

Enhancing Understanding about Social Issues: Exploring the Educational Role of Museums from the Audience's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Today museums function as important cultural institutions that not only preserve and display artifacts to spaces that can create social awareness and address contemporary social issues. To gain a better understanding about museum experiences and social interactions can enhance the understanding of social issues, this master thesis explores the educational role of museums from the perspective of museum visitors. This study applies the Social Learning Theory to the environment of museums. The Social learning theory is based on the statement that learning is a social process which is improved by social interaction and engagement with others.

The main question guiding this study is: What are the perceptions of museum visitors in Rotterdam, the Netherlands regarding the effectiveness of educational programs in museums and their possibility to enhance understanding of social issues? This study adopts a qualitative approach that involves semi-structured interviews with twelve museum visitors. These participants were selected to gain insight into their diverse perceptions about educational programs, museum experiences, learning preferences, and their views on the social function of museums. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes and patterns in the data, these themes focusing on how educational programs and social interactions enhanced the participants understanding of social issues.

The findings reveal that museum visitors mentioned social interactions multiple times as significant factors regarding their learning experiences. Social interactions, through observation and dialogue, provides chances for shared learning and the co-construction of meaning. This research contributes to our understanding of the educational role of museums by recognising the importance of social interactions and enabling immersive experiences to foster awareness of social issues.

Keywords: museums, museum studies, social learning theory, educational programs, museum learning, art education, social issues, visitor experiences, social interactions.

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1. Introduction

Museums have long been regarded as vital cultural institutions dedicated to the preservation of art, history, and science. However, today museums have also transformed into spaces for informal education and as tools for communicating mass culture (Günay, 2012). One of the main reasons for this, is that contemporary museum studies are recognising the connection between museums as cultural institutions and social learning processes. Here, museums are seen as dynamic institutions that offer possibilities to foster a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives through their educational programs by promoting social interaction and critical thinking (Bandura et al., 1977). Such diverse perspectives are promoted because of the shift towards a more interdisciplinary approach taken by museums where other disciplines, for example anthropology or sociology, are included to provide a broader scope of learning within the museum context (Fyfe, 2006; Macdonald, 2006; Silverman, 2015). Today, this approach taken by museums gains more attention due to its ability to address social-related issues from different sectors within society. By facilitating spaces where visitors can engage in discussions, collaborative activities (e.g. workshops) and immersive environments, museums are able to encourage social interaction and knowledge exchange (Kasperuniene et al., 2020; Soren et al., 1995). In our increasingly fragmented world, the evolving landscape of museums therefore has potential to address social issues by enabling connections between people and communities. This potential is also recognised in the museum definition provided by the International Council of Museums (2023):

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums 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.

Here, the participation of communities and offering varied experiences for education are seen as crucial parts of museum operations to enable knowledge sharing and reflection. Today, such educational experiences are often supported by new technologies to enhance the visitor experience. Through the integration of digital tools and interactive technologies, museums can

enhance the visitor experience and create a deeper understanding (Raimo et al., 2021). Notions of accessibility and inclusivity gain more attention through the implementation of such technological adaptations as it provides easier access to museum collections and is able to target a wider audience on a global scale (D'Allessandro et al., 2024; Morse, 2021; Raimo et al., 2021). Still, not everyone perceives the current museum practices as appropriate. Such advancements (e.g. interdisciplinary approaches, interactive learning or digital tools) are argued to aim to improve the relevance, accessibility, and impact of museums in today's society. However, critics point out that museums might still carry historical biases, leading to principles of inclusivity and representation being questioned (Hicks, 2021; Raicovich, 2021). Additionally, the legitimacy of museums is questioned due to the emphasis on social inclusion and the followed increased involvement in social- and political movements (Casey, 2003; Robinson, 2020; Sigfúsdóttir, 2020). So, while contemporary museums aim to enhance accessibility, relevance, and its impact through an interdisciplinary approach with interactive learning and digital tools, there are still some critiques that need to be addressed in order for them to fulfil such aims.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the question 'What are the perceptions of museum visitors in Rotterdam, the Netherlands regarding the effectiveness of educational programs in museums and their possibility to enhance understanding of social issues?'. Since this study examines the perceptions on the educational programs which museums offer from the visitors' perspective, the role museums have in creating deeper understandings about social issues will also be explored. For this, topics like museum impact, visitor engagement, museum learning, improving educational programs, and building relationships are discussed to explore this role of museums based on the visitor perceptions. This will provide new insights about how museums could possibly be used as instruments to educate the public about societal issues and what the perceived role of museums is in our contemporary society. Due to there being little research on the educational role of museums from the visitor perspective, this study will provide new insights into how museums can possibly become tools to educate the public about societal issues based on the experience of museum visitors. These insights are able to inform current museum practices, contribute to academic scholarship, or address broader societal issues.

To explore how museum visitors in Rotterdam perceive educational programs and their impact on understanding social issues, the Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura will be implemented to the museum context. This theory emphasizes learning through its key principles which include observation, modelling, and social interaction and was applied to

examine how museums can facilitate knowledge exchange and community cohesion (Bandura et al., 1977; Raspopovic et al., 2017). Since Social Learning Theory is primarily used in criminology, placing it in a museum context can provide valuable insights about how it can aid museum learning and community cohesion. This is significant while discussing the educational role of museums, since the Social Learning Theory enables for a larger public to be educated by fostering a more general understanding of new perspectives and norms through socialization. Museums pose for good spaces in which the key principles of the Social Learning Theory can be applied due to their free-choice environments in which museum visitors are able to engage in discussions and co-construct meaning together (Scott, 2006). Since art education and museum learning are often used to combine academic knowledge with practical experience, this study also includes how the theory of social learning can improve the interplay of these two forms of education (Osterman et al., 2010). By questioning the perceptions of museum visitors in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, it was investigated if applying this theory to the educational programs in the museum context is an effective approach for creating a deeper understanding through socialization.

Besides the Social Learning Theory, other literature also aided in clarifying the educational role museums have in our contemporary society. The literature on museum education emphasised the shift in approach, now aiming for interactive and participatory learning experiences within the museum context. On the other hand, visitor studies elaborated the impact of educational programs on the learning outcomes and levels of engagement of museum visitors. Literature on societal issues being present in museums underlined the role cultural institutions have in addressing current social challenges and to promote social change. One of the key concepts, visitor motivations, helped to understand why visitors engage with museum educational programs which is important to design effective experiences that cater to the personal interests and needs of a visitor. Another key concept, learning preferences, was included to recognize the diverse learning preferences of museum visitors and how based on this, museums can create educational programs that use different learning styles and enhance knowledge recollection. By also assessing the impact educational programs have on the understanding of societal issues for visitors, museum initiatives for promoting cultural awareness and social change are critically evaluated. However, there were also some gaps in the literature present which this study aims to address. These gaps are filled in by investigating the long-term effects of educational programs, the relationship between perceptions of visitors on societal issues, learning preferences and the impact of the educational functions in museums as means to promote social empathy and understanding.

These perceptions were gathered by employing a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews. The participants in this study were gathered through non-probability sampling, specifically criterion purposive sampling and resulted in a sample of twelve participants. Here, two criteria were employed to ensure a qualifiable sample that could provide valuable insights into the experience and perceptions of museum visitors related to educational programs museums offer. By employing purposive sampling, a diverse yet qualifiable set of participants, which included individuals from different backgrounds and disciplines, was gathered to allow a comprehensive understanding of how different types of museum visitors perceive educational programs in museums and contributed to a generalized understanding of visitor perspectives. The two criteria that were included, were that participants had to have visited a museum in the last year and them residing in Rotterdam in order to provide an answer to the research question. Since this research aims to investigate how museum visitors perceive educational programs in museums and their effectiveness in enhancing understanding of societal issues, this sampling approach ensures that the valuable experiences and insights of individuals could be related to the research topic. This was followed by a thematic analysis of the data to uncover the underlying motivations, perspectives, and experiences of museum visitors regarding the educational programs in museums. By employing a thematic approach in the analysis, common themes were uncovered which aided in understanding how the museum experiences of the participants influence their understanding of societal issues. The four key themes and seven sub-themes that structure the analysis, were able to present the insights that derived from the conducted interviews in a clear overview so the research question could be answered. Through the thematic analysis, this study aims to decode the ways in which museum experiences are able to shape the perspectives of individuals on educational programs and provides insights into how museums can serve as tools for social change in contemporary society.

2. Theoretical framework

The role of museums has changed since they first appeared over two thousand years ago (Ásványi et al, 2021). Museums today have progressed from the traditional idea of being mere spaces where art and science are displayed and all treasures of the past are conserved, to being informal educational areas and tools for communicating the mass culture (Günay, 2012). With the evolution of the social learning theory, museums are embracing new paradigms that enable experiential learning and provide dynamic spaces where community engagement takes place. Since museums offer collections that illustrate stories and expressions of humanity, they are well posed to play a vital role in helping people connect our increasingly fragmented world (Feldman, 2017). By approaching this through the Theory of Social Learning, it is investigated how this can be of aid in spreading knowledge about what these collections offer, and it could enable a deeper understanding of social issues and provide connections between people and communities.

2.1 The Social Learning Theory

The theory of Social Learning, first introduced by Albert Bandura, focusses on learning through the observation and modelling of behaviour, attitude, and outcomes of others instead of traditional behaviourist theories which focused solely on external reinforcements (Bandura et al., 1977; Muro et al., 2008). The Social Learning Theory is structured through five tenets provided by Bandura (1977), and based on these principles of social learning, learning is explained to as a cognitive process that occurs within social contexts. The environment playing a big role in learning is not something new, as different scholars argue the environment to be essential in supporting individuals to advance in their learning processes by integrating various tools and platforms (Clabaugh, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987; Raspopovic et al., 2017). However, the theory of Social Learning argues that individuals learn most in social environments through interactions with others, such interactions are possible through actual dialogues but also through only observation (Bandura et al., 1977; Raspopovic et al., 2017). This means that individuals can learn by observing other behaviours and their consequences, which can also happen subconsciously even when we do not immediately change our own conduct. Additionally, Bandura also established the concept of ‘self-efficacy’ emphasizing the importance of self-assurance amongst individuals regarding their own capabilities for determining their actions and outcomes, which has had a significant impact on education (Bijandi et al., 2011). This sheds light on how individuals can motivate themselves within a

learning environment, whether it being in a classroom or museum, to ensure that they are confident about their own knowledge and understanding and feel comfortable sharing this with others. Self-efficacy shows how individuals set goals, approach tasks, and handle setbacks which can be linked to different disciplines like, for example, education but also the medical field (Artino, 2012). With diverse audiences visiting museums, it is important to consider what the levels of self-efficacy could be for different individuals so effective ways to convey information can be provided. Such levels of self-efficacy, prior knowledge, and interpretive strategies used for art works are important to take into account as this influences how each individual approaches and learns within the museum context (Wilson, 2015). With individuals being active in different disciplines and having different levels of self-efficacy, the theory of Social Learning is able to foster conversations between different communities and people through its interdisciplinary nature.

However, Social Learning Theory argues that one of the main ways people learn is through operant conditioning and vicarious reinforcements (e.g. Brauer, 2009; Rebellon, 2006). Operant conditioning is a method of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for certain behaviour, where individuals are able to make associations between particular behaviour and its consequences (McLeod, 2018; Skinner, 1938). Still, critics like Strickland (1982) argue that the acquisition and persistence of behaviour (deviant or conforming) is contingent upon differential reinforcement, which is the balance of rewards or punishments attached to different behaviours. In the context of museums this already raises some questions, as individuals visiting museums are often not rewarded for how they act or behave during their visit. One of the main criticisms on social learning is to what extent social interactions influence behaviour (Stewart, 2021). Since museums offer free-learning environments which do often include some rules regarding preferred visitor behaviour, there are only limited punishments and barely any rewards. But further investigation shows that even though reinforcements are mentioned in the theory of social learning, they are also disarmed as sole determinants in behaviour (Bandura et al., 1977; Kendal et al., 2018; Thyer et al., 1998).

Instead, the focus of the Social Learning Theory focuses on how cognition, behaviour, and the environment interact and influence each other in a dynamic process called reciprocal determinism (Bandura et al., 1977). In this process, the significance of social interactions and environmental conditions in connection to shaping learning experiences is stressed. Yet including environments, whether they are actual spaces or network structures, is not a requirement of social learning (Reed et al., 2010). Still, the theory of Social Learning does

emphasize that environmental conditions can provide and maintain certain behaviour of a person (Amsari, 2024). However, in contemporary society, engagement with social media tools can also be seen as an emerging social learning environment and can even be viewed as a potential performance predictor (Popescu et al., 2018). Here, we step away from only focussing on tangible environments but also include digital environments due to technology also gaining popularity in cultural institutions, like museums. People are still able to process information through the observation of objects but today this also includes the presence of learning media, like social media, in their environment (Asmari, 2024). Nevertheless, the concept of reciprocal determinism notes that environment does not only influence an individual but that this is a dynamic interplay between the two (Bandura, 1978). The Mona Lisa, made by DaVinci, provides a clear example of this, with the inclusion of different cultural time periods, e.g. Dadaism and Pop-art, and millions of tourists visiting the Louvre each year to observe the painting (Carbon et al., 2013). By continuously being present in different environments and people actively observing, the interplay between the two contributes to the Mona Lisa staying one of the most important and known artworks in today's society. However, critics argue that social biases are of influence on social learning in certain environments due to individuals possibly imitating behaviours demonstrated by dominant individuals which influences their learning processes (Olsson et al., 2020). One could argue that, for example, the Mona Lisa is perceived as one of the most famous artworks in the world, making it difficult to go against this dominant perspective which could impede individual learning processes. Based on this, it has become visible that different forms of environments, moving past only tangible environments, observation and modelling can influence the process of social learning where new behaviour, understanding, and knowledge is gained.

2.2 Museum studies

Museum studies are recognising that museums as cultural institutions are deeply connected with social learning processes. This becomes noticeable due to museums stepping away from traditional approaches, based on history and art history, and instead contemporary museum studies put focus on drawing insights from various disciplines such as art history, anthropology, sociology, education, communication, and material cultural studies (Fyfe, 2006; Macdonald, 2006; Silverman, 2015). Including this interdisciplinary approach enables for a broader scope of learning within the museum context, which allows for more societal issues deriving from different sectors within society to be addressed. In 1839, the term 'museology'

was introduced, which can be defined as the science of museums, covering the history of museums, their social role, organization, and all issues pertaining to research, preservation, and dissemination (Popadic, 2020). However, the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) mentions that even though the field of museology is much more extensive than the study of the museum itself, its main focus remains on the functions, the activities, and the role in society of museums as a depository of collective memory (International Council of Museums, 2024). Whilst museums have been known to educate the public about history, today museums are able to offer more by also functioning as platforms to understand different cultures, address global issues and function as agents of cultural diplomacy by promoting unity and understanding (Sapir, 2023). This has also changed the way museum studies are approached.

One of the most notable changes in museum studies, is the shift of focus from only collecting, preserving and exhibiting objects to a growing recognition of museums functioning as spaces for community engagement, in which the demand to reflect a broader range of identities and perspectives, through engagements with marginalized groups, gains importance (Morse, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Silverman, 2015). Museums create spaces where visitors can engage in discussions, debates, and collaborative activities like workshops or hands-on exhibitions to encourage social interaction and knowledge exchange (Kasperuniene et al., 2020; Soren et al., 1995). One of the ways in which takes shape is by orientating through an experience-approach, that provides visitor engagement through immersive environments, representing a wider range of perspectives, and storytelling to convey cultural narratives (Aktin, 2020; Casey, 2003). The Cleveland Museum of Natural History is one of the museums that creates such immersive experiences by fusing the latest scientific discoveries and interactive technologies, for example, through Projection Mapping which allows visitors to have a multi-sense experience of prehistoric life (Russo, 2024). This is an example of how contemporary museum studies prioritise visitor engagement and experiential learning in which the focus is on creating meaningful and memorable experiences for visitors (Atkin, 2020; Casey, 2003; Rodner et al., 2015). The environment in which learning takes place has a big role in the Social Learning Theory, and even though multiple scholars argue the environment to be essential for individual learning processes, in the museum contexts visitors are also able to learn through the observation of other visitors and artifacts, thus creating experiences could improve the learning process in museums (Bandura et al., 1977; Clabaugh, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987; Raspopovic et al., 2017). Other, more art relevant museums, have also implemented similar strategies. The Louvre in Paris has integrated interactive and

multi-media elements, like mobile apps and online collections, into their exhibitions in order to make art and history more accessible and engaging to its visitors (Tung, 2020). This focus on the inclusivity and participation of diverse communities has caused museums to move away from more traditional top-down approaches, in which limited involvement from visitors or community members are present (Morse, 2021; Silverman, 2015).

The interdisciplinary approach adopted by museums is not the only shift in priority noticeable, as integration of new technologies in museums are rapidly increasing. In the examples mentioned above, it is shown that digital tools are being used for enhancing visitor experiences, providing access to collections and to enable interactive learning (Morse, 2021). The theory of Social Learning intertwines with this because not only the objects but also the museum space is being used to stimulate learning amongst visitors and thus engagement with the environment is applied to enhance this learning process. Today, museums aim to create influential encounters between visitors and museum narratives through digital tools, which take shape in virtual tours, interactive experiences, and immersive technologies (Raimo et al., 2021). These new forms of technology are increasingly being used in different museums, because it provides more in-depth information that is accessible to all, allowing for a deeper understanding amongst visitors about the museums content (D'Allessandro et al., 2024). Digitalized educational tools, for example audio guides, augmented reality or QR-codes, are also implemented in the museum context to also enable easier access to collections and facilitate interactive learning (Morse, 2021; Raimo et al., 2021). Such digital educational tools use principles from the Social Learning Theory by offering a new form of observational learning, a key tenet of the social learning theory (Bandura et al., 1977). Museums offering services online is not only supported because of accessibility reasons, but it also allows for museums to connect with their audiences on a global scale and enables a sense of community around their collections (D'Allessandro et al., 2024). Ultimately, the importance of museums as vital institutions shifts from preservation of the past to also including engagement with contemporary societal issues and future possibilities.

2.3 Critique on museums

Museums offer many positive aspects; however, they are also cultural institutions that often receive a critical stance. One of the most prominent points of critique for cultural institutions, for example museums, is that they might carry historical biases, especially regarding colonial legacies, which results in principles of inclusivity and representation being questioned (Hicks, 2021; Raicovich, 2021). These topics are therefor also quite prominent

when focusing on how museums are able to create understanding and a sense of community with their forms of education. Through the adaptation of new technologies, as used by the Cleveland Museum of National History, this point of critique could be faced by providing multi-sense environments of these historical events aimed at enabling museum visitors to experience and connect to historical events. Museums today have the possibility to reflect and reformulate their discourse on, for example colonial legacies, towards a more inclusive and representative narrative of history and culture with help of these new technologies and by adapting strategies of Social Learning (D'Allessandro et al., 2024; Lorente, 2022).

Another point of critique is how the emphasis on social inclusion in museums is undermining the importance of preserving and showcasing the collection, and thus the cultural and legitimacy of museums is seen as eroding (Casey, 2003; Sigfúsdóttir, 2020). Due to museums being increasingly more part of social- and political movements, this leads to museums being encouraged to take clear moral stands on cultural and social issues, aiming for a broader focus on advancing social justice and human rights within museum practices (Robinson, 2020). This can be achieved by incorporating principles of Social Learning by, for example, promoting social interactions within the museum space so visitors can exchange perspectives and learn from one another (Bandura, 1977). Though there is realistically no such thing as 'neutral' institution place; by promoting specific political ideologies through museums, they lose the function of being an autonomous cultural space that represent culture (Rodner et al., 2015). Here, stepping away from the traditional top-down approach and including other outside perspectives in decision-making could help addressing this critique and promote the legitimacy of the cultural institution whilst also regaining the function of an autonomous cultural space.

Lastly, to stay relevant museums today are increasingly adopting aggressive business strategies to attract wider audiences and to deal with institutional imperatives, such as maintaining collections and funding streams (Raicovich, 2021; Robinson, 2020; Rodner et al., 2015). However, this has raised questions about prioritizing entertainment over pedagogical goals through the commodification of art and culture and how this, as previously mentioned, impacts the museums independence and autonomy (Raicovich, 2021; Casey, 2003). For this, strategic management practices in the museum sector are necessary to balance such commercial imperatives with the educational and cultural missions of museums (Morse, 2021). Museums are able approach this through the theory of Social Learning by developing educational programs that encourage active participation and interaction instead of passive forms for consuming information (Bandura et al., 1977). Museums can foster an

understanding for diverse perspectives if their educational programs promote social interaction and critical thinking (Bandura et al., 1977). This also allows museums to evolve into dynamic institutions that do not only focus on the preservation of heritage but also serve as agents for positive social change and seen as relevant in current society.

2.4 Art education

Art education has been viewed as a means to express one-self in the past but in contemporary contexts it is much more than this, also functioning as a way to develop a cultural identity instead of only a personal identity (Zimmerman, 2009). This shift in paradigms, which is not only present in museums but also in art education, is consistent with the theory of Social Learning in which the role of social interactions and culture shape the behaviour or identity of an individual. Art education is argued to enable artistic expression and interpretation for individuals, by providing different ways to communicate and explore their thoughts, emotions and perspectives (Biesta, 2019). Here, the social aspects that come with art education, in which individuals find ways to not only express and understand themselves but also include outside perspectives and experiences to create a sense of social empathy and connection is recognized. This indicates that art education is able to aid individuals through exploration and artistic expression for understanding their relationships with others through and eventually helps foster a sense of embodiment and self-awareness (Ash, 2016; Heaton, 2018a, b). Since, as previously mentioned, there is an increase of fragmentation in the world, it is important to engage individuals in artistic processes where critical thinking skills, creativity, and problem-solving skills are developed (Feldman, 2017; Heaton, 2018a, b). This, so a broader understanding of the world can be developed by fostering values like empathy and tolerance and exposing individuals to a wide range of cultural perspectives and social issues (Heaton, 2021).

Contemporary art education therefor is not only a matter of self-expression but also a way to gain insights into different cultural norms, values and experiences through the observation and interaction with others. Here we see that, like museums, art education also implement an interdisciplinary approach by including disciplines like technology or the social sciences, to enable a holistic understanding of the world and its interconnectedness for individuals (Güler, 2017; Song, 2012). So called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education has allowed for an easier inclusion of such disciplines within the practices of art education, but it also resulted in a decrease in funding and focus on art education in schools (Desai, 2019). Correspondingly, there is a noticeable change in societal

values on art education since, compared to subjects like math and science, art education is not seen as an essential part of learning for younger generations (Eisener, 1987; Halverson et al., 2023). This change in value is recognised in the interest rates of Dutch high school students, with students interested in art dropping from 45% to 32% whilst subjects like math have an interest rate of 55% amongst students (Qompas, 2023). However, through the inclusion of other disciplines, students can understand the broader context of art in our society because of connections between art and different disciplines (e.g. Bevan et al., 2019; Halverson, 2021). So, art and art education should not be seen as a separate field but as a way to relate and understand the world.

However, in the Netherlands the adaptation of a more interdisciplinary approach for teaching art allows for a better understanding of such social, cultural, and political connections that art education deals with (Stuhr, 1995). Even though the role of art education is often facing challenges from external economic expectations and institutional accountabilities, which can limit its potential for creativity and innovation, there is notable improvement in enabling social awareness (Gierson, 2021). Different literature on art education indicates that providing cultural awareness by exposing people to different cultures, traditions, and perspectives through art education can ultimately play a role in the transformation of society (Halverson et al., 2023; Siegesmund, 2000). Once again, the principles of Social Learning can be applied to this concept by aiming for more social interaction between individuals and communities to enable a general deeper understanding amongst society. Since both museums and art education are undergoing transformations in which social interaction and aiming for a broader understanding of culture and the world have gained attention, their connection and combined impact on society is explored.

2.4 Museum learning

Museum learning is therefore of interest since museums are able to offer a broad range of ways to educate their visitors and allow visitors to decide how and in what they educate themselves. Compared to art education, museum-based learning enables a less formal and restrictive way of thinking and learning, provides aesthetic experiences, and personal engagement with artworks compared to state-controlled education (Earle, 2013; Kim, 2008). Here, the environment in which learning will take place is already equipped with the possibility of visitors interacting with exhibits, artifacts and other visitors. The aim of understanding museum exhibitions and programs derives from considering the social relationship which exists between objects, ideas, and agents during the course of a museum

visit (Luckerhoff et al., 2016). Doing this in an environment which already stimulates learning, once again through principles of Social Learning, visitors can also observe how other visitors interact with educational programs in museums and this influences their own learning experiences (Bandura et al., 1977).

Different tools and techniques are used in museum learning to enable the possibility of deepening the understanding of societal complexities amongst visitors. Such educational tools are often presented through exhibitions or guided tours where knowledgeable educators provide insights on the artworks, which are familiar strategies to enrich the visitors experience in a museum (Kim, 2008). However, as previously mentioned, over the last two centuries the shift towards more interactive and experiential learning approach has occurred, leading museums to the increased use of hands-on exhibits, interactive displays and workshops (Tišliar 2017). These forms of education, where visitors are actively engaging with the content presented in museums, promote experiential learning and skill-building by allowing them to get a deeper understanding of the subject matter and providing them with the ability to link intellectual concepts with practical applications (Kasperuniene et al., 2020; Tišliar, 2017). This is enabled by promoting critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation which encourages thinking, comparing and drawing conclusions based on their observations and interactions with museum exhibits (Tišliar, 2017). Due to museums being seen as dynamic institutions that work in diverse social contexts and with a great variety of people and groups, such interactions are seen as valuable for adult learning, empowering communities, and social change (Kim et al., 2016; Morse, 2021). Here, the dynamicity of museum education, where visitors can engage and interpret the objects displayed based on personal interest whilst also having the opportunity for dialogue, is essential (Kim, 2008).

Since contemporary museum studies focus on not only looking at educating but also creating an experience for museum visitors, the focus is not only on the content but also on how it adds to the experience. Such practical applications are often supported by making these experiences multisensory through the inclusion of touch, smell, sound, and sometimes even taste, to create an environment that is immersive, stimulates curiosity and deepens the understanding (Earle, 2013). This is also where the use of digital programs arises, where museums offer online educational programs, virtual tours, and digital resources are used to reach beyond the physical visit and attract to a wider audience (Knutson et al., 2012; Earle, 2013). However, today these digital programs also use tools as augmented reality, virtual reality, interactive displays and mobile apps to provide additional information as well as aiding the physical museum space with interactive experiences and storytelling

(Kasperuniene et al., 2020). By adopting such technologies in the context of museum learning, museums are able to extend their educational role to a larger audience by increasing the accessibility to their content. The Guggenheim Museum provides a clear example, as they actively make use of digital platforms like Instagram or YouTube to connect with their audience and spread information about their latest exhibitions (Social | The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, n.d.). Besides spreading information and connecting with their audience, it also allows for the audience to discuss their perspectives and opinions with one another, enabling Social Learning through digital technologies.

In addition to this, museums are able to facilitate personalized learning experiences that cater to the preferences and interests for each individual visitor. While learning in a traditional classroom setting aims to convey knowledge and skills related to art history, aesthetics, and techniques through formal modes of instruction and assessment – learning in museums offer a more immersive and interactive experience, which allows students to include personal reflection and interpretation and giving them freedom to explore at their own pace (Kim, 2008). However, museums are often equipped educational programs specially tailored for school groups which include guided tours, activities or workshops that connect to the curriculum to provide a hands-on learning experience for students (Candlin et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2012). In this personalized learning approach, the Social Learning Theory is reflected through the means of constructing knowledge and understanding through active engagement with the environment. Hence why school curriculums often include a trip to a museum to provide a complete educational experience with experiential learning that combined academic knowledge with the practical aspects, to ultimately create a deeper level of engagement and understanding (Osterman et al., 2010). This allows students to link what they have learned in the classroom to a more practical experience in museums, which requires critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation, also aiding in gaining a complete understanding of the world and all its complexities.

All of these ‘intangible’ aspects of museum education, such as personal learning in a visual, hands-on, free-choice environment and the development of perspective and insight are strategies used in museums (Scott, 2006). By employing such educational programs and strategies, visitors are presented with opportunities to share perspectives, engage in discussions and co-construct meaning together. Through museums that facilitate dialogue and community engagement, a social learning dynamic is promoted which aims to enhance visitor understanding and appreciation of (cultural) heritage (Bandura et al., 1977; Morse, 2021). The aspect of learning through interaction and observation is promoted within the museum

space through these educational programs allows visitors to learn from each other's experiences, insights, and interpretations of museum exhibitions and thus promoting this sense of community and shared learning (Soren et al., 1995). Museums therefor have the ability to not only educate younger generations but are able to educate all, due to the environment they offer in which each individual has their own personal way of learning about the content but also themselves and the world.

3. Methods

In this research it is investigated how museum visitors in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, perceive the effectiveness of educational programs in museums and their possibility to enhance understanding of societal issues.

3.1 Choice of method

In this study, data was collected through the qualitative method of conducting semi-structured interviews and analysed through a thematic analysis. This qualitative approach was effective for this study because it focuses on experience, meaning and perspective from the standpoint of the participant, in this case museum visitors in Rotterdam (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Since this study focussed on the experiences with educational programs from the viewpoint of museum visitors, this approach was fitting as it allows to gain a deeper understanding about different aspects that influenced these experiences. Besides that, the qualitative approach has enabled to uncover underlying reasons, motivations and processes of museums visitors in relation to their experience of educational aspects in museums (Busetto et al., 2020). This was useful to understand what role and function cultural institutions, in this case museums, have for each participant and what role educational programs play in this.

The research question is answered by means of semi-structured interviews because this allowed for a better understanding of the participant's unique perspective instead of a general understanding about educational programs in museums (Adeoye-Olatunde et al., 2021). Due to the experiences of museum visitors being the point of focus in this study, these unique perspectives will allow for a deeper insight into how educational programs specifically impact and enrich the individual museum experiences of visitors. Also, by using semi-structured interviews there was a certain flexibility in the (follow-up) questions asked and thus allowed for exploration of unexpected insights that came forth during the interviews (Knoblauch, 2004). An example of this, was the later addition of the question about what an ideal museum looks like for each participant to gain insight into what would work for them personally instead of what they thought was best. Since experiences are often very personal, the set questions were not able to fully explore the experiences and perceptions related to educational programs, therefore using a semi-structured interview allowed for this to be possible by having the possibility to delve deeper into interesting answers by asking follow-up questions. The aim for conducting these semi-structured interviews was to gain insight into how the participants, in this case museum visitors in Rotterdam, perceive the educational

programs in museums and if they believe they make it possible to enhance their understanding of societal issues.

3.2 Sampling

To collect the data for the semi-structured interviews, the technique of non-probability sampling in the shape of criterion purposive sampling was applied to gather participants for this study. The method of purposive sampling allowed for a structure within the data sample based on certain criteria (Rai et al., 2015). In this study the two criteria were implemented. The first criteria, for participants to have visited a museum in the last year, was necessary to gain insights into how the participants recently experienced a museum visit and if or how they perceive its educational programs. Recent recollection of visited museums would not have been possible if the participants had not visited a museum in the last year, bringing along the risk of participants having no active memory of their latest visits and therefore not providing useful insights for this study. The second criteria, for participants to reside in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, was chosen because of approachability in the collecting of participants and due to a strong presence of cultural institutions, like museums, in the Randstad compared to other regions of the Netherlands (Raat, 2011). This allowed for a more extensive sample, as most participants have visited more than one museum in the Randstad region, providing a diverse range of experiences with different museums and making it possible to compare multiple experiences of participants enabling clarification on what does and what does not work for them when talking about their perceptions of educational programs in museums.

For this sample, nine individual interviews were conducted and one group interview consisting of three people, resulting in a data collection of 12 participants in 10 interviews. Throughout this study these participants will be addressed by letters to maintain anonymity for ethical reasons. A complete overview of the participants included in this study can be found in Appendix I. The interviews varied in duration, all of them ranging from 45 minutes up to an hour and twenty minutes, following the Methodological Guidelines and allowing for elaborate insights on the questioned topics for each participant. The participants were gathered through different approaches, for example, through social-media and/or through mutual connections or networking. By using multiple approaches to gather willing participants for this research, a diverse yet qualifiable set of participants was achieved. The data sample for this research consists of ten female participants and two male participants, ranging from ages 22 to 29 and thus mostly focussing on young adults that currently reside in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Even though the participants were gathered through purposive sampling, the two points of criteria mentioned earlier in this chapter, the backgrounds of the participants vary in the fields and disciplines they are currently active in. The reason for having such diversity within the sample was to achieve a diverse and rich data set aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of how different types of visitors perceive educational programs in museums. Due to the participants being active in different disciplines, insights of people not actively working in the cultural sector were gained offering multiple perspectives and thoughts which contributed to a making it possible to create a generalized understanding of how visitors perceive educational programs in the museum context. Within the data set, two types of participants can be distinguished, those who work actively in the cultural sector and those who do not. With the participants being active in the cultural sector ranging from students at the art academy, the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, as well as having participants work as a theatre teacher or a media editor. These participants were included due to their active cultural engagements to gain insight into the perceptions on museum education from a more culturally aware point of view. Contrasting to these participants, people were included that are actively participating in other sectors like, for example, the municipality, the medical field and sectors like psychology or business. These participants, who do not have professional functions in the cultural sector, were included in this research due to them being less likely to engage actively in the cultural sector in their daily lives and thus providing insight into their perceptions from a standpoint that is less likely to be aware of the practices within the cultural sector. By including both participants who are active and not active within the cultural sector, an elaborate overview of insights was gained on the perceptions and allowed for a generalization about how museum visitors perceive educational programs within the museum context and if they are possible to enhance understanding of social issues.

3.3 Operationalization

This study is constructed around the main theory of Social Learning but also gives insight into how this intertwines with art education, museum learning and museum studies. The topic list for this study was constructed based on existing literature discussed in the theoretical framework, where the Social Learning Theory is linked to the research question. The topic list ended up being guided by the key concepts that derived from the theoretical framework, resulting in four topics to guide the interviews. The four concepts used in this study and derived from the theory are ‘Social learning theory’, ‘Art education’, ‘Museum learning’ and ‘Museum studies’. These concepts were transformed into simpler terms to make

it easier for the participants to understand what each topic is about, resulting in the following three topics guiding the interview: ‘Museum experiences’, ‘Museum education’ and ‘Museum perceptions’. In the conducted interviews, the focus was mainly on the experiences of each participant in connection to the educational programs that museums offer but also included other aspects present in museums, such as their motivations behind a visit and how they perceive the social role of museums.

The first topic discussed in the interview was ‘Museum experiences’. This topic included questions about the general experiences of each participant with museums by, for example, asking them about their motivations to visit a museum and if they visit with company or not. Since social learning theory argues that museums function as spaces for community engagement (Morse, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Silverman, 2015), it was valuable to gain insight about what has influence on the motivation of the participants to visit a museum. By also implementing one of the key tenets of the Social Learning Theory, social interaction, into the questions, insights were gained about if and/or how the participants used strategies of social learning during their visit. Since, Social Learning Theory argues that individuals learn most in social environments through interactions, both in dialogue and observation, questions about such interactions were also included in this topic (Bandura et al., 1977; Raspopovic et al., 2017). For example, questions about how participants are influenced by other visitors, if they interact with other visitors and how visiting with company influences their visit were included to provide insight into if and how the participants learn through social interactions.

The second topic discussed is ‘Museum education’. Here, the focus is on the experience of the participants with educational programs provided by museums and what their perceptions on museum education are. The first questions on this topic focussed mostly on if museums helped with their understanding of certain topics and their what their reasonings were behind participating or not participating in an educational program. These questions were aimed at gaining more insight into how accessible and approachable educational programs in museums are. Due to new forms of technology being adopted by museums to enable more in-depth information that is accessible to all visitors (D’Alessandro et al., 2024), questions were also asked about the participants’ experiences with such digital tools in museum contexts. Additionally, the participants were also asked if they would still physically visit a museum if all content was available online which, once again, gave insight into what they view to be the function of museums. Also, as previously mentioned, museum-based learning allows for a less formal and restrictive way of engaging in immersive and interactive experiences compared to classroom learning through instruction and assessment (Earle, 2013;

Kim, 2008). Hence why, participants were questioned about how they believe learning differs in these different settings and if they thought one was better than the other. This was included to give insight in how the participants view the educational role of museums and if they perceive this form of learning as relevant in today's society.

The third topic discussed in the interview was 'Museum perceptions'. This topic delves deeper into the social aspects of museums and how the participants interact with these aspects. Since museums can expose individuals to, e.g. social issues (Heaton, 2021), questions were asked about if and how museums could address such societal issues. This was done in order to gain insight into how the participants perceive the social role that museums have and its position in our current society. Following this, museums today are seen as platforms to understand different cultures, addressing global issues, and as agents of cultural diplomacy (Sapir, 2023). Therefore, the participants were also asked if they have ever taken action after a museum visit. This was included in the interview to explore the activating role museums might have based on the type of societal issues they address. Next, museums that facilitate dialogue and community engagement promote social learning by engaging visitors in discussions (Bandura et al., 1977; Morse, 2021). To gain insight into if these discussions actually occur based on museums, the participants were questioned about their social interactions, for example, if they had ever discussed their visits with others. Considering that the environment in which learning takes place has a big role in social learning by, for example observing other visitors (Bandura et al., 1977; Clabaugh, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987; Raspopovic et al., 2017), the participants were also asked if they believed museums are spaces where people can learn from each other. This allowed for insights into how they view learning in the space of a museum and explores if they believe this tenet of social learning is possible in the museum context. By structuring the interview guide according to these three topics, insights on the different aspects that relate to the perceptions of museum visitors on educational programs were gained and enabled the Social Learning Theory to be operationalized. Through the structuring of these topics, the social dynamics and educational potential of museum spaces are investigated and explored. The interview guide used in this study is presented in Appendix II.

3.4 Method of analysis

As mentioned before, this research used the approach of a thematic analysis to gain insights about the perceptions of museum visitors on the effectivity of educational programs in the museum context. Thematic analysis helps capture the essence of the perceptions from

museum visitors on educational programs by allowing for a deeper understanding of the participant's perspectives, beliefs and behaviours, and enables patterns and meanings within the data to be discovered (Maguire et al., 2017; Riget et al., 2016). The essence of each individual perception on educational programs provided by the participants, the patterns and the meanings within the data that arise out of the analysis will be used to provide a possible answer to the research question. The analysis process for this study started with familiarizing the collected data and preparing them for analysis through the process of transcribing the interviews. The interviews were transcribed within a span of two weeks, allowing for familiarisation with the data and already seeing connections and contradictions in the answers of different participants. During the process of transcribing the interviews notes were made to keep track of these connections and contradictions in order to give an overview of these varying perceptions.

Next, the transcriptions were uploaded in Atlas.ti and the procedure of open coding was applied to all interviews individually. This allowed for a further exploration of the data and provided the range of perspectives and ideas from each individual to be identified without pre-determined themes affecting this process. During this process, some quotes from the participants were coded 'in-vivo' because the exact words that were used by the participant was valuable for the analysis and thus it was unnecessary to apply a code to these quotes. After coding the data through open coding, a round of axial coding was done in order to structure the data systematically and to make identifying the key themes and sub-themes in the data clearer and manageable. This was done by connecting the open codes to categories which was done by color coding each open code, making it easier to identify in which category what specific code belongs. The results from the axial coding process can be found in Appendix III to give insight into how this contributed to the finalisation of the themes and sub-themes used in the analysis for this study. The final step in the coding process, was using the themes and sub-themes from the axial round of coding to generate the key themes that would be used during the analysis by looking at the similarities and differences between these themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes that were in similar groups were then transformed into a new set of themes and sub-themes which were then revised and defined by linking back to the theoretical concepts used in the theoretical framework and interview guide to create final key themes and sub-themes that structure the analysis. An overview of the final themes and sub-themes can be found in Appendix V. Based on these finalised themes and sub-themes the analysis was written, which are presented in the next chapter.

4. Analysis

The role of museums has changed drastically, transforming into informal educational spaces that play a vital role in helping people connect to our increasingly fragmented world (Ásványi et al., 2021; Günay, 2012; Feldman, 2017). By approaching this through the principles of the Social Learning Theory in which observational learning, modelling, and social interactions are promoted, individuals are stimulated to connect to this fragmented world by fostering a sense of community and understanding of diverse perspectives within the museum context (Bandura et al., 1977; Osterman et al., 2010; Wilson, 2015). In this chapter, I present my findings on how museum visitors perceive educational programs in museums and if they are able to enhance their understanding of societal issues. Through a thematic analysis of the data, key concepts were derived from the transcribed interviews which are essential for understanding each participants' perceptions on educational programs in museums and their role regarding societal issues. The key concepts, also known as key themes, have been labelled as 'Visitor Interests and Motivations', 'Visiting Experiences and Interactions', 'Educational Experiences and Learning Preferences' and 'Societal Relations and Museum Functions', to structure this chapter and give a clear overview of the insights gained based on the collected data. To each of these themes, one or more sub-themes were applied to also help with providing a clearer overview of the data with an effective structure.

4.1. Visitor Interests and Motivations

The first theme in this analysis, visitor motivations, explores the various factors that shape an individual's backgrounds and motivations for a museum visit. Before delving into how educational programs are perceived by the participants, some questions were asked to gain insight into their backgrounds and what influences their motivation to visit a museum.

4.1.1 Visiting Motivations

Regarding the frequency of museum visits, four participants mentioned that during their childhood, museum visits were often included. For two of these participants, these childhood visits are still of influence in their current motivations and interests in museums. Participant G, for example, said the following when asked about her interest in museums: "I think I more often visit traditional museums ... which is actually what my parents were mostly interested in and would mostly visit". Here, the concept of reciprocal determinism is recognised, in this case the dynamic interplay between childhood experiences of museums

and an individual, that is of influence on the current visiting interests of museums (Bandura, 1978). This is also recognised in the frequency of museum visits, with all four participants mentioning they would visit museums more often during their childhoods compared to their visiting habits now. Participant D, for example, elaborates on this by saying: “Now that I’m studying, I go less often than I would want to”. Indicating that for this respondent, the environment in which he is present and external factors are of influence for his current visiting habits to museums.

Continuing on participant D’s insight that shows the influence of the current environment on visiting habits to museums, motivations for visiting museums are shaped by a diverse range of factors. From the twelve participants, three indicate that cultural interest is the main reason for them to visit a museum aiming to gain a deeper understanding about different cultures. However, for five of the twelve participants the most prominent motivation to visit a museum is for its leisure aspects, where museums do not only provide an activity to do but also a moment of peace. For example, participant B said: “It stops the world for a second and it lets you think about yourself, that you’re really admiring something in the moment itself”. For this respondent, museums are spaces which provide a moment of peace and allow for a deeper engagement with specific content. This aspect is experienced by four other participants and indicates that museums are indeed seen as well posed environments that play a vital role in fostering engagement and connections in our increasingly fragmented world (Fieldman, 2017). The motivation behind visiting museums is for four of the participants also based on the interest of their social environment, e.g. friends or family. Participant F, for example, mentioned: “... often someone approaches you with ‘this is now in this museum, you like this’”. This type of interaction, where visitors learn from the interpretation of museum exhibitions by others, illustrates that museums are able to promote this sense of community and shared learning (Soren et al., 1995). Another interesting occurrence is that three of the participants, who are all active in the cultural sector, argue that their primary motivation behind a museum visit is to get inspired. Participant K, a writer and theatre teacher, for example said: “My biggest motivation is I think ... to get inspired ... and to see what there actually is and what’s going on”. Contrasting, participants I and L are the only individuals in this sample that clearly state that their visits to museums are to broaden their knowledge. For example, participant L said: “I want to know a lot and you don’t learn that by walking in the streets”. This indicates that museums are seen by some as spaces that facilitate a possibility for a deeper level of understanding through its educational aspects (Osterman et al., 2010). However, from the data, we see that individuals that are working

actively within the cultural sector are mostly visiting museums to get inspired whilst motivations of individuals who are not active in the cultural sector are based on leisure, gaining knowledge, their social environment and promotional strategies.

Nevertheless, other factors were mentioned to be of influence when deciding whether or not to visit a museum. Seven participants confirmed that the aesthetics, both in the interior and exterior, of a museum to be of influence when deciding to visit a museum or not. For example, participant E, said:

Yes, definitely ... It's also a bit of marketing, I think. What the building looks like, what the brand of the museum communicates, how they structure their social media, what people say about the museum. That does often influence if I want to visit something or not.

Here, we see that the increasing application of business strategies to, for example, attract wider audiences is also something which is effective and reflected amongst the participants in this sample (Raicovich, 2021; Robinson, 2020; Rodner et al., 2015). Another factor which was mentioned by six of the participants to be of influence, are the economic aspects that are connected to museums. Participant F, for example, said: “- a lot of places don't have student discounts ... I think this could be made more accessible sometimes”. The topic of accessibility is one that is discussed by all participants to need improvement. For now, only focussing on physical museums, they stress that improvement is necessary for multiple aspects like, for example, pricing, accessibility of information, and the lay out. Participant E, for example, said: “A lot of people visit museums that do not really have knowledge about art ... I would want a more clear to-the-point description”. This addresses how museums should be more aware of different levels of prior knowledge amongst different museum visitors, and how it influences the way individuals approach and learn within the museum context (Wilson, 2015). By gaining insight into the diversity of motivation behind a museum visit and addressing accessibility issues, the broader engagement with cultural institutions and visitor experience can be reevaluated.

4.2. Visiting Experiences and Interactions

The second theme, visiting experiences and interactions, explores the dynamics of the participants' engagements with museums by taking into account the museum environment, other visitors, and the overall experience of their visits.

4.2.1. Solo vs. Group Visits

In order to gain more insight into the social aspect of museums, this sub-theme explores how solo- or group visits shape the museum experiences of the participants. Most participants, nine of the twelve, indicate that they almost always visit museums with their friends or family. Whilst participant B and I indicate that they do both, participant A is the only one who almost always visits museums solo. Participant I, whose motivation for a visit is to broaden her knowledge, for example, said: "The presence of others is not a necessity for me to start enjoying it". Whilst those who visit mostly with company argue that it influences their museum experience both positively and negatively. The most positive aspect of visiting a museum with company that arises from the answers of the participants, is the possibility for dialogue. Participant G, for example, explains this positive aspect by saying: "I think that strengthens it, because you can talk about the art ... but also how other people view this, how they see it". The strong representation of conversation in the data indicates that the opportunity for dialogue is perceived as an essential part in museum education and enhances their experience (Kim, 2008). This can also be recognized in the negative aspects that are mentioned about visiting solo, where the possibility for dialogue is seen as limited. Participant E, for example, reflects on this by saying: "If you are by yourself, you wouldn't do that as quickly. Or you need to approach a stranger, but that's not really my thing". Here, we recognise that the facilitation for dialogue provided by museums, which promotes social learning dynamics, is not always effective for visitors who visit alone and have difficulty approaching strangers (Bandura et al., 1977; Morse, 2021). Continuing, another positive aspect of visiting with company is that it can offer an approachable way to address difficult topics which normally would not be discussed. Participant H, for example, mentions how visiting a museum helped her get a deeper understanding of her grandmother's life during World War II by saying: "- I never really talked about it with my grandmother ... but then she shared quite a lot and it was talked about quite a lot". In this situation, the social relationship between the artifacts presented and her grandmother, allowed for a deeper understanding about what that period in time looked like and how her grandmother experienced this. Such

situations proves that social interactions within the museum space do enable visitors to exchange their perspective and enables them to learn from one another (Bandura, 1977).

On the other hand, participants also named some negative influences during their visit with company. For example, participant C said: “- with company ... it feels more hurried ... I am less able to immerse myself in the works if I am with someone”. The feeling of not being able to take the time to stay at a work for a longer period of time is something that is mentioned by four other participants as a negative aspect of visiting with company. Participant L, provides an explanation by saying: “- because you, of course, are also a little bit responsible for each other. So, when you’re with someone else, you are more inclined to continue walking”. Here, one could argue that interaction with others in a free-choice environment actually obstructs the personal learning aspect instead of promoting this due to the feeling of responsibility regarding your company. Another negative aspect about visiting with company, which three of the participants mention, is the difference in interest between them and their company. For example, participant A when talking about visiting with her friends said: “It is more like ‘ah, how nice’ this and that, but not that they are really interested ... in why something is the way it is or how it’s made”. This once again, links back to the influential role levels of prior knowledge has amongst individuals when visiting a museum (Wilson, 2015). Indicating that visitors with limited prior-knowledge can affect visitors with a broader range of prior-knowledge in their experiences of museums.

Last, the participants were also questioned about their recollection of a museum visit and if this is clearer when visiting with company. Here, five of the participants indicated that they actually remember their visit more clearly when visiting alone. Participant B, for example, elaborates on this by saying: “I actually have less focus or thoughts on things that I want to think about or don’t want to think about at all. Then I remember less, because you are more with the company”. The participants who remember their visit more clearly alone, actually stress the importance of personal exploration within the museum environment during their visit and disprove the importance of social interactions in relation to their memory of a visit (Kim, 2008). However, seven of the participants argued that they remember their visit with company more clearly compared to solo visits. For example, participant J said: “- I also really enjoy discussing after the museum because it takes quite some time for me to process things ... only then am I able to come to a conclusion, what I actually thought of it”. Additionally, the fact that museum visits are seen as an activity with company, is also mentioned to be one of the reasons participants remember their visit more clearly. Participant H, originally from Friesland, for example mentioned: “Yeah, because often people come to

Rotterdam and then we visit a museum, so that is more the context indeed”. Due to museums creating spaces in which visitors and their company can engage in dialogues and share their museum experience, this social learning dynamic can enhance their memory of the visit by enabling meaningful connections and insights (Bandura et al., 1977; Kasperuniene et al., 2020; Morse, 2021; Soren et al., 1995; Osterman et al., 2010). This sub-theme presents the varied ways in which participants engage with museums, showing the contrast in dynamics between the immersion possibilities of self-exploration with solo visits and the enriching dialogues facilitated by visiting with company. Participant I, for example, elaborates on this by saying: “So, visiting with someone is for me much more a social activity and going alone is a lot more, we’re going to be absorbing art”. Showing that the reasoning behind a visit, with or without company, is of great importance regarding the purpose of a museum visit for an individual.

4.2.2. Interactions with Other Visitors

Since this study is looked at through the lens of the Social Learning Theory, exploring one of its key principles, social interaction, was included in the interviews to give insight into how the participants interact with other visitors in the social environment of museums (Bandura et al., 1977; Raspopovic et al., 2017). In this, other visitors are not inclusive of the company they visit with but is focused on strangers that are also present in the museum environment. When asked about interaction with other visitors, nine of the twelve participants indicate that they do not really have this type of interaction with other visitors. Participant L, for example, said: “I don’t ... I come for myself”. This objective was shared by the other participants who described interactions with other unknown visitors as, for example, something they try to avoid or find irritating because it distracts them in their museum experience. However, three of the participants also explained that interaction with other visitors is something they do not think of during their museum visit. For example, participant D said: “I’m not really bothered by it, what other people are doing”. Here, increasing the diversity of museum learning possibilities could provide opportunities for self-exploration and learning without the need for social learning (Kim, 2008). On the other hand, four of the twelve participants indicated that they do sometimes have interactions with other unknown visitors during their museum visits. Participant I, for example, explains how she approaches this by saying: “It’s not that I then intensely enjoy myself ... but I just have a sort of understanding in that moment that we’re all here together with each other ... and that I am a part of that”. Based on this answer, the role of museums functioning as spaces for community

engagement is recognised and reflected upon as additional value (Bandura et al., 1977; Morse, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Silverman, 2015). Still, following the principles of the Social Learning Theory, social interactions do not always happen through dialogue but also through only the observation of others (Bandura et al., 1977; Raspopovic et al., 2017). For example, participant K said: “- what I do find positive, is that I sincerely ... see someone get super emotional from something ... and that I do find very nice or beautiful”. In this situation, the interaction of simply observing emotions and behaviour of other unknown visitors is seen as a positive aspect of their visiting experience.

Aside from participant K, four of the twelve participants also mentioned being influenced by other unknown visitors during their visit through observations. Participant C, for example, gives insight on this influence by saying:

If there is a line with people that look cool, then I do get motivated. Because if there is a line with all, yeah, white elderly, then I think, okay this is probably not the exhibition that I will find interesting.

Here, it becomes clear that the aesthetic experience of museums, in which the aesthetics of visitors is also included, has quite some influence on whether or not some participants are interested in visiting a museum (Earle, 2013; Kim, 2008). Looking more into the influence of aesthetics on the individual experience of museum visits, three participants mention some negative aspects which can disrupt the aesthetics of museums. Participant A, for example, said: “- I notice that very often grumpy people work there ... I often don't like the employees in museums that much”. Since the theory of Social Learning focuses mainly on the environment and the social interactions which take place here, which includes the relationship between staff and visitors, the complete aesthetics of the museum environment are of great influence on visitors participating in such social interactions (Bandura et al., 1977; Luckerhoff et al., 2016). This statement is backed up by the other three participants that mention similar negative experiences due to, for example, too many tourists or not enough diversity amongst the type of visitors. Presenting the dynamics of interaction with other visitors in the museum environment, has offered valuable insights into the complexities that come with social learning, indicating the importance of both individual preferences and the broader social contexts that shape the museum experience.

4.3. Educational Experiences and Learning Preferences

This third theme, educational experiences and learning preferences, explores what the participants' perspectives and experiences are regarding museum learning and the educational programs in museums.

4.3.1. Experiences with Educational Programs

In order to gain a complete understanding of how educational programs in museums are perceived by the participants, their experience with such programs is first presented. There were more participants that engaged with educational programs in museums, but this was not recently, and those experiences will be elaborated later. From the twelve participants, three indicated that they often actively participate in different educational programs, e.g. workshops, guided tours, before during their museum visits. Participant F, for example, said: "You have a lot of programs and things which you can sit down for ... I did consciously participate in that". Since museums are described as spaces in which individuals can learn freely, the diversity of the educational programs needs to be considered in order to stimulate individual learning and attract to different types of visitors (Kim, 2008; Scott, 2006). For these participants, the reason for participating in such educational programs was mainly based on wanting to deepen their understanding with additional knowledge during their visit. Such hands-on learning experiences are aimed at creating a deeper level of engagement and understanding, showing that some museum visitors also experience this (Osterman et al., 2010). However, other participants also indicate that participating in an educational program provided by museums also has or had other reasonings. For example, participant K, who actively participates in educational programs said: "And sometimes I find it nice to just think, well there is someone who is going to say something, we'll do this and that. That it's very framed ... and still I always find it very pleasant". This shows that even though museums provide free-learning environments, some visitors experience that more structured forms of learning are more enjoyable or effective for them.

The nine participants who do not actively participate in educational programs offered in and by museums argue that this is because of, for example, its accessibility, having to pay for such programs or the perceived inability to have your own tempo. Participant J, for example, said: "Often those workshops are for children, so you're also not going to stand between them". This gives insight into how the focus on inclusivity and participation of diverse communities in museums has not yet caused visitors to be more involved in educational programs (Morse, 2021; Silverman, 2015). Additionally, it was also mentioned

that educational programs in museums do not always feel very approachable. Participant I, for example, said: “I also don’t believe that I am the creative soul that you want to have in such an interactive workshop-like situation. So, for me it feels as if I am not in the right place”. Even though this feeling is very personal, it still provides insight on the perceived accessibility for approaching educational programs in museums. This also questions the principles of inclusivity and representation in museums, especially since museums today are increasingly being recognised for spaces that enable community engagement, in which a broad range of identities is reflected (Hicks, 2021; Morse, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Silverman, 2015). Participant A, for example, said: “It could actually be really interesting is that types of educational programs do their best to attract different types of people”. Indicating that if museums were to improve this reflection of different identities, more visitors might get inspired to also participate in the educational programs a museum has to offer. Presenting what participants do or do not have active experience with educational programs in museums, emphasizes the importance of diversity and approachability of such programs to cater to the diverse learning preferences of individual visitors.

4.3.2. Classroom vs. Museum Learning

The following paragraph explores the perceived differences between classroom learning and museum learning to gain insight about how the participants view the practical learning experiences in museums (Osterman et al., 2010). The reason for including this in the analysis of this study is because eight of the twelve participants mention that their participation in educational activities during museum visits was due to their school education. Participant A, for example, said: “- I’ve never had a tour guide, unless it was with my school”. Here, because this experience is shared by seven other participants, the facilitating role of museums to provide tailored educational programs for school groups to enable a more hands-on learning experience is recognised as effective (Candlin et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2012). Participant G, for example, supported this by saying: “- normally you read in a classroom and talk about things, but physically observing the different aspects, I think, leaves a better impression and because of that you remember it better”. Continuing on this, we can argue that schools do indeed aim for a complete educational experience by promoting participation in museum educational programs in their curriculums, aiming to combine academic knowledge and practical aspects, (Osterman et al., 2010). Participant E explains the value of this by saying: “- that counts for ... art education but also for politics, that you visit the House of Representatives once ... that you do something with that or to go out there”. Here, the need

for interdisciplinary approaches and the connection between school- and museum learning is recognised as useful for creating a more holistic understanding of the world (Güler, 2017; Song, 2012).

When asked about in what ways learning in a museum differs from classroom learning, eight of the twelve participants mentioned that they perceive learning in a museum as freer. Participant F, for example, explains: “- it’s also freer, right? You are allowed to walk around by yourself, you can touch by yourself, you can listen by yourself, you can choose by yourself if you participate”. This aligns with the explanation of museum learning offering a more immersive and interactive experience in which students are given the freedom to explore at their own pace (Atkin, 2020; Casey, 2003; Kim, 2008). Another prominent difference mentioned by some participants, is that museum learning offers a more personal form of learning that is based on individual merit and motivation. Participant C, for example, said: “There are definitely less higher expectations or not a school-like expectation of your learning process, so I think you have more autonomy if you learn in a museum”. This links to the dynamicity museum education has and the ability for visitors to engage and interpret the objects displayed based on personal interest (Kim, 2008). This form of dynamicity is not being recognized by the participants in classroom education. For example, Participant D elaborated on this by saying: “Because then there is a teacher that guides you, that gives you assignments, who gives you interaction”. The structure of school education and its formal modes or instruction and assessment is also mentioned by the participants and is described as somewhat restrictive, compared to the free-learning environment of museums (Kim, 2008). For example, participant K said: “- there it is much more about the routine and in the structure and in the uniform and repetition and so on”. Because other participants also mentioned these aspects of classroom learning, their perceptions confirm that classroom education is seen as a more formal way of learning compared to the freedom museum learning offers. Other points that were made on the difference between school education and museum learning included aspects like, for example, that it is easier due to not needing personal effort or that it filters the information that an individual is taught. From these perceptions, light is shed on the multifaceted dynamics of learning experience within different educational settings and the interplay between structured classroom education and the experiential value of museum environments.

Whilst the participants agree on the effectiveness of educational programs in museums to aim at a complete education, some participants describe the negative aspects that arise. Participant D, for example, mentions: “Well, if you have an artist who says something critical

about the world ... and you make a scavenger hunt of it. Is that critical opinion ... do you still seriously interpret this?”. Even though educational programs in museums aim to promote critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation with the museum exhibitions, this participant stresses the impact that some methods used for educational programs have and that those might need to be considered (Tišliar, 2017). Other participants focus more on the personal struggles they would experience if they were to participate in educational activities. For example, participant G, said: “I think that keeping people busy and keeping people you are trying to inform involved is a very important concept”. This relates to other participants who mention they are easily distracted or have a short attention span. Here, improvement for visitor engagement in educational programs can be achieved by applying principles of the Social Learning Theory, for example, immersive environments and using storytelling to convey cultural narratives (Atkin, 2020; Casey, 2003). These could help with attracting more visitors towards educational programs through stimulating the individual learning process.

Due to the previously explained and perceived differences between learning in a classroom and a museum, the participants were asked as follow-up question if they believe one to be better than the other. All participants addressed that they do not think one is better than the other, but a combination would be most effective. Participant A, for example, said: “I think that education from a museum can only go to a certain level. I think that the knowledge you get from school also very important is and it is actually a tool that you have to combine”. This connects to the notion of connecting academic knowledge from the curriculum to the practical experience students experience in museums, enabling a deeper level of engagement and understanding (Osterman et al., 2010). However, some participants note that for different people different ways of learning are effective, so a variety in education is important. For example, participant H, supported this by saying: “I think the variety is quite good ... I think that for different people one works better than for the other”. The other participants also agreed with this statement, indicating that each individual learns differently and therefore has different learning methods which work for them. This confirms that the participants believe that in order to gain a complete understanding of the world, we need both forms of education to expose us to a wider range of cultural perspectives and social issues (Heaton, 2021). The participants indicate the importance of considering diverse methods of learning and aiming for a combination of both to achieve a comprehensive and effective learning experience.

4.3.3. Perception of Digital Tools

Due to the rise of digital technology in museums, this section of the analysis explores how these digital tools are perceived by the participants and how they add to their experience in museums. Six of the participants indicated that they have had experience with digital technologies adopted by museums. For example, participant J said: “Yeah, knowing the opening times is pretty useful”. Whilst most of these participants indicated that they only use digital tools for practical information (e.g. opening times or ticket pricing), others have actually experienced digital tools being used for educational purposes. Participant A, for example, said: “I think that I at Boijmans, you could I think, I don’t know, you had to scan something, then you could listen to something through your phone”. Here this museum offers a digital tool as a way to create a more immersive environment that aims at deepening the understanding about the content that is presented (Earle, 2013). Still, most participants only named using QR-codes and websites as their interaction with digital tools. The use of websites however is, for some participants, a crucial part of their museum experience. For example, participant I, explained: “Oh, most of the times before I am inside a museum I have definitely already uncovered the website”. Five other participants mention they use digital tools provided by museums, mostly websites, before their actual visit as form of preparation. However, participant E, for example, said: “Yes, just to do some preliminary research or to look if I find it nice”. So, besides enhancing the knowledge of visitors through such digital platforms, their role is also perceived by some participants as aid in exploring the topics and content presented in museums where educational aspects are not recognised.

One of the main reasons for the participants to not have experienced digital tools that aim to enhance museum learning, is due to the fact that they enjoy the tangible aspect of museums. For example, participant G mentions: “It’s so different to experience something in real life than to see something online”. Although these ‘intangible’ aspects of museum education are said to improve the development of perspective and insight, most participants do not see the added value of using such digital tools (Scott, 2006). Here, participants also agree that visiting a museum is also seen an activity. Participant L, for example, said: “If I look on the internet, I can also quickly go somewhere else and if you visit something physically, then you are there. Then you also need to take the time for it”. Besides participants approaching a museum visit as an activity where the environment in which the content is displayed is of influence, others also stress the importance of the ability to critically observe this content. Participant J, for example, mentions: “I just want to see all those details. You’re really not going to be able to see that on a screen”. Here, the influence of environment on

cognition is stressed as something which differs in the way most participants approach their museum visits. Participant E backs this up by saying: “If I think a painting is pretty and I view it online then I don’t have the idea that I really saw it”. The participants were also asked if they would still physically visit museums if everything was available online, on which eleven of the twelve participants argued they would. However, participant D said: “I would not visit a museum if that’s also possible online, because I find the exposition less exclusive and less valuable”. Contrasting, the other participants agreed upon the fact that digitalization of museum content would diminish its value, for them it would not be a determinant to not visit museums again due to the influence of the environment during their visit.

Though most participants have not experienced digital tools to enhance their knowledge and understanding, some participants are positive about the use of digital tools in museums. For example, participant B said: “I think, for example, that an app could be a good initiative. That you can, for example, give your preferences ... and that there might even be a connecting possibility”. Based on this statement, the sense of community and shared learning which is promoted through digital tools is recognised in the museum context. (Soren et al., 1995). Other participants see the more social function of museum digitalizing their content. Participant C, for example, said: “- I do think of it as an additional value that it’s online, because people who can not physically go there ... they can still admire it in their own way”. Here, museums offering online educational programs, virtual tours, and digital resources to reach beyond the physical visit is recognised as a means to attract to a wider audience (Knutson et al., 2012; Earle, 2013). Another positive aspect that is mentioned by some participants, is that digital tools help in providing them with more in-depth information of about the museum content (D’Alessandro et al., 2024). Participant F, for example, supports this by saying: “I think that QR-codes work well if you want to read more up-close and bigger and if you want to go more in depth”. Other participants also express their interest for more in-depth information through digital tools and platforms if these were included in their museum visit. However, most participants agree they perceive digital tools used by museums mostly to gain information about what they are exhibiting at that moment. For example, participant L said: “- it’s nice to get a sort of activation. But such an advertisement does help”. Since this experience is shared with other participants, it does indicate that people can process information through the observation of learning media, e.g. social media (Asmari, 2024). In this section, the participant varied in their perceptions on the role of using digital tools to enhance museum experiences. While some acknowledged its potential for community

engagement and accessibility, others question the added value of digitalization due to their prioritization on the tangible aspects of museum visits.

4.4. Societal Relations and Museum Functions

This fourth theme, museum functions and societal relations, explores how the participants perceive museum functions as well as their ability to address social issues.

4.4.1. Function of Museums

Since the participants all vary in their motivations to visit a museum, this section explores what each individual perceives the function of museums to be in our contemporary society. Whilst four of the twelve participants indicate that the function of museums for them is a combination of different things, others are very clear in what they perceive the function of museums to be. Four of the twelve participants describe the function of museums to be based mostly on conveying knowledge and see it as an institute for spreading knowledge. For example, participant F said: “For me a museum is a place where people can go to if they want to know more or if they find a topic interesting. So, literally that educational purpose”. This can be connected to museums being seen as educational spaces that encourage knowledge exchange (Soren et al., 1995; Kasperuniene et al., 2020). However, two of these participants recognize the diverse functions museums have, by also seeing how museums include an inspiring functionality. Participant E, for example, said: “- I think spreading knowledge in a very accessible way ... and also a bit of inspiration ... you can just enjoy other people’s creativity”. This indicates that the traditional idea of museums being spaces to display artifacts, is disproved by most participants due to their functionality being perceived as more than only conveying knowledge (Günay, 2012). This is also reflected in the perceptions on the function of museums amongst the other participants. Three of the twelve participants indicated that they perceive the function of museums as inspiring. Participant J, for example, said: “For me it’s purely to get inspired ... I find it important to just have other perspectives and also to look differently at the world”. Museums are promoting representation by providing a wider range of perspectives through creating experiences for its visitors, which nine participants mention as important during their visit (Atkin, 2020; Casey, 2003). These nine participants recognise the facilitating function museums have in presenting a wider range of perspectives which aids them with understanding the world they live in. Participant H, for example, said: “Because you have a different vision. Someone just looks at different things. In that sense it is broadening”. Here, the participants do recognise the connecting role museums have in helping people connect through dialogue and community engagement (Feldman, 2017; Kasperuniene et al., 2020).

Some of the participants also mentioned that museums facilitating a broader range of perspectives also helps them gain a complete understanding of difficult topics, for example, the Dutch colonial history. Participant K, for example, said:

Yes, that with that closer look of that extra perspective that hasn't been there very long ... - with that perspective that more and more museums are providing or changing the texts. That you, because of that, can look differently at artworks.

Here the ability for museums to reflect and reformulate their discourse to achieve a more inclusive and representative narrative of history and culture is recognised by participants as something museums are also implementing (D'Allessandro et al., 2024; Lorente, 2022). From these perceptions the role museums have for broadening one's perspective is recognised and mentioned by most of the participants, without providing them with this topic.

However, seven of the twelve participants view the function of museums to be one for leisure purposes. Participant G, for example, said: "For me it's mainly more fun than actually learning something". Even though the focus of a museum visit is not on learning for this participant, the environment of a museum functioning as a means to enjoy oneself is recognised by participants. For example, participant L, said: "It's the confirmation that it's fun to learn and also to actually learn ... like I said earlier ... you go to a museum, you don't have to". Here, the free environment of museums is recognised as a space that provides learning opportunities, even if the visitors do not have the intention to learn something from their visit, the immersive environment enables them to link intellectual concepts with practical applications which allows for a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Kasperuniene et al., 2020). Although some participants do not mention this aspect right away when mentioning the function of museums and view it at first sight as a leisure activity. Participant H, for example, said: "Recreation. Yes, there is a bit of an outing about it". This adds to the strategies museums are applying to create experiences for their visitors in which they can engage with the content presented to create a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Kasperuniene et al., 2020; Tišliar, 2017). Two participants also mentioned the function of museums to facilitate a moment of quiet compared to their busy daily lives. For example, participant C said: "A little bit of a way out of the crowds and really a moment to be able to immerse yourself in something". As previously mentioned, the ability to immerse yourself in specific topics continues to be recognised by participants as a positive aspect of museums. Participant B, for example, supports this by saying: "It's kind of

my outlet, my free zone of appreciation, learning to appreciate and thinking about myself and the world actually”. This also supports how museums are trying to enhance visitor appreciation and understanding, mainly through social learning aspects like dialogue and community engagement, on (cultural) heritage that also allows for a broader understanding of the world (Bandura et al., 1997; Morse, 2021). This section provided an insight into what the varied perceptions of the participants are on the function of museums, ranging from educational institutes to spaces for leisure. Still, most participants agreed on the diverse functions that museums have in our contemporary society. This is confirmed by participant D, for example, who said: “I think it’s everything. It’s the combination of entertainment and learning and getting inspired, it’s not one thing”. Indicating that most participants recognise the dynamicity of museums and their differentiating ways of adding value to society.

4.4.2. Influence on Society and Cultural Representation

This last section explores how the participants perceive the impact of museums on society and their role in shaping cultural representation. Since museums today are seen as tools for communicating the mass culture, the participants were asked if they believed it should be mandatory for museums to address social issues (Günay, 2012). Three of the twelve participants indicated that they believe museums should use their platform as a way to address and create understanding about social issues. Participant K, for example, said:

Yes, I see a museum as a kind of house that represents what is going on in the world ... and I think a museum is responsible for that ... to put it in a certain context of an exhibition, I think that’s kind of an obligation”.

Here, it is confirmed that by museums exposing individuals to a wide range of cultural perspectives and social issues is perceived as a way to gain a broader understanding of the world (Heaton, 2021). Other participants argued that some museums should not have to address social issues considering their content or the type of museum. For example, participant H said: “- you of course also have things with history and so on. You can ask yourself how actual that is, but I do think that we, for example, look at that with the outlook of today”. This statement can be connected to the concerns of critics about museums might carrying social biases and that they should grab the possibility to reflect and reformulate their discourses on history by using new technologies and strategies of social learning, to create a more inclusive and representative narrative of history and culture (D’Alessandro et al., 2024;

Hicks, 2021; Lorente, 2022; Raicovich, 2021). However, some participants indicate that more modern museums should include social issues in their expositions. Participant G, for example, said: “Those kind of museums do have more responsibility to also show actual aspects, I think”. Here we see that museums acting as agents for positive social change, by including social issues, is being perceived as a responsibility for more modern types of museums. Still, most of the participants argued that museums should not be required to address social issues. For example, participant B argued: “I think there can be a lot of restrictions because then you can also quickly fall in a selective group”. This also aligns with the arguments of some critics, that individuals might imitate the behaviour demonstrated by dominant individuals which questions the representation and inclusivity of a museum (Hicks, 2021; Raicovich, 2021; Olsson et al., 2020). So, for most of the participants, making it mandatory for museums to include social issues would limit the diverse perspectives they are able to foster and thus limit them in gaining a complete understanding of such issues.

Whilst most participants agree that it should not become mandatory for museums to address social issues, they do encourage museums to address these topics. Participant I, for example, argued: “How group A and B experience this and what the impact of that is, and in what way that ... also works in other sectors. You can only really experience that through art sometimes”. This indicates that participants perceive museums that use an experience-approach with immersive environments is seen as a positive thing and able to enhance knowledge about social issues (Atkin, 2020; Casey, 2003). Participant J supports this by saying: “Through art it’s actually one of the easiest ways to share all those things. Because those boundaries just feel a bit further away to me”. Here, it becomes clear that the participants do view museums as spaces in which societal issues can be addressed to enable a deeper understanding. Still, some participants are critical about museums addressing social issues. Participant C, for example, mentions: “- the museum does have a problem of accessibility. Try to do something with that and being honest about that”. Here, it is stressed that museums should first deal with their own previous or current biases regarding their content before they start addressing current societal issues.

Something else which the participants mention as important for museums, is that they enable awareness about these social issues. For example, participant H said: “I think that they can create some awareness anyways”. This is of importance since by exposing people in a museum to different cultures, traditions and perspectives they could aid in the transformation of society (Halverson et al., 2023; Siegesmund, 2000). These were aspects were also

described by some participants as important when creating social awareness. Participant K, for example, said:

It's more just an enrichment of perspective, and for me that did cause that I gained more empathy or a broader field of vision on that subject at least ... and became more aware of my position within that.

This, again, shows that the immersive and interactive experience that museums offer allow for personal reflection and interpretation whilst also conveying information about these topics, all enabling a deeper understanding to be created (Kim, 2008). However, some participants are also critical of museums aiming to create awareness about social issues. Participant L, for example, argues: “- art is an opinion, so then it's impossible to give it a certain direction. Some museums are factual, and others are based on an opinion”. This links back to what has been discussed earlier regarding museums including social issues, some participants conclude that addressing and creating awareness for such topics is not fit for every museum based on the content they include in their expositions.

Lastly, the participants were asked if their visit to a museum ever encouraged them to take action in their own community or environment. Whilst most participants have not taken action after their visit to a museum, participant K has had an experience like this. Based on a visit to an exhibition on racism she said: “It does activate. That it touched me and that I started doing more with it, that did happen yes”. So, museums are able to encourage its visitors to take action in their own environments, but the type of environment does need to be taken into account. This because participant K is actively working in the cultural sector, possibly making it easier to include such actions in her daily life compared to those that do not work in the cultural sector. Some of the other participants, who did not take action after a museum visit, indicated that they simply do not feel influenced to undertake such actions. Participant A, for example, said: “I think in the first instance that that's not really why I go to a museum ... I don't really get influenced to be activistic”. This links back to both the motivation of visitors behind a museum visit and what they perceive to be the function of museums. However, other participants that did not take action after a museum visit, did mention that a museum visit sometimes influences their own lifestyles. For example, participant C mentions: “Yes, so it's not really a change, but it is definitely a change in my perspective and experience of being social”. Eight other participants indicated that they also have changed in their personal lifestyles and perspective because of a museum visit. This

section gives insight on the varied opinions regarding the necessity of addressing social issues for museums, leaning towards a more positive perception whilst still being critical of aspects that need improvement.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify the perceptions of museum visitors from Rotterdam, the Netherlands on the effectiveness of educational programs in museums and the ability to enhance their understanding of social issues. Since, today we live in an increasingly more fragmented world, it was investigated how museum could possibly aid the transformation of society by creating awareness on social issues through their educational programs. For this, the key principles of the Social Learning Theory, learning through the observation, modelling and interactions with others, were applied to see how and in what ways social interactions and educational programs in museums could enable more awareness about social issues.

5.1 Main findings

The first key theme, Visitor Interests and Motivations, gave insight into what influences the interests and visiting habits of museum visitors, and how this influences their perception of educational programs in museums. Current motivations of participants can be significantly impacted by backgrounds and past experiences, including childhood visits. Some participants who mention museum visits and participation in educational programs as a part their childhoods are still influenced by this in their current interests and visiting habits for museums. The motivations for visiting a museum vary among the participants but include cultural interest, leisure purposes, inspiration and as an activity. Here, social interactions and their social environment, such as recommendations from friends or family, are of influence on their motivation for museum visits. The aspects of shared learning and a sense of community are promoted because the participants are able to learn and gain insights from the interpretations other visitors made about museum exhibitions. Additionally, individuals who are actively working in the cultural sector are more likely to visit museums for inspiration. Whilst individuals who are not actively working in the cultural sector are more likely to visit museums for leisure purposes or to gain additional knowledge. This confirms the dynamicity of museums as institutions and that they are able to provide engagement and interpretation for visitors based on their personal interest. Other participants also indicated that museums provided them with a moment of peace and allowed for a deeper engagement with the content presented. Here, museums are confirmed to be perceived as spaces that enable a deeper understanding about the world and promote community cohesion (Fieldman, 2017). Lastly, this topic explored the ways in which the museum visitors are influenced by aesthetic aspects.

Participants indicated that other unknown visitors and the environment are seen as part of the experience and also impact their individual learning processes in the museum space.

The second key theme, Visiting Experiences and Interactions, provided insights about the overall experience of museums as well as their engagements with the museum environment and other visitors. Most participants prefer visiting with friends or family as this allows for dialogue, which is seen as a positive aspect. Such dialogues enhance the museum experience by allowing visitors to discuss and share perspectives on the content they are viewing in that moment. These aspects promote the social learning dynamic, as it allows them to co-construct meaning together by using forms of social interaction. However, visiting with company can include negative influences with participants feeling rushed, not being able to completely immerse themselves in the artworks and having different interests. With contemporary museum studies focussing on creating memorable experiences, what influences the participants recollection of museum visits varies. Some participants remember their visit better alone due to the possibility for self-exploration, whilst other participants indicate they remember more when they visit with company due to the ability for including social aspects (e.g. discussions, the visit being a fun activity). The role of social aspects in relation to the recollection of a museum visit correspond with the social learning dynamic that enable meaningful connections and insights. Still, most participants do not actively seek interactions with other unknown visitors, and mainly find them distracting or try to avoid this. Their reasonings for not interacting with other visitors were that they do not really take notice of the other visitors or that those interactions are not the reason why they visit museums. Nevertheless, some participants do recognise the museum as a shared place and feel a sense of community during their visit. This aligns with the notion that museum function as spaces for community engagement in which a social learning dynamic is promoted to enhance understanding and appreciation of (cultural) heritage (Bandura et al., 1977; Morse, 2021). Some participants state that interactions with other visitors are not always through dialogue but also sometimes happen through observation. This also aligns with the key principle of observational learning presented in the Social Learning Theory. Following this, the appearance of other visitors and museum staff are also influential on the participants perceptions of the museum environment. Here, encountering unfriendly staff or a lack of diversity amongst the other museum visitors can negatively influence the overall museum experience and even cause participants to not visit a museum.

The third key theme, Educational Experiences and Learning Preferences, provided insight into how museum visitors perceive the educational programs in museums. Some

participants actively engage in educational programs that museums offer during their visit in order to deepen their understanding and enhance their museum experience. Their reasoning for participating in such programs is the additional knowledge they are able to gain with these educational programs. However, most participants do not actively participate in educational programs due to factors like accessibility, cost, and the perceived lack of approachability. The participants emphasize the importance of museums offering diverse and approachable educational programs to increase visitor engagement and to cater to the individual learning preferences of museum visitors. Still, all participants perceived museum learning as freer, more personal, and less formal compared to classroom learning. Here, museum learning is described as places for individual exploration, interpretation and reflection by offering more immersive and interactive experiences. All participants value the practical, hands-on experience of museum learning and its ability to connect with classroom education. The participants believe that combining classroom- and museum learning is the most effective because it caters to the diverse learning preferences of different individuals and provides a more comprehensive educational experience by linking academic knowledge to practical experiences. Also, museums today often include digital technologies in their environments to improve their educational programs. Whilst some participants have had experiences with digital tools utilized by museums primarily to gain practical information, others also elaborated their educational experiences with digital tools. The potential of digital tools to enhance museum experiences and museum learning is recognised by some participants as a positive movement where museums improve aspects like accessibility and inclusivity. However, other participants prioritize the tangible aspects of a museum visit and question the added value of digitalizing the museum experience. These participants still acknowledged the potential digital tools have to promote community engagement, accessibility, and in-depth information but some remain sceptical about their role in museum learning.

The fourth theme, Societal Relations and Museum Functions, gave insight into how the participants perceive the social role of museums and if they should incorporate addressing social issues. The participants perceive museums as spaces with various functionalities in contemporary society, indicating functions like conveying knowledge, inspiring, broadening perspectives, facilitating leisure activities, and providing moments of quiet to reflect. Some participants view museums primarily as institutions for educating and spreading knowledge, while others emphasize their prominent role for inspiration and offering diverse perspectives. Participants view museums as spaces that foster social interaction, dialogue, and contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural and historical topics. The participants recognize the

dynamicality in museums and acknowledge their ability to cater to diverse interests and motivations. However, the participants hold varied opinions on whether it is required for museums to address social issues. Some participants advocate that museums should use their platform to address social issues and use their platform for creating social awareness on these topics. Other participants expressed reservations about this due to some museums being based on history or facts, but they did confirm that museums should also reformulate their discourses on history to create a more inclusive and representative narrative of history and culture. These participants did acknowledge the potential for museums to raise awareness and encourage dialogues about social issues, although this should not be mandatory due to a risk of selecting only a certain group to represent leading to biases that might question the representation and inclusivity of a museum. Here, participants highlight the importance of museums in constructing cultural representation and fostering empathy, but also stress that museums should first address their own biases and limitations. Most participants have not taken action in their community or environment based on a museums visit. However, some do recognise changes in their perspective and lifestyles.

Concluding, museum visitors from Rotterdam perceive educational programs in museums as an effective tool for enhancing the understanding of social issues if these programs are accessible, diverse, and engaging for different individuals. The participants recognize that museums have the potential to aid transformations in society. They perceive educational programs in museums as a means to effectively create awareness on social issues if they employ social learning dynamics which foster a sense of community. However, if museums want to maximise their impact, they should first look at the barriers that limit participation in educational programs and ensure the inclusivity and representation of their presented narratives.

5.2 Implications

Based on the theory discussed earlier in chapter 2, through the application of the key principles of the Social Learning Theory this study investigated how educational programs in museums and social interactions could foster awareness about social issues. The findings support the value of the Social Learning Theory in the context of museums with museum visitors frequently mentioning social interactions, both with company and other visitors, as important contributions to their museum experiences. Participants perceive these kinds of social interactions, both dialogue and observation, as opportunities that provide shared

learning and the co-construction of meaning. This perception is consistent with the Social Learning Theory, which maintains that social interactions and engagement with others facilitate the social process of learning. The participants also mention that the observation of others interacting with exhibitions enabled for them to also understand and interpret such exhibition. This further supports that the Social Learning Theory is fitting in the museum context, as it provides understanding on how individuals learn in social settings like museums. However, while this research shows that many participants recognise the value of museums as educational spaces, they also perceived the function of museums to be for inspiration of moments of leisure. So, even if social learning is a critical component, individuals preferring to use museums for personal reflection are also important. Therefore, museums should aim to provide a well-balanced combination of social- and individual learning experiences.

5.3 Contributions to knowledge

This study has presented multiple significant contributions to the role of museums in education, their functions in contemporary society, the understanding of museum experiences from the visitors' perspective, their impact on social awareness and action and the role digitalization plays in enhancing the experiences of museum visitors. This study explores the perceptions of the participants on educational programs, learning preferences, and social interactions within the museum context. Here, the multifaceted nature of museum experiences became clear and informs museum practitioners and educators about the diversity of the needs and preferences of visitors. Opportunities for hands-on, immersive and personalized learning in the museum environment are highlighted in this study, setting them apart from traditional classroom learning and suggesting ways to integrate this in educational practices and curriculum development, especially the concept of experiential learning. Through the examination of the participants perceptions on the functions of museums, which include knowledge exchange, inspiration, leisure, and to address social issues, this study shows the evolving role of museums in contemporary society and could be of assist for museums to fulfil their mission and adapt to social needs. In this study, the role of museums for creating awareness about social issues and their ability to inspire their visitors to act in their own communities and environment is explored. This led to insights being provided on how museum experience can influence attitudes, perspectives, and behaviour that inform strategies which can be used to promote more awareness of social issues to stimulate individuals to take action. Additionally, by exploring the perceptions of digital tools being used in the museum

context, this study contributes to understanding what role technology can have. It provides insight on how this can enhance visitor experiences, visitor engagement, accessibility and knowledge exchange but also addresses the concerns about tangible aspects contributing to the museum experience. Overall, this study refines our understanding of the dynamics between society, museums and visitors by offering valuable insights that can be used by museum practitioners, educators, policy makers, and researchers who are seeking to enhance the impact and relevance of cultural institutions in the 21st century.

5.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations which should be considered. First, the sample size used in this study might not encompass the diverse range of perceptions museum visitors have on their experiences and functions. Also, because some of these participants share similar backgrounds or experiences selection bias might be present. Second, the participants included in this study could have given answers they found socially desirable or in line with the expectations of this research and possibly skewing the results with participation bias. Third, the cultural and contextual differences might affect how individuals perceive museums and their functions, meaning that the findings might lack generalizability beyond the specified content in this study. Fourth, the study's data collection, design and the interpretation of results could include researcher bias. This highlights the importance of employing reflecting strategies to shift such biases. Fifth, museum practices, technology and societal attitudes are constantly changing and could hinder studies aimed at longitudinal periods of time but could provide insight into the evolving perceptions of museum visitors regarding their museum experiences. Finally, the focus on specific themes related to the perceptions of educational programs and their ability to address social issues may not include other relevant factors like, for example, socioeconomic status or cultural background.

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