



Rethinking the Museum's Social Role from Within: A Bibliometric Analysis of Employee Engagement, Leadership, and Organizational Performance

Emanuela Ana-Maria BĂLAN

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
30A Expoziției Blvd., District 1, 012104 Bucharest, Romania

 ORCID No: 0009-0006-9722-2890

emanuelaanamaria.balan@gmail.com

Abstract

Museums have long been associated with the conservation, research, presentation, and display of cultural heritage. In recent years, however, they have been increasingly repositioned, in both theory and practice, as socially engaged, participatory, and reflexive institutions that need to better serve society and respond to their communities' needs. This shift was reinforced by the 2022 definition adopted by the International Council of Museums, which places greater emphasis on the museum's social responsibility. In this context, the museum's social role can no longer be understood only through its public programs, exhibitions, or audience-oriented activities, but also through the internal organizational dynamics that make such transformations possible. The present paper examines how the academic literature addresses the relationship among employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance in the museum sector, and how these concepts are linked to the broader debate on the evolving social role of museums. More specifically, the article questions how this field of research has developed over time, which thematic clusters and conceptual connections can be identified, and to what extent the literature connects museums' external social mission with their internal organizational processes. Methodologically, the study employs a bibliometric analysis with Bibliometrix, an R package, to process data retrieved from the Web of Science database. The article maps publication trends, influential sources, authors, keywords, and thematic structures at the intersection of museum studies and organizational research. The findings indicate that although themes such as participation, inclusion, sustainability, and social impact have gained visibility in museum-related scholarship, the roles of employees, leadership, and organizational performance remain comparatively underexplored. By identifying these gaps, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of museum performance, arguing that the reflexive museum is not only defined by its public role but also by its capacity to change from within.

Keywords

Reflexive museum; organizational performance; social impact; employee engagement; leadership; Bibliometrix.

Introduction

In recent years, the role of museums has undergone significant transformations. Museums have increasingly evolved beyond their traditional functions as institutions primarily dedicated to conservation, research, and exhibition, becoming socially engaged, participatory, and reflexive spaces. In this context, they are expected to assume more relevant roles within their communities and to function as active agents in society. In 2022, the International Council of Museums adopted a revised definition of the museum, one that places greater emphasis on aspects such as inclusivity, community participation, sustainability, and the institution's role in serving society. The updated definition reflects broader social and cultural shifts, as well as the evolving expectations of audiences, who no longer seek to engage with static, elite-oriented spaces but rather aspire to participate actively, contribute, and feel a sense of belonging within cultural institutions. Thus, museums are increasingly imagined not as silent repositories of

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authority, but as living spaces of encounter, dialogue, and belonging, where visitors are invited to participate, contribute, and recognize themselves as part of the cultural narrative.

Building on these transformations, a growing number of scholars in museum and cultural studies have introduced new concepts that seek to capture the evolving role of museums, among which the notion of the reflexive museum has gained particular relevance (Marstine, 2008; Macdonald, 2013; Witcomb, 2003; Sandell, 2007; Simon, 2010; Falk & Dierking, 2016). The reflexive museum, or more precisely, the museum that changes from within, can be understood as an institution capable of critically examining its own practices, values, and assumptions while continuously adapting to societal changes and the needs of its audiences. In this sense, reflexivity does not refer only to the museum's public discourse but also to its internal capacity for transformation. This perspective shifts attention not only to what museums do but also to how they operate from within, including how institutional values are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by museum employees.

However, despite the increasing emphasis on the social role of museums, the internal dynamics that sustain these transformations remain insufficiently explored, thus leaving an important gap in the literature. Existing research tends to focus predominantly on institutional frameworks, public engagement, or policy-level developments, while comparatively less attention is paid to the role of employees and their engagement with the museum's mission, vision, and purpose. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of research examining how performance in museums should be defined and measured, beyond existing operational practices. This gap becomes particularly relevant in the context of the reflexive museum, where social responsiveness depends not only on public-facing initiatives but also on organizational culture, leadership, and the everyday engagement of museum professionals.

Against this background, the present paper aims to examine how academic literature conceptualizes and connects employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance within the museum sector, as well as how these concepts relate to the evolving social role of museums. To achieve this, the study employs a bibliometric analysis based on data retrieved from the Web of Science database and processed using Bibliometrix.

Examining this field through a bibliometric lens is relevant for several reasons. For researchers, mapping how the literature on employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance in museums has developed makes it possible to identify the main themes, the connections between them, and the areas that remain underexplored, which can inform future research on the internal dimensions of the reflexive museum. For museum managers and leaders, understanding whether and how these internal dimensions have been studied is important because the social mission of the contemporary museum depends not only on public-facing programs but also on the engagement of staff and the quality of organizational leadership. For cultural policymakers and funding bodies, the analysis is relevant because it shows the extent to which current conceptions of museum performance, often based on operational indicators, reflect or omit the organizational and human conditions that sustain institutional change. Finally, the analysis is relevant for underrepresented contexts, including the Central and Eastern European and Romanian museum sectors, which are weakly represented in the existing literature and where these questions have rarely been studied.

Theoretical background

This section introduces the four concepts on which the present study is built and explains how they are connected. The starting point is the reflexive museum, understood

as an institution that changes from within, since it is this concept that links the museum's external social role to its internal organization. If reflexivity depends on the museum's internal capacity for transformation, then it depends on the people through whom that transformation occurs, which makes employee engagement the second concept, the mechanism through which staff interpret the institution's mission and translate it into practice. Engagement, however, does not arise on its own. It is shaped by the conditions under which people work and, in particular, by how they are led, which is why leadership is discussed as the condition that enables or constrains employee engagement. Finally, if engagement and leadership influence how the museum's mission is enacted, their effects should become visible in the museum's organizational performance, provided that performance is understood not only through operational indicators but also through its social and internal-organizational dimensions. These four concepts are therefore not treated separately but as a sequence, from the reflexive museum's purpose through the employees who mediate it and the leadership that supports them to the performance in which their combined effect should appear.

The reflexive museum

The museum has long been defined through its relationship to collections, through acquiring, preserving, researching, and displaying material and immaterial heritage. Within this paradigm the institution spoke with the authority of the expert, and the visitor occupied the position of a recipient of knowledge already constituted elsewhere. The body of work usually grouped under the new museology (Vergo, 1989) broke with this object-centered conception, moving the center of attention from the collection toward a more mixed approach, combining the traditional functions of a museum with communication, interpretation, and the social purposes a museum might serve. Scholarship registers the same shift: the contemporary museum is no longer a hermetic space reserved for elites and their values, even if it remains a contested terrain for the right to representation and access (Sfinteş, 2014; Gray & McCall, 2020). The revised definition adopted by ICOM in 2022, which foregrounds service to society, inclusivity, community participation, and sustainability, can be read as the institutional consolidation of this longer trajectory rather than as a sudden break.

Three interconnected concepts now articulate this evolving social role, and they organise much of the present study. The first is the activist museum, which positions the institution as a social actor that engages with sensitive and civically relevant issues, such as migration, climate change, contested histories, rather than confining itself to neutral display (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Kavanagh, 2002; Bergevin, 2018). The second is the participatory museum, which reconceives the visitor as a contributor to the production of meaning rather than a passive audience, through co-creation and consultative or collaborative involvement (Simon, 2010; Sandell, 2003; Black, 2021; Emery, 2001; Barnes & McPherson, 2019; Mygind et al., 2015). The third is the reflexive museum, or the museum that changes from within (Marstine, 2008; Macdonald, 2013; Witcomb, 2003; Sandell, 2007; Falk & Dierking, 2016), positioning the museum as an institution capable of turning the critical lens onto its own practices, assumptions, and modes of authority and of adapting them as society changes.

It is the third concept that carries the weight of this paper's argument, because reflexivity is not only a matter of public discourse. It concerns the museum's internal capacity for transformation and, therefore, the people through whom that transformation must happen. Reflexivity, on this reading, is enacted in how museum employees understand their own role, whether they see themselves as mere executors, as neutral specialists, or as socially engaged actors and in how they relate to the institution's mission and to the broader changes happening in the cultural field.

This shifts the analytical question from what museums do to how they operate from within, and it is precisely here that the museological literature, focused as it is on the institution's outward-facing role, tends to fall silent. The activist and participatory turns

describe a changed relationship with the public; the reflexive turn obliges us to ask whether the institution has changed internally enough to sustain it.

Employee engagement in museums

The capacity of museums to fulfill their social mission and to achieve their intended public impact depends on the active commitment of their employees to that mission, rather than on the mere execution of assigned tasks. If the social role of the museum depends on the people who enact it, then understanding how engaged those people are and what sustains or undermines their engagement becomes essential. This is why employee engagement is treated here as a central dimension of the museum's capacity to fulfill its social role, and the following section traces how the concept developed before considering what it means specifically in the museum context.

The interest in how organizations relate to the people who work for them has a long lineage. In the decades following the Second World War, employee satisfaction became an explicit organizational concern, as firms came to recognize that workers who were well treated and content also tended to be more productive. Maslow's hierarchy of needs gave this intuition a theoretical frame: once basic needs such as adequate pay and security are met, individuals are motivated by higher-order needs: belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Over the following decades, the focus shifted from satisfaction toward the more demanding notions of commitment and, more recently, engagement, which captures not merely whether employees are content but how far they invest themselves in their work.

If the reflexive museum depends on its people, the engagement of those people becomes a central rather than a peripheral concern. Within this lineage, employee engagement as a distinct construct took shape in the 1990s, when Kahn (1990) defined it as the extent to which individuals are psychologically present in their work roles: bringing and expressing their preferred selves physically, cognitively, and emotionally rather than withdrawing or defending them. Kahn argued that this presence rests on three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, the sense that one's work is worthwhile and one's contribution matters; safety, the sense that one can show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences; and availability, having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources to engage at a given moment.

This reframed engagement as something different from mere satisfaction or happiness: an engaged employee is not simply content but fully involved, enthusiastic, and committed to the work. Building on this and on the broader "positive psychology" turn toward optimal functioning rather than dysfunction, Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) developed an approach that treated engagement as a construct in its own right rather than as the simple inverse of burnout and operationalized it through three dimensions: vigor, characterized by high energy, mental resilience, and a willingness to persist even when work is difficult; dedication, which refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride in one's work; and absorption, which means being fully concentrated and happily engrossed, such that time passes quickly and detaching from work becomes difficult, a state they likened to "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Crucially, they conceived engagement not as a momentary mood but as a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state.

Subsequent work refined the construct. Saks (2006), in one of the first studies to test what causes engagement and what it leads to, used social exchange theory and showed that there are two kinds: engagement with one's job and engagement with one's organization. The scholar also kept engagement separate from similar ideas like organizational commitment. The difference is that commitment is how attached someone feels to the organization, while engagement is about how focused and involved they are while actually doing the work. Macey and Schneider (2008) tried to clear up the confusion around the term, which had spread quickly through HR consulting firms with

many different meanings. They proposed that engagement has three sides: a personality trait (some people are simply more inclined to it), a mental state (feeling energetic and absorbed), and a behavior (putting in extra effort and going beyond what the job strictly requires). They also argued that engagement is not the same as job satisfaction: satisfaction is feeling content, while engagement is about energy and drive. Both papers note that businesses became eager to measure engagement and tie it to results like staff retention and performance, but both warn that this enthusiasm ran ahead of the actual evidence, which is part of why the link between engagement and performance is still debated.

The cultural sector has several particular characteristics that are relevant here, and museums are a good example of them. Work in cultural institutions is often experienced as vocational rather than as an ordinary job. Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010), in a theoretical integration of the meaning of work literature, identify organizational mission as one of the key sources of meaning for employees: when workers perceive alignment between their own values and the goals and purposes of their institution, the work gains significance beyond its practical content. This alignment is particularly strong in museums, where the mission is socially oriented and connects employees to a sense of purpose and contribution that goes beyond individual tasks. Rosso et al. (2010) also note, however, that mission-based meaning is not straightforwardly positive: organizations that build their psychological relationship with staff on mission and ideology face stronger negative reactions when those ideals appear to be violated or left unsupported, because the expectations they have created are correspondingly higher. When an institution asks staff to commit to a socially meaningful purpose while failing to provide adequate material conditions, the gap between declared values and actual support becomes a source of disillusionment rather than engagement.

The literature on creative and cultural work shows that this gap is common. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) argue that worker experiences in the cultural industries are highly ambivalent: alongside genuine satisfactions, such as autonomy, meaningful output, and social recognition, cultural workers face significant insecurity, low or uneven pay, long hours, and conditions in which commitment and self-exploitation are difficult to separate. The lure of self-realization through work can itself become a source of vulnerability, in that it encourages workers to absorb poor material conditions in the name of a calling. Museum employment shares this profile: specialists identify strongly with the mission, find meaning in the work, and often accept constrained pay and difficult conditions as part of what the role requires.

This situation is difficult to reconcile with the strict order proposed initially by Maslow. In museums, and especially in the Romanian sector, the mission-based motivation that Maslow places at the higher levels is expected precisely where the lower levels, adequate pay, and security are not met. Romanian museum professionals describe this directly: underfunding, low and sometimes very poor salaries, and the loss of qualified staff who leave for better-paid work are recurrent problems, and the same underfunding and unstable pay are seen as having reduced the professional motivation of museum specialists (Nițulescu, 2016). Rosso et al. (2010) offer a relevant observation here: when employees face significant financial pressure or inadequate income, the economic value of work becomes more salient, and other sources of meaning, including purpose and mission, become harder to sustain. In other words, financial circumstances do not simply add to or subtract from meaning; they can restructure it, shifting attention away from the higher-order sources of significance that mission-driven institutions depend upon. The basic needs are therefore not satisfied before the higher ones; the two coexist in tension. This does not mean that Maslow's model is irrelevant, but that, in mission-driven cultural institutions, its order does not apply directly: for a while, meaning compensates for what material conditions do not offer. As a result, engagement in museums is an important but fragile resource, supported by the mission but vulnerable when underfunding and low pay erode the very motivation on which it depends.

This fragility is important because the social role of the contemporary museum depends to a large extent on its employees. The activist, participatory, and reflexive roles described above cannot be applied only through management decisions; they depend on whether employees assume them and put them into practice. An activist museum that addresses difficult social topics cannot function without the real involvement of its staff (Janes & Sandell, 2019), and the transition towards a more open and participatory museum is based on its human resources and on how employees understand and respond to the new expectations of the public (Black, 2021). Participation, in particular, requires specialists to give up part of the interpretive authority that has traditionally defined their professional role and to invite the public into processes that used to belong only to the expert (Emery, 2001). How employees see themselves in relation to this change, as simple executants, neutral specialists, or socially engaged actors, therefore influences whether the museum's mission is actually achieved or remains only a statement. In this sense, their engagement is not a secondary aspect of museum performance, but one of its conditions, and this internal dimension is exactly what the literature on the social role of museums has explored less.

The literature on organizational engagement is extensive, and research on creative and cultural labor has grown considerably in recent decades. Yet empirical studies that specifically address employee engagement within museums and connect staff attitudes to the institution's evolving social mission remain scarce. Within museum studies, the term "engagement" has been applied far more consistently to visitor and community participation than to the people who work inside the institution. This imbalance reflects a broader tendency in the museological literature to theorize the museum's outward social role while leaving its internal organizational conditions largely unexamined, and it is precisely this gap that the bibliometric analysis of the present study is designed to document.

The studies that do exist tend to focus on related but distinct constructs. Dragouni and McCarthy (2021), in one of the few empirical studies on the museum workforce from an organizational theory perspective, examine job satisfaction and organizational commitment among UK museum staff and volunteers, finding that transformational leadership has a positive relationship with both outcomes, particularly when it communicates a clear mission and supports employee participation in decision-making. Their study explicitly notes that management and leadership within the museum sector have received little academic attention and that there is a marked scarcity of empirical research on the subject. Goulaptsi, Manolika, and Tsourvakas (2019), working with museum employees in Greece, examine individual innovative behaviour rather than engagement, and find that transformational leadership and team climate, specifically task orientation, are significant predictors of employees' willingness to adopt and apply new ideas. Both studies point to internal organizational conditions as meaningful determinants of how museum employees perform their roles, yet neither directly addresses employee engagement in the sense developed by Kahn (1990) or Schaufeli et al. (2002), nor does it connect staff attitudes to the museum's social mission. The gap is therefore not simply quantitative; it is conceptual: the literature that exists on the museum workforce draws predominantly on job satisfaction and organizational commitment frameworks, leaving the relationship between employee engagement, leadership, and the institution's evolving reflexive and social role largely unexplored.

Table 1. Factors influencing employee engagement in museums

Dimension	Factor of influence	Sources
Personal factors	Psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability	Kahn (1990)
	Vigor, dedication, and absorption as a persistent affective-cognitive state	Schaufeli et al. (2002)

	Identification with the mission and meaning found in the work itself	Rosso et al. (2010)
	Vocational orientation and personal commitment to a calling	Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011)
	Financial pressure, which can weaken higher-order sources of meaning	Rosso et al. (2010)
Organizational factors	Alignment between employee values and the institution's mission	Rosso et al. (2010)
	Transformational leadership and support for participation in decision-making	Dragouni & McCarthy (2021); Goulaptsi et al. (2019)
	Team climate, particularly task orientation	Goulaptsi et al. (2019)
	Stable leadership, communication, and a shared sense of purpose	Jung (2016)
External/systemic factors	Underfunding, low or very poor pay, and unstable material conditions	Nițulescu (2016)
	Precarious employment conditions in the cultural sector	Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011)
	Loss of qualified staff to better-paid sectors	Nițulescu (2016)

Note: Some of the sources listed address related constructs such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or innovative behavior rather than employee engagement in the strict sense developed by Kahn (1990) and Schaufeli et al. (2002).

Table 1 summarizes the main factors identified in the reviewed literature as associated with employee engagement in museums, grouped into personal, organizational, and external or systemic dimensions.

Leadership in Museums

Leadership is one of the most consistent determinants of organizational effectiveness in museums. In a comparative study of 33 museums across five countries, Griffin and Abraham (2000) found that cohesive leadership, defined as leadership that encourages shared values, a commitment to agreed standards of quality, and effective communication, accounted for more than 44% of the variance in museum performance and was the single strongest predictor of effectiveness, ahead of public programming and governance. Among the different styles, the literature points consistently to transformational leadership, which motivates staff by appealing to shared values, a clear vision, and the intrinsic worth of their work (Bass & Avolio, 1994), as the type most closely associated with engagement and mission achievement. In the museum sector specifically, Dragouni and McCarthy (2021) found that transformational leadership was positively related to both job satisfaction and organizational commitment among UK museum staff, particularly when it communicated a clear mission and supported employee participation in decision-making, while Goulaptsi et al. (2019) found that transformational leadership, mediated by a task-oriented team climate, significantly predicted innovative behavior among Greek museum employees. Leadership is therefore treated here not as a separate subject but as the condition that enables or constrains employee engagement and, through it, the museum's capacity to fulfill its social mission.

The relationship between leadership and employee engagement is especially visible in museum organizations, where the commitment of staff is tied closely to their sense of

institutional purpose. Griffin and Abraham (2000) found that in the most effective museums, staff at all levels demonstrated a high degree of commitment and a strong sense of involvement in the organization's goals, conditions that were actively cultivated through consistent communication of vision, genuine investment in staff development, and the alignment of management practices with clearly articulated values. Jung (2016) demonstrated the opposite case. When the Avery Art Museum lacked a stable director capable of articulating and sustaining a shared institutional vision, staff did not have a clear sense of how their contributions related strategically to the museum's function as a whole and began working in silos rather than as a team. This dynamic produced what Jung described as a patchwork culture: a museum that was technically functional but organizationally incoherent, held together by individual effort rather than by shared purpose.

Leadership communication is the primary mechanism through which purpose is transmitted and sustained within museum organizations. Johnson and Sobczak (2021) found that the symbolic frame of leadership, encompassing the use of storytelling and the capacity to inspire staff through a compelling narrative of institutional significance, was among the leadership dimensions most visible to senior managers and most absent from the experience of non-managerial staff. Griffin and Abraham (2000) found that in more effective museums, information was transferred quickly and efficiently to all those who needed it, staff took an active interest in the information communicated to them, senior managers were open to new ideas, whereas in less effective museums, communication was top-down and formal, and staff reported a management style more comfortable with command and control than with teamwork.

A further consequence of leadership style concerns the museum's willingness to move beyond its traditional collections-based functions toward the broader social, educational, and community roles associated with the new museology. McCall and Gray (2014) found that this openness varied considerably across the museum services they studied, and that the variation was explained not by resource levels or institutional type but by the values and leadership of those responsible for each service. Where leaders did not actively support the expanded role, it was left to be pursued informally by individually committed staff rather than embedded in institutional practice, which again points to leadership as the condition that determines whether a museum's social mission is realized.

Organizational performance in museums

In practice, museum performance is most often assessed through a familiar set of operational indicators: visitor numbers, the count of exhibitions and events, earned and granted revenue, projects delivered, and metrics relating to the heritage held and conserved. These measures are attractive because they are countable, comparable, and legible to the funders and public authorities to whom museums report, a consideration that is especially salient at the national level, where the reporting frameworks imposed on Romanian institutions tend to privilege output. This tendency is visible among practitioners as well: some museum directors argue that museums must pursue performance measured through quantifiable objectives and that the value of a museum should ultimately be reflected in visitor numbers and earned revenue (Nițulescu, 2016). At the national level, more developed attempts to capture museum performance and sustainability exist, for instance, the multi-indicator model proposed by Pop and Borza (2016) and the framework for the sustainable museum advanced by Pop (2017), which already extend beyond simple counts toward conservation, research, online accessibility, and media presence.

The predominance of quantitative indicators in Romanian museum practice is not incidental but is structurally embedded in the legal and administrative framework governing public institutions. Under Law no. 311/2003 regarding museums and public collections and O.U.G. no. 189/2008 regarding the management of cultural public

institutions, museums in public ownership function under the direct supervision of their tutelary authority, which may be the Ministry of Culture, a local public administration, or another public body. Managers of these institutions are required to submit annual activity reports evaluated against performance indicators established in their management contracts. In practice, the criteria used in accreditation procedures under the 2007 Norms specify a predominantly quantitative set of reporting obligations: the number of cultural goods for which classification procedures have been initiated, the number of publications produced, the number of temporary exhibitions organized, the number of educational programs delivered, and the number of objects restored annually. What is systematically absent from these frameworks is any indicator relating to the engagement of museum staff, the quality of internal organizational culture, or the social outcomes produced for the communities the institution serves. The reporting system, in other words, makes museums legible to their supervising authorities in precisely the terms that the reflexive museum model identifies as insufficient.

The limitation of the conventional indicators is that they record activity and throughput far more readily than value or effect. They say little about the quality of the museum's relationship with its community, its organizational culture, the engagement of its staff, or the social outcomes it produces. Worts (2006) makes this point with particular precision, arguing that attendance, revenue, objects accessioned, exhibitions mounted, and publications produced are not cultural indicators at all; they offer insight into the activity of museums as institutions but reveal nothing about the cultural needs, opportunities, or well-being of the community nor about the cultural impacts of museum operations on individuals. Significantly, some of the same practitioners who defend quantifiable output measures also acknowledge that underfunding and unstable pay have reduced the professional motivation of museum specialists over time (Nițulescu, 2016), which points to a contradiction: a performance model that counts outputs while ignoring the motivational conditions that sustain them is incomplete even on its own terms. A substantial strand of museum and cultural-policy scholarship has pressed exactly this point: that museums must demonstrate that they make a difference rather than merely report what they do, and that conventional metrics systematically miss the dimensions of public and social value (Scott, 2010; Weil, 2002; Semmel & Bittner, 2009).

Scott (2010) argues that the managerial model of public sector accountability, with its emphasis on results-based evidence and numerical participation statistics, has made visitor numbers a primary indicator of engagement, crowding out the more complex question of what difference museums actually make to the lives of the people they serve. This pattern is not confined to Romania: Semmel and Bittner (2009), reviewing the accountability demands placed on American museums by federal funding agencies, document the same pressure toward quantifiable output reporting and note that the field has yet to develop a comprehensive, sector-wide case for museums' positive social and educational impacts. Adaptations of broader performance frameworks to the museum sector, such as the balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1992), represent attempts to widen the lens, with varying success. Gstraunthaler and Piber (2007), in an empirical study of Austrian national museums following their transition to autonomous budget management, found that while government-mandated reporting retained a strong focus on quantifiable output indicators, museums themselves were developing internal performance measurement practices that began to address non-financial dimensions of institutional activity, and concluded that multidimensional performance measurement, rather than a single bottom line, is the only approach capable of capturing the complexity of value creation in museums.

For the reflexive museum, this gap between what is measured and what matters becomes a conceptual problem rather than a merely technical one. If a museum's social responsiveness depends on its internal culture, its leadership, and the engagement of its professionals, then a performance model that registers none of these is not simply incomplete; it is misaligned with the very mission the institution now claims. Operational indicators record what a museum does; they do not record whether the

people who do it are engaged with its purpose, whether the leadership supports or undermines their commitment, or whether the institution is genuinely changing in response to its communities. These are not incidental variables: as the evidence reviewed in this paper suggests, they are among the conditions on which the quality of museum work depends.

A more adequate conception of museum performance would therefore need to incorporate at least three dimensions that conventional indicators systematically omit. The first is the social dimension: whether the museum produces meaningful outcomes for the communities it serves, beyond the number of visitors it attracts or events it stages. Scott (2010) has argued that a true public value orientation requires museums to move beyond being visitor-centered and to actively seek partnership with the public in creating value, a shift that demands demonstrating difference rather than merely reporting activity. Weil (2002) pressed the same point from an organizational perspective, arguing that museums must earn their place by making a positive difference to individual and communal lives rather than by sustaining their traditional activities. The second is the organizational dimension: the quality of leadership, the culture of the institution, and the degree to which staff are genuinely engaged with its mission rather than simply executing assigned tasks. Dragouni and McCarthy (2021) demonstrated that these internal conditions have measurable effects on job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which in turn affect performance and retention. The third is the human dimension: whether the institution supports the development of its people, distributes decision-making in ways that develop staff agency, and creates the conditions in which museum professionals can function as active mediators of the institution's social mission rather than passive executors of it. Griffin and Abraham (2000) found that in the most effective museums in their international study, these conditions were not incidental but were actively cultivated and that their presence was more predictive of institutional effectiveness than formal management systems or written policies. Performance, on this account, is not a single metric or a ranked indicator but a multi-dimensional property of institutions that take seriously both what they do and how they operate from within.

Linking purpose, employees, and social impact

This section brings together the three concepts discussed above. The contemporary museum is increasingly defined by a social mission to serve, include, and act within its community. But that mission is not self-executing. It is interpreted, negotiated, and translated into practice through countless everyday decisions: by the curator who reframes an exhibition, the museum educator who designs a participatory program, and the conservation or public-relations specialist who shapes how heritage is made accessible. In this sense, employees are not the passive executors of a vision handed down from management; they are the mediators of the museum's social mission, the point at which declared institutional values either become practice or remain merely declarative.

Black (2010) makes this argument explicitly in relation to civil engagement: achieving a genuine participatory role for museums will only be possible if there is a change of culture across the profession, and that change of culture is an internal organizational matter before it is an external programmatic one. The organizational capacity to build stronger community partnerships, adequate time and resources, strong leadership commitment, an organizational culture that embraces change, and staff skilled at listening to community voices cannot be conjured by policy mandate alone; it depends on whether the institution's people are genuinely committed to a broader role. Where that commitment is absent, civil and social engagement remain piecemeal, reactive, and contingent on individual initiative rather than embedded in institutional practice.

This reframing carries a direct consequence. If employees mediate the mission, then the quality of that mediation depends on their engagement: on whether they identify with the institution's purpose, find meaning in their work, and are supported by leadership

and an organizational culture oriented toward openness and participation. The opposite profile is also documented: a museum employee who prefers repetitive and predictable activity, avoids taking initiative, and resists the extended demands that community engagement or participatory work may bring is unlikely to function as an effective mediator of a reflexive mission (Nițulescu, 2016). Employee engagement therefore plausibly conditions both organizational performance and social impact, rather than being a separate human-resources matter. The reflexive museum, on this reading, is defined not only by its public-facing role but also by its capacity to change from within, and that internal capacity depends on its people.

These expectations, which guide the bibliometric analysis, follow from the argument developed above:

- P1. The literature has developed the museum's outward social role, namely participation, inclusion, sustainability, and social impact, far more extensively than its internal organizational dimensions of employee engagement, leadership, and performance.
- P2. The museological and organizational bodies of literature remain largely separate, with comparatively few works and few connecting references that link the external social mission of museums to their internal organizational processes.
- P3. Where performance in museums is addressed, it is conceived predominantly in operational terms rather than in social or internal-organizational ones.

These anticipations concern the state of the literature, not the museum as such, which is what a bibliometric method is able to test. The analysis that follows examines how far the existing scholarship confirms, qualifies, or contradicts them.

Methodology

The transformation of museums from closed, elite-oriented institutions into more open, participatory, and socially engaged organizations has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Within this broader context, concepts such as the reflexive museum, social impact, employee engagement, museum leadership, and organizational performance have become relevant for understanding how museums respond to contemporary social and cultural expectations, as well as to the changing needs of their audiences. However, while the social role of museums has been widely discussed in relation to audiences, communities, and public programs, less attention has been paid to the internal organizational dynamics that support these transformations. Considering the recent changes in the sector, including the revised museum definition adopted by the International Council of Museums in 2022, an updated overview of the existing body of knowledge is needed.

To address this need, the study employs bibliometric analysis. This method is suitable for the present purpose, as it enables the identification of publication trends, influential contributors, thematic developments, conceptual structures, and knowledge gaps within a specific field (Snyder, 2019). It is used here to examine how the literature connects the external social mission of museums with internal organizational dimensions such as employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance.

The data were retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, selected for its broad coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the social sciences and humanities. The search was conducted on 27 June 2026 in the Topic field, which covers titles, abstracts, author keywords, and Keywords Plus, using the following query: museum* AND ("museum management" OR "museum leadership" OR "employee engagement" OR "work engagement" OR "organizational performance"). The results were refined to include only documents classified as "Article" or "Review Article" and written in English, with no restriction on publication year. After applying these criteria, the final corpus consisted of

253 documents published between 1980 and 2026 in 113 sources, written by 559 authors.

The corpus draws on 10,958 references and 916 author keywords, with an average of 11.63 citations per document and an annual growth rate of 4.32%. The earliest document indexed in the dataset dates from 1980, while the figure recorded for 2026 is partial, since the year was still in progress at the time of data collection. The main descriptive characteristics of the corpus are summarized in Table 1 and discussed in the following section.

The data were analyzed using Bibliometrix, an R package for science mapping, together with its web interface Biblioshiny (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The analysis combined performance analysis and science mapping. Performance analysis was used to describe the annual scientific production, the most relevant sources, authors, and countries, and the most globally cited documents. Science mapping was used to examine the conceptual structure of the field through trend topics, a keyword co-occurrence network, and a thematic map. The thematic map and the co-occurrence network were generated from author keywords.

In order to address these objectives, the study is structured around the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main publication trends and conceptual developments regarding employee engagement, leadership, organizational performance, and the social role of museums?

RQ2. Which countries, institutions, authors, and sources have contributed most significantly to the development of research in this field, and which are the most influential and cited?

RQ3. What are the main themes addressed by the research community in relation to employee engagement, leadership, organizational performance, and the social role of museums?

RQ4. From which perspectives or conceptual angles do researchers most often approach these themes?

RQ5. What emerging themes and research gaps can be identified in relation to the connection between the social mission of museums and their internal organizational dynamics?

Results and interpretation

Table 2 summarizes the main characteristics of the dataset. The corpus consists of 253 documents published between 1980 and 2026 in 113 sources, written by 559 authors. The annual growth rate of publications is 4.32%, which points to a field that has expanded steadily but moderately rather than rapidly. Together with an average document age of 9.81 years, this suggests an established body of work rather than a recent surge of interest. The 253 documents draw on 10,958 references, an average of about 43 references per document, while the 916 author keywords indicate a thematically diverse field. The average of 11.63 citations per document reflects a moderate level of citation impact. Collaboration is moderate, at 2.35 co-authors per document, and international co-authorship is limited (17.39%), a pattern consistent with research on museums being shaped by national contexts.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the bibliometric dataset

Indicator	Value
Timespan	1980-2026
Sources	113

Documents	253
Authors	559
References	10,958
Author's Keywords	916
Annual Growth Rate	4.32%
Average Document Age (years)	9.81
Average Citations per Document	11.63
Co-authors per Document	2.35
International Co-authorship	17.39%

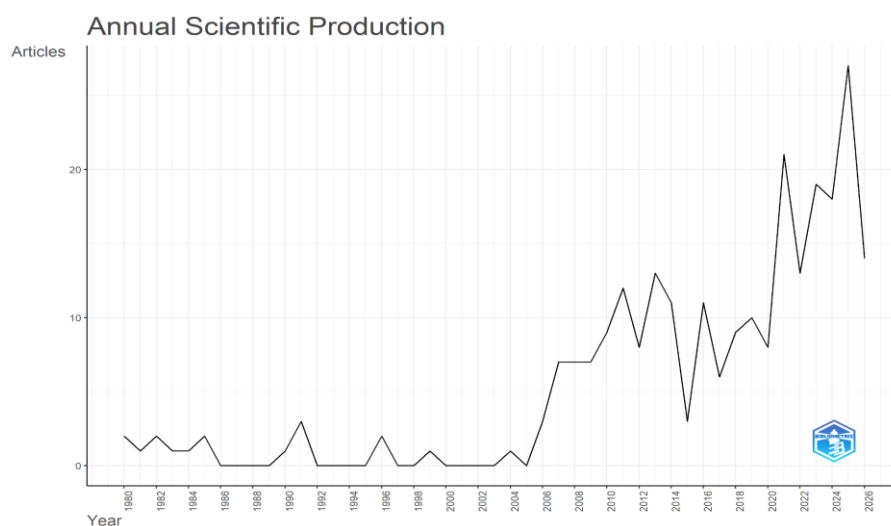


Figure 1. Annual scientific production

Figure 1 illustrates the annual scientific production on museum management, leadership, employee engagement, and organizational performance between 1980 and 2026. Research output remained very limited until the mid-2000s, with several years recording no publications at all. From 2006 onwards, the number of studies increased markedly, with clear year-to-year fluctuations, including a first peak from 2011 to 2013 and a temporary decline in 2015. This overall growth reflects the rising scholarly interest in organizational and managerial issues within museums, and it may also be linked in part to the expanding coverage of bibliographic databases over the same period. A more pronounced upward trend is observed after 2020, with publication activity reaching its highest level in 2025. This recent acceleration is consistent with the increased attention paid to organizational resilience, leadership, and the workforce in museums following the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lower figure recorded for 2026 should not be read as a decline, since the year was still in progress when the bibliographic data were collected.

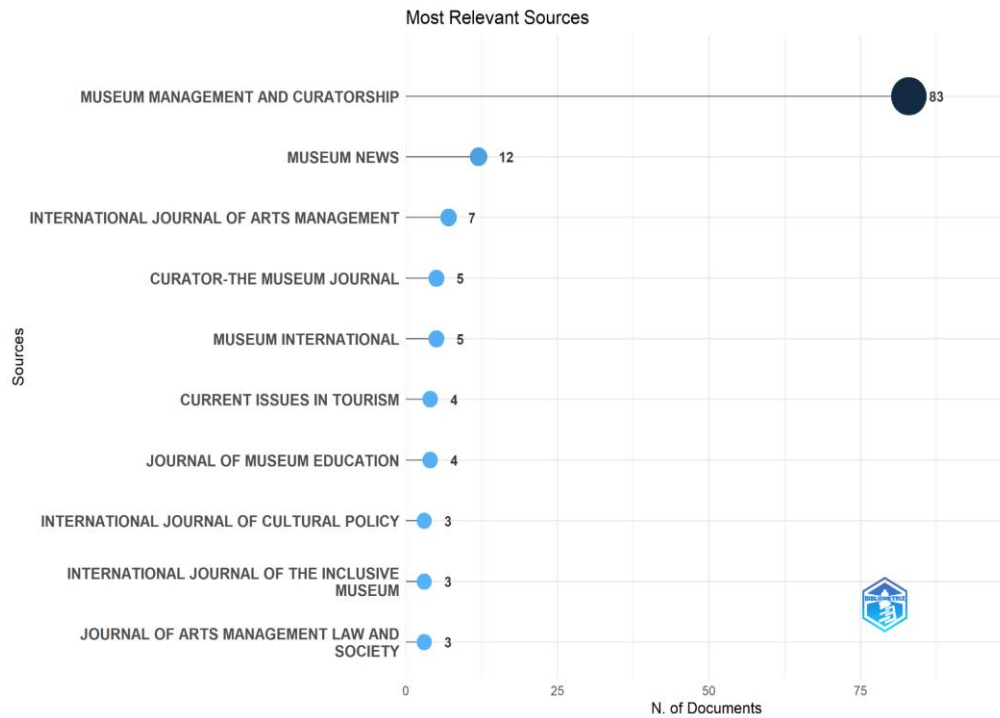


Figure 2. Most relevant sources

Figure 2 presents the most relevant publication sources within the dataset. Museum Management and Curatorship is by far the leading journal, with 83 publications, almost seven times more than the second-ranked source, Museum News, which records 12. On its own, Museum Management and Curatorship accounts for roughly one third of the entire corpus, which indicates that, although the literature is dispersed across 113 sources, it has a single clear core journal alongside a long tail of outlets contributing only three to five documents each. This pattern is consistent with Bradford's law of scattering. The remaining relevant journals, including the International Journal of Arts Management, Curator: The Museum Journal, Museum International, and the Journal of Museum Education, are also specialised in museum studies and cultural management. The presence of Current Issues in Tourism and the International Journal of Cultural Policy among the leading sources further reflects the interdisciplinary character of the field, which connects museum research to tourism and cultural policy.



Figure 3. Most relevant authors

Figure 3 presents the most relevant authors in the dataset. The field is characterised by a highly dispersed authorship pattern. The most prolific authors, Cerquetti, Jung, and Zan, contributed only four documents each, followed by Vecco with three, while the remaining authors produced two documents each. Given that the corpus includes 559 authors for 253 documents, this indicates the absence of a dominant author or core research group, and it is consistent with a relatively young and fragmented field in which most authors have so far engaged with the topic only occasionally. Several of the most productive authors are based in Italy, with others working in South Korea and Spain, which suggests that research on museum management is concentrated in a small number of national academic traditions, in line with the low level of international co-authorship reported in Table 2.

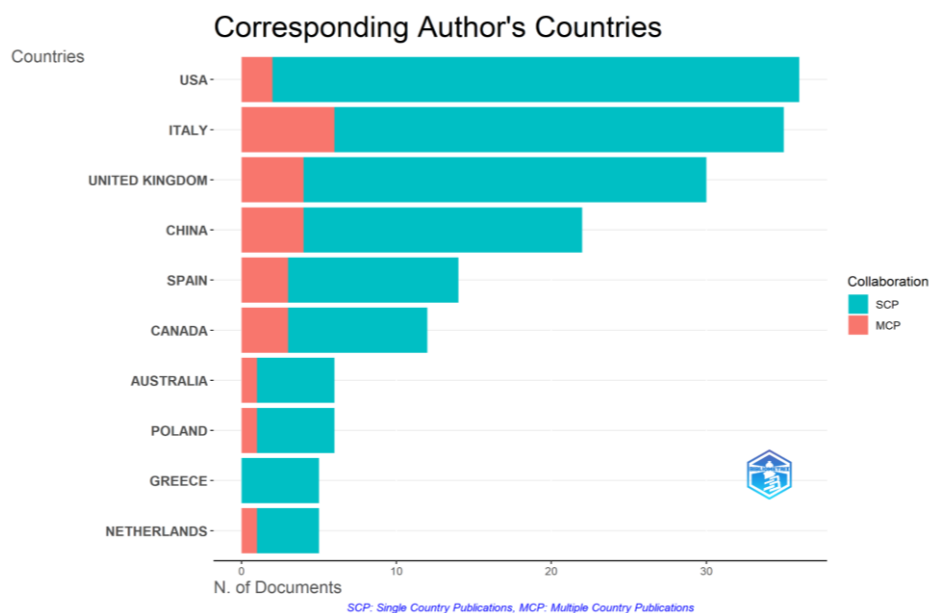


Figure 4. Corresponding author's countries

Figure 4 presents the geographical distribution of research based on the corresponding author's country. Output is concentrated in a limited number of countries, with the

United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom as the principal contributors, followed by China. Single Country Publications clearly outnumber Multiple Country Publications across all leading countries, and the share of internationally co-authored work is small in every case. This confirms, at country level, the low international co-authorship rate of 17.39% reported in Table 2, and it indicates that international collaboration remains limited despite the growing global interest in museum management and organizational studies. The leading countries are predominantly Western, with China as the main exception, which suggests that research in this field is produced mainly within a small group of national academic traditions.

The fact that research is produced mainly within a few Western academic traditions points to a geographical gap in the literature. Contexts that are currently underrepresented, such as the Central and Eastern European museum sector, may offer conditions that differ from those most often described, and remain comparatively underexplored.

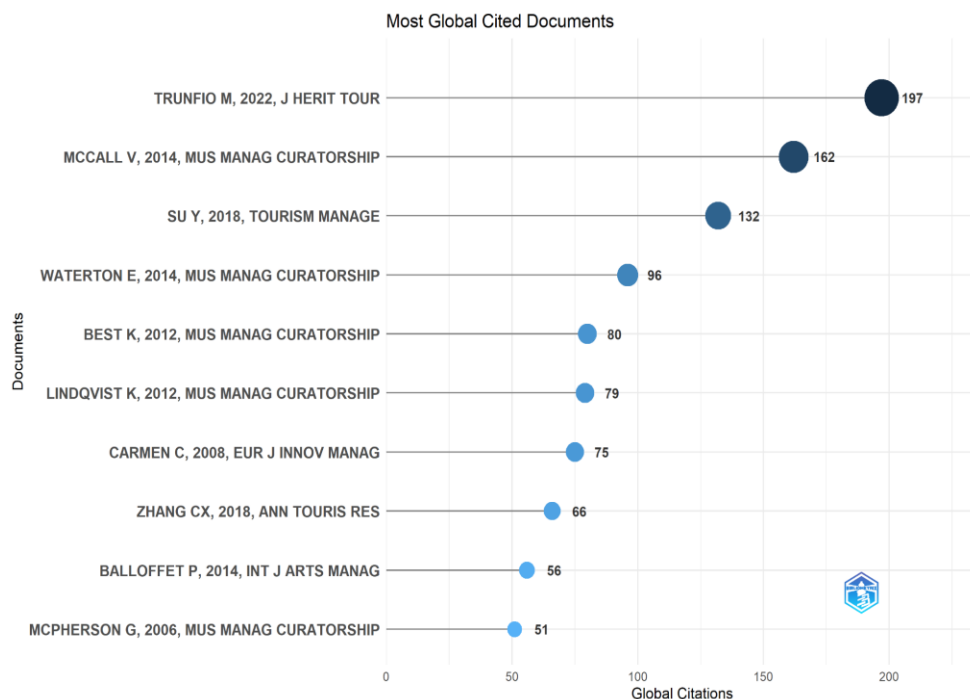


Figure 5. Most cited documents

Figure 5 presents the most globally cited documents in the dataset. The most cited work is Trunfio et al. (2022), with 197 citations, followed by McCall and Gray (2014) with 162 and Su (2018) with 132. The high citation count of Trunfio et al. (2022) is notable given its recent publication date, which indicates a high annual citation rate and suggests a recent reference point for the field. Five of the ten most cited documents were published in Museum Management and Curatorship, which confirms the central position of this journal identified earlier. In thematic terms, the three most cited works after McCall and Gray, namely Trunfio et al. (2022), Su (2018), and Zhang et al. (2018), are all situated at the intersection of museums and tourism and focus on visitors and the visitor experience, as reflected in the tourism-oriented journals in which they appear. By contrast, comparatively few of the most cited documents address the internal organizational dimensions of museums, such as employee engagement, leadership, and performance. This pattern suggests that the most influential research has tended to examine museums in their outward, audience-facing role rather than their internal functioning.

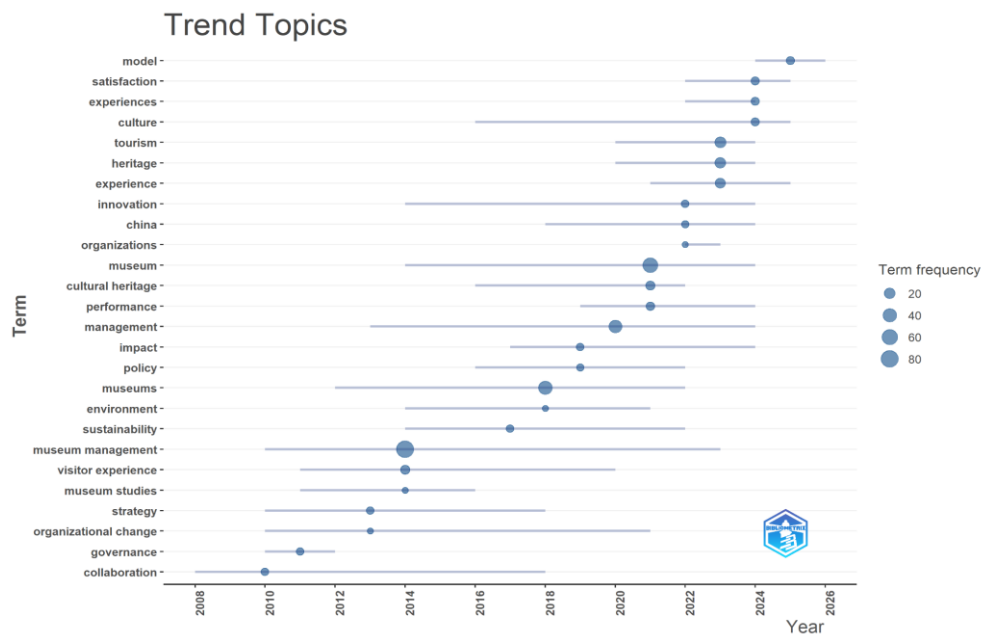
**Figure 6. Trend topics**

Figure 6 presents the trend topics, where each term is positioned according to its median year of use, with the horizontal line indicating the period of activity and the size of the point indicating term frequency. The earlier terms, around 2010 to 2014, include collaboration, governance, organizational change, strategy, and museum management, the last being the most frequent term overall and centered on 2014. From around 2017 to 2021, terms such as "sustainability," "policy," "impact," "management," and "performance" become prominent, with "performance" appearing comparatively recently. The most recent terms, from 2022 onwards, include experience, satisfaction, culture, tourism, and heritage, which indicates that the current research front is oriented towards the visitor and the outward, audience-facing role of museums. Notably, employee engagement and leadership do not appear among the trend topics, which reinforces the observation that the internal organizational dimensions of museums remain peripheral to the main lines of recent research.

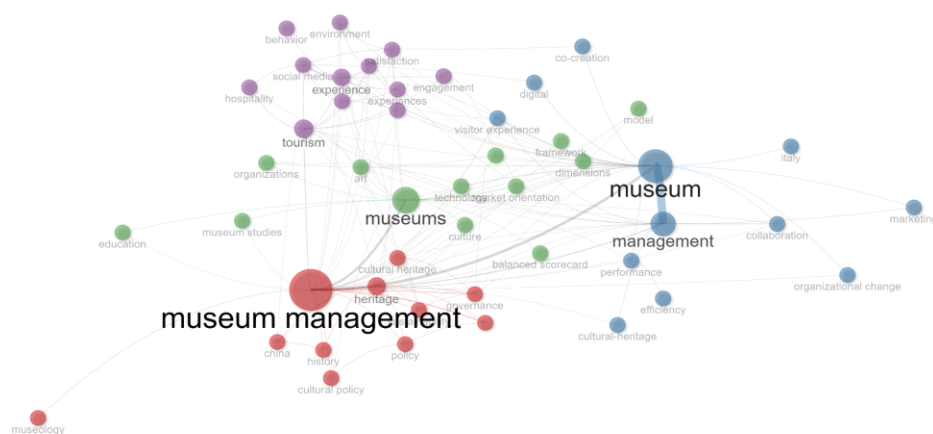
**Figure 7. Keywords co-occurrence network**

Figure 7 presents the keyword co-occurrence network, in which node size reflects keyword frequency, links indicate co-occurrence in the same documents, and colors indicate thematic clusters. Four main clusters can be identified. The first, organized

around museum management, groups keywords related to heritage, cultural policy, and governance. The second brings together tourism, experience, satisfaction, social media, and engagement, which indicates that the term "engagement" is associated mainly with the visitor and the visitor experience rather than with employees. The third cluster groups management, performance, efficiency, organizational change, and balanced scorecard, which corresponds to the organizational and managerial dimensions of museums. The fourth, more central cluster links general terms such as museums, culture, education, and technology. Two observations are relevant for the present study. First, leadership does not appear as a node in the network, which is consistent with its limited presence in the trend topics. Second, the organizational and performance cluster and the visitor-experience cluster occupy distinct and weakly connected positions, while performance is associated primarily with efficiency and managerial control rather than with employees or the social mission. This structure indicates that employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance are addressed in separate parts of the literature and that the connection between employee engagement and organizational performance, which is the focus of this study, is weakly represented in the field.

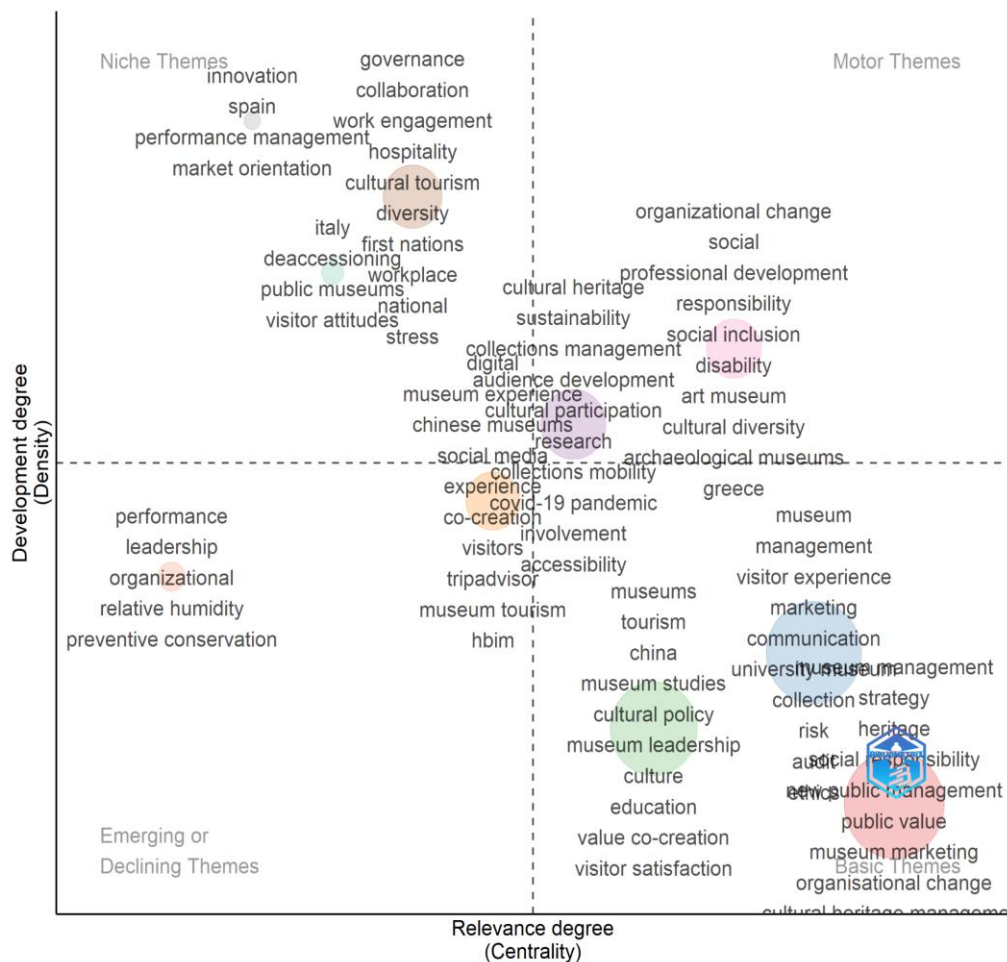


Figure 8. Thematic map

Figure 8 presents the thematic map, which positions the main research themes according to their centrality (relevance degree) and density (development degree). Several themes that are central to this study appear in the lower-right quadrant of basic themes, including museum leadership, cultural policy, public management, and public value. Their position indicates that they are relevant and widely shared across the field, but still relatively underdeveloped. Work engagement, by contrast, is located in the upper-left quadrant of niche themes, together with performance management,

workplace, and stress. This suggests that employee engagement has been addressed as a specialized and relatively isolated topic, weakly connected to the central concerns of the field. At the same time, themes related to the outward, public role of museums, such as cultural participation, social inclusion, cultural diversity, and audience development, occupy more central and developed positions. Taken together, this pattern indicates that the internal organizational dimensions of museums, namely employee engagement, leadership, and performance, have so far been treated separately from one another and less thoroughly than the outward-facing themes, which supports the gap identified in this study.

The role and social impact of museums in the literature

A closer reading of the corpus, in the light of the conceptual framework set out earlier, shows how the literature addresses the role, definition, and social impact of museums. The redefinition of the museum's role is itself a central theme. The shift described by the new museology (Vergo, 1989), and consolidated in the 2022 ICOM definition, has reframed the museum as an institution in the service of society, and this reframing is reflected in the prominence of themes such as cultural participation, social inclusion, cultural diversity, and audience development, which occupy central and well-developed positions in the thematic map. The literature has, in other words, extensively elaborated what it means for a museum to be socially engaged, participatory, and oriented toward its community.

The question of social impact and relevance is addressed by a distinct and influential strand of scholarship. Several authors argue that museums must demonstrate the difference they make rather than simply report their activity. Weil (2002) framed this as the museum's obligation to make a positive difference to individual and communal lives, while Scott (2010) developed the notion of public value, arguing that museums create value through their relationship with the public rather than through visitor numbers alone. Worts (2006) made the same point from the perspective of measurement, observing that conventional indicators capture institutional activity but say little about the cultural well-being of the communities museums serve. This body of work establishes social impact and relevance as recognized concerns within the field.

What the analysis shows, however, is that these themes are developed mainly in relation to the museum's outward, public-facing role. The co-occurrence network associates engagement primarily with visitors rather than with employees, and the most cited works are concentrated at the intersection of museums and tourism. The internal organizational conditions through which the social role is enacted, namely employee engagement, leadership, and performance, remain comparatively peripheral, and the works that do address them, such as McCall and Gray (2014) and Dragouni and McCarthy (2021), are few. The literature, therefore, offers a well-developed account of what the museum's social role is and why it matters but a much thinner account of the internal organizational conditions on which the realization of that role depends.

Conclusions and limitations of the paper

This paper examined how the academic literature addresses employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance in museums, and how far it connects these internal organizational dimensions to the museum's evolving social role. Using a bibliometric analysis of 253 documents retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection, the study mapped the development, structure, and thematic composition of this field. The findings allow the research questions and the three guiding propositions to be addressed.

In response to RQ1, the analysis shows that research on these topics is a relatively small and recent field. Output remained sporadic until the mid-2000s, increased from 2006

onward, and accelerated after 2020, reaching its highest level in 2025. In response to RQ2, the field is concentrated in a single core journal, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, and dispersed across many authors and outlets, with no dominant author or research group. It is produced mainly within a small number of Western countries, led by the United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom, and international collaboration is limited. The most cited works are oriented toward visitors, the visitor experience, and the intersection of museums and tourism.

In response to RQ3 and RQ4, the science-mapping analysis indicates that the themes connected to the museum's outward, audience-facing role, such as participation, inclusion, sustainability, and the visitor experience, occupy more central and developed positions, while employee engagement appears as a niche and relatively isolated theme, and leadership emerges neither among the trend topics nor as a node in the co-occurrence network. Where the term "engagement" appears, it is associated mainly with the visitor rather than with employees, and "performance" is associated mainly with efficiency and managerial control. In response to RQ5, the analysis identifies the principal gap: employee engagement, leadership, and organizational performance are addressed in separate parts of the literature, and the connection between these internal dimensions and the museum's social mission is weakly represented.

These results provide broad support for the three propositions. The literature has developed the outward social role of museums more extensively than their internal organizational dimensions (P1); the museological and organizational areas occupy distinct and weakly connected positions in the thematic and co-occurrence structure, consistent with the expectation that the two bodies of work remain largely separate (P2); and performance, where it is addressed, is conceived predominantly in operational and managerial terms rather than social or internal-organizational ones (P3). Taken together, the analysis supports the central argument of the paper: that the reflexive museum is defined not only by its public-facing role but also by its capacity to change from within, and that this capacity depends on the engagement of the people through whom the social mission is enacted. By identifying employees as mediators of that mission, the paper connects two bodies of literature that have so far developed separately and identifies employee engagement as a condition of museum performance rather than a separate concern.

The study has several limitations. The data were drawn from a single database, the Web of Science Core Collection; other databases such as Scopus, together with the inclusion of books and book chapters, which remain important in museum studies and the humanities, could yield a broader or differently composed corpus. The search was restricted to documents written in English, which excludes relevant non-English scholarship, a limitation that is particularly significant given the national embeddedness of museum research. The analysis included only articles and review articles, and the figure for 2026 is partial. The author-level results are sensitive to name disambiguation, and the science-mapping results depend on the chosen parameters and on the use of author keywords, so different settings could produce somewhat different maps. The analysis also did not include co-citation or bibliographic coupling, which would allow the connection between the two bodies of literature to be examined at the level of references rather than keywords.

Finally, the findings suggest directions for future research. The most evident is an empirical study of employee engagement within museums that connects staff attitudes to the institution's social mission, an area the present analysis shows to be underdeveloped. Research situated in underrepresented contexts, including the Central and Eastern European and Romanian museum sectors, could test whether the patterns described here hold under different funding structures and institutional conditions. There is also scope to develop conceptions of museum performance that incorporate the social and internal-organizational dimensions that current operational indicators omit.

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Author biography

Emanuela Ana-Maria BĂLAN is a Ph.D. candidate at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania. Her research focuses on museum management, employee engagement, and the social role of museums. She also works as a PR Specialist, combining academic research with professional experience in strategic communication.