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# Gen Z Reimagines Engagement with Archives

**London College of Communication (LCC) students and creative design consultancy Bright White Ltd worked together to explore potential solutions to a persistent challenge in the archives sector: how to encourage young generations to appreciate and value archives. Using digital tools and creative approaches students provided fresh perspectives to make archives accessible and relatable to them.**

## **A Brief Introduction to London College of Communication**

London College of Communication, part of University of the Arts London (UAL), is a well-known arts institution dedicated to a forward-thinking approach to media, communication and design education. With a long history of nurturing creative minds, LCC equips students with the skills needed to navigate the ever-evolving media landscape. Through Knowledge Exchange (KE) initiatives, LCC actively brings together students, graduates, academics and external partners to address real-life challenges and to co-create positive change.

## **An Exciting New Collaboration**

In an ambitious step, LCC's BA (Hons) Media Communications course partnered with Bright White, which specialises in innovative approaches to heritage interpretation. Bright White provided a real-life design challenge.

The project, which gained special commendation at UAL's KE Staff Awards 2024, invited students to apply their creative communication skill set to reimagine how younger audiences can engage with archives. The collaboration offers insights into how media and communication education can work together with the heritage interpretation sector.

## **The Design Challenge: Connecting Archives with Gen Z**

This was the challenge set by Chris Walker at Bright White:

'How can we encourage young people to discover, appreciate and value the memories held in their community's collective memory bank?'

The main challenge of the project was to address a long-standing issue within the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector: how to make archives appealing to a Gen Z audience. Gen Z refers to a generation of individuals who are presently between 12 and 27 years old and the first generation in which digital technology has been with them from birth.

While archive collections are increasingly digitised, which typically makes them accessible to diverse users, young people are still not engaging with them despite their prominent digital life. In the student briefing session Chris highlighted that traditional users of archives tend to be people in their 50s or older. This is also supported by The National Archives, which note that 77% of their volunteers are over the age of 55, while 91% are white.

A study by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport in 2020 showed 16–24 was the second least common age group to have visited a museum or gallery in the past 12 months. This disengagement is especially pronounced in deprived areas, where young people are half as likely to visit any cultural institutions.

Our students, many of whom are from diverse backgrounds, were well-positioned to tackle this challenge. Over 86% of the student cohort in the course is aged 18 to 24 and a significant proportion identify as ethnically diverse. This diversity not only reflected the demographic the heritage sector is trying to reach, but also brought in a range of fresh perspectives.

### The Students' Creative Responses

Drawing on their rich media skill set, students tackled the brief on multiple levels, from ideation and creative direction to production and execution, through showcasing their deeper understanding of Gen Z's digital habits.

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One standout project, 'Memory Orbs', took inspiration from the popular Disney film *Inside Out* (2015) and prototyped interactive digital orbs to propose immersive user journeys through archival content. The project envisions users to interact with archives both in physical exhibition spaces (blended reality) and within the metaverse (virtual reality). Blended reality environments allow for virtual and real elements to interact like they would in the real world, while virtual reality allows the user to fully immerse themselves in a digital space.

*'Memory Orbs' video still showing a digital orb in a memory deposit. Amrita Gurung. Freya Mashru, 2024 BA Media Communications, London College of Communication, UAL.*



For example, with the help of a VR headset ‘memory orbs’ users could create a digital avatar to virtually deposit a memory into an archive and, through repeating this process over and over again, a virtual track of several ‘memory orbs’ would be created. This would form part of the archive’s online collective memories for the user. The project aspires to make archives feel alive and resonates with Gen Z and the born-digital nature of smartphone video.

Another project, ‘Girlhood’, explored personal identity within girlhood. The team proposed an immersive exhibition, which invites audiences to reflect on their own lived experiences of girlhood and adolescence using archives as a medium to explore personal and collective memories. These archives might consist of photographs depicting childhood memories that visitors could identify with, audiovisual artefacts referencing music, fashion, film & TV or arts content that whole generations of girls might have had a shared passion for, or specific technological platforms that might have empowered girlhood. The visitor could also take pictures of themselves in the immersive room and upload on social media and tag the arts company.

The project highlights archives as tools for personal storytelling but also creates – for visitors – a sense of belonging, community and girlhood collective.

*‘Girlhood’ video still showing point-of-view shot from immersive room. The video was a test film rather than a fully produced video of the immersive experience room. Shakila Razaei, Liyah Saeed, Jahkaya Smith, Lianne Yu, 2024 BA Media Communications, London College of Communication, UAL.*



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‘404 Archive’ tackled the sensitive area of media censorship during China’s zero-Covid policy (Davidson, 2022). It aimed to bring banned news stories to light through an adventure role-play game proposal. Players would be presented with scenarios based on true censored media content and make critical decisions that affected the outcome.

One such event was the devastating fire that broke out in a high-rise building in Urumqi, Xinjiang, in November 2022, which left 10 people dead and several others injured. The city was under strict Covid restrictions at the time and local authorities were widely criticised online for under-reporting the incident.

In the process of discovering the truth about these events, the player is met with a series of on-screen options. By ‘unlocking’ the event bit by bit, the player encounters relevant photographic content and is eventually presented with the original news video at the end of the ‘journey’. The project’s gamified approach duly met Gen Z’s preference for interactive storytelling.

### What LCC and Media Communications Students Gained

For us as educators, this small-scale, yet powerful, collaboration highlighted the educational value of engaging students with real-world industry challenges.

The students gained exposure to the heritage interpretation field, which they may not have previously considered as a graduate employment destination.

The GLAM sector’s continuing shifts in digital practice creates a necessity for skills in media and content creation, interactive storytelling, social media engagement, crowdsourcing and online participation. This highlights the relevance of media and communication skills in heritage interpretation and notes the value of graduates with such skills for the sector.



'404 Archive' video still showing a gamer's on-screen options. Yuxin Chen, Yao Wang, Wenxuan Xu, 2024 BA Media Communications, London College of Communication, UAL.

### Key Takeaways For Those Working in Heritage Interpretation

Chris said, 'From an interpretation professional point of view, the insight generated by the collaboration was considerable in both breadth and depth. Many small and interesting points came up. Surprisingly, a series of strong themes also emerged which, taken together, really help us as a design team to see the world the way that Gen Z does. This helps us make sure that we are planning our media, content and engagement modes to suit the large and enormously important Gen Z cohort.'

The following themes were observed in the students' projects:

- Gen Z liked to overlap their personal interests with archive content that covered themes such as fitness, gaming, armed forces families, women's history, art, censored media, hidden history and precious family interactions. In this sense, personal interest was a critical bridge between the individual and the collections.
- The majority of the cohort use TikTok and this is often the place where Gen Z discovers new things. Students started their communication through line with a TikTok post, which led to a website and a web-borne experience, or a physical experience. Like it or not, to ignore TikTok is to ignore Gen Z.

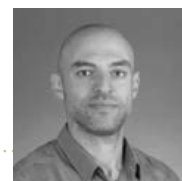
- All students were very media and technology literate. They demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of media and were highly knowledgeable about the possibilities of linking different media or digital techniques together to make one 'story space'. The idea of transmedia storytelling was present in every response. Examples included storytelling through games, film, photography, installations, theatrical productions, podcasts, web media, video, user-generated content, chatbots, AI, augmented reality, virtual reality, and were all completely technically feasible.

For future steps, we urge deeper connections between the field of media communication and heritage interpretation, further integrating creative storytelling and digital platforms. By expanding such knowledge-exchange projects, we can develop insights that bridge the gap between Gen Z and archives, as well as other heritage sites, so fostering long-lasting engagement and ensuring they remain relevant in the digital age.

#### Read on...

The National Archives, 2017. Volunteering at The National Archives. <https://bit.ly/VolNA>.

DCMS, 2020. Museums – Taking Part Survey 2019–2020 <https://bit.ly/DCMSStudy>.



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