From Trash to Art: Crowdsourcing and the Bottom-up Heritagisation of Neon Signs in Hong Kong

Veronica Sau-wa Mak [1]

[1] Dept. of Sociology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong, China - swmak@hksyu.edu

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Abstract

Despite growing interest, there is a lack of research on the impact of crowdsourcing and social media on heritage-making and conservation in post-colonial societies. To fill this gap, this article uses neon signs in Hong Kong as a case. It discusses the build-up of the artistic and heritage value of neon signs, which were formerly treated as 'trash' by the Hong Kong government, through a museum's use of crowdsourcing to complement its existing collection and through local citizens' social media networking activities. The article reveals a tension between the government, professions and local activists regarding the artistic and heritage value of neon signs and contributes to the debate on the meaning of heritage.

1. Introduction

Neon signs are a cultural symbol and part of the built heritage of Hong Kong, which is well known as the Pearl of the Orient. With an increasing number of iconic neon light signboards having been abolished by the government for building security reasons in the last decade, many educated young Hong Kong people are trying to monitor, protect and conserve those that remain by establishing a conservation network through social media. In 2014, responding to the same trend and recognising neon signs as a modern art form, the M+ museum of visual art launched the NEONSIGNS.HK crowdsourcing initiative, for which it invited members of the public to upload over 4,000 geo-tagged photos of neon signs accompanied by curatorially produced essays, videos and slideshows about the history and stories of the neon signs for geographical indexing and categorisation. The aesthetic value of neon signs has been further supported by design researchers who have digitised neon signs and built an archive with detailed justifications of their heritage value. More importantly, images of neon signs have gone viral after being promoted by social media influencers in Hong Kong and mainland China, which has led to an influx of tourists hoping to see the disappearing cityscapes. To capitalise on this new phenomenon of neon signs as touristscape, the government formally included the neon tube–making technique as an official piece of cultural heritage in 2025, in the context of a tourist economy facing challenges from a fall in the number of international tourists after the implementation of the national security law.

This study provides an opportunity to show how data obtained from crowdsourcing and social media can be mobilised to produce alternative understandings of cities, art and heritage. Crowdsourcing, which involves obtaining information or services by asking for input from the public to help transcribe, describe, locate or categorise cultural heritage resources, is an emerging field of research on collaborative systems in heritage conservation (Oomen and Aroyo 2011). Many scholars contend that crowdsourcing provides museums with a powerful platform for audience engagement, offering connection with cultural heritage through online collaboration around shared goals or resources. However, to what extent do these emerging technologies affect the everyday relationship between cultural heritage and the local population? And how can technology bring about a paradigm change in aesthetic discourse and influence the fields of cultural heritage conservation specifically and, more generally, cultural identity?

Although the relationships between neon lights, aesthetics, linguistics and the cityscape have been investigated (Kwok 2020), this study has the more specific objective of identifying how crowdsourcing and social media can deepen the local population's cultural heritage engagement and how the local population search for a post-colonial identity in the process of conserving and giving new meanings to neon light signboards. The study also shows how this bottom-up heritagisation process is closely related to the democratic movement and to the identity crisis and nostalgic sentiment arising in the face of rapid political change.

1.1 Colonial History and the Neon Sign as an Icon of Hong Kong

Neon signs are 'socio-technical artefacts' (Broto 2015) of Hong Kong and reflect its unique historical trajectory, having served as a platform on which splendid colours, bilingual texts and various shapes negotiated multiple cultural streams and fostered local identity (Song 2025). During the Cold War, the new international political positioning of Hong Kong transformed the cityscape and brought significant economic and cultural change. With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was an influx of people, capital, technology and the entertainment industry into the territory, with Hong Kong replacing Shanghai as the entertainment and industrial hub of the East (Steele 2016: 92). Hundreds of thousands of people flooded into British Hong Kong, driven out by socialist China's land reforms (in the early 1950s), the Anti-rightist Campaign (1957–59), the Great Famine (1959–61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Trade embargoes against the Chinese mainland and geopolitical challenges in the early 1950s further spurred Hong Kong's industrialisation. The southward migration of Shanghai's industrialists, entrepreneurs, skilled professionals and entertainment industry to Hong Kong, coupled with the city's burgeoning consumer culture, created a fertile ground for neon signs to flourish, with neon technology

already well-developed in Shanghai (Henderson 1991; Song 2025). Neon signs became an attractive and affordable tool for promoting entertainment venues and manufacturing and service businesses, offering vibrant visual advertising that could capture attention in densely populated urban areas. The technology and expertise from Shanghai helped establish Hong Kong as a hub Movies and songs about Hong Kong's neon-lit streetscapes in the 1950s and 1960s not only made the neon sign the icon of the city internationally but also portrayed the colonial and post-colonial conditions of Hong Kong. The Korean (1950–53) and Vietnam wars (1955–75) led to frequent docking of American warships in Hong Kong, which boosted the bar, restaurant and entertainment industries in Wan Chai and Tsim Sha Tsui and contributed to the emergence of neon-lit streetscapes. The story of East-meets-West culture and the iconic streetscape was further told in the novel *The World of Suzie Wong*, later adapted into a Hollywood movie, and in the 1950 Korean song *Hong Kong Girl*. Neon signs have also been frequently depicted in international movies, music videos, manga, Cantopops and other cultural productions set in Hong Kong. Neon signs were used as a symbol of capitalist modernity (in stark contrast to Communism in China) in Alfred Cheung's crime comedy *Her Fatal Ways* (1990) and as a symbol of the postmodern world in Oshii Mamoru's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) (Chan 2018) and the comic book character adaptation *Doctor Strange* (2016). The neon sign streetscape has also been used to reflect the post-colonial condition in the movies of Wong Ka Wai, such as *Fallen Angels*, which are presented by Abbas (1997) as symbolic artefacts of Hong Kong's post-cultural, post-colonial position.

Although neon signs have long been regarded internationally as the symbol of Hong Kong, recognition of their artistic value and cultural significance and calls to preserve the 'neon heritage' of the city are recent phenomena. From the government's perspective, neon signs did not qualify as heritage and thousands were deemed illegal or structurally dangerous, and thus in need of being torn down and sent to landfill. Over the last decade, up to 90% of Hong Kong's outdoor neon signs have disappeared as a result of stricter building regulations, costly maintenance, a decline in skilled craftworkers and the availability of cheaper LED lights (Fernández 2018). Public attention to the need to conserve neon signs did not emerge until the Umbrella Movement of 2013, of which Kwong (2016) contends that the growth of localism was a possible new path for the democratic movement. Neon signs in Hong Kong are even regarded as a source of light pollution and thus a problem to be overcome (Lam 2024).

This paper explores the relationship between digital technology, political change and heritagisation (heritage-making) using the case of neon signs, drawing on Smith's (2006) argument that heritage is a performative process of meaning-making, linked to the negotiation of various forms of cultural and political identity, that is essential for people to interpret both their history and present circumstances (Lynch 1960). I focus here on the role of two types of digital technology – crowdsourcing and social media – in digitising neon signs and in the making of heritage in post-colonial Hong Kong.

1.2 Crowdsourcing, Democracy and Heritagisation

As Dahlgren and Hansson (2022) points out, crowdsourcing – engaging the general public in transcriptions and production of metadata through institutions' websites, heritage portals, wikis or social media platforms – is seen not only as an efficient and cost-effective way to make cultural heritage collections more for neon sign production, which further enhanced their role in the city's visual landscape. Several major neon factories had been established by the 1960s, and by 1975 there were over 80,000 neon signs in Hong Kong, reflecting the industry's thriving state (Tsang 2024).

open and searchable but also as an ideal way to fulfil institutions' democratic mission by creating a more diverse and polyphonic heritage (Giaccardi et al. 2012; Huvila 2008; Liu 2010; Ridge 2017). Laurajane Smith (2006) claims that heritage has been grounded in an 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD) that underlies national and international Western concerns about the characteristics, values and meanings of heritage (Smith 2006). This discourse constructs heritage in ways that reinforce varied relations of power, including those rooted in nationalism and social exclusion based on gender. AHD often draws a connection between nationalism and masculinity in which patriarchal culture becomes the heritage for all members of society (Smith 2008).

Crowdsourcing, as a way to increase participation in the process of heritage-making and the creation of a common history, is today seen as a fundamental democratic right, assuming that democracy means that those affected by a decision should be included in the process of making it. Seitsonen (2017) contends that following a recent worldwide boom in the democratisation of knowledge, crowdsourcing and Participatory GIS, heritage practice increasingly draws on crowdsourced geographical data. In a study of the application of crowdsourcing in the domain of cultural heritage, Oomen and Aroyo (2011) find that crowdsourcing is increasingly used by galleries, libraries, archives and museums around the globe for six types of activities: correction and transcription tasks; contextualisation; complementing collections; classification; co-curation; and crowdfunding. Scholars also investigate the motives for citizens to participate in crowdsourcing. For example, in his study of the public crowdsourcing of twentieth century conflict heritage in Finland launched by state-owned broadcasting company Yleisradio, Seitsonen finds that many of the public entries mirrored local perspectives on conflict heritage: pride in personally important loci and self-satisfaction appear to be important incentives for taking part.

Although many heritage institutions tend to see social participation as a synonym for good governance (e.g. Shipley and Kovacs 2008), case studies by Cortés–Vázquez et al. (2017) reveal that participation is embedded in a network of structural social fractures that are reproduced amid the specificities of an expert-based and top-down heritage regime. Thus, they suggest that the empirical analysis of cases is essential alongside a reorientation of critical research in the heritage field to unveil and develop conceptually what participation does to the entire heritagisation process. Two questions need to be addressed: What does participation do to heritage governance? And how do participatory techniques affect the people involved? Such investigations would permit the identification of the logics and powers prevailing in participation and the inequalities and structural limitations being reproduced. This study follows this vein in going further to understand how crowdsourcing, heritage and the political arena become interlocked.

1.3 Social Media as an Archive and Affordance

Alongside crowdsourcing, social archiving through social media is another form of the democratisation of heritagisation. For example, Pietrobruno's (2013) study of YouTube as an archive of the Turkish Mevlevi Sema (whirling dervish) ceremony

(safeguarded by UNESCO) shows how digital archives of intangible heritage have forged a new form of structure that absorbs both dominant and marginal perspectives and is produced by the efforts of humans and machines. The building of archives on Facebook and Instagram (IG), which is achieved through user participation (e.g. uploading photos and videos) and algorithms, intersects with an incipient area of inquiry in new media (Beer 2009: 994; Uricchio 2011: 34). This archive is constantly shifting. Each interaction with Facebook or IG creates a trace in the system, which turns into a record with statistical significance that is read externally as a marker of popularity. User participation thus becomes integrated into the software design (Kessler and Schäfer 2009: 285).

Research into Instagram has been conducted from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: media and cultural studies(Tama et al 2020), tourism studies (Volo and Irimiás 2021), cinema studies (Lundemo 2009), museum studies (Budge and Burness 2018), platform studies (Caliandro and Graham 2020) and archive studies (Bainotti et al 2021). The present study adds critical heritage studies to the fields of inquiry from which social media (IG and Facebook in particular) as archive has been approached. This emerging field unveils the power relations maintained to sustain a traditional understanding of heritage (Association of Critical Heritage Studies 2011).

This study looks into how data and images collected on social media serve as a record of important heritage performance and events through users' creation and uploading of photos and videos as affective practices for experiential reasons. The images and text disseminated on social media by local citizens and tourists to show that they have witnessed the neon signs before their demolition or to 'rescue' a half-century-old neon sign may serve as documents that record the disappearing cityscape in Hong Kong. IG's archive under the search hashtag #neonsign is composed of a collection of posts with photos and text uploaded by users – individuals and institutions – engaged in creating a body of records that constitute the archive. Like other social media, IG is constantly built and reshaped by its users, as users' viewing, liking, following or forwarding activities have an impact on the response of IG to future search requests and the sequence in which results appear. By simply viewing a short reel on IG, users implicitly provide metadata (Flanagin et al. 2010: 186). Viewing, liking, interacting (e.g. placing emojis) and visiting a profile are factors in determining the order of the IG accounts that are returned to correspond with a given keyword or hashtag. The building of archives on IG thus combines algorithms and user-generated content and participation. While recognising that some users may be consciously involved in creating and distributing photos and videos for their historical importance, this study also reinforces the potential of Facebook and IG to act as a means of conservation via their widespread use as a repository of experiential moments.

However, important questions remain to be addressed: What is the meaning of participation in heritagisation through digital media practices for people and its impact on heritage governance? Bareither (2021) argues that tourists' seemingly superficial digital media practices, such as taking photos and posting on social media, are not a mere digital reflection of the architecture and materiality of these places; instead, they articulate and shape how visitors emotionally experience them. By articulating and shaping emotional experiences lived on-site, digital memory practices at heritage sites work through place. To understand this emotional experience, Bareither suggests looking into the emotional affordance of social media and its impact on the heritagisation of culture. Following Bareither, the present study investigates the co-constitution of emotional affordances – those of the heritage site and those of digital media – through the neon sign, enacted through visitors' digital image practices. Studying the emotional affordance of heritage places through the capturing, sharing and contextualising of digital images is important as this process constitutes a particular kind of digital memory practice that contributes to identity- and community-building.

2. Methodology

For this study, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the heritagisation and conservation process of neon signs. First, a case study of the crowdsourcing platform of the neon sign project led by the M+ museum was conducted to explore the formation of an alternative understanding of the cultural meanings of neon signs in Hong Kong. Second, a quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) of the web pages and posts on Facebook pages and IG accounts related to the neon signs in Hong Kong was carried out for the periods from December 2021 to January 2022 and from December 2023 to May 2025. Third, in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with social media influencers, neon sign conservation activists and local people in the second half of February 2023 to gain an understanding of their motives for and practices of neon sign conservation, online and offline. Based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), conceptual categories were developed organically from the interview data and then grouped into broader themes. Fourth, from September 2022 to May 2025, a digital ethnographic observation was made of five IG accounts that were promoting neon signs: tetraneonex, hkreminiscence, streetsignhk, kowloneon and hongkongneonarchive.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Case Study: The M+ Museum and the Transformation of Neon Signs from Trash to Art

Before the opening of the Neon Sign Collection at the M+ museum, torn-down neon signs, which the government regarded as illegal, were treated as trash and sent to landfill. Since 2013, M+ has preserved the two gigantic neon signs of Sammy's Kitchen and the Kai Kee Mahjong parlour, which were once landmarks of the neighbourhood. The neon sign collection was started because, as their curators contended, neon signs define Hong Kong's visual culture through their representations in film, visual arts, literature and other cultural forms. The museum's Curator-at-Large, Aric Chen, explained that neon signs are not conventional items for collection by a contemporary museum; the impulse for M+ to preserve the signs stems from the fact that 'neon signs have come to embody and represent a breadth of modernity's contradictions: the glamour and grit, the confidence and fragility, the mass spectacle, and the alienation that lurks beneath' (Chen 2014).

This collection not only preserves these iconic objects that are steadily disappearing from the city's visual landscape from being destroyed as trash but also serves to establish their artistic and cultural significance. M+ has also been collecting and digitising the historical design sketches of neon signs from neon sign manufacturers. The design sketches provide insights into the intentions and processes that give neon signs their final shapes, colours and forms. Marked with notations,

measurements, revisions, connection points and grid lines that aid in enlarging the designs to full scale, these skilfully rendered drawings trace the artful translation of a client's brief into a graphic medium and, eventually, the sign itself.

3.1.1 Crowdsourcing- Complementing the Neon Sign Collection and Co-creating Artistic Value: In 2014, to complement the neon sign collection, M+ launched a crowdsourcing initiative that not only helped to enrich the collection digitally but also increased public awareness of the neon sign as art form. M+ invited the submission of geo-tagged images of neon signs from the public and produced an interactive online map of neon signs. This call for documenting the disappearing neon sign cityscape was met with great enthusiasm, with the museum receiving over 4,000 geo-tagged photos from 21 March to 30 June 2014 to collectively co-create a unique interactive 'neon map' of Hong Kong. On this map, the neon signs are categorised by location and business type. Users can zoom out to see the overall distribution of neon signs in different parts of Hong Kong or filter by business type (e.g. pawn shops, nightclubs and entertainment) to examine the different characteristics of the design of neon signs to cater for different business needs. The site remains as a lasting record and examination of Hong Kong's rapidly disappearing neon signs. By examining the signs on the site, Hong Kong citizens can gain insights into their design, typography, engineering and craft.

M+ museum not only crowdsourced neon sign photos from the public but also collaborated with the Google Cultural Institute in 2015. This further solidified the neon signs as 'art' in two ways. First, the Google Arts and Culture platform maintained by the Google Cultural Institute hosts approximately six million high resolution images of world-class artworks from around the world. The neon signs in Hong Kong are now placed side-by-side with digital representations of the paintings of Vincent van Gogh and Monet, and thus perform as art for a global audience. Second, over 150 new archival neon sign photos and 12 street views and videos, slideshows and sketches were created by the Google's Arts and Culture team and are shared on the online exhibitions. By leveraging existing technologies, including Google Street View and Picasa, camera systems using CMOS sensors and an electronic rolling shutter provide an immersive aesthetic experience for the appreciation of neon signs as art.

3.2 Crowdfunding, Design Experts and the Heritagisation of Neon Signs

In Hong Kong, despite the two neon signs preserved by M+, complemented by the crowdsourced neon photos collected through the 'Mobile M+: NEONSIGNS.HK' project, which has formed an essential database for the core heritage activities of creating, managing, discovering, using and reusing, neon signs are categorised as 'visual art' rather than cultural heritage.

In the heritagisation of neon signs in Hong Kong, two visual design researchers, Brian Kwok and Keith Tam, have been playing a significant role by collecting data that underpin the heritage value of neon signs. After being asked by M+ in June 2014 to design and run a neon sign bus tour, aiming to share knowledge about the connections between neon shop signs, visual culture, urban space and architecture, Dr Kwok and Mr Tam began their own neon sign project, financed through crowdfunding and a university grant, for the systematic documentation of local neon sign visual culture despite continued demolition. In a large-scale university research project titled 'Disappearance of Neon Signs' running from August 2015 to December 2016 (Kwok 2018), they systematically documented, with the help of students, the design (including the size, typology, colour, shape, graphic symbols, neon lettering and layout of information), way of hanging and position on the street of over 400 neon signs in Hong Kong (Kwok 2020). Supported by crowdfunding, Kwok and his team disseminated their findings through book and journal publications, talks and seminars.

This systematic digitisation, textualisation and categorisation process created a new aesthetic value for the heritagisation of neon signs. First, the heritage value of neon signs arises from the particular visual communication style seen in the lettering and design. As Gray (1986) contends, studying the historical development of the design, arrangement and composition of the font type can enable researchers to understand the culture, history, politics and everyday life of people. In the words of Brian Kwok and Anneke Coppoolse (2017: 91), who were the first to discuss neon signs as 'heritage' in Hong Kong, neon signs contain

> visual markers that are highly representative of Hong Kong's bicultural heritage: they involve images that range from old Chinese symbols to global signs of desire, and in their eclectic fashion they represent Hong Kong as a melting pot of tradition, colonial implication, and particular consumption.

In addition to the bicultural design, the calligraphy of neon signs has important historical, social, cultural and aesthetic value. The neon sign survey conducted by Kwok (2020) showed that in the 1940–70 period the most popular lettering was Beiwei (北魏; a style of Weibei ti). This style was popularised by Mr Qu Jian Gong (區建公 1887–1971), a famous calligrapher, in the post-war period in Hong Kong. Beiwei-style calligraphy became widely used as the font type of neon signs and store signs from the 1940s through to the 1970s (Kwok 2020). Its popularity was due to its high density of strokes arranged towards the centre and its outward expanding quality, which creates a distinct sharpness in its characters. These features, combined with a remarkable stroke thickness that renders the text highly legible even from great distances, culminated in an image that was simultaneously strong, bold, rhythmic and trustworthy, and these are all desirable traits for store signs (Kwok 2019).

Second, as Kwok suggests, the architectural spatial relationship between neon signs and the environment is a kind of heritage. Each type of sign presents different spatial relationships between architectures, streetscapes and human activity, reflecting the varied needs of businesses. Such relationships play a role in the construction of community life in each district and provide a glimpse into the distinct and profound visual cultures that permeate local daily life. As important communication elements in architecture, neon signs also play a role in the construction of narratives in the community and in local cultural history through the messages conveyed by their visual content.

Although M+ and design researchers have played a critical role in associating neon signs with art and heritage, the voices of local people on neon signs are seldom heard. What are the meanings, significance, values and emotions that people attach to the neon signs? How do people interact with neon signs in their everyday life and how do they feel the impact of their disappearance? These questions point to the affective dimensions of heritage, representing how people identify with urban heritage narratives. According to Caswell and Mallick

(2014), these emotional meanings are often neglected in official heritage practices, despite carrying important information about how the past was experienced. Surprisingly, in the interview data collected for this study, none of my informants had heard of the M+ crowdsourcing initiative or the survey by Kwok. Instead, they had learnt about the heritage value and status of neon signs through social media influencers they were following. My study of the social media activity surrounding neon signs as a set of affective practices provides some clues to address these questions.

3.3 Social Media, Heritage Social Media Influencers and Nostalgia

My recent studies have shown that one of the unexpected results of the 2019 social movement was a surge in the awareness of local culture conservation, including that of neon signs (Mak and Poon 2024). One informant said during an interview:

> To tell you the truth, recently, because of this era [since the 2019 democratic movement], there have been a growing number of nostalgic and vintage shops. I find myself falling in love with the old things in Hong Kong, such as the neon signs and ding-ding [train]. So, I started reading and following the Instagrammers and their pages.—Chan (30, F)

Some scholars have traced the rise of localism and the need for local culture conservation in Hong Kong to the anxiety, discontent and resentment after the Umbrella Movement in 2013 (Chen and Szeto 2015) or even earlier to the handover period, when Hong Kong people were facing an identity crisis (Ho 2020). A deep sense of loss and desire for nostalgic materials has emerged since the 2019 anti-extradition movement. Social discontent over the disappearance of neon signs is an extension of the social resentment in the post-movement period, as described in Haah Beech's 2023 *New York Times* article: 'Hong Kong today [after the implementation of security law] can feel like a city of shadows and metaphor, where a subject as innocuous as neon takes on shades of meaning'.

Parallel to the growing number of nostalgic shops is an increase in the number of nostalgic social media influencers with IG accounts focused on heritage or materials that are at the edge of disappearing. My content analysis showed that all of the IG posts related to neon signs that were set to be torn down delivered negative emotions, including loss, nostalgia and sadness. For example, a picture of an iconic and gigantic neon sign with a running deer posted on 17 March 2023 was accompanied by this poetic text:

> The neon lights passing by on the tram- the Lee Workers' Golden Deer [a brand] sweater. Goodbye, the little golden deer flying over Johnston Road. (Lam F)

Underneath the post appeared a number of comments expressing emotions ranging from loss to frustration:

> A: Going to be torn down? [fearful face emojis]
> B: So sad [crying emojis]
> C: The neon sign is not so big but still cannot stay. Luckily I took a picture when I passed by on a tram two months ago.

My findings also support Baretheir's argument that the process of capturing the feeling of place and material through photography by Lam, the social media influencer, was not only relevant for her experience taking photos of the signs of the Sweetheart Garden Restaurant, Pawnbroker and Koon Nam Wah – the three most well-remembered neon signs – but also changed the way in which the place and the material was perceived by her followers and others, potentially on a global scale. In other words, digital image practices, especially by a renowned photographer such as Lam, can transform the place itself.

Miss Lam agreed that the nostalgic emotion that emerged during the rapid social and political change has played an important role in the heritagisation of neon signs in recent years:

> I think we have a lot of emotions pinned on the neon signs due to our collective memories. In the past few years, we have witnessed many precious things disappear. We are projecting this heart-breaking feeling and the feeling of powerlessness onto the disappearing neon signs. Here, you find many people taking snapshots of the neon sign of Nan Cheong Pawn Shop before it was destroyed.—Lam (30, F)

Lam also believes that the energy generated from the emotion of loss, resentment and nostalgia has led to an increase in civil engagement in neon sign conservation (i.e. by taking photos, sharing posts and following heritage IG accounts) in the post-social movement era. Lam told us:

> There are a lot of people going out to take photos of the most 'Instagrammable' neon signs in the past year or two. Photography enables each individual to have their own angle and point of view to study neon signs. Also, everyone has different presentations. This practice of searching for neon signs so far can help many people to recognize and treasure some neon signs. The photos of the neon signs can serve as an important record of the urban landscape.
>
> My IG page has been active for 2 or 3 years, and now it has 49,000 followers. A few major, unexpected social issues arose during this time. For example, my followers increased by 30,000 after I posted about the government's decision to demolish the century-old underground reservoir in Bishop's Hill, and by an additional 5,000 followers after I posted photos about the sinking of Jumbo Seafood Restaurant. These events are important parts of our collective memories, [and they] resulted in dramatic increases in the number of followers of my IG page.—Lam (30, F)

Lam's narrative on the rising concern about local heritage due to the nostalgic feelings brought on by social issues supports Smith and Campbell's (2017: 615) theory on nostalgia and heritage-making:

> Framed as nostalgia … this form of selection is identified as inherently political. Heritage and emotions such as nostalgia are intimately entwined and inseparable. While practices of heritage making can be enacted using other emotional registers beyond nostalgia, nostalgia, nonetheless, is logically a key foundational and activating emotion of heritage making.

3.4 Rescuing Neon Signs and the Hope to Conserve Hong Kong's Identity

Unlike the overwhelmingly negative emotions unveiled in the IG accounts of social media influencers who focus on the disappearance of heritage, my content analysis showed that the emotions circulated on the IG accounts of social media influencers who focus on neon sign conservation were mostly positive, including hope, pride, excitement and happiness.

One example of such a conservation IG account is that of the NGO Tetra Neon Exchange (TNX). As recorded in TNX's IG and Facebook posts, it is the public's strong affection for and

attachment to neon signs that motivates the NGO to continue their challenging conservation efforts, participant recruitment and network maintenance. This affective motivation is strongly reflected in posts on Facebook relating to the demolition and conservation of neon signs. One example is the neon sign of Bao Sheng Da Ya (Bao Sheng Big Pawnshop) in Wong Tai-sin, documented on TNX's IG and Facebook accounts:

> During the removal of the neon sign of Bao Sheng pawnshop, many workers in the nearby shops and older residents stopped to watch. After learning about our work, they said that they were so happy and expressed their gratitude to us. This 'rescue' of the neon sign of a 60-year-old pawnshop is important to them as the sign has witnessed their life journey – from young to old. (TNX 2021)

The social media post on this rescue event aptly illustrates the importance of social media in the emotional aspect of the heritage experience and in connecting individuals within the neon sign heritage actor-network. For many local residents, the demolition evoked childhood and collective memories. Chan and her team witnessed many spectators crying as the neon sign was taken down, broken apart and removed. Others expressed gratitude to the team for giving the sign a 'new home' and 'second life'. In addition to personally acknowledging Chan and her team, many shared their appreciation for the conservation work online, reinforcing the heritage value of the neon sign. In response to the conservation of the Bao Sheng Da Ya neon sign, a blogger posted on IG: 'Time flies, and most neon signs slowly disappear. Only Hong Kong people are willing to keep them' (@intheseyears, 11 May 2020).

A post by TNX on another 'rescue' event provides further information on the importance of digitisation of emotion in the process of heritage conversation and its impact on the pedagogy of the aesthetic value of neon signs. In the post, TNE reports being informed in May 2021 by streetsigns.com that the neon signs of Xiangxin Pawnshop had been placed under tents, suggesting their imminent removal (TNX 2021). The pawnshop manager had been unaware of the heritage value of his shop's neon sign prior to a two-hour conversation with Chan. During this discussion, Chan shared her extensive knowledge of the history, value and declining number of Hong Kong's neon signs and the importance of conservation efforts. Chan also highlighted several elements of the Xiangxin Pawnshop neon sign that make it aesthetically and culturally valuable. First, with a history of more than 20 years, the sign served as an artefact reflecting the historical role of pawnshops in providing micro-financing to lower-income individuals from colonial to post-colonial Hong Kong. Second, the design featured a rare and significant motif, featuring a pair of double-circle-shaped behemoths with an upside-down bat clutching a coin. Third, its strategic location, visible from even the far end of the bustling Kuai Fu Street, made it a 'lighthouse' of sorts, symbolising hope for many – and particularly for gamblers seeking funds for bets at the nearby Jockey Club. Moved by Chan's detailed explanation, the manager was convinced of the sign's heritage value. He even succeeded in persuading the pawnshop owner to erect a new neon sign, abandoning the original plan to install a standard LED street sign.

In line with Bareither, these social media posts show how neon sign heritage sites often have strong emotional affordances that can be enacted by influencers, activists and visitors as part of emotional memory practices that are crucial for mobilising other people for neon sign conservation. My findings also show how digital media, mediated by social media influencers, enable visitors to enact the emotional affordances of heritage places through the capturing, sharing and contextualising of digital images and how this process constitutes a particular kind of digital memory practice working essentially through place. This digital memory is essential in forming new 'memory communities' that creatively reassemble fragments from a shared past into dynamic collective memories, fostering a reflective expression of contemporary identity (Silberman and Purser 2012). This aligns with Smith's (2006, 270) observation that during the performance of heritage, memories are discussed and shared among the audience and performers, transforming into collective memories, which mark and reinforce their importance. Smith (2006, 265) further notes that the primary consequence of heritage performance is its capacity to generate community identity. The process by which neon signs became symbols of Hong Kong identity is not straightforward; however, it appears that this identity was constructed through community experiences. Acts of remembering and commemorating removed neon signs are not merely processes of identification but also constitutive processes of heritage-(re)making.

The social media posts of neon signs illustrate (1) the making of heritage during photo-taking and rescue events; (2) the enactment of emotional experiences of both the influencer/activists and their followers through posting and viewing the photos and text of the events; and (3) that knowledge about the cultural and heritage value of neon signs is neither static nor predetermined by experts. Social media influencers have been involved in heritage performance and have a critical role in increasing awareness of the heritage and cultural value (e.g. font type and aesthetic value) of neon lights. These heritage values are co-produced during heritage performance through the deconstruction and re-erection of neon signs, the social media posting of photos and text and the ensuing online discussion.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I develop a conceptual and methodological approach to the study of the impact of digital technology – specifically crowdsourcing and social media – on heritage conservation. My case study of the neon sign collection at the M+ museum supports Oomen and Aroyo's (2011) argument that crowdsourcing can help to build a more open, connected and smart cultural heritage that heavily involves consumers and providers while at the same time generating an artistic and aesthetic value for neon signs that has been overlooked by the Hong Kong government. Through the 'Mobile M+: NEONSIGNS.HK' project, the data and knowledge of neon signs are open (the data are open, shared and accessible), connected (the use of linked data allows for interoperable infrastructures, such as Google Culture and Art, to more closely connect users and providers) and smart (the use of knowledge technologies and web technologies, such as sorting and filtering, allow for tailored data to be delivered to the right users, in the right context, at any time and place).

In addition to crowdsourcing theory, the concept of emotional affordances is introduced in this article and proves to be a useful conceptual tool for analysing the capacities of the materiality of neon sign heritage sites and visitors' digital devices to enable, prompt and restrict the enactment of particular emotional experiences. These capacities are realised by visitors through complex memory practices unfolding in-between heritage sites and digital media. In this study, I focus on how the heritagisation process occurs through affective practices on social media, as influencers and their posts on social media afford particular emotional experiences for their followers,

before describing how these emotional affordances of the neon signs and the place are enacted through the emotional affordances of digital media. I demonstrate how influencers use digital media to 'capture the feeling' of the neon sign and the site, how the digital image practices (taking photos and posting on social media) capture the emotional experiences of neon signs and how these practices enact the emotional affordances of memory to present the past through emotions and share experiences with others. The approach outlined in this article can aid in the understanding of this co-constitution in the context of memory cultures and heritage sites. By taking pictures of a heritage site, contextualising them and sharing them with others, visitors do not merely reflect a place. Instead, by digitally enacting the place's emotional affordances and bringing them into (often public) view, visitors participate in its making. From this perspective, crowdsourcing and digital image practices can have a constitutive function for the heritagisation of neon signs and thus deserve more careful analytical attention.

Overall, this paper highlights the utility of combining the conceptual approaches of digital technology, emotional affordance and critical heritage theory while adopting interdisciplinary mixed-methods approaches to understand crowdsourcing and social media data. As the case of the neon signs and the associated social media posts in Hong Kong illustrates, IG and Facebook can safeguard community expressions that are not officially recognised. This research should foster further empirical work that examines how crowdsourcing and social media can work together to safeguard intangible heritage recreated by communities and groups while exposing the power dynamics that are often embedded in national presentations.

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