

Shakespeare Lives on Instagram

Report One

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1 Executive Summary

This report is one of three which examine how the British Council used Instagram to promote, and promote engagement with, the Shakespeare Lives programme. We also look at how other Instagram users used the official hashtag of the programme, #ShakespeareLives, and the extent to which these photos and videos display engagement with the programme, Shakespeare more broadly, and/or the values which the British Council sought to promote through Shakespeare Lives.

This report gives the analysis and findings from the first phase of our research, which in common with our reports on Shakespeare Lives in Arabic, English, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish focused on the weekend around Shakespeare Day, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. This most notably included [Shakespeare Day Live](#), a day of live Shakespeare Lives broadcasts streamed around the world through a digital pop-up channel co-curated by the BBC and the British Council. Highlights of Shakespeare Lives were also made freely available through the BBC iPlayer.

During the first phase of our research, we studied the British Council's use of Instagram through its main [Shakespeare Lives Instagram](#) account between 23 October 2015 and 8 August 2016, coding all posts during this period (38). We also analysed a random sample of 202 photos and videos that included #ShakespeareLives between 22-25 April 2016, the weekend around Shakespeare Day.

The key questions addressed by the Instagram analysis were as follows:

1. How do people engage with Shakespeare Lives through Instagram? And what kinds of people? What triggers most engagement?
2. What kinds of identifications with characters and actors, themes and memes are taking place through Instagram posts?
3. Does Shakespeare Lives allow for 'the presentation of self in everyday life' as Goffman (1978) called it, via Instagram? Are users actually engaging with Shakespeare Lives and/or with each other and/or with the projection of self via Shakespeare Lives?
4. Given the literary nature of Shakespeare Lives, do people like to use the Instagram to display their 'cultural capital'¹, in Bourdieu's terms?
5. What do users do or express with images on Instagram that cannot be expressed with words?
6. Does Instagram allow for or enable a more creative engagement with Shakespeare Lives than Twitter or Facebook?

1.1 Summary of Findings

- Overall, few comments are made in reaction to the British Council's posts. Compared to Twitter and Facebook, Instagram is a more neutral space in which people draw each other's attention to posts without much dialogue. Images by users and by others are the key attraction.
- While Instagram users took up the Shakespeare Lives hashtag enthusiastically, users rarely referred to the British Council itself.
- Surprisingly, the use of celebrities does not necessarily correlate with high interaction levels on Instagram. Posts with no celebrity reference were actually interacted with more. This is an interesting contrast with some of the other reports, which suggest that celebrity presence can increase engagement, and that sufficiently big hitters (for example Prince Charles) create engagement through surprise appearances.
- Love and romance are the most popular themes in mentions of Shakespeare.
- Instagram users engaged more with simple quote graphics than with popular culture/rap videos and adverts for modern adaptations.
- British Council followers are literary-minded, relating to the traditional representations of Shakespeare. The quote graphics generated more likes and comments than more original, innovative (and expensive) outputs such as the Julius Caesar short film, which cunningly exploited the #GameOfThrones hashtag.
- The colourful quote-image designs produced by the Council have been adopted by British Embassy in Seoul. The Embassy has been posting images of the identical format with their own choices of quotes.
- The British Council's Shakespeare Lives Instagram page makes much reference to popular culture, for example Game of Thrones and rap or grime musicians such as Mic Righteous. This is a way to make Shakespeare relevant today, but surprisingly it does not correlate with greater engagement.
- The British Council employs the words of celebrities to inspire a democratisation of the language of Shakespeare. British Council posts follow the theme of diversity in language, register, dialect, class, and race. Shakespeare's work is portrayed as a vehicle for socially progressive ideas, for example through linking Othello's relationship to black history and civil rights.
- One of the most frequently shared quotes is from Julius Caesar, 'it is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves'. This report offers insights into how this was used to express a sense of self.

- Images of books by or about Shakespeare appear prominently, and are used to display cultural capital. This refers to the ideas, knowledge, language registers and idioms, style, cultural reference points, artistic and other cultural assets that people use in their everyday lives to identify and distinguish themselves socially from others. It is an expression of their class status, in terms other than socio-economic status.
- Shakespeare Lives Instagram posts have opened up personal interpretations of Shakespeare ideas and maxims important in their own lives. People use it to project, for example their attachment to polysexualism and veganism. Instagram is demonstrably not a platform for analysis and debate of these concepts.

1.2 Recommendations

1. Ensure that British Council Instagram pages are updated consistently. No posts were made for 14 weeks until June 2016. Programmes such as Shakespeare Lives need a long-term content plan of timely posts designed to tie in with specific calendar events and specific localities.
2. Be clear about the target audience and what you hope to achieve by engaging with that audience, or audiences. Is the British Council trying to make rap fans like Shakespeare or make Shakespeare fans like rap?
3. To appeal Instagram users' demographic with high levels of educational and cultural capital, who have been using #ShakespeareLives, popular culture related posts could be accompanied by brief literary discussion/quotation in the comment.
4. Take care in selecting celebrities for promotional activities. The celebrities in Shakespeare Lives programme featured on its Instagram feed during this period did not create greater engagement. Public figures could be chosen more carefully to include famous artists that not only have some connection with Shakespeare, but also have an existing presence and following on Instagram.
5. Consider whether to seek greater British Council brand recognition among Instagrammers, or allow programmes such as Shakespeare Lives to gain their own profile. While Instagram users took up the Shakespeare Lives hashtag enthusiastically, users rarely referred to the British Council itself. The programme might be more successful if the British Council were less distant from its outputs, for example by introducing a hashtag that incorporates the British Council name. But perhaps this finding could instead be viewed positively, as demonstrating the soft power of the British Council: the Shakespeare Lives programme has filtered through the world to reach and

engage thousands of people on Instagram, a relatively new platform for cultural organisations to use.

6. Develop *Instagram-specific tactics* to promote the key values British Council seeks to communicate through programmes such as Shakespeare Lives. Perhaps the values Shakespeare Lives is trying to promote need to be more carefully selected and targeted for different people, platforms and purposes. Some values may be more difficult to convey on Instagram (mutuality) while others (visible diversity) can be more easily expressed.
7. The Shakespeare Lives programme is about sharing Shakespeare with the world, but has not often enough been about *sharing world cultures through Shakespeare*. Consequently, mutuality is not felt and real. Other language reports show how, for example, Cervantes and Pushkin get projected back onto Shakespeare and therefore Britain. Since this did not happen on Instagram, this points to an opportunity the British Council Instagram team could pursue.
8. For a cultural institute to be using Instagram may be innovation enough, but if the British Council wants to be in the vanguard it will need to do more to attract younger audiences with high levels of social, network, cultural and educational capital and digital literacy.
9. The British Council could make more use of Instagram via photo competitions to inspire creativity and cultural imagination, and to reward and attract followers.
10. Instagram offers a self-conspicuous-ness and self-display, *sharing the self through Shakespeare*, which the British Council could work with.

2 Methods

Instagram is a platform, usually used through a mobile app, which allows users to share photos and videos and edit the former using filters and other modifications. Users can write descriptions for these posts and use hashtags, like those used on Twitter. Clicking on or searching for a hashtag will show a page with all public posts containing that hashtag.

The 38 posts of the British Council's Shakespeare Lives Instagram page between 23rd October 2015 and 8th August 2016 were scraped using Brand 24. The #ShakespeareLives corpus collected all Instagram posts with the Shakespeare Lives hashtag between 22-25 April 2016, the weekend surrounding Shakespeare Day. These posts were randomised in Microsoft Excel, and a sample of 202 was selected for coding. Both datasets were coded and analysed Excel coding workbooks. We developed two coding frameworks for the analysis of photos and videos shared on Instagram, one to analyse posts from British Council accounts and another to analyse other posts which included #ShakespeareLives (please see the Summary of Methodology document for more information on our approach, and full coding frameworks). The Instagram coding framework for posts from British Council accounts was designed to capture their visual and textual elements and measure the level of interaction with each post in the form of likes and comments, in order to draw conclusions on which types of post inspired greater levels of interaction. The Instagram coding framework for posts including #ShakespeareLives was designed, like the Twitter coding framework, to capture who was posting about Shakespeare Lives, the sentiment of these posts, and whether posts reflected the values promoted by the British Council, but also to capture the visual elements present in the images and videos shared, as well as the level of interaction with each post.

For the #ShakespeareLives corpus, to ascertain 'actor type' the researcher navigated to each user's personal page to contextualise their post with a brief impression of their identity as held in the bio and other posts. This also helped to ascertain the 'tone' of a post; the image, the accompanying caption/comment and some context, allowed for inference concerning whether the post was positive, negative or neutral towards the British Council and the programme. In the findings and analysis section below we give examples of how the values the British Council sought to promote through Shakespeare Lives – mutuality, diversity, creativity, innovation, and welcoming – were interpreted and coded for.

3 Findings and Analysis

This section sets out the most significant and interesting recurring themes and trending topics, including specific examples of posts to illustrate how the data were coded. We start by setting out our findings on how the British Council used Instagram to promote Shakespeare Lives and the extent to which Instagram users engaged with different content, before moving on to discuss the use of #ShakespeareLives by other Instagram users, and how they relate to Shakespeare Lives and Shakespeare more broadly through images and video.

3.1 British Council Posts

Overall, few comments are made in reaction to the British Council’s posts. Compared to Twitter and Facebook, Instagram is a more **neutral** space in which people draw each other’s attention to posts without much dialogue. The image is the most crucial aspect. If the audience comments, it is usually to copy in a friend’s username so that it pops up in their friend’s feed. We found no negative audience reactions on any posts, and few overtly positive ones. The most enthusiastic responses relate to mention of a celebrity, for example, “I love Cumberbatch and adore Hamlet with all my might... Can't wait to see him on screen!”

Surprisingly, use of **celebrity** does not necessarily correlate with high interaction levels. Posts with no celebrity reference were actually interacted with more.

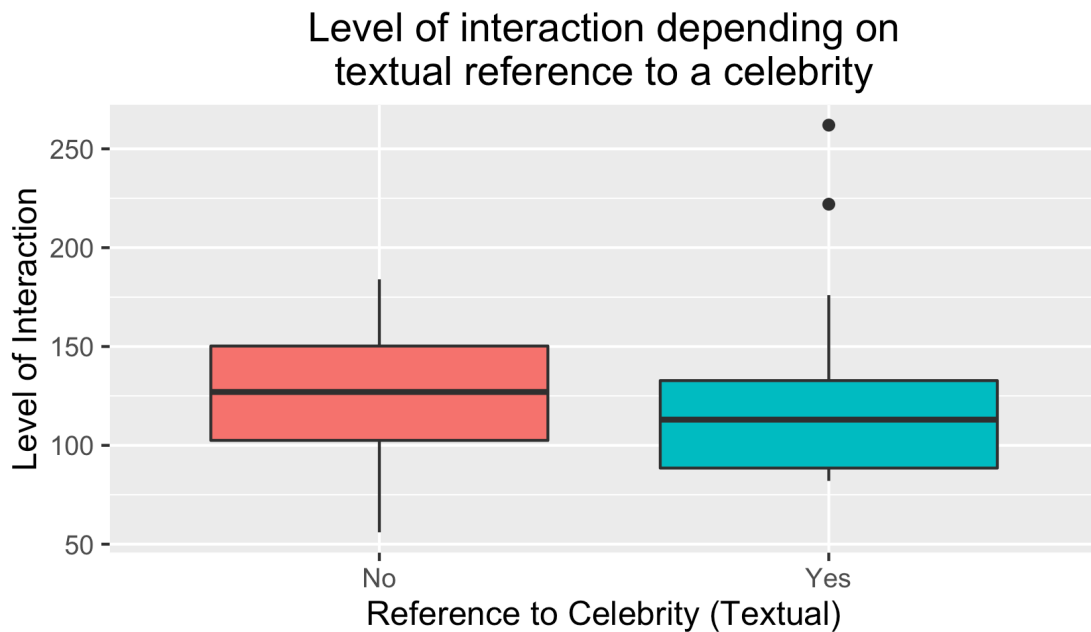


Figure 1: Level of interaction (comments and likes) on posts that do, and do not, refer to a celebrity

However, the two most interacted with posts overall were the ones about Sir Ian McKellen (222 interactions) and Alan Rickman (262, see Image 1 below). Such posts, with a celebrity in a visual element AND in the comment, are rarely employed but produce much engagement. These high interaction levels seem to stem from a correlation with use of celebrity and **reference to calendar event/current affairs** in the comment. People engage well when posts tie into the zeitgeist, here by emotively commenting on and contributing quotes upon the death of Alan Rickman for all #AlanRickman Instagram mourners to find and respond to:

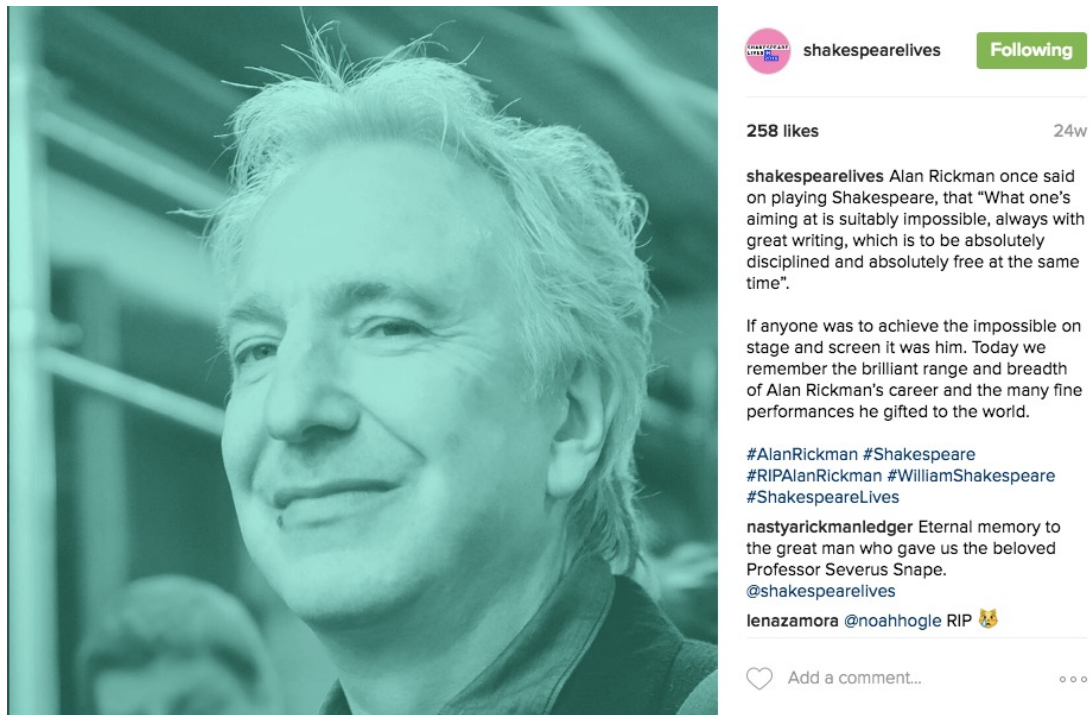


Image 1: British Council post about Shakespeare and Alan Rickman, posted following the actor's death

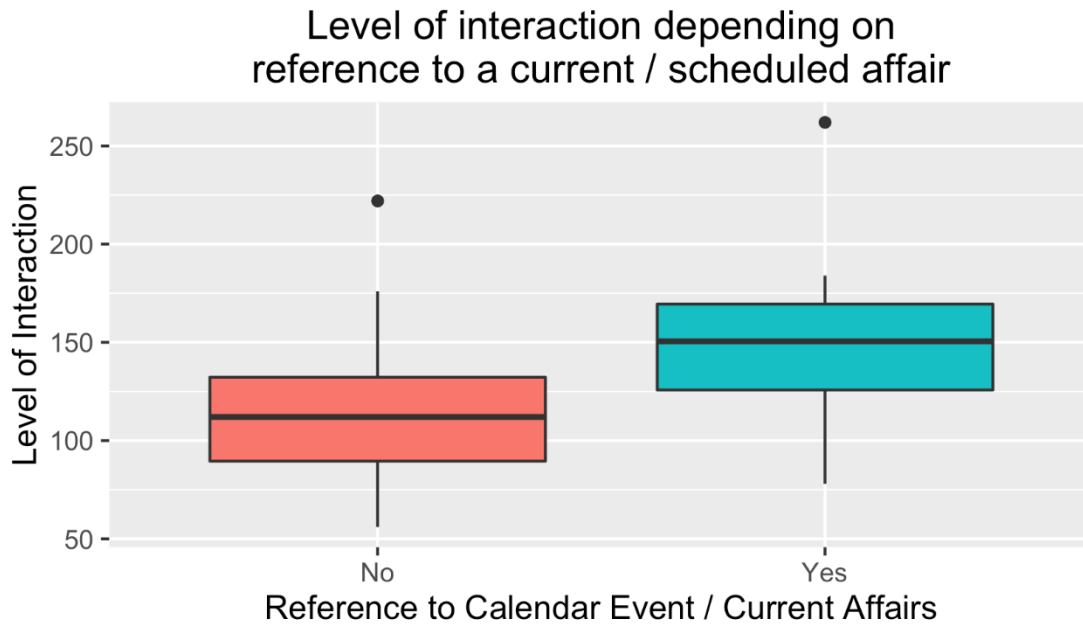


Figure 2: Level of interaction on posts that do, and do not, reference an event or current affairs

This discrepancy in popularity suggests that at other times the British Council was posting about unpopular celebrities, or at least celebrity that do not generate interest on Instagram specifically. Celebrities featured, such as Denzel Washington and Ralph Fiennes, might be popular in the public sphere but have no existing presence on Instagram. If the British Council seeks to expand its reach, it should feature celebrities that are active on Instagram already, tying posts into existing hubs and hashtags to engage wider audiences. However, it may have multiple objectives, for instance showcasing lesser-known British actors. Such trade-offs must be confronted.

While it was not coded for, it was observable that **love and romance** are the most popular themes in mentions of Shakespeare. Romantically-themed posts, especially colourful quote graphics (see Image 2 below) generated more likes and comments. Surprisingly, more than original, innovative (and expensive) outputs such as the Julius Caesar short film, which cunningly exploited the #GameOfThrones hashtag (see Image 3 below).



Image 2: British Council Instagram post using Shakespeare quotation

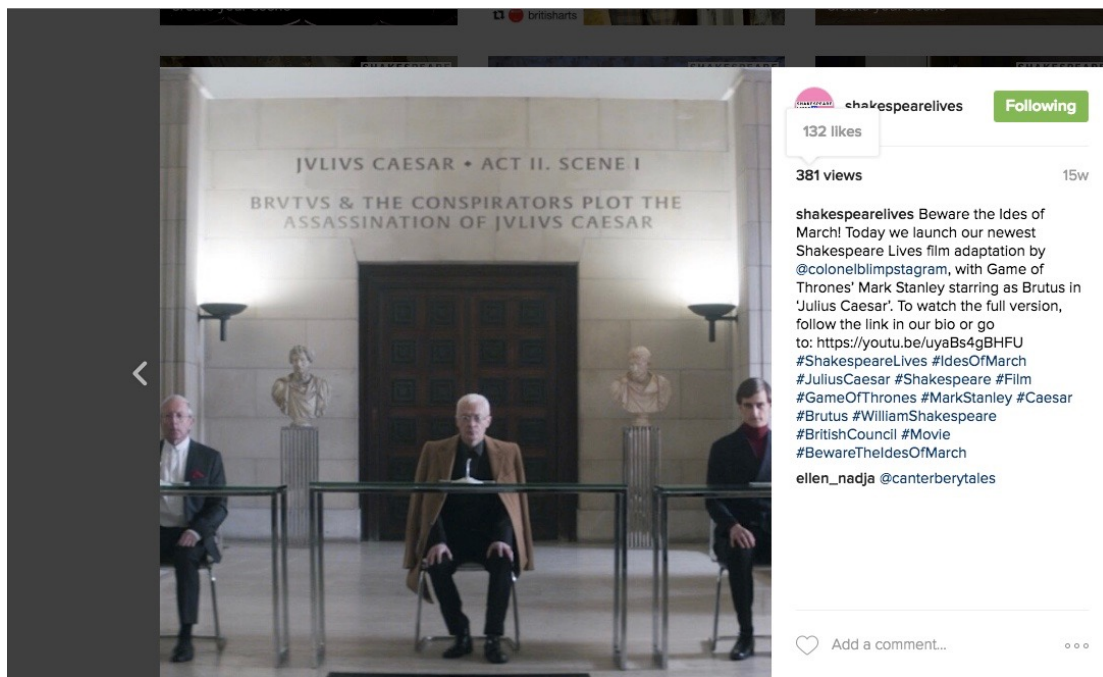


Image 3: British Council Instagram post sharing link to Julius Caesar short film

It is interesting to note that the colourful quote-image designs produced by the British Council have been adopted by British Embassy in Seoul. The Embassy has been posting images of the identical format with their own choices of quotes. While this may well have been agreed with the British Council, it is perhaps evidence that the

model is deemed high quality enough to adopt and adapt. Just as the general public often employ the Shakespeare Lives hashtag but do not refer to its generator, the British Council, this British organisation in Seoul is borrowing a Shakespeare Lives initiative without crediting the British Council. Again, this could be taken as evidence of the Council's soft power: its products are being carried globally on the undercurrents of social media.

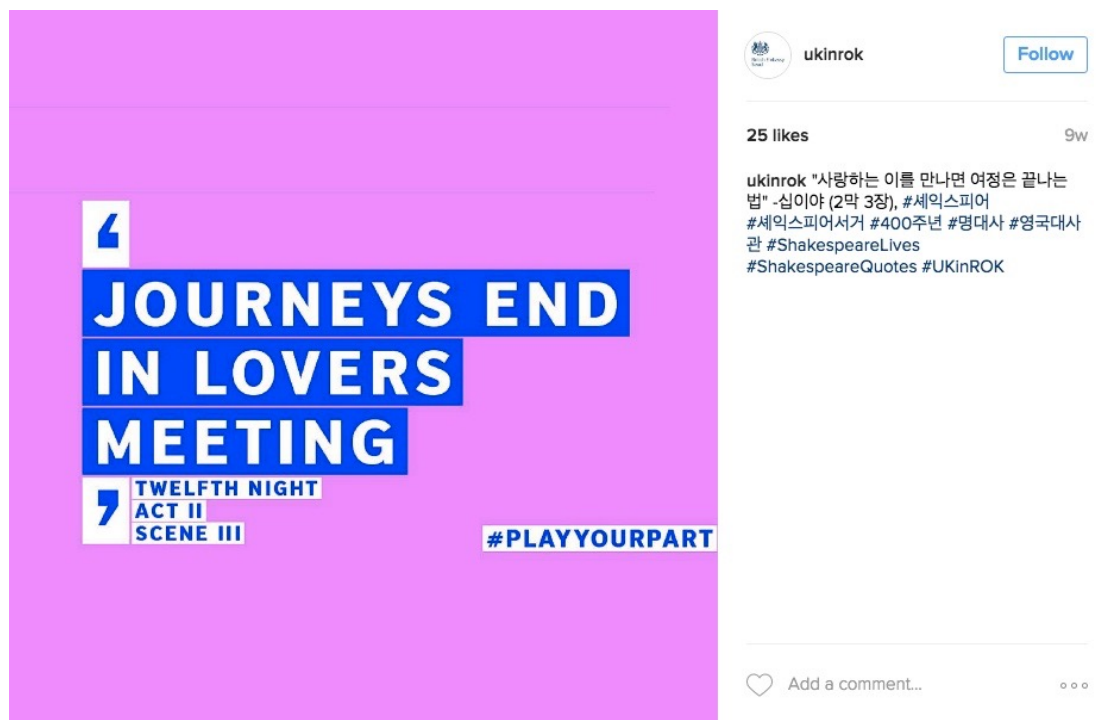


Image 4: British Embassy in Republic of Korea Instagram post sharing Shakespeare quote

The British Council's Shakespeare Lives Instagram page makes much **reference to popular culture**, for example Game of Thrones and rap or grime musicians, for instance Mic Righteous as below. This is a way to make Shakespeare relevant today, but surprisingly it does not correlate with greater engagement. We might deduce that fans of these forms of popular culture do not dwell on Shakespeare-related Instagram pages or move in the relevant cultural circles on their social networks. Perhaps the reverse is also true: most committed Shakespeare fans may not inhabit Instagram.

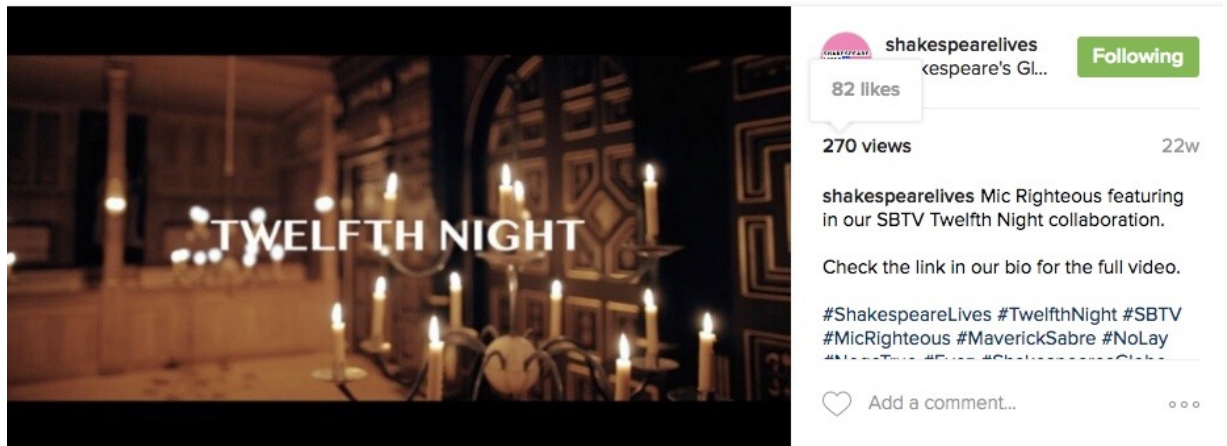


Image 5: British Council Instagram post sharing short film featuring Mic Righteous

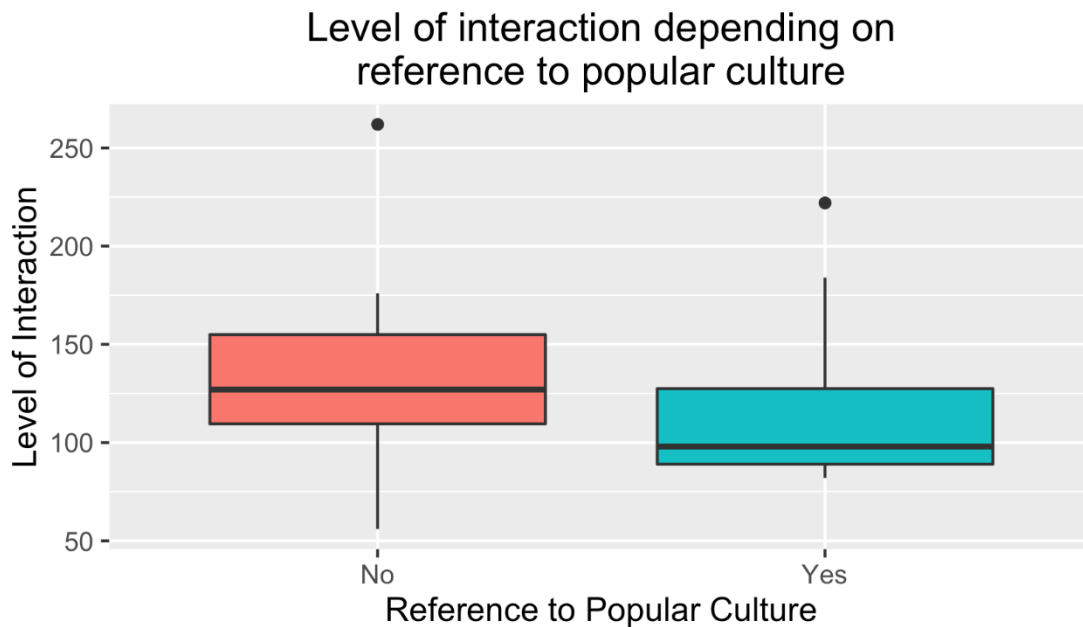


Figure 3: Level of interaction on posts that do, and do not, reference popular culture

Few of the British Council’s posts relate to specific landmarks. Incorporating a sense of place into the Instagram offer might evoke a greater range of more local, intimate responses and user identities, as Instagram is often used to share what you are doing and where.

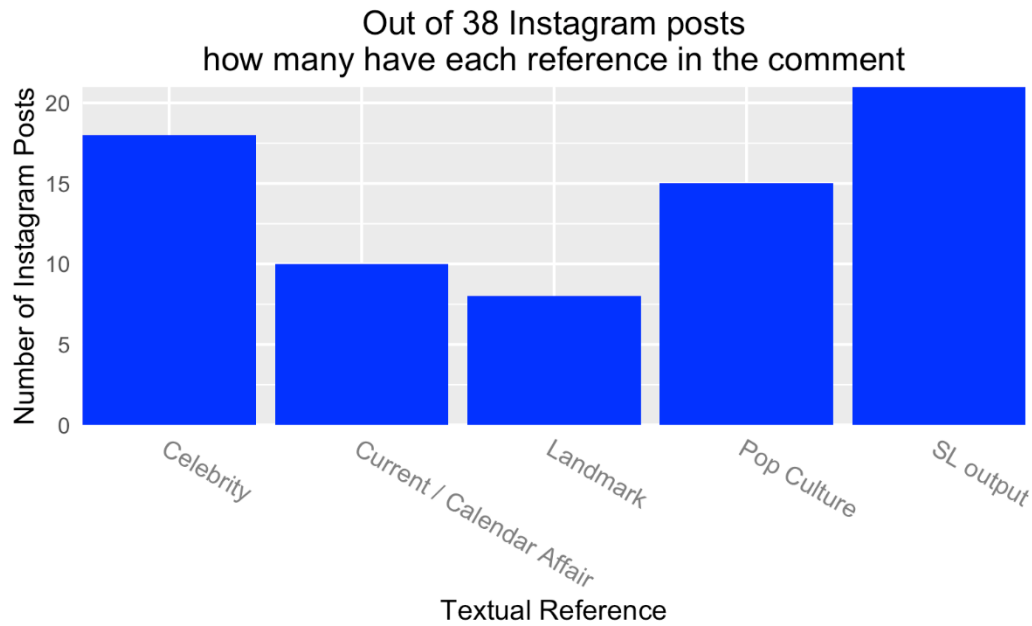


Figure 4: Number of British Council Instagram posts by reference to specific content

Overall, British Council posts set up dialogue about several key themes surrounding Shakespeare. The British Council employs the words of celebrities to inspire a democratisation of the language of Shakespeare. British Council posts follow the theme of diversity in language, register, dialect and class, but also in race: Shakespeare is a vehicle for social progression, for example how Othello is related to black history and civil rights. The story of Julius Caesar and Brutus in the short film extracts (see Image 3 above) relate to the precarity of power and political corruption, suggesting that lessons in Shakespeare are eternal; the play is adapted to fit a modernised, even futuristic election setting. Lessons in love and romance are a prominent theme, and several posts prompt discussions about literary theory and the challenges of interpreting Shakespeare.

But are public conversations in the #ShakespeareLives corpus engaging with these themes? Is the British Council setting up a dialogue with themes that Instagrammers are responding to? We will now explore how other Instagram users engaged with #ShakespeareLives, and the extent to which this related to the Shakespeare Lives programme itself.



Image 6: British Council Instagram post sharing actor quote about the first black actor to portray Othello



Image 7: British Council Instagram post sharing a quote from actor Ralph Fiennes

3.2 Posts Using #ShakespeareLives

3.2.1 Use of Quotes

While many of the posts engage with Shakespeare as a figure, not with his works, **use of quotes** is common, most often with text imposed upon a background image. Generally, quotes are posted but not discussed. This might indicate that the programme has not successfully provoked deep thought about Shakespeare's works and delineation of his texts through Instagram. Alternatively, this might point to the restrictions in using this particular image-sharing platform for this purpose, which, indeed, has not necessarily been a key programme aim.

As in the British Council posts we discussed above, many user quotes relate didactically to love and romance. One of the most popular in quantitative terms is the 'love all trust a few' extract from *All's Well That Ends Well*, shown in Image 8 below. These conversations do not necessarily derive from a dialogue set up by the Council; love is a universal theme traditionally associated with, and prevalent in, the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare. On Instagram, Shakespeare prompts reflection (but not much discussion) on the human condition; fate, mortality, being alone or together.

One of the most quantitatively popular quotes is from Julius Caesar: 'it is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves'. It is interesting to note the 'superartificiality', explicit contrivance and performance, and 'presentation of the self' here. For example in Image 8 below, we see a person expressing their individual outlook by quoting from one (Sixteenth Century) text in a handwritten font, suggesting authenticity, but captured digitally and posted on another medium, Instagram, while affirming the correctness and universality of the quote ('Shakespeare getting it right again'), and using hashtags to increase attention to their post, and their self-expression through it. Not only does this exemplify how multiple media are woven together in this space, but how culture is appropriated and made meaningful across centuries and contexts.



Image 8: Instagram post sharing a Shakespeare quote



Image 9: Instagram post sharing a Shakespeare quote and image

Also common is the well-known 'life's a stage' speech from *As You Like It*, quoted in the comment of the photo of books below (Image 10).



Image 10: Instagram post showing Shakespeare works, with quote in the comment

3.2.2 Self-Expression through #ShakespeareLives

Missing from coding framework is a section for ‘**images of books**’. I found this to be one of the most common images. In the terms of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it signifies the conspicuous ownership/consumption of **high cultural capital**. This refers to the ideas, knowledge, language registers and idioms, style, cultural reference points, artistic and other cultural assets that people use in their everyday lives to identify and distinguish themselves socially from others. It is an expression of their class status in terms other than socio-economic status. The photograph above contributes to a sense of super-artificiality; the books are arranged with decorative objects face up for the camera, such that they reflect the intended authentic perspective of the user but in a contrived way. As in this image, users often photograph a collection of Shakespeare’s works. Again, this is interesting as it signifies demonstration of high cultural capital, and intellectual capital, as if proving they do not just enjoy reading but are a well-read, avid collector of respected works. Many Instagrammers also post photographs of Shakespearean text. In Image 11 below, the text is too small to read; the post is not about the content of Shakespeare’s poem. Rather, it is again about conspicuous reading, being seen to be reading, and producing and sharing an aesthetically pleasing picture.



Image 11: Instagram post showing a Shakespeare Sonnet

However, various examples demonstrate users engaging with Shakespearean texts in thoughtful ways, interpreting his words for their own purposes. Shakespeare is a high cultural capital, trans-historical figure employed to support and promote personal views and interests. Interesting case studies include posts that employ Shakespearean quotes to comment on veganism/anti-animal cruelty, polysexualism, and even Star Wars, as shown in Images 12, 13 and 14 below.



Image 12: Instagram post showing a dog in costume, using a quote from Shakespeare to support veganism

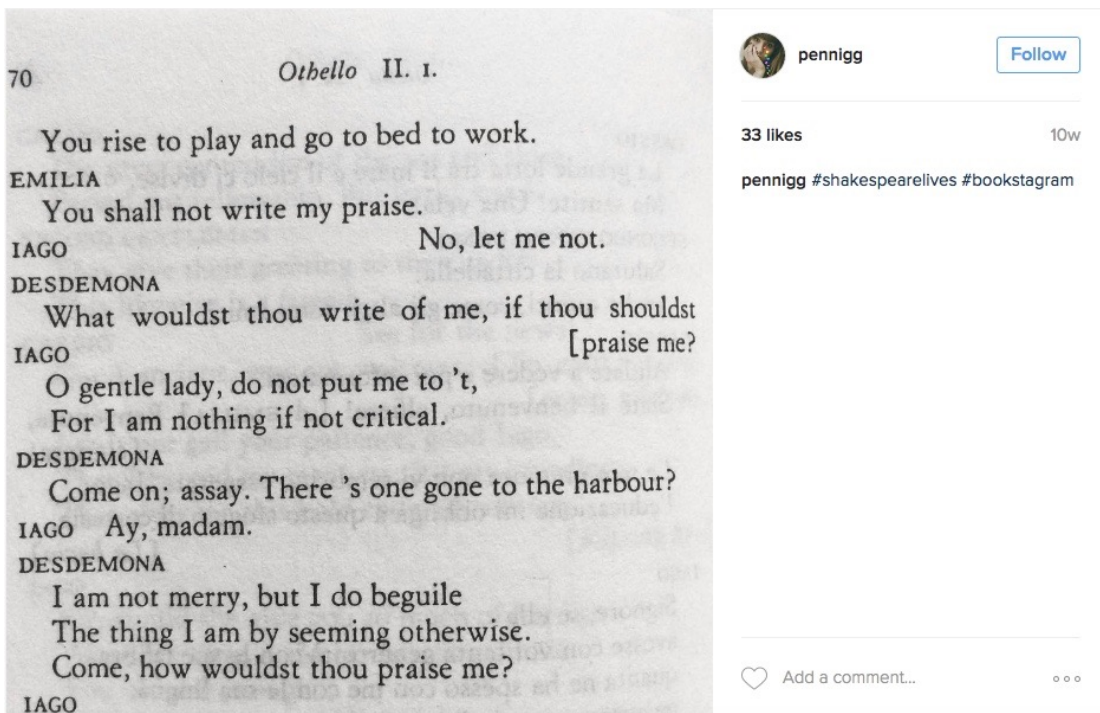


Image 13: Instagram post showing text from Othello



Image 14: Instagram post showing Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker) as Hamlet

Shakespeare is also ‘made relevant’ through humorous image editing. Various examples of users playing with pictures of Shakespeare on Photoshop demonstrate the capacity of Instagram, and Shakespeare, for comic creativity. Below (Images 15, 16 and 17), users mix up the old and new, toying with the modern idea of the hipster, fusing Shakespeare with a contemporary Indian actor to refer to drinking, and reinventing common hashtags in the comments (‘#prosebeforehoes’).



Image 15

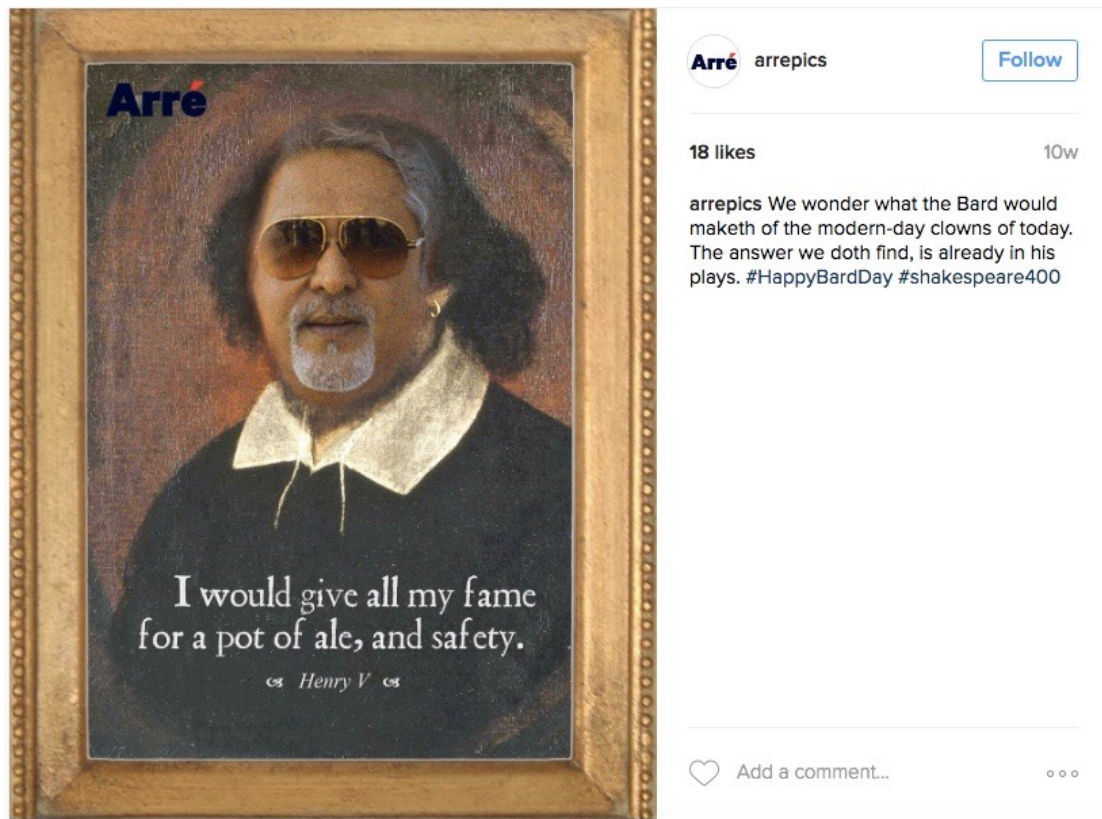


Image 16



Image 17

3.2.3 Tone of Posts

As with the British Council posts we analysed, comments and responses, as well as the images shared in posts, were overwhelmingly **neutral** in tone, suggesting Instagram is a polite, detached, creative space. While Instagrammers used the Shakespeare Lives hashtag enthusiastically, they rarely made reference to the British Council itself, let alone pass judgment on the organisation.

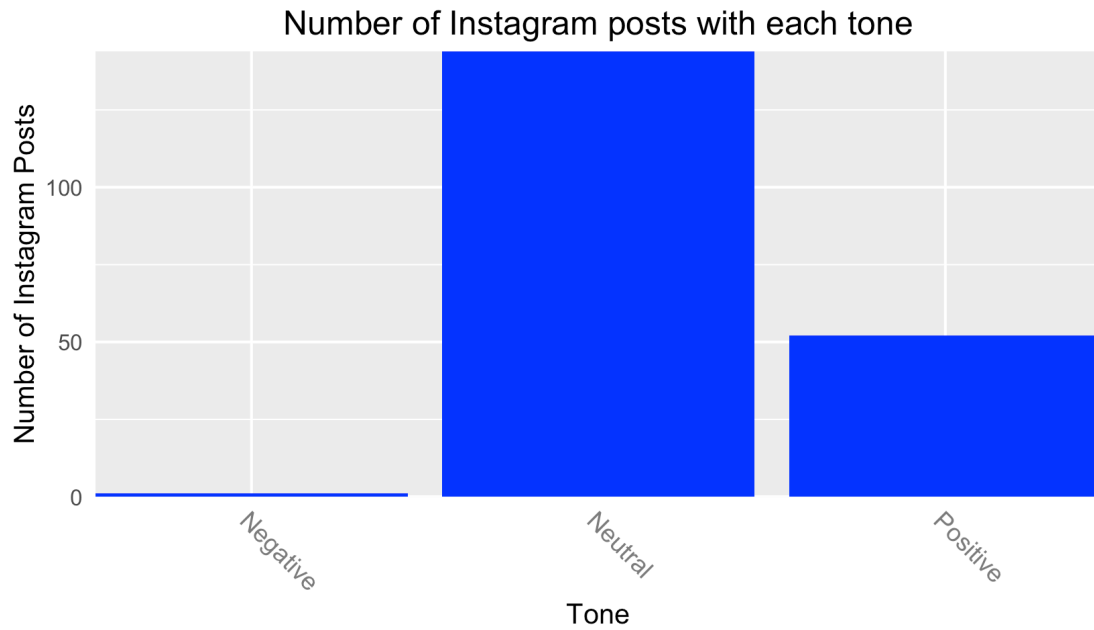


Figure 5: Number of #ShakespeareLives Instagram posts by tone displayed

Contrary to our expectations, there was no correlation between reference to an arts performance and the post displaying a positive tone. Instagrammers do not use the platform for making opinionated, assertive comments on live events. They do not share post-performance reviews or pre-performance hype posts as they might on, for example, Twitter. Only one negative/critical post was found. This concerned the lack of Shakespearean events in South Wales around Shakespeare Day, other than the BBC’s output (see Image 18 below).



Image 18: Instagram post sharing image of Shakespeare text, commenting on the lack of events in South Wales

3.2.4 Values

Figure 6 below shows the number of Instagram posts analysed which displayed one of the values the British Council sought to promote through Shakespeare Lives; creativity, diversity, innovation, mutuality, and welcoming. While all values were present to an extent, there was considerable variation.

Out of 202 Instagram posts,
how many have are concerned with each value

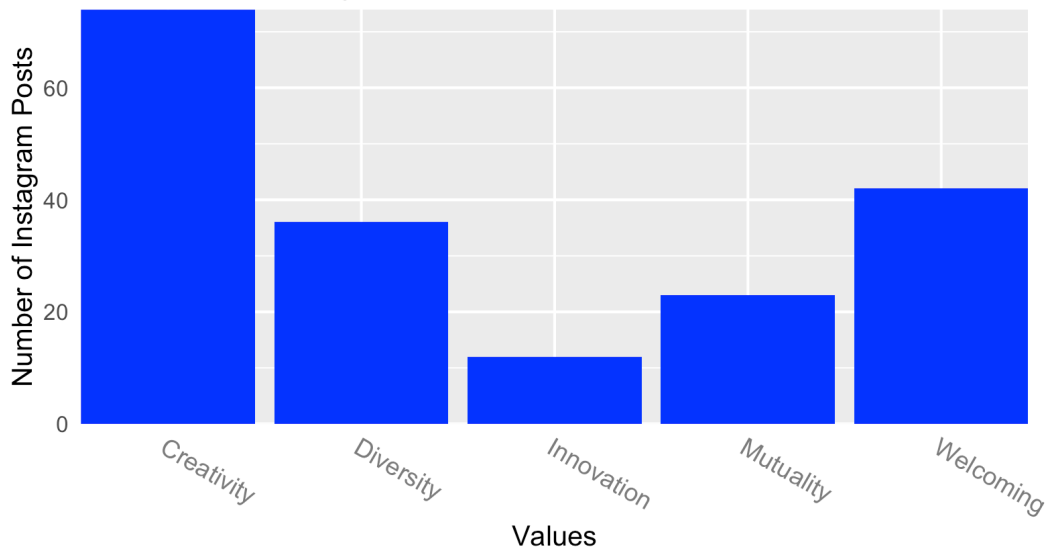


Figure 6: Number of #ShakespeareLives Instagram posts by value referenced

From the picture and what can be gathered from the profile, Image 19 below illustrates how difficult it is to know which posts ought to fit into the category of **diverse**. The concept of diversity can cover many things, including gender, class, age, religion, and race. There were not many obviously diverse posts. Those that achieved diversity did so mainly through displaying an ethnic/age mix in posts that showed performing artists.



Image 19: Instagram post from a Shakespeare Lives event

Posts that advertise (commercial or business accounts, as well as cultural organisations and artists) are naturally **welcoming** to audiences, drawing them in to their activities or products. Few posts by members of the public hold the value of welcomingness, especially not a sense of being welcomed to or feeling welcome in Britain. However, the **Play Your Part hashtag** was a useful inclusive device to welcome audiences to the programme. Here, members of the public are taking part in a British Council activity in Singapore:



Image 20: Instagram post showing people in Singapore interacting with a Shakespeare Lives activity

The posts indicate that Shakespeare is no longer associated with Britain: posts are associated with global locations rather than British ones and make no link between the location and Britain, suggesting that **Shakespeare's legacy is international**.

Posts were coded for the value of creativity, the most commonly referenced value as shown in Figure 6 above, if the subject of the image was people making something. There had to be human agency involved; for example, an actor taking part in a show or subjects competing in slam poetry. Creativity was by far the most prominent value, but very few posts concerned innovation. Our project defined **innovation** as the suggestion of new methods, ideas or products, usually that which relates to technology or new media, while creativity concerns artistic creation and the imagination. Posts with the values of mutuality could all be deemed as innovative. Many innovate by transposing Shakespeare into modern day register or relevance. Here, innovative posts are those concerning a new media remodelling of the reception

of Shakespeare. This includes visual art, experimental video art, or Shakespeare-themed selfies:

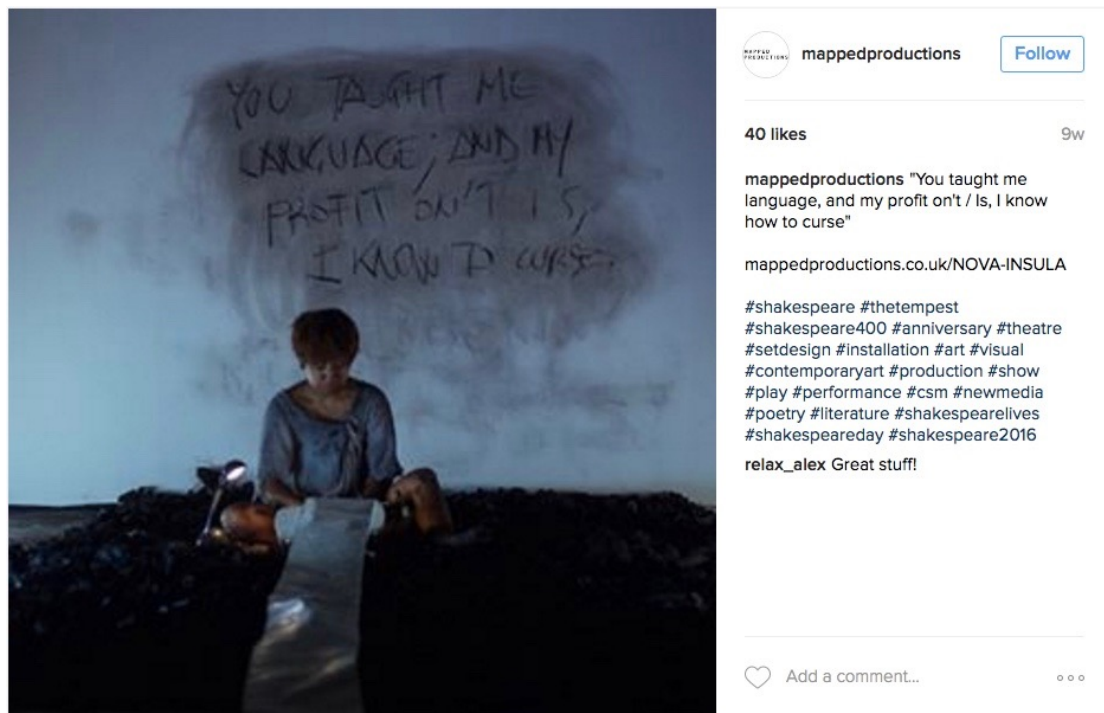


Image 21: Instagram post showing example of the 'creativity' value



Image 22: Instagram post showing example of the 'creativity' value



Image 23: Instagram post showing example of the 'creativity' value, encouraging library users to share Shakespeare selfies

Innovation might be an appropriate desired value for Twitter and Facebook because of their various extended multimedia capacities, for example the Shakespeare emoji which accompanied the use of #Shakespeare400 in the period around Shakespeare Day. But on Instagram, innovation seems largely irrelevant to the people using the Shakespeare Lives hashtag. The season's focus is literary history, a 400-year-old canonised wordsmith to whom it would be difficult to respond innovatively. Although not all posts were coded as creative, all could be considered so: Instagram is intrinsically a creative photography/editing platform. Indeed, the British Council itself is innovating successfully already by employing Instagram as a social media outlet; few cultural organisations have been taking up new accounts on the platform to promote specific programmes. Most posts other than those made by members of the public were by artists and cultural/educational organisations, often small theatres, commonly promoting some kind of artistic product.

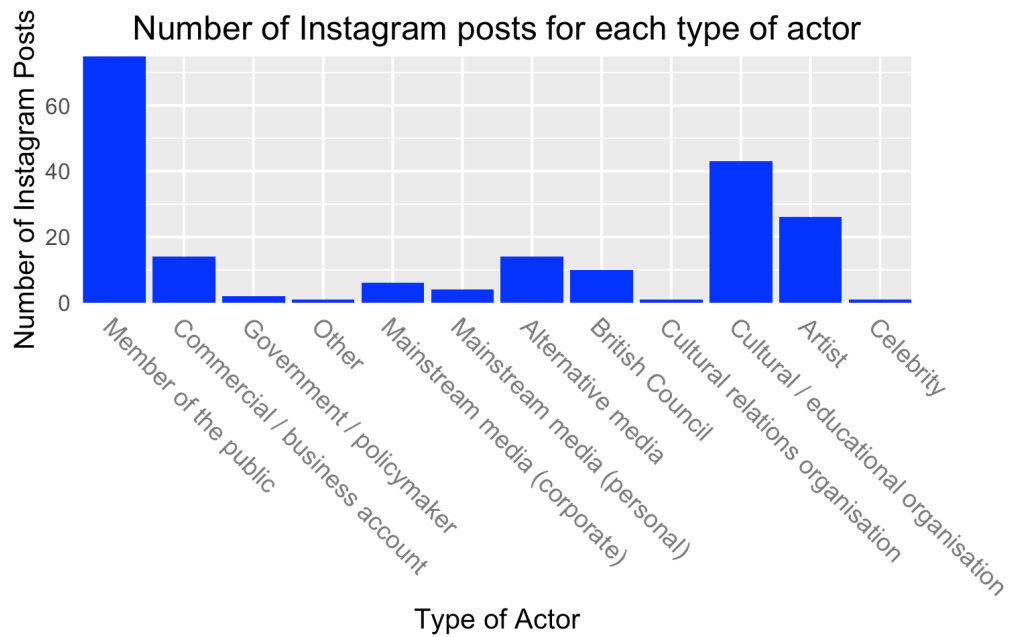


Figure 7: Number of #ShakespeareLives Instagram posts by actor type

Instagram is often used in its **promotional** capacity; the image-based format is easy for audiences to digest, while other social platforms offer more convoluted multimedia marketing posts. One very common trope was artists’ self-promotion through ‘behind the scenes’ shots.

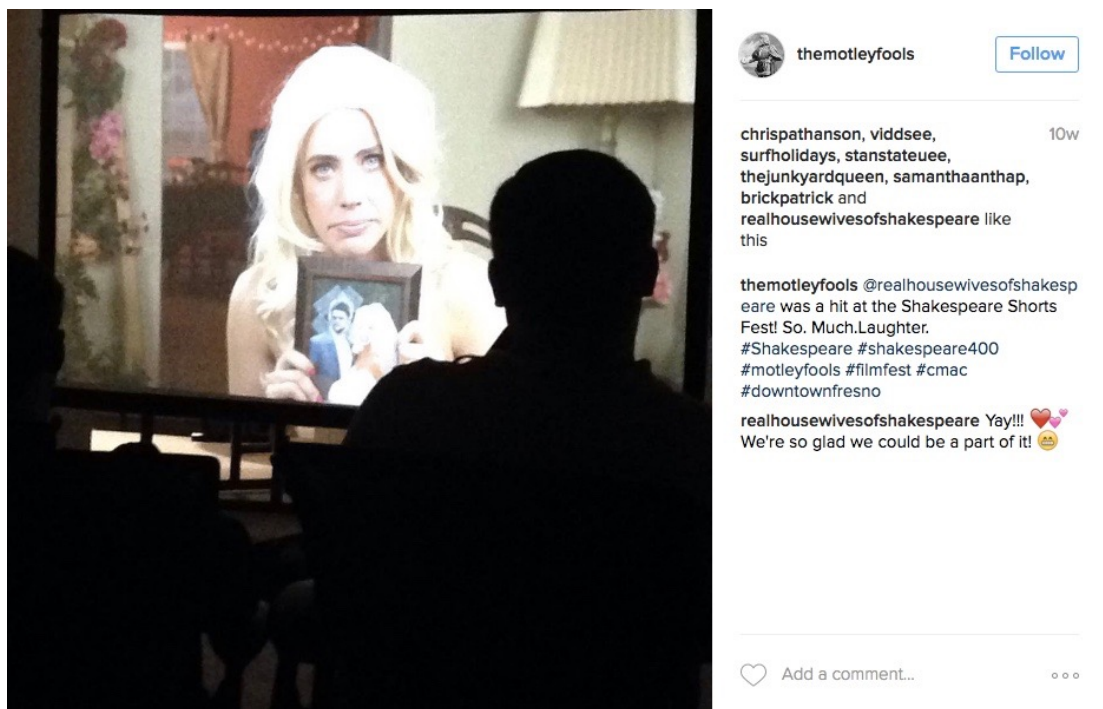


Image 24: Instagram post showing the Shakespeare Shorts Fest

4 Conclusion

Shakespeare is a figure of transhistorical, transcultural significance who people engage with in multiple ways. Themes centre around romance and the human condition, and some Instagram users interpret and frame Shakespeare through their own concerns and sensibilities, which can be comic and thoughtful. Indeed, through its references to celebrities and historical figures in its Instagram posts, the British Council broaches issues such as civil rights. This opened up personal interpretations among other Instagram users in which they relate Shakespeare to concepts important in their own lives, for example polysexualism and veganism. However, Instagram is demonstrably *not* a platform for analysis and debate of these concepts.

#ShakespeareLives posts often frame the user as thoughtful and sentimental, especially when they employ quotes and pictures of books. Often this seems contrived, a demonstration of intellectual and cultural capital (in Bourdieu's terms) in which users seek to display their familiarity with canonical literature as a form of status. A platform like Instagram encourages conspicuous self-projection and careful articulation of objects, images and meanings. Yet, overall, #ShakespeareLives Instagram posts present instances of 'realist', genuine-seeming images too, and a whole host of new and hybrid forms of visual construction and reflection, such behind-the-scenes sneak peaks and Photoshop creations.

5 Bibliography

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ⁱ Cultural capital refers to the ideas, knowledge, language registers and idioms, style, cultural reference points, artistic and other cultural assets that people use in their everyday lives to identify and distinguish themselves socially from others. It is an expression of their class status in terms other than socio-economic status.