

# How COVID-19 Changed the Digital Presence of Italian Museums: Comparing Influencer Marketing Attempts at the Uffizi Galleries and the Museums of Bologna

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Beginning with an analysis of the digital audiences of Italian museums, undertaken during their period of closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper traces the reasons and the consequences of the increase in the museum supply on social networks. After reconstructing the history of the first attempts at influencer marketing by Italian cultural institutions, this study analyses two communication campaigns developed by museums in collaboration with influencers who are not part of the art world: the much-discussed Instagram post by Chiara Ferragni for the Uffizi Galleries; and the promotion of the Bologna Museums and the niche exhibition on the Griffoni Polyptych by the YouTuber Luis Sal. The questions of the tone of voice and digital identity narration, raised by the involvement of influencer marketing in the two museum institutions, are examined in order to contribute to the ongoing debate on the democratic nature of museums, their accessibility and inclusiveness.

## **“Digital bulimia” for an elitist audience: Italian museums on social media**

During the first Italian lockdown,<sup>1</sup> the media talked about the social presence of museums by using the term “digital bulimia”<sup>2</sup> (Solima, 2020) to describe the paradoxical gap between the exponential increase of digital content transmitted by museums and the corresponding lack of attention to the quality of that same content, which often fell short of the expected standard, in view of the status of the institutions delivering it.

1 Italian museums were closed from March to May 2020, reopening nationwide during the summer and facing a new closure from November to January 2021. While this article was being written, a third closure was announced from 15 March to 6 April 2021.

2 The expression, first introduced by Ludovico Solima, was discussed by Nicolette Mandarano and Maria Elena Colombo, respectively the digital media curator of the Barberini Corsini National Galleries and a lecturer in Multimedia and Cultural Heritage at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, during the cycle of seminars organised by Ilaria Miarelli Mariani as part of the Museology course of the Department of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Chieti, administered under a system of distance learning.

The Ministry of Culture undertook a survey in the same period, which sought to understand the background and the attitudes of visitors in relation to digital solutions. The most alarming result of this survey was the discovery that the audience of Italian museums mainly consists of cultural elites, a fact that indirectly indicates 'a retreat in the capacity of museums to diversify their audience and to be inclusive towards different interlocutors' (Direzione Generale Musei, 2020, p. 7).

Driven by the need, on their reopening, to bring audiences back into museums as physical visitors, these same institutions chose to entrust their promotion to influencer marketing. In some cases, such as the museums of Bologna and the Vatican museums, it was simply a matter of accelerating the communication campaigns that had been planned well before the pandemic began and had already proved to be successful. In other cases, such as the Uffizi Galleries, the sudden decision to participate, for example, on the social platform TikTok, only contributed to the "digital bulimia" already mentioned.

This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate by reconstructing some symbolic cases of cultural communication adopted during the first and second Italian lockdowns. Although it does not claim to be exhaustive in analysing the various methods and approaches, this paper focuses on the museums' attempts at social media marketing and examines how the presence of "non-art influencers" at these institutions changed their perception of the tone of voice adopted and the dialogue that they maintained with their ever-changing audiences.

## **Origins of influencer marketing in Italian museums and the issue of the tone of voice**

Marketing has long been known to be an effective way of engaging audiences in the cultural industry (Kotler and Kotler, 2004; Chamorro, Gertz and Naidtich, 2017), but its use in the cultural heritage sector in Italy has always been limited (Columbro, 2019; Trombin and Veglianti, 2020). The first collaborations between museums and influencers date back to the early days of the use of social media (Cerquetti, 2014), but, until the COVID-19 pandemic, the only personalities regarded by institutions as suitable for promoting their cultural messages were those who were already working within the cultural industry itself. A first attempt to introduce influencer practices in Italy was made by the Scuderie del Quirinale, in Rome (Redazione – Artribune, 2017). To attract a broader public, the institution

engaged bloggers to advertise *Il Museo Universale. Dal Sogno di Napoleone a Canova* (2017), a potentially "difficult" exhibition to promote because of its highly scientific profile. While the innovative aspect of the campaign should be acknowledged, it cannot claim to have been designed to address different audiences, as the profiles chosen for the collaborations were those of a distinct community of older, cultured people, who were regular visitors to museum collections. This meant that they still fell into the category of an elite audience.<sup>3</sup>

Situated at the opposite end of the spectrum from this choice are the two campaigns analysed in this study, with it being immediately necessary to state a premise relating to the responsibility for communicating cultural heritage. Did the idea of using influencer marketing come from the museum itself, or was it proposed through the collaboration taking place between influencers and the private cultural industry? Establishing this is crucial to the analysis. The responsibility for the communication serves to explain the strategy of an institution, and it is a great indicator that helps the community to distinguish between promotion and self-promotion practices. This issue lies at the heart of the numerous controversies relating to the posts of influencers in Italian museums. The public reacts very positively when the idea of using influencer marketing comes directly from the institutions themselves, as in the case of the campaign of the YouTuber Luis Sal for the Museums of the city of Bologna. On the contrary, when museums are not the starting point of the communication campaign, they risk losing centrality, as was the case with the post that the famous influencer Chiara Ferragni made on Uffizi's Instagram page.

## The case of Chiara Ferragni at the Uffizi Galleries

In the case of Ferragni, it was a fashion shoot for Vogue Hong Kong (Fig. 3), at the end of which the director Eike Schmidt informally offered the digital entrepreneur a guided tour of the Uffizi Galleries. Since there was no previous agreement, an improvised photo shoot was made of the event and disseminated through the museum's social media accounts, particularly on Instagram (uffizigalleries, 2020). The social team decided not to sponsor

3 Among the contributors were the founder of the Igers Rome community, Matteo Acitelli, the creative profile whatitalyis and the diconodioggi project, managed in collaboration with the Chair of Contemporary Art History at the Sapienza University of Rome. None of these profiles were aimed at a wide audience; on the contrary, they were all directed towards a community already interested in the world of museums, who were therefore also attracted by the aura of "high" culture shared by all those involved in the campaign. In this way, they essentially became an updated digital version of the traditional art critic writing in newspapers.

the museum by providing Ferragni's varied audience with a targeted campaign that conveyed specific content controlled by the museum. Instead, they treated the influencer's visit as if it were that of a celebrity caught in a moment of their private life, thus demonstrating that they severely underestimated the attractiveness that this type of advertising campaign can have on digital audiences. Besides lacking an oriented strategy, the museum did not agree with her on the content to be promoted or on the tone to be adopted – the essential tone of voice that all users of digital platforms care about and of which a public cultural institution should be especially aware.

Inevitably, there was some confusion about the strategy that should be adopted, and the institution's limited awareness of the community's sensitivities caused it to make a serious error of judgement. This was evident in the inadequacy of the caption that accompanied the circulation of the photo of the influencer standing in front of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Figs. 1-2). In March 2021, half of the 3,854 comments added beneath the post expressed feelings of hatred, misogyny and body shaming, while the other half directly called out the social media manager, declaring disappointment, and immediately deciding to unfollow the profile. The Uffizi intentionally compared Ferragni to the protagonist of their most famous painting, choosing words such as "canon of beauty", "feminine ideal" or "contemporary divinity", terms that social networks users, and especially the audience of young people, can scarcely stand, committed as they are to daily activism and the fight against social inequalities. Perplexity and indignation were soon expressed in the numerous questions addressed to the museum:

'Why are you also talking about female aesthetic canons? At a time in history when we are all trying to break them down, why did you make this choice?'

'Every day we are trying to recognise the existence of multiple ideals of beauty, and you propose yet another white and blonde woman as the canon of our times?'

'Bringing young people closer to culture does not mean debasing such an important artistic heritage. But what is the aim? That we should dwell on a precise aesthetic canon? In 2020, with the acceptance of diversity?'



🌐ENG: Beauty standards change in the course of time. The female ideal of a blonde-haired woman with diaphanous skin is a very common beauty model in the Renaissance. Masterfully expressed by the Florentine Sandro Botticelli in *The Birth of Venus* maybe portraying the face of one of his contemporary, Simonetta Vespucci. A beautiful noble woman, of Genoese origin, beloved by Giuliano de' Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo the Magnificent; she was so worshiped by Sandro Botticelli that she became his muse.

Nowadays, Chiara Ferragni, born in Cremona, embodies a role model for millions of followers - a sort of contemporary divinity in the era of social media -

The myth and the story of Chiara Ferragni, argued by harsh critics and supported by faithful fans, is a real sociological phenomenon that involves millions of supporter worldwide and it can undoubtedly be considered a snap-shot of our time.

Visualizza tutti e 3.854 i commenti



👤👤👤 Piace a laulianti e altre persone

**yodarte** Molto intelligenti agli @uffizigalleries sono. Gli influencer come me e come Chiara molto importanti per la cultura e per l'arte sono. Dell'invito io vi ringrazio!!!! ❤️ #OccupyUffizi Adesso anche la @fondazioneandretto invitarla deve!!!!

Fig. 1 → Chiara Ferragni in front of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* for the Instagram campaign of the Uffizi Galleries, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu\\_l3JlvFn/?igshid=1b9q6by1nr0d](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu_l3JlvFn/?igshid=1b9q6by1nr0d) (Accessed: 9 February 2021). Photo: @uffizigalleries / Uffizi Galleries by permission of the Ministry of Culture.

Fig. 2 → The caption of the post with Chiara Ferragni in front of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu\\_l3JlvFn/?igshid=1b9q6by1nr0d](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCu_l3JlvFn/?igshid=1b9q6by1nr0d) (Accessed: 9 February 2021). Photo: @uffizigalleries / Uffizi Galleries by permission of the Ministry of Culture.

Fig. 3 → Chiara Ferragni shot by Michal Pudelka for *Vogue Hong Kong*, 2020. Screenshot from [https://www.instagram.com/p/CGmSsx7A-9e/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CGmSsx7A-9e/?utm_medium=copy_link) (Accessed: 9 February 2021). Photo: Michal Pudelka / *Vogue Hong Kong*.

Fig. 4 → Master Yoda in front of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Photomontage by Silvio Salvo, 2020. Screenshot from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCvNOjGoWHv/?igshid=z9f4zig2tbxd> (Accessed: 9 February 2021). Photo: @yodarte / Silvio Salvo.

These are just three of the countless comments that were inserted beneath the Instagram post (uffizigalleries, 2020), in which users expressed their perplexity about the role that museums play today in determining the concept of beauty. The museum is required to take a position on social issues (such as diversity, be it physical, socio-economic or cultural) that previously were always considered to be unconnected with art-historical processes and which today must necessarily form part of the institutional narrative, if the museum wishes to remain at the centre of democratic debate and not on its disinterested periphery.

At the same time as people in Italy were debating the real democratic nature of cultural sites, due also to the controversy raised by the post we are discussing, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States involved the major cultural institutions of that country, calling their privileges into question for the first time (Bryant, Curtis and Ramos, 2020). The growing interest in the digital role of museums today is a natural corollary of these revolutions led by generations of digital natives.

The issue in question was not whether an influencer should be used to sponsor the museum, but had more to do with the tone of voice and advocacy adopted by a national cultural institution. Totally opposed to this narrative was the post of Silvio Salvo, the social media manager of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo.<sup>4</sup> He re-posted the content of the Uffizi on his own Instagram account, which is linked to the official profile of the Turin institution. Instead of the influencer, in front of the Botticelli painting he placed a photomontage of Master Yoda, the Foundation's mascot, with a sarcastic comment in favour of influencer marketing in museums (yodarte, 2020) (Fig. 4). Regardless of the meme industry that has sprung from the post (which has since gone viral) and the whole sterile controversy that has since ensued, we decided to comment on this event as part of the recent history of museum communication because it seems to us, in many ways, to be a watershed.<sup>5</sup>

The digital space of the museum in Italy only expanded due to the pandemic situation, and it was also as a result of this that, for the first time, museums

4 In 2017, the newspaper *Artribune* proclaimed the Press Office of Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo as the best on the national scene. In several interviews, Silvio Salvo, the social media manager, explained his vision of social communication and the Foundation's strategy with the term "infochaostainment= information+chaos+entertainment".

5 Our reflections do not refer to the 27% increase in the youth audience at the Uffizi Galleries following the weekend after the social communication campaign. Several articles, which can be found in the list of references, have already analysed the engagement results. This study wishes instead to underline the quality of the debate that first arose among the digital audience.

felt the need to attract different audiences. The long list of comments appearing beneath the post of the Florentine museum is quite unprecedented: the almost 4,000 opinions, made not only by an audience of regular visitors, enthusiasts and professionals from the world of culture, but also by audiences who had never previously been interested in cultural heritage, are more than welcome. As Adam Koszary pointed out, cultural institutions must engage in dialogue because 'the core purpose of museums is to be places of connection, meaning-making and celebration of all cultures. We can only do that if we embrace online engagement. Museums have become used to being masters of their own spaces, but on the Internet, we need to embrace the fact that we are one voice among many' (Koszary, 2020).

The museum attendants would have continually silenced this plurality of voices in the room that houses the *Birth of Venus* at the Uffizi Galleries, showing dutiful respect for that silent sacredness that still anachronistically marks museum visits. When standing in front of a painting, we are not allowed to talk unless we are accredited speakers, tour guides, professors, art historians or conservators. For the first time, in front of that same painting, everyone was allowed to have their say, invading a space usually confined to a cultural and academic elite that chose to distance itself from this new type of participated communication. We must attribute to this distance the fierce criticism that was levelled against the institution. Such criticism was infused with outdated prejudices expressed about the means that were unknown to those who were using them, such as the language of social media and influencer marketing practices (Ercoli, 2020).

While the Florentine museum was the first such institution to unintentionally make public the debate on the democratisation of the digital space of museums, it was not the first to embrace the novelty of influencer marketing applied to cultural communication. The Vatican Museums used this strategy in May 2020, when they reopened after the first severe national lockdown (Grieco, 2020). Acting in the same way as a brand company, the institution offered influencers free entry in exchange for visibility on their profiles, thus targeting audiences that are doubtlessly different from those who usually visit the museum, but above all not risking alienating its most loyal followers, who, as we saw in the case of Ferragni, tend to be more conservative. Once again there was a complete divide between the social media followers and the specialist audiences, who saw in this opening up of the museum a certain negative contamination, and this time directed their criticism against another Italian entrepreneur, Cristina Fogazzi.



With a following of 700,000 people in March 2021, and known by the nickname of *Estetista Cinica* (Cynical Beautician), the influencer took part in a visit accompanied by the Vatican Claviger and then posted this information on her profile (estetistacinica, 2020) (Fig. 5). A certain distrust was expressed by the classical media culture, which showed a 'reticence to the new way of disseminating, enhancing and promoting' (Iervasi, 2020). This reaction was particularly alarming because of the classism that emanated from this attitude. If the experts themselves regard a beautician as an unsuitable visitor to a museum, then we may justifiably wonder what the democratisation of art means for public institutions today, questioning how they believe they can achieve this if the national cultural infrastructure is still essentially determined by a series of self-referential, elitist mechanisms. As already pointed out in the case of Ferragni's photo at the Uffizi, here too we find ourselves faced with 'a series of barriers and cultural prejudices that seem to die hard, sometimes masked by a "high" culture that has not come to terms with the desire for change' (Miarelli Mariani, 2020).



Fig. 5 → Cristina Fogazzi visiting the Vatican Museums poses in the Sala Regia, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CGkhWiHJYij/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CGkhWiHJYij/?utm_medium=copy_link) (Accessed: 4 March 2021). Photo: @estetistacinica / Cristina Fogazzi.

Fig. 6 → Live by Martina Socrate at the Uffizi Galleries for the first Museum Week on TikTok, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.tiktok.com/@uffizigalleries/video/6836366685474262278?lang=it-IT&is\\_copy\\_url=0&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&sender\\_device=pc&sender\\_web\\_id=6974032361630074374](https://www.tiktok.com/@uffizigalleries/video/6836366685474262278?lang=it-IT&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6974032361630074374) (Accessed: 5 March 2021). Photo: Uffizi Galleries by permission of the Ministry of Culture.

Fig. 7 → Martina Socrate poses with the Portraits of Agnolo and Maddalena Doni by Raphael, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CBVZdBJFUEJ/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CBVZdBJFUEJ/?utm_medium=copy_link) (Accessed: 5 March 2021). Photo: @martina\_socrate/ Martina Lavinia Socrate.



## The medium is the message: @uffizigalleries on TikTok

In this context, the strategy embraced by the Uffizi Galleries on TikTok<sup>6</sup> is enlightening. Even if the Uffizi was not the first Italian museum to sign up to the Chinese social network,<sup>7</sup> it was the first to reach such high numbers in terms of its engagement and to involve a TikToker in a cultural promotion campaign (Figs. 6-7). The influencer in question was Martina Socrate, a 22-year-old student of cultural mediation with more than one million followers in March 2021, who, on the occasion of the museum week promoted by the social network, led her very young followers to discover the Uffizi in a live broadcast (martina\_socrate, 2020). With a total of 90,000 likes in June 2020, the profile produced an outstanding engagement. Since then, the audience numbers have grown, but from the phrase "Laughing Uffizi" (Bartezzaghi, 2020), which was the title used to advertise the event, we have now graduated to the less praiseworthy one used by *The New York Times*, which compared the social media presence of the institution to that of 'an Unlikely Class Clown' (Marshall, 2020).

Scrolling through the content published by the museum, any user of the platform notices the dichotomy between the production of the content itself and the language with which it is conveyed. The Uffizi Galleries post irreverent contents that do not enhance the works, but whose message is based on non-sense, causing the profile itself, and with it the idea of the museum, to slip into the embarrassing sphere of what Millennials define as 'cringe'. The account manager, Ilde Forgione, has repeatedly stressed how 'adapting the message to the tool is not cultural impoverishment' (PA Social, 2020), almost contravening the first rule of social networks, which is precisely to adapt the language to the tool because the medium is already the message, as Marshall McLuhan stated in his fundamental work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in 1964.

6 On the app's website, TikTok is described as 'the leading destination for short-format mobile videos. Our mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy' (TikTok, 2021). Originating in China in 2016, the platform now has almost 800 million users worldwide. In July 2020, Italian users numbered 8 million, recording a 377% increase compared to the same month in 2019 (Riyahi, 2021). For the younger generation's use of this app, see Dilon, 2020.

7 The first Italian institution to use the platform was the archaeological site of Paestum and Velia, in October 2019. Other Italian museums currently operating on the app (in April 2021) are the Stibbert Museum (Florence), La Galleria Nazionale (Rome) and the archaeological museum MarTa (Taranto).

## How to bring “non-museum audiences” into museums? Cultural storytelling for the city of Bologna

The Municipality of Bologna had already accepted the difficult challenge of reaching the target group of young people in 2018. The city succeeded in attracting to its cultural sites the quintessential “non-museum audience”, the age group of 13 to 24-year-olds, by speaking its language. The successful museum communication campaign was entrusted to the YouTuber Luis Sal, with a channel that, in March 2021, boasted more than 1.5 million subscribers. All the institutions accessible with the Bologna Museums Card<sup>8</sup> were promoted through videos, tweets, a post and an Instagram story, with astonishing results (Profili, 2020). The influencer’s opening sentence: ‘I have never been an intellectual, I have never loved museums and exhibitions – what an ignorant person I am!’ (Comune di Bologna, 2018), immediately captures the attention of young visitors, who recognise themselves in this statement, thus breaking down the wall of prejudices that divides cultural institutions from the public and allowing themselves to be intrigued by the message of the videos.

It was therefore natural, during the lockdown in March 2020, to entrust the influencer with the task of telling the story of one of the most eagerly awaited exhibitions on the national scene: *La Riscoperta di un Capolavoro*, which brought together the *Griffoni Polyptych* by Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de’ Roberti at Palazzo Fava. The promotional video (Fig. 8) reached more than 115,000 views in March 2021, a remarkable number for a “non-blockbuster” exhibition (Genus Bononiae, 2020), impossible to obtain without the popularity offered by the young influencer. The video shows Sal in the rooms that had been set up for the exhibition, but which were not opened due to the pandemic. In this way, it not only advertised a cultural event, but also significantly documented the historic moment of the closure of the institution.

As a consequence of the pandemic, and given the urgency of attracting new audiences, cultural institutions in Italy went from promoting online content to realising that there was already an unfilled potential digital audience. The only strategy that was needed was to translate the storytelling of their identities into the languages of social media platforms. This challenge, addressed with

8 The advertising campaign analysed here was commissioned by the Municipality of Bologna, to which the city’s museums belong. The communication was intended to raise awareness about all the cultural institutions – both public and private – that are accessible with the annual card designed by the municipality to make it easier to visit the institutions. After Luis Sal’s videos, the sale of the card doubled among the age group of Millennials.

varying degrees of awareness by different institutions, resulted in a number of significant moments in the marketing campaigns analysed in this study. They sparked a public debate that had been producing the same conclusions for years, namely the discussion of the role that the museum plays in contemporary society and the perception of its relevance in the middle of a historic global moment. The Italian museums' communication thus finally found itself dealing with such urgent issues as accessibility and inclusiveness, thanks to the open approach adopted towards social media audiences and particularly towards the communities of influencers with whom each institution decided to collaborate. In conclusion, the case studies presented here demonstrate that social media marketing practices can naturally enter the museum space, which is a place where social and cultural phenomena can be found. Furthermore, these new practices should be critically included in the digital communication strategies of cultural institutions in order to consciously build new communities. And this does not necessarily imply any loss to the centrality of the museum's mission.



Fig. 8 → Genus Bononiae communication campaign for the exhibition *La Riscoperta di un Capolavoro* on YouTube, 2020. Screenshot from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Fj\\_PHFNRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Fj_PHFNRo), 2' 14" (Accessed: 6 March 2021). Photo: Genus Bononiae.

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