

Innovations of the Museums during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in the latter half of 2019 many fields got affected severely and museums faced a noticeable downfall among them. Especially social distancing imposed by the government, museums worldwide resulted in a clear reduction in museum visitors. Since a museum is a bridge that connects the knowledge and discoveries of past human culture and the public while interacting with the community, this situation forced the museums to look for alternatives to go up against the challenge. Hence, this research attempts to identify the innovations proposed and applied by the museums during the pandemic period redefining their traditional role in various approaches. In this study, the problem statement 'How are the museums able to face the challenges encountered during COVID-19?' is selected and the research objective is to mainly identify various measures taken by museums around the world during the particular time. To compile this research museum websites, research papers, articles, and case studies were studied to find out the methods used by the museums for their exhibitions and other basic functions during the pandemic occurrence. During the study, it was able to discover different efforts taken by the museums, especially with the upgrading of digital usage and technological advancements including promoting virtual museums, digitalizing museum collections, organizing webinars, and increasing the use of various smartphone activities and engagements through social media while focusing on recreating the visitor experience beyond physical space. They have resulted in yielding promising benefits not only during the pandemic but also following the crisis in enhancing the visitor experience, exhibition methods, and management. Consequently, from this study, it was able to be identified that the museums have taken pivotal measures to adapt to the new normal condition in society in the context of COVID, -19 acting as a steppingstone in introducing a new paradigm and an essential change in the relationship between museums and its visitors.

Keywords: COVID-19, innovations, digital usage, technological advancements, visitor experience, new normal

Introduction

Being the custodian of a particular culture, preserving artworks and artifacts belonging to different periods, museums have become essential institutions with social and economic value. In this regard, traditionally, museums being mediators and facilitators serve as a medium for transmitting culture by exhibiting their collections in a physical space, and the collections provide visitors with historical knowledge and aesthetic experiences. The role of museums has been evolving with time together with the changing aspects of culture, society, economy, and perspectives of the visitors and there is an obvious need for them to continuously innovate and keep pace with the occurring changes.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned defined museum role was interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis creating a huge obstacle for museums to deal with. Museums suffered from income losses and changed visitors' behavior related to the pandemic, especially due to the considerable decrease in global tourism and new health security measures. The cultural sector has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with museums particularly as the 2020 UNESCO report estimated that nearly 90%, or an estimated 85,000 institutions, had been closed for varying lengths of time (UNESCO, 2020). Museums needed to realign their role in ways that increase visitor engagement, and experience, and reach out to more diverse audiences while not being so dependent on tourism, especially since COVID-19 has restricted travel.

This paper presents a landscape view of how museums have overcome challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and contextualizes the solutions designed and developed by the authorities, answering the problem statement of the study 'How the museums able to face the challenges encountered during the COVID-19?' aiming to identify various measures taken by museums around the world during the particular time. The pandemic has accelerated many of the changes driving museum transformation along with the growing role of digital technology altering the way

they operate. Here, the data is presented under the noticeable measures taken by the museums to survive during the time of change including using and upgrading previous digitized resources, encouraging communication through social media, organization of special activities, organization of professional and academic activities, strengthening links with communities and enhancing cooperation among museums to set up common solutions and re-organization of previously planned activities via online.

Methodology

The research approach taken for the study is quantitative, involving collecting and analyzing data to resolve the research problem. Secondary sources including museum websites, research papers, articles, reports, and case studies were studied to gather in-depth insights into the problem and consequently identify the key information to compile this paper.

Results and Discussion

1. Using and upgrading previous digitized resources

Since the latter part of the 20th Century, many institutions have made use of technology, particularly digitalization, and museums have also followed various technical methods to carry out their main tasks. At first, digital media was mainly used for electronic brochures and digital data archives, basically for marketing and data storing purposes; however, later, it has been used as an effective tool for almost all the activities of museums including online collections, 360° tours, virtual museums, online publications, and digital exhibitions. During the period of COVID-19, the attention towards these digitalized methods was enhanced and the museum authorities attempted to develop earlier digital activities to showcase the collections more effectively and to interact with the audience.

Many museums have developed their projects utilizing advanced digital technology. For example, Korea's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art opened an online art museum in a digital space facilitated by curator-guided exhibition

tours, and lectures and symposiums of museum educators or lecturers from universities (Choi, B., & Kim, J, 2021).

Plus, the Google Arts & Culture website gained attention from the museum authorities. It is a non-profit initiative that partners with cultural institutions around the world and allows museum staff to upload a virtual tour, and digital visitors to do a 360-degree virtual walk through a selected venue using Google's Street View technology.

Extending physical reality in museums using VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality), MR (Mixed Reality), and 3D was broadly used by the museums during COVID-19. In 2021, a new digital experience was introduced as the result of an innovative partnership between the Victoria and Albert Museum and HTC Vive Arts named 'Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser' that presented an interactive re-imagining of Wonderland through the playful dimension of VR (Noehrer, L., Gilmore, A., Jay, C., & Yehudi, Y, 2021).

2. Encouraging communication through social media

Museums have been transformed into user-centered from collection-centered institutions and visitor experience together with satisfaction are considered important services rendered by the museums. As the pandemic limited the opportunities for people to meet in real space, it increased the desire for them to communicate with each other. This scenario encouraged more participation of users on the online platform, and it encouraged museums to find more useful and effective ways to communicate with their users.

Some of the museums like the Leventis Gallery in Cyprus developed their social media activities on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram or launch a YouTube or SoundCloud channel during the time of lockdown (UNESCO, 2020) whereas other museums that were already active on these networks continued their activities with the museum teams like curators and management teams. The development of new content on social media including live via Facebook or videos broadcast via YouTube supported the museums to engage with the community closely. The

process of developing the use of social media is used as a basis for creating an open social discourse by sharing information along with users' perspectives. These new trends demonstrate the museums' desire to delegate their authority to the users even in times of pandemic.

3. Organization of special activities

Museums as user-friendly institutions always attempt to entice the audience with varied activities along with the collections they own. During the lockdown too, several museums made maximum use of the situation and created to appeal to audiences through participatory actions that have become widespread. The useful outcome is that the museums were able to accommodate the emotional aspect of audiences by creating positive distractions from the pandemic.

Most of the projects were exhibitions of collections, in particular, museums took advantage of the empty rooms to present a view of the collections or tours with a robot such as Hastings Contemporary, United Kingdom. Additionally, new types of online experiences organized with curators have been launched, including the invitation of people to participate in 'Cocktail with the curators' held by Frick Collection, New York, or presentation of the museum's collections using a video game called 'Animal Crossing' held by the Anger-museum, Germany which all focused on engaging the visitors in the museum experience as much as possible (McGrath, J, 2020).

The '#GettyMuseum Challenge' conducted by the Getty Museum, Los Angeles is a social media challenge to recreate artworks based on things people had at home (*Museum of Royal Worcester | Getty Challenge*, n.d.). This challenge enabled people to make their versions of The Getty's artworks, which were available in the Getty digital catalog, and post their creations on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram social media platforms.

Dan Hicks, the Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, launched '#MuseumsUnlocked' on Twitter asking people to create virtual visits to museums through contributions using the hashtag (Burke, V., Jørgensen, D., & Jørgensen, F. A, 2020). It had a

different theme each day covering particular museums. Many contributions were made with photos and descriptions of museums and heritage sites people had visited. This program enabled people to look back at previous museum visits through the photos and unlock museums that were currently closed innovatively.

In addition to that, various online challenges, educational games, children's stories, quizzes, collaborative video game sessions (Centre Pompidou, Paris), games such as crossword puzzles, art prompts as well as coloring activities have been set up (UNESCO, 2020).

Likewise, museums have sought to develop original projects in the context of lockdown. New types of ideas were emerging, designed to break away from the more traditional projects conducted earlier.

4. Organization of professional and academic activities

The dissemination of knowledge or simply education, one of the crucial roles of a museum, cannot be ignored even in times of a pandemic. The disruption of traditional educational activities like school visits, guided tours, and workshops as a result of the pandemic was a noticeable downfall in the museum sector.

Due to this reason, several museums and museum associations like ICOM, Ontario Museums Association, Association of Children's Museums, Virginia Association of Museums, and Association of Academic Museums and Galleries initiated web conferences in the form of webinars or meetings via Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts and other videoconferencing media (Kist, C, 2020). As a medium for sharing insights related to the field of museology or heritage, scholars participated in these programs that were mostly focused on topics related to the COVID-19 crisis, but later on, different topics were given attention.

Especially UNESCO took measures to co-organize several debates with museum institutions around the world to provide a space to share thoughts on the role of museums in the context of Covid and the aftermath (UNESCO, 2020) such as:

- Three debates were organized with IberoMuseos (Brazil) namely ‘Museums in times of pandemic – innovation and perspectives’ (May 2020), ‘Museums and their audiences in times of crisis’ (June 2020), and ‘Reaffirming the social role of museums in times of crisis’ (July 2020).
- A webinar titled ‘What Museums Post Pandemic?’ (June 2020) was held with the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum, India.
- A webinar named ‘Museums after the Pandemic’ (July 2020) was conducted with ICCROM.
- UNESCO online debate was held with 12 museum directors "Reflections on the future of museums " (March 2021).

5. Strengthening connectivity with other museums and museums' cooperations

The sphere of museums not only consists of isolated institutions: it constitutes a wide network of collaborations. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have emphasized the significance of this network in the survival of museums. Especially, museum cooperations have played a significant role in developing materials and guidelines to ensure the safety and preservation of collections during the period, and then the safety of the audiences when they reopen, how to better reach audiences at a distance, etc as that is evident from the activities mentioned below (Giannini & Bowen, 2022).

- In May 2020, UNESCO and ICOM coordinated their efforts to publish two complementary reports, respectively for UNESCO titled ‘The Museums around the World in the Face of COVID-19’ report and: ‘Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19’ (May 2020) and ‘Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19: Follow-up Survey’ (November 2020) for ICOM.
- The Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO) has published two reports in 2020 and 21.
- The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) presented its national study on the impact of COVID-19 on its museums in June 2020.

- Several national or regional associations have also published documents on this subject: Colombia, the Museum Association of the Caribbean, and New Zealand published reports in 2020.
- OCIM (Office for Cooperation and Information between Museums) in France issued a special report on COVID-19, conducted several webinars, and provided digital monitoring on the subject.

6. Re-organization of previously planned activities on the online platform.

Due to the pandemic, scheduled events or special exhibition programs had to be canceled or postponed when the lockdown was imposed. Some of the museums took measures to hold these programs online, most often via social media, either live or recorded, often downloadable or available on digital platforms like YouTube, and SoundCloud. For example, Bergamo, Italy's Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art created an online radio show, while the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Zagreb, Croatia launched numerous online initiatives (UNESCO, 2020).

One such popular exhibit was 'In the Clouds' of Stavanger Art Museum, which was scheduled to be opened in March 2020. However, on 20 March 2020, Stavanger Art Museum held a live launch event on Facebook which involved walking with live viewers around the exhibit in a half-hour live video stream. "In the Clouds" highlights how a museum could use online tools to bring visitor experience of the exhibit from their homes, while still maintaining the focus on the physical installation of the collections (Burke, V., Jørgensen, D., & Jørgensen, F. A, 2020).

"Stormy Weather: From Lore to Science" was supposed to open in March 2020 and was organized by the Royal Society in London based on the collaboration between the Royal Society collections and the National Meteorological Library and Archive. But it was remade on the Google Arts & Culture platform where the original exhibits became digital exhibits during COVID-19 (Giannini, T., & Bowen, J. P, 2022).

In this manner, the physical closure of museums has led the museum to seek alternatives and opportunities for recovery and survival throughout the crisis. Consequently, the knowledge and experiences provided by museums were being extended through the connectivity of the digital world. The development of digital technology made it possible for users to directly engage with museums, enhancing the visitor experience. The above-mentioned findings of the study indicate that many museum institutions have devised new ways of maintaining contact with their audiences and generating alternative financial resources, using the digital environment largely through virtual visits and the use of social networks. This digital transformation facilitated the museums to showcase their collection just as before the pandemic and stay connected with their audiences while reaching new potential visitors.

Mainly through using and upgrading previous digitized resources or devices to cope up with the ongoing crisis, encouraging communication through social media to maintain the relationship with the visitors, organizing special activities while taking advantage of the situation, organizing professional and academic activities to continue the knowledge dissemination related to the field of heritage or museology, strengthening connectivity with other museums and museum cooperations aiming for the survival and better future of the museums and its visitors and also re-organization of previously planned activities via online enabling interactive access to the information available to connect with the audience can carry out the role of museums even amidst unfortunate and unprecedented social condition can be witnessed among the measures taken by the museums during the pandemic.

Adaptability, one of the fundamental characteristics of museums, has become even more evident since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, reinventing themselves and adapting to the new normal condition of society. This study implies that they have realigned their role including operations and their relationship with the public to move forward and survive post-COVID-19.

Conclusion

Due to COVID-19, each museum had to make its own assessment and cater to the needs of the audience which has enabled it to adapt to a new reality and new challenges. Though the pandemic has made it difficult to maintain numerous measures related to the security and preservation of collections, raising concerns all around the world, most of the responsibilities were fulfilled by the museums altering their traditional methods as mentioned above. Although these initiatives are primarily led by large museums with required digital facilities, they could inspire other provincial and city museums, where there were few resources to offer online content to their audiences. This paradigm change has continued to post COVID-19 also paying the path for the museums to rethink the usual ways. While the advance of digitality is inevitable in the field of museology even after this crisis, there are critical choices in how and where it should be applied, why and for what purpose and outcomes, and importantly, how it serves the public and enhances the visitor experience. So, it's up to the relevant museum authorities to give out the needed visitor satisfaction utilizing both traditional and digitalized ways properly.

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