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ARTICLE

We Don't Need More Screens in Museums

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Abstract

As technology continues to shape how we engage with the world, museums are increasingly encouraged to adapt in order to appeal to younger audiences. Promoting exhibits through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok can be an effective way to attract visitors, but that doesn't mean museum spaces themselves need to become more digitally driven. For a generation already saturated with screens, adding more technology to exhibitions may actually detract from the experience. In this essay, I explore the effects that excessive screen use has on us and argue that museums can offer something more meaningful by providing a break from the digital overload. To support my argument, I conducted a straw poll survey to better understand how other young people feel about technology in museum settings.

Keywords: Generation Z; museums; screen fatigue; technology

Your average Generation Z morning begins not with a stretch or a shower, but with a screen. Before setting foot out of bed, we're deep into Instagram, X, TikTok—or all three. After a good 30-minute scroll, we get up, only to trade one screen for another: the laptop at work, the desktop in class, and the tablet at home. Our days are an endless cycle of glowing rectangles, each one quietly eroding our attention spans, mental health, and even posture. This isn't some niche concern—it's a shared exhaustion. We feel it in our eyes, our backs, and our brains. And yet, more and more, museums are racing to add the very thing many of us are desperate to escape: more screens.

During a recent museum visit, I came across an interactive feature where visitors could scan a QR code that opened a Snapchat filter. Through the phone's camera, the gallery transformed—artifacts appeared as they might have looked in their original time, with animated figures telling their stories. While creative, it felt out of place in a space dedicated to the ancient past. Glitches aside, the idea of walking through an exhibit with my phone in front of my face is not appealing, nor is it why I go to museums.

Increasingly, museums have been doubling down on digital innovation, hoping to better connect with the public—especially younger visitors. While most institutions already have some form of tech woven into their exhibits, the new trend involves more advanced technological tools like augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), mobile apps, QR codes, and touchscreen displays—all promising to enhance the museum experience. These

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features may recreate lost details or add layers of storytelling, but they also raise larger questions: Do people really want this experience? Is this the place to be adding more screens into our lives?[1]

Scholarship on how to engage Gen Z with museums and cultural heritage sites is overwhelmingly one-sided—most of it promotes the idea that more technology equals better engagement.[2] A recurring assumption in this body of work is that Gen Z, having grown up surrounded by screens, will only respond to exhibits that are interactive, gamified, or digitally enhanced. These arguments focus so much on our tech use that they overlook a major factor: our tech fatigue. Yes, Gen Z uses social media heavily, but that doesn't mean we want every experience, especially something as potentially meaningful as cultural heritage, to be filtered through a screen. There's no mention of the downsides of tech overuse, no space given to the possibility that too much technology might actually detract from the museum experience, not enhance it. There is little to no research that focuses on how Gen Z actually feels about advancing technology in museums, and what really engages them in these spaces.

1. The rise of brain rot

Adults are advised to spend no more than two hours a day on screens, yet the global average is closer to seven—and in the United States, it's even higher.[3] For Gen Z, that number jumps to nine hours daily—not including time spent on screens for school or work.[4] While Millennials and Gen Z are often labeled as the most tech-dependent, heavy screen use is now ingrained across all generations. It's not just common use—it's excessive, especially among younger demographics. We spend our leisure time on our devices, and then often our work time on our devices.

Too much screen time takes a toll on our minds and bodies. Physically, it leads to eye strain, headaches, poor posture, and less movement overall.[5] Mentally, it drains us and even shrinks gray matter, the part of the brain tied to memory, movement, and emotions.[6] Our focus suffers too, since these quick dopamine hits from our screens train us to jump from one thing to the next without really taking anything in.[7]

In 2024, the Oxford Dictionary word of the year was "brain rot," defined as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content)."[8] This term has been increasingly used in relation to Gen Z and by Gen Z: the same group heavily involved in creating and consuming digital content has popularized the phrase on social media—the very platform often blamed for causing it—which shows a certain level of self-awareness about the impact of excessive screen use on our generation.[9]

[1] I am mainly referring to universal museums in this essay. I believe science, technology, and branded interactive/immersive experience museums are exceptions to my argument.

[2] For some leading examples of research on how to engage Generation Z with museums and cultural heritage sites, see Bello and Matchette (2018), Charr (2020), Pentescu (2023), and Voges (2025).

[3] "Average Screen Time Statistics" 2025.

[4] "Average Screen Time Statistics" 2025.

[5] Devi and Singh 2023.

[6] Descourouez 2024.

[7] Novak 2021.

[8] Heaton 2024.

[9] Heaton 2024.

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This emerging research on screen time suggests why many Gen Z visitors don't want more screens in museums. We feel the grogginess, the "brain rot," the strain in our eyes. And while Gen Z is known for heavy device use, we're also becoming just as well known for prioritizing health and wellness.[10]

2. What if we just ask Gen Z about museums and technology?

Since there isn't much existing research on how Gen Z feels about increasing technology in museums and museum engagement in general, I decided to conduct my own straw poll survey, which I made on my phone from my couch in about 30 minutes. I had 36 participants: 72.2% are part of Gen Z, 22.2% are Millennials, and 5.6% are from Generation X. I asked about their personal relationships with their devices and how they felt about their own screen use. From there, I shifted the focus to their views on museums—specifically, how they felt about exhibits incorporating more technology, such as VR, AR, and apps. I asked whether this kind of tech enhanced their experience, interfered with it, or made no difference.

Most people—especially Gen Z participants—reported feeling screen fatigue or "brain rot." Out of the 26 people who are part of Gen Z and took this survey, 20 recorded that they do feel brain rot and screen fatigue, 4 said maybe, and just 2 said no (Figure 1).

I asked if people try to limit their screen time, and if so, what strategies they use. Only 5 out of the 36 participants said they don't do anything to limit their screen use—3 were from Gen Z and 2 were Millennials. A lot of people mentioned using similar methods for getting off their devices, such as going out to do something and intentionally leaving their phones behind. Others mentioned tools such as screen timers and Do Not Disturb settings to help cut down on screen time. Many Gen Z participants wrote about outright hating technology and wishing they could be less reliant on their devices, but also how unavoidable it is.

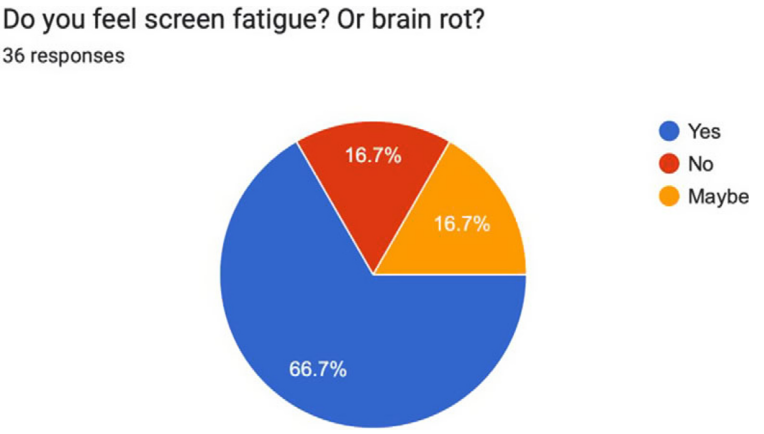


Figure 1. Chart breaking down the percentages of participant answers.

[10] It's hard to provide data to back this up, since I'm drawing not only from my own perspective but also from conversations with friends and what I see trending on social media. There's a constant stream of posts about mental health and mindfulness, along with ads for new apps aimed at curbing screen use—just yesterday I came across two in one sitting, Brick and Opal.

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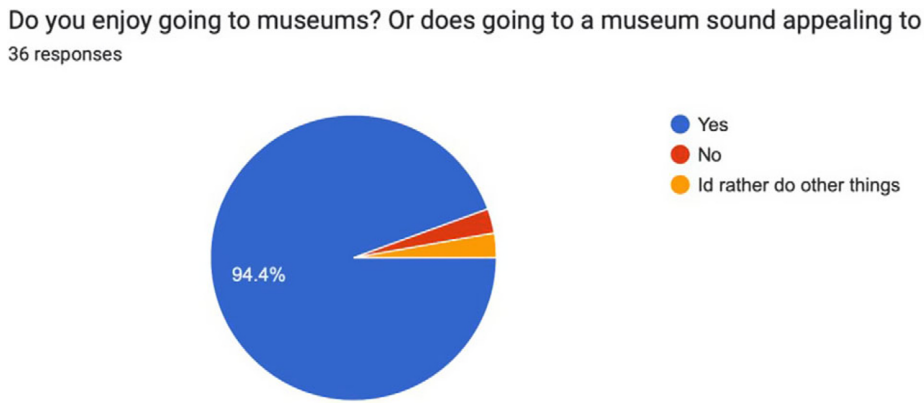


Figure 2. Chart breaking down the percentages of participant answers.

Very few of the people who took this survey would consider themselves "museum people." They represent the general public. When I asked this screen-fatigued public if they enjoy going to museums, an overwhelming 94% said "Yes" (Figure 2).

This result suggests that the lower visitation rates among my generation likely stem from factors unrelated to technology. When I later asked what makes them uninterested in visiting a museum, most responses related to a lack of interest in the topics presented or the museum's advertising and events. Then I asked what makes a museum interesting to them: *what makes them want to visit?* Not a single answer involves technology engagement. Every response expressed an interest in learning new things with the real objects in front of them, with one participant explicitly saying, "Something to do off my phone, learn, and see things."

When I asked the specific question about whether more technology in museum exhibits (such as VR, AR, or apps) enhances, interferes with, or has no effect on their experience, responses varied—but a clear pattern emerged. While a few participants felt that technology could enhance their museum visits, nearly all of them added qualifiers: it must be well implemented, not forced, and not overwhelming. Many Gen Z participants expressed feeling that too much tech interferes with the experience, or said they'd prefer museums without it altogether. Several emphasized that museums offer a rare chance to disconnect and focus—a needed break from the digital world. Some responses acknowledged the value of tech in certain cases—for example, for accessibility, or when used to enhance understanding of a complex topic. However, few believed it should be central to the museum experience.

3. Materiality as the value proposition of museums

The overarching takeaway from my survey is that younger audiences are not calling for *more* screens in museums. Instead, they're seeking thoughtful, meaningful experiences—and in many cases, that means less technology, not more.

Technology in museums can certainly help people learn in new and engaging ways, but there is something very different about learning through a screen versus learning directly from the object in front of you. The object should remain the focal point that draws our attention. After all, we already see pictures, videos, and gamified content at home or in school. Museums offer the chance to stand before an object and feel a deeper connection to

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ourselves, our communities, our heritage, and the world around us. While I know most museums use technology alongside objects rather than replacing them, it still creates a layer of distraction. Our instinct today is to focus on the screen we can swipe or play with, rather than the artifact behind the glass, and in doing so, we become less present with what is actually there.

Personally, when I look at an object that is a thousand years old, I pause and reflect—I see evidence of how people lived, how they were both similar to and different from us, and it makes me think about my own life in comparison. That kind of contemplation is part of the beauty of museums. Some technology can enhance certain experiences, and I don't deny its usefulness, but I worry about it taking over in the same way it has in so many other parts of our lives. Maybe this is inevitable, and maybe I'm wrong, but I feel it's worth sharing another perspective on the balance between screens and objects—one I've been thinking about a lot through my graduate studies. Objects give us the chance to study history in a way that words on a page or images on a screen cannot. They remind us that history is not abstract—it is physical, it is real, and it has been lived.

As a society already struggling with digital fatigue, we can't afford to lose the special experience that museums provide. There are other, more effective ways to engage younger audiences—ones that don't involve doubling down on the very technology we're trying to escape. Many of us in Gen Z are painfully aware of the mental exhaustion that comes from staring at screens all day, and the last thing we want is for museums to become extensions of that experience. Museums already have something invaluable to offer, and they don't need more screens to make it meaningful or engaging.

Shayna Huberman is a graduate student at Harvard University Extension School pursuing a master's degree in Museum Studies. She currently works in the museum field, where she combines her interests in history and anthropology to create meaningful visitor experiences that highlight the connections between people, place, and memory. Her academic and professional work reflect a deep appreciation for the stories that objects and spaces can tell. Passionate about the role museums play in connecting people to the past, she is committed to fostering inclusive, thoughtful, and engaging spaces that inspire reflection and spark curiosity about our shared human experience.

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