

SELF-ORIENTED OR VISITOR-ORIENTED? Exploring the stance of museums online

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Abstract – Websites play a double role in museum communication: on the one hand, they serve as powerful branding tools, where museums establish identity online, and, on the other, they are bridging tools, able to reach out to potential visitors. Both from the perspective of linguists as well as practitioners, little attention has been paid to the interplay of these two dimensions, which defines the quality of the relationship established online with visitors and identifies the museum’s commitment to participate and engage ethically. Based on the observation of forty international museum websites, this study aims to develop a methodological proposal for the analytical description of the museum homepage, the showcase *par excellence* where museums present themselves to their audiences. The methodological toolkit for the analysis relies on a combination of multimodal analysis and discourse analysis techniques. The study lays the foundations for a theoretical distinction between a ‘self-oriented’ and a ‘visitor-oriented’ stance, suggesting that a balance between the two is key to the pursuit of ethical engagement in museum communication.

Keywords: museum communication; museum websites; discourse analysis; multimodal analysis; ethical engagement.

1. Introduction

For the contemporary visitor, it is quite natural to define the identity of a museum based on the image it projects onto the outside world and the mental associations it arouses. For example, a major European museum like the Louvre might immediately conjure up the image of the Mona Lisa surrounded by crowds of tourists, as well as the process of relentless marketisation undertaken by ‘superstar museums’ (Frey 1998). Likewise, the Guggenheim circuit of museums, besides being associated with the charismatic personality of its founder and spectacular architecture, is there to remind us of the increasingly global nature acquired by successful museums (Mathur 2005). Again, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam may remind us of Vermeer’s paintings, but also of a cultural operation that saw this museum as one of the first institutions in the world to make its collections available online.

Museum identity has developed historically and has acquired different connotations over time. In the first phase, the identity of a museum was mainly associated with material aspects: its collections, its physical location, and the building itself. As McLean (1993, p. 23) peremptorily stated in the 1990s, “a museum would not exist without a collection”, because “it is the collection which ultimately defines its character and determines its context”. Likewise, Gosden *et al.* (2007, p. 5) stressed that “it is objects that have drawn people together, helped to define their interactions, and made them relevant to the museum”.

More recently the identity of a museum has acquired an intangible value, expressed in terms of image, mood, or even ‘personality’ (McLean 2012, pp. 142-143). This has marked a conceptual shift in the overall consideration of museums: from sites in which art

and culture were displayed to inspirational places where lifestyles are staged (Steiner 2000). This transition has indeed been a consequence of marketisation undertaken by museums since the 1980s, which led to seeing the museum's identity as a brand, a further asset to add to the more visible and consolidated ones, such as collections, exhibitions, and the architectural buildings that house them.

Digital media has contributed to enhance the intangible identity of museums, providing a virtual counterpart to their more visible assets. The Covid-19 pandemic has further emphasised the importance of having a digital presence for museums, leading to a significant shift towards new media (Noehrer *et al.* 2021), which enabled institutions to stay in contact with the public and stick in visitor's minds, even when doors were closed (Zuanni 2020, 2021). According to ICOM (2020a, 2020b), digital activities increased or began after the lockdown for at least 15% of the world's museums. Yet, the rise of digital media has required museums to rethink their identity again, which can no longer be reduced to material and commercial aspects but appears increasingly connected to ethical issues (Besterman 2006; Marstine 2011). The ethical transition embraced by museums involves communication as well, with scholars advocating ethical trajectories in communication and "more dynamic and meaningful forms of cultural participation" (Kidd *et al.* 2022, p. 2).

The idea of engagement as collaboration (Dhanesh 2017), based on principles of dialogue and openness, is overtly advocated by many scholars as an ethical mode of communication, which is preferable to the notion of engagement as control, enacted through self-referentiality and one-way dissemination of messages (Cho, De Moya 2016; Taylor, Kent 2014). Ethical and not only promotional considerations should therefore guide museums to develop their online activities. As pointed out by Kidd (2018), "making decisions about ethics has become a daily part of museums' digital practice" and professionals engaged in digital practice should be aware that digital platforms "are not neutral" (Kidd 2018, p. 202). Evidence shows that taking a visitor-centred approach, both in-house and online, is rewarding for museums: visitors are willing to incorporate digital museum resources into their lives on their own initiative and "have strong opinions about the role of digital museums overall" (Marty 2008, p. 97). Yet, often museums continue to rely on conventional and self-referential modes of communication to warrant their legitimacy, restricting participation and avoiding effective engagement (Lazzeretti 2021).

Websites appear as an ideal means of investigation for exploring the ethical approach in museum communication, as they offer an insight into how museums see themselves and how they would like to be seen by their visitors (Pierroux, Skjulstad 2011). However, limited attention has been paid to the interplay between self-referentiality and visitor-centeredness in contemporary museum communication and in the dialectic exchange established with visitors through websites, at least from a discourse-analytical perspective (Blunden 2021; Turnbull 2020), despite the importance of this distinction in defining and understanding the quality of online engagement pursued by museums.

Based on the observation of forty British and American museums, this study looks at features of self-referentiality and visitor-centeredness in a key section of the museum website, the homepage, the showcase *par excellence* through which the museum projects its identity and sets the tone of the relationship established with the visitors. In so doing, the study aims to develop a methodological proposal for the analytical description of the museum homepage, based on the theoretical distinction between a 'self-oriented' and a 'visitor-oriented' stance. The methodological toolkit for the study combines multimodal analysis (Kress, van Leeuwen 1996) and discourse analysis applied to the specific field of museum communication (Bondi 2009; Purser 2000; Ravelli 2006).

The paper is organised as follows. The next section deals with theoretical issues, surveying existing literature on museum websites from both the perspectives of communication and linguistics. Section 3 provides an overview of materials and methods adopted in the analysis. Section 4 deals with the homepage description, looking at the interplay between museums and visitors in a sample of cases and evaluating the quality of the stance adopted.

2. Background and rationale

Research on museum websites has been carried out mostly on the perspective of practitioners, who have underlined their potential for increasing museum visibility, encouraging visitor participation and engagement, and, in general, establishing a positive relationship with them (Marty 2007, 2008, 2011; Soren 2009). Another relevant aspect is the wave of studies emerging from virtual museums, which sees museum websites as ideal repositories of virtual galleries and other digital resources (Huhtamo 2010), a research trend has become even more prominent after the Covid experience (Corona 2021).

Discourse studies on museum websites are few and far between and have taken into consideration specific sections or topics characterising them, such as landing pages (Blunden 2021), ‘About us’ pages (Turnbull 2020), exhibition web presentations (Bondi 2009), or web areas expressly designed for children (Sezzi 2019). What is common to these studies is a multimodal approach to the analysis, which entails noting the verbal and visual components. Indeed, the focus of visual perception in museum settings justifies the paramount role played by the visual mode in museum web texts, but “the typical combination of visual and verbal elements” which characterises multimodal texts in general and museum web texts in particular “invites us to look more closely at how the verbal relates to the visual” (Bondi 2009, p. 113).

The issue of the generic membership of museum websites, determined by reference to their structure and communicative purpose, is also a point of interest. As in the case of corporate websites, museum websites fall into the category of hyper-genres, which cannot be seen as genres *per se*, but, similar to matryoshka dolls, as whole sets of genres (Bondi 2009, p. 115). The homepage, which takes centre stage in the present analysis, can be interpreted as an obligatory genre of museum websites, with no antecedent among the pre-existing genre repertoires of museum communication. The web medium not only adds unique properties to genres, such as hypertextuality and multimodality, but also imposes limitations in terms of granularity (Garzone 2007). Hence it is necessary to break text down into blocks, or ‘layers’, that fit the size of the screen – the block style, as Bondi (2009) defines it –, which enables the combination of verbal components with some visual content (e.g. images and infographics) and does not require a great deal of scrolling.

In the light of current studies, both on the practitioners’ and the linguists’ basis, the role of museum websites appears as two-fold. Undoubtedly, they are powerful multimodal tools where the museum’s public image is fashioned, developed, and communicated to increase attendance and visibility (Pierroux, Skjulstad 2011). Nonetheless, museum websites are also ‘bridging’ tools, with an invaluable potential for connecting with the users: as such, they play a fundamental role in establishing a positive and complementary relationship with visitors. According to Marty (2007), museum websites can be used “as a bridge” (Marty 2007, p. 337) to connect the pre-visit and the post-visit phase: at a first stage, they should “lure online visitors into the museum’s collections virtually and inspire

them to visit the museum in person”, and, at a second stage, they should be used as a source of information for visitors who want to know more and broaden their museum experience. That is because there is strong evidence that “online museum visitors visit museum websites before and after museum visits” (Marty 2007, p. 356) and, more importantly, that visitors use websites to come to a decision about whether or not visiting in person (Park *et al.* 2021).

3. Materials and methods

The analysis has taken into consideration the homepages of 40 museum websites, evenly distributed across the United Kingdom and the United States. The choice of Anglo-American museums was primarily determined by the need to collect data originally written in English, as to avoid translation problems in a second language. Furthermore, the selection was made drawing on Wikipedia’s “List of most visited museums in the United Kingdom”¹ and “List of most-visited museums in the United States”². The following table (Table 1) provides a full list of the museum websites under scrutiny.

	Country	City	Museum	Website address
1	UK	Cambridge	The Fitzwilliam Museum	http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk
2	UK	Edinburgh	National Galleries Scotland	https://www.nationalgalleries.org/
3	UK	Edinburgh	National Museum of Scotland	https://www.nms.ac.uk/
4	UK	Liverpool	National Museums Liverpool	www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/
5	UK	London	British Museum	http://www.britishmuseum.org/
6	UK	London	National Gallery	https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/
7	UK	London	National Portrait Gallery	https://www.npg.org.uk/
8	UK	London	Natural History Museum	http://www.nhm.ac.uk/
9	UK	London	Royal Academy of Art	www.royalacademy.org.uk
10	UK	London	Royal Museums Greenwich	https://www.rmg.co.uk/
11	UK	London	Science Museum	https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/
12	UK	London	Southbank Centre	https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/
13	UK	London	The Design Museum	https://designmuseum.org
14	UK	London	The Freud Museum	www.freud.org.uk
15	UK	London	The Saatchi Gallery	www.saatchigallery.com
16	UK	London	The Wallace Collection	www.wallacecollection.org
17	UK	London	Victoria & Albert Museum	www.vam.ac.uk
18	UK	Nottingham	National Justice Museum	http://www.nationaljusticemuseum.org.uk/
19	UK	Oxford	Ashmolean Museum	https://www.ashmolean.org/
20	US	Boston	MFA Boston	https://www.mfa.org/
21	US	Boston	The Gardner Museum	https://www.gardnermuseum.org/
22	US	Chicago	MCA Chicago	https://mchicago.org/
23	US	Chicago	The Art Institute Chicago	http://www.artic.edu/
24	US	Los Angeles	The Broad	https://www.thebroad.org/
25	US	Los Angeles	The Getty	http://www.getty.edu/
26	US	Los Angeles	The Los Angeles County	http://www.lacma.org/

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_visited_museums_in_the_United_Kingdom

Last accessed: 19 March 2023

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-visited_museums_in_the_United_States

Last accessed: 19 March 2023

		Angeles	Museum of Art	
27	US	Los Angeles	The Museum of Contemporary Art	https://www.moca.org/
28	US	Miami	Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami	http://mocanomi.org/
29	US	Miami	The Bass Miami Beach contemporary art museum	https://thebass.org/
30	US	Miami	The Wolfsonian	https://www.wolfsonian.org/
31	US	New Orleans	The National WWII Museum	https://www.nationalww2museum.org/
32	US	New York	The Metropolitan Museum of Art	https://www.metmuseum.org/
33	US	Philadelphia	The Philadelphia Museum of Art	https://www.philamuseum.org/
34	US	San Francisco	Exploratorium	https://www.exploratorium.edu/
35	US	San Francisco	San Francisco Museum of Modern Art · SFMOMA	https://www.sfmoma.org/
36	US	San Francisco	The Contemporary Jewish Museum	https://www.theccjm.org/
37	US	San Francisco	The GLBT History Museum	http://www.glbthistory.org/
38	US	Washington	The Kreeger Museum	https://www.kreegermuseum.org/
39	US	Washington	The National Gallery of Art	https://www.nga.gov/
40	US	Washington	The Smithsonian Institution	www.si.edu

Table 1
Museum websites under scrutiny.³

The methodological toolkit for the analysis relies on a combination of multimodal and discourse analysis techniques, allowing research into possible interconnections between verbal and visual language.

From a multimodal perspective, the observation of non-verbal semiotic modes (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), such as the positioning of logotype and illustrative and photographic style, can unravel the actual stance adopted by museums when addressing users. Commitment to ethical engagement (Dhanesh 2017) can be recognised, for instance, in the way visual components combine with textual distribution and hyperlink structures to enact meaningful interaction with users, and not to merely promote the museum itself.

From a discourse-analytical point of view, the pursuit of ethical engagement can be recognised in the style of textual communication, i.e. in the lexical and interpersonal features adopted to discursively ‘situate’ and position the institution when addressing the visitors. According to Hyland (2010, p. 123) proximity is “where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers” and “including them as discourse participants”. For instance, the use of personal pronouns for ego-targeting (Dann 1996), imperatives and other linguistic means of proximal deixis (Culpeper, Haugh 2014), can be interpreted as evidence of proximity on the part of museums. Conversely, the use of third-person for self-reference contributes to create distance and can be seen as reflective of a monologic and unidirectional stance.

Considering that the description and positive evaluation of exhibitions, art work, artists as well as the museum itself are distinctive features of museum websites (Bondi

³ All websites were last accessed on March 19, 2023.

2009), the concept of evaluation is also crucial for the purpose of this article. Analysis is based on relevant studies on the language of evaluation (Hunston 2011; Hunston, Thompson 2000) and looks primarily at the value system of museum communicators, as reflected by evaluative language in use on the museums' homepage.

4. Discussion

The empirical observation of the homepages under scrutiny has enabled the identification of two ways in which museums present themselves online: a visitor-oriented stance and a self-oriented one. These two communication styles are not exclusive of each other, but can also be combined within the same homepage.

The visitor-oriented stance is characterised by a focus on the audience and their needs: the main emphasis is placed on the content, i.e. on the cultural and educational offerings made available by the museum, such as exhibitions, collections, events and activities. Consequently, on the homepage, useful visiting information on opening hours, admission, advanced booking, etc., is immediately at hand and images mostly portray visitors, artists, performances, and exhibitions on view. Self-referentiality, as obtained through the visual representation of the museum itself, its logo, and other brand identity features, is kept to a minimum and carried out with simplicity and subtlety. Direct links to self-referential sections of the websites, such as the 'about us' section or the mission statement, feature in the lowest part of the homepage or do not appear at all, as they are not perceived as a priority in the overall communication. Users are directly addressed through ego-targeting strategies and language is aimed at establishing proximity to the public.

Conversely, a self-oriented stance has been detected in the homepage when the major focus is on the museum and its public image. Communication is mostly concerned about establishing a strong brand identity and the 'who-we-are' component is apparently more important than the cultural contents offered by the museum. In visual terms, emphasis is placed on those elements that are more likely to convey the museum identity, such as the logo, the typefaces and colours in use, and the overall imagery related to the museum. The homepage is also characterised by the presence of self-referential texts, appearing in the form of brief self-introductions (who-we-are texts) or claims, strategically inserted in the most visible part of the page. In this textual component, the language of evaluation plays an important role in delivering a self-promotional and memorable message to users; yet, visitors are considered as passive receivers of the communication and seldom addressed directly. A direct link to self-referential information – the 'about us' section – may appear on top of the homepage, clearly visible to those who are interested in knowing more about the museum and its mission.

The visitor-oriented stance was the most featured in the sample, with twenty-one overall cases. Ten homepages were classified as self-oriented, while a further nine cases were considered hybrid (see Table 2).

	N. of cases
VISITOR-ORIENTED STANCE	21
SELF-ORIENTED STANCE	10
HYBRID STANCE	9
TOT.	40

Table 2
Summary of stance types adopted in museum homepages.

In the following subsections, a selection of homepages representing two identified positions - visitor-oriented and/or self-oriented - will be described in detail. This part of the analysis aims at illustrating how these two positions are visually and textually implemented and to what extent they can coexist on the same homepage.

4.1. The National Gallery, London

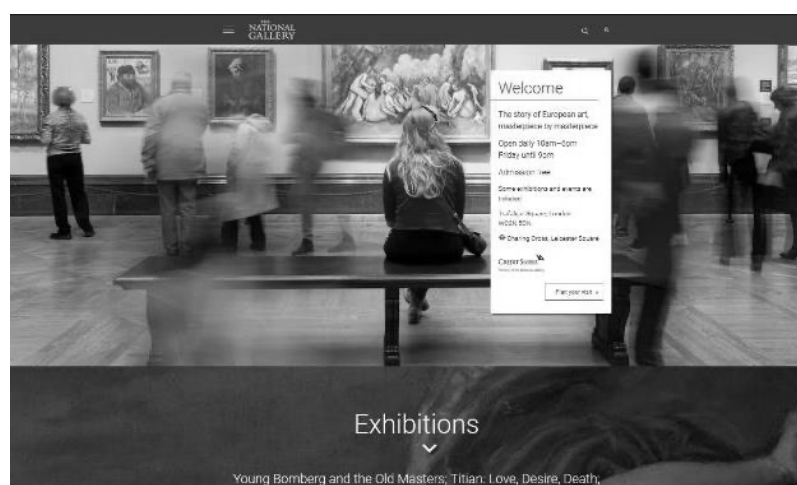


Figure 1
The National Gallery homepage.

A first example to illustrate the visitor-oriented stance is offered by the London National Gallery homepage (see fig. 1). The overall design of the website is fresh and appealing: images take centre stage and content is organised into a very regular layout; no animation is used, which brings about a sense of order, balance and completion.

The homepage opens with a full-screen image, portraying visitors walking around the Gallery: the room is crowded and figures are blurred while moving, with the exception of a young woman in the middle, sitting on a bench and looking at a painting in front of her. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) model, the woman can be seen as the 'carrier' of the narrative process, whose meaning or identity is established in the relation with the context, while her position in the foreground defines the 'symbolic attribute' of the representation. The woman is the focus of the composition: viewers are naturally led to empathise with her and put themselves in her shoes. The intentional focus on this unidentified character seems to suggest that, despite the high density of figures represented

inside the gallery, the National Gallery visitor experience is still unique, personalised and diverse for anyone, like it is for the young woman on the bench.

Coming to the verbal component conveyed by the homepage, a welcome message is placed in a box on the right side, over the image, condensing the essence of the National Gallery into an effective claim – ‘The story of European art, masterpiece by masterpiece’ - and summarising basic information for visitors (opening hours, admission, venue address and main sponsor). A call to action (‘Plan your visit’) is strategically inserted at the end of the box. By so doing, the purpose of enabling users to pick up all basic information on the museum at a glance and plan their visit right away is perfectly achieved. The second layer of the homepage focuses on running exhibitions, while the following blocks link to works in the collection (‘30 must-see paintings’), in-depth resources, virtual tours, etc. By clicking on ‘Surprise me!’, a random list of masterpieces in the collection is generated and a personalised navigation path is offered to users (‘Congratulations. You have generated a random search of the collection, pulling out just 10 of our masterpieces. Hit Take a Chance! again to discover further surprises’). This tool adds a touch of originality, interactivity and personalisation to the traditional browsing options provided by galleries of digitised artworks and objects appearing on museum websites.

All throughout the homepage users are addressed directly through imperatives (‘Surprise me’, ‘shop’, ‘read and watch’, ‘learn about art’, ‘support us’, ‘the world’s greatest paintings to your inbox’, ‘join the conversation’, etc.); the use of an informal, yet overused phrase, such as ‘must-see exhibition’, shows the intention, on the museum’s part, to sound friendly and welcoming.

Self-referentiality is clearly not the priority on this homepage, where most content is audience-oriented: the ‘what-we-do’ component appears considerably more relevant here than the ‘who-we-are’ one. The page mostly aims at engaging users by showing what the National Gallery has to offer. Only two panels on the homepage - ‘Membership’ and ‘Support Us’ – can be traced back to self-referential aims, and in particular it positions the National Gallery as a prestigious institution, which deserves special attention and adequate support from the public.

4.2. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

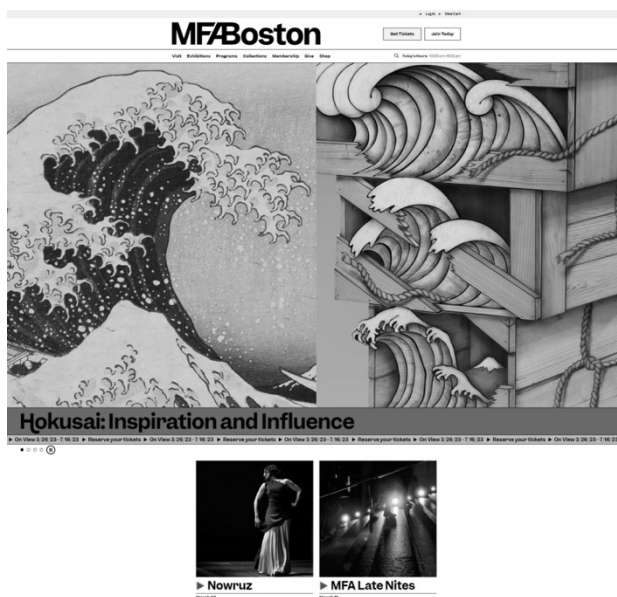


Figure 2
The Museum of Fine Arts homepage.

Another example of the visitor-oriented stance is exemplified in the homepage of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where self-referentiality is kept to a minimum level. Most visual content refers to what the museum has to offer to its visitors (exhibitions, collections, events and activities), while the representation of the museum's brand identity is less prominent in terms of information value, salience and framing (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). All the images rolling from right to left in the main slider of the homepage highlight audience-oriented activities, and, especially, running exhibitions. Also the subsequent blocks below the slider link to current events, such as 'Nowruz' and 'MFA Late Nites' (see Figure 2). Users are directly addressed through the second person and are invited to participate in the proposed activities through the imperative form ('spend your evening at the MFA', 'see program calendar', etc.), in the frame of an ego-targeting strategy (Dann 1996) aimed to single web-readers out of the crowd and emphasise their uniqueness.

When the overall space available on the homepage is considered, the logo and the naming of the institution, placed as usual at the top of the page, seem to play a minor role in proportional terms. The logo of the museum is simple, clean and not provocative. It features the word 'Boston' prominently, with the A and B letterforms connecting to firmly tie the museum to its location. The primary colour palette uses white, black and red.

There is no text to introduce the museum, nor a claim to highlight its brand identity on the homepage. Moreover, the direct link to the 'about' section of the website is to be found only in the footer, i.e. at the bottom of the homepage, and appears in very light fonts.

On the whole, the presentation of the museum seems to rely on understatement and be minimised in order to shed light on the varied array of activities and services offered to visitors. Self-promotional aims are intentionally put aside and left to other sections of the website.

4.3. The Design Museum, London



Figure 3
The Design Museum homepage.

A different scenario is offered by the London Design Museum, whose homepage seems to privilege strong brand identity elements rather than highlighting the cultural offer to visitors. The layout of the homepage is multileveled and organised as a sequence of full-

screen images, followed by a series of further minor blocks. The main visual component relies on a full-screen representation of the upper coverage of the museum building, the hyperbolic roof of the Commonwealth Institute, the Design Museum’s Holland Park home (see Figure 3). The choice of showing an iconic feature of the museum, the main building, is strategic, as it conveys strong elements of architectural identity and contributes to branding the museum’s public image (Pierroux, Skyulstad 2011).

The welcome claim placed over the image reminds users that the Design Museum is “the world’s leading museum devoted to contemporary design in every form”. The strength of the evaluation leaves the reader little space for mild disagreement, while the use of the third person for self-referentiality seems to convey a sense of superiority on behalf of the museum and places a distance from the readers.

The logo of the museum is prominent in the organisation of the homepage. Its visibility has been intentionally increased in the external communications of the museum through a revision to the primary logo, with a lowercase “the” added above the Design Museum line. As explained in an interview by the agency in charge of restyling, the museum’s director “was keen to establish the authority of the institution in its new location by using the definitive article, *The Design Museum*, and build on the elements that existed in the previous identity” (Fulleylove 2016). The characters in the wordmark were therefore redrawn to work with this addition, combining lower case (the) and upper case (DESIGN MUSEUM). The addition is extremely relevant at the linguistic level: the presence of a determiner modifying the proper name of the institution contributes to stressing the valuable assets of a museum, as being specific – the Design Museum is specialised in design – and unique – it is (possibly) the only one of its kind. Moreover, the determiner is a strong identifying element, bringing about a sense of familiarity and evoking positive habits, as in the case of other popular the-museums, like The Met, The Getty, The Broad, etc. The determiner does not only add to the specificity of the museum, but conveys the idea of a higher involvement on the audience’s part, suggesting the idea of a familiar habit linking the museum to its visitors.

On the whole, the homepage of the Design Museum can be classified as self-oriented, given the emphasis on strong visual identity features such as the museum building, including an evaluative claim that emphasises the museum’s particularities, and the strategic role played by the logo as well as name of the institution.

4.4. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



Figure 4
The San Francisco Museum of Modern Arts homepage.

Another example of the self-oriented stance can be found by looking at the homepage of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This homepage features a non-traditional layout, with a fixed, non-scrolling screen, in which a video has been embedded (Figure 4). Moving images show some iconic details of the museum's exterior architecture, which have already been identified as an effective 'branding' tool for the museum (Pierroux, Skyulstad 2011). The verbal component is limited to a two-level menu in the bottom left hand corner, where the name of the institution is featured prominently and links directly to the 'about' section. Visiting information is relegated to the bottom of the page and consists of three labels, reproduced in small print, which link to 'Exhibitions and Events', 'Tickets' and 'Visit'.

The logo of the museum plays a paramount role in the homepage: it is characterised by three unaligned parts (SF, MO, MA), which can appear in an expanded or in a contracted version. This configuration is particularly interesting in linguistic terms, as it raises a few questions among audiences who might be less familiar with the museum and its name: is SFMOMA an acronym or a word? How is it spoken out loud? How important is "San Francisco" in "San Francisco Museum of Modern Art"? Is the museum somehow related to New York MoMA? All these questions are directly involved in the definition of the museum's identity and therefore highlight the priority, on the museum's part, to become easily recognisable and have an impact on the audience.

The SFMOMA homepage can be classified as self-referential, since verbal and visual elements of communication aim at shedding light on the institution and its identity: in the first place, the video footage, relying on the museum's exterior architecture and its placement in the urban setting, appears strongly self-promotional; secondly, the pervasiveness of the logo SFMOMA, taking different shapes and oscillating all over the page, invites visitors to acknowledge the strong visual identity of the museum. The focus is placed on the brand – the museum's public image – rather than on its products – exhibitions and projects –. Moreover, information about what is currently on view at the museum is not immediately at hand on the homepage, and one has to further browse the website in order to find what the museum has to offer.

4.5. *The Isabella Gardner Museum, Boston*



Figure 5
The Isabella Gardner Museum homepage.

The homepage of the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston can be regarded as an example of a hybrid stance held by museum communicators, in which elements of self-referentiality coexist with more overtly visitor-oriented ones.

The brand identity of the Gardner Museum is entirely built around its founder, Isabella Stewart Gardner, an eccentric and wealthy Bostonian heiress who collected more than 16,000 works of art throughout her life. The layout of the homepage (Figure 5) features an opening full-screen video that is fixed and horizontally developed with a 45-second trailer that plays once per user session. In 45 seconds the clip tells who Isabella was, what the museum looks like and which masterpieces it houses. Images showing artworks (as first, a large portrait of Isabella Gardner), interiors, gardens and performances taking place at the museum flow rapidly on the screen, while a background voice says that the Gardner is ‘one woman’s daring vision’, ‘a personal museum’ that ‘spark[s] your imagination and awaken[s] your senses’. ‘Isabella’s legacy’ is made salient through ‘her palace’, enhanced by ‘a vibrant new wing’ and ‘a sumptuous garden courtyard’, meant ‘for the enjoyment of the public forever’. Evaluative language is strategically combined with the narrative built around the museum’s founder to add colour to the story and create a dreamy, literary atmosphere.

Compared to the innovative design adopted for the website, the Gardner logo looks old-fashioned: the typeface used is a dated, with combined letters, as in the case of ‘L’ and ‘A’ in ‘Isabella’ and ‘T’ and ‘E’ in ‘Stewart’. Behind the logo are maybe two colliding ideas: to state the full name of the patron and to accentuate the initial ‘G’ of the name that was used, which is, short and simple, ‘the Gardner’. The logo has been revived by a claim directly addressing visitors and appearing on the right side, at the same height, reading ‘what’s your pleasure?’, which is inspired by Isabella’s own words, as explained in another section of the site. Isabella created an immersive environment and she used to say that this collection was her pleasure. That quotation is exploited to engage visitors and make them feel like protagonists of the visiting experience: “As Isabella said, ‘it’s my pleasure’, but it is likely to be yours as well”.

The Gardner museum’s homepage shows how self-referentiality can be mixed with visitor-oriented aims. The tone of voice is overtly promotional and texts, images and videos are strategically combined to shed light, first and foremost, on the founder’s figure, Isabella Gardner. However, the communication style aims to directly engage users through a seductive narrative, which not only enhances the museum’s institutional image, but also promotes its content to the public in an original way.

5. Concluding remarks

The present study has relied on the premise that museum websites cannot be considered only as promotional tools, but, more importantly, as a means for connecting in order to sensibly improve the visitor-museum relationship (Marty 2007; Park *et al.* 2021). The homepage is the place where the interplay of these functions is best illustrated and, consequently, the analysis has focussed on the description of its design and content across a representative sample of museum websites, with a view to unravelling the stance adopted by museum communicators toward their audiences.

After taking into account elements of visual and verbal communication, this study has shown that more than a half of the museums under scrutiny display a fully visitor-oriented attitude on their homepage; approximately one-quarter of the sample reflects a self-referential stance, while the other one-quarter shows mixed intentions. The

predominant stance therefore is that of museums putting the visitor first or, at least, partially pursuing that ideal, in an attempt to combine promotional needs and attention to visitors. In fact, the results demonstrate that the ‘self-oriented’ and ‘visitor-oriented’ stances are not necessarily at odds but may coexist within the same homepage. This implies that a visitor-oriented attitude in communication does not require museums to neglect or forget what they are, but, more realistically, to re-evaluate and calibrate the presence of identity elements on the website.

In laying the foundations for a theoretical distinction between ‘self-oriented’ and ‘visitor-oriented’ stances in websites, this study suggests that a balance between the two should be pursued. Museums should establish a more symmetrical and equal relationship with the visitors starting from the most visible component in the overall system of digital tools at their disposal, the homepage of the website, in order to set the tone of communication and show commitment to participation and ethical engagement. In fact, if, in the past, communication could be based mostly on self-promotion, today the pandemic has shown that such an attitude is no longer sustainable, nor advantageous to the museum. Contemporary cultural institutions cannot ignore a more ethical style of communication, in which information is immediately at hand, services available are clearly stated and a proximal stance is adopted to show an authentic need to get closer to visitors and empathise with them.

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Acknowledgements: I thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions.

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