

How Can Manchester Museum Engage the Younger Generation

From TikTok to co-curated galleries: The museum’s strategy for making history matter to young people.

By RUBY HENRY-DICKS

Heritage, arts, and culture institutions like **Manchester Museum** are actively working to attract and engage **Generation Z** (born 1995-2012) and **Generation Alpha** (born 2010-2025) age groups often characterised by their reliance on technology and shorter attention spans.

Yet, practical barriers such as transport costs, admission fees, and limited information about museum offerings create a disconnect. Social and attitudinal factors also play a role: many children and young people see museums as remote or not designed with their interests in mind. School visits, once a key route for introducing young people to museums, have declined due to curriculum changes and budget cuts.

Upon speaking to **Kids in Museums**, a charity advocating for youth access to culture they highlighted that: *“When the last Taking Part Survey was conducted in 2019, about 40% of 5–15-year-olds hadn’t visited a museum in the past 12 months. This means that millions are missing out every year on everything museums have to offer.”*

They add, *“the cost-of-living crisis has caused a significant decline in school trips, particularly for those from deprived backgrounds. This means that visits with family and friends are increasingly important, and museums need to work hard to welcome these groups.”* Despite these challenges, Manchester Museum has been nominated for the European Museum of the Year Award 2025, recognising its efforts to create a place *“where everyone belongs.”*

Chloe Cousins, Social Justice Manager at Manchester Museum, describes her role as *“cross-organisational, really to look at how social justice practices and principles are embedded throughout,”* including how people engage with the museum and what their experience is like.

Cousins explains that engagement with young people is a work in progress: *“There’s quite a big engagement around children’s education and their learning in curriculum that links in with their experiences in museums. But practical barriers like transport are a real issue-especially for schools in Manchester who can’t always afford to get here. We’ve piloted projects, like the Time Odyssey app, that included funding for school transport, but that funding was finite.”*

Kids in Museums emphasises the importance of staff and facilities: *“Well trained staff who are welcoming to all visitors, understand their needs and support them in a way that is friendly and empathetic can really make a visit a success...Young people want places to sit and spend time with friends or study, Wi-Fi and places to charge their phones.”*

Manchester Museum’s recent £15 million ‘hello future’ transformation, completed in 2023, expanded facilities and rethought community engagement. *“We’ve got a new exhibition hall, Chinese Culture Gallery, and the South Asia Gallery,”* says Cousins. *“What also came with that was the creation of a quiet space and changing spaces toilets, recognising some of the needs of young people in terms of care and how they*



Interactive Galleries (Photo credit: Ruby Henry-Dicks)

think about themselves and what they need in spaces. The quiet space was built with neurodiversity in mind, so people can decompress and reflect.”

Exhibitions are now designed to be more interactive and engaging for younger visitors. Cousins explains: *“Our new galleries are more interactive and personal, with a focus on co-curation and storytelling that aligns with how young people prefer to engage with museums. For example, the South Asia Gallery and Chinese Culture Gallery are co-curated with communities and use diverse media, including comics created by indigenous artists, to share personal stories. We hope this graphic way of sharing stories is more in line with how young people receive information and engage.”*

Manchester Museum hosts Critical Conversations, *“a regular group for 18–30-year-olds, providing a space to discuss heritage, culture, and museums,”* says Cousins. *“It meets a real need for social spaces where young people can connect with peers who share their interests. The group also allows young people to reflect on and question big issues, such as decolonisation and gender in museums. This immediate impact is creating a welcoming space for young people to engage and for the museum to listen and build better relationships with them.”*

Museums across the UK are grappling with their colonial histories. Cousins describes a shift away from curators making all decisions about displays, towards working with communities who have connections to



Manchester Museum (Photo credit: Ruby Henry-Dicks)

“My Year 3 children loved their visit to the museum yesterday. Our workshop teacher was fantastic and really engaging. It is always better for the children to hear the information from the experts and in the correct environment. The children did not just ‘look’ at the artefacts, they were encouraged to ‘wonder’ about them, make connections to other knowledge they may have and also to ask lots of questions. A perfect environment for the children to really immerse themselves in their learning.” - Lisa Fuggle, Teacher at Dane Bank Primary School

the museum’s collections. She believes, “It shouldn’t be a person or a team of people at the museum who aren’t connected to them making those decisions.”

To reach younger audiences, the museum targets TikTok, where **76% of UK users are aged 15-24**, according to Ipsos. Though they have just under 7,000 followers, one video about a plaque found in Oldham reached over 300,000 people, showing the platform’s potential. The museum is also active on other platforms such as Instagram, with over 30,000 followers. “The person doing a lot of that content has really brought a lot of humour to that page that I think speaks to a Gen Z audience. Some of the content is really on trend,” says Cousins. “For a lot of young people, probably having fun and being silly with museum content is not something you’d expect...so I think there’s work to do

around ways for young people to connect into the collections in meaningful ways.”

Cousins gives the following advice for museums to engage young people, “Create social spaces for young people to connect, provide opportunities for deeper reflection and discussion, and ensure that young people’s feedback is genuinely listened to and acted upon. Be responsive and open to change, even if institutional processes can be slow.”

Kids in Museums agrees: “Museums can improve their offer by collecting feedback, running focus groups or longer-term advisory projects and working with young people as equal partners to design, create and curate new exhibitions and displays.” This approach could bridge an ever-growing gap between museums and younger generations to come.



Belonging Print (Photo credit: Ruby Henry-Dicks)

By RUBY HENRY-DICKS

The Street Acts of Manchester’s Market Street

Street performers have long been part of Manchester’s Market Street, continuing a tradition dating back to ancient times. From medieval minstrels to emerging stars like Alex Spencer who started out busking on Manchester’s streets where the rich music scene inspires new talent. Today’s buskers face challenges from city rules, shifting public views, and poverty, all while sharing their art with passersby.

On any given afternoon, Market Street is alive with music, voices, and the rhythms of daily life. Among the performers is **Ally, 25, from Kelbrook**, who sings and plays acoustic covers with her bandmate Joe. *“We’ve been performing here for about a year”* she says, tuning her guitar between songs. For Ally, busking is less about income and more about exposure: *“Our main source of income is performing at pubs and bars. We just do this when we’ve got some time to kill.”*

Finding a good spot is one of the biggest challenges for Manchester’s street musicians. “Especially on Market Street, you have to be 50 metres away from anybody else with a speaker; 50 metres from a tram-track, there’s a bunch of other rules as well.” Ally explains. Despite the regulations, she finds the experience rewarding. “You get so much exposure from different people coming to listen to you, videoing and posting on social media. Loads of different bars contact you from people seeing you perform.”



Ally, 25, and Joe 22

Photo Story



Stian Jebesen, 23

Stian Jebesen, 23 a singer originally from Norway, brings a different style to the street, blending musical theatre and opera with pop covers. For him, busking is both a passion and a way to build his audience online. “Busking is a big part of my TikTok live streaming and earn money through that” he says.

Stian points out that the challenges of street performing go beyond the music. “One is weather and the time of year, there’s a big difference in, like, November versus July in terms of earnings. Then there’s finding pitches with other street performers. There’s a lot of competition, and you get a lot of weird people as well, who might come and want to mess up your stuff.” He adds, “Manchester’s busking rules are quite lax. You can be in one spot for as long as you want.”

Both performers agree that the public’s perception can be mixed, but mostly positive. “It’s been positive so far” Ally says. “We haven’t had a negative experience.” Stian reflects, “If you say you’re a busker, people are going to be like ‘oh, okay.’ So, it’s up to every performer to prove them wrong.”

Memorable moments are part of the job-some uplifting, some challenging. “You get so many different people” Ally says, “and sometimes you get those lovely moments when someone stops to really listen, or a child starts dancing.” For Stian, he experiences more unpredictable moments, “There was someone who came up to me and just screamed into my ear while I was singing. It was memorable, but not too nice!”.



Breakdancing group Neriofrao



Breakdancing group Neriofrao



Breakdancing group Neriofrao



Anonymous religious singer



Breakdancing group Neriofrao



Anonymous singer



Breakdancing group Neriofrao



Ally and Joe's equipment



Breakdancing group Neriofrao

Despite the hurdles, Manchester's street performers keep coming back, drawn by the city's energy and the chance to share their music and dance with anyone who will listen and watch.