

Transgression as Brand: Tate Modern's Cultural Expressiveness through Space and Language

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Abstract:

This study takes Tate Modern as a case to explore how the transformation of an abandoned industrial space into a contemporary art museum shapes public perception through spatial narratives and brand language. A total of 500 high-quality user comments were collected from Instagram and Reddit, and the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) method was applied to construct a semantic network of keywords based on three dimensions: Prevalence, Diversity, and Connectivity. The results reveal that public discourse predominantly centers around the themes of “space–experience–curation,” with high-SBS keywords such as “space” and “turbine_hall” occupying core positions in the semantic network. In contrast, official brand terms like “bold,” “inclusive,” and “visionary” appeared in less than 3.5% of comments and scored more than one standard deviation below the mean, failing to enter the Top 20. The study highlights a gap between institutional brand language and public narratives, and proposes strategies to enhance brand communication through spatial storytelling. This research offers valuable insights for museum branding and the cultural communication of industrial heritage sites.

Keywords: Brand Language, Spatial Narrative, Semantic Brand Score, Industrial Heritage, Audience Discourse

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Research Questions

With ongoing urban regeneration and cultural transformation, the adaptive reuse of industrial heritage sites as cultural institutions has become a significant trend. A key concern in current academic discourse

is how museums construct public perception through spatial narratives and brand language. As a representative case of industrial heritage reuse in the UK, Tate Modern offers a compelling context to examine this issue. However, there remains a lack of empirical research on whether its brand value terms—such as “bold,” “inclusive,” and “visionary”—are effectively internalized within public discourse and capable of sustaining cultural transmission.

1.2 Research Aims and Significance

This study aims to investigate the relationship between Tate Modern's brand language and public narratives. By collecting social media discourse and applying the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) method to construct a semantic network, it analyzes the alignment between institutional brand value terms and high-SBS keywords, as well as their respective positions within the semantic structure. The study further proposes strategies for enhancing brand communication through spatial storytelling. It not only fills a gap in research on the internalization of museum brand language but also provides empirical evidence for brand development in the context of industrial heritage sites.

2. Literature Review

Existing studies primarily focus on how museums shape brand identity through mission statements and visual identity systems (Kapferer, 2012). However, Freire and Lourenço (2021) argue that when brand language lacks contextualized narratives, it becomes difficult for the public to reproduce such language organically, leading to a decline in brand recognition. Spatial narrative is increasingly recognized as a crucial medium for conveying brand value, utilizing physical space and exhibition design to express meaning (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). For instance, Tate Modern's "Turbine Hall" is a highly recognizable symbol of industrial heritage reuse, but whether it can form a stable association with abstract brand values remains to be empirically validated.

At the same time, the rise of social media offers large-scale data for analyzing public language (Bruhn et al., 2012). Keller's brand knowledge model (1993, 2003) emphasizes that the richness and strength of brand associations are central to brand equity. Yet, there is limited research on how brand equity is constructed through social media in the context of industrial heritage sites. In recent years, the SBS method has gained traction for its ability to assess the semantic embeddedness of keywords by combining frequency, neighbor count, and connectivity (Fronzetti Colladon, 2018). While it has been applied in brand equity research (Biffignandi & Troiano, 2022), its use in the study of museum brand language remains relatively rare.

3. Methods

3.1 Data Source and Sample Description

This study collected user-generated content related to Tate

Modern from Instagram and Reddit, yielding over 1,000 individual comments. After removing duplicates and irrelevant content, a final dataset of 500 high-quality comments was retained. The sample covers a time period from January 2023 to December 2024.

3.2 Data Cleaning and Pre-processing

The data cleaning process involved the following steps:

- (1) Removal of stop words (e.g., it, of, is);
- (2) Phrase unification (e.g., turbine hall → turbine_hall);
- (3) Retention of only nouns, verbs, and adjectives;
- (4) Construction of a word co-occurrence matrix using a sliding window (window size = 5).

3.3 SBS Method and Core Formulas

This study employs the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) method to assess the semantic embeddedness of keywords. SBS is calculated by summing the standardized scores of three dimensions: Prevalence, Diversity, and Connectivity:

$$PREV(g_i) = \frac{f(g_i)}{totW}$$

Where g_i denotes the keyword $f(g_i)$ is its frequency, and $totW$ is the total number of words in the corpus.

$$DIV(g_i) = \frac{d(g_i)}{n-1}$$

Where $d(g_i)$ is the number of unique neighboring words that co-occur with g_i , and n is the total number of keywords.

$$CON(g_i) = \frac{\sum \left(\frac{d_{jk}(g_i)}{d_{jk}} \right)}{\frac{(n-1)(n-2)}{2}}$$

Where $d_{jk}(g_i)$ represents the number of shortest paths between nodes j and k that pass through g_i , and d_{jk} is the total number of shortest paths.

$$SBS(g_i) = Z(PREV(g_i)) + Z(DIV(g_i)) + Z(CON(g_i))$$

Where Z denotes the standardization function.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Alignment Between High-SBS Keywords and Official Brand Terms

The results of the SBS analysis reveal a significant discrepancy between the core expressions used by the public in social media discourse and the official brand language

promoted by Tate Modern. As shown in Table 1, the top 20 high-SBS keywords primarily revolve around themes such as “space,” “turbine_hall,” “installation,” “building,” and “experience.” These words exhibit not only high prevalence (Prevalence > 4%) but also balanced performance in terms of Diversity and Connectivity, making them central nodes within the semantic network constructed from

public discourse.

In contrast, official brand terms such as “bold,” “inclusive,” and “visionary” each appear in less than 3.5% of the sample and register SBS composite scores more than one standard deviation below the mean. As a result, none of these brand terms are included among the top 20 high-SBS keywords.

Table 1 Top 20 High-SBS Keywords with Prevalence, Diversity, Connectivity and Composite SBS Score

Keyword	Prevalence	Diversity	Connectivity	SBS Score
space	17.9%	95	58.0	6.15
turbine-hall	13.8%	83	57.5	5.16
installation	11.7%	85	53.9	4.39
building	10.8%	83	53.4	4.74
experience	10.3%	91	53.9	4.34
feels	8.3%	83	53.0	2.32
industrial	7.2%	79	56.9	2.31
art	7.9%	83	56.9	2.20
work	6.6%	74	57.4	2.22
exhibition	6.1%	77	55.2	2.15
loved	5.6%	55	50.5	2.05
beautiful	5.4%	35	55.5	1.34
artist	4.9%	35	57.4	1.71
life	4.4%	31	57.8	1.54
sculpture	4.5%	35	58.3	1.49
feit	4.4%	37	56.6	1.42
amazing	4.3%	35	56.0	1.32
modern	4.1%	30	55.8	1.30
impressive	3.3%	39	57.4	1.33

Table 2 Comparison between Official Brand Terms and High-SBS Keywords

Brand	Prevalence	SBS Score	Top 20 Inclusion
bold	2.2%	1.41	No
inclusive	2.1%	1.80	No
visionary	2.2%	1.80	No

These findings suggest that Tate Modern’s articulated brand values have not been successfully internalised within user-generated discourse, indicating a disconnection between institutional messaging and audience narratives.

4.2 Cluster Analysis: Space – Experience – Curation

Through keyword clustering analysis (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), three distinct semantic clusters emerged in public discourse: Space, Experience, and Curation.

(1) Space Cluster

Centred on keywords such as “space”, “turbine_hall”, “building”, and “industrial_space”, this cluster reflects a strong public focus on the spatial characteristics of Tate Modern. The physical space itself functions as a perceptual anchor and a core narrative element in audience discourse.

(2) Experience Cluster

Focused on expressions like “feels”, “felt”, “experience”, and “loved”, this cluster captures emotional and sensory

responses to the museum visit. It highlights how visitors articulate feelings of being moved and emotionally engaged during their interaction with exhibitions.

(3) Curatorial Cluster

Including terms such as “installation”, “work”, “painting”,

and “sculpture”, this cluster indicates audience engagement with specific artworks and curatorial choices. It demonstrates how exhibition content and display strategies influence public interpretation.

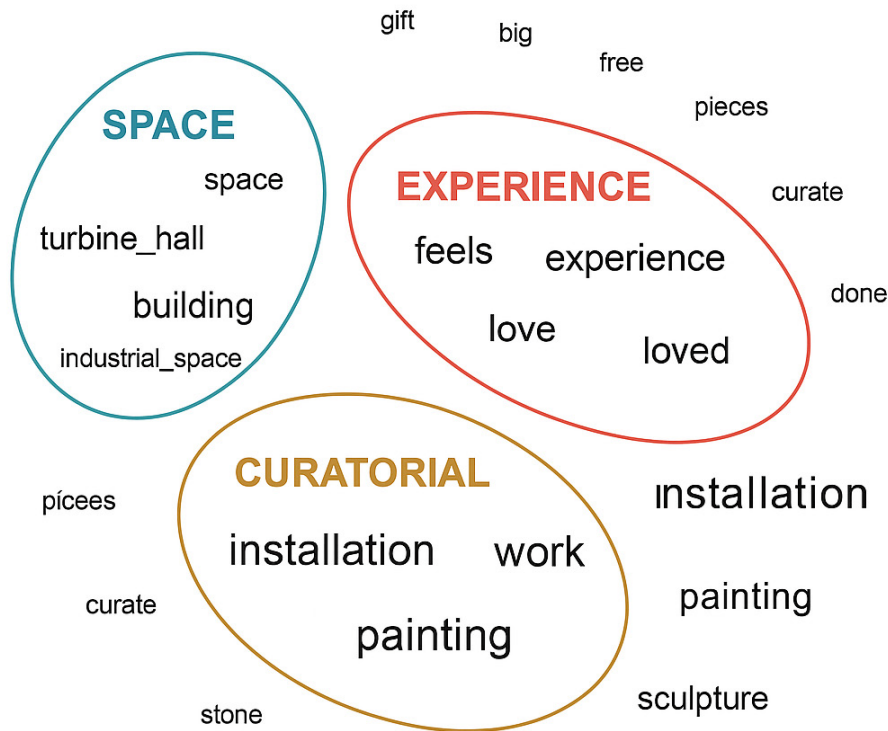


Figure 1: Semantic Clusters of SBS Keywords

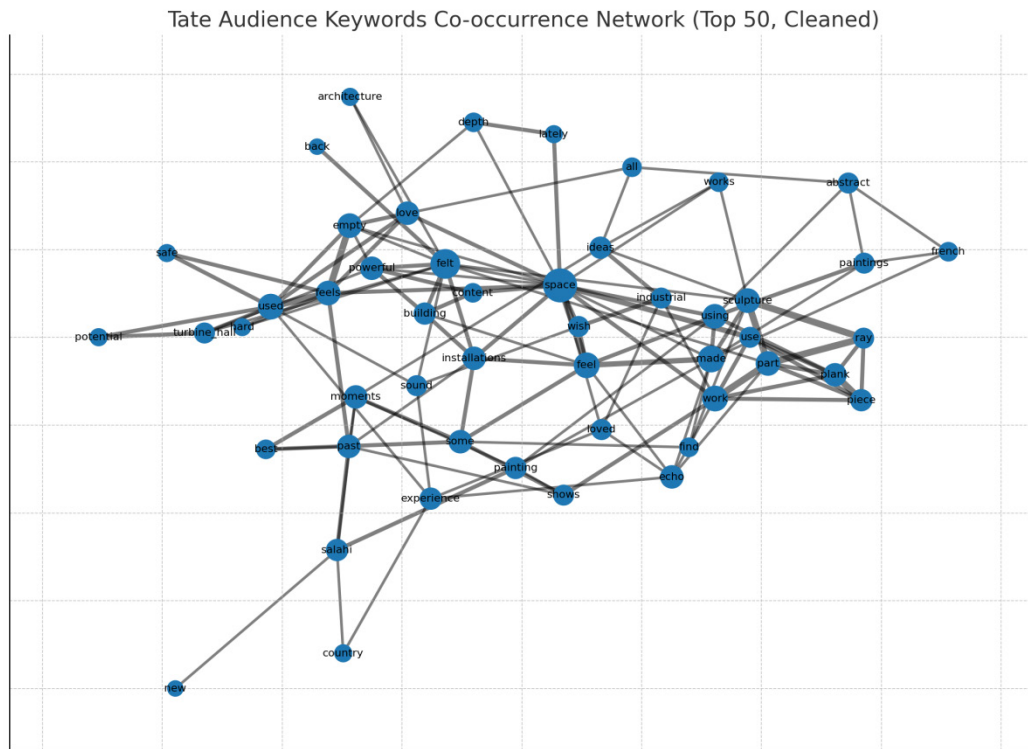


Figure 2 Semantic Network of Official Brand Terms vs. High-SBS Keywords

4.3 Interpretation of SBS Indicators: Prevalence, Diversity, and Connectivity

The three key indicators in the SBS method further reveal the structural characteristics of public discourse. High-SBS keywords consistently outperform across all dimensions:

Prevalence: For instance, the term *space* appears in 17.9% of the 500 sampled comments—significantly above the average frequency.

Diversity: High-SBS keywords co-occur with a wide range of other terms. For example, experience frequently appears alongside installation and turbine_hall, indicating semantic richness.

Connectivity: Terms like turbine_hall and building not only occur frequently but also function as bridges in the semantic network, linking multiple topical nodes.

In contrast, official brand terms such as **bold** and **inclusive** appear only sporadically and lack strong co-occurrence with other terms, resulting in low Connectivity scores. This implies their limited integration into the discourse chain.

Such disparity aligns with Keller's (1993, 2003) brand knowledge model, which posits that enduring brand value depends on establishing a rich and well-connected network of brand associations. Without such linkage, abstract brand language struggles to achieve resonance in public

narratives.

4.4 Theoretical Implications and Interpretations

Freire and Lourenço (2021) argue that abstract brand values must be anchored in concrete exhibition, spatial, or interactive contexts to be naturally reproduced by audiences. The results of the SBS analysis support this theory: public discourse tends to center on tangible and experiential aspects—such as space, emotion, and curation—rather than on high-level value-driven language. This finding also echoes Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) theory of the “experience economy,” which emphasizes that memorable and communicable brand impressions are often rooted in spatial, event-based, or sensorial encounters.

Moreover, the contextual characteristics of social media further reinforce this tendency toward visual and concrete content. De Vries et al. (2012) found that users are more likely to like and share content featuring physical settings or emotional cues, as opposed to abstract ideas. In this context, Tate Modern's Turbine Hall—with its distinctive spatial character—emerges as a spontaneous narrative hub and a symbolic anchor for brand communication. Conversely, brand terms like inclusive and visionary rarely become standalone points of discussion.

To enhance the visibility and transmissibility of brand lan-

guage in social media discourse, it must be closely tied to users' lived experiences. Two strategies are recommended: (1) embedding brand value terms in exhibition design and visitor guidance to strengthen contextual cues, and (2) encouraging user-generated content (UGC) that integrates brand language—for instance, inviting visitors to describe “an inclusive experience inside the Turbine Hall” on social platforms. Such practices could increase the SBS scores and centrality of brand terms within the semantic network.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Embedding Brand Language in Spatial Narratives

Integrate core brand value terms into the spatial and curatorial design of exhibitions. For example, reinforce the use of terms like inclusive within the interpretive materials and interactive experiences of the Turbine Hall, thereby anchoring abstract brand language in specific visitor contexts.

5.2 User-Generated Content and Social Media Engagement

Leverage social media by encouraging user-generated content (UGC) initiatives—such as inviting visitors to share “my bold experience at Tate Modern.” This approach promotes the organic reproduction of brand vocabulary in public discourse and enhances the SBS scores of brand-related terms.

5.3 Brand Listening and Data-Driven Optimisation

Regularly apply the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) method to monitor shifts in public discourse and semantic networks. By identifying the gap between high-SBS audience terms and underperforming brand keywords, institutions can dynamically adjust their brand communication strategies.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Key Findings and Contribution

This study applied the Semantic Brand Score (SBS) methodology to reveal that Tate Modern's official brand language has not been effectively internalised into public discourse. Instead, audience-generated content predominantly centres around the themes of space, experience,

and curatorial practice. These findings provide empirical evidence to enrich research on brand language internalisation within museum contexts.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited to two platforms—Instagram and Reddit—with a modest dataset and only English-language content. Future research could incorporate a broader range of platforms and multilingual datasets, combining SBS with sentiment analysis or interview-based methods to further examine the internalisation mechanism of brand language. Additionally, integrating SBS indicators with emotional valence metrics may help identify “high-SBS—positive/negative sentiment” keywords, offering more nuanced insights for brand communication optimisation.

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