



Original Research

Raising Young People's Awareness of Racism: A Communication Experiment at the Museum of America in Madrid, Spain

Juan Enrique González-Vallés, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Ana Pedreño Santos, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Sonia Carcelén-García, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Mónica Viñarás-Abad, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

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Abstract: The effectiveness of awareness campaigns on inclusion is increasingly complex, and sometimes the boomerang effect is observed, which is the opposite of the intended effect of an advertised message. Faced with this situation, this seeks alternatives to raise awareness about racism. To this end, a visit to the Museum of America in Madrid (Spain) is made with a group of young people who participate in a digital community, where their opinions on racism are collected before and after the visit for one month. Subsequently, a content analysis of the comments made by young people in the digital community was carried out. The aim is to analyze the impact of the visit, as well as to identify the reasons why the visit and the museum exert that influence. The impact has been codified into three categories: the message received (cognitive), the emotions felt (affective), and the transformation (behavioral intention). The results show how there is no boomerang effect and how the visit has impacted young people and why. Although they all state that the visit has transformed them in relation to racism, this change is more or less profound in some than in others. The objects seen in the museum, and the institution itself, exert power through their objectivity and authenticity, leading to a more elaborate cognitive and emotional process than a traditional communication campaign. The results encourage us to give the museum a more central role in raising awareness about inclusivity.

Keywords: Racism, Awareness, Museum of America (Madrid), Experiment, Advertising, Boomerang Effect

Introduction

Hatred is linked to emotional situations that are difficult to rationalize. This is why it is more present in young people, as they are still in the process of maturing (Navarro et al. 2013; Pace et al. 2018). Hate gives rise to violent and criminal behavior: almost half of the hate crimes in Spain in 2023 were carried out by young people under twenty-five years of age (Ministry of the Interior 2023). Men are the main victims and the main aggressors in overall hate crimes.

Hate messages are increasingly present in public discourse across Europe, with racism having the greatest impact in all countries analyzed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2023). Table 1 shows the grounds for discrimination in the thirteen countries studied by the FRA, with skin color (38%) and having an immigrant background (30%) being the main causes of discrimination. Together, they account for 68% of the grounds for discrimination, compared to religious beliefs (6%), age (6%), and sex/gender (5%).

Table 1: Grounds of Discrimination EU-13 By Country (%)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Skin Color</i>	<i>Ethnic or Immigrant Background</i>	<i>Religion or Belief</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex/Gender</i>
Austria	65	56	14	15	12
Belgium	52	32	4	8	5
Germany	68	57	10	13	11
Denmark	44	45	16	11	10
Spain	29	23	2	1	1
Finland	48	53	11	11	4
France	31	24	5	5	4
Ireland	50	38	6	10	8
Italy	35	34	5	0	2
Luxembourg	33	34	5	15	6
Poland	20	12	1	1	1
Portugal	26	4	0	0	0
Sweden	18	16	10	3	3
EU-13	38	30	6	6	5

Note: The same person may report different types of discrimination.

Source: FRA's (2023) EU Survey on Immigrants and Descendants of Immigrants 2022.

The countries reporting the highest levels of discrimination on these grounds are Germany, Austria, and Finland. The lowest levels are found in Portugal, Poland, and Sweden. Although Spain is below the average of the thirteen countries studied (52% compared to 68%), this type of crime grew by 76% between 2020 and 2023 (Ministry of the Interior 2023), as shown in Table 2. This racial discrimination has grown particularly against people of African and North African origin, although most recent ethnic diversity groups are immigrants from Hispanic American countries (Ministry of the Interior 2023) with whom Spain shares a language and a common past. Hence, the government's interest in working intensively within the "Agreement to cooperate institutionally in the fight against racism, xenophobia, LGTBphobia and other forms of intolerance," signed in 2015.

Table 2: Evolution of Hate Crimes in Spain

<i>Known Facts</i>	2020	2021	2022	2023	<i>Distribution 2023 (%)</i>	<i>Variation 22/23 (%)</i>	<i>Variation 20/23 (%)</i>
Anti-Gypsyism	22	18	22	37	2	68	68
Anti-Semitism	3	11	13	23	1	77	667
Aporophobia	10	10	17	18	1	6	80
Religion or Belief	45	63	47	55	3	17	22
Disabilities	44	28	23	49	2	113	11

Age	10	35	15	21	1	40	110
Disease	13	21	11	11	1	0	-15
Sex/Gender	99	107	189	206	10	9	108
Ideology	326	326	245	352	16	44	8
Sexual Orientation	277	466	459	522	24	14	88
Racism/Xenophobia	485	639	755	856	40	13	76
Total Facts	1.334	1.724	1.796	2.150	100	20	61

Source: Report on the Evolution of Hate Crimes in Spain 2023 (Ministry of the Interior of Spain 2023)

Since this agreement, there have been multiple advertising campaigns that have brought the problem to the table and increased reporting, but they have not succeeded in reducing the number of racist crimes. On the contrary, these campaigns may have generated a boomerang effect that occurs when an advertising campaign causes the opposite of the desired effect (Zhao and Fink 2021). This effect occurs especially in the field of social communication, in which the citizen is asked to change behavior (Osman 2020). The study by García Castro et al. (2025) highlights the boomerang effect among young people and warns of the dangers of online gambling. During the coronavirus pandemic, a boomerang effect was observed in messages prohibiting gatherings of more than six or ten people. This is because compliance meant changing deeply ingrained habits and giving up social relationships. This is understood as a restriction of freedom and, as a result, some people adopt contrary behaviors (Martínez 2020).

As an alternative to the usual advertising campaigns, museums can be spaces for active communication (Andújar et al. 2022). These are institutions whose involvement in social issues has been increasing in recent years (Message 2022). In recent times, institutions have found it difficult to reach young audiences who receive multiple stimuli through both social and traditional forms of media, including awareness campaigns on social issues (Pedreño et al. 2024). On the other hand, museums are working to play a more active role in society (Mensah 2025; Brulon 2020), which includes raising awareness about certain issues, such as racism. For this reason, this research explores how museums can participate in raising social awareness about specific issues.

Some research shows how museums play an important role in education and awareness-raising against racism (Dewhurst and Hendrick 2017). Among the initiatives, we find thematic exhibitions (Olivares and Piatak 2022; Levenson 2014), collection reviews (Washington and Hindley 2017), educational activities (Real López 2022), community collaborations (Da Silva, (2023), spaces for dialogue (Arao and Clemens 2013), and the demonstration of institutional commitment to these ideas (Brulon 2020; Poulot 2016), where experts on the subject are needed to change the management approach (Washington and Hindley 2017). Brulon (2020, 21) argues that “We have changed into another time of theoretical production to recognize that innovation might express itself in the reinvention of

traditional practices in the everyday life of a museum.” For Olivares and Piatak (2022), although there are countries that are joining this change, not all are equally committed. This situation forces museums to review their ethical commitment (Miró Alaix 2023) because it represents a change in their purpose. “It means thinking of themselves as institutions that not only serve to display objects, but also as spaces for interaction with and for people, which can assume their role as legitimizers of discourses and where relationships can be reflected upon” (Da Silva 2023, 15). In conclusion, “museums and heritage are the keys to shaping a more just, egalitarian, and democratic social state” (Real López 2022, 6).

The role that museums play today opens up the possibility of more active participation, as proposed by this research, the results of which will allow us to verify this. Therefore, this work focuses on this capacity of museums and how it can be leveraged in social issues. This work belongs to a research project called “Effective communicative alternatives for vulnerable audiences: experiential interventions in museums versus the traditional communication campaign” funded by the Universidad Complutense of Madrid.

State of the Debate

The Museum and Its Communicative Competence

Social polarization is of global concern (World Economic Forum 2023). The lack of authoritative referents (Rekker and Hartevelde 2024) is one of its causes. At the same time, we find that the role of museums today is to act as agents of change, precisely because of their social legitimacy (Carbonell-Currado and Maestro-Galán 2023; Kampourelli et al. 2024; Lovay 2022). Programs and exhibitions such as “Reckoning with our racial past” (Smithsonian, USA) or the “Festival de Cultura Antirracista” (MNCARS Spain) show the conversation that exists today around racism and the role of museums.



Figure 1: Reckoning Exhibition
Source: Wellep 2022

In the scientific literature, the number of works on racism and museums (Sandell and Nightingale 2012; Golding 2013; Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2000) has also increased with the aim of “demonstrating the role that museums and heritage play in favoring the visibility of a population that, until recently, lacked cultural initiatives or the academic recognition it deserved” (Real López 2022, 4). Museums and heritage are key to articulating a more just, egalitarian, and democratic social state, where there is talk of equality and not discrimination. For Cantle (2008), the prejudice is an antipathy toward another person based upon pre-existing belief or opinion, resulting from some form of social categorization or membership of a particular group. It relies upon a stereotypical characterization, or generalization, of others, which is not grounded in evidence or experience. Museums can change prejudices and stereotypes (Golding 2013).

The museum takes on the role of an activist (Janes and Sandell 2019), developing new models for its relationship with the surrounding environment (Murawski 2021). As a result, new approaches have emerged, such as the Empathic Museum, which advocates for institutional empathy as a transformative force within museums. This trend arose in the second decade of the twenty-first century, following significant social events that prompted a deeper examination of how museums engage with social issues.

“The Empathic Museum emerged as a critique of the indifference and reluctance of museums to engage with problems that deeply affect their communities, especially those of color” (Jennings et al. 2019). Examples of this approach include the Reina Sofía Museum and La Casa Encendida in Madrid, which have permanent spaces for dialogue and activities organized in collaboration with local residents.

In this vein, following the death of George Floyd in 2020, museums across the United Kingdom began to reflect on their commitment to anti-racism and issued a statement pledging to end racism in the heritage sector (MA 2024). The statement recognizes that museums are uniquely placed in society to address this issue because of their connection to the public and communities, and because of the link between collections and buildings and the British colonial past. Most museums are also public institutions, which mean they have a legal obligation to address racial inequality through the law (MA 2024).

In the study of the museum as a space of communication, experience is an object of interest for its capacity to persuade and influence (Little and Doerr-Stevens 2023). This is known as experiential communication, in which museums are experts: “Experiential communication is an intrinsic and inseparable element of the museum experience” (Justicia et al. 2022, 65). The proposal of Experiential Museology is interesting, as it considers the museum as a social space (Aguilar 2020), which has to do with alternative ways of sharing knowledge. Schmitt (2016, 109) includes among the functions of the museum, to show stories linked to certain social situations of importance to the community, “by showing us fragments of reality, they contribute to the awakening of people and to generate awareness regarding the discourse that is exposed.” According to Galmés Cerezo (2015), experience has an impact

on the sensory, emotional, and intellectual aspects. The visitor's perspective is further explored through the Museum Experience Model developed by Falk and Dierking (2011), illustrated in Figure 2. According to this model, museum experiences result from the interaction of three contextual dimensions: the personal, social, and physical. It provides a holistic, context-based understanding of visitor experience.

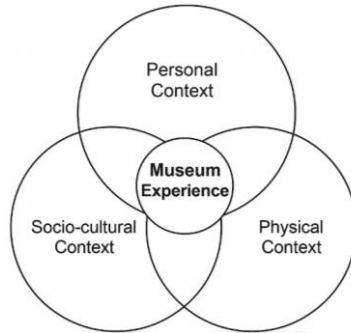


Figure 2: Museum Experience Model Developed by Falk and Dierking Museum Experience Model
Source: Falk and Dierking 2011

They are places where ideas, knowledge, concepts, and situations are questioned and debated, so that they can be heard, known, understood, confronted, valued, and vindicated (Hervás 2010). In fact, during the COVID pandemic, museums had to make a great effort to try to maintain this work without being able to open their halls (González et al. 2021) in the face of social demand and their corporate purpose.

The museum now has a proactive role in society capable of driving more diverse and inclusive social change. This work seeks new opportunities for museums to contribute to a more inclusive society, both as broadcasters and as media for raising awareness. Although in recent years there have been numerous proposals from museums and their subsequent research on racism from exhibitions and objects, this work does not address this issue but rather starts from the power of the museum as a credible means of communication (Dewhurst and Hendrick 2017).

Communication and Boomerang Effect

The boomerang effect is based on a break in the communication process (Figure 3). Following Shannon's (1948) classic process, when a sender sends a message, it reaches the receiver through a channel (in the case of advertising, a medium), who decodes it. In this process, there is always noise that will affect the receiver's decoding.

In the current situation of polarization (Rekker and Hartevelde 2024), the noise in the process is so high that the receiver may have negative predispositions and not agree to decode or even decode the message in the opposite direction to that conceived by the sender. In this case, the boomerang effect occurs (Zhao and Fink 2021).

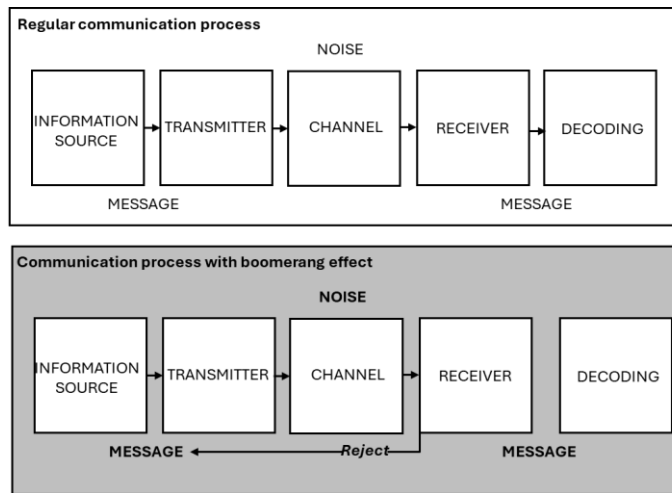


Figure 3: Communication Process with Boomerang Effect
 Source: Adapted from Shannon's (1948) Model

Persuasion is lost in the process because the person has such an ingrained belief system that he or she only accepts messages in line with his or her initial attitudes about a topic (Chongwilaikasaem and Ayaragarnchanaku 2023). These opinions are formed influenced by cognitive, social, and affective factors (Ecker et al. 2022). When motivated reasoners are exposed to information that clashes with their beliefs, they develop motivated skepticism in which they mentally counterargue against any stimuli that might depolarize their opinions (Zhou 2016). For example, if a message is appraised as a threat to identity this may elicit intense negative emotions that motivate strategies such as discrediting the source, ignoring evidence inconsistent with their worldview, or selectively focusing on evidence that reinforces it (Ecker et al. 2022). For Hochschild (2002), emotion depends on social norms, social category and position, and cultural factors.

The communications that produce the greatest boomerang effect are those that ask citizens to change their behavior (Osman 2020). In advertising communication, they are known as awareness or sensitization campaigns. They are those that aim to modify the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the target audience in order to improve their well-being or contribute to a social or environmental benefit.

In recent years, the polarization of society has radicalized opinions (Rekker and Harteveld 2024), which may affect the evolution of racism. The fundamental rights of individuals are under threat across Europe. This is due to rising levels of poverty, persistent threats to democracy, widespread racism, and challenges in the context of migration, as the FRA's Fundamental Rights Report 2024 (FRA 2024) concludes. Hate crimes due to racism and xenophobia in Spain are the most numerous and represent more than 40% of the total (FRA 2024).

Therefore, it is essential to know the stereotypes and prejudices among young people, since they reflect beliefs, generalizations, and evaluations about other people or social groups.

In this regard, the study by Barral et al. (2021) on the prejudices of young Spaniards indicates that 80% of young people in Spain are aware of emitting harmful prejudices. Twenty-four percent do so on a frequent basis. In total, 94% of Spanish youth (aged 15–30 years) are aware of receiving devaluation through harmful prejudices; 49% do so frequently.

In order to avoid institutional communications that generate a boomerang effect, it is necessary to work in all phases of the communication process (Figure 3). The purpose of this project is to find out how the museum can form part of this communication process aimed at young people.

Methodology

This work belongs to a research project called “Effective communicative alternatives for vulnerable audiences: experiential interventions in museums versus the traditional communication campaign” funded by the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. The object of study is the boomerang effect in awareness campaigns and the alternatives offered by actions such as experiences in museums as a tool for social awareness. The project aims to deepen the capacity of the museum to be an active agent of awareness through its collections.

This study presents the results of one of the objectives of the project: to analyze the impact of the museum experience for raising awareness about racism among young audiences. In the project, these results are compared with the impact of a media advertising campaign, in order to establish the effectiveness of each of these experiences and check the boomerang effect. The objective of the research is to analyze how the visit to a museum by young people impacts their attitudes toward racism.

To address this objective, we used an experimental qualitative methodology based on the digital community technique. This technique creates a virtual space specifically for the research, where a qualitative sample of participants interact, share aspects of their lives, and exchange opinions to generate insights into the social reality under study (Barral et al. 2021). The digital community allows the participant to express, over a relatively long period of time (not less than one month to several years), his or her free discourse from three perspectives: individual, group, and social. To this end, three fundamental tools are used within the digital community: the personal blog or diary, the forum, and the social blog. The personal blog is a private space for the more reflective and intimate expression of the participant, since it is not shared with the rest of the members of the community and is only accessible to the research team. The forum is another place within the community whose objective is group conversation, where all members can share and exchange ideas and opinions always from the encounter with the other. And finally, the social blog is a space within the digital community where the participant expresses and shares freely and voluntarily with the rest of the participants those things that interest him, enriching himself in turn with the stories created by the other members of the community (Durán et al. 2023).

The digital community was developed over a period of four weeks (September 2024) and seven activities were carried out in accordance with the study objectives:

- Four diaries: “Is your social environment inclusive?,” “Exploring my least tolerant side,” “Quick two-step survey: and pre-spot/museum,” and “The boomerang effect of communication!” (sixteen contributions per diary).
- Three forums: “Intolerant situations” (twenty-eight contributions), “The impact of the ad” (twenty-two contributions), “The impact of the museum” (twenty-nine contributions).

The sample community consisted of sixteen young men (eight) and women (eight), between 19 and 29 years of age, and selected using the snowball sampling technique, looking for profiles that met the following criteria: age, gender, race (white), and different attitudes toward racism. To this end, a recruitment questionnaire was administered to ensure the typological representativeness of the sample.

For one month (May 2024), they participated in a reflective process, through blogs and forums on their attitude toward inclusiveness. To this end, throughout the four weeks of the digital community, the same activities and different topics of reflection related to inclusion have been proposed to all participants. However, at the beginning of the third week, the participants were exposed to two different stimuli: half of the sample watched a spot focused on inclusiveness, and the other half carried out a museum activity where they worked on the same message addressed in the advertising communication. Subsequently, the remaining two weeks were spent working with the participants to know and compare simultaneously the impact that these stimuli had on the subject under study.

As for the selection of the museum to carry out the activity, it was necessary for it to be an institution whose content alluded directly to inclusion and the diversity of races and cultures. For this reason, the Museum of America in Madrid, Spain, chronicles the arrival of the Spanish on the American continent and the relationship between cultures and, therefore, races. Regarding the design of the visit, it was decided to visit the permanent collection, rather than a specific exhibition on racism or another theme. This decision was intentional: the hypothesis is that museums and their permanent collections contain meanings that allow different social issues to be addressed. A selection of objects from the museum was made in accordance with the object of study: those in which people of different races appear or have interacted. These objects give rise to discussion about their relationship.

Half of the members of the digital community took a ninety-minute tour with an expert. Some of the objects (twelve in total) chosen were: paintings of castes (mixed-race families), a painting of the arrival of Viceroy Morcillo in Potosí, a Mayan codex (preserved and translated), reproductions of dwellings, etc.



Figure 4: Of Spanish and Mestiza, Castiza, 1763. From Miguel Cabrera's Series of Paintings on Mixed-Race. Museum of America in Madrid, Spain
Source: Ministry of Culture of Spain

To analyze the impact of the visit, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the texts shared by young people in the digital community. This content was coded into three categories: the message received (cognitive), the emotions felt (affective), and the transformation that the visit has caused (behavioral). These categories were obtained using a deductive method based on the theories of Moya (2000) on persuasive communication; Gil (2016) and the influence of culture on the complexity of human emotions; and more specifically, the Museum Experience Model by Falk and Dierking (2011) and the Ibermuseos Report (2013). "The intensity of the experience is translated into cognitive terms (sense of learning, orientation, comfort, etc.), emotional terms (sense of fascination, immersion, escape from daily routine, etc.) and social terms (sense of belonging and identity)" (Ibermuseos 2013, 20). The results are presented in these three categories.

Results: The Visit Transforms

The main objective is to know how the visit to the Museum of America has an impact on young people. For this purpose, their sensibilities before and after the visit were compared, which made it possible to obtain an attitudinal taxonomy of positions toward racism prior to the visit. They were invited to reflect on social inclusiveness and tolerance of differences, as perceived in contemporary society. The experiences they shared, which are the fruit of the reflection of a young generation (from 18 to 28 years old), frame the concept of social inclusiveness within a generalized consensus around these three aspects: (1) inclusiveness is a phenomenon linked to each historical moment; (2) in my network of relationships, I experience the value of social diversity; and (3) social inclusiveness is a value to be taken care of because of its own fragility.

The analysis has made it possible to identify three discursive positions and to establish this taxonomy:

- Group 1—The Blind Spot, where the person perceives him/herself as inclusive by the mere fact of belonging to contemporary society: “We live in a diverse society, and everyone has their own value and contribution to society. In recent years, we have witnessed a movement toward a more inclusive society, where we seek to remove barriers and discrimination that exist against certain groups of people” (Male, 24 years old).
- Group 2—The Courageous Response, where the person is mobilized in the face of excluding gestures, provoking shame in those who emit them. These individuals maintain, more than in the rest of the profiles, an emotional link with social inclusiveness, understanding that it is an indisputable social value that must be cared for and reinforced: “As a person from another country, at first you think it’s different and that no one will want to join me. However, as the years have gone by, I can say that I have learned a pleasant lesson...I can affirm that my social environment is inclusive” (Male, 28 years old).
- Group 3—Reflection Transforms, where the person forges his or her own tolerance, day by day, responding to the automatic gestures that he or she recognizes in him or herself as triggers of exclusion: “The other day at work I felt I was not very tolerant toward a group of lodgers. It was about 10 o’clock at night, I was tired and felt like going out...Suddenly, a group of about thirty Asians arrived all at once...What should have been a normal check-in turned into a very tense situation...After the service I felt bad for the way I treated them” (Female, 26 years old).

This taxonomy allows a better analysis of the impact of the visit. The results presented below have been classified according to the variables of the study—the experience of the museum visit: the message received, the emotions felt, and the transformation it caused them.

The Perceived Message

Next, opinions about the message, the information conveyed to them by the visit are collected. While the emotion arises involuntarily, the message needs cognitive processing by the receiver. This is because the stimulus received first passes through the hypothalamus and amygdala (emotions) and only then reaches the prefrontal area for cognitive processing. The stimulus triggers the sensation and the emotion in a matter of milliseconds (Castellanos 2022).

When asked what is the main message that the activity conveyed to you about racism, the most repeated message among those who participated in the museum activity is centered on the following statement: “The activity tells the history of racism, its origins and evolution, helps to understand current racism, and takes responsibility for solving it. There is a centuries-old recognition of social exclusion based on gender, race, skin color, etc.” (Male, 23 years old).

More concretely, however, each of the three typologies incorporates nuances to this message. For Group 1, people in the “blind spot,” the museum has allowed us to look at the past in such a way that we can now and in the future avoid racism; to recognize that racism is part of history and that its eradication is absolutely necessary. It is a social commitment. “I think the main message of the activity has been to look at the past to transform the future” (Female, 18 years old).

For individuals in group 2, “courageous response,” the visit has meant understanding and knowing history so as not to repeat it. Current behaviors are forged on a racist basis. In general terms, human beings tend to think that what is their own is superior and that what is different, therefore, does not have the same value. The activity serves to assume that there is much work to be done, and that ideology is a burden.

The main message I have perceived would be: understand and know history in order not to repeat it. I think it reflects very well why we went to the Museum of America...I think the message we have to take with us is not guilt, it is responsibility, to understand what the dynamics have been in order not to repeat it. (Male, 18 years old)

Finally, people in group 3, in “reflection transforms” receive a message about how human beings, throughout history, fear those who are different, and feel superior in many cases. “Fear of what is different is an acquired animal feeling. Fearing a different human being and therefore, if you are in a situation of superiority is something that accompanies us throughout our history” (Male, 27 years old).

Secondly, they were asked the question “To what extent does the message connect with the way you relate to racialized people?” The young people in group 1, “blind spot,” state that it helps them to look beyond differences, seeing and respecting the human being. On the other hand, it connects them with their own instinctive dynamics, based on prejudices, and helps them to become aware of them so that they disappear. “I try day by day to make this message present in my reality, but sometimes I fall into stereotypes and these same dynamics that I judge. But little by little I try, and I believe that as a society we try to make them disappear” (Female, 18 years old).

The young people in group 2, “courageous response” acknowledge that the message they received from the visit was that it connects them to the idea behind how humans cling to a sense of superiority of their own in the face of the lesser value brought by someone who is clearly different. Finally, they receive a message about the complexity of the issue and become aware that exclusion is deeply internalized in society. “That message connects with my reality because I realize how complex is the racist system in which we live...and above all, discriminating because it has always been discriminated against, and it is already internalized in our society” (Male, 18 years old).

The last group, “reality transforms,” recognizes that the museum has connected them with a reality that, despite having evolved, persists in our society. “Yes, it is a message that connects

with my reality,...I would like these visits and these reviews of history to be given to young children, so that they can see other realities and the events of the past, and how they are reflected today” (Female, 18 years). For others, the message does not impact everyone equally, as lack of knowledge of history, coupled with stereotypes, lead to the development of racist attitudes.

Emotions Felt

The activity at the museum aroused great interest among the young participants, who expressed their desire to return to the museum calmly and thoroughly in order to deepen and share their reflections with others.

After my visit to the museum, I left with a bit of a bittersweet feeling. I was happy to have seen the museum, which I had never been there before, and a little sad to have seen it so quickly. It is true that it served me as an appetizer, and I will certainly return to see it more calmly and thoroughly. (Male, 28 years old)

The participants who make up profile 1 called “blind spot” summarize the activity as an experience that “generates the desire to know more, to come back, to debate.” The museum activity awakens in this profile the curiosity to learn more about racism: “My feeling with the museum has been very good. I felt interested to learn more and I want to come back another day to see the works in more detail” (Female, 18 years old).

The visit to the museum is an activity that, while raising relevant questions and reflections in this profile, also provokes a critical look at the unique historical moment. Those who participate in this activity recognize that it is framed in a very attractive space with a unique and singular narrative (guide-communicator), allowing the experience to be open to reflection and a critical spirit. On the other hand, exposure to the museum’s works of art amplifies the value of the narrative, being in themselves thought-provoking: “The exhibition does not judge; it simply exposes certain ideas for you to debate and think about” (Female, 18 years old). “I found it very interesting the way of expressing history through art and especially this reality that is so historically overshadowed” (Female, 18 years old).

Those who make up profile 2, which we call “courageous response,” emotionally synthesize the experience with these types of expressions: “It stirred my guts,” “fascination,” “interest,” “broadening of perspectives,” “remorse.” These are young people who experience intense emotions through the museum activity. Let us recall that in this profile they are particularly sensitive to intolerant gestures, being more active in reacting to social exclusion. Those who conform this profile empathize strongly with the story given in the museum activity by the guide-communicator, since it makes them experience a gradient of emotions, from anger to fascination, which will offer the young person the opportunity to open up to new perspectives, far from making judgments and provoking new questions.

To put words to the sensations and emotions that the experience has generated in me, I would say: Interest, broadening of perspective and remorse. Interesting for the amount

of similarities that unite us and to see how marked we are by the context. Interesting to see how religion is so determinant in making differences. (Male, 28 years old)

This museum activity stirs the concerns of this profile by generating questions that enter fully into the origin, causes, and consequences of the racial situation in the conquest of America. These concerns and emotional experiences extend beyond their historical context and prompt reflection on the phenomenon in the present.

Unlike the previous profile, these young people, when looking at a singular historical time, project learning and knowledge from what they have already experienced to their contemporary time and react emotionally with certain embarrassment in some moments of the journey given their extreme sensitivity to gestures of exclusion. “I would like someday to know the reason or origin of the ethnic segregation so marked, even having equal treatment, through labels according to complexion or distinctive social statuses that has been weighing for centuries, as we could verify” (Female, 26 years old).

On the other hand, those who participated in this activity, especially valued the selected works on which the narrative was articulated, being positively evaluated in their potential to “impact emotionally” and “make people reflect.” “The guide told it with so much enthusiasm that it is impossible not to want to follow his narration on the subject...I have also been struck by the caste paintings, like the one in the photo, on a documentary level” (Female, 26 years old).

Those who make up attitudinal profile 3, which we call “reflection transforms,” synthesize the activity from values such as: “Gratitude,” “intrigue,” “curiosity.” This profile—which especially values reflection as an antidote to the automated, reactive, discriminatory gestures that assail everyone when they show misgivings and/or fears of those who are different—is going to live a tailor-made experience with the museum activity. The experience allows to approach a current issue in an objective and respectful way, helping to “learn not to repeat mistakes” through art and history.

Honestly, I really enjoyed the experience. I think being able to look back at such a hot topic today in an “objective” way through art has given me a sense of gratitude. In my case, I make a big effort not to judge history. What has been was, and one cannot opine/judge/judge it from our point of view of the present. We must study it objectively, respect it, and learn from it in order not to repeat mistakes. I would have liked to spend more time (Male, 27 years old)

The museum activity is seen as an opportunity for reflection, assisting the evolution of the different contexts in which racialized people develop. “The activity has drawn my attention to aspects I was totally unaware of, awakening my desire to learn more about the evolution of the different contexts, not only social, but also political or economic in which racialized people developed” (Male, 22 years old).



Figure 5: Don Francisco de Arobe and His Sons, Caciques of Esmeraldas, Andrés Sánchez Gallque, 1599, Museum of America in Madrid, Spain
Source: Ministry of Culture of Spain

Figure 5 was selected because it shows indigenous rulers dressed in Spanish clothing of the period as an example of power.

Transformation Experienced

Finally, a reflection on the capacity of this museum activity to transform non-inclusive attitudes and on which profile of person could have a greater impact—that is, to what extent this type of activity can influence/move more.

For this purpose, a tool of the digital community, the forum, is used, which facilitates the debate to develop a discourse that brings together the different attitudinal positions. Finally, a consensus is generated on the transforming power of the activity: change is possible—it can transform—but especially among those people who are sensitized to inclusion. The museum can change attitudes if the person wants to change them beforehand.

The visit to the museum has raised awareness of some exclusionary daily gestures when there is a previous predisposition in the person.

I believe that the museum visit can help to diminish small discriminatory attitudes, “micro-racism.” I think, by and large, most of the people present at the museum and most people in society are fortunately not textbook racists who make their hatred of certain races explicit (by physical and verbal violence). I think many of the people there had prior education on issues of racism, and that’s why the museum activity worked. (Male, 18 years old. Profile Group 2 Brave Response)

For others, the museum visit is an activity that can bring about change and is likely to lead to serious and deep reflection on previous thoughts that the person may have had prior to the museum visit. “I think the museum activity can help reduce a little bit small issues in racism, but not to promote bigger movements” (Female, 19 years old. Profile blind spot).

On the other hand, there is no consensus on the influence of the predisposition prior to the visit. The activity has greater transforming potential in young people, adolescents and possibly in children, since these are groups that are in the process of building their critical thinking.

I believe that the activity of the museum, or activities similar to this one, can have a significant impact on the way of understanding issues such as racism...On the other hand, I think that the individuals on whom it can have a greater impact are young people, since they are the ones who are building their thinking, their critical. (Male, 22 years old. Profile Group 3, "Reflection transforms")

On the other hand, the participants in the activity also expressed what, in their opinion, are the barriers/limitations of this museum activity in bringing about changes in people's attitudes. The first difficulty is in the individual himself, if he places a barrier to connect the history of the conquest with everyday realities. In this sense, a "racist past and a racist present" are not always easy to link. "Yes, I totally agree, especially with the fact that it is very likely that there are people who do not relate historical situations with the current situation, who do not associate that racist past with the racist present" (Male, 18 years old. Profile Group 2 "brave answer").

Among less-sensitized groups, although art can be a transformative element, it would be interesting to make use of more radical resources.

I believe that art has a transforming capacity, but we cannot forget that the world evolves (or devolves) and we are less and less sensitive to certain stimuli. The power of the image is effective, but perhaps in the case of painting, architecture, or photography it doesn't work so much in times of immediacy and effectiveness. Perhaps it would be interesting to make use of more radical resources to better reach today's sensibilities. (Male, 28 years old. Profile brave answer)



Figure 6: Group Visit to Museo de América

Discussion and Conclusion

Once this research has been completed, relevant conclusions can be drawn regarding the role that museums can play in social communication through awareness campaigns. A discussion is also presented regarding its effectiveness, comparing previous research with the results obtained. The main objective is to analyze the impact of the museum experience for the purpose of raising awareness about racism among young audiences, and secondly, check whether there is a boomerang effect.

The conclusions have been drawn based on the type of impact caused by the visit, which is the main objective of the study. The impact—as explained in the methodology—has been considered intellectual due to the perceived message (cognitive), emotional, and finally behavioral, due to the transformation it causes and which may precede behavior (Moya 2000; Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2000; Castellanos 2022; Hochschild 2002).

Regarding the impact of the visit and its influence on racism awareness, the main conclusion is that it has been effective for this sample, as all participants have expressed a transformation in their opinion and attitude, either rationally or emotionally (Hochschild 2002); this idea coincides with previous research (Falk and Dierking 2011; Dewhurst and Hendrick 2017). In no case it has caused a boomerang effect (García Castro et al. 2025). Therefore, including visits to museums as part of communication awareness campaigns has proven to be an effective practice.

Other contributions refer to more specific aspects of the visit. The second conclusion refers to the power of emotions (Hochschild 2002) and how they have been the trigger for reflection: Emotions have a greater impact than receiving a message or information, which is a more cognitive process (Castellanos 2022). All the participants value the visit positively as a tool for raising awareness, where the museum-institution acts as a legitimizer of information (Brulon 2020; Washington and Hindley 2017). The visit provokes positive emotions in all of them that lead them to a more elaborate and reflective thinking, ranging from a critical and questioning look to feelings of responsibility toward what happened and gratitude for the learning that can change today's society. If the boomerang effect had occurred, this would not have happened, since, according to Ecker (2022), a message that threatens your identity is rejected. Research such as that by Dewhurst and Hendrick (2017) on museums and awareness or Olivares and Piatak (2022) on new participation strategies is reinforced.

Within this idea, different emotions can be identified after the visit. The greater the prior awareness, the greater the emotion and therefore the greater the impact. Thus, among the less aware attendees, those who consider themselves inclusive because they live in an inclusive society (group 1), the visit awakens curiosity and stirs latent thoughts and interest in knowing and understanding the past, which leads to reflection and a critical look at the unique historical moment. These expressions are similar to the Empathetic Museum by Jennings et al. (2019), which manages to awaken the public and connect by sharing common problems in society, such as racism in this case.

The public more sensitive to racism (group 2) willing to take an individual position on the situation, experience the visit with greater emotional intensity, after making a deeper and more contrasted reflection, seeking the reason for the events, which transcend the historical content, transferring the reflection on the phenomenon also to the contemporary moment. In this group, the work of the guide is more relevant, and there is a greater connection with the selected works on which the narrative was articulated, being positively evaluated in their potential to “impact emotionally” and “make people reflect.” This group’s position coincides with proposals for thematic exhibitions (Olivares and Piatak 2022; Levenson 2014), collection reviews (Washington and Hindley 2017) or spaces for dialogue (Arao and Clemens 2013). This group demands greater participation and proactivity from the museum.

For the most conscientious group (group 3), the museum activity provokes a very positive emotion, close to gratitude, because the visit leads to reflection as an antidote to the automated, reactive discriminatory gestures that all people experience when they are apprehensive and/or fearful of those who are different. The museum activity is a tailor-made experience, since they are places where ideas, knowledge, concepts, and situations are questioned and debated, so that they can be heard, known, understood, confronted, valued, and vindicated (Hervás 2010). This experience can be related to the dialogue that some authors (Mensah 2025; Brulon 2020; Arao and Clemens 2013) propose as part of the contemporary museum, connected with society.

The third conclusion is about the message received: History as a demonstrative argument, supported by the power of authority that the institution has (Da Silva 2023) and which triggers an intellectual process from the call for attention to reflection. During the visit, an objective message is perceived, supported by history through the objects and the guide, which helps to understand the current situation and to assume, by being aware of it, “the responsibility to solve it.” History serves as a lever to assume responsibility for the present. As mentioned before, although the emotion arises involuntarily, the message needs cognitive processing by the receiver (Castellanos 2022). The message is received as a story, with all its narrative power, as it helps to understand the circumstances and events, as well as their effect on the past society and their arrival in the present (Mensah 2025; Brulon 2020). The visit reaches in some profiles (group 2) to provoke a feeling of responsibility or guilt, while group 3 (the most conscious) goes a step further, looking for the reasons, the motives, that lead them to the feeling of survival and superiority of the groups.

The fourth conclusion is the transformation caused by this visit: the museum has the capacity to raise awareness, but to a different extent depending on the previous predisposition of the visitor (Hochschild 2002), but in all cases, it has made it possible to identify micro-racism and has a greater transforming capacity in children and young people, who are forming their critical thinking. In those cases where there is a certain predisposition, the visit promotes a serious and deep reflection on the previous thoughts that the person may have had before visiting the museum (Zhou 2016).

In summary, the impact of visits from different museological, pedagogical, and didactic perspectives (Mensah 2025; Murawski 2021; Brulon 2020), and even their communicative power, is well known. This study brings a new perspective by presenting the visit as a persuasive communication strategy to raise awareness and sensitize, just as advertising does. To this end, it delves into the process of the visit, as an act of communication, and how each of its elements has an impact on the individual: the message, the emotions, and the transformation it provokes. Falk and Dierking (2011) already show the threefold dimension of the visitor experience in their model.

To conclude, we are facing a visit prepared and designed with this intention and objective: to raise awareness of racist behavior today, and for this purpose, works and a specific narrative have been selected, as is done in advertising. What elements have influenced effectiveness?

- The museum visit with a strategic communication approach: joint work between mediators, curators, and communicators is recommended in order to design visits with this communication perspective.
- Perceived objectivity in the objects and in the institution: enhance the legitimacy of the institution.
- The strategic narrative of the visit, including the guide's speech: it should be linked to the communication strategy.
- The building and its environment are conducive to discussion and reflection: this aspect should be included in the communication strategy, that is, in the visit.
- History as a rational argument that leads to reflection: useful for making an impact with rational messages.
- The emotion provoked by the experience as a trigger for change: promoted through the visit.

Therefore, the museum offers a reality that complements the message of an advertising campaign in relation to their current role in society (Murawski 2021), counteracting the boomerang effect that sometimes occurs in campaigns that boost for a change of behavior (Little and Doerr-Stevens 2023; Zhao and Fink 2021). Therefore, it can be said that adding visits to museums as part of awareness campaigns is an interesting proposal to take into account in initiatives to raise awareness and sensitize. No rejection of this activity has been found, nor have any previous studies been found that show rejection of this type of initiative.

The limitation of this study lies in the fact that it is experimental, with a small sample that is not representative of the universe under study. Furthermore, the subject matter is sensitive, and those involved may modify their responses for social reasons. To reduce this bias and encourage participants to express themselves freely, we turned to the digital community.

This work opens doors to future studies with multidisciplinary approaches due to its holistic perspective: the museum-institution as a transmitter, the collection as a message, and the museographic language as a code, with expected effects on public awareness.

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The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript. The authors confirm that they are the sole authors of this article and take full responsibility for the content therein, as outlined in COPE recommendations.

Informed Consent

This study was conducted with the informed consent of all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Juan Enrique González-Vallés: Tenured Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Media & Communication Science, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
Corresponding Author's Email: jegonzalvez@ucm.es

Ana Pedreño Santos: Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
Email: apedreno@ucm.es

Sonia Carcelén-García: Tenured Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Media & Communication Science, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
Email: slcarcelen@ccinf.ucm.es

Mónica Viñarás-Abad: Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Media & Communication Science, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
Email: mvinaras@ucm.es