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Language, narrative and structure of storytelling in museum communication: A diachronic approach

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is at the core of museum activities (Bedford 2001), but little attention has been paid to its role in museum communication (MC) from a discourse-analytical perspective. This paper aims to show how narrative has developed as part of MC since the 1970s, appearing in a wide array of museum texts, from press releases to digital genres. Typically, museum storytelling goes hand in hand with evaluative language, lexical markers of AFFECT and forms of non-standard language (emoji). The methodological toolkit for the study is qualitative in focus and draws on frameworks developed for the analysis of museum discourse (Ravelli 2007). The dataset consists of a corpus of museum press releases, dating from 1950 to 2016, and a sample of digital museum texts, dating from 2015 to 2021. The study confirms that MC represents an interesting field for discourse studies, providing a repertoire of innovative practices not only in terms of storytelling techniques, but communication strategies in general.

Keywords: storytelling, narrative, museum communication, diachronic studies, discourse analysis, emotive language, emoji.

1. Introduction

The pervasive role played by storytelling in museum settings is widely recognised by practitioners, who have based most of their activities, from exhibitions to educational programs, on the art of telling stories. Bedford (2001) argues that the *raison d'être* of the museum has to be traced back to a story worth telling and passing on from generation to generation, thus claiming that stories are the “real thing” of museums (Bedford 2001: 33). Similarly, Nielsen (2017: 6) sees museums as storytellers “with a firm grasp of

what can be communicated and understood”, constantly creating meaning and eliciting individual interpretation from the public through the use of narrative resources.

In a global context of communication dominated by storytelling, the forms of narration implemented by museums seem to be qualified by an added value. As highlighted by Hughes (2021), museums are generally trusted by the public and perceived as a reliable source of information: they are still considered as a safe zone, unaffected by misinformation and fake news, where critical thinking can still be exercised and authentic knowledge dissemination take place. In the current times, when opinions are strongly polarised and society is exacerbated by divisions, museums are therefore called upon to assume a great responsibility: they have the opportunity to share thought-provoking stories, dealing with salient issues, such as globalisation, inequality, climate change, and migration, that are credible in the eye of the public.

Today, it is not only exhibitions that are organised following the framework of stories (Hughes 2021). Professionals in the education departments of museums also rely heavily on them, and have developed principles for effective storytelling according to different segments of the public (Di Blasio – Di Blasio 1983), involving verbal and non-verbal communicative practices (Burdelski et al. 2014). These forms of museum storytelling require a wide array of skills: Bourlakovs et al. (2017) argue that behind the narrative of a guided tour is the joint work of an educator, a performer, a psychologist, and a contractor, the latter being able to manage strict time constraints.

Storytelling is very much part of the picture even in the communication departments of museums, when it comes to prompt visitor interaction and participation, i.e. at the stage of reaching out to the audiences (see Kramper 2017 on the benefits of using storytelling in museum public relations). Yet, comparatively little attention has been paid to the role stories play in museum promotional and digitally-mediated communication (Nielsen 2017). Museum communication (MC), often considered as the domain of practitioners (media and public relations experts), actually represents a burgeoning research area for discourse studies, pioneered in the 1990s by Louise Ravelli (1996, 2006, 2007) and sharing common ground with the domains of art, media, and tourism discourse. Inherently discursive aspects of MC, such as lexis, structure and narrative, deserve attention on the part of linguists, as their analyses can add to the experience of practitioners and offer further insights into professional practice.

This paper aims to provide a contribution in this respect, by analysing the use of narrative in MC across diverse genres, such as press releases,

web pages and social media posts. Drawing on frameworks applied in the qualitative analysis of museum discourse (Ravelli 2007), the study explores the language features and structure underlying narrative in MC from a diachronic perspective. Two main research questions are addressed: 1) when did museums start using narrative in communication? and 2) what are the typical language features of storytelling used in MC?

The next section provides a brief presentation of the materials used for the study, as well as of the methodology adopted. The analysis will first deal with the identification of prototypical forms of narrative in museum press releases, considered as a founding genre for MC, on which all subsequent genres have been built, and then move on to an overview of recontextualised forms of narrative and micro-narrative in newly emerged museum genres, such as websites and social media. The discussion of the data will focus on the degree of manipulation and transformation of basic narrative structure across genres, taking into account the typical combination of narrative with emotive language and the gradual introduction of non-standard language features (emoji).

2. Materials and methods

The analysis carried out in this study is based on two main resources: a corpus of press releases issued by US and UK museums between 1950 and 2016 (*EPA Diacorpus*, see Lazzaretto 2016), and a sample of web pages and social media posts collected from US and UK museums' digital platforms between 2015 and 2021. The non-homogeneous nature of the dataset's two components must be recognised in advance. Whereas in the case of press releases – which are 'finished documents' and, once published, cannot be changed – texts were collected across seven decades, web pages and social media were observed within a more limited time span, covering less than a decade. This is due to the ephemeral nature of Internet texts, which "were not designed to be considered 'finished products', but to be continuously built on and modified" (Tagg 2015: 34), or even deleted by their authors. These considerations affected the way digital museum texts were collected and led to focus on a period which could guarantee actual data availability. This can be roughly dated between the start of the author's research in the field of digital MC (September 2015) and January 2021.

While in the first part of analysis, aimed at tracing the origins and evolution of narrative in MC, an ad-hoc structured corpus of 430 press releases

(378,315 words) has been utilised in order to mirror language change over seven decades, in the second part, a selective approach has been adopted so as to illustrate how the use of narrative has been transferred and recontextualised in museum digital media: therefore, some notable examples have been chosen across the digitally-mediated communication produced by museums and dealt with in the analysis. The selection was made bearing in mind Glaser – Strauss’ (2006) principles of theoretical sampling, whereby “the process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory” (2006: 45). Accordingly, the examples presented in this paper were chosen for their value in illustrating particular theoretical phenomena noted by the researcher.

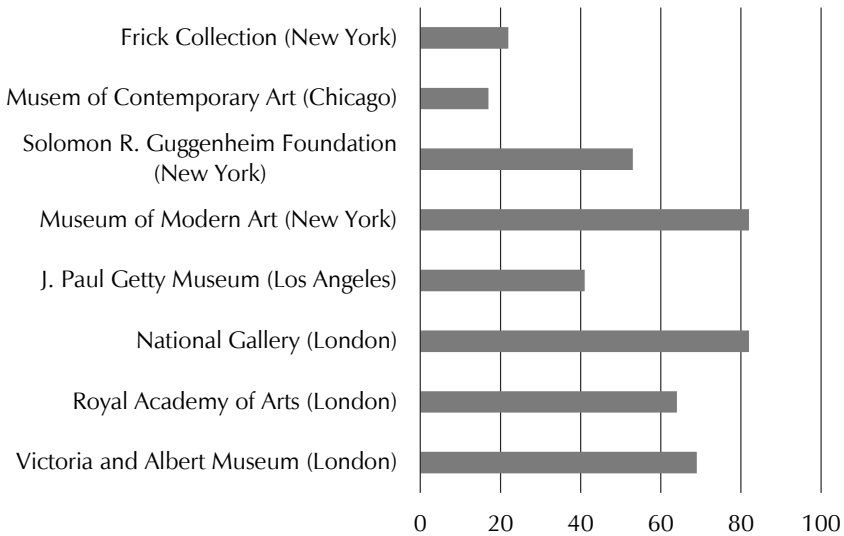


Figure 1. Museum sources of press releases

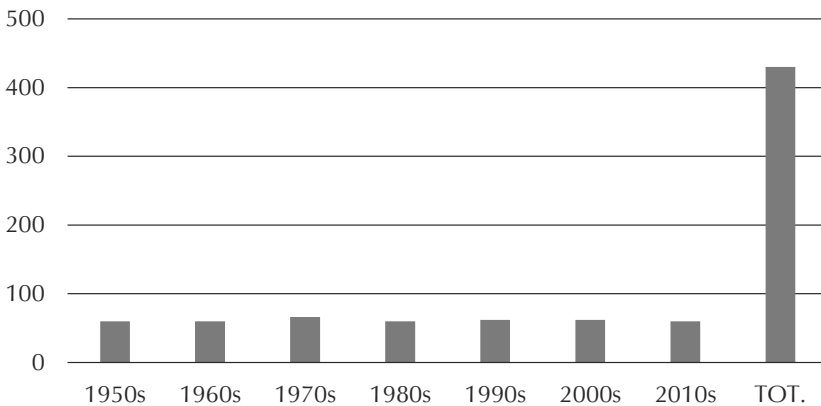


Figure 2. Number of press releases collected per decade

The graphs reproduced above (Figure 1 and Figure 2) show sources and number of press releases in use for the diachronic analysis, while Table 1 summarises the main features of the sample of museum digital media. References for web pages and social media posts taken into consideration in the second part of the study will be contextually provided throughout the analysis.

Table 1. Main features of the sample of museum digital media

Observation Period	September 2015 – January 2021
Number of observed museum websites	40
Number of observed museum social network sites	30
Number of collected web pages	60
Number of collected social media posts	120

The methodology adopted in the study is discourse-analytical and draws on frameworks applied in the qualitative analysis of texts in museums (Ravelli 2007). To a lesser degree, the study entails a quantitative approach, insofar as it aims to determine when MC began to rely on narrative techniques and to quantify their use over time. Consequently, the calculation of word frequency, made possible by Wordsmith Tools 8 (Scott 2020), and the manual analysis of texts were combined.

Since the main focus of the study is on storytelling in MC, some clarifications of the theoretical approach taken here need to be mentioned, starting from a terminological one. As pointed out by Pireddu (2018: 3), when speaking about museum storytelling, “we are dealing with technique rather than content” and, more specifically, with “a selection of techniques that can fit into the museum environment”. Emphasis, therefore, is placed on the skill of museum professionals as tellers and on their ability of telling a story which is compelling and engaging. Conversely, narrative is a theoretical notion and deals with more formal aspects of a story, as comprised of structural components. In the context of MC, storytelling and narrative appear closely intertwined, as museums, in consequence of being multimodal spaces (Hofinger – Ventola 2004), need to think both in terms of performance – the art of telling a story – and message – the content and articulation of the story itself. Bearing in mind this distinction, the present study would ideally take into account both aspects, but will necessarily focus on the material signs of narrative identified across diverse museum genres, i.e. on the discourse which

conveys the story. To that end, the canonical structure of narrative and its discursive features, as described by Toolan (2001), will serve as a framework for the present study and guide the analysis of museum texts. Narrative, in Toolan's sense, is "a recounting of things spatiotemporally distant" (Toolan 2001: 1), consisting of "events, characters and settings" (2001: 12). Furthermore, the discourse of narrative is defined by a series of typical discursive signs: a certain degree of constructedness and prefabrication; a 'trajectory', i.e. some sort of development, coming to a resolution, or conclusion; a teller (and, consequently, an addressee); linguistic markers of displacement, referring to things or events that are removed, in space and time, from both the speaker and the addressee (Toolan 2001: 4-5).

Evaluation, stance and appraisal are all terms which describe the ways the subjective views of speaker or writer are conveyed in language (Hunston – Thompson 2000; Martin – White 2005; Biber et al. 1999). In the theoretical approach of Appraisal Theory (Martin 2001), in particular, the function of AFFECT is understood as a semantic resource for constructing emotions and establishing an interpersonal relation with the reader. Language used for expressing feelings and opinions plays a key role in narrative, as authors often deploy evaluation to highlight the news story potential and emphasise aspects of narrative complication (van Dijk 1988). The use of narrative may also be combined with emotive language, relying on an intense vocabulary which triggers an emotional response in the readers (Ungerer 1997).

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Narrative in museum press releases

Museums have embraced public relations in the form of a structured practice, by hiring professionals in the field, dedicating a museum department to media relations and investing resources in communication projects, only after the end of the Second World War. In this respect, US museums have led the field and provided a model for other cultural institutions worldwide (McLean 2012). Hence, it is worth exploring when the fascination with stories began and storytelling emerged as a powerful communication tool for museums.

As suggested by Baker (2011), language change over time can tell us much about changes within culture, society, and everyday life. The appearance of new words, as well as the decline or re-conceptualisation of

old ones, across corpora containing texts from different periods, can give us a hint at phenomena on a larger level. Baker's suggestion is applied here to an historical corpus of museum press releases covering seven decades, from 1950 onwards, to corroborate the results of manual inspection of texts. More specifically, frequency of the words "story" and "stories" has been calculated over decades. These words have been selected for their metadiscursive function: they can be considered, in Hyland's (2004, 2005) sense, as metadiscursal features, able to explicitly organise the propositional content and signal the writer's attitudes towards both their writing and their audience. As such, these words may reflect awareness of writers regarding the use of narrative at different points in time.

The graph below (Figure 3) shows the frequency of "story" and "stories" over decades – from 1950 to 2010 – in the corpus under scrutiny. Data were obtained by using the 'detailed consistency analysis' function in WordSmith Tools 8 (Scott 2020), enabling the analyst to compare multiple word lists.



Figure 3. Absolute frequency of the nouns story and stories (1950-2010)

The frequency pattern shown by both nouns is that of an irregular increase over decades, going from none or very few occurrences in 1950 up to 15 or more in 2010. In particular, the period between 1970 and 1980 appears crucial, as from these years on the frequency of "story" and "stories" starts to increase sharply. These findings are in line with those provided by close reading of press releases and manual identification of prototypical narrative forms within their structure. It is in fact from the 1970s on that museum press releases start relying more consistently on a new structural element: narrative sections. These are textual sequences, varying in length and

illustrating facts or cases of particular interest for the journalistic readership, structurally characterised by the presence of the basic components of stories, i.e. characters, events and settings (Toolan 2001). The following excerpt (1) provides an early example of these sections.

- (1) “During these same years Rossetti had moved to a house in Cheyne Walk in Chelsea. A large and brilliant group of friends met there – Ruskin, Swinburne, Morris, Whistler and Burne-Jones among them, and along with the amazing menagerie of wombats, kangaroos and armadilloes that were kept there, they proved an irresistibly fascinating target for Rossetti’s contemporaries. [...] However from 1870 onwards it slowly began to break up under the pressure of Rossetti’s worsening physical and mental health which turned him into a recluse. [...] It seems that Rossetti’s growing feelings of remorse over Elizabeth Siddal’s death became identified in his mind with that hopeless grief which Dante felt after the death of his Beatrice”.

(Press Release of the Royal Academy of Arts, London – 1 January 1972)

The example above is taken from a press release on Pre-Raphaelite painters, whose works were exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1972. In particular, this narrative section was retrieved from a specific rhetorical step within the organisation, or macrostructure, of museum press releases, which is the biography of the featured artists. In fact, it is in this step, appearing in the body of the press release, that narrative is more likely to appear, as part of a strategy aimed at arousing interest and curiosity around an artist. In this case, the biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is told in a way that activates imaginative processes and connects with our experiences and emotions. Emphasis is placed on the unusual and exceptional company the artist used to keep, on his wife’s tragic death and his subsequent illness.

The second example (2) was also retrieved within the biography step of a press release announcing a major retrospective dedicated to German artist Joseph Beuys by the Guggenheim Museum in 1979. The narrative focusses on a serious accident Beuys had during the war, which, it turns out, was crucial for his career and determined his production as an artist, including the choice of using felt and fat for his sculptures. Readers are led to empathise with the leading character of the story told and to re-live his experiences. The story ignites a process of self-reflexivity (Giddens 1991), disclosing emotions and feelings readers can relate to (Georgakopoulou 2015).

- (2) “In World War II, as a combat pilot in the German AirForce, Beuys was seriously injured several times. After a near-fatal plane crash during a snowstorm on the Russian Front, he was found by Crimean Tartars who saved his life by wrapping him in a thick insulation of fat and felt. [...] He had never fully recovered from his shattering war experience and withdrew into a state of depression that lasted throughout the 50s. Beuys emerged from this period of crisis with new convictions which led him to testify against Nazism”.

(Press Release of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York – 1 November 1979)

In both examples 1 and 2, a narrative prototypical structure can be recognised on the basis of the presence of basic components, as identified by Toolan (2001): characters (Dante Gabriel Rossetti/Joseph Beuys, both flanked by side characters), spatio-temporally distant settings (XIX century, Pre-Raphaelite Circle / World War II, Russian front), and a development of events culminating in a conclusion or resolution (popularity and success – death of wife – grief and illness / plane crash – rescue – depression – creativity and artistic awareness). The aim of emotional engagement is, however, obtained through the combination of a narrative structure with evaluative language (Hunston – Thompson 2000). In both cases, evaluation is key to the success of the narrative. Based on Martin and White’s (2005) APPRAISAL system, the evaluative markers used in the narrative sections presented above, such as *a large and brilliant group of friends, amazing menagerie, irresistibly fascinating target, worsening health, growing feelings of remorse, hopeless grief, near-fatal plane crash, seriously injured, never fully recovered, shattering war experience*, can be regarded as linguistic realisations of AFFECT, addressing positive or negative feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes (Martin – White 2005). This category includes “a range of grammatical metaphors, including nominalised realisations of qualities (joy, sadness, sorrow) and processes (grief, sobs, constriction in his throat)” (Martin – White 2005: 46). Markers of AFFECT allow the attitude of the narrators toward the narrative emerge: authors project their subjective views on situations, unveiling their emotional state and establishing relations with readers.

The use of narrative sections in museum press releases has increased over the decades. As shown by Table 2, these were extremely rare in early examples of the genre, while today at least 1 out of 3 press releases – 35% – include narrative sections. This result may suggest an evolution in the practice of writers, who have gradually become more aware of the potential of narrative in terms of reader involvement and newsworthiness.

Table 2. Number of press releases including narrative sections across decades

	N. of PRs	%
1950	2	3%
1960	2	3%
1970	9	14%
1980	15	25%
1990	16	25%
2000	15	23%
2010	21	35%
TOT	80/430	18%

To explain the increasingly important role played by narrative in museum press releases, one has to bear in mind that stories are particularly valued by journalists, the “professional storytellers of our age” (Bell 1991: 147). Press releases with a narrative potential have news value in the eye of reporters and therefore greater chances of being used and retold in subsequent news stories. As van Dijk (1988: 87) puts it, newsmakers tend to “make the news report livelier... conveying both the human and the dramatic dimension of the news event”. Narrative sections provide

therefore that *quid* of ‘newsworthiness’ which seems to be an indispensable element for the implementation of what has been defined by Jacobs (1999) as the metapragmatics of the press release, i.e. its function of reuse by journalists and its pre-formulation aimed at such reuse.

3.2 Narrative in museum websites

In the mid-to-late nineties, with the development of the first websites, museums started to slowly venture into digital media. At an early stage, museum websites mostly replicated the printed material online and offered basic information, while later on many institutions began to digitise their collections and offer virtual visits (Rizzo – Mignosa 2013).

The storytelling tradition, so firmly embedded in museums, was automatically applied to the new media. As observed by Geismar (2018), museum websites reproduce older representational frameworks, showing the same issues of “classification, narration, value, and perspective that are on display in the galleries” (2018: 78). Furthermore, web narrative is used across different areas of MC, as in the case of *ad hoc* storytelling for educational web content (Glover Frykman 2009), or specific narratives conveying architectural identity in museum websites (Pierroux – Skjulstad 2011).

Narrative sections, in the form already identified for press releases, typically feature in specific pages of the museum website, such as those on the history of the institution, or on the statement of museum identity and mission (‘who we are’ and ‘about’ pages). However, forms of narratives

in nuce, or micro-narratives, which promise or imply a story, even though not fully developed in structural terms, can be disseminated also elsewhere in museum websites. This is the case, for instance, of the Gardner Museum website, where storytelling is used as the predominant way to engage with visitors.¹

The institutional image of the Gardner Museum is built entirely 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 website of the Gardner Museum aims to reflect her unique personality by sharing a selection of meaningful stories, set in a colourful and lively context. Isabella is the main character of a narrative pervading the website both at the verbal and visual level, depicting an ambitious, unconventional woman, unafraid of pursuing dreams and desires, even if it implied risks. Beside the main narrative devoted to Isabella Gardner, a series of further, secondary narrative layers are disseminated throughout the website, such as those on the Venetian palace built in Boston to house her collection and the infamous theft happened at the museum in 1990.^{2,3}

Right from the homepage (see Figure 4), visitors are invited to ‘meet Isabella’, called by her name all across the website to establish a sense of familiarity, and ‘learn about the daring visionary and the museum she created’.



Figure 4. Homepage of the website gardnermuseum.org

- 1 <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/>, accessed October 2021.
- 2 <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/building-isabellas-museum>, accessed October 2021.
- 3 <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/theft>, accessed October 2021.

Bearing in mind the attitudinal provocation (Martin – White 2005) inherent in the evaluative coupling ‘daring visionary’, this invitation sounds as a prelude to a story and can serve as a narrative cue. As noted by Baumbach (2015), these forms of micro-narratives, or narratives *in nuce*, are particularly involving for readers, who need to activate their cognitive schemata to interpret them and complement the information provided with their previous “knowledge of images, figures and narratives” (Baumbach 2015: 29). The storytelling approach characterising the website is then made fully explicit by means of metadiscourse elements, as the final link guides users to discover ‘stories and more’: the upcoming narrative content is therefore clearly anticipated by the audience, who knows exactly what to expect.

Following the link on the homepage, users willing to ‘meet Isabella’ are sent to a richly illustrated ‘about’ page, which is structured as a major, multimodal extension of the narrative sections previously identified in museum press releases (see Figure 5).⁴ The page, divided into subsections, provides a detailed account of Isabella Gardner’s ‘unconventional life’, from her early life, to her marriage, travels, friendships, and lastly her ‘visionary’ legacy. Isabella is often defined as ‘a visionary’ throughout the website: she is called ‘a daring visionary’ in the homepage, ‘a visionary founder’ in the mission statement. The noun ‘vision’ (like its synonym ‘dream’) is therefore key to the characterisation of her personality. Lexical choices also rest on the theme of sensuality: Isabella created an immersive environment and she used to say that her collection was her pleasure. The museum is therefore described as a source of ‘pleasure’ – as it was for Isabella, it can also be for visitors – and as a place to ‘awaken your senses’.

In addition to evaluative language, quotations are strategically used throughout the text to amplify the main character of Isabella, appearing as a sort of literary heroine that would fit well in a novel by Henry James or Edith Wharton (who, by the way, were both friends of Gardner in real life). As shown by the examples below (1-6), the voices quoted in the web page are those of side characters in Isabella’s story: friends, acquaintances, reporters.

- (3) *“Mrs. Jack Gardner is one of the seven wonders of Boston. There is nobody like her in any city in this country. She is a millionaire Bohemienne. She is the leader of the smart set, but she often leads where none dare follow... She imitates nobody; everything she does is novel and original.”* – a Boston reporter

⁴ <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/isabella-stewart-gardner>, accessed October 2021.

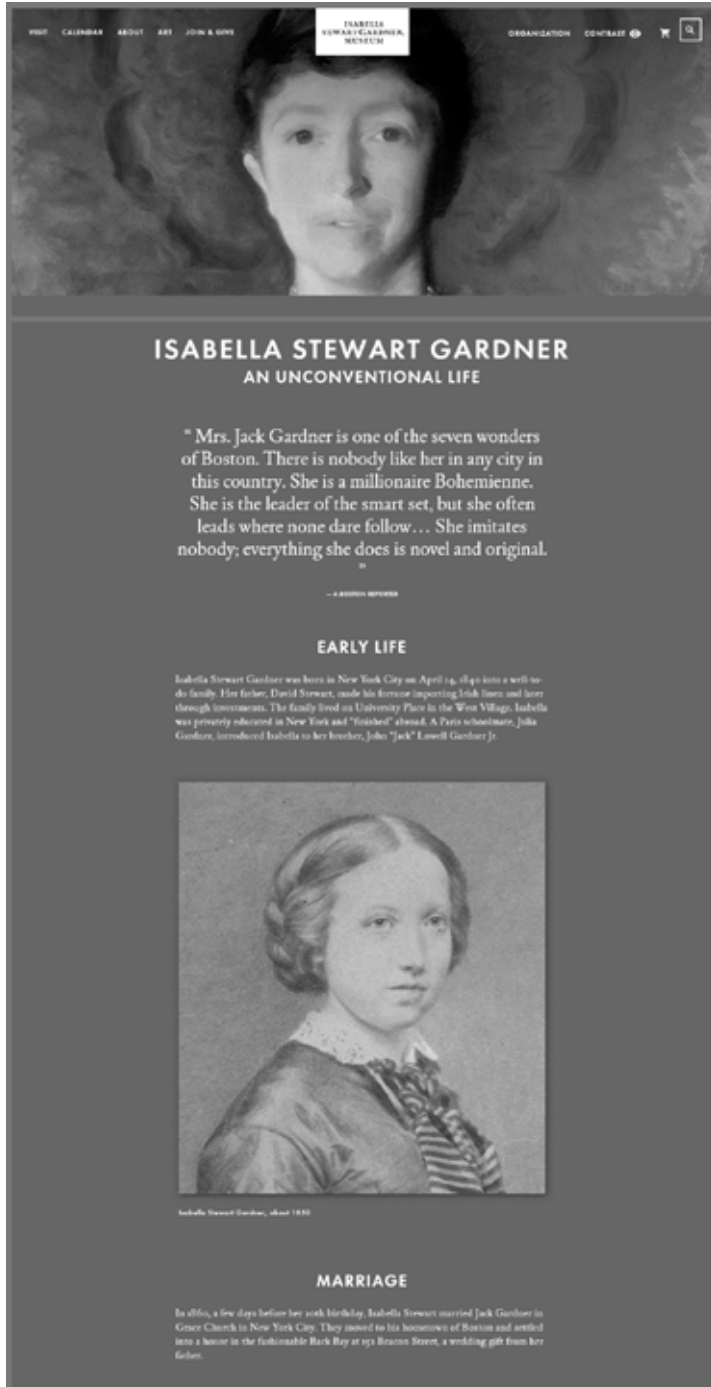


Figure 5. Upper part of the 'about' page on Isabella Stewart Gardner

- (4) *“She lives at a rate and intensity, with a reality that makes other lives seem pale, thin and shadowy.”* – Bernard Berenson
- (5) *“You said to me... that if ever you inherited any money that it was yours to dispose of, you would have a house... filled with beautiful pictures and objects of art, for people to come and enjoy. And you have carried out the dream of your youth.”* – Isabella’s friend, Ida Agassiz Higginson, 1923
- (6) When Renzo Piano did his first walk-through of the Gardner Museum, he [...] said, *“This lady was mad. I have to quit this job. No one can do it.”*

The above characterisation of Isabella is achieved by means of other-presentation, typically occurring “when a character or person provides explicit information about someone else” (Culpeper 2001: 167). When a number of different characters characterise the target character in the same way the validity of the characterisation itself is reinforced and the aim of high consensus is achieved.

The last quote (6), by Italian architect Renzo Piano, who was hired in 2005 to design a new wing for the museum, makes an exception, as it comes from a contemporary character who never met Isabella in person. However, Piano seems to have perfectly grasped the temper of Mrs. Gardner, by defining her as ‘mad’ due to her unrealistic demands: according to Gardner’s will, no one would ever have been allowed to alter the museum’s basic premise after her death. Even though Piano accepted the job in the end and the new wing opened in 2012, he had realised from the beginning that Mrs. Gardner, even after her death, would be a very difficult client to please. The characterisation of Isabella is therefore well-rounded and does not exclude negative aspects, such as, for instance, that she could be very stubborn and spoiled.

The insertion of Renzo Piano as a secondary character in the main narrative level devoted to Isabella also allows the introduction of a story within a story, dealt with in another page of the website: that of the ‘personal museum’ Mrs. Gardner built in Boston to house her collection, which was modelled after the 15th century Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. Similarly, a secondary level of narrative has been inserted in the website, regarding the theft which occurred in 1990, when thirteen works of art, including some paintings by Vermeer and Rembrandt, were stolen from the museum. Guards admitted two men posing as police officers responding to a disturbance call; the thieves then tied the guards up and looted the museum over the next

hour. The case is still unsolved, no arrests have been made and no works have been recovered. The empty frames of the stolen paintings still hang on the wall of the museum as a memento. This infamous event in the history of the museum, which would best fit in crisis communication manuals, is defined as “the single largest property theft in the world” in the website and told in a captivating way, as if it was crime fiction. It is not surprising that Netflix has developed a docu-fiction on this story.^{5, 6}

3.3 Narrative in museum social media

As pointed out by De Fina (2016), the transposition of narrative practices to social media implies that stories become subject to “recontextualisations, contestations, and all sorts of manipulations that would not have been possible in offline environments” (2016: 493). Thus, when we move on to the observation of museum social media, despite the limitations in terms of textual length imposed by the genre (Carter et al. 2013), we do not have to expect the demise of narrative, but rather its reconfiguration and reinterpretation according to the characteristic features of these highly interactive and multimodal platforms. Indeed, stories conveyed in museum social media can still comply with the criteria of a canonical narrative, yet, attention is not placed only on their content, but also on their production and circulation: on the way they are “shared, recontextualised, commented upon” (De Fina 2016: 477). This reinforces the hypothesis that museum communicators have become increasingly aware of the potential of narrative as a discursive strategy. Having experienced the effectiveness of narrative in other museum genres (e.g. in press releases and websites), they were highly motivated to extend its use to different contexts.

Typically, in the case of museum social media, we come across forms of minimal narrative, containing at least two clauses told in the same order as that of the original events (Labov 1972: 360; Labov 2006: 38). An example is provided by Figure 6, reproducing a Facebook post of the Victoria & Albert Museum, where an object in the museum’s collection – a medieval beaker – is not presented through a description, but by telling ‘a romantic story’ condensed into two propositions.⁷ As seen in previous examples,

⁵ <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/about/theft>, accessed November 2021.

⁶ <https://www.netflix.com/title/81032570>, accessed November 2021.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/victoriaandalbertmuseum/photos/the-romantic-story-of-this-medieval-beaker-ca-1350-says-that-the-fairies-left-it/10153431981188880/>, accessed November 2021.

the narrative dimension is also here announced *a priori* and made explicit by means of metadiscourse (“story”), while the evaluative lexical choice confirms a preference for markers of AFFECT (“romantic”).

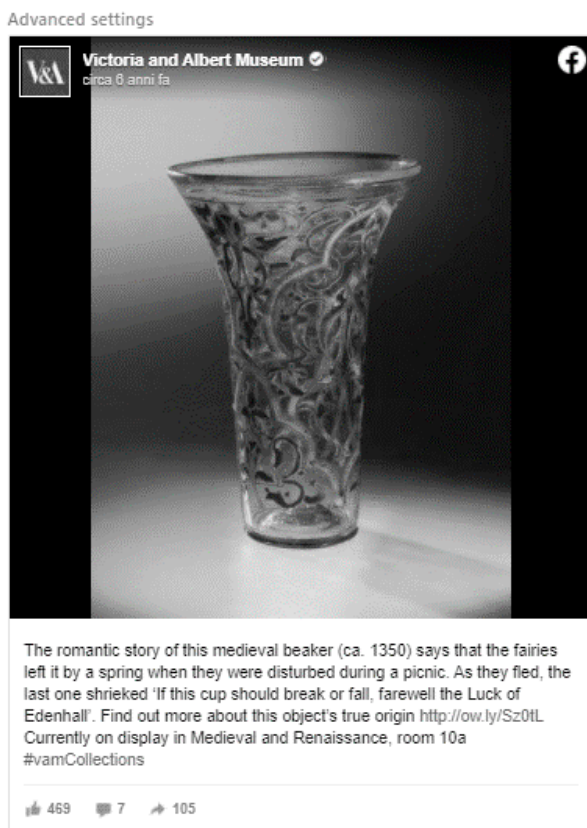


Figure 6. Micro-narrative in museum social media

Even within the limited space of a Facebook post, the basic components of narrative can be identified in the text: settings – an imaginary Eden –, characters – the fairies –, and an essential plot (the fairies were having a picnic, then were disturbed by something, so they had to leave the cup by a spring and flee, but they cast a spell on the object). The final call to action (“Find out more about this object’s true origin”) invites users to discover the story in its entirety, as told in the linked webpage, and to fill in the details left unsaid in the post.

Another aspect of the recontextualisation of narrative in museum social media relies on the use of emoji, a form of non-standard language based on pictograms (Danesi 2017: 2) and increasingly used in digitally

mediated communication “to add visual annotations to the conceptual content of a message” (Danesi 2016: 10). While at the scholarly level debate on the semiotics of emoji, alternatively interpreted as an independent language (Ge – Herring 2018), or as a paralinguistic modality (Gawne – McCulloch 2019; Logi – Zappavigna 2021, Zappavigna – Logi 2021), is in full bloom, at the level of professional communication, museums have been among the first to acknowledge the ground breaking contribution of emoji to digital communication. Notably, in 2016, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York acquired the original set of 176 emoji characters designed by Shigetaka Kurita and contextually organised an exhibition celebrating the new acquisition (Lee 2018). In justifying their choice, the MoMA stressed that emoji were “reasserting the human within the deeply impersonal, abstract space of electronic communication”.⁸

In the context of museum social media, emoji are often used in combination with language to create innovative pictorial representations and generate new forms of storytelling, which range from “improvisational approaches to narrative” (Sergeant 2019: 167), drawing on the conventions of comics, e.g. the use of bubbles to express the interior concerns of characters, to straightforward emoji stories, whose interpretation is co-constructed and shared among members of a close community (Kelly – Watts 2015).

The following example (Figure 7) can be ascribed to the first category of minimal narratives, where emoji provide users with a visual hint for interpreting the story. Introducing an artwork by Henri Matisse in the Tate collection, the Facebook post tells a story about the author, who, in his elderly age, was confined to bed and couldn’t paint anymore.⁹ Matisse had therefore to switch to a less tiring art technique, that of collage.

As it is often the case with abstract art, the subject of the collage shown in the post would be hard to recognise at first sight, if it weren’t for the caption and a small emoji representing a snail placed at the end of the post. Emoji are therefore used here as a fundamental complement to the narrative: it allows users to identify a relevant character in the story, the snail, while, at the same time, it suggests the emotional state of the artist, who perhaps, during his illness, likened his condition to that of a snail. The evaluative dimension of AFFECT, revealing the author’s stance and leading

⁸ <https://stories.moma.org/the-original-emoji-set-has-been-added-to-the-museum-of-modern-arts-collection-c6060e141f61>, accessed November 2021.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/tategallery/photos/a.117432718992/10159481646913993>, accessed November 2021.

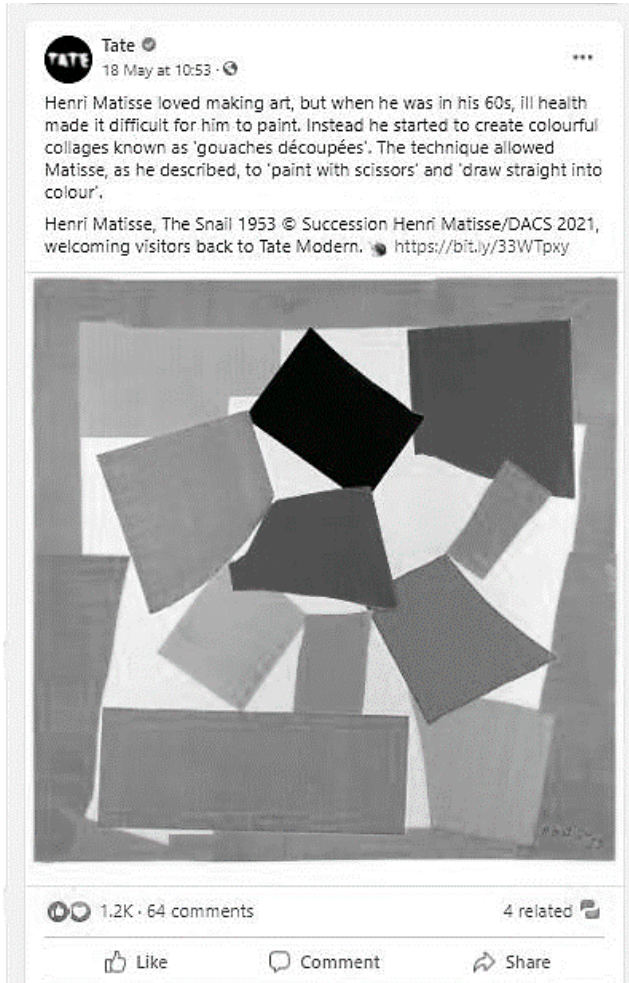


Figure 7. Micro-narrative combined with emoji

users toward empathy, is therefore still present in the narrative, yet, it is not fulfilled by lexical items, but by emoji, effectively replacing the use of emotive standard language.

A second, less frequent category of narrative which can be identified across museum social media is that of micro-stories told in emoji, where pictograms are used to replace single lexical items or even entire strings of meaning. This leads to a most peculiar communicative strategy, that of “emojification” (Seargeant 2019: 163), generally signalled in the Web by the hashtag #emojireads and especially applied in MC to involve users in games or puzzles, as shown in the example below (Figure 8).

4. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to illustrate the fundamental role played by storytelling in MC, an area that has received little attention from narrative scholars. While the use of storytelling techniques is fully recognised in ordinary museum activities, such as exhibition organisation, guided tours, education and public outreach programmes, its applications in MC deserve further investigation. Particular attention has therefore been paid to the discursive and communicative features characterising storytelling across textual genres on which MC typically relies (press releases, websites, social media networks), taking into consideration the language, structure and narrative strategies in use. A diachronic approach has been adopted, taking into consideration a period covering seventy years, from 1950 to the present.

The analysis has shown how narrative forms have been part of MC almost from the beginning of this professional practice, which has been embraced by museums in a structured way only after the Second World War. In particular, it was not until the 1970s that stories began to be used more consciously by communication professionals, with the increasing insertion of narrative sections within press releases. From the 1990s onwards, storytelling has been extended to digital media, undergoing a natural process of gradual transformation that has neither threatened its survival nor altered its essential features. The diachronic analysis suggests that museum communicators have become gradually aware of the effectiveness of narrative as a communication strategy. Its success seems to be rooted in the textual genre of press releases, which increasingly made use of stories for the purpose of newsworthiness (van Dijk 1988, Bell 1991). Once writers had experienced the positive effects of narrative on a restricted professional community – journalists – they extended it to other genres, aimed at a wider audience. Since then, storytelling has been used in MC as a public engagement tool and has been adapted to an increasingly innovative and complex multimodal environment.

The affordances that typically characterise new media provided an opportunity to develop narrative strategies well beyond the space of a single textual section, as in the case of press releases. Websites, in particular, offer the possibility of disseminating hypertexts with narrative cues, and inserting stories into the story, as in the case of the Gardner Museum website, where secondary stories are intertwined with the main level of the narrative centred on the museum's founder. By contrast, the space constraints imposed by social media platforms have led to a contraction of the narrative structure,

reduced to micro-narratives. Yet, museum communicators have not been constrained by the challenges that new media entail, performing a re-contextualisation of former narrative practices (De Fina 2016) and relying on new media affordances, such as multimodality, hyper-textuality, and non-standard language (emoji). This evolution over time and across different communicative genres bears witness to a creative and dynamic appropriation of narrative practices by museums, anticipating further developments, some of which are probably already underway.

A salient aspect of this diachronic study is that the typical features of narrative, i.e. i) its canonical structure, consisting of characters, events and settings (Toolan 2001), ii) its evaluative language (Hunston – Thompson 2000), and, in particular, iii) its emotive language (Ungerer 1997) appear consistently across traditional and digital genres. Already from the first experiments with narrative sections shown in press releases, the use of evaluative language has been strategic. In particular, the semantic dimension of AFFECT (Martin – White 2005), revealing the subjective stance of the author and activating empathy processes in the reader, seems to play a key role in engagement. Interestingly, in the case of social media posts, where the available textual space is necessarily reduced, the emotive function, previously performed by standard language, can be assumed by alternative semiotic resources, i.e. emoji, which allow for a visual representation of feelings and moods. The study suggests, therefore, that emoji might gradually replace evaluative language in museum storytelling, at least as far as social media networks are concerned. It is not excluded, moreover, that emoji will come out of the spaces to which they have been relegated up to now to reach other, less obvious, museum genres.

In consideration of the developments outlined above, the field of MC appears as a rich research area for discourse and communication studies. Museums play a valuable role as incubators of innovation and creativity in communication practices and, as such, can inspire professional communicators and researchers from different areas and disciplines.

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