in and thus deeply moved by something. The exciting museum is characterized as ‘entertaining,’ ‘fun,’ ‘surprising,’ and ‘sensorial.’ Conversely, the boring museum is characterized as ‘uninteresting,’ ‘tedious,’ providing ‘heavily dragged-out information,’ ‘monotonous,’ ‘useless,’ a ‘waste of time,’ and even a ‘waste of life.’ The language
used to describe the boring museum includes references to measurements of experienced time which can feel longer than true chronological time: ‘you get tired when you walk and stare at things that you know or don’t know for a long time.’ In assessments of the boring museum, the respondents also refer to weight in a way that resembles carrying a physical burden: ‘a museum is very heavy in content; therefore, it is very boring.’

Other respondents describe museums through personifications that conjure up images of museums as agents with their own agendas to supply boring content. For example, a respondent describes museums as places which ‘glorify thoughts and ideas that do not influence me. … They are, so to say, irrelevant.’ Through the image of glorification, the respondent brings museums closer to everyday life (they are agents) counter-balanced against the explicit assessment of distance (they are irrelevant).

For some respondents, it is the term museum itself that has negative connotations:

I think the word museum sounds quite boring to most young people. The concept of a museum doesn’t appeal to me either, but on reflection, a museum can contain a lot of things. It is not necessarily exhibitions of dresses from the 1600s. I think that one should be [careful] with naming newer exhibitions that cater to young people museum—then we won’t bother with them. Call them planetarium, for example. Then we are more likely to give them a try.

For this respondent, the term museum is in itself a factor leading to a boring experience, or rather, it creates the expectation of something boring to come.

Factors leading to either boring or exciting museum experiences
As noted, many respondents stress that their evaluation of a museum as either boring or exciting very much depends on their own interests:

A museum can be incredibly boring as well as incredibly exciting depending on what kind of exhibition it is. If the exhibition is about something you have an interest in, it may be exciting to visit a museum, whereas visiting a museum with Stone Age tools when you have a special interest in the Cold War, for example, can be incredibly boring.

These respondents note that their assessments are heavily dependent on personal thematic interests formed before their museum visit, and they do not mention museums generating an interest in or
'grabbing’ their attention in topics new to them or beyond their horizon of expectations. These respondents describe museums as exciting places when they present content in which young people are already keen to engage. Both respondents who portray museums as generally exciting places and as generally boring mention the importance of visitors’ prior interest in the particular topics the museum covers.

When evaluating museums as either boring or exciting, only a few respondents mention other factors influencing their assessment. Among these factors is exhibition style: ‘museums can sometimes be exciting, but it depends how well the people making the exhibition draw the audience in. So you also have to make something yourself instead of just walking around looking at stuffed animals, pictures.’ Other respondents note that the social context of the visit is an important factor in their evaluation: ‘it depends on what kind of museum it is and why you are there. If you are there to learn something together with friends/family, it can be a very fun experience.’

As seen in relation to learning, a few respondents note the role played by museum guides in making a museum exciting or boring. Some respondents emphasize that guides can make the experience entertaining and not boring: ‘You are never bored because often there are entertaining guides you can follow.’ ‘The experience at museums varies according to the preferences and interests that I hold, but good guides can always lift the experience.’ This metaphor of lifting indicates that the guide can bring the museum experience to another, more exciting level and even alleviate the burden of visiting. The opposite, though, can also be the case: ‘the guide turns the museum visit into something even more boring than it ought to be.’

The respondents typically find that their previous interests are the primary factor influencing their evaluation of whether a museum visit is exciting or boring. This result corroborates the findings from a Danish qualitative user study focusing on young peoples’ views and uses of museums (Damgård et al., 2012). The study documents that young users and young non-users both claim that their key motivation for visiting (or not visiting) museums is the fit (or lack of fit) between their own interests and the thematic content of museums. These findings are interesting because they point out that the topics defining museums act as the main entry point to making museums attractive to young people. Exhibition styles, social contexts, and interactions with guides do play parts, but far fewer respondents note that these factors are decisive in their assessments.
Museums as interactional partners or distanced others

The relationship between the exciting museum and the boring museum thus can be seen as a dichotomy closely related to the dichotomy between being or not being of interest. The vocabulary used to describe the exciting and the boring museum, though, do vary somewhat.

When describing the exciting museum, the respondents focus heavily on visitors’ personal experiences, actions, and take-aways. The exciting museum is characterized as a resource with personal take-aways such as ‘learning,’ ‘having fun,’ ‘being enlightened,’ ‘being absorbed,’ and ‘getting a sense of introspection.’ Conversely, the boring museum is described in more concrete, physical terms, such as ‘dry,’ ‘heavy,’ ‘tedious,’ ‘monotonous,’ and ‘non-alive.’ With this language, the respondents portraying the boring museum draw the picture image of a concrete, material, yet distanced phenomenon with specific characteristics.

As noted, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe conceptual metaphors as human practices that map abstract target domains by reference to more concrete source domains, thus using concrete issues to make sense of abstract ones. In our material, the respondents apply conceptual metaphors, in particular, when grappling with the experience of the boring museum. This connection may indicate that the respondents consider the boring museum to be a more incomprehensible, distant phenomenon than the exciting museum. The boring museum is even personified as a distant other with abilities, for instance, to ‘glorify the irrelevant.’

Very rarely in our material do the respondents articulate the experience of the boring museum as dependent on or shaped by the visitor’s own attitudes: ‘all museums contain their stories, and it’s up to the audiences whether they will let themselves be inspired and enlightened.’ This quote exemplifies how a few respondents understood the relationship between museum content and user interests as a situation in which the user, regardless of museum content, is responsible for making the museum visit relevant and thus exciting. In this way, the museum becomes subject to the user’s ability to see, perceive, and embrace its story.

Thus, the respondents not only position the boring museum and the exciting museum at opposite ends of a spectrum, but the majority also express very different positional relationships between themselves as users and the exciting and the boring museum. When describing the exciting museum, they articulate the inclusion of themselves as changed or influenced in such terms as ‘being enlightened,’ ‘being immersed,’ and ‘feeling contemplative.’ Conversely, when describing the boring museum, they articulate distance and othering with terms such as ‘dry,’ ‘tedious,’ and ‘monotonous.’ Thus, when emphasizing the boring museum, the participants often refrain from
explicitly relating themselves to the museum. They do not name specific negative feelings but, rather, state that they do not care for museums: ‘museums are not what I feel for the most :) – don’t feel for it.’ One respondent, though, describes the museum as a place of punishment: ‘if you went to the museum for sightseeing, some felt it was exciting because it suits their interests, while others would feel punished.’ Generally, the respondents map the exciting museum as a dynamic, close interactive partner and personify the boring museum as an intentionally distanced, un-influential, irrelevant other. With such metaphors of proximity and distance, the respondents underline their different positional relationships with the exciting and the boring museum.

Connections: Educative, exciting, and boring

Our material contains only a few examples of responses in which all three categories appear. These examples point in numerous directions regarding the semantics indicating respondents’ meaning-making efforts. For example, in the following quotation, the educative and exciting categories are somewhat causally connected as the exciting experience leads to a good learning experience:

It’s very varied what I think about museums. A museum with art is boring, while a museum such as the Old Town in Aarhus [an open air museum] or Iron Age villages are super-exciting. There, I learn a lot and get an experience.

Other responses claim that the exciting, boring, and educative qualities are separate attributes of the museum visit. Even when the museum is perceived to be boring, it still has the capacity to be educative: ‘it’s a bit boring to be in a museum, but you learn something, and sometimes it can be quite exciting.’ The following quotation sums up very well how the respondents articulate the relationship between educative, exciting, and boring:

I have mixed thoughts about museums. If they fit my interests, then I think they are exciting, fun, and educational. But on the other hand, if they don’t interest me, then I think they are boring. They can still be educative, but it is rare.

This respondent clearly expresses a conditional relationship between personal interests and museum content, emphasizing that an exciting museum is also likely to be an educative museum. At the same time, it is recognized that the boring museum may be educative, too. We only find a few
examples in which the respondents juggle all three categories in an attempt to make sense of what is clearly seen as a complex phenomenon.

**Conclusions and discussion**

Taking a mixed-methods, visitor-focused approach to views on museums, we examine *what* views young Danes aged 13–23 years hold on museums and *how* these views may be categorized and articulated. Drawing on speech-act theory and cognitive linguistics to understand the respondents’ views as socially situated meaning-making practices, our study documents that the most prevalent semantic categories of the respondents’ views are “exciting”, “educative”, and “boring”, and their responses fall into two main types of assertive and expressive speech acts.

In what respondents say about museums, the assertive and expressive response types are quite evenly distributed. Nearly half of the respondents provide rather factual descriptions of what a museum is, while the other half offers more normative opinions and evaluations. Of the assertive responses, the majority find that museums provide instructive learning experiences, and this view is often correlated to positive evaluations of museums. Of the expressive responses, more than a third articulate what we term a conditional view (‘museums are exciting if/provided that X’), followed, in number of responses, by a positive view and then a negative view, the least prevalent category. This result is worth noting because it deviates from the common belief that most young people find museums boring.

Regarding how respondents express their views on the main semantic categories of educative, exciting, and boring, we find that, in general, the category of educative falls within the assertive response type, while the response types of exciting and boring are both part of the expressive response type. When describing museums as educative, the respondents variously see this function as the provision of factual information and as a resource for reflexivity, similar to much professional literature on museum learning. Both groups tend to use conceptual metaphors signaling physical movement (such as time travel), while the reflective group also connects physical and spatial change (i.e., ‘change of perspective,’ ‘expansion of horizon’). These metaphors indicate a view of museums as catalysts of personal transformation. When describing how learning occurs in museums, many respondents use visual metaphors that point to learning as a means of systematizing information. Interestingly, these uses sometimes are combined with an emphasis on the concrete bodily materiality of the learning experience and metaphors stressing the physical action involved in attention (‘grabbing’).
Metaphors of being lifted up and tied down dominate the exciting and boring response types, respectively. Unlike the educative response type, both exciting and boring responses stress that the respondents’ prior interests, not the museums’ ability to transform or extend knowledge, are key to their assessments. These findings are worth noting because they document a key indicator of young visitors’ museum assessments. Moreover, metaphors connecting the museum to personal, even bodily, modes of interaction abound in descriptions of the exciting museum, while the boring museum appears as a distanced, irrelevant other.

Our analytical approach and empirical results indicate promising routes for museum practitioners and researchers who want to further explore and build on people’s voices for social inclusion as a means to achieve wider societal impact. Museum practitioners may note that young people make sense of museums along three different routes. One group wants museums that expand and possibly challenge their prior perceptions and modes of knowledge; another group prefers museums that cater to existing interests; while the members of a third, small group take it upon themselves to make museum visits enriching experiences. These results lend nuance to the common perceptions of young people as a uniform group which is defined by age and must be catered to in the same way. In developing both on-site and online visitor interactions, museum professionals should note the metaphorical dimension of museum views which points to important potentials and pitfalls in young people’s engagement. For example, attempts to minimize feelings of physical and mental distance seem crucial for museums to turn around young non-visitors and others who find museums to be boring.

In future museum research, our approach invites added emphasis on visitors’ and non-visitors’ communication with museums as socially situated practices encompassing both substance (what they say) and form (how they say it). This approach expands museum communication beyond focusing on what museums want to convey to people to paying attention to what people want to say about—if not to—museums. Moreover, our combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies offers an important, understudied route to understanding these meaning-making practices so that results demonstrate both validity and reliability. This multi-method approach, though, should be applied with analytical caution. As noted, the open-ended question on which this study is based comes after closed-ended questions that might guide the associations the respondents make in the open-ended answers; in particular, the survey directions indicate educative, exciting, and boring as the most prevalent categories (Schwarz 2007).
In the empirical dimension, our finding that young people follow three different routes of sense-making regarding museums, as noted, provides a granular understanding of young people’s museum views. This understanding helps in analyzing, for example, quantitative visitor studies on individual motivation or interest because they document how such motivations and interests are intimately bound up with shifting processes of articulation best understood through contextualized analysis. To strengthen such analysis, future studies might explore, for example, how these three groups are correlated to the variables of class, age, and gender, in a manner similar to studies on how museum-going relates to social and cultural capital following the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others (Bennett 2013).

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