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Museums and Social Cohesion: An Integrative Review of Concepts, Evidence and Measurement

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ABSTRACT: Museums across the world increasingly justify their public funding through claims to social benefit, and social cohesion has become one of the most frequently invoked of those benefits. This article reviews the international research literature on museums and social cohesion in order to establish what the literature claims, through what mechanisms museums are held to build cohesion, and how strong the supporting evidence is. An integrative review of scholarship published between 1990 and 2024 identifies four thematic strands: representation and recognition, in which museums include marginalised groups in public narratives; participation and social capital, in which museum programmes build networks and trust; health and wellbeing, in which museum-based interventions reduce social isolation; and policy frameworks, in which international instruments formalise the museum's social role. The article contends that the literature demonstrates consistent small-scale effects while leaving the central claim undertested, because social cohesion is defined at the level of societies yet measured at the level of programmes and individuals. This mismatch of scale, rather than any absence of effect, constitutes the principal gap in the field. The review closes with an agenda for research that is longitudinal, comparative and geographically broader than the United Kingdom, North America and Western Europe, where the existing evidence is concentrated.

KEYWORDS: museums, social cohesion, social inclusion, social capital, cultural participation, wellbeing, museum studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern museum has always carried a social mandate alongside its curatorial one. Bennett (1995) traces the nineteenth-century museum's origins to an explicitly civic project, in which public collections were to form citizens as much as to display objects. What has changed in the past three decades is the directness with which that mandate is stated and funded. The International Council of Museums revised its definition of the museum in 2022 to include accessibility, inclusiveness, diversity, sustainability and community participation among the institution's defining properties (ICOM, 2022). UNESCO (2015) recommends that member states recognise and support the social role of museums, and the OECD and ICOM (2019) jointly advise local governments to treat museums as instruments of local development. Across these instruments, one claimed benefit recurs with particular frequency: that museums contribute to social cohesion.

The scale of the institution gives the question its weight. UNESCO (2021) estimates that some 104,000 museums operate worldwide, and the figure has grown fastest outside the regions where museums originated, as states across Asia, Africa and Latin America build national sectors within a generation. The museum is now a global institutional form, present in societies with widely differing associational traditions, levels of diversity and relationships between culture and the state. A claim about what museums do to the societies around them is therefore no longer a claim about a European inheritance; it is a claim about one of the most widespread public institutions in the world, and it deserves to be examined with corresponding care.

The claim matters because resources follow it. Governments, foundations and international bodies fund museum programmes on the premise that cultural participation binds societies together, and museums report against that premise in their advocacy. Yet the claim is rarely examined as a whole. Individual studies evaluate individual programmes; critical scholars question the instrumental turn in cultural policy; and policy documents assert the connection without pausing over the evidence. What the field lacks is a synthesis that asks the simple question directly.

This article therefore asks: what does the international research literature claim about the contribution of museums to social cohesion, through what mechanisms is the contribution held to operate, and what is the quality of the supporting evidence? Social cohesion is defined here, following Chan, To and Chan (2006), as the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of a society, characterised by trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help. The museum is defined per the current ICOM (2022) definition. The article contends, on the basis of the review, that the literature establishes consistent programme-level effects but leaves the societal-level claim undertested, because the concept and its measurement operate at different scales. Naming that mismatch precisely, and proposing a research agenda that addresses it, is the article's contribution.

The article proceeds in four parts. Section 2 establishes the conceptual background, reviewing how social cohesion has been defined, how museum studies arrived at its social turn, and how a critical strand has contested the enterprise. Section 3 describes the review method. Section 4 presents

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the four thematic strands into which the literature resolves, with their characteristic claims, mechanisms and evidence. Section 5 discusses what the strands jointly establish, where they fail to meet, and what research would close the gap between them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social cohesion as a concept

Social cohesion entered social science as a property of groups and societies rather than of individuals. Chan, To and Chan (2006) survey the concept's inflation in policy discourse and propose a deliberately minimal definition: cohesion consists in trust, belonging and cooperative behaviour, expressed both horizontally among citizens and vertically between citizens and institutions. The adjacent concept of social capital supplies the mechanism most often borrowed by cultural research: Putnam (2000) distinguishes bonding capital, which tightens ties within groups, from bridging capital, which builds ties across them, and argues that the decline of associational participation erodes both. Cultural institutions enter this framework as venues of association. Jeannotte (2003) makes the connection explicit for cultural policy, arguing that cultural participation generates the shared references and networks on which sustainable communities depend.

A second mechanism arrives from social psychology. Allport (1954) established the conditions under which contact between groups reduces prejudice: equal status within the encounter, common goals, cooperation and institutional support. Museums are routinely claimed as contact settings of exactly this kind, neutral ground on which strangers encounter one another and one another's histories under institutional sanction. The claim is theoretically plausible and empirically demanding: contact theory's conditions are specific, and a shared building does not by itself produce cooperative, equal-status encounter. The distinction between bonding and bridging capital does similar analytical work: a programme that deepens ties within an existing community builds bonding capital, while the cohesion claim, strictly read, requires bridging across groups that would not otherwise meet (Putnam, 2000). Much of the empirical literature does not record which of the two it has observed.

2.2 The museum's social turn

Museum studies arrived at the social question by its own route. The "new museology" of the late 1980s redirected attention from collections to publics and purposes (Vergo, 1989). Sandell (1998) gave the agenda its programmatic form, arguing that museums can act as agents of social inclusion at individual, community and societal levels, and later documented how the inclusion agenda reshaped the British museum sector (Sandell, 2003). Crooke (2007) examines the museum's entanglement with community, including in divided societies, and Silverman (2010) recasts the museum as a social service institution with therapeutic capacities. Simon (2010) supplies the participatory toolkit through which many institutions now operationalise the agenda. Falk and Dierking (2013) ground the discussion in visitor research, showing that museum experiences are socially mediated: most visits take place in groups, and their meaning is constructed through interaction.

2.3 The critical strand

A third body of work questions the entire enterprise. Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) demonstrated five decades ago that European art museum audiences were drawn overwhelmingly from the educated classes, and that the museum, far from binding society together, functioned as a machine for distinguishing its fractions. Belfiore (2002) argues that claims for the social impact of the arts in British policy ran far ahead of the evidence, and Belfiore and Bennett (2008) show that the habit of justifying culture by its social effects is centuries old and chronically under-demonstrated. This strand does not deny that museums can produce social goods; it insists that the evidence offered is often advocacy in the form of research, and that self-selection among participants undermines causal claims. Any honest synthesis must hold the programmatic and critical strands together, and the review below attempts to do so.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employs an integrative narrative review, a design suited to a literature that spans disciplines, methods and publication types and that therefore resists the homogeneity assumptions of formal meta-analysis. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science using combinations of the terms museum, gallery, social cohesion, social inclusion, social capital, community, wellbeing and participation, for publications between 1990 and 2024. Inclusion required that a source address museums or galleries specifically, rather than the arts in general, and that it make or test a claim about social outcomes beyond the individual aesthetic experience. Policy instruments issued by international bodies were included alongside peer-reviewed scholarship because the research question concerns claims as well as evidence. The final corpus of works cited here was selected to represent each identifiable thematic strand with its most influential and most recent exemplars.

Analysis followed the thematic procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006). A first pass coded each source for the mechanism by which museums are claimed to affect cohesion; a second pass coded study design, outcome measures and the level, whether individual, community or societal, at which outcomes were assessed. The synthesis reports themes rather than effect sizes, which the heterogeneity of the underlying studies does not permit. The method yields a map of claims, mechanisms and evidence quality, which is the object of the research question; it does not yield a quantitative estimate of museum effects, and none is offered.

4. RESULTS

Four thematic strands organise the literature. Table 1 summarises the mechanism, representative works and typical evidence base of each.

Table 1. Thematic strands in the literature on museums and social cohesion.

Strand	Claimed mechanism	Representative works	Typical evidence
Representation and recognition	Inclusion of marginalised groups in public narratives builds belonging	Sandell (1998, 2003); Crooke (2007); Simon (2010)	Case studies; exhibition analyses

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Participation and social capital	Shared cultural activity builds networks, trust and bridging ties	Matarasso (1997); Putnam (2000); Jeannotte (2003); Falk & Dierking (2013)	Surveys; programme evaluations
Health, wellbeing and connection	Museum-based interventions reduce isolation and improve wellbeing	Chatterjee & Noble (2013); Thomson et al. (2018)	Intervention studies; standardised measures
Policy frameworks	International instruments formalise and fund the social role	UNESCO (2015); OECD & ICOM (2019); ICOM (2022)	Normative texts; guidance documents

4.1 Representation and recognition

The first strand claims that museums affect cohesion through what they display and whose stories they tell. Sandell (1998) distinguishes three levels of effect, individual, community and societal, and argues that at the societal level museums contribute by representing excluded groups within the national narrative, thereby extending the boundaries of belonging. Case studies in this strand describe museums co-curating with immigrant communities, documenting marginalised histories and providing platforms for groups otherwise absent from public culture (Sandell, 2003; Crooke, 2007). Simon (2010) reorients the mechanism from display to participation, arguing that institutions become socially relevant when visitors contribute, collaborate and co-create. The strand's evidence base is rich in depth and thin in breadth: it consists mainly of single-institution case studies, often written by practitioners or embedded researchers, which demonstrate that recognition occurred but rarely measure whether belonging followed. The strand's internal development is nevertheless instructive. Early work framed inclusion as outreach, the museum extending its existing offer to new audiences; later work frames it as shared authority, with communities participating in the selection, interpretation and even ownership of what is shown (Simon, 2010). The shift matters for the cohesion question because the two models predict different effects: outreach adds audiences to an unchanged narrative, while shared authority changes whose narrative the institution tells, which is the mechanism Sandell's societal level actually requires.

4.2 Participation and social capital

The second strand claims that the act of participating matters more than the content displayed. Matarasso (1997) remains the foundational text, reporting positive social outcomes, including new friendships, confidence and community activity, across participatory arts programmes in the United Kingdom; its methods, resting on self-report without comparison groups, also made it the founding target of the critical strand (Belfiore, 2002). Putnam (2000) supplies the theoretical machinery: if associational activity builds social capital, and museums host associational activity, museums build social capital. Jeannotte (2003) formalises the argument for cultural policy, and Falk and Dierking (2013) provide the empirical observation that museum visiting is already a social practice conducted in families and groups. The strand's weakness is inferential: museum participants are disproportionately the educated and connected (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991), so programmes may concentrate social capital among those who already hold it, a bonding effect where the cohesion claim requires a bridging one. The strand nevertheless changed what governments asked of culture. Matarasso's framework travelled quickly from the United Kingdom into the cultural policies of other European states, Australia and Canada, and the social capital vocabulary it popularised remains the lingua franca in which museums justify participatory programmes to funders today. Whatever its methodological debts, the strand set the terms of the field: participation became the unit of cultural value, and the burden of proof shifted onto institutions to show who participates and what follows.

4.3 Health, wellbeing and social connection

The third strand supplies the most rigorous designs in the field. Research on museums, health and wellbeing, consolidated by Chatterjee and Noble (2013), treats social isolation as a measurable harm and museum programmes as structured interventions against it. Thomson, Lockyer, Camic and Chatterjee (2018) evaluated a museum-based social prescribing programme for socially isolated older adults using standardised psychological wellbeing measures across multiple museum sites, and reported significant improvements. Studies in this strand use validated instruments, pre- and post-intervention measurement and, increasingly, referral pathways integrated with health services. Their limitation is scope rather than rigour: they demonstrate effects on individual wellbeing and social connection for small groups of participants, which is a component of cohesion rather than cohesion itself. The strand has also widened the museum's claimed constituency. Where the representation strand addresses groups defined by identity and the participation strand addresses communities defined by place, the wellbeing strand addresses conditions, such as isolation, dementia and chronic illness, that cut across both, and it connects museums to health systems through referral rather than marketing. The pandemic years reinforced the connection: UNESCO (2021) documents museums worldwide shifting to digital programming during closures explicitly framed as maintaining social connection, an episode that treated the museum's social function as essential infrastructure precisely when its buildings were shut.

4.4 Policy frameworks

The fourth strand consists of the international instruments through which the social claim has been institutionalised. UNESCO (2015) recommends that states recognise museums as spaces of cultural transmission, dialogue and social cohesion, and integrate them into social policy. The OECD and ICOM (2019) guide instructs local governments to mobilise museums for local development, listing inclusion and wellbeing among the returns. ICOM (2022) completes the arc by writing inclusiveness and community participation into the definition of the museum itself. These texts cite the research strands above selectively and assert the cohesion connection as settled. Their significance for this review is double: they demonstrate how far the claim has travelled, and they raise the stakes of its evidentiary foundations, since definitions and funding now rest on it. The instruments also shape the evidence that reaches them. Museums reporting to funders under these frameworks count what the frameworks reward, such as participant numbers, demographic reach and self-reported outcomes, and the resulting grey literature feeds back into advocacy as demonstration. The circularity is structural rather than dishonest: institutions document their social value in the terms their funders have defined, and funders cite

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the documentation as evidence for the terms. Breaking the circle requires measures designed outside the funding relationship, which is one reason the health strand, anchored in clinical instruments developed elsewhere, has produced the field's most credible findings.

5. DISCUSSION

Read together, the four strands support a precise and limited conclusion. Museums demonstrably produce programme-level social goods: recognition for represented groups, reported gains in confidence and connection for participants, and measured improvements in wellbeing for targeted populations. What no strand demonstrates is the societal-level claim embedded in the word cohesion. Chan, To and Chan (2006) define cohesion as a property of societies, observable in aggregate trust, belonging and cooperation; the evidence reviewed above is gathered almost entirely from individuals and small groups over short periods. The field's central gap is therefore not an absence of effects but a mismatch of scale: the concept lives at one level of analysis and the measurement at another. Programme evaluations cannot close this gap however well they are designed, because no accumulation of individual-level findings, absent population coverage and time depth, amounts to an observation about a society.

The critical strand sharpens the point without settling it. Belfiore (2002) and Belfiore and Bennett (2008) are right that advocacy has repeatedly outrun evidence, and the selective citation practices of the policy instruments reviewed in Section 4.4 illustrate the pattern. Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) add the structural objection: where museum publics skew educated and affluent, cultural investment may redistribute esteem toward the already included. Against this, the wellbeing strand shows that the objection is contingent rather than fatal. Social prescribing programmes recruit precisely those who do not self-select into museums (Thomson et al., 2018), and their standardised measures answer the methodological complaint directly. The critical literature, written largely before this strand matured, has not yet absorbed it; equally, the wellbeing literature rarely engages the scale problem. Each strand holds a piece the other needs.

The geography of the evidence constitutes a second structural limitation. The works reviewed here originate overwhelmingly in the United Kingdom, North America, Western Europe and Australia, and the policy instruments generalise from that base to the world. Whether museum participation builds cohesion in societies with different associational traditions, different relationships between state and culture, and museum sectors of recent creation remains, on the published evidence, an open question. The rapid construction of national museum sectors in East and Southeast Asia and parts of Africa and Latin America offers natural settings for the comparative work the field lacks; studying cohesion claims only where museums are centuries old builds the institution's history into its evaluation.

A further implication concerns what the field counts as participation. The literature reviewed here measures engagement almost entirely through programmes and visits, the forms of participation museums themselves organise and record. Yet the mechanisms invoked, trust, belonging and bridging contact, operate through many encounters the sector does not count: school visits remembered decades later, buildings used as meeting points, collections consulted online, and the diffuse civic standing of an institution known even to those who never enter it. If the museum contributes to cohesion partly by existing as a shared public good, in the way parks and libraries are held to, then evaluations confined to programme participants systematically understate the base on which the effect operates while overstating the causal share of any single programme. Measurement that includes non-visitors, and that treats the institution rather than the programme as the unit of analysis, would capture what the current evidence structurally cannot.

Three lines of future research follow from the review. First, longitudinal designs that follow participants and non-participants over years rather than weeks would connect programme effects to durable changes in trust and belonging. Second, area-level studies linking museum provision and participation to existing social cohesion indicators, of the kind developed in the social indicators literature (Chan et al., 2006), would address the scale mismatch directly. Third, comparative studies across museum sectors of different ages and governance traditions would test how far the existing findings travel. For practice and policy, the review counsels neither scepticism nor celebration but precision: museums can defensibly claim programme-level social outcomes now, and should claim societal cohesion effects as a hypothesis under investigation rather than a settled return on investment.

For museum practice, the review implies a discipline of specification. A programme intended to build cohesion should state its theory of change in the vocabulary this literature has already developed: which groups it brings into contact, whether the capital it builds is bonding or bridging, which of Allport's (1954) conditions the encounter satisfies, and at what level, individual, community or societal, its intended outcome sits (Sandell, 1998). Programmes specified in these terms become evaluable in them, and the sector's accumulated results would then aggregate into something the cohesion question could use. The alternative, in which every programme claims the full chain from participation to social cohesion, has produced the present situation: a literature rich in activity and weak in inference, vulnerable to the critical strand's charge precisely because it claims more than any single programme can show.

6. CONCLUSION

This article asked what the international literature claims about museums and social cohesion, through what mechanisms, and on what evidence. The review identified four strands, namely representation, participation, wellbeing and policy, and contended that together they demonstrate consistent programme-level effects while leaving the societal-level claim undertested, because social cohesion is defined at the scale of societies and measured at the scale of programmes. The finding reframes the familiar dispute between advocates and critics of the museum's social role: both argue over evidence that was never, by its design, capable of settling the question as posed. The way forward is not more of the same evaluation but research built to the concept's own scale, longitudinal, area-based and comparative, conducted across museum sectors old and new. Museums have carried a social mandate since their public founding; whether they bind societies together is a question the field is only now equipped to ask properly.

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ETHICAL AND COMPLIANCE STATEMENTS

This study reviewed published literature and involved no human or animal participants; research ethics approval was therefore not required. The manuscript is the author's original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. The author declares no conflict of interest and no funding.

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