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## The Art Gallery of Ontario

### Introduction

We selected the art gallery as our research site for our qualitative method assignment, motivated by our personal passion for art and a desire to deepen our understanding of it. Our focus is on Generation Z, specifically individuals aged 11 to 26 who are in emerging adulthood, as we wanted to know how they engage with the site. We came up with the research question: How does the Youth Council/Youth Programs(AGO) facilitate collaborations, enhancing AGO's connection with Gen Z? How do digital platforms change the way the AGO interacts with Gen Z? Our research aims to explore the impact of the art gallery on this demographic, particularly in the context of Toronto's youth, including the immigrant population. This group is in need of spaces where they can cultivate a sense of belonging, articulate their identities, and share their distinct adolescent experiences. We believe art serves as a medium that fosters community understanding and cultural tolerance. Furthermore, our study will delve into the Art Gallery of Ontario's decision to provide free admission to this demographic, examining the underlying implications in terms of its business strategy and marketing approach. Also, we will analyze their shift to digital platforms after COVID-19.

In recent years, the Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) Youth Program has stood as a pivotal element in shaping the artistic and cultural landscape of its surrounding community. This paper delves into the significance of AGO's Youth Program, underscoring two primary arguments. To begin with, the program is vital to public engagement in the arts, as evidenced by research indicating that early exposure to artistic experiences can significantly enhance lifelong participation in the arts. However, this paper critically examines the AGO's recent decision to discontinue its Youth Council, a cornerstone of its Youth Program, and transition to a digital platform. This move, I argue, is shortsighted and potentially detrimental to the long-term engagement and community-building that the Youth Council fostered. Not only the limit engagement and ephemeral nature of online interactions, this study questions the effectiveness of the digital transition and its implications for future community engagement in the arts.

### Background / Literature Review

The relationship between early exposure to the arts and later adult participation is well-established. Studies show that children and young adults who engage in arts activities are more likely to continue this engagement into adulthood (Annabel, 2019). This pattern is particularly pronounced when children frequently attend arts events, with a notable example being that 22% of adults who attended arts events annually as children continue to do so (Department for Digital, Culture,

Media & Sport, 2016). From a business perspective, maintaining a long-term relationship with youth is crucial for arts organizations like AGO. This ongoing relationship increases the likelihood of these individuals returning as adult patrons (Orend, 1988), supporters, or artists, thereby ensuring a continuous and loyal customer base for the future. This underscores the importance of organizations like AGO fostering early art experiences, as these experiences ensure future audience sustainability and provide a nurturing environment for youth. This environment is crucial for their artistic and personal development, offering a space for exploration, social connection, and cultural enrichment. Moreover, public art initiatives, like those highlighted in "More than a Mural," are vital in integrating immigrant youth into society (Gutiérrez-Vicario, 2016). These projects allow them to share their unique experiences and identities through art, promoting community understanding and cultural tolerance. Art serves as a universal language, effectively uniting youth from diverse backgrounds. This unity fosters empathy and solidarity, which are essential for a cohesive society. Such inclusive and educational art projects reflect AGO's mission, which aims to use art as a medium for social engagement, education, and nurturing diverse community connections, making it not just a cultural hub but also a vital part of community building and social integration. Creating urban spaces like the AGO, which celebrate diverse cultures and promote inclusivity, is essential for developing vibrant and functional cities (Shannon, 2019).

The critiques of moving away from community-based programs to digital platforms, the work of Jeremy Liu and Lorrie Chang from PolicyLink provides relevant insights. As part of the Art Place Community Development Investments (CDI) initiative, their research emphasizes the importance of integrating arts and cultural strategies into community development (Liu & Chang, 2019). They highlight how such integration can transform community engagement into community organizing, thereby strengthening the social fabric of communities. The CDI initiative showcased that arts and cultural strategies when employed within community development, enhanced community engagement and allowed organizations to achieve mission-aligned outcomes more effectively. These outcomes included increased agency among community members and the creation of more meaningful forms of community engagement, disrupting traditional power dynamics and fostering a stronger community connection. This perspective aligns with the concerns about transitioning from physical, community-centric art programs to digital formats. It underscores the unique benefits of in-person engagement in fostering deep community ties, collaborative creation, and cultural exchange—elements that might be less pronounced in digital-only formats (Liu & Chang, 2019).

Robert Putnam's Theory of Social Capital focuses on the importance of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trustworthiness in fostering community engagement and civic participation (Häuberer, 2011). This theory emphasizes the value of social connections and the benefits they bring to individuals and communities. Social capital is built through various forms of social interaction, from informal socializing to more organized community activities. In the context of

art programs like the AGO's Youth Council, Putnam's theory suggests that such programs are not just about artistic development but also play a crucial role in building social capital. They provide a space for community members to connect, collaborate, and build relationships. These interactions can strengthen community ties, enhance participant trust and reciprocity, and foster a sense of belonging. Consequently, such community-based programs can significantly contribute to communities' overall health and vibrancy.

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital is a concept that explores how individuals' cultural knowledge, skills, and tastes, acquired through their upbringing and education, contribute to their social and cultural status (Ventura, 2022). This theory encompasses the internalization of cultural competencies through personal socialization and education, which is an ongoing process that shapes one's perceptions and values (Ventura, 2022). It also includes the role of physical objects and media, like books, artworks, or musical instruments, in representing and transmitting cultural knowledge (Ventura, 2022). Additionally, the theory considers the formal recognition of cultural competencies, often validated through educational qualifications (Ventura, 2022). In the context of art programs such as the AGO's Youth Council, Bourdieu's theory suggests that these programs play a crucial role in enhancing an individual's cultural capital. They provide a platform for developing artistic skills, deepening cultural understanding, and potentially gaining formal recognition, all of which shape an individual's cultural engagement and social positioning.

Therefore, the AGO's shift to digital, by potentially diminishing youth immediate and future cultural participation, overlooks the crucial role of early, community-based artistic experiences in promoting lifelong arts engagement, inclusivity, and the development of cultural capital, critical for fostering young people's creativity, social mobility, and status.

## Methodology

Our research focused on understanding the relationship between Generation Z and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). Our methodology comprised three main phases: preliminary observations, visual analysis, and interviews.

**Preliminary Observations and Focus:** Initially, we conducted preliminary observations at AGO at two different times of the day. During these visits, we meticulously noted our sensory experiences—what we saw, heard, smelled, and perceived in the environment. These observations were crucial in formulating our initial research questions. Notably, we observed a significant presence of youth visitors at AGO, which piqued our interest in exploring the connection between Generation Z and the gallery. Based on these findings, we decided to tailor our research to delve into this specific demographic's interaction with AGO.

**Visual Analysis and Mapping:** Our next step involved a visual analysis, for which we revisited the site equipped with cameras and audio recorders. This phase was aimed at capturing the essence of AGO through different lenses, literally and figuratively. We took a bunch of photos, each telling a unique story about the site

(Mirzoeff, 2016). These stories varied, ranging from the gallery's relationship with its neighborhood. This exercise was not just about capturing images but also about critically interpreting the site from multiple perspectives and recognizing our own biases. After organizing our photos, we composed a paper explaining their narratives. This process raised new questions and offered insights into aspects of the site we initially overlooked (Mirzoeff, 2016). Concurrently, we studied existing maps of the AGO area and then created our own, focusing on its surroundings and neighborhood. This included an analysis of nearby art galleries, art supply stores, and the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). These elements were emphasized in our customized map, which provided a deeper understanding of AGO's location within the city's environment (Solnit, 2010). The atlas is presented as a guide to geography and a deeper inquiry into the essence of place, invoking a sense of infinite discovery in the urban landscape (Solnit, 2010).

**Interviews with Stakeholders:** The final phase of our research involved interviewing key stakeholders associated with AGO's youth programs, specifically the Youth Council. It's important to choose respondents who can provide a range of perspectives on the research topic (Weiss, 1995). We prepared a set of interview questions targeting two individuals—a principal and a council member, who could provide different perspectives and experiences. Qualitative interviews capture the richness of individual stories, often lost in standardized surveys or survey interviews (Weiss, 1995). The qualitative interviews provide a deeper, more narrative understanding of participant's experiences and perceptions (Weiss, 1995). These interviews were instrumental in gaining insights that were not accessible through online resources or direct observation. The information gathered from these discussions provided a deeper understanding of AGO's engagement with Generation Z, enriching our research with personal perspectives and experiences.

### Reflection on Methods

In reflecting on our qualitative research methods, our positionality as young undergraduate students played a significant role in both the data collection process and our interactions with the interviewees. Being in the same age demographic as the target group for AGO's youth programs facilitated a comfortable and open environment for discussion. For instance, Sarah, who oversees these programs, demonstrated enthusiasm in meeting us and was keen to exchange views about the youth programs at AGO. Similarly, Adam, slightly older than us but still part of the younger generation, was receptive and interested in sharing his experiences with the Youth Council. Our age and status as university students did not hinder our interactions but fostered engaging dialogue. This shared demographic context likely created a sense of relatability and openness, enabling the interviewees to share their experiences and insights comfortably.

However, there were limitations in our project that impacted the depth and scope of our findings. One significant limitation was the specificity of our questions. In some instances, they lacked the sharp focus that could have directed the

conversations to garner more detailed responses. For example, a more targeted approach to understanding the influence of digital platforms on artistic expression among youth might have yielded richer insights. Additionally, while our identity facilitated open discussions, it also introduced a level of complexity, as seen in Sarah's apprehension about sharing candid opinions due to potential repercussions from AGO's internal policy decisions. This underscores the sensitivity and ethical considerations inherent in conducting interviews, especially when discussing potentially contentious topics (Weiss, 1995). Furthermore, the realization during our interviews that some of our initial questions were no longer relevant highlighted the importance of adaptability in qualitative research. Our ability to be flexible and responsive to the interviewee's input was crucial in extracting meaningful information, even when unexpected changes occurred.

Conducting interviews online also presented its own set of challenges and limitations. On the positive side, the convenience and accessibility of online interviews allowed for more flexible scheduling and eliminated geographical constraints. This accessibility likely contributed to the willingness of our interviewees to participate. On the downside, the virtual nature of these interviews sometimes made it difficult to establish a deeper, more personal connection. Non-verbal cues and subtleties in body language, which are crucial in qualitative research, were harder to discern. This limitation potentially impacted our ability to fully grasp the nuances of the interviewees' responses and experiences. Furthermore, the digital format may have influenced the depth of our questions; in a face-to-face setting, we might have pursued more detailed follow-up questions based on the immediate environment.

In summary, while our position as young university students facilitated a rapport with our interviewees, enabling a fruitful exchange of information, the limitations in question specificity and the ethical complexities encountered underscore the nuanced challenges inherent in qualitative research.

## Results / Data

In our exploration of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and its engagement with Generation Z, we conducted in-depth interviews with key individuals involved in the AGO Youth Council. These interviews, one with Sarah, the Youth Program principal, and another with Adam, an active council member, shed light on the multifaceted relationship between young people and the art world today. Through these conversations, we delved into both the institutional and youth perspectives, uncovering the nuances of how art is perceived, experienced, and valued by the younger generation.

### *Interview with Sarah - The Institutional Perspective*

Sarah's interview revolved around the intricacies of managing the AGO Youth Council and its varied programs. She illuminated the challenges of sustaining youth-focused initiatives within a large institution like AGO, particularly in the face of leadership changes and budget constraints. Sarah once said, "You're always trying to adapt depending on who's the leader and what their priorities are,"

captures the fluid nature of her role and the impact of institutional dynamics on youth programs. Despite these challenges, her commitment to youth engagement remained unwavering as she continued to facilitate various youth-oriented activities, ranging from dance classes and film collectives to fashion shows. These initiatives were aimed at transforming AGO into a more inclusive space for young people, extending beyond conventional art appreciation. Designing urban spaces like the AGO that support diverse formats of art and foster inclusivity is crucial for creating functional and vibrant cities (Shannon, 2019). Also, Sarah said that even though the transition to online platforms reaches a broader range of people, there are only very few people going to the online drop-in session activities, even though she has promoted it on social media and hundreds of people have watched the Instagram posts and stories.

#### *Interview with Adam - The Youth Perspective*

Adam's journey with the AGO Youth Council began during his university years, seeking an outlet that would rekindle his passion for art. He found solace and inspiration in the council, stating, "The council helped me find joy in art again and took the pressure off. Emotionally it helped me feel excited again." His experience highlighted the empowering role of the Youth Council in fostering personal interests, especially for those feeling stifled in academic settings. Adam also brought attention to the council's significant social and networking aspect, which he valued even more than the projects. The diversity within the Youth Council, encompassing a wide range of art backgrounds, added a rich dynamic to his experience. Moreover, Adam discussed the influence of digital platforms on art interactions, noting both their necessity and the challenges they present while expressing a preference for in-person engagements.

#### *Synthesis of Findings*

Our research at the AGO, incorporating insights from Sarah and Adam, revealed several key themes: a significant rejuvenation of artistic passion among Generation Z, as highlighted by Adam's rediscovery of his love for art in a less formal, more community-oriented setting like the AGO Youth Council. This finding underscores the importance of informal art spaces in nurturing young individuals' intrinsic artistic interests, often dampened by academic pressures. The diversity within the Youth Council, encompassing a wide range of art backgrounds, emphasized the value of inclusivity, allowing for a richer tapestry of perspectives and expressions in the art community. A central theme was the paramount importance of social connections, with Adam noting the social aspect of the Youth Council as even more significant than the projects themselves, indicating the vital role of community and networking in the artistic journey of young people. Additionally, the necessity and challenges of digital platforms were apparent; while offering unique opportunities for outreach and expression, there's a discernible preference among some individuals for tangible, in-person art experiences, suggesting a tension between digital and physical art interactions. Finally, the interviews suggested a potential disconnect between the preferences of young artists and the

offerings of traditional art institutions like the AGO, with Generation Z showing a keen interest in DIY art and activities beyond the conventional gallery setting, indicating a shift towards more participatory and interactive art experiences. Collectively, these insights highlight the evolving dynamics of art engagement among younger generations, pointing towards the need for traditional art institutions to adapt to their changing expectations and preferences.

## Analysis

The Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) Youth Council and Youth Programs play a pivotal role in engaging with Generation Z by facilitating collaborations and enhancing connections through various initiatives. The relationship between early exposure to the arts during youth and continued participation in adulthood is well-established. AGO's initiatives are instrumental in fostering this long-term relationship with Gen Z. By engaging them in various art activities, the AGO ensures future audience sustainability and contributes to these individuals' personal and artistic development. This approach is crucial for nurturing a loyal customer base and for the cultural enrichment of the community.

Moreover, AGO's initiatives are key in integrating immigrant youth into society, as art serves as a universal language that unites youth from diverse backgrounds. Through art, AGO allows youth to share their unique experiences and identities, promoting community understanding and cultural tolerance. This aligns with AGO's mission to use art as a medium for social engagement, education, and nurturing diverse community connections, making it not just a cultural hub but also a vital part of community building and social integration. However, as Jeremy Liu and Lorrie Chang discussed, the transition from community-based programs to digital platforms brings forth potential challenges. While digital platforms can broaden outreach and accessibility, they might lack the depth of community ties and collaborative creation that in-person engagement offers. Therefore, AGO's digital platform use must be balanced to maintain strong community connections.

According to Robert Putnam's Theory of Social Capital, AGO's Youth Programs contribute significantly to building social capital. These programs facilitate social interactions and collaborations, enhancing trust, reciprocity, and a sense of belonging among participants, thereby strengthening community ties. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital highlights the role of AGO's programs in enhancing the cultural capital of participants. They provide opportunities to develop artistic skills, deepen cultural understanding, and influence the participants' social positioning and cultural engagement.

The AGO's Youth Council and Youth Programs are central to connecting with Gen Z, fostering long-term relationships through early arts exposure, integrating diverse youth through public art projects, and building social and cultural capital. The incorporation of digital platforms offers new avenues for engagement but should be used in tandem with community-based programs to maintain the quality of social and cultural interactions.

## Conclusion

According to various qualitative research methods, youth programs are vital as they lay the foundation for ongoing engagement with art, enriching the lives of young people and fostering a continuous connection with the artistic community. On the other hand, the Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) decision to pivot towards a digital platform, moving away from more community-focused initiatives like the youth council, raises concerns. This shift potentially underestimates the importance of early and inclusive artistic experiences in the development of cultural capital among the youth. Such experiences are crucial for nurturing creativity, facilitating social mobility, and enhancing social status. By overlooking these factors, the AGO risks reducing the opportunities for young individuals to engage deeply with culture, which could lead to a decline in overall cultural engagement in the long term.



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