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UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC HERITAGE ARCHIVE USERS AND CURATORS

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Abstract

Public archives that are involved with heritage are not solely sites of collection. They can also be emotional spaces and places for users and curators. Knowing and considering emotional relations in public archive context lays the groundwork in enhancing accessibility, generating stronger connections, and encourages consideration of more inclusive practice in and with archives. The research presented in this paper, draws in angles of user and curatorial cognition and emotion, through the methods of interviews, observations and emotional mapping. It presents findings of networks of emotional resonance, emotional labor, as well as, responses triggered by memory along with diverse user groups and curatorial roles, as well as the impact of culture or even identity, personal relevance, or digital relations. The study demonstrates that beyond curation and engagement with archival heritage, emotional experiences are active and subject to contextual negotiation, and are relevant to archival satisfaction, interpretive behavior and trust concerning institutional / archival narratives. The work thus advances emotions as a framework for emotional affordances in archives, providing opportunities for ideation for design of empathic (inter)faces (e.g. for co-curation and research) and training (for curators). By contributing to both archival theory and user experience research, I advocate for archives that are emotionally aware of inclusive, ethical and participatory heritage.

Keywords: Emotional engagement, public heritage archives, archival users, curators, affective resonance, memory and identity, user experience, emotional labor, archival empathy, participatory heritage

INTRODUCTION

Emotional engagement within the scope of public heritage archives encompasses the spectrum of affective experiences individuals may experience when engaging with archival content, physical locations, and curatorial meaning. Such experiences may include feeling nostalgia, reverence, sadness, pride, or potentially discomfort and dissonance. Emotional engagement is about more than the cognitive competence of extracting information, it conveys personal cultural and/or psychological resonance[5]. Often this is ignited by materials relevant to one's ancestry, community identity, or shared historical trauma. The interaction medium - traditional archival reading room or digital repository respectively - then adds to the levels of emotional intensity and the character of the emotional response. Aspects of cultural background, social positioning, and prior knowledge will shape how one emotionally interprets what is seen - to include there are aspects that are preserved, presented, or omitted. In so-called emotionally charged spaces the 'silence' of the omitted can invoke an experience as intense as those invoked by the documented file.

The value of emotional engagement in heritage archives encompasses user experience, cultural representation, and curatorial duty[1]. For users, emotional engagement turns data retrieval from a passive action to an experience that is alive and meaningful. This may prompt users to ask additional questions, advocate for the preservation of materials, or make contributions of their own (like storytelling or annotating). Emotional engagement can also help archives to be more inclusive—by drawing attention to marginalized voices and alternative histories[14]. For curators, the challenges and opportunities emotional engagement offers must be balanced[2]. By engaging with archives that contain sensitive materials, curators must take care not only to be ethically conscientious, but also to moderate their own emotional engagement; this is a kind of emotional labor that remains largely unaddressed

as part of institutional policy. If archives can weave emotional engagement into their design and outreach programs, and make the experience of engaging in archives more emotional, then archives can be transformed into places for meaningful collaboration of cultural dialogue, healing, and remembering[4].

This research looks at emotional engagement in public heritage archives to assess emotional engagement from two perspectives: archive users and curators[3]. The project is set up around three main outcomes. The first explores the emotional responses we see and how many different responses may be experienced when coming into contact with archives, especially those shaped by personal memory, identity, or surprise and tackling contested histories[7]. Second, the study will then consider what contextual factors can enact and moderate the emotional connection: whether the digital interface of the archive, metadata structure, layout of the physical space, or curatorial language invites different forms of engagement[10]. Third, this research considers the emotional labor of curatorship: how to curate already emotionally charged content, how to be empathetic to users, always keep a level of professional neutrality. This research utilizes qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and emotion-mapping tools, to achieve a holistic picture of emotional engagement in archival space. The aim of this research is to help inform emotional-responsive design for public heritage archives; staff training; and inclusion of institutional practices.

II. Emotional Engagement in Archival Contexts

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Emotional Engagement in Archival Settings

Archives have been approached from emotional engagement via grounding themselves in theories of affect, archival studies, and cultural heritage studies. Affect theorists (e.g. Tomkins, Ahmed) argue that emotion is experienced as pre-cognitive, embodied reaction to space or object. This is helpful to consider when reflecting on how archival content produces memory and identity. Archival theorists (e.g. Harris, Gilliland) have proposed their own forms of understanding how archives create emotional spaces, potentially linked to trauma, memory, and power. Ideas like "archival affect," and "archival empathy," have provided additional explanation for how emotional responses can be mediated through curatorial choices, guiding institutional narratives, and user experiences to content in both the physical and digital world.

2.2 Previous Studies on Emotional Engagement in Public Heritage Archives

Studies show that many archives are encounters that also evoke strong feelings. The strongest feelings appear to be generated when people encounter archival material that relates to their own experience or their community history[15]. Community archives are critical in validating marginalized identities and evoking emotionally significant experiences. The potential for shared emotional connection due to the emotional labor of archival empathy between archivists and users has been documented. Some design elements such as interface design, narrative, and organization, and presentation also seem to influence the emotional involved in digitally engaging with archives. The idea of emotional engagement has rarely been compared between users and curators of archives - especially in the case of users' and curators' emotional engagement of materials in a public heritage archive.

2.3 Factors Influencing Emotional Engagement Among Users and Curators

Emotion engagement is impacted by factors like personal meaning, cultural context, sensory design, and emotional readiness. Users often resonate with collections with identity or heritage ties. Curators develop emotional connections to sensitive collections, but must also learn emotional control, which is based in empathy and can be thought of as a kind of emotional labour. Institutions can provide support, and digital design can influence this, but as we continue to recognize the importance of all of these factors, we will be able to develop some important inclusive and ethically responsible archival models of practice.

III. Investigative Approach to Mapping Affective Interactions

3.1 Research Design and Approach

The study uses a qualitative, exploratory research design, with an interpretivist methodology to explore emotional engagement in public heritage archive contexts. The complexity and subjective nature of emotional experiences means this approach would be suitable as numbers and quantitative measures alone would not do justice to one aspect of emotion. The research is based on principles of ethnography in that it involves immersion in an archival space and a consideration of the social dynamics of users, curators, and collections. Ultimately, the study's goal is to uncover the affective dimensions of engaging with archives, by examining how different participants' verbal, behavioral, and emotional expressions would shape their interactions with object-based heritage. The design has drawn on a range of methods to examine this including semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, and emotion-mapping activities all with the intention of building a rich, triangulated view of how emotions are experienced and expressed in archival spaces. This multi-method approach provides the depth and flexibility to capture the affective levels of engagement since traditional approaches to surveying can often not account for the nuanced emotional dynamics.

3.2 Sampling Methods and Participant Selection Criteria

The participant pool was purposively sampled to include a balance of public archive users and professional curators. The sampling approach, purposive sampling, was designed to capture variability across age, cultural background, professional affiliation, and past archival engagements. For users, potential participants were

engaged through public announcements at three urban community heritage archive centers, and through social media and research group outreach to many more community heritage groups. User participants were included if they engaged with the archive, in person or virtually, on at least one occasion within the past year. For curators, potential participants were engaged based on a current role managing collection, public programming, or user engagement. Deliberate placement of curators who managed emotionally sensitive collections (e.g., conflict records, oral histories, minority collections) was made to make sure emotional labour and archival empathy was present in the study[8]. A total of 24 participants were interviewed—14 as users and 10 as curators—which enabled an examination of affective experiences of users-comparatively to curators-in the specific contexts of community archival usage and management[11] [13].

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Emotionally Inclusive Archival Engagement
Figure 1 represents a layered schema that outlines the ways in which emotional engagement in public heritage archives is constructed and mediated. The model contains input, process, output, and outcome levels. Emotional engagement at the input level comes from two primary sources: User Factors - including identity, memory, and personal affective trigger experiences - and Curator Factors - including emotional labour and decision-making responsibilities based on ethics - which together interact on the Archival Interface (which includes the physical environment, digital tools, and curatorial narrative structure, including all factors that create user experience)[6]. Out of this Archival Interface, a personalized Emotional Engagement Experience is created by the way in which users and curators encounter emotions, such as empathy, discomfort, contemplation, and connection. The experience and engagement result in the forms of Institutional Outcomes and Strategies such as creating inclusive policy, developing empathetic service, or offering staff emotional literacy training. The model recognizes emotional engagement as a cyclical, integrative understanding of emotional undertones of archival practice and the reality of systemic ability to respond to emotional experiences and dynamics.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Techniques
The data collection involved three phases which overlapped in time. The first involved semi-structured interviews where participants were asked to describe particular moments of emotional intensity as they engaged with the

archival material, which were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis[12]. The second phase involved observational fieldwork in reading rooms and digital exhibit spaces that allowed the researcher to explore the non-verbal aspects of emotions such as facial expressions, changing postures, and interactional patterns through field notes that were later coded as emotional, contextual, or environmental. In phase three, participants were able to employ an emotion-mapping tool that allowed them to mark up the archival interface or physical exhibit with affective labels (e.g., "joy," "tension," "confusion") according to where they felt these emotions. Overall, all data sets were analyzed using hybrid thematic coding techniques, drawing on pre-existing emotional engagement categories, and inductive coding concepts. NVivo was also incorporated in a few different ways for coding reliability, inter-coder reliability, and case-to-case synthesis as well. This integrated approach created a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of emotional engagement and its contextual situatedness in archival environments in phase three of this project.

IV. Emotional Resonance in Archival Experiences

4.1 Levels of Emotional Engagement Among Public Heritage Archive Users and Curators

The research showed a range of feelings from light engagement to a deep emotional connection among users and curators. Users frequently responded with emotion when they came across materials that were personal to them or held cultural significance to them. They described this as a "journey of reconnection" because negative emotions—nostalgia, pride, grief—were connected to items such as photographs or letters. Other users, like casual users noted curiosity but weren't overtly involved or engaged, feelings of pleasant curiosity but without forming a deep emotional connection. The curators were also continuously engaged and emotionally responsible, and their experiences often included records of trauma or social injustices. They had to balance empathetic closeness to the records and people they worked with, and utilizing professional distance; the curators responded that curating under emotional responsibility is taxing for them personally (e.g., curating a museum exhibition) especially when managing visitors who were emotionally affected by content they viewed. While it was drawn that level of emotional engagement was dictated by role, situational context, and relational dynamics were also factors for both users and curators.

4.2 Factors Contributing to Emotional Engagement in Archival Experiences

Important element of emotional engagement included personal connection, cultural relevance, and sensory design. For example, an object that had a connection to a community and/or family history created more emotion compared to an institutional document. Sensory aspects such as lighting, touchable objects, and contextual labels all increased and/or decreased emotional engagement. In addition, having interactive features, such as timelines or stories contributed by users, helped to create contexts that anchored their emotional experience and helped them situate materials into a larger narrative. With regards to curatorship, emotional engagement was related to sensitive collections, institutional values, and users. Curators managed their emotional labour though team discussions and reflective practice. Both users and curators reported that digital archives, particularly then they are embedded with immersive features, increased emotional accessibility and made content feel immediate and personal.

4.3 Differences in Emotional Engagement Between Users and Curators

Although users and curators both had emotional responses, their emotional sensations were experienced differently in their nature, intensity, and duration. Users experienced emotional responses episodically—once again, highly dependent on the specificity of the materials users encountered and the situational context of the visit. Users' emotions were often short-lived but meaningful, and were commonly the precursor to developing a deep-seated curiosity towards archival diving or involvement in the community. Users expressed emotions that were spontaneous, deeply personal, and even unanticipated. On the other hand, curators' engagement with emotional content was a longer-term, cumulative process, and very different because their emotional responses were part of a professional identity. Curators had a different approach because their emotions reflected more upon the social archive, were anticipatory, and mediated by ethical considerations. Curators also tended to become emotionally fatigued and develop strategies to cope with repeated affective exposure. This complicates the emotional engagement experience, and more-so the asymmetrical emotional engagement shows two dimensions to emotional engagement when engaged in archival work: user centred, emotion as outcome, and curatorial, emotion as responsibility. Each experience requires context specific supports, methods of care, and emotional empathy strategies.

V. Toward Emotionally Inclusive Archival Practices

5.1 Implications of the Findings for Public Heritage Archive Management

This study further identifies how emotional engagement relates to user engagement with public heritage archives. Emotional engagement also influences people's connections to heritage content, and should inform service design, exhibit planning, and access policies in the future. Public heritage archives need to begin to move away from preservation-based project management and adopt user-centered collaborative processes. Furthermore, curatorial emotional labor requires similar institutional support in a practical way, even if, for instance, those support systems exist as personal wellness references or ethical practice guidelines. Encouraging emotional awareness, as we have

suggested, could promote better inclusivity, build community trust, or better represent the histories of people who are frequently ignored or left out.

5.2 Recommendations for Enhancing Emotional Engagement Among Users and Curators

In order to cultivate emotional engagement, archives need to create emotion-sensitive designs that facilitate reflection and connection - both in physical and digital environments, a few options are: emotional tagging or a collection that each visitor can curate for themselves. Furthermore, the training of curators should include some emotional intelligence and trauma-informed training. Co-curation can also enable users and provide more diversity to narratives. Emotional mapping tools and feedback loops will enable archives to observe users' responses and improve accessibility. Together, these approaches will cultivate a more empathetic and responsive archival environment.

5.3 Future Research Directions in Understanding Emotional Engagement in Archival Settings

Future research should look at how emotional engagement varies across archival types to understand the differences in people's affective responses. Longitudinal studies may also examine how emotions change over time as people continue to use the archives. Interdisciplinary approaches with affective computing and psychology can inform the development of emotion-aware tools for archiving while also addressing important ethical considerations. AI tools offer possibilities for tracking and monitoring affect but must continue to prioritize privacy. Comparative research across cultures may also provide insights into emotional norms, expectations, and inter-enaction in relation to archival use on a larger scale and impact the global, sensitive practices we establish.

CONCLUSION

This thesis presents emotional engagement as an essential but publicly invisible aspect of archival interaction; it traces the experiences of public archive users and the archivists who support their access to these items. By recognizing that emotional responses are influenced through personal experience, cultural identity, curatorial framing, and the affordances of the space in which the interaction takes place, the study demonstrates that while users often deal with a sudden and fleeting emotions tied to discovery and memory, the archivists are contending with processing ongoing emotional labour, not commonly recognized in practice. Emotional engagement for both archivists and users emerges from complex interrelations between material, digital, and institutional contexts. Therefore, with the identification of emotional engagement as at the heart of archival work allows us to take archives from passive, and storage spaces to be active, ethical and community engaged. While for users, emotional connection encourages storytelling, reflection, and advocacy for local and shared heritage, for archivists, it is equally important to recognize their emotional labour for personal well-being, and meaningful engagement with community. Overall, this thesis argues for a shift in archival practice to prioritise empathy, inclusivity, and responsiveness through policy, design, and training. As archives grapple with the changing practices and expectations in a digital world, archivists will need creative future-thinking to determine health and sustainability maintaining a practice that is increasingly informed by technology but is also cognizant of emotions, needs, and social values creating an even more human, participatory archival experience.

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