



## A meaningful museum for young people? Sharing insights from the field study

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### Abstract

Current discussions about museum institutions cover a range of issues, including technological and societal changes, as well as political and economic aspects. A common aspect of all of them is the notion that museums are not only places for storing and exhibiting heritage artifacts, but also places that represent different perspectives and are perceived as meaningful. Among the various indicated matters, one important research stream concerns how young people perceive museums and other cultural spaces: as open, friendly, and inclusive, or, on the contrary. This topic remains open and worth exploration. Hence, this paper aims to explore and analyze the preliminary results of a study conducted across three departments of the National Museum in Krakow (Poland), selected non-probabilistically. The three-stage research procedure included desk research, overt observations, and focused group interviews. The main idea of the study was to explore how young people aged 13 to 18 experience museum visits and what is especially meaningful to them. After presenting the general research assumptions and research procedure, the preliminary insights are also discussed. As already noted, young people can be interested in and engaged with museum programs, yet issues such as the appropriate time or place often pose a barrier to participation. The museum's activities reflect its efforts to encourage youth participation in its programs and to shape its offerings actively.

### Keywords

Meaning; museum; young people; experience; participation.

## Introduction

Beyond collecting, researching, and preserving heritage artifacts, museums also perform many other functions. Hence, their meaning goes beyond those collection-oriented issues, as mentioned, for example, in the International Council of Museums (ICOM)'s 2022 definition of museums. According to the proposition made by this entity, it is possible to read that museums are "*Open to the public, accessible and inclusive (...) foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing*" (ICOM, 2022). In light of the current dynamic social changes, the aspects of inclusivity, participation, and openness seem to be especially important and valuable (e.g., Coghlan, 2018; Olivares & Piatak, 2022), as the museums do not provide activities just for themselves, but for the people who are their audiences and part of their environment. Moreover, those changes in museum activities are somewhat

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expected by the audience (Black, 2018) and are also a consequence of the generational turn in society. Hence, the way in which museums are perceived - whether as open, inclusive, and meaningful places or not - will be crucial for the institutions, their future programming and the scope of activities.

Those multidimensional changes and challenges, hence, could be explored through many lenses, one of which is generational change. Whether, on the one hand, the issue of an aging society can be noticed (Pantel & Anderson, 2026), on the other, researchers and practitioners from many sectors discuss how young people are active in the online and offline areas, how they consume content, and what is important for them. Such an aspect is also important for the museum sector (e.g., Batat, 2020; Kisiel, 2024; Manna & Palumbo, 2018), where analyses and discussions examine whether young people feel represented in museums and what those places mean to them. Despite being somewhat noted in the literature, this topic is still not fully explored, and many institutions are trying to adapt to the new circumstances and listen to the voices of younger generations. Moreover, some existing explorations focus more on how school groups participate in museum programs, while individual perspectives are not explored as intensively.

Therefore, this article discusses the initiative conducted by one of the renowned Polish cultural institutions - the National Museum in Krakow, which aims to give a voice and space to the youngest representatives of the audience - both Generation Z and Generation Alpha. The article is structured as follows. At first, the theoretical aspects of the changing functions of museums and the representation of young people (ages 13 to 18) in culture are discussed, along with their opinions of cultural institutions. Then, the research assumptions, together with the initial reflections, are presented. The article ends with the conclusions.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***The changing role and position of museums in the contemporary world***

Currently operating museum institutions are situated in a rapidly changing environment, facing many challenges. Hence, focusing only on curatorial work and collections seems insufficient nowadays, even if it still sustains a core of museums. Instead, museums have to adapt to unstable external conditions, as was clearly evidenced during the pandemic (e.g., Giusti, 2024). On the other hand, museum stakeholders formulate the expectations that museums should be aware of many situations and the changing needs and preferences of visitors (e.g., Black, 2018; Janes, 2022). All these issues may lead to the assumption that the meaning of museums is not predefined and indisputably existing, but rather must be continually created, refined, and enhanced.

Hence, across all the aspects investigated, one crucial discussion point concerns the accessibility of museum space, given the generally agreed view that museums should be open and accessible to everybody, as noted in ICOM's proposition (ICOM, 2022). The discussions in this area concern various spatial arrangements and the way to remove physical access barriers in the first place. It is also worth noting that pandemic-related challenges and the resulting need to develop online museum programming are closely connected to discussions about making museums more accessible (e.g., Fissi, Gori, & Romolini, 2025). While having museums available online makes the offer more accessible, this approach is not free of challenges. Moreover, the growing need for an attractive online museum presence creates an additional call to make the traditional visit more interesting and meaningful (e.g., Kisiel, 2024), especially in the times of multiplicity of leisure options and the various approaches to edutainment activities (e.g., Balloffet, Courvoisier, & Lagier, 2014).

Additionally, research attention is gradually shifting to issues such as "quiet spaces" and "silent hours" (Lucy & Anderson, 2025), as well as to the general design of museum spaces that are aware of neurodiverse people and their needs, regardless of their age. In such a

manner, the idea of an accessible museum is broadened, truly taking into account the diversity of current and future museum visitors. However, it should be noted that in practice it is not a dominant approach yet, but some initiatives can be noticed, including, among others, the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (Emigration Museum in Gdynia, n.d.), National Museum in Krakow (Accessibility for people with sensory sensitivities, n.d.), or Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands (Rijksmuseum, n.d.). By exploring and considering this aspect, the museum is considered not only as a place with valuable artifacts, but also as a venue where people - both seniors, adults, children, and teens - can feel comfortable. These considerations can also, to some extent, be connected to the broader issue of people's well-being in museums or in art therapy (e.g., Cull & Cull, 2022).

Apart from these aspects, museum institutions are also currently changing the ways and forms of communicating with the environment. It may refer to the general importance of interactivity, dialogue, and openness to co-creation, as well as to participating in important social topics in some way. Hence, museums not only present artifacts, but also, whether through exhibitions or educational programs, address actual and relevant social topics. The range of issues elaborated is quite wide, including, for example, the environment and climate change, migration, feminism, and the broadly understood role of women. These aspects also became part of museums' narratives due to observations of the external environment and the changing needs and preferences of museums' audiences.

### ***Young people in museums – feeling good or being excluded?***

Hence, the discussion of multidimensional changes in museum institutions and their environment cannot be fully conducted without including generational change in society. While on the one hand, the phenomenon of an aging society is clearly observed (Pantel & Anderson, 2026), on the other hand, the younger generation (Generations Z and Alpha) is at the center of attention for many brands and organizations. Conducted explorations and analyses focused on issues such as the way of interacting and consuming the content, interests and forms of spending free time, as well as the high amount of time spent in social media (e.g., Hudders, 2025). Those aspects provide relevant insights for various organizations, but may also raise important cautions, for example, concerning social media and phone addiction or phenomena like "TikTok brain" (e.g., David & Roberts, 2025; Owens, 2025).

Representatives of museums and other cultural institutions are aware that this situation concerns these places as well. Researchers and practitioners are exploring which factors and conditions make museums meaningful for young people, as there is, in general, an observable problem: the younger generation does not see cultural institutions as places dedicated to them or as meaningful. Such a feeling of being more excluded than included was identified some time ago (e.g., Mason & McCarthy, 2006), and it still seems to be the case. Nowadays, in the post-pandemic era and in an environment marked by many challenges, this issue is even more visible, as it concerns both generational aspects in general and broader identity (Linn et al., 2024). Therefore, challenges regarding the low popularity of museums among young people can be observed both in the general trends of visitors' frequency and in whether the museum offers and programming address the needs, values, and preferences of young people. Regarding visitor frequency, researchers observe that although young people in general are willing to participate in various cultural activities, they do not often visit museums (Kisiel, 2025). This provides an interesting insight, as the problem may not always lie in an unwillingness to participate in cultural programs in general, but in how museum offerings are created and communicated to the environment (in terms of how and through which channels).

Apart from describing the current situation, the important issue is to explore the conditions that have led to it. The studies conducted with young people reveal various opinions, focusing not always on a specific place but on the idea of "museum institution" as a whole (Kisiel, 2025). Therefore, it may suggest that facing some kind of "museum

stereotype" may be challenging, as negative opinions are not always addressed toward specific places. Hence, the opinions mentioned, among others, that it is outdated and not oriented toward visitors (Kisiel, 2025). However, it was also evident that perceptions of the museums were dominated by their own school-based experiences (Józef Piłsudski Museum, 2018; Kisiel, 2025). On the other hand, even if museum institutions are not evaluated negatively, respondents do not always report that visiting those places was an occasion to experience the artworks satisfactorily (Kisiel, 2021). These insights may be evaluated more deeply by combining them with the growing concept of "silent hours" in museums.

The discussion about how young people perceive the museum - whether as attractive or not - should be conducted, including the issue of the wide popularity and presence of the Internet and various technological tools and social media platforms. After the pandemic, researchers are increasingly concluding not whether museums should be available online, but how to communicate in an attractive and engaging way. The social media presence - whether on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok - is a very important factor from a promotional point of view. Although some of the content may be discussed through different tools, institutions on TikTok may also provide educational activities adapted to how this kind of social media content should be created (e.g., Huebner, 2022). Hence, if young people spend a lot of time online, museums aiming to attract them should be active in this area as well.

However, this raises the next challenge within the area of museum promotion and communication for young people. Researchers note that when museum collections are available online, institutions must thoroughly reconsider the additional value they can provide. It can be a dedicated program or a place for sharing opinions and perspectives - the crucial point is that it cannot be replaced with the online experience, and it should be something beyond the available online content (Kisiel, 2024). Moreover, it should be interesting and entertaining to support that, even with limited free time, young people will be willing to come and participate in the museum program. Given the diversity of museums, local contexts, and audience-specific needs, it may be challenging to propose a single solution that will definitely fit all conditions. It also considers, among others, the museums' perspectives on social media - while Facebook and Instagram are quite popular communication tools, opinions about TikTok tend to be more diverse (e.g., Sawczuk, 2026). Hence, while on the one hand museums try to actively participate on this platform, knowing that young people can find this content, on the other hand, some institutions are not interested in this form of social media presence for various reasons. However, based on some case analyses, it may be possible to provide a general overview and recommendations for museum actions. All these reflections and considerations make the issue of engaging young people in museums a relevant and current concern.

## Research design

Therefore, based on the provided theoretical overview, the paper aims to explore museums' practices for including the perspectives of young people in cultural programming. The research approach is based on a single-case study design, with the National Museum in Krakow (MNK) purposefully selected for analysis, due to its involvement in the overall idea of engaging representatives of younger generations in creating and shaping the museum content.

The study presented in this article is a part of the broader, qualitative-oriented project named *"Museum Present and Useful"*, implemented by the National Museum in Krakow in cooperation with the PZU Foundation (National Museum in Krakow, 2025). This wider project was designed as a sequence of interconnected activities, consisting of diagnosing the needs of selected audience groups, developing appropriate educational solutions, testing them, and then implementing them in institutional practice. Its central premise is to develop the museum as an accessible, socially responsible space that is attentive to the diverse experiences of its audiences, particularly children, young people, and individuals

with limited opportunities for cultural participation. It should be noted that this museum, in general, is open to various approaches to make this place more accessible - one example are "silent hours" on specific days and hours in order to make a better, more visitor-friendly experience of visiting. According to the project initiators, the starting point for these activities is the belief that museum education can play a role that extends beyond the transmission of knowledge about collections, art history, or the contexts in which artworks were created. Contact with art and the museum environment may also support the development of social and cultural competences, strengthen self-agency, foster relationships, encourage reflection on personal experience, and contribute to psychological well-being. Thus, as the project initiators emphasize, the project aligns with the National Museum in Krakow's mission, *"Museum, People, Future"* (National Museum in Krakow, 2025), which foregrounds accessibility, cooperation with the museum's social environment, and sustainable development.

The concept of *"Museum Present and Useful"* comprises four mutually complementary components. The first - *"Presence"* - focuses on researching young museum audiences and deepening knowledge of their expectations, preferences, and ways of experiencing art and museum space. The study described in this article was carried out within this component. Its relevance stems from the need to identify the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of young people's visits to an art museum, as well as to determine the conditions that strengthen or limit their sense of comfort, orientation, belonging, and active participation.

The next component - *"Sztuka tereNOWA"* ["Art Here and Now"] - has an educational and training-oriented character and is addressed to teachers and students from smaller towns, where access to institutions presenting high art remains limited. The main aim here is to strengthen the competences of people working with children and young people and to embed museum content in local contexts that are familiar and meaningful to audiences. The *"użyj muzeum"* ["Use the Museum"] component develops the idea of young people co-creating the museum's offering. It involves preparing self-guided educational activities addressing topics relevant to young people, such as freedom, the body, well-being, self-acceptance, and intervention. Here, art is treated as a starting point for discussion, creative expression, and work on future-oriented competences, including self-awareness, empathy, creativity, and agency.

The fourth component, named *"Tu i teraz"* ["Here and Now"], focuses on mindfulness, emotion regulation, and psychological well-being in contact with art. It involves the planned development of an educational and relaxation tool in the form of a deck of cards, prepared in cooperation with psychologists and therapists. The tool is intended to support audiences in deepening their reflective engagement with artworks, recognizing their own emotions, and developing practices of rest and self-awareness. The proposed solutions are designed to be universal, enabling their use in museums, schools, developmental activities, and other cultural institutions.

The study of young audiences, therefore, serves both a diagnostic and a design-oriented function within the project. On the one hand, it provides knowledge about young people's experiences in the museum environment. On the other hand, it forms the basis for developing educational solutions that respond to the needs identified through the research. The findings are intended to support the development of museum practices that take into account both the diversity of ways of engaging with art and different levels of cultural competence, as well as the individual emotional and social experiences of participants. The project also refers to the Sustainable Development Goals set out in the 2030 Agenda (Sustainable Development, n.d.), particularly Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being; Goal 4: Quality Education; Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities; and Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. This perspective makes it possible to view the museum as an institution that contributes to creating conditions conducive to well-being, education, social inclusion, and local cooperation.

An important outcome of the project is also intended to be the dissemination of knowledge and tools developed throughout its implementation. A planned concluding conference, primarily addressed to teachers, will provide a space to present research findings, exchange experiences, and discuss the museum's role in responding to contemporary educational and social challenges. The educational materials and recommendations developed within the project will be made available online and distributed to cultural institutions across Poland. In this way, *"Museum Present and Useful"* aims to extend beyond the boundaries of a single institution and become a source of solutions that can be adapted by other museums and organizations engaged in educational and cultural animation activities (National Museum in Krakow, 2025).

The broader research program comprised several complementary strands, one of which was designed and carried out by the researchers and practitioners from the Research Institute of Cultural Organizations (IBOK). They were responsible for conducting this part of the study, including developing research tools, collecting data, conducting qualitative analysis, and interpreting the findings presented here.

The study was requested by the National Museum, which had limited influence on the research. The soliciting institution can be characterized as highly receptive to the research team's methodological recommendations. The main research team conducting the abovementioned part of the project comprised 10 members of the Research Institute of Cultural Organizations - IBOK, supported by volunteers for overt observation. Working groups were designated for study coordination, tool preparation, data collection, qualitative analysis, and results presentation.

The study addressed the set of research questions regarding the emotional, cognitive, and reflective dimensions. Hence, within the **emotional** dimension, the questions were as follows:

RQ1: What attitudes, emotions, and moods do young people experience while in the museum space / [...] does the museum exhibition evoke in young people / [...] emerge in young people when they engage with selected works of art?

RQ2: How do young people connect their impressions with specific museum stimuli, such as light, sound, the scale of the space, silence, or crowds?

RQ3: What role do the body and the senses play in young people's museum experience, particularly in terms of the pace of the visit, fatigue, arousal, immersion, comfort, and discomfort?

Within the **cognitive** dimension, the questions were as follows:

RQ4: Which elements of the museum space [...] / museum exhibition—such as the layout of the galleries, the presentation order, curatorial narrative, descriptions, multimedia, or lighting—support or hinder young people's reception and understanding of the content?

RQ5: How do young people perceive the exhibition as a whole, and how do they describe its clarity, logic, and the way it guides the viewer's attention?

RQ6: What interpretive strategies do young people employ when engaging with works of art, such as references to school knowledge, personal associations, digital culture, and pop culture?

Finally, the **reflective dimension** was represented by the following questions:

RQ7: How does engagement with the museum space, exhibition or specific works of art stimulate young people's self-reflection regarding themselves, their own experiences, their relationships with others, the world, their place in the world, and the future?

RQ8: How do young people relate the museum experience to their own values, beliefs, and identity, including their sense of being included or excluded?

RQ9: Which museum spaces are perceived by young people as conducive to social interaction and co-presence with others?

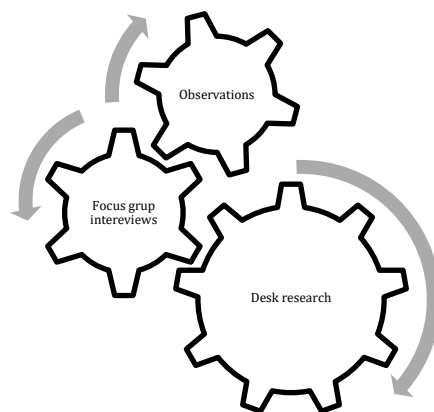
RQ10: What preferences regarding the museum space (e.g., way of touring, atmosphere, relationships, belonging, social interaction, accessibility) do young people express?

*RQ11:* Does the form of the museum exhibition stimulate young people to reflect, and if so, how, and how does it relate to their own experiences?

The study sample included young people aged 13 to 18; therefore, both primary school students and high school students. This age span was predefined by the museum. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed through online channels and via telephone calls to schools and youth organizations. A specific research sample was identified, consisting of individuals whose interests centered on museum management, art, art history, general artistic activities, and historical studies, or who had pursued an education in the arts or at an arts institution (e.g., an art school). By the middle of June 2026, around 30 people had participated in the study. Consent forms for participation in the study were signed by the participant's parents or legal guardians.

It should be noted that young people aged 13 to 18 constitute a particularly interesting yet highly heterogeneous audience. They differ not only in age and developmental stage, but also in their cultural experiences, interests, levels of autonomy, social competencies, emotional sensitivity, and familiarity with museums and art. For this reason, the category of "young people" should be approached with caution and not treated as a uniform group with shared expectations or modes of participation.

An additional methodological challenge was the recruitment process. The study was designed to involve young people who chose to participate voluntarily, rather than pre-existing school classes or other institutional groups. Such an approach was important because it enabled participants who individually chose to take part in the research to speak from their own perspective, rather than primarily as members of a class-based group. At the same time, recruiting such participants required more extensive outreach and coordination, particularly because the study involved minors and therefore required parental or legal guardian consent.



**Figure 1. Elements of the research procedure**

Source: own elaboration

The employed qualitative research methods included desk research, overt observation, and focus group interviews (fig. 1). The three-step research procedure started with desk research—a review of the existing literature, documentation, and online materials, such as research reports about young people and their participation in culture. The analysis was conducted using keywords, including "young people in museums", "teenagers in museums", "museum education for young people", "young people in cultural institutions", or "Generation Z in museums." Based on the results, a tabular summary of the sources was prepared, and a theoretical background for the research was subsequently developed.

In the next phase, research tools were prepared, including a standardized observation form and a standardized script for focus group interviews. The observation form included three types, each tailored to a specific museum department and always structured into sections corresponding to exhibition halls. Moreover, each form has subsections such as: participant demographics; total time spent touring; time spent in specific areas; methods of exploring the exhibition; use of multimedia; use of descriptions; use of phones—both for documenting the exhibition and for unrelated purposes; interaction with others; signs of fatigue; resting during the visit; and the order in which the exhibition was visited. The focus group interview script was organized into blocks, including participants' impressions of the museum space; their sense of orientation within the museum; elements enjoyed and disliked; overall well-being in the exhibition area; influencing factors; experiences with the artwork; suggestions for improvement; and final reflections. Additionally, an exhibition map exercise allowed participants to place markers indicating their assessments of specific areas, the emotions they experienced, and related comments or associations.

The first phase of the empirical research involved observing non-probability-sampled participants. Selection was based on age and needs identified during the study. At times, more participants (4–17) attended sessions than researchers (2–5), requiring a selection process. Participants were informed that they were being observed as they explored the exhibition for 60 minutes. During this time, they explored the gallery freely while researchers observed without interference.

The second phase of the field study consisted of a 2-hour focused group interview supported by the participatory and creative techniques. The participants, along with the moderator and a support person, sat at a table in the museum's education room. The participants' comments were recorded on audio, as indicated in the consent forms and explained before this part of the study began. The creative part involved working with a map that featured a technical sketch of the exhibition space. Participants applied star stickers ranging from 1 to 5 in ascending order, where 1 meant "I definitely would not recommend this place to a friend" and 5 meant "I definitely would recommend this place to a friend." Emoticons were also included to illustrate the emotions participants experienced as they explored the various spaces. The range of emoticons was determined based on Paul Ekman's (2012) work and included emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, joy, disgust, and surprise. Another creative technique involved asking participants to write down their associations with museum areas and specific works of art on speech-bubble-shaped sticky notes.

### **Preliminary insights and observations**

As the project is still ongoing, the results and insights discussed below are preliminary. However, even at this stage, some interesting conclusions can be drawn, given that the participants in the study are a very diverse and unique group of interviewees. First of all, the museum is introducing initiatives to spark young people's interest in art and encourage them to visit exhibition spaces. What is also important is the open cooperation of the museum's employees and their genuine interest in the progress of the study, as well as the ongoing support during the research sessions.

Among the young people participating in the study, their levels of openness, shaped by individual characteristics, differ slightly, yet each research meeting presents interesting opinions and valuable reflections. First of all, it can be observed that they make some suggestions for improving museum space, yet, in general, they are satisfied with the way the museum operates. The conducted focus interviews also revealed that they are attentive to even the smallest details - it could be the light on the painting, the temperature in a specific exhibition room, the type of frame, or whether the sculpture's position allows for the full exploration of the nearby painting.

Moreover, they pay close attention to the context - descriptions (textual introductions to the works) are extremely important to them - they suggest adding brief stories about the works, explanations of the figures depicted in the paintings, and including additional interesting facts that provide context for the artwork. Hence, information only about the painter's name and the title of the work does not seem to be enough. Young people expressed a strong interest in contextual information during the interviews, and this was also evident during the observations. In one of the museum buildings, the exhibition consists of a section called "texts and contexts" - additional information about particular times and artists living in this moment - a lot of young people showed interest in the content provided in those exhibition sections.

Apart from more practical and organizational aspects, focus group interviews were also dedicated to the young people's feelings, emotions, and experiences. Hence, it can be said that they place great importance on the emotions and feelings they experience in museum spaces. Therefore, they show a strong desire to immerse themselves in the museum space and to fully experience it with all their senses. At the same time, they suggest that direct use of multimedia is not necessary; however, opinions are divided regarding the use of projectors. It should be highlighted that the explored museum branches are not places with much multimedia, yet the interviews did not reveal this to be a big disadvantage. Moreover, during the tour around the exhibitions, young people were not interested in using their phones. Some people use them to check the time or take photos, yet this is not a common behavior.

The fact that phones were not used as often can be seen as evidence that a museum is a place for reflection and relaxation, serving as a sensory break from other stimuli. Some of the interviews and observations revealed that sometimes young people go back to already visited exhibition rooms - exploring this, for example, by the nice atmosphere and good place to sit and look at some paintings. For them, the museum is also a place for interaction with others - even without explicit mention during interviews, the social aspect of experiencing the museum was clearly evident, as many study participants explored exhibitions together, sharing insights and commenting on artworks. For the study participants, the Museum is also a place that enables the development of their passions - many of them were specifically interested in art, history, or the history of art, and the visit to the exhibition was a good occasion to strengthen and deepen their passion for specific topics. Some of the participants also admitted that they were somehow familiar with some exhibitions presented by this institution.

Data obtained during the interviews revealed that deepening knowledge was important, including the information acquired through school activities. As some young people declared, artworks made by the artists already known to them especially grab their attention. Moreover, being in the exhibition area, they follow the museum's recommendations - that is, the exhibition route - so it is important to plan this route carefully and thoughtfully. The careful consideration of exhibition space planning concerns both the way sightseeing is described and the clear signage for specific exhibition rooms, as not all of them were equally recognized by the young people.

Apart from the already mentioned aspects, it was observed that young people express satisfaction with the opportunity to influence the museum's decisions, so they have a strong need for agency.

## **Conclusions**

The findings point to an approach closely aligned with a constructivist understanding of learning, developed in the Polish context, among others, by Dorota Klus-Stańska (2020). From this perspective, educational value does not arise primarily from the transmission of ready-made knowledge. It emerges through opportunities for participants to construct their own experiences, interpretations, and meanings.

Young people, therefore, do not seem to expect only an expanded informational layer or a greater intensity of stimuli produced by additional technological tools. More important are conditions that enable attentive immersion in the museum environment, direct contact with artworks, an unhurried pace of engagement, opportunities for conversation, and access to contextual information that supports a deeper understanding of the objects on display. This observation calls for reconsidering the assumption that a greater number of digital forms will automatically increase the engagement of young audiences. Young people who have grown up in a digital environment do not necessarily expect the logic of intensive, screen-based communication to be transferred into museum spaces. Such observations are also made within the field of museum management - hence, in a world dominated by technology, an offline, "traditional" visit to the museum space may rather be based on factors and experiences that are not available only through multimedia (e.g., Kisiel, 2024).

Participants' statements suggest a need for a different kind of experience: more direct, multisensory, less rushed, and embedded in a relationship with the space, the artwork, and other people. Technologies may still play a supportive role, particularly when they facilitate orientation, deepen contextual understanding, or open additional interpretative pathways. However, they should not replace the experience of being present with art. These observations are somewhat consistent with the perspectives of many museum professionals (e.g., Sawczuk & Bajak, 2025), which allowed for the online museum experience during the pandemic, yet after this, they once again focused on activities conducted in direct, "offline", way, that allows for experiencing the museum space, the exhibition, as well as the particular artwork – in a personal way. In this manner, the assumption of an "authentic museum experience" can be observed to some extent. The museum may therefore be understood as an environment that supports the independent construction of meaning. Designing encounters with art should enable young people not only to acquire information, but also to pause, feel, ask questions, create their own associations, and relate museum experiences to their own lives.

In this sense, the engagement of young audiences may be strengthened not by multiplying attractions but by improving the quality of contact, the clarity of the narrative, the accessibility of context, and the sense that their own ways of experiencing art matter within the museum. The need to truly experience the art in the museum was already noticed by the researchers (Kisiel, 2021), as the museum visit does not always allow for this.

The findings may also be interpreted through the lens of the participatory museum and the growing need for co-creation (e.g., Thyne & Hede, 2016). Young people clearly emphasized their need to influence institutional decisions, and they responded positively to being invited to participate in the research and to having their observations treated as a meaningful source of knowledge. Participation, in this context, extends beyond consulting audiences on pre-defined solutions. It may be understood as creating conditions in which visitors co-shape the organization of museum experience: they identify barriers, propose changes, articulate their needs, and contribute to the language through which art is interpreted and discussed.

This approach is consistent with Nina Simon's concept of the participatory museum (2010), in which audiences can act as active participants and co-creators of cultural experience rather than merely as consumers. In the Polish context, it may also be linked to the idea of the relational museum (2025) developed by Beata Nessel-Łukasik, who was also a member of the research team involved in the study discussed in this article. From this perspective, the museum becomes a space of relationships, cooperation, and mutual learning, rooted in the experiences of the people who visit it or contribute to its development.

Including young people in the research process may therefore be understood as an initial step towards a deeper model of shared decision-making. Their perspectives could be used

not only at the stage of evaluating existing provision, but also in designing visitor routes, exhibition narratives, interpretative tools, educational activities, and solutions supporting well-being. Particularly important is informing participants how their recommendations have been taken into account. Such feedback strengthens their sense of agency and helps build trust in the institution. This kind of message was also provided in the described research procedure, which strengthened the overall perception of the participants on this project and its relevance. Although this study provides important insights, the described findings are preliminary and will be further explored.

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