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GENERATIVE AI, HERITAGE AND TRANSNATIONAL TOURISM: An Analysis of Vienna's "Unartificial Art" Campaign for American Audiences

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the use of generative artificial intelligence as a tool for heritage mediation and tourism promotion in the UnArtificial Art campaign, developed in 2023 by the Vienna Tourist Board (Visit Vienna). Aimed specifically at American audiences, the initiative used text-to-image AI to intervene in iconic works of Vienna's artistic heritage and to place them on digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, within a playful and emotionally driven visual strategy. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study combines an analysis of digital strategies, exploratory netnography and an in-depth interview with the creative team responsible for the campaign. Official impact metrics (views, clicks, exposure time and reach) are also incorporated in order to assess the campaign's communicative and touristic effectiveness. The article discusses the role of AI in the resignification of museum heritage and proposes key insights for understanding its potential in cultural campaigns aimed at international audiences.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in visual communication has transformed the ways in which cultural images are created, circulated and received. Text-to-image systems, in particular, occupy an increasingly prominent place in institutional campaigns of cultural projection, blurring the boundaries between art, entertainment, marketing and automation (Guerrero-Solé & Ballester, 2023; Irala Hortal, 2024). In this context, the UnArtificial Art campaign (2023) by the Vienna Tourist Board (Visit Vienna), in partnership with Dentsu Creative Austria and local museums, constitutes a paradigmatic case. By inserting AI-generated cats into masterpieces of Viennese heritage, it sought to attract American audiences through virality, visual humour and the spectacularisation of heritage (Corzo, 2025).

The analysis focuses on how algorithmic automation produces new forms of aesthetic and institutional mediation while also raising ethical, symbolic and epistemological tensions in the representation of heritage (Irala Hortal, 2024; Guerrero-Solé & Ballester, 2023). It further discusses the extent to which these AI-generated images resignify the museum experience and shape new digital subjectivities under algorithmic regimes of visibility (Corzo, 2025).

The study responds to the need to examine critically the institutional uses of AI in cultural and tourism contexts, beyond technological enthusiasm and promotional instrumentalisation. Through a qualitative approach —a visual, narrative and strategic analysis of the campaign— it contributes to debates on the automated aestheticisation of heritage, the gamification of the cultural experience and the epistemic legitimacy of visual discourses generated by non-human systems (Corzo, 2025; Salazar & Zaldívar, 2024).

In addition to the analysis of the content disseminated, an in-depth interview will be conducted with the creative team of the Vienna Tourist Board responsible for the conceptual, communicative and operational coordination of the campaign, in order to reconstruct its ideation, understand the technical and discursive criteria governing the use of GenAI and assess institutional perceptions of its symbolic, ethical and communicative effects.

2. Theoretical framework

Over the past decade, visual culture has been profoundly transformed by the convergence of digitalisation, networked sociability and emerging technologies, with extended reality (XR) and artificial intelligence (AI) playing a particularly prominent role. This shift goes beyond the conception of the museum as a material archive and positions it as a dynamic space for visual, emotional and technological experimentation. Drawing on the notion of "cultural visualisation", Reyes & Manovich (2020) show how cultural analytics, by bringing media studies and digital culture together with data visualisation, turns the exhibition itself into both object and method, whereby data become an exhibitionary form and the interface becomes discourse.

Within this framework, *metaverse museums* are emerging: institutions that exist natively in virtual environments, either by replicating physical museums or by designing spaces conceived specifically for XR. Nisiotis et al. (2019) describe how these initiatives reconfigure the visit towards immersive and ubiquitous experiences, while Borda & Bowen (2025) frame their deployment within digital citizenship policies grounded in co-creation, openness and inclusion. Nevertheless, unequal access and limited funding remain persistent barriers to the equitable development of such practices, a reminder that socio-technical infrastructure conditions the promise of democratisation.

It should be added that contemporary visual culture cannot be understood as a mere repertoire of "the visible", but rather as a regime of looking articulated by social, political and technical conditions. Mirzoeff (2002) stresses that the field of the visual extends beyond human perception and permeates the whole of contemporary experience, with the transition from analogue photography to the manipulable digital image marking a turning point. The image loses its indexical fixity and becomes an actor endowed with symbolic agency, capable of reconfiguring frameworks of meaning. Along these critical lines, Cronin & Dobbie (2023) propose shifting the focus from "what is seen" to "how it produces meaning", interrogating the ways in which images reproduce or destabilise dominant discourses as they become embedded in complex socio-technical ecologies.

Likewise, the current ecosystem adds a further layer comprising the ubiquity of the mobile phone, hyperconnectivity and the rise of generative artificial intelligence. The Interaction Design Foundation

(2025) explains that AI-generated art relies on algorithms trained on large datasets and that, by means of generative adversarial networks (GANs), it can produce original images from human instructions or semi-autonomously. This horizon opens up new forms of human–machine collaboration and challenges the notion of art as an exclusively human attribute. At the same time, digital storytelling offers a lens through which to evaluate the quality of these experiences. Chang & Suh (2025) show that narrative strength, affective charge and educational value heighten the sense of presence, thereby increasing enjoyment and continued usage intention, particularly in virtual environments.

At the operational level, AI is being integrated into museum mediation, as documented by Styx (2024), who describes personalised guides and AI-based augmented reality systems that overlay layers of information onto exhibits, enrich the discourse and broaden accessibility (for instance, for visitors with hearing impairments or cognitive disabilities). Along similar lines, Wholey (2024) rethinks the figure of the spectator from the standpoint of queer digital culture, showing how Instagram, TikTok and YouTube enable dissident aesthetics through remix, humour and performativity, eroding institutional hegemonies and opening up alternative avenues of visual knowledge that are relevant to historically marginalised communities. Consequently, critical visual literacy becomes a central task for museums and educational programmes seeking to foster a creative, aware and politically engaged digital citizenship (Borda & Bowen, 2025).

2.1. The logics of the image on social platforms

The digital image has ceased to be a medium of representation and has become an apparatus traversed by algorithms, affects and cultural dynamics, reconfiguring the relationship between museums and their publics towards practices of circulation, interaction and co-creation. Charr (2024) warns that understanding these logics is essential in order to analyse how institutions are re-articulated within an ecosystem in which the image operates simultaneously as a marker of identity, a vehicle of knowledge and a viral object.

In virtual reality exhibitions, audiovisual narrative enhances immersion, empathy and understanding through the orchestration of stories, visual elements and sound (Chang & Suh, 2025). Social media further drive this reconfiguration, since visitors produce content that circulates in parallel with —and at times in tension with— curatorial discourses. Budge (2018), for example, distinguishes three types of visitor-generated images: documentary (of works or spaces), personal (selfies) and playful-creative (interventions). These practices extend the museum experience into a distributed narrative that prolongs and resignifies interaction with heritage, and they legitimise micro-narratives that complement or contest official scripts.

Consequently, curatorial practice steers design towards “shareable” scenographies, incorporating QR codes, co-posting dynamics and participatory channels that extend the experience beyond the physical space (Charr, 2024). TikTok thus emerges as a privileged laboratory in which the most successful museum videos combine dynamic subtitles, effects, music and hashtags into a coherent narrative that maximises engagement (Chek et al., 2024). Martínez Sanz & Solano Santos (2024), in turn, observe the centrality of user accounts that reinterpret collections through memes, choreographies and humour, shifting institutional authority towards a polyphonic field.

An analysis of the hashtag #MuseumTok confirms this discursive redistribution, as categories such as *MuseumCriticism* and *MuseumStorytelling* reveal audiences that co-produce meanings and negotiate the significance of the museum in public (Sallaku et al., 2025). For Budge (2018), these images function as alternative narratives that democratise aesthetic agency and erode the hierarchies between artist, institution and spectator. The rise of ephemeral narratives (stories) adds, moreover, an attention economy based on transience and immediacy, which puts pressure on the preservation of digital memory and on institutional coherence. Participation must therefore balance authenticity, virality and curatorial consistency, within a horizontal approach to community management in which audiovisual co-creation fosters empathy, immersion and mutual recognition.

2.2 AI as a new aesthetic agency

In this environment, AI is consolidating its position as an aesthetic agency that transforms creative processes. Text-to-image models and GANs democratise production and blur the boundaries between the human and the algorithmic. DALL·E, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion translate descriptions into sophisticated images, expanding a distributed creativity that involves both artists and prosumers

(Palmer & Sluis, 2024). Data indicate that the global market for AI-generated images could reach US$0.9 billion by 2030, an increase of 254% on 2022 (AIPRM, 2024), with Midjourney and DALL·E 2 among the preferred tools.

This shift repositions "style" as a programmable category. Art history thus becomes a dataset that can be queried by keyword, and the logic of "seeing photographically" is recalibrated in computational terms. The consequence of this new visual "order" is a crisis of authorship and indexicality, since the algorithmic image inhabits a space of the possible rather than serving as a record of what has occurred. From the perspective of Aesthetics of Photography (2024a, 2024b), these images are understood as statistical fictions situated in a "latent space", where meaning is inferred but not verified.

In parallel, Wu et al. (2025) present *VisualPrompter*, which optimises prompts by means of unsupervised visual feedback. Lin et al. (2024), for their part, propose a *dueling bandits* approach to refining prompts through subjective user evaluation, outperforming previous strategies. These innovations point towards a closer form of co-creation between human sensibility and generative processes.

However, tensions are also emerging, such as the perceptual indistinguishability of human-made and synthetic images (Corsato, 2025). This author observes a shift in emphasis from authorship ("who made it?") to the trust of the recipient ("can I believe this?"), in a context of algorithmic opacity and low critical literacy. Here, the pedagogical role of cultural institutions is key to explaining how these systems work, as well as their limits and biases. The time has come to rethink the conservation, cataloguing and exhibition of AI-generated works, and to design participatory models in which the experience includes processes of co-creation between visitors and intelligent systems. It is no coincidence that, according to AIPRM (2024), more than half of artists regard their own creative input as fundamental in text-to-image works, while a third of users perceive these technologies as a significant advance. The challenge, therefore, is to preserve a visual heritage born of computation and human–machine interaction. This calls for appropriate curatorial methodologies and archival standards, as well as critical reflection on the work, authorship and cultural value within automated aesthetics.

2.3. Emotional engagement and digital performativity

Platforms do not merely disseminate culture; they govern affective regimes that shape subjectivities and structures of symbolic participation. In this environment, engagement ceases to be a quantitative indicator and comes to be understood as a performative practice in which processes of identity formation, desires for visibility and logics of belonging are intertwined (Barrón San Blas, 2025; León Olvera & Villaplana Ruiz, 2019; Linne, 2022). Linne (2022) describes how social networks and dating apps institute a youthful sentimental grammar in which technologies function as devices of subjectivation shaped by gender and symbolic consumption. Vitaller et al. (2020), for their part, document how lockdown isolation reconfigured affective bonds under technological mediation, altering the sensory conditions of everyday life.

In this respect, TikTok is paradigmatic, since the content that generates the greatest engagement — video selfies, entertainment, lip-syncing— responds to an immediate and superficial emotional interaction in which the "like" operates as the principal metric (López Navarrete et al., 2024). This "light" engagement, heavily coded by the interface, coexists with more complex affective economies. It is for this reason that León Olvera & Villaplana Ruiz (2019) put forward the notion of *viral transfemininity* to explain the identity negotiations of subaltern subjects through algorithmically amplified aesthetic practices. Barrón San Blas (2025) shows that influencers refine their performative strategies to optimise visibility, constituting a symbolic economy in which affectivity operates as capital and reinforces a culture of digital performativity.

Furthermore, gamification emerges as a technique of affective modulation, with playful mechanics that sustain attention and encourage repeated interaction (García-Ortega & García-Avilés, 2018), underpinned by persuasive platform design (García-Tort et al., 2019). The gap between youth practices and traditional institutional mediation compounds the challenge. Viñarás Abad et al. (2025), for instance, note that there is no stable common code between the two, which brings to light young people's reappropriation of spaces of cultural authority through interactive, emotional and fragmentary formats.

Within this ecology, memes function as civic resources that go beyond entertainment, articulating discourses and forms of affective citizenship (Camas et al., 2018). Hence the proposal of the critical deconstruction of memes as a pedagogical tool for active and committed digital citizenship. Taken

together, emotional engagement and digital performativity articulate affects, algorithms and narratives within an ecology governed by the logic of platforms; these are not spontaneous processes, but practices regulated by regimes of visibility and control that translate cultural consumption into the performative production of subjectivity.

2.4. Gamification and cultural entertainment

Contemporary museology has taken a turn towards the playful and the participatory, incorporating informal registers, unconventional narratives and game mechanics that bring together entertainment, pedagogy and co-creation. Memes, games and visual storytelling are not mere accessories, but devices that reorganise the construction of meaning and relevance. The example of the "*absolute unit*" of the Museum of English Rural Life illustrates how an anecdotal image can amplify visibility and resignify an institution's public identity. Yet the use of memes calls for caution, as Moshenska (2023) warns: being multimodal texts prone to reappropriation, they require deliberate management policies that address ethical, legal and reputational risks.

In parallel, a comparative study of French and Canadian museums introduces the term *memourism* to designate the intersection between cultural tourism and memetic practice, whereby collections become the raw material for collective creation (Velley & Cordonnier, 2025). This dynamic blurs the boundary between the on-site visitor and the digital user, fostering horizontal relationships. Nevertheless, few institutions integrate memes systematically, for fear of losing symbolic control or damaging their reputation. Beyond humour, gamification —points, rewards, achievements— enhances enjoyment and involvement, provided that the narrative is robust (Sangamuang et al., 2025). In natural history museums, for example, such systems improve attention and retention when they are linked to contextualised and meaningful content.

Moreover, the combination of immersive technologies with game mechanics expands the museum as an interactive environment. In cultural tourism destinations, VR combined with rewards not only entertains but also improves knowledge acquisition (Yolthasart et al., 2024). In virtual museums, playful navigation strategies —mini-maps, clues, information layers— optimise spatial cognition and the sense of presence (Xu et al., 2024). Finally, the CHATS project, which integrates a tangible interface with augmented reality, offers personalised narratives that combine image, music and voice at the visitor's own pace (Trichopoulos et al., 2022).

This is a playful turn that converges with a broader narrative shift, in which the dossier *Museums as Storytellers* identifies a drift towards the narrative, the visual and the affective, whereby the museum ceases to "show things" and instead tells stories that stimulate the imagination, the emotions and the senses (Chassagnol & Marie, 2025). Digital communication, in other words, intensifies this orientation by fragmenting stories and distributing them across platforms. In this scenario, XR —VR, AR and MR— brings together play and narration, going beyond the traditional exhibition through historical reconstructions, natural interaction and immersive narratives, by means of mini-games, information layers and animations that stimulate curiosity and memory (Okanovic et al., 2022). Strategically, the international adoption of XR renews communication with young audiences and broadens cultural value. And the metaverse, by bringing VR and AR together, is emerging as the ideal space for participatory exhibitions and creative social interaction (Avlonitou & Papadaki, 2024).

The key, as Moshenska (2023) reminds us, is to accompany these innovations with clear institutional frameworks that recognise their value without overlooking risks relating to a lack of transparency, responsible participation and heritage integrity. In short, the contemporary museum is taking shape as a narrative and playful space in which emotions, images and stories intertwine to construct shared meanings within digital culture.

2.5. Scroll appeal and attention strategies

Scroll appeal, that is, the capacity of a piece of content to arrest the gaze amid the incessant scrolling of the feed, has become a criterion of communication design. In European museums, posts that combine high-quality images with participatory dynamics (polls, challenges, questions) achieve significantly higher engagement than conventional institutional formats (Del Pino Rodríguez-Vera et al., 2024). This claim is corroborated by Museum Advocate (2024), which states that combining curated images with spontaneous, behind-the-scenes content and competitions humanises the institution and strengthens its bond with the community.

Scroll appeal is particularly relevant to Generation Z, who are accustomed to short, mobile and audiovisual formats. Indeed, more than 90% use Instagram and 86% turn to TikTok to discover brands and content (Suss & Atikah, 2025). Adapting visual narratives to these codes is unavoidable, since otherwise museums are left out of emerging cultural conversations. Furthermore, a transmedia and omnichannel logic is taking hold, with more than 60% of young people using TikTok as a search engine, displacing traditional access channels. Content must therefore be conceived to inform and, at the same time, to be shared, remixed and experienced across multiple platforms (Charr, 2024b).

From *Emoji Quest* to "choose your own adventure" videos, audiovisual gamification turns viewers into co-protagonists and increases their participation (Richardson, 2024). The most successful content integrates dynamic subtitles, effects, music and hashtags within a unified narrative, whose effectiveness depends less on spectacle than on the semiotic consistency between image, text and sound (Chek et al., 2024). In parallel, the rise of "Instagrammable" exhibitions demonstrates how scroll appeal feeds back into exhibition design. Yayoi Kusama's *One with Eternity* in the Hirshhorn Collection, for example, was conceived to produce viral images. Along these lines, Rhee et al. (2022) warn of the risk of reducing the visit to the "perfect photo", at the expense of deep aesthetic appreciation and meaningful engagement with the works.

In response to these challenges, digital storytelling and gamification are becoming established as strategies for articulating cultural narratives attuned to the regime of the scroll. Chang & Suh (2025) show that stories built with video, image and sound strengthen emotional bridges between audiences and heritage, facilitating personal and affective forms of appropriation. In sum, scroll appeal is not mere surface aesthetics. It entails a comprehensive reconfiguration of how museums narrate, design and distribute content. In an environment in which attention is cultural capital, institutional success depends as much on the collection as on the capacity to participate in the rhythms, formats and affectivities of digital culture.

2.6. Museums as transmedia platforms

The digital transformation of the museum is clearly expressed in its conversion into a transmedia platform: a narrative expansion that extends beyond the physical gallery and unfolds across multiple formats, channels and devices, articulating fragmented yet connected experiences before, during and after the visit. Krasnova (2024) argues that, by operating as transmedia devices, museums reconfigure their traditional role through distributed narratives capable of engaging audiences accustomed to discontinuous, personalised and non-linear consumption. This splits heritage narratives across touchpoints for a visitor who begins on Instagram, continues in the gallery and prolongs the experience in an app or on an educational platform. In Buenos Aires, for example, visual arts museums deploy multichannel networks that cut across media, contexts and temporalities (Diéguez, 2020).

International cases such as China's Palace Museum consolidate this expansion by reinterpreting historical figures —such as the Qing emperors— through social media, apps, audiovisual projects and digital merchandising, revitalising the collective imaginary and connecting with young audiences (Li, 2022). Chile's Museum of Memory and Human Rights, for its part, promotes a platform that addresses dictatorship, justice and memory through interactive testimonies, digital archives, audiovisual pieces and collaborative fictions, fostering participatory and affective collective memories (Maldonado, 2024).

Digitalisation is also reconfiguring access, as museums operate as digital access platforms where objects, in addition to being physically exhibited, are made available globally through archives, open catalogues and virtual tours (Wilson-Barnao, 2021). Although this openness democratises knowledge and enables forms of distributed cultural citizenship, it also introduces tensions concerning the ownership of knowledge, data control and the mediating role of big tech (Wilson-Barnao, 2021). At the same time, theoretical and methodological frameworks are being consolidated for non-fiction transmedia narratives that integrate video games, virtual museums and participatory documentaries, positioning the museum as a generator of immersive experiences (Basaraba, 2022). Likewise, the design of narrative interfaces places the user as an agent of the story, promoting meaningful interactions (Sens, 2021). In addition, institutions act as catalysts for the creative industries through incubators, collaborations with digital artists and innovation networks, contributing actively to the creative economy (Fedorova, 2023).

Conceiving of museums as transmedia platforms thus entails adopting rhizomatic, participatory and distributed narrative logics, which in turn calls for an institutional literacy geared towards experience

design, community building and the construction of plural narratives within a changing media ecosystem (Basaraba, 2022; Fedorova, 2023; Sens, 2021; Wilson-Barnao, 2021).

On the other hand, the advent of AI ushers in a phase of automation in the production, curation and circulation of content that puts pressure on traditional frameworks of aesthetic experience, heritage interpretation and citizen participation. Irala Hortal (2024) emphasises that, in addition to enabling the classification and large-scale analysis of data, AI makes possible interactive and personalised experiences that "innovate in the museum experience" (p. 6). The museum is thus reinterpreted under a regime of algorithmic mediation in which curatorial decisions are articulated with recommender systems, image synthesis and natural language processing.

This shift raises ethical dilemmas concerning algorithmic transparency and the intellectual property of AI-generated content, as well as risks of creative impersonation and the manipulation of museographic authenticity, making it necessary to revisit the boundaries between creation and reproduction (Franganillo, 2023). At the same time, it transforms professional roles: Túñez (2021) describes processes of "cobotisation" and co-creation that reconfigure traditional functions in content management, shifting the emphasis from one-way expertise towards participatory, hybrid and transmedia dynamics.

Intermedial and immersive devices are likewise emerging that redefine museography as a process. Tortosa Cuesta et al. (2021) propose AR/VR-based laboratory museums in which interaction is the "engine and moment of the work" (p. 101), displacing the piece as a contemplative object in favour of performative and multimodal experiences that extend the museum beyond its physical limits. This reconfiguration cannot be approached solely from the standpoint of technical efficiency: it demands a critical perspective on digital inequality, data surveillance and the precarisation of curatorial work. For Martín-Fiorino (2021), technoscience must be grounded in an "education committed to academic quality and social responsibility" (p. 70), repositioning the relationships between knowledge, culture and citizenship from the standpoint of an informed humanism.

3. Methodology

UnArtificial Art is the campaign launched in 2023 by the Vienna Tourist Board (Visit Vienna) in collaboration with Dentsu Creative Austria and several museums in the Austrian capital. It constitutes the object of this case study, which adopts an exploratory-interpretive qualitative approach. Disseminated under the slogan *See the Art Behind AI Art*, the initiative intervened in classical works by means of generative AI (text-to-image), incorporating cats as a disruptive visual element in order to attract digital audiences on social media.

The choice of case is justified by its paradigmatic value in the institutional use of generative AI for cultural and tourism purposes, and by the opportunity it affords to analyse the aesthetic, communicative and ethical implications of visual automation in heritage contexts. Through qualitative triangulation, three techniques are combined: analysis of digital strategies, exploratory netnography and in-depth interviews. The first phase comprises three actions: analysing the digital strategies in order to understand the campaign's narrative structure; identifying visual and discursive elements; and pinpointing interaction dynamics on Instagram and TikTok. The variables observed include audiovisual formats, use of hashtags, posting schedule, institutional rhetoric, calls to action and engagement performance, drawing on studies of digital communication in cultural institutions (Fernández-Hernández et al., 2021; Viñarás Abad et al., 2025) and on transmedia and cultural gamification frameworks.

Secondly, exploratory netnography (Kozinets, 2014) is employed through non-participant observation of the interactions generated by the campaign. The focus is on patterns of reception, reappropriations, comments, derivative memes and affective dynamics, with a view to capturing structures of shared meaning in algorithmic environments (Mesquita et al., 2018).

To complete the triangulation, qualitative in-depth interviews are conducted with members of the Visit Vienna team —those responsible for coordination, conceptual design and execution— in order to reconstruct the creative process, ascertain the strategic objectives behind the use of AI and assess institutional perceptions of its cultural, visual and ethical effects (Martínez López, 2023; Sierra Caballero, 2021).

This methodological combination enables a multi-scalar approach to the *UnArtificial Art* case, integrating visual, institutional, technological and social dimensions. Triangulation provides a critical

understanding of the use of generative AI in cultural communication campaigns, addressing both its creative possibilities and its symbolic and ethical challenges.

4. Results

The results obtained from the *UnArtificial Art* case study make it possible to bring the theoretical dimensions addressed in the conceptual framework —algorithmic visual culture, digital performativity, emotional engagement and the resignification of heritage— into dialogue with the empirical evidence generated by the interviews and by the quantitative analysis of the campaign. This articulation helps to explain how heritage communication is being reconfigured today in contexts of aesthetic automation and transnational cultural tourism.

One of the first elements in answering the research questions is the way in which the campaign was conceived as a reflexive device. As the Visit Vienna team explained, the aim was not to surrender to techno-determinist enthusiasm surrounding AI, but rather to treat it ironically and to expose its dependence on strategically designed human inputs ("we wanted to highlight that AI models need excellent inputs"). This dimension connects with Noble (2018) and Crawford (2021), who warn of the need to make visible the human mediations that automation tends to conceal.

The use of cats as a disruptive visual element can be understood, in the light of affective engagement theory (Linne, 2022; Barrón San Blas, 2025), as a means of activating the immediate emotional connections characteristic of circulation on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This choice is rooted in an institutional track record of critical engagement with technoculture —the Board had already experimented with formats such as *UnHashtag Vienna* and *Vienna Strips on OnlyFans*— and can be read as a form of algorithmic visual diplomacy in which heritage is reinscribed in contemporary debates from a strategic institutional perspective.

The empirical findings indicate that the campaign did not rely on a single generative platform, but rather on a combination of technologies (Midjourney, DALL·E 2 and Topaz Gigapixel AI), selected according to criteria of visual quality and compatibility with physical display environments (e.g. Times Square). This technical sophistication corresponds to what the theoretical framework terms high-resolution algorithmic aestheticisation (Guerrero-Solé & Ballester, 2023; Salazar & Zaldívar, 2024), whereby not every AI-generated image circulates, but only those that meet the visual standards of contemporary cultural capitalism.

The interview revealed that the museums took an active part in the selection and validation of the works. The algorithmic intervention did not take place outside the institutional apparatus, but in dialogue with it. This finding makes it possible to contrast critically those views that warn of the decontextualisation of digital heritage (Bautista, 2021) and to support a model of digital co-curation in which AI does not replace heritage authority but is inserted within its negotiated margins.

The campaign deployed a dissemination strategy that may be described as transmedia symbolic saturation. According to the metrics provided, more than 116 million impressions were distributed across a hybrid ecosystem that integrated social platforms, cultural media and physical spaces. This cross-cutting reach confirms the observations of Vitaller et al. (2020) and García-Ortega & García-Avilés (2018) on high-turnover affective narratives, in which heritage becomes an emotional interface designed to circulate.

The interview corroborated that this choice sought to articulate an accessible, critical and viral narrative. From a theoretical standpoint, this may be interpreted as performative museum transmedia, in which the images prioritise not institutional pedagogy but activation and reproduction under logics of algorithmically guided emotional participation (López Navarrete et al., 2024).

The netnographic dimension of the study revealed a recurring pattern of ambivalence in reception: thousands of positive reactions —ranging from amusement to aesthetic admiration— organically amplified the campaign's reach, while some specialist voices expressed concern about the trivialisation of heritage.

This bifurcation confirms the arguments set out in the theoretical framework regarding the affective regime of digital culture (Barrón San Blas, 2025): emotionality dominates symbolic circulation but does not guarantee legitimacy. In the case of heritage, the effects of algorithmic spectacularisation may strain institutional frameworks of meaning (Viñarás Abad et al., 2025), which calls for strategies of cultural dialogue and protocols of narrative transparency.

The analytics data reveal the communicative power of the campaign: more than 6 million views, 150,000 clicks and a cumulative exposure time equivalent to more than six years (see Table 1). These figures position *UnArtificial Art* not as an ephemeral campaign, but as a case of institutional success in the digital attention economy.

Table 1. *Analytics of the campaign undertaken by Visit Vienna*

Channel	***Impressions***	***Views***	***Time-spent-with-brand***	***Clicks***	***Comments***
DOOH	*67.1M*	*3.6M*	*/*		
Print	*12.6M*	*/*	*/*		
Earned Media	*3.5M*	*/*	*/*		*Media coverage and press articles*
Artnet/Artnews	*0.95M*	*/*	*1 year*	*6,716*	*Advertorial*
Owned Media	*0.38M*	*/*	*/*		*Wien.info, social channels, newsletter…*
Outstream	*/*	*0.64M*	*1.94 years*	*58,797*	*Outstream video ads*
YouTube	*2.7M*	*1.6M*	*3.19 years*	*1,927*	
Story Ads	*/*	*0.4M*	*/*	*1,406*	
HPA	*6.3M*	*/*	*/*	*67,015*	*Half-page ad (display banner)*
FB/IG	*22.6M*	*/*	*/*	*17,092*	*Facebook/Instagram*
Total	***116.13M***	***6.24M***	***6.13 years***	***152,953***	

Source: Vienna Tourist Board & Dentsu Vienna.

As these figures show, it is possible to speak of performative heritage value: success is measured not only by museum visits, but by the digital interaction and emotionality that the content generates. This is consistent with Couldry & Mejías (2019): attention is a form of symbolic power, and AI not only captures it but also shapes it affectively.

Finally, the interview made it possible to identify a strategic perspective that transcends the instrumentalisation of AI. Visit Vienna does not regard artificial intelligence as a substitute for heritage, but as an institutional co-narrator capable of expanding ways of telling, connecting and resignifying. This view resonates with Hintz et al. (2019) and Tubaro et al. (2025), who conceive of AI not merely as technical infrastructure, but as a form of cultural mediation with political and ethical dimensions. Following the co-curation described above, co-narration operates at the mediation stage.

In sum, the findings confirm the reconfiguration of heritage communication identified at the outset and open up lines of enquiry in algorithmic cultural communication oriented towards legitimacy, transparency and participation.

5. Discussion

The findings of the analysis are set against the main concepts of the theoretical framework: automated visual culture, emotional engagement, the algorithmic aestheticisation of heritage and digital mediation in international tourism contexts. This confrontation between theory and data confirms the central hypotheses and opens up lines of reflection on the limits, tensions and future prospects of the institutional use of generative artificial intelligence in cultural campaigns.

At the theoretical level, it was argued that cultural campaigns in the digital age do not merely communicate, but configure performative visual narratives that produce meanings, emotions and consumer orientations (León Olvera & Villaplana Ruiz, 2019; Linne, 2022). Within this framework, the Viennese campaign operates as a device of algorithmic cultural diplomacy that intervenes in debates on technology, art and authenticity. The decision to problematise the creative processes of AI resonates with Noble (2018) and Crawford (2021) on opacity and the need to make social and cultural mediations visible.

The campaign is likewise aligned with post-digital institutional culture (Viñarás Abad et al., 2025), articulating a form of communication that combines irony, transgression and high aesthetics for ideologically segmented audiences. The choice of an American audience and of visual humour featuring

cats responds to a logic of calculated emotional engagement (Barrón San Blas, 2025; García-Tort et al., 2019), in which affect acts as the main vector of symbolic circulation on social media.

The empirical work reveals a use of GenAI that is technically sophisticated and culturally mediated. The selection of works and their institutional validation by the museums point to a consensual algorithmic curation that tests the boundaries between the authorised and the intervened. This point qualifies criticisms concerning the decontextualisation of heritage in digital environments (Guerrero-Solé & Ballester, 2023), since museum legitimacy formed part of the process. What emerges, therefore, is a model of communicational cobotisation in which AI and institutions co-create.

From a theoretical perspective, Salazar & Zaldívar (2024) and Corzo (2025) point out that digitised heritage circulates in ecosystems governed by the algorithmic logic of attention. The results confirm this diagnosis: the combination of digital out-of-home media (DOOH), social media and cultural media responds to a strategy of symbolic saturation designed to insert the heritage narrative into spaces of visual consumption. The campaign functions as a case of the affective automation of heritage, in which the museum becomes viral emotional content (Vitaller et al., 2020).

This transmedia circulation not only reproduces content across multiple platforms but also reconfigures the experience of heritage, from mere contemplation to an ironic, intervened and shareable re-encounter, thereby materialising the article's theoretical core: the transformation of heritage into a viral interface mediated by logics of visual performance.

In line with the critical perspective on digital culture (López Navarrete et al., 2024; Camas et al., 2018), the reception of AI-intervened campaigns is bifurcated: the netnography reveals playful-affective celebration and, at the same time, tensions among specialist sectors that perceive a trivialisation of the artistic canon. This confirms that algorithmic reappropriations of heritage produce both meaning and controversy, and that virality affects not only visibility but also legitimacy (Viñarás Abad et al., 2025).

The metrics exceed sector averages —more than 6 million views and more than 150,000 clicks— reinforcing the view that digital success depends not only on the quality of content, but on its capacity to produce measurable affect: emotional engagement operates as symbolic capital that organises circulation (León Olvera & Villaplana Ruiz, 2019). By intervening in heritage with humour and surprise, AI updates its aesthetic and turns it into a vector of desire, in keeping with the "aestheticisation of the emotional as a strategy of power" (Han, 2022).

Institutional testimonies and future projections, for their part, reinforce a post-threat view of AI: far from displacing the museum experience, it is conceived as a digital co-narrator capable of expanding ways of telling, attracting and interpreting, in dialogue with Hintz et al. (2019), who frame AI as a form of cultural mediation with performative capacity.

In sum, the contrast between the results and the theoretical framework allows progress to be made on the initial questions: GenAI, applied strategically within the institutional sphere, can resignify heritage and attract tourism. Its symbolic effectiveness, however, is mediated by aesthetic, discursive, ethical and institutional factors that require careful management. *UnArtificial Art* stands as an exemplary case of automated visual culture that enhances the international visibility of heritage without forgoing critical reflection on its conditions of production.

6. Conclusions

The *UnArtificial Art* experience lends itself to a twofold reading. On the one hand, it confirms that institutions can draw on processes of creative automation to resignify heritage and extend its reach without compromising their educational mission, provided that such practices are developed in a reflexive and participatory manner. On the other hand, it raises challenges that transcend the specific case and open up new lines of research. There is a clear need to explore the scope of automated cultural communication, particularly with regard to the capacity of generative algorithms to assume narrative and promotional functions without displacing the institutional voice.

The results of the campaign highlight a process whereby museum heritage is transformed into an interface suited to viral circulation, within the algorithmic logics of contemporary dissemination. Heritage works, traditionally associated with an experience of erudite contemplation, were converted into emotionally resonant and highly shareable content. This shift responded to a strategy of algorithmically mediated cultural diplomacy that sought to capture the attention of global audiences through accessible and emotionally effective visual resources.

However, far from functioning as a mere display of technological spectacle, the Vienna case reveals a deliberate integration of AI in the role of institutional co-narrator. The automated images are not situated outside museum authority but enter into dialogue with it. This articulation materialises in the joint selection and validation of the works intervened. From this dynamic, an incipient model of human–machine co-curation emerges, in which artificial intelligence broadens narrative possibilities without displacing the expert legitimacy of institutions.

These conclusions nonetheless call for a critical reading that acknowledges the tensions inherent between spectacularisation and cultural legitimacy. Although it revitalised the international visibility of Viennese heritage through strategies based on surprise and emotion, the campaign exposed the fragile balance that cultural institutions must preserve in initiatives of this kind. Thus, while a large majority of the public celebrated its playful and creative approach, some specialist sectors expressed reservations about a possible trivialisation of the artistic canon. In the case analysed, however, the active presence of the museums as supervisors of the creative process and the discursive transparency of the campaign helped to mitigate the frictions that emerged.

The analysis of the case suggests several avenues for future research, inviting further examination of the role of generative artificial intelligence as a narrative agent within the heritage field. First, it is essential to explore ethical and methodological frameworks for human–machine co-curation that preserve institutional legitimacy, and to rethink notions of authenticity and authority in digital contexts shaped by virality. A second area for research concerns the need to develop critical digital pedagogies that strengthen the interpretive capacity of audiences and professionals in the face of new automated narratives. Finally, it would also be worthwhile to investigate how to balance the pursuit of media visibility with communicative sustainability and the educational mission of cultural institutions.

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