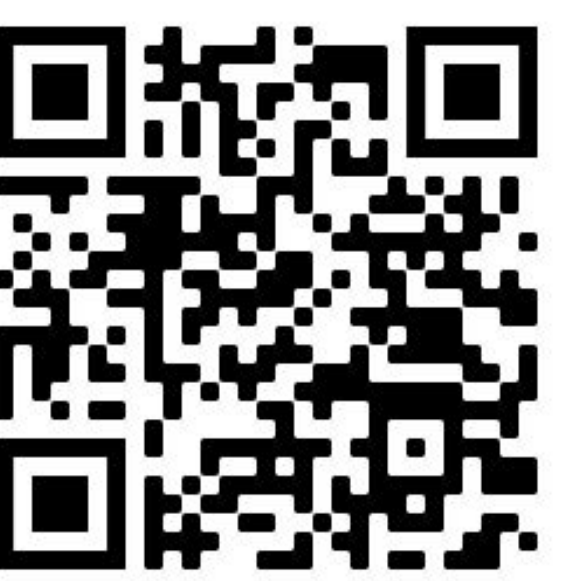


HANDS ON HISTORY: Messaging “touch” in California’s history museums

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INTRODUCTION

The 1992 report *Excellence and Equity* cites “**human interaction and interaction with objects and ideas**” and “**direct encounters with objects**” as key contributions that museums make to public service and scholarship (American Association of Museums & Hirzy, 2008, p. 13). Since the “sensory turn” in cultural studies (Howes, 2006, 2014; Howes & Classen, 2014), research about and programming for embodied experiences in museums have become increasingly popular (Faron & Banda, 2014; Kai-Kee et al., 2020).

As part of a broader research program exploring the affordances of object-based learning with historical artifacts in heritage contexts (Chatterjee, 2008), this preliminary study employs summative content analysis to characterize the epistemic ideologies that manifest on museum websites.

Research Questions

In what contexts does the word “touch” appear on California’s history museum websites?

How is touch characterized in these contexts?

METHODS



All American Alliance of Museums-accredited history museums in California (n=106) were sampled for this study.

1. The Google site:search function was used to identify all uses of the word “touch” on each institution’s website.
2. After excluding cases based on study criteria, 54 unique uses of the word “touch” across 27 museums were identified for inclusion.
3. Texts featuring the keyword “touch”, direct links, and additional metadata were scraped and added to the data corpus. Attributes, keywords, and initial themes were then coded (Saldaña, 2015).

RESULTS

Out of the 54 texts identified for inclusion, 42 were coded with positive valence. In several cases (**Theme 1**), museum websites speak to the power of touch in the development of historical empathy, imagination, and perspective-taking (Nilsen, 2016). Elsewhere, touch is framed in the language of exploration and whole-body engagement, one modality among many through which to experience history and culture (**Theme 2**).

In contrast, touch is viewed negatively in the majority of visitor policies sampled for this study (**Theme 3**).



CONCLUSIONS



*Variations in the context and valence of “touch” on the websites of California’s history museums reflect the contested status of touch as **an important aspect of multisensory learning** on the one hand and as a **threat to the conservation of valuable material culture** on the other.*

Future studies will investigate sense-specific affordances of object-based learning in online and on-site museum programming.

Limitations: Museum websites may be poor indicators of conditions “on the ground,” especially in the context of COVID-19. Bias toward archived materials using the Google site:search function as a data collection method may skew results.

Theme 1: Connection to the Past Through Haptic Engagement

“[S]tudents will touch and use artifacts to develop an understanding of past desert cultures and present desert uses”

Theme 2: Touch as an Element of Multisensory Learning

“Look, listen, smell, taste, and touch. See how Historians use all of their senses in uncovering hidden secrets of the past.”

Theme 3: “Thou Shalt Not” Visitor Policies

“Guests must NOT touch the glass and must stay at least one foot away from objects. They must NOT touch exhibits, walls, or statues.”

References and image credits available upon request.