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THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS ON ATTRACTING NEW AUDIENCES IN CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract. This paper examines how technological innovations affect the ability of cultural institutions to attract and engage new audiences across five European countries. Using a mixed-methods design – interviews with museum managers and a survey of 215 organisations – it analyses both immersive innovations (VR/AR) and process innovations (digital ticketing, online collections, mobile apps). Immersive technologies engage younger, digitally native groups, while process innovations improve accessibility for broader publics. The study highlights barriers such as resource constraints and limited strategic alignment, offering guidance for managers and policymakers on leveraging technology for sustainable audience growth.

Keywords: technological innovations; digital transformation; art management; process and product innovation cultural organizations

JEL: Z11, O33, L31

Introduction

Cultural institutions across Europe are facing mounting pressure to diversify audiences, remain socially relevant, and secure sustainable funding in a rapidly digitalising society. Over the last two decades, museums have shifted from being custodial repositories of objects to becoming dynamic spaces of learning, co-creation and civic dialogue (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2006). This transformation coincides with the spread of digital and immersive technologies that promise to extend reach, enhance engagement, and differentiate the visitor experience. Social media campaigns, online ticketing, digital collections and mobile apps have become standard tools in many institutions (Borowiecki & Navarrete, 2017; Carrozzino & Bergamasco, 2010; Kamariotou et al., 2021), while more resource-intensive innovations such as virtual and augmented reality exhibitions are emerging as high-profile "signature experiences" designed to attract younger, tech-savvy publics (Bekele et al., 2018; Elgammal et al., 2020; Pérez, 2022).

Despite the promise of these technologies, empirical evidence on their actual impact on audience attraction and diversification remains limited and fragmented. Most prior studies have either evaluated single digital tools or focused on visitor satisfaction rather than on audience development as a strategic outcome (Jarrier & Bourgeon-Renault, 2012; Zollo et al., 2022). Moreover, findings are often uneven: some institutions report substantial gains in reach and engagement, whereas others experience little change or even alienate traditional visitors (Larceneux et al., 2016; Roederer et al., 2020). Scholars increasingly stress that technology's effectiveness depends on institutional readiness, leadership support, staff capabilities and alignment with visitor needs (Camarero et al., 2011; Vitkauskaitė, 2016; Tham et al., 2025). Without a clear audience strategy, digital tools risk becoming superficial add-ons rather than catalysts for deeper participation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Simon, 2010).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to advance understanding of how technological innovations influence the ability of cultural institutions to attract and engage new publics. By combining qualitative interviews with museum managers in Bulgaria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Romania and a survey of 215 cultural organisations, the study provides cross-country, cross-institutional evidence on both product innovations (e.g., immersive VR/AR exhibitions) and process innovations (e.g., online ticketing, digital collections, personalised mobile apps). Specifically, it addresses three research questions: RQ1: To what extent are technological innovations adopted by cultural institutions across different European contexts? RQ2: What effects do these innovations have on attracting new and more diverse audiences and on deepening visitor engagement? RQ3: What barriers and enabling factors shape the effectiveness of technological innovations in audience development?

By answering these questions, the paper contributes to the literature on cultural management, digital transformation and audience development. It extends innovation-adoption theories to the non-profit cultural sector, and it offers actionable insights for managers and policy-makers seeking to translate technological investments into sustainable audience growth.

Theoretical Background

Technological Innovations and Cultural Organizations

Cultural organizations – especially museums – are shifting from repositories of collections to platforms for learning, co-creation and social engagement (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2006). This transformation reframes their value proposition from preservation to creating experiences and social impact (Kotler et al., 2008; Rentschler, 2007). Technological innovations support this shift: digitisation expands access beyond physical space, while social media, mobile apps and immersive media enable personalized visitor journeys and continuous interaction

(Borowiecki & Navarrete, 2017; Carrozzino & Bergamasco, 2010; Kamariotou et al., 2021; Zollo et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2025). These innovations help attract younger and underrepresented publics (Gofman et al., 2011; Kim & Kim, 2025). Process innovations – digital ticketing, real-time capacity management, online collections, open-access data – improve efficiency and inclusivity (Camarero & Garrido, 2012; Guccio et al., 2020, Guccio et al., 2023; Stavinova et al., 2023). Product innovations such as VR/AR exhibitions differentiate institutions and stimulate curiosity and media attention (Elgammal et al., 2020; Pérez, 2022; Bekele et al., 2018). Digital transformation succeeds only when supported by organisational culture, skills and partnerships (Eid, 2016; Guccio et al., 2023; Matiash et al., 2025; Søndergaard & Veirum, 2012; Janes, 2013). Similar patterns are observed in other non-profit and public sector contexts, where digital innovation requires organisational learning and strategy alignment to achieve impact (Slavova, 2024). Without strategic alignment, new technologies risk being under-utilized or even alienating existing audiences (Larceneux et al., 2016; Roederer et al, 2020). Innovation theory reinforces this: technological adoption requires complementary organisational capabilities (Dosi, 1982; Teece, 2007; Tidd & Bessant, 2020).

Audience Attraction and Engagement

Audience development has shifted from "attendance" to "engagement," emphasizing long-term relationships and visitor co-creation (Rentschler, 2007; Reussner, 2003; Kotler et al., 2008; Kolb, 2013; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Black, 2012). Interactive and digital technologies – virtual tours, gamification, personalized content – increase satisfaction, dwell time and repeat visitation (Jarrier & Bourgeon-Renault, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2025; Tallon & Walker, 2008; Camarero et al., 2011; Zollo et al., 2022). Social platforms help museums reach younger, diverse audiences and maintain ongoing dialogue (Russo et al., 2009). However, the effectiveness of digital tools depends on institutional readiness and alignment with visitor expectations (Camarero et al., 2011; Vitkauskaitė, 2016; Tham, 2025). Poor strategic integration may result in digital tools being perceived as add-ons and may even alienate traditional visitors (Larceneux et al., 2016; Roederer et al., 2020). Co-creation and segmentation are critical to ensuring that digital innovation leads to real audience engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Simon, 2010; Borowiecki & Navarrete, 2017).

Barriers, Risks and Strategic Integration

Despite positive effects, cultural organizations face barriers such as limited resources, skill gaps and institutional inertia (Janes, 2013; Dafoe, 2017). Digital transformation requires changes in leadership, governance and stakeholder involvement (Søndergaard & Veirum, 2012; Eid, 2016; Matiash et al., 2025). Technology attracts and engages new publics only when strategically integrated into organisational culture, audience strategy and mission (Larceneux et al., 2016; Roederer et al., 2020). This study builds on these findings by examining how

technological innovations contribute to audience attraction and engagement using mixed-methods evidence from cultural institutions across Europe.

Methodology

Because the objective of this study is to understand how technological innovations influence the ability of cultural institutions to attract new audiences, a mixed-methods design was adopted. This approach combines the depth of qualitative inquiry with the breadth of quantitative evidence, allowing triangulation and richer interpretation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitative Phase: Semi-Structured Interviews

The first phase sought to capture in-depth insights from practitioners responsible for innovation and audience development. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers and digital/education specialists from museums and related cultural organisations in Bulgaria, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Romania. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in size, funding model (public, private, mixed) and level of digital maturity. Inclusion criteria required that the organisation had implemented at least one technological innovation – such as VR/AR exhibitions, online ticketing, digital collections or personalised mobile applications – within the past three years.

Interviews were guided by a protocol derived from the literature review and pilot-tested with two experts. Key topics included: (1) types of product and process innovations adopted; (2) perceived effects on audience attraction and diversification; (3) barriers and enablers to implementation; and (4) strategic frameworks or policies guiding innovation. Each interview lasted 45–75 minutes, was conducted via video conferencing or on site, and recorded with participant consent. Transcripts were anonymised for confidentiality.

Quantitative Phase: Survey of Cultural Organisations

To complement and contextualise the interviews, a survey was distributed to 215 cultural organisations across the same five countries. The questionnaire measured the extent of adoption of various technological innovations, perceived impact on audience numbers and diversity, and organisational characteristics such as size, governance structure and funding sources. Respondents included directors, heads of departments and digital managers. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Both authors independently coded the transcripts, then met to compare and refine codes into higher-order themes. NVivo software supported data management and cross-case comparison. Themes were iteratively linked back to the literature to ensure analytic rigour. Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively to identify patterns of innovation adoption and perceived impact across countries and institution types. These results were used to validate and enrich the themes emerging from the qualitative phase.

To enhance credibility, the study employed triangulation between interviews and survey data, maintained an audit trail of coding decisions, and conducted peer debriefing with external experts in cultural management. Member checks were performed with a subset of interviewees to confirm interpretation of their statements.

Results and Discussion

Adoption of Technological Innovations

The study revealed widespread but uneven adoption of technological innovations among the 14 museums interviewed and the 215 survey respondents. Social media campaigns (used by 75% of institutions) and QR codes (65.6%) were the most prevalent tools, followed by audio-visual media and interactive displays (around 50%), and online ticketing systems (50%). By contrast, immersive virtual exhibitions were implemented by only 37.5% of respondents, signalling that product innovations requiring larger investments remain less common. This pattern suggests that while low-cost, scalable technologies are mainstreaming, more resource-intensive tools are still in an early diffusion stage. Table 1 summarises the adoption level of seven technological innovations across cultural organizations, along with executives' assessment of their impact on audience engagement.

Table 1. Adoption and perceived impact of technological innovations across the sample

Technological Innovation	Adoption (%)	Strong Impact (%)
Social Media	55	75
QR Codes	50	60
Audio-Visual Media	40	50
Online Ticketing	45	50
Digital Collections	35	45
VR/AR Exhibitions	33	40
Personalized Mobile Apps	38	45

Impact on Attracting New Audiences, Engagement and Visitor Experience

The quantitative evidence indicates that technological innovations are indeed effective in attracting new visitors, but the intensity of this effect varies considerably across institutions. Around 37.5 percent of museums reported that between 10 and 25 percent of their new visitors came directly as a result of technological innovations, while a further 25 percent stated that digital tools accounted for 26 to 50 percent of their new audiences. Only a small minority – 6.3 percent – achieved more than half of their new visitors through technology-driven initiatives. These results support the proposition that technological innovations can boost visitor numbers, particularly among younger demographics. More than 70 percent of museums confirmed that

they had reached a younger audience, and 56.3 percent rated the impact on visitors under 35 as "excellent." Yet 15.7 percent still reported weak effects, suggesting that the mere presence of technology is insufficient; strategic integration and purposeful communication are critical to maximising its effectiveness.

A similar pattern emerges with respect to engagement and the visitor experience. Fully 78.1 percent of respondents agreed that technological innovations make exhibitions more engaging, and 40 percent reported increased time spent per visit. However, 41 percent saw no change in dwell time, indicating that digital tools do not automatically translate into deeper involvement. These mixed outcomes show that interactive technologies can enhance engagement but only when carefully designed and aligned with visitor expectations. Passive or poorly contextualised innovations fail to stimulate active participation—a finding consistent with prior research emphasising the centrality of content curation and experience design in digital engagement (Jarrier & Bourgeon-Renault, 2012; Zollo et al., 2022).

Process vs. Product Innovations

Qualitative interviews highlighted a strategic split: museums investing in product innovations (e.g., VR, AR, mixed-media installations) prioritise attracting new audiences and media attention, while those focusing on process innovations (e.g., online ticketing, digital archives, CRM) aim to improve efficiency and accessibility. Both approaches can support audience development, but product innovations are more visible to the public, whereas process innovations often create "invisible" benefits that enable smoother visitor experiences.

Barriers and Enablers and Interpreting the Findings

Across countries, managers identified several barriers limiting the long-term impact of technological innovations: insufficient funding, lack of specialised staff, fragmented standards, resistance to change, and absence of strategic planning. These findings echo international literature on innovation adoption in the cultural sector (Janes, 2013; Matiash et al., 2025). Interviewees stressed that staff training, cross-functional teams and external partnerships are critical enablers of successful implementation and scaling.

Taken together, the results depict a "dual-effect" pattern: technological innovations clearly expand reach to younger and more diverse audiences and can extend engagement, but benefits vary widely depending on institutional readiness, leadership support and integration with broader audience strategies. Without a coherent framework, museums risk fragmented or short-lived outcomes. The mixed-method evidence thus reinforces the view that digital transformation in cultural organisations is as much about organisational capability and strategy as about technology per se.

Implications for Theory and Practice

For theory, the study extends innovation-adoption models (Dosi, 1982; Teece, 2007; Tidd & Bessant, 2020) by demonstrating their relevance in non-profit cultural contexts, showing that dynamic capabilities and strategic alignment mediate the

relationship between technology and audience development. For practice, the findings suggest that managers should:

– balance investments between process and product innovations;

– design participatory, content-rich digital experiences;

– allocate resources to staff skills and cross-sector partnerships; and

– develop clear audience strategies to communicate the benefits of new technologies.

Table 2. Managerial Implications of Technological Innovations in Cultural Institutions

Theme	Key Findings from Study	Managerial Implications
Product Innovations (immersive VR/AR exhibitions, interactive displays)	Drive higher visibility and attract younger, digitally native audiences but require larger investment and content quality.	Treat immersive technologies as strategic projects; secure partnerships and funding before rollout; design experiences around storytelling and co-creation to maximise engagement.
Process Innovations (digital ticketing, online collections, mobile apps)	Improve accessibility, reduce waiting times and expand reach to underserved groups, but benefits often invisible to visitors.	Communicate process improvements externally; integrate with CRM to capture data on new publics; use process innovations as a platform for personalised follow-ups and loyalty programmes.
Audience Engagement Outcomes	Mixed results: some institutions see longer dwell times and higher satisfaction, others report no change.	Combine technology with interpretation and educational programming; evaluate visitor journeys iteratively; avoid “tech for tech’s sake.”
Barriers and Enablers (skills, leadership, funding, resistance to change)	Lack of staff capacity and strategic frameworks undermines long-term impact.	Build internal digital skills through training; create cross-functional teams; develop innovation roadmaps linking technology adoption to audience objectives.
Strategic Integration (linking innovation to mission and governance)	Institutions with clear strategies achieve more consistent results; ad-hoc pilots remain isolated.	Embed technological innovation in institutional mission and budgeting cycles; align KPIs with audience development goals; report outcomes to funders and stakeholders.

In short, technological innovations offer powerful tools for cultural institutions to attract and engage new publics, but their success hinges on how they are integrated into organisational culture and visitor experience management.

Conclusion

This study provides cross-country, mixed-methods evidence on how technological innovations influence audience attraction and engagement in cultural organisations. By analysing interviews with museum managers in five European countries together with survey data from 215 institutions, it shows that digital tools are no longer peripheral but central to audience-development strategies. Product innovations such as immersive VR/AR exhibitions and interactive displays can generate visibility and attract younger, digitally native publics, while process innovations such as online ticketing, digital collections and personalised mobile apps improve accessibility and inclusivity. However, the findings also reveal that the presence of technology alone is insufficient: outcomes vary widely depending on institutional readiness, leadership support, staff capabilities and strategic integration. The research extends innovation-adoption and dynamic-capabilities theories (Dosi, 1982; Teece, 2007; Tidd & Bessant, 2020) into the non-profit cultural sector by demonstrating that technological tools yield audience benefits only when embedded in broader organisational change. For practitioners, the results underscore the importance of balancing investments between process and product innovations, designing participatory content-rich experiences, developing staff skills and cross-sector partnerships, and linking technology initiatives to clear audience strategies and evaluation metrics.

Future research could test the proposed framework quantitatively in other cultural contexts, examine longitudinal effects on visitor loyalty and revenue diversification, and incorporate direct visitor perspectives on the perceived value of technological innovations. By mapping both the promise and the constraints of digital transformation, this study offers a roadmap for managers and policy-makers seeking to translate technological investments into sustainable audience growth and deeper engagement.

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