

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Museums become latest institutions to embrace livestreaming to woo Chinese consumers

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The British Museum is embracing livestreaming for Chinese tourists with help from Fliggy, the travel arm of Alibaba. Image credit: British Museum

By ELLEN KELLEHER

The popularity of livestreaming by museums in China is pushing cultural organizations around the world to follow suit, according to a new report from [Jing Culture & Commerce](#).

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The pandemic has catalyzed the widespread adoption of livestreaming in China, turning it into a key communication tool, per the report "Digital Connections: How Arts Organizations Can Leverage Livestreaming in 2021." Eager to draw virtual crowds of Chinese tourists and answer to the same digital pivot in their own countries, storied Western museums from Versailles to the British Museum have enlisted Fliggy, the travel arm of Chinese tech behemoth Alibaba, to help them embrace the method.

"Livestreaming created personal connections at a time of social distancing and drove e-commerce sales at a time of economic uncertainty," said Richard Whiddington, senior staff writer at [Jing Culture & Comment](#). "These assets added to Chinese consumers' embrace of livestreaming for reasons of practicality and entertainment have pushed brands, businesses and, as our report focuses on, cultural organizations to explore livestreaming."

Museum livestreams

Western institutions have been inspired to adopt livestreaming after the success that Chinese museums have had in reaching new audiences and opening up new revenue channels by engaging in the practice.

"As China's COVID-19 situation has stabilized, we are already beginning to see how tools developed under lockdown are becoming integrated in hybrid digital/physical museum strategies," Mr. Whiddington said.

Formerly the domain of gaming and entertainment establishments, livestreaming has come to dominate China's digital landscape in 2020 across a number of industries and it has been at least a \$5 billion business since 2018.

Booyed by the method's success, Fliggy arranged partnerships with the Palace of Versailles, the Louvre in France, the British Museum and the Museo del Prado in Madrid to help Chinese travelers go on virtual holidays.

Through its partnership with Fliggy, Versailles' team gave viewers access to its leaders, including its president, director and chief curator. During a two-hour livestream, viewers toured the King's private apartments, the Hall of Mirrors and the Gardens, aided by a translator.



The Louvre is another group opting to partner with Fliggy to gain Chinese virtual visitors. Image credit: Louvre

More than 10,000 viewers tuned in live, according to the report, and the tour gained more traction through WeChat and Weibo video posts later.

At the British Museum, viewership numbers from livestreaming thanks to the partnership with Alibaba's Fliggy were off the charts as well.

Hosted on Fliggy and Taobao, the livestream was led by staff at the British Museum and included links to the museum's Chinese ecommerce platforms.

After showing a two-hour tour of Egyptian mummies, the Parthenon and Assyrian sculptures, the British Museum attracted more than 370,000 Chinese visitors within the first minute of livestreaming and saw exposure spread across its Chinese social media accounts in subsequent hours and days.

"International museums are succeeding in working with Chinese technology companies to livestream to Chinese audiences in what will likely become a key long-term strategy," Mr. Whiddington said.

Chinese museums remain at the forefront of the livestreaming movement and are delivering particularly innovative approaches to the method.

Last June, for instance, the National Museum of China coordinated a livestream relay that included 16 museums and five continents.

Each leg of "Treasure Hunt Relay: Global Museum Director's Choice" kicked off with the museum's director Dr. Wang Chunfa in conversation with his counterpart at another museum, such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Art or the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, and then cut to tours that offered collection highlights with subtitles in Mandarin and English.

The livestreams, which were high-tech thanks to 5G and computer-generated 3D modeling, were coordinated via a centralized website, making them accessible in real time.

Brands and museums experimenting with livestream should be mindful of a few factors, per the report.

A seamless technological experience is as important as the storytelling involved. Also, if catering to Chinese consumers, a strong Mandarin speaker is essential.

Partnerships are key as well, as the right collaborator supplies technical expertise and new networks of viewers. Lastly, the dynamic between the host of the event and the viewer is pivotal as that is what makes the livestream experience unique.

As they develop, the forms and focus of these cultural livestreams will likely shift. Cultural institutions will have to continuously create engaging livestreams and eventually gauge whether livestreams will generate revenue or lead to on-site visitors.

Livestreaming adoption

Western museums are jumping onto the livestreaming movement, which was advanced first by luxury brands eager to access the Chinese consumer.

According to research from Forrester released earlier this year, livestreaming commerce is set to reach \$100 billion in China by 2023, up from \$34 billion in 2019, and other Asia-Pacific markets are set to follow ([see story](#))

More brands are relying on livestreams to engage with Chinese consumers. Tmall Luxury has expanded its livestreaming options, introducing Soho Live this summer ([see story](#)).

According to the Chinese consultancy C2 Global, 30.8 percent of respondents will purchase a product that they saw on a livestream organized by an influencer or celebrity ([see story](#)).

While previously behind in their efforts to engage in this kind of digital pivot, Chinese cultural institutions and their Western counterparts are likely to continue to build on the solid footholds they established this year when it comes to livestreaming.

"Without doubt, 2020 will be reviewed as the year livestreaming became a thoroughly mainstream digital tool in China," said Mr. Whiddington. "We anticipate Chinese cultural institutions, state and private, large and small, will build off successful campaigns launched this year long into the future."

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