

Research on the Formation Mechanism of Online Exhibition Failure in the Pre-epidemic Era (Post-print)

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Date: 2023-07-23T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, an increasing number of art exhibitions have been presented in the form of online exhibitions. However, although online exhibitions had already emerged with the assistance of virtual reality and other technologies prior to the outbreak, their advantages such as convenience and reproducibility have not enabled them to achieve the expected effectiveness. This paper employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to analyze observations and interviews conducted at exhibition venues, and argues that although online exhibitions utilize technical means to reproduce the offline environment and exhibits, they are constrained by the absence of the ‘gathering’ characteristic inherent to offline environments. Perceptual factors such as ‘sense of ritual’, sense of identity, and emotional interaction are difficult to evoke through technical means, consequently preventing them from fulfilling their proper role in the pre-epidemic era.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Formation Mechanism of Online Exhibition Failure in the Pre-Epidemic Era

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Abstract: Since the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, an increasing number of art exhibitions have been presented in online formats. However, although online exhibitions had already emerged before the pandemic with the support

of virtual reality and other technologies, their advantages—such as convenience and reproducibility—failed to produce the expected impact. This paper employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to analyze on-site exhibition experiences, arguing that while online exhibitions use technical means to reproduce offline environments and exhibits, they are constrained by the offline environment’s capacity to evoke perceptual factors such as “sense of ritual,” identity, and emotional interaction, which are difficult to arouse through technological means alone. Consequently, online exhibitions failed to fulfill their intended role in the pre-epidemic era.

Keywords: Online exhibition; Embodied communication; Communication ritual view

1 Introduction

With the nationwide outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in 2020, offline art exhibitions were either postponed or shifted to online formats due to policy restrictions and other factors. As a result, digital art exhibitions became one of the primary means for audiences to appreciate artworks.

However, we observed that even in the pre-epidemic era, such digital art exhibition platforms had already emerged, mostly for international exchanges, while the development of domestic online exhibitions remained slow and failed to achieve their expected effectiveness. This raises several questions: Why did online exhibitions not produce the anticipated effects in the pre-epidemic era? Have they achieved their ultimate goals? What are the reasons for their failure? What mechanisms affect their functioning?

2.1 Literature Review of Online Exhibitions

The issue of online exhibitions and their effectiveness has attracted joint research from multiple perspectives in academic circles both domestically and internationally. Domestic scholars such as Zhu Changqiao and Gong Jinhong published “Gaze or Forget: Research on Audience Behavior of Temporary Exhibitions at Guangdong Provincial Museum” in 2017, conducting detailed research on audience behavior in temporary exhibitions. Their work demonstrates that audience impressions and evaluations of exhibitions depend on the time spent in front of exhibits, the number of exhibits that attract them, and their viewing behavior. Scholar Fu Lihai published “The Challenges and Countermeasures of Digital Technology to Cultural Industry Content Production” in 2022, examining in detail the challenges and solutions that digital technology brings to cultural content production. According to his research, excessive emphasis on digital technology while ignoring the particularity of culture has led to problems such as crude and random content production, diminished value judgment standards, and increased ideological risks. Digital technology should be used patiently and over the long term to present the connotation of cultural products.

2.2 Literature Review of Embodied Communication

The concept of embodiment was first systematically discussed in French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, where it manifests primarily as subjectivity, providing a valuable framework for understanding embodiment as an idea. In the virtual environment of online exhibitions, embodied communication—an emerging concept formed through the combination of mobile Internet and virtual reality—has been widely discussed and researched by scholars. Domestic scholars Yu Fasheng and Zhang Yue argued in “Immersive Communication: Sensory Resonance, Image Restoration, and On-site Participation” (2020) that through the interaction of internal and external senses and the superimposition of physiological and psychological elements, users can achieve an immersive resonance experience, thereby continuously enhancing human subjectivity and centrality. This provides a technical empowerment perspective for exploring the mechanisms of online exhibitions.

Domestic scholars Liu Hailong and Shu Kairong proposed in “The Body Concept of Embodiedness and Communication Research—Perspectives of Perceptual Phenomenology and Cognitive Science” (2019) that “to understand the embodiment of the communication process, it is necessary to affirm the body’s materialistic position in the flow and reception of information,” demonstrating the importance of embodiment in communication processes. However, these studies have examined audience behavior in offline exhibitions and improvements in online exhibitions compared to their offline counterparts, while neglecting the reasons why online exhibitions lost effectiveness in the pre-epidemic era.

2.3 Literature Review of Communication Ritual View

Since James W. Carey proposed the theory of communication ritual view in the 1980s, it has attracted significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally, yielding numerous research achievements. Chinese scholar Yu Guanzhen proposed in “Art Exhibitions from the Perspective of Communication Rituals” (2020) that art exhibitions should be viewed through the lens of communication rituals. The holding of art exhibitions maintains society’s shared understanding, where people’s behaviors and thoughts are exchanged and coordinated. Audiences gain a sense of intimacy with each other, thus forming group identity. Foreign scholar Carol Duncan pointed out in “Civilized Rituals in Public Art Museums” (1995) that art museums are often compared to ceremonial places, representing sites of belief that embody a certain social order, while palaces, churches, temples, and other locations are precisely the sacred places that reflect the highest social order and people’s spiritual beliefs. Their research demonstrates that rituals are necessary for forming collective consciousness and emotions, thereby integrating society. Meanwhile, foreign scholar Eric Rothenbuhler argued in “Ritual Communication: From Daily Conversation to Mediated Ceremony” (1998) that “among all designs for maintaining social order, ritual communication is the most gentle and useful.” However, these studies did not examine the failure of online exhibitions from the perspective of the pre-

epidemic era and therefore did not address the primary mechanisms underlying online exhibitions.

2.4 Questions Raised

Therefore, starting from communication ritual view theory, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why did online exhibitions fail to play their due role in the pre-pandemic era? What mechanisms influenced the functioning of online exhibitions during that period? How did these mechanisms contribute to the ineffectiveness of online exhibitions?

3.1 Research Methods

This paper employs two research methods—participant observation and in-depth interviews—to address these questions. Considering that the reasons for online exhibition failure require comparison and analysis with offline exhibitions as a variable, this study uses participatory observation to attend existing offline exhibitions, analyzing exhibition design, atmosphere, visitor attitudes, and purposes from multiple dimensions. The primary work at this stage involves collecting and organizing basic observational data. Interviews were conducted from December 2022 to February 2023. Interviewees initially included curatorial teams and on-site exhibitors, with additional research samples collected through information exchange.

Interviews were conducted via WeChat text and one-on-one face-to-face formats. The basic information of respondents is shown in Table 1 .

Table 1 Basic information of the respondents

Respondents	Occupation	Relevant contact	or Book-fair	Volunteer	Student	Student	Curator	Day	Job	Curator	Day
Job	Showroom	owner	Freelancer	Designer	Day	Job	Showroom	VI	design	Number	of offline exhibitions participated
counted	counted	counted	50	to	60	Number	of online exhibition participation	Satisfaction	with online exhibitions	General	General
30	to	40	Average	Unsatisfied	30	to	40	Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Average	

4 Analysis and Discussion

This study employs participatory observation and in-depth interviews to analyze audiences who have participated in both offline and online exhibitions from the perspectives of exhibition behavior, emotion, purpose, and other dimensions.

4.1 Real Experience and Emotions of Offline Exhibition Attendance Are Difficult to Generate

Through participatory observation, we found that in the initial curating stage of most exhibitions, curators and authors develop a rough plan for exhibition routes—that is, the theoretical viewing sequence for visitors is determined and

guided by an ideal route with key stopping points. Generally, most curators design the exhibition route as a multi-centered series of “entrance—sub-exhibition area—sub-exhibition main area—sub-exhibition area—sub-exhibition main area—exit” according to the exhibition theme, exhibit selection, and other factors.

The single or multiple core exhibits in each sub-exhibition area are designed as one or several stopping points to attract visitors to linger while reflecting the exhibition area’s theme. This design also facilitates audience “check-ins” as souvenirs, providing ideal emotional enfranchisement at the planning level, bringing exhibitors a sense of experience and anticipating greater emotional identification. Each sub-exhibition area is then connected through brief transition routes to form a relatively complete exhibition path. Online exhibitions take each scene as an “exhibition area.” Since they are not limited by physical environments, the tour sequence of the entire online exhibition may be non-linear, allowing audiences to click on different scenes at any time to skip through the exhibition according to their preferences.

It is difficult to summarize a specific exhibition route for online exhibitions. Simultaneously, given that exhibit reproduction cannot be completely restored, some exhibits requiring special viewing methods may not be effectively displayed in the online environment, affecting exhibitors’ understanding of the exhibits and their relationship to the exhibition theme.

Beyond the routes designed by curators and authors, actual stopping points for exhibitors include: the core works that authors intend to convey, and the works that exhibitors spontaneously endow with emotional value. In most exhibitions, these two key stopping points are: works endowed with the highest emotional value by the author, and works spontaneously endowed with the highest emotional value by exhibitors. These are generally located at the center of the exhibition area, occupying the largest area, at transition and sign points such as entrances and exits, or at random positions. At these locations, compared to the average 20-40 seconds spent on common exhibits, the time spent on key exhibits extends to an average of 72 seconds. If exhibitors take photos and interact in front of the exhibits, the duration further extends to 2-4 minutes.

After observing exhibitors’ movements and behaviors during the exhibition, we noted that exhibitors display different facial expressions and emotional responses when interacting with exhibits based on their viewing emphasis. When first entering the exhibition area, exhibitors generally focus on browsing guide content and randomly viewing exhibits of interest. For more famous or eye-catching exhibits, exhibitors often use their mobile phones to take photos and post on social media to gain satisfaction and attention, demonstrating that they have indeed “visited here.” Some exhibitors who have browsed promotional materials in advance consciously and selectively target core exhibits matching their interests, choosing not to follow the planned route. Instead of viewing all planned exhibits, they focus on and selectively “jump the exhibition,” or linger longer before certain exhibits. During this process, such exhibitors often appear more

excited and active than ordinary visitors due to the satisfaction of personal needs such as displaying their personal image, and this state may influence other exhibitors sharing the same time and space. Conversely, due to free access, limited exhibit restoration, inability to observe audience status, and other factors, online exhibitions lack realistic interaction with exhibits and emotional feedback, as well as the sense of atmosphere and ritual brought by co-presence with other audiences.

Therefore, generally speaking, in curating offline exhibitions, it is easier to create an on-site atmosphere and suitable viewing space for audiences through route and spatial layout based on the exhibition theme, inspiration, and exhibit size. This allows exhibitors to obtain an immersive sense of space and presence during their visit, which can be demonstrated through the construction and display of personal image via social media dissemination. While offline exhibitions offer exhibitors more choices in exhibits and viewing routes than online exhibitions, the sense of detachment and jumping caused by scene switching is diminished due to the larger number and wider range of exhibits visible in the exhibitor's field of vision.

4.2 The Emotional Experience of “Being Present” Can Hardly Be Compensated by Technical Rationality

Through further in-depth interviews exploring questions such as “why offline exhibitions failed to achieve expected results in the pre-epidemic era,” we found that interviewees’ responses regarding “exhibition atmosphere,” “exhibition experience,” “immersion degree,” and related attitudes confirmed our conjectures.

As expected, offline exhibitions’ ability to attract more exhibitors and leave sufficient impression is based on their actual advantage: being embodied. Compared with online exhibitions, offline exhibitions are more “humanistic.” During the exhibition process, exhibitors as the main body are closely connected with the exhibition hall’s layout, installation, atmosphere, and works, with emotional expression coming from a first-person perspective through visual observation and active establishment of contact with the scene. Online exhibitions lack this feature—they allow people’s first-person perspective to intervene in media communication, which greatly reduces physicality and easily causes visitors to feel confused about “whether I am watching the exhibition or just watching an existing video.” As interviewee B stated: “When I watch the online exhibition, I don’t realize that the real thing is important to me. The artwork shows me the whole picture through the screen, but I feel like I’m watching some kind of live broadcast.” Online exhibitions swallow the information and power that works can convey through the medium, causing the audience to feel that the transmission of energy gradually disappears during the dissemination process. This weakens the connection between visitors and the exhibition to the point of near elimination, making the exhibition theme become the works shown in the media rather than the visitors themselves. Interviewee G also noted: “During the online exhibition, I feel that each piece of work is near or far away, and I

only need to click the mouse or shake the phone to navigate. When I really want to see something clearly, I can zoom in infinitely on a work, to an extent that the naked eye cannot achieve, but I can't feel the work. This is not something that technology can accomplish.”

The communication ritual view posits that communication is a process in which information is transmitted and released in space, while the ritual view of communication represents a sacred ceremony that gathers people through a sense of group or common identity. “Ritual” is a bond that maintains social existence, and communication is not merely superficial information transmission but a ritual activity that maintains social relations and social life. The exhibition itself can be regarded as a ritual behavior; viewing an exhibition is like participating in a ceremony whose ultimate purpose is to gain a sense of identity and satisfaction. Viewing itself constitutes participation in an event full of ceremony. Offline exhibition viewing can provide audiences with a more complete and immersive visual and auditory experience than online virtual environments. However, due to the lack of on-site environment and co-present audiences, online exhibitions lose the effectiveness of ritual connection.

4.3 The Sense of Ritual and Identity Play an Effective Role in Offline Exhibitions

Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews, this study examined the failure phenomenon of online exhibitions in the pre-epidemic era, explained how offline exhibition embodiment contributes to online exhibition failure, and attempted to answer the reasons and formation mechanisms behind this failure: When people participate in a scene with a certain sense of atmosphere, they seek real experiences rather than merely displayed materials. When exhibited objects are redistributed through media, their sense of presence is weakened. For artworks, their artistic features cannot be accurately restored and displayed due to inherent technological limitations. On one hand, audiences find it difficult to fully appreciate the same artwork from all angles; on the other hand, because the artwork exists independently of the scene environment, the interaction between audience and artwork lacks a strong connection. Online exhibitions cannot fully meet audience value needs in terms of aesthetics and education. Therefore, the reasons for offline exhibition failure in the pre-pandemic era become clear.

5 Conclusion

In summary, this study proposes a mechanism for online exhibition failure in the pre-epidemic era that reflects the limitations of online exhibitions regarding “presence” and “absence.” This provides a more theoretical perspective for digital art exhibition platforms to play a greater role in China's post-epidemic normalization. The discussion of failure mechanisms in the research process facilitates better development of subsequent online exhibition platforms. However, it is worth noting that this failure phenomenon may limit art exhibitions

in cultural transmission and consumption due to environmental particularities. When offline communication and industries shift to online development, existing production, marketing structures, and operational modes may be passively altered, particularly regarding the main disadvantage of online platforms: the lack of interactive environments. When offline exhibitions transform into online exhibitions, maintaining necessary real-time audience interaction and rendering emotional needs such as empathy during the viewing process should be prioritized, with attention paid to humanistic care—issues worthy of vigilance, reflection, and in-depth study.

However, due to the diversity of exhibition types and audience subjectivity, this study also suffers from relatively narrow and insufficiently generalizable research scope. In future studies, researchers in cultural industry and art management may need to pay greater attention to content production levels and expand research and practice in content production and mass communication.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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