

# BEWARE! THE FALSE CONSENSUS EFFECT

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

You were once a kid, so you know the line.

"Everyone else's parents said it was OK!"

Yeah, right. Sure they did.

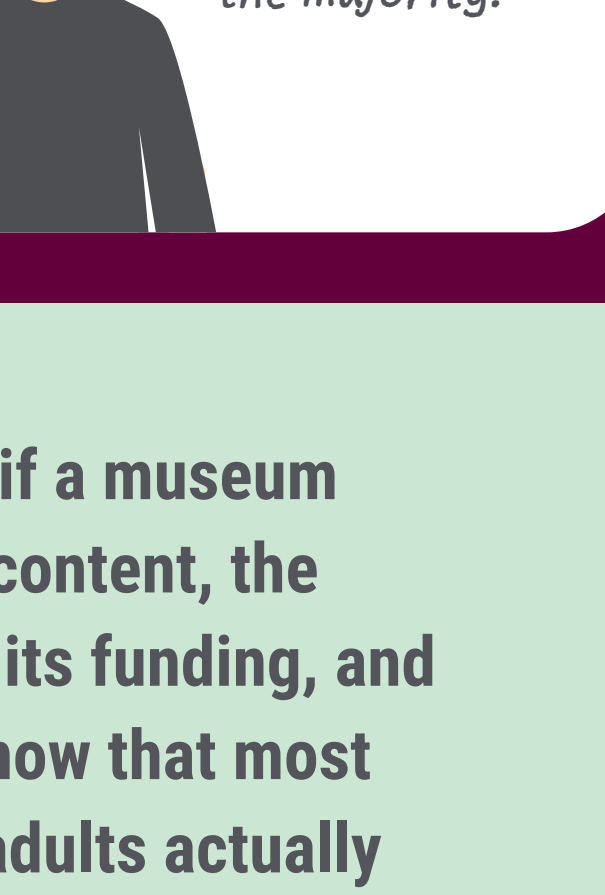
In reality, we know what's going on. Whatever it is, most parents probably don't want their kids doing it.

This attempt by kids is known as the **false consensus effect**. And as adults, we are on to them.

But here's the thing. Some of our museum visitors do it too ... and sometimes museum staffers and trustees **do** fall for it.

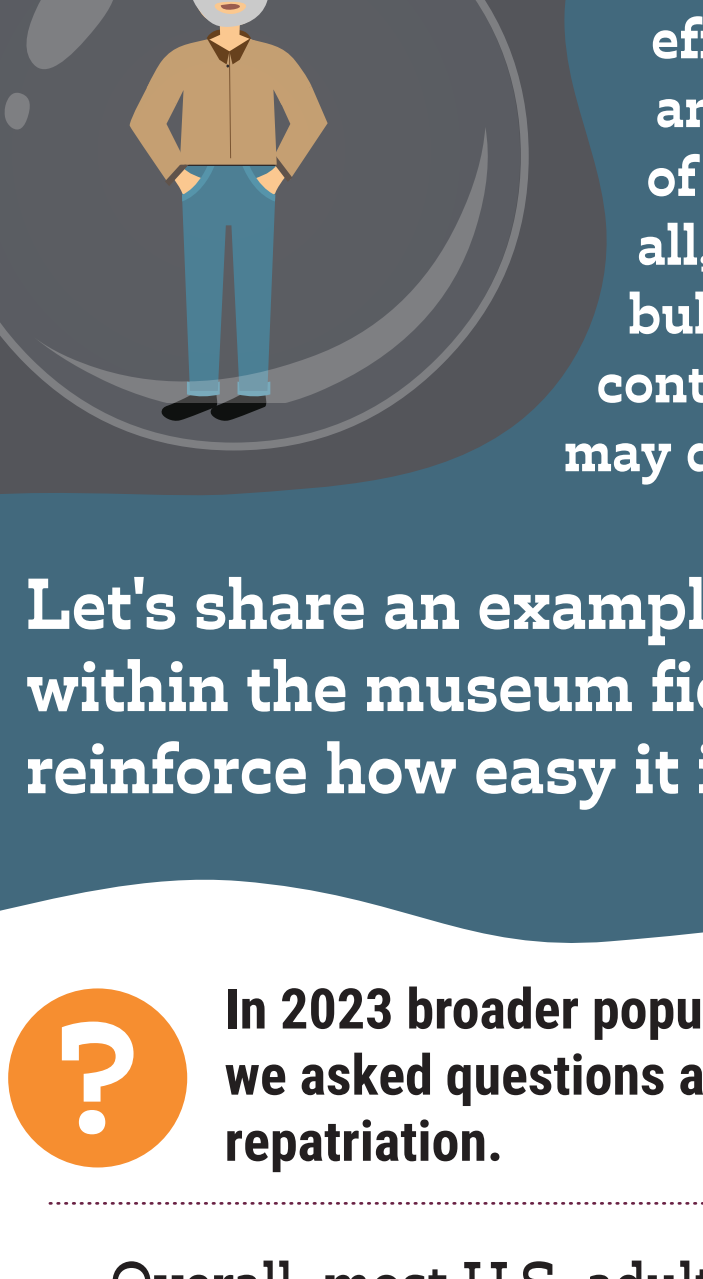
## So what is the false consensus effect?

It is when a small group of people projects the idea that their values and attitudes are shared by the majority of people. Typically, in our modern discourse, it is used to shut down conversations that a small segment doesn't want us to have or to stop a behavior they don't approve of.

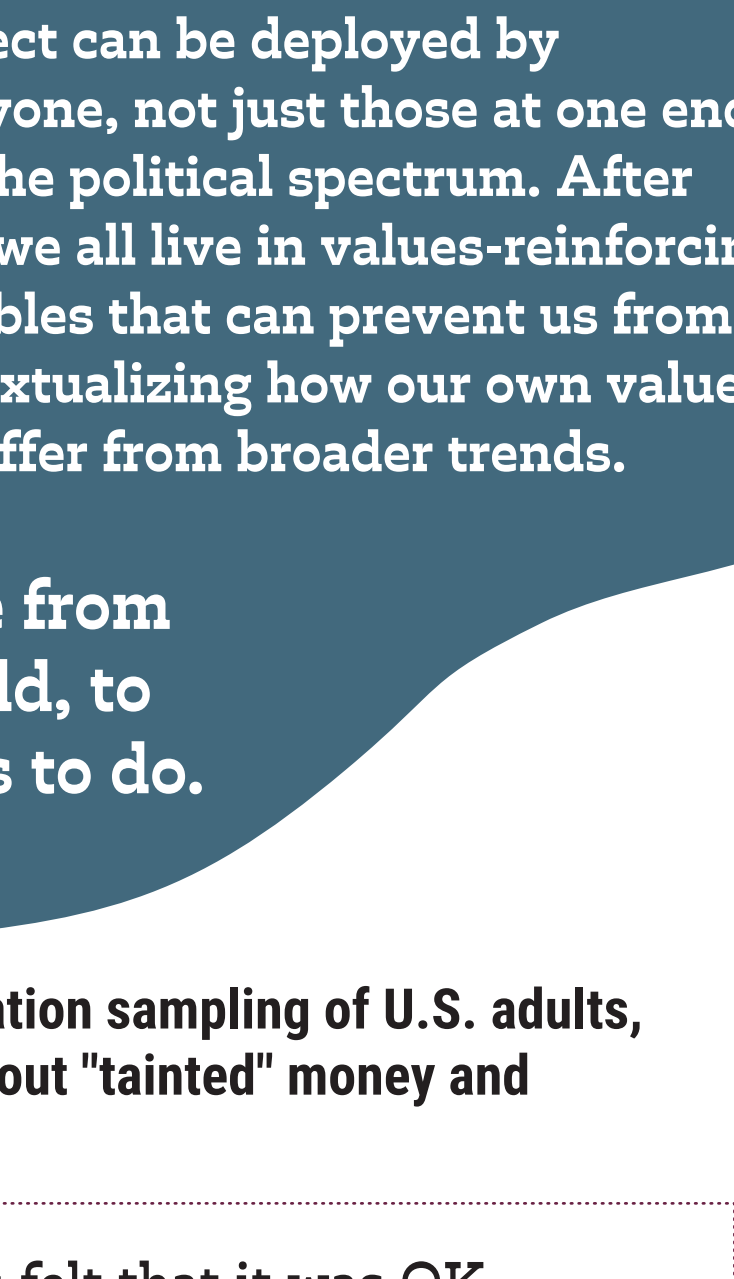


IN MUSEUMS this most frequently occurs around inclusive content, but it can also happen in response to content on climate change, public health, civic engagement, and well-being. Here are some example comments around inclusion specifically:

"Go woke and go broke."

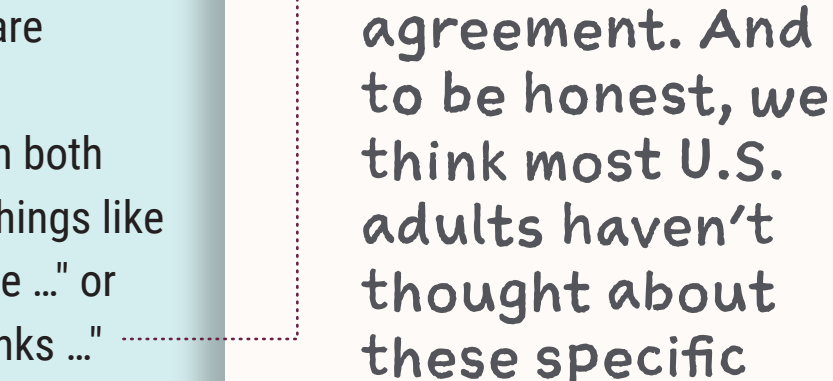


"Stop catering to [woke] people who only impose their thoughts and not the majority."



Examples like these claim that if a museum continues to present inclusive content, the museum will lose its audience, its funding, and more. In reality, however, we know that most museum-goers and most U.S. adults actually support inclusive content in museums.<sup>1</sup>

The individuals who respond so negatively to these topics are often defensive, emotional, and vocal. Some of them may actually think most people agree with them, which reflects the bubble they live in (because, to some extent, we *all* live in bubbles). Others realize their opinions are in the minority, so they are deliberately projecting the false consensus effect because they think it will work to shut down your efforts.



To be fair, the false consensus effect can be deployed by anyone, not just those at one end of the political spectrum. After all, we all live in values-reinforcing bubbles that can prevent us from contextualizing how our own values may differ from broader trends.



Let's share an example from within the museum field, to reinforce how easy it is to do.

**In 2023 broader population sampling of U.S. adults, we asked questions about "tainted" money and repatriation.**

Overall, most U.S. adults felt that it was OK for museums to accept "tainted" money, and there was no consensus at all on repatriation.

When we share these results with people who work in museums, a common response is astonishment. There is a sense of shock that most U.S. adults don't agree that there are important ethical considerations on both topics. We hear things like "how could people ..." or "but everyone thinks ..."

Well, no, not everyone is in agreement. And to be honest, we think most U.S. adults haven't thought about these specific issues enough to even have an opinion.

But that knee-jerk reaction we are seeing from museum staffers is also a projection of the **false consensus effect** because the bubbles of our work environments (where we do talk and think about these topics a lot) may have prevented us from seeing the bigger picture.

(We can also look at these results from the broader population another way ... as an opportunity to transparently share more about the topics and educate the public about our concerns.)

Now, let's explore what happens when the false consensus effect succeeds.

This is called **pluralistic ignorance**. And it can have devastating consequences for sharing a full and complete history, accurate science, and more.

That is, when do we avoid or back down on a topic because we believe significant swaths of the population disagree with us, when in reality most people actually agree with us?

Although I believe climate change is important, if the museum goes out of business and loses customers to the point of needing to shut down ...

As [inclusion] tends to divide people politically, I fear that a museum being at the forefront of these conversations can hurt attendance, contributions, and support in the community."

Now, we know from those same surveys that far more people support climate change content and inclusion than are opposed to it.<sup>2</sup> In fact, because majorities support them, for most museums it is actually riskier to avoid these topics (losing relevance than the majority of people) than to incorporate them into your content (losing a small segment of people who we already know are less likely to visit museums in the first place).<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, when we examined comments that indicated either the false consensus effect or pluralistic ignorance, virtually all were from white people. While we're not really sure why this is (though we have some ideas), it's a fascinating observation.

Additionally, anti-inclusive and/or anti-science individuals sometimes go to extreme lengths to pressure museum leadership to stop sharing the content they object to. This typically involves engaging far-right media to highlight the issue, overwhelming museum social media accounts with toxic comments, and contacting museum leadership to complain or even threaten. Sometimes they may also bring in well-known individuals with like-minded viewpoints to comment and escalate the issue.

For museum staff and leadership, this can feel overwhelming and even intimidating (and we don't want to underestimate nor overestimate the risk of physical harm), scary, and personal. It thus isn't a surprise that museum leadership often goes into a protective stance. They don't want staff harmed. It is an untenable situation.

The inclination then is to back down and defuse the issue. But here's the thing: that means **anti-inclusive and/or anti-science perspectives win**. It is exactly what they want to happen, especially since it often discourages museums from this work that matters and that most people support.

**It is so hard to be brave in this situation, yet bravery is exactly what is called for.**

**So what are we supposed to do about it?**

**Be prepared. And here are five steps to help you:**

**1 GET THE FACTS.** Find the information that shows majorities of people are on your side. This can be from reputable sources that focus on broader population research<sup>4</sup> as well as museum-audience specific research such as our Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.

**2 INOCULATE YOUR TEAM.** That includes staff as well as trustees/governance and possibly major donors or stakeholders. Walk them through the three steps of disinformation inoculation:

- 1 Share the facts. This means the evidence-backed context that not only supports the content you are sharing, but also that most people support this work.
- 2 Warn people that there could be pushback from the minority who oppose this work, and what they are likely to say (that is, how are their defense mechanisms triggered, what their feedback will be like, the incorrect statements they are likely to make, and what they might even threaten).
- 3 Reinforce why what you are doing matters. Why it matters to inclusion, why it matters to history/science/art, why it matters to truth, and why it matters ethically.

**3 CREATE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS AND INTERPRETATION PLANS.** Use strongly worded language that states how your content is evidence-based and, for that reason, not only ethically the right thing to share, but also what most people want and support. By doing this proactively, you "inoculate" more ambivalent people to see anti-inclusive/anti-science pushback as fringe, and you also reduce negative media attention as it minimizes the story. Additionally, create a plan for when you do receive complaints, either privately or publicly. Consider when no response might be better than a response.

**4 CREATE A SAFETY PLAN.** For the most part, this should prioritize the support and care your staff should have available to them. In particular, this should focus on front-line staff and whoever manages your social media. Depending on your museum and your content, you may also want to invest in de-escalation training. In extreme cases, you may want to consider more robust security.

**5 RE-INOCULATE YOUR TEAM REGULARLY.**

By taking these steps, you can stand up for history, science, and art while also serving audiences most effectively ... especially in this contentious time when our work matters more than ever.

"Museums should be a social gathering place so people build relationships with those in their communities so we care more about those we live and work with, building a stronger community."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:  
\* 2017-2023 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers  
\*\* See Connection to Humanity Data Story, released January 2023  
https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/connection\_to\_humanity\_data\_story.pdf  
\*\*\* See Climate Change in Museums: The Spectrum of Climate Change Attitudes Data Story, released October 2022  
https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/uploads/8/6/3/2/86329422/climate\_change\_2\_data\_story.pdf  
\*\*\*\* Why "most" museums? Unfortunately, here's where politics actually does come in and affect museum content. State and locally-funded museums are much more likely to be susceptible to publication as publicly-funded institutions – even when most of the public supports their content. That leaves some museums in a difficult position of either limiting what they share to have some impact or risking their ability to have any impact at all (through loss of funding, closure, or forced change in leadership).  
\*\*\*\*\* We like Pew Research Center, PRRI, APM Research Lab, to start.

\*Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 13, 2022 for more information on methodology.

More Data Stories can be found at [wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories](https://www.wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories).

