

Local art museums and visitors: Audience and attendance development

Theoretical requirements and empirical evidence

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ABSTRACT

During the 20th century museum visitor studies have used different approaches with varying results. They have covered not only individual demographic and psychographic characteristics, but also the motivation, needs and expectations of both visitors and non-visitors. According to the visitor-oriented approach, most research has been suggested to attract and satisfy new audiences promoting social interaction and the emotional involvement of visitors through edutainment, new technological devices, exhibitions and other 'block-buster' events.

In this paper we will analyse the content and language of art museum communication, to verify if the general knowledge people have when they visit a museum is sufficient to understand and appreciate the complex value of exhibits in museums and if museum communication strategies are suitable to the *mise en valeur* of local cultural heritage. Analysing the findings of a local survey on the relationship between museums and their real and potential visitors, carried out among students, the following paper argues that museums and education should enhance the distinctive features of local cultural heritage, both to promote the understanding of its complex value and to reach new audiences.

Keywords:

Audience development
Local museums
Museum communication
Museum visitors studies

1. Cultural assumptions: the Italian ‘threefold natural museum’

According to Throsby’s definition there are six different dimensions of cultural value: (1) historical; (2) aesthetic; (3) spiritual (or religious); (4) social (to the extent that something provides people with a sense of identity); (5) symbolic (to the extent that cultural objects act as ‘repositories and conveyors of meaning’); and (6) authenticity (because a work is the ‘real, original, and unique artwork which it is represented to be’) (Throsby, 2001: 28-29).

Sharing these assumptions, the mission of cultural organizations is to enhance the broad spectrum of value of the cultural objects they preserve, communicating all these dimensions to different sectors of the public and focusing on their specific features: ‘maintaining and managing the quality of ongoing exhibitions is a first priority in a museum. Each museum should identify what makes it distinctive’ (Kotler, Kotler, 1998: 176).

in the continuity of cultural heritage, in the ubiquity and pervasiveness of material evidence of humanity and its environment (Toscano, 1998). For this reason Chastel (1980) called Italy a ‘threefold natural museum’, where the collection, the historical building where it is preserved and the town which hosts it are mutually linked in an exemplary manner as three different components of the same museum.

According to a marketing-oriented approach the characteristics of the Italian cultural heritage could be synthesized in 3 C’s: capillary, contextual, and complementary (Golinelli, 2008). Also the Ministerial Decree of 10 May 2001, which provides the guidelines to set minimum standards for museum management (user services, facilities, collection management, etc.) encompasses a section on the relationships between museums and cultural heritage in their context. According to these requirements, some recent studies (Siano, Siglioccolo 2008; Siano, Eagle, Confetto, Siglioccolo 2010) have investigated the role of location reputation to enhance Italian cultural heritage and the appeal of museums, suggesting museum marketing strategies based on the analysis of competitiveness in

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As far as Italian cultural heritage is concerned, distinctive features of museums – especially local ones in the central regions of Italy – are not only the aesthetic value of the exhibits, but also their historical value; the deep relationship between cultural objects – artistic and archeological, historical and ethnographic – and the local context: squares, monuments, other museums and cultural goods preserved not only in museums but also beyond their doors, in churches, convents, monasteries, and other historical buildings. These institutions – public, small and almost unknown – do not preserve artifacts brought together by a collector: most of them were created at the end of the 19th century to gather and preserve goods removed from churches and other ecclesiastic institutions after Italian unification.

Therefore, the competitive advantage of Italian cultural heritage does not merely exist in a few masterpieces preserved in the most important and biggest Italian museums, such as the Uffizi Gallery in Florence or the Academia Galleries in Venice, but also

the context of where museums are located.

Therefore school education and museums – especially local cultural institutions – after understanding the needs and levels of competences of different audiences, should recognize and communicate the distinctive features and value of Italian cultural heritage, without neglecting the relationships with their territory of reference.

2. Theoretical background: knowing the public needs

Since the second half of the 20th century, the role of museums has been changing from one of mastery to one of service (Weil, 1997: 257). Museums are not only about something, but also for somebody (Weil, 1999). Therefore, attention to the public has gradually increased (Macdonald, 1993; Doering, 1999; Weil,

1999; McLean, 2005) and museum visitor studies¹ have advanced with different approaches and various results both in the academic field and among museum professionals (Black, 2005). Unlike in the United States – especially in science and children’s museums – the first studies were carried out at the beginning of the 20th century by museum staff or consultants (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: 363), Europe and art museums realised the need to know their publics later in the century.

From the 1930’s to the 1990’s most research focused on the socio-demographic profile of museum visitors, to answer the question: ‘Who comes to museums?’ (Dickenson, 1992: 141)². In the United States surveys revealed that museum attendees were more likely to be white, middle or upper class and exhibited higher education and higher income levels than lower attendees³ (Robbins, Robbins, 1980; Yucelt, 2000). In 1969, in Europe, transnational research carried out by Bourdieu and Darbel confirmed these demographic data, also claiming the role of a museum as a tool for cultural democratization and criticizing the social discrimination of people to access to culture.

Only since the 1980’s have visitors studies focused on decision process and motivations to visit a museum, as well as investigating psychographic characteristics of visitors – their values, attitudes, perceptions, interests and expectations. Additionally, research started to analyse visitor behaviour and museum experiences.

According to the marketing-oriented approach (Rentschler, 2002), visitor surveys have subsequently evaluated customer satisfaction and service quality (Rentschler, Reussner, 2002; Solima, 2008), in order to measure and improve museum performances (Donato, 2008). In this way, visitor-responsiveness has become a criterion to judge exhibitions, educational programmes, cultural events and other museum services. Therefore, nowadays visitor studies and evaluation⁴ are important means for strategic management of visitor-oriented museums, useful not only ‘to gather reliable information about museum visitors in a systematic way’, but also to support ‘goal-defining, strategic planning and implementation of measures’ (Reussner, 2003: 104):

a strategic focus on visitors puts audience development among the primary aims of museums.

Audience development implies maintaining the core audience, building a broader audience base, attracting diverse audiences and building relationships with the community. (...) In order to develop marketing activities, information is needed from strategic analysis on the actual and the potential audiences, their preferences and characteristics, and on the audiences and services of competing museums (Reussner, 2003: 103).

The involvement of both current and potential visitors is also an example of co-production (Davies, 2010: 307), which is ‘a process through which inputs from individuals who are not “in” the same organization are transformed into goods and services’ (Ostrom, 1997: 85).

Sharing these assumptions, since the 1990’s studies have been focusing on non-visitors of museums through qualitative research – interviews, focus groups, etc. (Bollo, 2008). Without discussing this literature in detail – recent literature reviews and useful critiques have already been provided by Merriman (2000) –, suffice it to say that in order to improve the cultural role of museum visiting, it is essential to understand the reasons for non-visiting as well (Schäfer, 1996). Non-participants perceive museums to be ‘formal, formidable places, inaccessible to them because they usually have had little preparation to read the “museum code” – places that invoke restrictions on group social behavior and on active participation.’ (Hood, 1983: 54) Therefore, we have to look at how barriers that deter people from visiting local museums might be removed.

3. Aims and scope: enhancement beyond edutainment

In order to reach new audiences and offer a high-quality museum experience, research has suggested to make museums places for exploring and discovering, promoting the interaction and the emotional involvement of visitors – especially young people –, through edutainment and immersion exhibits (Addis, 2002; Rentschler, Hede, 2007; Calcagno, Faccipieri, 2010; Mortensen, 2010). According to a constructivist perspective, science centres and museums are driven by the recognition that ‘informal

¹ Museum visitor studies bring together scholars from different sciences (museology, economics, sociology, management, etc.), with the common goal of audience development, not only increasing, but also satisfying museum visitors: “Visitor studies” is an umbrella term for a range of different forms of research and evaluation involving museums and their actual, potential, and virtual visitors which collectively might be termed the “audience” for museums. These studies focus on the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of people in and about museums of all sorts (art, history, science; national, local, private, and so on) (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: 363).

² These studies did not investigate people’s motivations and needs and did not indicate ‘the reasons why some adults choose to frequent museums and why some do not’ (Hood, 1983: 51).

³ Surveys also revealed that a very small minority of blacks in cities with a large black population felt comfortable in the museums (Dickenson, 1998: 144).

⁴ *Front-end evaluation* provides information at the first stage of the planning; *formative evaluation* takes place during the planning; *remedial evaluation* helps to identify and remove problems during the planning; and *summative evaluation* assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of a programme (Reussner, 2003: 105-106).

learning' can be an important contribution to awareness and understanding not only among children but also among adults (Falk, Dierking, 2000).

However, even though there is a growing commitment to enhance individual 'interactivity', some video-based field researches have revealed that most of the computer-based interactive exhibits neglect the possibility of social interaction, co-participation, shared experiences and mutual engagement (Heath, vom Lehn, 2008): 'the innovation rarely goes beyond designing exhibits that rely primarily on conventional human-computer interfaces such as keyboards, pushbuttons, and touch-screens' (Meisner, vom Lehn, Heath, Burch, Gammon, Reisman, 2007: 1532).

In summary, as far as education and visitor services are concerned, museum studies have focused on the interactive construction of meaning through new technological devices, innovative exhibits, exhibitions, and other 'block-buster' events. However, research has not sufficiently investigated the role of words in exhibit communication. Therefore, surveys should also analyse museum verbal communication – its contents and language – to verify: (1) if the general knowledge people have when they visit a museum is sufficient to understand and appreciate the complex value of exhibits in museums, and (2) if museum communication strategies are suitable to the mise en valeur of the uniqueness of each museum collection (Cerquetti, 2010).

Indeed, the rich value of museums is not accessible to everyone. Considering the role of addition in cultural consumptions (Stigler & Becker, 1977), an appreciation – positive evaluation and memory – of a museum experience is necessary for a repeat visit – as well as for future visits to other museums. However, if we did not understand what we have seen, we would not come back to the museum (Vergo, 1994).

Moreover local and small institutions usually fail in enhancing the distinctive features that make them different from big institutions and competitive in the global context.

4. A local survey: method and findings

Sharing these theoretical requirements, this paper reports the research results concerning the

relationship between museums and their potential public. During January 2010 a 30-item structured questionnaire – with open and closed questions – was submitted to 394 students aged between 16 and 18. The survey took place in Fermo (FM, Italy) among students studying art history. The research consisted of a wide range of questions, which examined: (1) the comprehension and evaluation of written art museums communication; (2) the students' experience and perception of the local art museum; and (3) young people's cultural consumption.

The findings presented in this paper focus on the analysis of the first and the second part of the questionnaire. Firstly, the students were asked to participate in the innovation of the local museum's labels and boards, choosing the caption they preferred among some short texts taken from guides, catalogues and other publications about the museum, to verify their confidence with the scientific specialized language. They were asked to explain the reasons for their choice, generating descriptive data for analysis and interpretation. The students also had to underline in the text words or phrases they did not know. Furthermore, questions were asked about students' perception of the Fermo local museum and their recollection of the visit.

When asked about the labels' basic contents, a large majority of the interviewed (74%) answered they prefer information about the style and aesthetic value rather than about the history of the paintings and their original location (26%). (See Figure 1).

Students justified their choice by saying they preferred to receive a visual description of the paintings, focusing on stylistic and technical details (colours, lights, composition, etc.), rather than about their purchaser or finding.

They revealed much more confidence with the artistic language rather than with historical information – boring for most of the students. Only a few students preferred information about the original location of the paintings, the social context of their production and the relationship with other monuments of the town.

This difference is less when we analyse more detailed information. In general students confirm a preference for information directly referring to the visual component of the paintings (style and iconography) exposed in a museum (54%) rather than for socio-cultural and historical meaning (40%), far less 'concrete'. Nevertheless, in some cases students even chose texts they considered more difficult and which contained words they did not know!

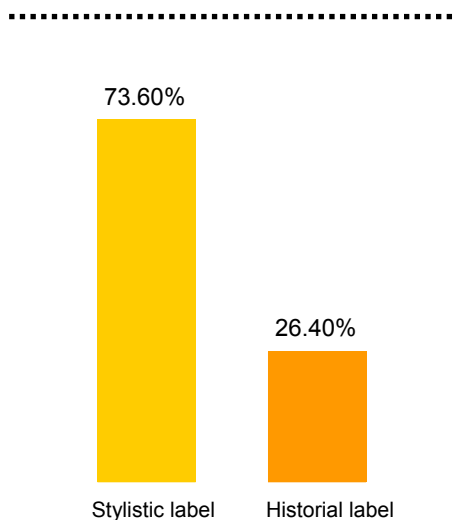


FIGURE 1.
STUDENTS' PREFERENCES FOR COMMUNICATION CONTENT IN AN ART MUSEUM

In summary, the lead factor – which determines the choice and the preference for some information – is the “look” point of view. Moreover, despite difficulties in understanding the professional jargon, young people seem to be “in awe” of museum language.

Focusing on the second part of the questionnaire, 59% of the students have already visited the local art museum, and 86% of those on a school trip. In most of these cases they have a blurred memory of the visit.

Analysis of the data reveals that education has an important role in establishing future potential museum visitors, not only because the first visit was with teachers, but also because education gives students important tools to understand and appreciate the value of objects exhibited in museums.

When analysing customer satisfaction we avoided considering these preferences the real wishes of the young public, that museums should satisfy. The comprehension and the appreciation of the value of cultural heritage require a level of competence, which higher education has to provide and whose lack is the first obstacle to intellectual accessibility. The role of the State in cultural heritage policies – the State is involved both on the demand-side and on the supply-side – (Graziani, 1990) means young people’s preferences are not absolute, but dependent on the cognitive tools provided by education (Bourdieu, Darbel, 1969), determining cultural skills and customs.

Therefore, students’ critical evaluations illustrate that they have much more confidence with aesthetic and stylistic categories rather than historical and social ones. Under Throsby’s classification, education focuses on the aesthetic value of cultural objects, with a hierarchic approach, neglecting other important aspects of value – historical, symbolic, spiritual, etc.

Indeed, schools teach history of art and artistic values, but not history of cultural heritage and its cultural value. Of course this approach prepares visitors for big museums, which preserve well-known

and artistically important masterpieces, but does not help the understanding and appreciation of the value of the dense net of little known local museums throughout Italy. The competitive advantage of these museums – of local interest and exhibits, of which the study case provides an example – is not necessarily artistic or aesthetic quality, but the deep relationship with the local cultural heritage. Therefore the knowledge of their historical value could be an efficient means of visiting the town and surrounding area, as well as understanding its history. Furthermore, even though the cultural objects inside local museums have an artistic value, their distinctive feature is not only aesthetic, but also historical.

Finally, the survey revealed that the Fermo local museum is not well remembered by some of its potential visitors – such as students who do not remember previous visits and have no clear perception of the location of the museum. Therefore, museums – especially local ones – have to create a clear image and identity for their product, brand and organization.

5. Conclusions

These findings, even though they relate to a specific study, could have broad applications and involve important implications for school and university programs and local museum management both to help reach a new audience and to enhance Italian cultural heritage (Figure 2).

When the purpose of school education is to prepare and stimulate demand for cultural heritage, then higher education has to develop a broad spectrum of value of cultural heritage (Figure 3) – not only aesthetic and stylistic, but also historical, documentary, artistic, social, etc. (Montella, 2009) –, innovating the dominant processes and categories of



FIGURE 2 -
IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURAL MANAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

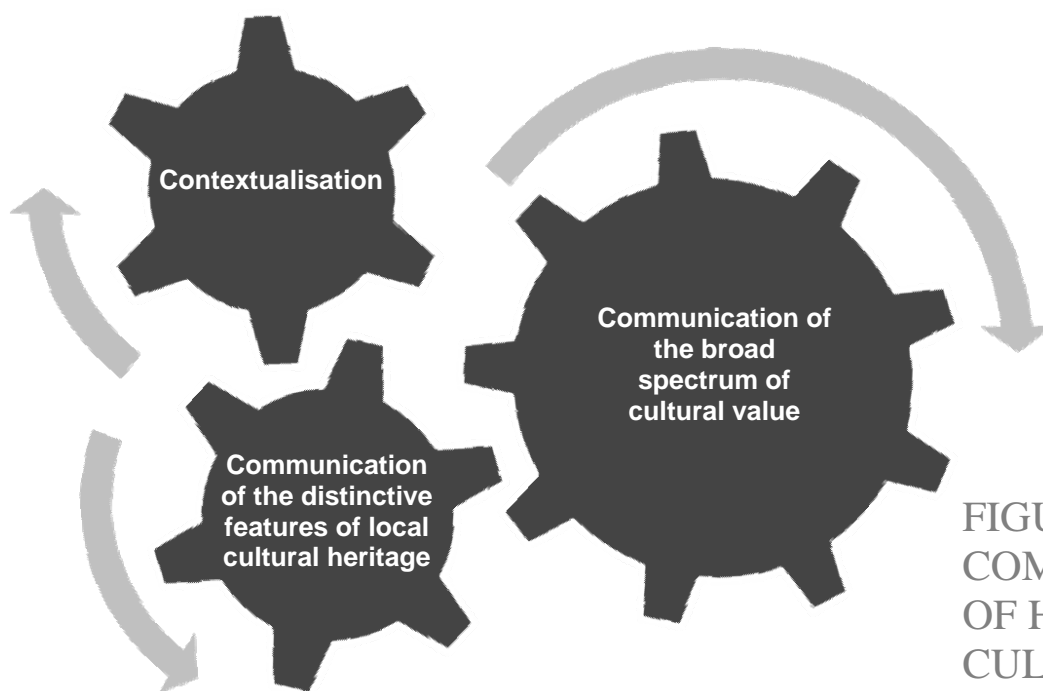


FIGURE 3 - THE COMMUNICATION OF HERITAGE CULTURAL VALUE

knowledge transmission (Macdonald & Silverstone, 1990). This approach could enhance the uniqueness of Italian cultural heritage and, if started from the bottom and developed in a local dimension, could promote a deeper relationship between museums and local communities – including schools – according to ICOM’s guidelines for the active protection of cultural heritage.

Universities training cultural heritage managers and curators should not avoid this perspective. Graduates should have the competence and skills to position local museums in a global context, promoting both audience development (that is the process of reaching new audiences) and the enhancement of Italian cultural heritage (which includes the communication of its cultural value).

At the same time, local museums should focus not only on the communication of formal and stylistic values of cultural heritage, but also on the enhancement of its distinctive features – often related to the local context (Figure 3). Moreover, considering that people are often standing during the visit, communication in museums should be clear, brief and nontechnical (McManus, 1989; Bitgood, 1991; Serrell, 1996), using images when possible rather than written texts (Montella & Cerquetti 2008). Photos, video and contextual exhibitions could be very useful in constructing new narratives and avoiding most of the difficulties related to verbal communication, supporting the transmission of historical information connected to paintings and other objects, without direct and figurative examples in the museum.

Finally, the approach based on the innovative communication of cultural value could also have economic implications for local sustainable development (Grefe, 1999): (1) positioning peripheral areas and their assets in the minds of potential visitors; (2) making local museums into pivots of a cultural itinerary rather than unknown destinations; (3)

benefitting from the new and increased experience-based tourism and in search for authenticity; (4) reducing negative externalities and diseconomies due to the concentration of tourism flows in a few art cities; (5) opening new possibilities for local entrepreneurship in tourism and “Made in Italy” production.

Local cultural destinations proactively addressing these innovative trends will be able to gain a long-term competitive advantage which combines durable socio-economic benefits with the conservation of cultural resources and identity.

Moreover, this approach should be extended to a broad area, analysing different strategies used in museum communication.

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