

Through the Public's Lens: Are Museums Active Members of Society? An Investigation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Authors
- Alexandra Zbucea
- Mauro Romanelli
- Monica Bira

Abstract

Traditionally, museums have cultural and educational roles. Increasingly, however, museums are also assuming a social role in engaging with visitors and communities and strengthening social involvement coherently given the changing expectations of the public. Museums have become participatory organisations that contribute to the well-being of society. Considering the global health challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter investigates the way museums have responded to support their communities, as well as the public's perception of museums' civic profile. An online survey was applied in Italy, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova to identify the dimensions of the activity of museums regarding how the support offered by museums is visible and appreciated. The study shows that museums reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, developing online and digital sources to adapt and deliver their offers, to have a voice within society. Generally speaking, it seems that the public does not pay much attention to museums concerned in contemporary societal debates. Understanding the public image of museums helps museums redesign their organisation and activities to meet the expectations of contemporary audiences coherently, given the recent societal developments. This investigation is among the first to highlight the way museums have assumed an activist role, providing support to the wider public, by reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic Museums' public perception Museums' activist and social role Museums as communities

This is a preview of subscription content, [log in](#) to check access.

References

1. Abend, L. (2020, March 31). Museums scramble to document the pandemic, even as it unfolds. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/arts/design/museums-coronavirus-pandemic-artifacts.html>
2. Addis, M. (2005). New technologies and cultural consumption—edutainment is born! *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(7–8), 729–736. Retrieved

from https://cursa.ihmc.us/rid=1234517332312_632271524_3467/%EE%80%80edutainment%EE%80%81.pdf.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)

3. Agostino, D., Arnaboldi, M., & Lema, M. D. (2020). New development: COVID-19 as an accelerator of digital transformation in public service delivery. *Public Money and Management*, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2020.1764206>.
4. Antón, C., Camarero, C., & Garrido, M. J. (2018). Exploring the experience value of museum visitors as a co-creation process. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21(12), 1406–1425.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
5. Artforum. (2020, May 28). *Baltimore museum of art to provide financial relief to local artists and businesses*. Retrieved from <https://www.artforum.com/news/baltimore-museum-of-artto-provide-financial-relief-to-local-artists-and-businesses-83129>.
6. Atkinson, A. B., Guio, A. C., & Marlier, E. (Eds.). (2017). *Monitoring social inclusion in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.[Google Scholar](#)
7. Bagdadli, S. (1997). *Il museo come azienda. Management e organizzazione al servizio della cultura*. Milano: Etas.[Google Scholar](#)
8. Bandelli, A., & Konijn, E. A. (2015). Public participation and scientific citizenship in the science museum in London: Visitors' perceptions of the museum as a broker. *Visitor Studies*, 18(2), 131–149.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
9. Black, G. (2005). *The engaging museum: Developing museums for visitor involvement*. London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
10. Bonacini, E. (2012). Il museo partecipativo sul web: forme di partecipazione dell'utente alla produzione culturale e alla creazione di valore culturale. *Il capitale culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*, 5, 93–125.[Google Scholar](#)
11. Brida, J. G., Dalle Nogare, C., & Scuderi, R. (2016a). Frequency of museum attendance: Motivation matters. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 40(3), 261–283.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
12. Brida, J. C., Meleddu, M., & Pulina, M. (2016b). Understanding museum visitor's experience: A comparative study. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 6(1), 47–71.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
13. Brown, K., & Mairesse, F. (2018). The definition of the museum through its social role. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 61(4), 525–539.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
14. Burton, C., & Scott, C. (2007). Museums. Challenges for the 21st century. In R. Sandell & R. R. Janes (Eds.), *Museum management and marketing* (pp. 56–68). London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
15. Cascone, S. (2020, April 8). Masks and other ephemera from the coronavirus pandemic to document history as it unfolds. *Artnet.com*. Retrieved from <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-starting-coronavirus-collections-1827606>

16. Casey, D. (2007). Museums as agents for social and political change. In S. Watson (Ed.), *Museums and their communities* (pp. 292–299). London: Routledge. [Google Scholar](#)
17. Christiansen, K. (2020). The Met and the COVID crisis. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(3), 221–224. [Google Scholar](#)
18. Cook, C. (2020, July 7). France: Rodin Museum sells works amid COVID-19 losses. AA. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/france-rodin-museum-sells-works-amid-covid-19-losses/1903874>
19. Culturefor. (2020). #CultureForDigital—MANN Napoli. *Culturefor.com*. Retrieved from https://culturefor.com/2020/04/18/culturefordigital-mann-napoli/?fbclid=IwAR2lhCdilBd_N9kb-NVh67CTiEoJHrpGXRFLYGhNE9VONr6f3D3GhOgxCKE
20. EC. (2017). *Special Eurobarometer 466*. Cultural Heritage Report. Retrieved from file:///D:/articolle,%20lucrari%20etc/2020/Springer%20-%20Culture/ebs_466_en_final.pdf [Google Scholar](#)
21. Ellis, K. (2019). How social media is driving the climate change conversation. *NewsWhip*. Retrieved from <https://www.newswhip.com/2019/09/social-media-is-driving-the-climate-change-conversation/>
22. Emery, A. R. (2001). The integrated museum: A meaningful role in society? *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 44(1), 69–82. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
23. Eurostat. (2016). *Culture statistics*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/7551543/KS-04-15-737-EN-N.pdf/648072f3-63c4-47d8-905a-6fdc742b8605>. [Google Scholar](#)
24. Falk, J. (2016). Museum audiences: A visitor-centered perspective. *Society and Leisure*, 39(3), 357–370. [Google Scholar](#)
25. Firenze Today. (2020, April 6). Coronavirus, su Instagram per ripensare i musei del future. *Firenze Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.firenzetoday.it/eventi/coronavirus-su-instagram-per-ripensare-i-musei-del-futuro.html>
26. Harper, D. (2020, March 26). Museums and art schools donated supplies to hospitals overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases. *Artsy*. Retrieved from <https://www.artsy.net/news/artsy-editorial-museums-art-schools-donated-supplies-hospitals-overwhelmed-covid-19-cases>
27. Hede, A. M., Garma, R., Josiassen, A., & Thyne, M. (2014). Perceived authenticity of the visitor experience in museums. *European Journal of Marketing*, 48(7–8), 1395–1412. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
28. Hofstede Insights. *Country comparison*. Retrieved from <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/italy,moldova,romania/>

29. Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1995). Museums and communication: An introductory essay. In E. Hooper-Greenhill (Ed.), *Museum, media, message* (pp. 1–12). London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
30. Janes, R. R., & Sandell, R. (2019). Posterity has arrived. The necessary emergence of museum activism. In R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (Eds.), *Museum activism* (pp. 1–21). London: Routledge.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
31. Karp, I. (1992). Introduction: Museums and communities: The politics of public culture. In I. Karp & C. Mullen Kreamer (Eds.), *Museums and communities* (pp. 1–17). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.[Google Scholar](#)
32. Kelly, L. (2010). How web 2.0 is changing the nature of museum work. *Curator*, 53(4), 405–410.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
33. Kendall Adams, G. (2020, May 1). *Grassroots fundraising efforts take off amid Covid-19 crisis*. The Museums Association. Retrieved from <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/05/01052020-grassroots-fundraising-efforts-take-off/#>
34. Kim Lian Chan, J. (2009). The consumption of museum service experiences: Benefits and value of museum experiences. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, 18(2–3), 173–196.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
35. Knell, S. (2019). *The contemporary museum*. London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
36. Komarac, T., Ozretic-Dosen, D., & Skare, V. (2020). Managing edutainment and perceived authenticity of museum visitor experience: Insights from qualitative study. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(2), 160–181.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
37. Kopke, J. (2011). The Denver community museum. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 54(4), 399–402.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
38. Kotler, N., & Kotler, P. (2007). Can museums be all things to all people? Mission, goals, and marketing's role. *Museums Management and Curatorship*, 18(3), 271–287.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
39. Latorre, A. (2020, April 3). Arte, visibilidad y apoyo moral: nace el Covid Art Museum, el primer museo inspirado en la crisis del coronavirus. *20minutos.es*. Retrieved from <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/4214976/0/nace-el-covid-art-museum-el-primer-museo-virtual-inspirado-en-el-coronavirus/>
40. Legget, J. (2018). Shared heritage, shared authority, shared accountability? Co-generating museum performance criteria as a means of embedding 'shared authority'. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 24(7), 732–742.[Google Scholar](#)
41. Lord, B. (2006). Foucault's museum: Difference, representation, and genealogy. *Museum and Society*, 4(1), 1–14.[Google Scholar](#)
42. Lynch, B. T. (2011). Custom-made reflective practice: Can museums realise their capabilities in helping others realise theirs? *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 26(5), 441–458.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)

43. Manna, R., & Palumbo, R. (2018). What makes a museum attractive to young people? Evidence from Italy. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 20(4), 508–517. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
44. Mears, H., & Modest, W. (2013). Museums, African collections and social justice. In R. Sandell & E. Nightingale (Eds.), *Museums, equality and social justice* (pp. 294–309). London: Routledge. [Google Scholar](#)
45. Moreno Gil, S., & Ritchie, J. B. (2009). Understanding the museum image formation process: A comparison of residents and tourists. *Journal of Travel Research*, 47(4), 480–493. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
46. NEMO. (2021, January 2021). *Follow-up-survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums in Europe Final Report*. Retrieved from https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19-FollowUpReport_11.1.2021.pdf
47. Nowacki, M., & Kruczek, Z. (2020). Experience marketing at polish museums and visitor attractions: The co-creation of visitor experiences, emotions and satisfaction. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1730228>.
48. OECD. (2019). *Talent Abroad, a review of Romanian emigrants*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/migration/talent-abroad-a-review-of-romanian-emigrants-bac53150-en.htm>
49. Packer, J. (2008). Beyond learning: Exploring visitors' perceptions of the value and benefits of museum experiences. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 51(1), 33–54. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
50. Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2002). Motivational factors and the visitor experience: A comparison of three sites. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 45(3), 183–198. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
51. Passy, Ch. (2020, April 6). History in the moment: Museums begin chronicling coronavirus pandemic. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/history-in-the-moment-museums-begin-chronicling-coronavirus-pandemic-11586210478>
52. Pogrebin, R. (2020, September 16). Brooklyn museum to sell 12 works as pandemic changes the rules. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/arts/design/brooklyn-museum-sale-christies-coronavirus.html>
53. Potts, T. (2020). The J. Paul Getty museum during the coronavirus crisis. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(3), 217–220. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
54. Rentschler, R. (2007). Museum marketing. Understanding different types of audiences. In R. Sandelli & R. R. Janes (Eds.), *Museum management and marketing* (pp. 345–365). London: Routledge. [Google Scholar](#)

55. RFI. (2020, August 11). MNAC: Prima procedură de achiziții publice de artă contemporană din ultimii 12 ani. *RFI*. Retrieved from <https://www.rfi.ro/cultura-123895-mnac-prima-procedura-achizitii-publice-arta-contemporana>
56. Sandell, R. (1998). Museums as agents of social inclusion. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17(4), 401–418.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
57. Sandell, R. (2002). Museums and the combating of social inequality: Roles, responsibilities, resistance. In R. Sandell (Ed.), *Museums, society inequality* (pp. 3–23). London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
58. Sandell, R. (2003). Social inclusion, the museum and the dynamics of sectoral change. *Museum and Society*, 1(1), 45–62.[Google Scholar](#)
59. Sandell, R. (2007). Museums and the combating of social inequality: Roles, responsibilities, resistance. In S. Watson (Ed.), *Museums and their communities* (pp. 95–113). London: Routledge.[Google Scholar](#)
60. Scott, C. (2010). Museums, the public, and public value. *Journal of Museum Education*, 35(1), 33–42.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
61. Sholts, S. (2020, February 26). How museums can help the public make sense of pandemics. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-museums-can-help-public-make-sense-pandemics-180974281/>
62. Simon, N. (2010). The participatory museum. *Museum 2.0*. Retrieved from <http://www.participatorymuseum.org>
63. Smee, S. (2020, April 20). Museum association relaxes rules on selling art. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/this-is-how-bad-things-are-for-museums-they-now-have-a-green-light-to-sell-off-their-art/2020/04/29/b5492a5e-899e-11ea-8ac1-bfb250876b7a_story.html
64. Stephens, S. (2020). *Natural History Museum declares climate emergency. Museum launches strategy for tackling the planetary crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/01/23012020-nhm-declares-climate-emergency/#>
65. Stylianou-Lambert, T. (2009). Perceiving the art museum. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 24(2), 139–158.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
66. Taylor, C. (2017). From systemic exclusion to systemic inclusion: A critical look at museums. *Journal of Museum Education*, 42(2), 155–162.[CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
67. Tully, G. (2020). Are we living the future? Museums in the time of Covid-19. In F. Burini (Ed), *Tourism facing a pandemic: From crisis to recovery* (pp. 229–242). Università degli Studi di Bergamo.[Google Scholar](#)
68. Valentine, V. (2020, April 19). In wake of COVID-19, artists are uniting to support the Museum of the African Diaspora San Francisco with an online benefit auction. *Culture Type*. Retrieved from <https://www.culturetype.com/2020/04/17/in-wake-of-covid-19->

[artists-are-uniting-to-support-museum-of-the-african-diaspora-san-francisco-with-online-benefit-auction/](#)

69. Varella, S. (2020). Migrants arrivals in Italy, 2014–2020. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/623514/migrant-arrivals-to-italy/>
70. Verdon, M. T. (2020). Art in time of Corona virus. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35(3), 215–216. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
71. Watson, S. (2007). Museums and their communities. In S. Watson (Ed.), *Museums and their communities* (pp. 1–23). London: Routledge. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
72. Zardini Lacedelli, S. (2020, February 27). La risposta Dei musei italiani al coronavirus: Diffondiamo cultura e positività attraverso il web [The reaction of Italian museums to covid-19: Spreading beauty and culture on the web]. *Muzeo Dolom*. Retrieved from <http://www.museodolom.it/home/it/2020/02/27/la-risposta-dei-musei-italiani-al-coronavirus-diffondiamo-cultura-e-positivita-attraverso-il-web/>
73. Zbucea, A. (2015). *Marketing muzeal pentru nonmarketeri* [Museum marketing for nonmarketers]. Bucharest, RO: Tritonic. [Google Scholar](#)