Shakespeare Lives on Instagram

Report Three

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Contents

1 Executive Summary

This report is the third of three that examine how the British Council used Instagram to promote, and promote engagement with, the Shakespeare Lives programme. In this final phase of our research, we analysed all posts (106) on the British Council's main [Shakespeare Lives Instagram](#) account between 10 August and 19 December 2016. This period included several initiatives to promote Shakespeare Lives on Instagram, including the #ShakespeareNoFilter campaign retelling of A Midsummer Night's Dream on the British Council Europe Account which we discussed in our second Instagram report, and on the main Shakespeare Lives account 'takeovers' by actor [Ankur Bahl at the Globe Theatre](#) and poet [Deanna Rodger](#) at the Vancouver Writers Festival, and [primary school children in Greece](#) who showed their 'selfie' version of Macbeth.

We will use this analysis to draw comparison with how the main Shakespeare Lives Instagram account promoted the programme, and the extent to which this received engagement or provoked conversation, in the earlier stages of the programme, having analysed all posts between 13 October 2015 and 8 August 2016 during our first phase of research (findings presented in Instagram report one). Did the initiatives launched on Instagram in the later stages of the programme help to boost engagement with Shakespeare Lives on Instagram? If so, which Shakespeare Lives posts were most appealing to Instagram users?

1.1 Summary Of Findings

- The British Council provides **a diverse array of media forms and formats** in its Instagram feed for Shakespeare Lives. Innovative play re-enactments sit alongside colourful quote graphics and 'finish the quote' competitions, photographs of global Shakespeare performances, events, related celebrities, and more. In addition to this formal diversity, the Council's outputs invoke a variety of registers. For example, one post might target very young audiences (for example Roald Dahl quotes or Primary School Retelling posts), and the next might appeal to more intellectual Instagrammers (for example literary posts about the first folio).

- While this may facilitate a socially inclusive set of Instagram outputs, analyses of engagement do not suggest that this is reflected through the successful engagement of a diverse demographic of Instagram audiences. The British Council may be **spreading itself too thinly**, and could benefit from a deeper understanding and **focused targeting** of the key, untapped user groups populating Instagram.

- Research shows that Instagram is overwhelmingly used by young adults (teens-35). However, our reports have found that much engagement with @ShakespeareLives and other related Instagram outputs comes from intellectually-minded audiences and 'usual suspects' – British Council and related industry accounts – rather than younger people. We suggest several **ways in which the Council can appeal to Instagram's youthful populace**.

- We found the Instagram outputs of successful Scandinavian television teen drama, Skam, to be a fruitful comparative resource and best practice model. Their highly

successful Instagram-specific outputs explore challenging themes. @ShakespeareLives has set up dialogues about race and depression, and **there is space for new, challenging thematic explorations**.

- The page is averaging 55 likes and comments per post (though, as we have previously found, comments usually come in the form of handle link-ins: Instagram is largely an aesthetic space rather than a dialogic one).

- Compared with similar cultural organisation the Goethe Institute (which receives hundreds of likes per post), this remains a very low level of audience engagement. It is difficult to explain this comparative discrepancy: perhaps the Goethe Institute promote their outputs more in 'real life'. The Goethe Institute appear to attract more internal (German) audiences than the British Council. Indeed, in our previous Instagram reports we found that most posts including #ShakespeareLives do not mention the organisation (are Instagram users and British citizens more broadly unfamiliar with the British Council?). We suggest **ways of appealing to local audiences**.

- Our analyses show that @ShakespeareLives posts are well-received when they appeal to specific localities and contexts. **Real-time behind-the-scenes posts are popular**: they provide audiences with an Instagram-exclusive supplement to current, real-life events.

1.2 Recommendations

1. The target audience for British Council content should be is more carefully pinpointed. Instagram is mainly populated by young adult audiences, and this is the group that Shakespeare Lives and subsequent cultural programmes should focus on catering better to, for example through the themes presented and an appropriate choice of celebrities and/or champions. The experimental and diverse array of forms and registers employed on the Shakespeare Lives account is creative and innovative, but **audiences may be unclear as to who the posts are for**. The Shakespeare Lives account received much of its active engagement from 'usual suspects' within the British Council and related organisations.

2. Choice of themes: the British Council could make the most of Shakespeare's potential, as was done successfully in the earlier Shakespeare Lives posts. Shakespeare's work incorporates a kaleidoscopic variety of challenging themes beyond just romance. To provide for young adult audiences, the Shakespeare Lives feed could draw on this more, **pushing thematic boundaries** whilst remaining within its political, cross-cultural constraints.

3. The British Council could consider featuring a selection of **celebrities who have an existing following on Instagram**, as well as a link with Shakespeare. Drawing upon celebrities within existing Instagram networks and conversations, and employing the right kind of current, challenging themes, will open up British Council content to substantial networks and bring in more engagement.

4. Our three Instagram reports have found that audiences respond well when Shakespeare Lives Instagram posts tie in with specific calendar events and specific localities. The British Council can **build on the strong sense of time and place** it is able to provide through references to programme events. Whether the post is from The Globe, or at a particular Shakespeare-related event, @ShakespeareLives can use location tags and hashtags more precisely to encourage interaction. The appeal to British locations and contexts such as the Globe Theatre perhaps gives people what they want or expect when they 'follow' the British Council's Shakespeare Lives on Instagram. People generally use this platform for recording/observing the aesthetic of a particular moment in time and space.

2 Methods

Between 10 August and 19 December 2016, the British Council's Shakespeare Lives Instagram account posted 106 times. All of these posts were manually collected from the account in an Excel coding workbook. We used the same coding framework as was used in phases one and two of our research for analysing British Council Instagram posts, with some minor additions to take into account changes in the content of the Shakespeare Lives account since the first phase. We expanded the framework to include new standalone projects within the feed (such as the Primary School Retelling and #ShakespeareNoFilter) so that the merits of the British Council's most recent experimental endeavours could each be analysed, to see which of these initiatives was able to increase engagement with Shakespeare Lives on Instagram. Please see the Summary of Methodology document for full coding frameworks.

3   Findings and Analysis

We will now discuss the most significant and recurring themes in the British Council's use of Instagram through the Shakespeare Lives account in the second half of 2016. This includes discussion of the extent to which Instagram users engaged with the British Council's content, which types of post and which themes or public figures received the most engagement, and how this compares both with engagement with the account in the earlier stages of the programme and with the accounts of similar cultural relations organisations. We will also discuss how the British Council can better target a younger audience on Instagram, through comparison with an account that does this particularly well.

3.1.1 Levels of Interaction

In our first phase of research on the Shakespeare Lives Instagram account, we found the feed to be inconsistent. Posts were irregularly timed and not planned to tie in with specific calendar events and specific localities (for example, no posts were made for 14 weeks before June 2016). Our analysis of posts from the same account between August and December 2016 demonstrates much greater consistency in the main Shakespeare Lives page outputs. Posts were made regularly and often (20-30 per month). During the later months of the programme, the account became established as a significant, regular presence on Instagram.

As the graph below shows (Figure 1), the overall level of interaction (including likes and comments) in this corpus of posts clusters around 55. This is higher than the average between November 2015 and August 2016 (around 40), and roughly matches audience engagement levels with the retelling of A Midsummer Night's Dream (MSND) for the #ShakespeareNoFilter campaign on @britishcouncileurope (which we analysed in our second Instagram report).

Out of 106 Instagram posts,
how many have provoked each level of interaction

Number of Instagram posts

Level of Interaction
Median = 55. Range = [21;137].

Figure 1: Number of British Council Instagram posts by level of interaction (likes and comments)

However, 55 is overall a very low average interaction level for a cultural organisation by Instagram's standards. The Goethe Institute Germany's Instagram account reaches 500-700 interactions per post (see, for example, Image 2 below), largely through posting simple city/landscape photographs and quotes. They do not use innovative campaigns akin to the British Council's live retellings of Shakespeare plays or account takeovers. The Goethe Institute is a cultural organisation of similar standing to the British Council: why do their posts have so much higher a level of interaction on this platform? It may be that the Goethe Institute's objective is simple reach, whereas the British Council seeks richer forms of engagement. A large proportion of the Goethe Institute's audiences are German, whereas we have found that the British Council's are most often not from within the UK: perhaps the Council could do more to promote the engagement of domestic as well as overseas audiences and connect them. In our first phase of research, we found that the British Council brand was not well known within the UK.

While it is difficult to explain the comparative discrepancy with Goethe Institute audience interaction, this report will offer some actionable points for targeting the Instagram feeds of cultural programmes to better suit those who most frequently use Instagram. This is based on analyses of the British Council's posts, of the best practice case study Instagram outputs of Scandinavian drama Skam (see below), and of audience trends on Instagram. These points

principally relate to (I) audience targeting (II) choice of featured celebrity (III) linking in with specific current events and localities and (IV) choice in themes.

Image 1: Goethe Institute Germany Instagram post sharing Goethe quote, with likes and comments

A key, emergent point of comparison to the British Council's outputs, especially to the #ShakespeareNoFilter campaign which we studied during the second phase of our research, is the successful Instagram outputs of the Scandinavian TV drama, Skam ("Shame" in English. See Fig. 3). The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) give each of their teenage cast an Instagram account. These posts cover risqué themes compared with Shakespeare Lives, and supplement the TV programme, which has been a hit with wide audiences and is about to be brought to the US (*Guardian*, 2016). These accounts reach hundreds, sometimes thousands of interactions per post, reaching diverse global audiences (*New York Times*, 2016). This work provides us with a best practice case study. What are the secrets to Skam's success? What can the Council do to perform at a higher level on Instagram? This report will incorporate a comparative analysis to see what Skam's success can tell us.

Image 2: Instagram post about the characters Isak and Evan ('Evak') in Scandinavian drama Skam

This report identifies several key projects that the Shakespeare Lives feed refers to: posts from the Globe (this includes actors' takeover and other behind the scenes posts), the Primary school retelling (where primary school children showed their modern take on Shakespeare's works) and #ShakespeareNoFilter (this includes @ShakespeareLives references to the live Instagram retellings of MSND and Othello, which were posted on @BritishCouncilEurope). This report seeks to explain why some projects were less or more popular than others, and what can be learned from this. As Figure 3 shows, the Primary school retelling received the lowest level of engagement, and posts from the Globe received the highest. One explanation for this may be related to the British Council's unclear audience targeting, which we will now discuss.
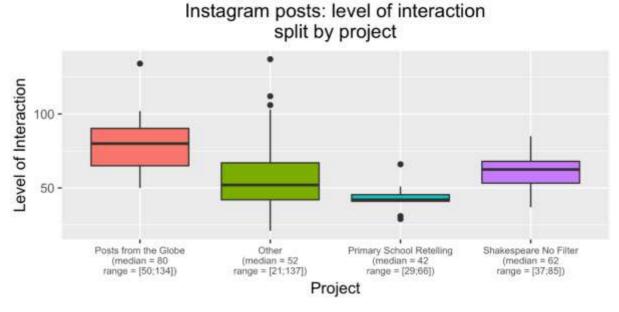

Figure 2: Level of interaction with British Council posts by the project shown

3.1.2 Audience targeting

Online demographic research suggests that the vast majority of Instagram users are young adults (Pew Research Centre, 2016). Indeed, according to Brandwatch's global comparative study, 90% of Instagram users are younger than 35 (Brandwatch, 2016). The Scandinavian drama Skam presents an interesting example of a cultural output with a clear target audience on television and on Instagram: teens. Yet Skam 'has become a sensation across Scandinavia with viewers of many ages, thanks to a clever multi-platform format and social media strategy' (*New York Times*, 2016). It is necessary that the British Council understand and cater especially to the particular audience bracket of active users on Instagram, young adults, in order to increase engagement with its promotion of cultural programmes. Following Skam's lead, this kind of audience targeting can still be accessible and appealing to all ages.

The Shakespeare Lives Instagram account intermingles and experiments with a wide range of registers, forms, styles and themes. This experimentation, though refreshing and creative, results in an unclear sense of who the target audience is. In its effort to produce innovative content on Instagram, the British Council may be spreading itself too thinly. The selfie enactment of Macbeth (Primary school retelling, see Image 3 below) was, as Figure 3 above shows, the most unpopular output, perhaps because it appeals primarily to very young and parent-age audiences in its tone and form, and this conflicts with other forms and registers on the Shakespeare Lives feed.

The feed intermixes this schoolchildren's creation with a variety of other media, which perhaps appeal to too wide a variety of audiences. These include Shakespeare versus Dahl quote competitions (Dahl has limited appeal. See Image 3), displays of cultural/intellectual capital (see picture of Shakespeare's first folio, Image 5) and rapped retellings of Romeo and Juliet; as discussed in our first report on Instagram: 'The Council needs to decide whether they are trying to make rap fans like Shakespeare or make Shakespeare fans like rap.'
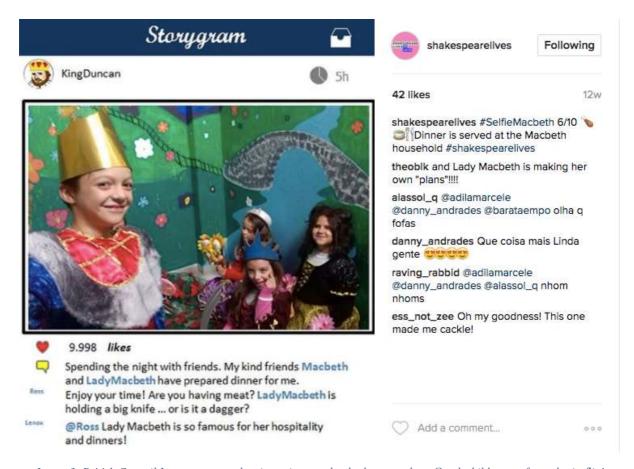
Storygram

KingDuncan · 5h

9.998 *likes*

Ross: Spending the night with friends. My kind friends Macbeth and LadyMacbeth have prepared dinner for me.
Enjoy your time! Are you having meat? LadyMacbeth is holding a big knife ... or is it a dagger?

Lenox: @Ross Lady Macbeth is so famous for her hospitality and dinners!

shakespearelives · Following

42 likes · 12w

shakespearelives #SelfieMacbeth 6/10 🍗🍽 Dinner is served at the Macbeth household #shakespearelives

theoblk and Lady Macbeth is making her own "plans"!!!!

alassol_q @adilamarcele @danny_andrades @barataempo olha q fofas

danny_andrades Que coisa mais Linda gente 😍😍😍😍😍

raving_rabbid @adilamarcele @danny_andrades @alassol_q nhom nhoms

ess_not_zee Oh my goodness! This one made me cackle!

Add a comment... ○○○

Image 3: British Council Instagram post showing primary school takeover, where Greek children performed a 'seflie' version of Macbeth
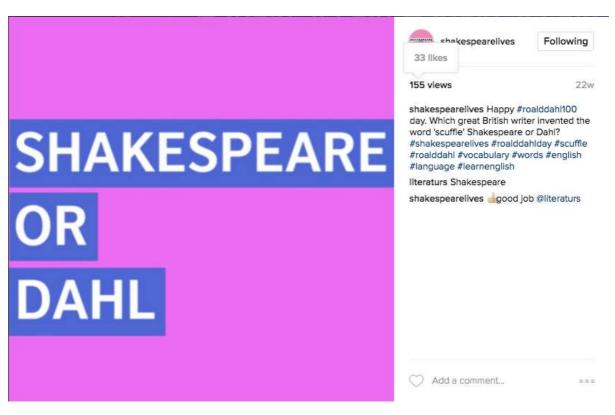
Image 4: British Council Instagram post asking followers a question, showing response and British Council reply.

Image 5: British Council post showing Shakespeare's First Folio display in Hong Kong

As we found in our second report on Instagram, this Instagram feed draws comments from many 'usual suspects' (British Council accounts or affiliated industry accounts). For example, @UKinLaos and @childrenshakespeare (see Image 6 below), and written engagement with the post shown in Image 7 below comes from related artists and industry (@alastairhunter is an artistic director and @kevinspaceyfoundation trains actors).
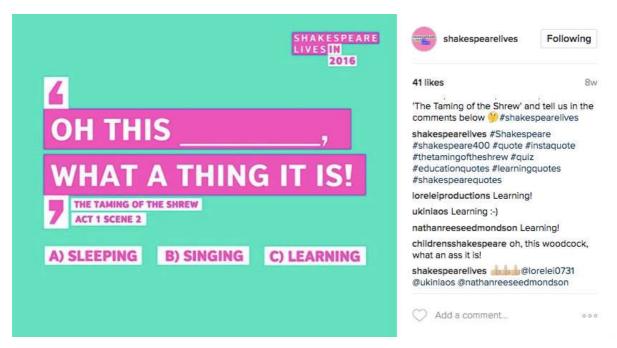

Image 6: British Council Instagram post asking followers a question, with comments and British Council response

Image 7: British Council Instagram post asking followers to complete a quote, with comments and British Council response

3.1.3 Thematic choices

Our first report on Instagram found that British Council posts set up dialogue about key themes surrounding Shakespeare, especially around diversity in language, register, dialect and class, but also in race: Shakespeare is a vehicle for social progression, for example Othello is related to black history and civil rights. During this analysis of posts from the later stage of the programme, posts about Black British experiences and mental health resonated well with audiences (see Image 8 below). The Instagram feed also targeted issues around male suicide (see Image 9 below, which includes the It's Ok To Talk hashtag). These powerful thematic choices could be explored further, and in other intersectional domains. Shakespeare Lives outputs most often draw upon light-hearted themes of love and romance, with A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo & Juliet the most appropriated/adapted, light-hearted works.

Skam is a hard-hitting drama exploring current, challenging coming-of-age themes like sex, depression, rape and religion. Through Instagram, it plays cleverly with notions of online and offline 'status anxiety' (New York Times, 2016). On Instagram, the British Council could push the potential of their Shakespearean outputs (our outputs from other cultural programmes) to deal with a broader spectrum of challenging themes such as these, which have proved relevant to the young adult audiences using the platform. The British Council has political, cross-cultural and organisational constraints, but Shakespeare is no doubt up to the task.

Image 8: British Council Instagram post promoting Dear Mr Shakespeare short film

Image 9: British Council Instagram post promoting Hamlet version of #ShakespeareNoFilter on the British Council Europe account

3.1.4 Celebrity selection

The Shakespeare Lives feed finds an exciting variety of ways to appropriate Shakespeare and make him relevant today through featuring celebrities such as actors, poets and playwrights. However, this does not correlate with greater engagement. As Figure 4 below shows, visual or textual reference to a celebrity does not, as we found in other reports about Shakespeare Lives on Twitter and Facebook across languages, correspond with a strong level of interaction. The Shakespeare Lives feed incorporates lots of celebrities and portraits, but we must deduce that these are the wrong kind of celebrities, and are often portraits of unknown actors.

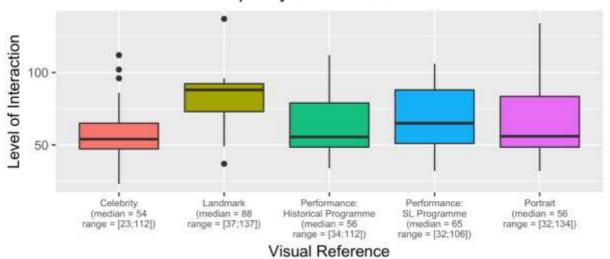## Instagram posts: level of interaction split by visual reference

Figure 3: Level of interaction with British Council Instagram posts, by the theme of posts

The celebrities featured, for example poet Deanna Rodger (Image 12), Phil Davis (an actor in BBC series Poldark, Image 11) and Girls Aloud (Image 10), are probably too obscure or out of currency for most Instagram audiences. We must assume that fans of these figures or forms of popular culture do not dwell on Shakespeare-related Instagram pages, or move in the relevant cultural circles on their social networks. The reverse may also be true: the most committed Shakespeare fans may not inhabit Instagram. With a clearer sense of its target audience (crucially, untapped young adult Instagrammers), the British Council could consider finding more current, relevant celebrities in popular culture, preferably those that have an existing presence on Instagram.

Image 10: British Council post featuring Girls Aloud, promoting The Selector Shakespeare Special

Image 11: British Council post promoting King Lear short film featuring actor Phil Davis

Image 12: British Council Instagram post announcing account takeover by poet Deanna Rodger

3.1.5 Contextualisation

In our first and second Instagram reports, we found that people engage well when posts tie into current context, be it a visual/textual reference to location or a particular event. Figure 5 reinforces this, showing that visual references to landmarks generate higher levels of interaction than other aesthetic themes. Brandwatch found that posts with a location receive 79% more engagement (Brandwatch, 2016). But, as we can see in Figure 6, few posts incorporate geographical setting: this can be built upon. The findings for posts that referred to a current/calendar event were similar: popular with audiences, but not frequently posted by the British Council. For example, posts from the Globe Theatre were especially successful with Instagram audiences, particularly photographs of a Globe performance with an accompanying quote (see Image 13 below). Perhaps this is because this is the kind of post people, especially international audiences, want and expect when they follow the Shakespeare Lives account? Undoubtedly, such posts exhibit a strong sense of place, legacy and history at the Globe, providing a virtual slice of real arts experience, at the spiritual heart and home of all that is Shakespeare. Indeed, in the post shown in Image 13 below someone comments, "these are the types of photos I love the most".
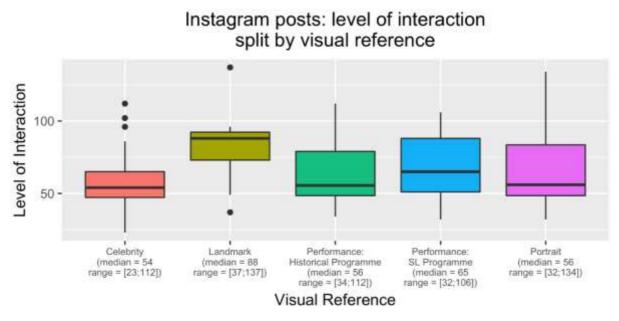

Figure 5: Level of interaction with British Council Instagram posts, by the visual reference of posts
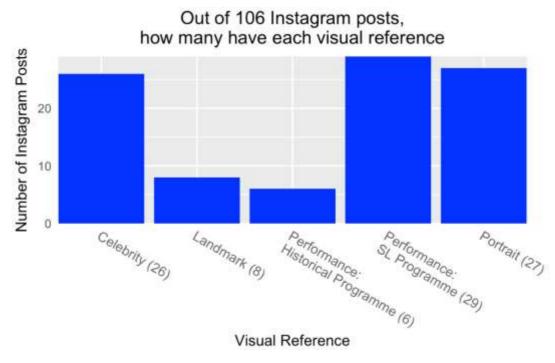
Figure 6: Number of British Council Instagram posts by visual reference included

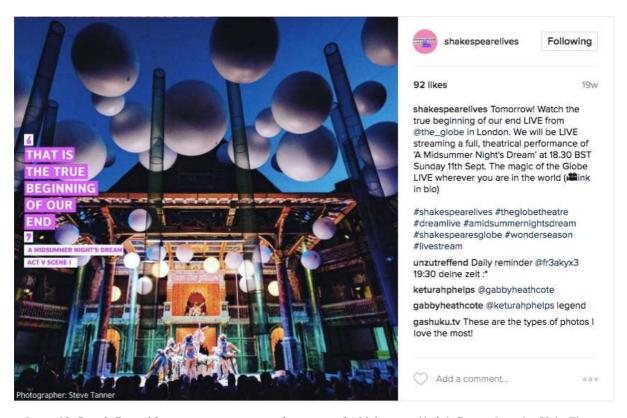Image 13: British Council Instagram post promoting livestream of A Midsummer Night's Dream from the Globe Theatre

The British Council can build on the strong sense of time and place that is popular in posts, for example posting more frequently to promote specific events or show events which are currently taking place to followers around the world through Instagram. This perhaps gives people what

they want/expect when they 'follow' the British Council's Shakespeare Lives on Instagram: people generally use the medium for recording the aesthetic of a particular moment in time and place, in real-time.

Another example of a popular Globe post is Image 14 below, which shows the actor who has staged a 'takeover' of the Shakespeare Lives account sitting in the audience at his own production of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Despite giving the audience a spoiler in the comments, this is a real-time post connecting Instagrammers with a real-life event and setting. Just like Skam's Instagram outputs, which supplement a TV series, this is an intimate extra addition to a public output, a behind-the-scenes sneak-peek. Comparing this with the #ShakespeareNoFilter retelling of MSND on the British Council Europe account studied in our second Instagram report, which we found to be at times confusing and inauthentic for audiences, we can see that this was perhaps because the Mechanicals 'band' shown in the story had no real events or 'gigs' to hype and supplement. **A key finding is that behind-the-scenes posts, especially those from the Globe, have proven to be successful and engaging; more posts could play with this format, using Instagram as a lively supplement to tangible, real-life cultural and artistic outputs, checking in explicitly with particular locations.**

This point is confirmed when we analyse a selection of well-received posts (shown below) from the Shakespeare Lives account. In the post shown in Image 15, there is a strong sense of place and timeliness in the textual reference, which advertises an interactive Shakespeare Lives activity to audiences in London in real time. Image 16 shows an example of one of the LIVE Lord Mayor's Show posts, which linked up well with the Twitter live feed, promoting a current, interactive event. Image 17 ties in with Halloween, and Image 18 with a specific country and cultural identities. Image 18 also employs the interrogative mode effectively, as global audience members post about their favourite carpet in response to being asked for their opinion (see Image 19 for comments).

Image 14: British Council post showing actor Ankur Bahl in the audience at the Globe, with his comment telling followers about the production of A Midsummer Night's Dream about to be performed
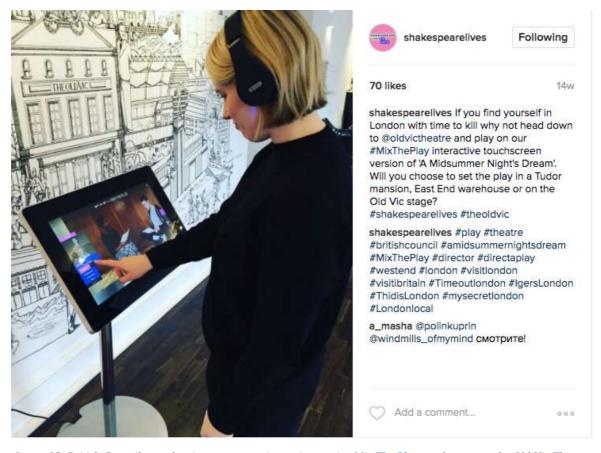

Image 15: British Council post showing someone using an interactive Mix The Play touchscreen at the Old Vic Theatre

shakespearelives · Following

71 likes · 12w

shakespearelives 2 Days to Go - @vsointernational volunteers and @emergencyexitarts bringing some colour to the Shakespeare Lives float. What do you think? Only two days left until we get to parade this magnificent piece of work in the 2016 Lord Mayor's Show in London. Follow the fun on our Twitter channel @BritishArts from 11am on Saturday 12 November. #Shakeapearelives #playyourpart #lordmayorsshow

Add a comment...

Image 16: British Council Instagram post showing the Shakespeare Lives float at the Lord Mayor's Show

shakespearelives · Following

132 likes · 14w

shakespearelives #repost @the_globe 🎃 How to carve a Shakespeare pumpkin like a pro 👉Link to blog post and full instructions in our bio
Happy Halloween! Which Shakespearean character would you like to carve into a pumpkin?
#shakespearelives #halloween #pumpkin #halloween2016 #trickortreat

la_rahel @milou_de_lair

trystan830 @extermafriends

Add a comment...

Image 17: British Council Instagram post showing a Shakespeare-themed pumpkin on Halloween

Image 18:British Council Instagram post asking followers to pick their favourite carpet from the Azerbaijan Shakespeare carpet competition

Image 19: Comments on Image 18 above, showing followers answering the question and the British Council responding

4 Conclusions

According to the Cultural Value Model (see our assessment report for the entire Shakespeare Lives Programme on this website), the British Council should be aiming for a level of engagement that falls within a band of equilibrium, i.e. a sustainable, happy middle ground. Comparing models of Instagram use such as Skam and the Goethe Institute's Instagram posts, the Council has work to do to build and grow its audience levels on this important and newly popularised social media platform. According to the Global Web Index (2015) Instagram is one of the top social media platforms, and its usage doubled from 2013 to 2015.

The British Council's use of Instagram shows potential for 'explosive growth', the main features of which, Postill suggests, include: 'social drama liminality; real-time participation; multiple online and face-to-face arenas and intense but ephemeral news media coverage' (Postill, 2012:179). This 'social drama liminality' may well include a more focused targeting of liminal themes, as in Skam's challenging outputs for young adults and the British Council's well-received forays into themes of race and mental health. Such themes perhaps raise the most pressing, difficult and human questions, a key reason people keep coming back to Shakespeare.

In addition, the British Council can do more to contextualise their posts. Instagram posts that have worked well usually incorporate a strong sense of place, cultural identity, and/or tie in to current affairs or a current event. The notion of currency is important; the British Council must also work on choosing celebrity references that have relevance to, and so are appropriate for, Instagram audiences. Choice of celebrities and of themes must complement a young adult target audience. Intellectual, academic people and older people enjoy Shakespeare, but they do not dwell on Instagram in the same way that young adults do: this is the group that posts must appeal to if Shakespeare Lives (or promotion of similar cultural programmes) is to tap into more active networks on the platform and reach a level of impact and interaction on a par with organisations like the Goethe Institute. **A key recommendations is that the BC should be developing a long term instagram presence and then using that to drive engagement with global events such as Shakespeare Lives, rather than being relatively inactive for most of the time and then trying to engage users when there's a special event.**

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