Museums in the Face of the Pandemic:

The Virtual Museums Overcoming the Challenges of the Pandemic

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Introduction

Inarguably, museums are very essential in the preservation of culture, archeological sites, monuments, and other memorable aspects of society. According to Wateren (1999), all civilizations starting from "the most primitive to the most advanced" have one thing in common: they have the desire "to accumulate objects that are beautiful, costly and rea of merely curious" (p.190). Therefore, lovers of art, history, cultural enthusiasts, and academicians find a museum an indispensable part of their world. Over the ages, people have visited museums for various educational purposes. However, the museum sector has never encountered challenges of the magnitude that it is doing presently. More than one and a half years since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the museum sector is still struggling to sustain itself as well as coping with challenges of opening while observing health protocols such as social distances. Therefore, a call to have the management of the centers learn from the crisis so as to respond, recover by integrating new ways to save the museums from collapsing is essential.

The Museum in the 21st Century

To understand the challenges encountered by museums better, it is imperative to locate the state of the museum in the 21st century. Various researchers have termed the museum in the current century as "a lab" (Vega, 2019, p.121). As such, the museum is deemed to be a place where they "no longer exhibit incontestable truths" but where they "provide an environment for ideas to be tested, challenged ad co-created" (Vega, 2019, p.121). It is a place where people are not only invited to see and be seen, but to participate in hands-on activities and in gathering specimens for collection. In so doing, people are invited to give ideas on what should be kept in a museum and how it should be kept. It is in this modern arrangement that irrelevant specimens are

expunged while those which are worthy but were in the past trashed are incorporated after wide, logical discussion.

Also, in defining the sector as a laboratory, especially in the incorporation of modern art, scholars have revealed the indispensability of the people in participation in all activities of a museum. A museum is a place of experimentation in which the people are invited to participate (The Museum of the Modern Art, 1957). Such inclusivity is characterized by spaces where participation in experiments happens. For instance, children have a studio for direct experimentation with materials such as elastic strings or magnetic boards for them to experiment with color and design (Mairesse at al., 2018). Museum managements have been striving to keep their institution's places that are adequately flexible to meet varying needs for their ever-increase clientele. However, the Covid 19 pandemic has badly hit the sector, threatening to cease their presence. Consequently, research studies show that museums have been undergoing financial constraints and therefore threatening their survival and the the livelihood of thousands of museum staff.

The Situation of the Museum Across the world

Research findings show that museums across the world were badly hit by the global pandemic. A report by Antara & Shuvro (2020) reveals that since the coming of the Covid-I9 resulting lockdown, the situation of the museum worsened. Research findings also show that organizations of all kinds were expected to restrict "physical access to buildings and on-site provision of services" (Samaroudi et al., 2020, p.338). It is in this connection that museums were not exempted from the remedies taken in response to the crisis with the urgency that it deserved. However, the situation was not consistent in all regions of the world. While unlike in countries

like the US that the museums were forced to close in North America and Europe, the majority of
them remained open in Asia and America (Yan, 2020). However, as infection mortality rates
increased, the government in these regions tightened measures to tame the pandemic.

Among the mitigation ways of ensuring flattening of the curve included lockdown, which
led to the closure of museums. This disrupted the activities of the museums which led to a
limited collection of revenue and loss of jobs. There was irregular especially in the second waves
of the pandemic, where there was showed a reduced presence of staff onsite. According to the
Network of European Museum Organizations (2020), the majority of museums in Europe
reopened in May/June 2020 after months of closure. Research findings show that museums were
losing an average of €20,300 a week as a result of the closure of activities (NEMO, 2020). A
report by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO) in April
2021, also submits those primary threats to the museum in the face of the pandemic is "decrease
in revenue"(p.6). Also, there are overall negative implications of the crisis of conservation
(UNESCO, 2021, p.6). This raises serious concern about the survival and security of the
museums since there is an expected reduction in collections of artifacts and other valuables kept
in the museum.

Many museums in the world embarked on mass lay-offs and others put on hold contracts
with freelance workers while at the same time halting their volunteer programs (Yan,2020).
These financial constraints almost rendered the future of the museums bleak. According to
Samaroudi et al., (2020) apart from the negative implications on the museums' finances and
workforce, the institutions had to "close, postpone or cancel projects" as well as reduce
"performances, exhibitions and education programs" they offer to the public (p.338). These
hiccups point to the fact that important heritage institutions such as museums should require

review and restructuring to successfully deal with weather future storms (Network of European Museum Organizations, 2021, p.2). The magnitude of the blow dealt with the heritage institutions by the pandemic reveals that there is a lot that needs to be done to ensure adequate preparedness to face such storms.

Museums' response to the pandemic

Since it is widely known that necessity is the mother of invention, museum managements seized the opportunity to come up with ways of ensuring the survival of the sector. Museums have shown an ability to be proactive in dealing with the adverse effects of the pandemic. Studies show that they used their resources to fight the pandemic by "addressing needs within their communities" (p.1). These efforts include the provision of masks to people, gloves, and medical materials to medical centers. In so doing, they have contributed significantly to the tremendous gains that have been continued to be realized in the fight against the pandemic. In addition to museums engaging directly in reducing the number of new infections, it has also contributed to the cultivation of "the sense of trust and community by requesting people to share objects and stories to preserve and learn from this moment" (Yan, 2020). The people were required to do this share through social media platforms. This revealed that our museums are an asset for society in terms of their social development.

Also, the museums have adopted digitalization in offering their service to their audience. Since on-site visits were reduced or closed down, most museums went online. Research studies show that most museums used their web pages to offer text and image elements audio-visual streaming, interactive games, virtual tours, and interactive panoramas (Samaroudi et al., 2020, p.343). The content disseminated digitally is customized for relevant audiences. The audiences

include those that seek to learn support, those that seek emotional support and entertainment, and the stakeholders that wish to be kept involved (Samaroudi et al. 2021, p.345). The distinguished needs of these varied audiences need to be satisfied, and therefore, there is a great need for museums to be dynamic enough for them to respond appropriately.

In their effort to meet the needs of the audience that seeks to learn support, the museums have been providing valuable information on history, culture, science, and technology, and so on in the face of the pandemic. In so doing, the museums have been adopting online learning services that help this audience to reflect, think, analyze and inform themselves on various academic themes (Samaroudi et al. 2021). For those that seek emotional support and entertainment, the museums have been offering access to content that reduces boredom, loneliness, stress, and exhaustion promotes well-being and etcetera. Also, the museums have been handy in furnishing the stakeholders who wish to be kept involved with information on how they can contribute to empowering museum activities through online dissemination of content. The ICOM (2020) reports that there was a "surge in virtual tours "and "remote interactions with the public" (p.9). Indeed, among the most utilized digital platforms include online tours and online exhibitions on websites, podcasts, and social media platforms. Researchers agree that Zoom and YouTube were the most used digital outlets (UNESCO, 2020). Also, many museums seized the opportunity availed by the lockdown to update their websites and applications. As such, online ticketing, tracking of occupancy rates in real-time, and digital wayfinding were some of the services offered by virtual museums (Hawky, 2020). Thus, the museums are doing much better in terms of maintaining their position in society by embracing the dynamism of information technology.

Problems Associated with Virtual Museums

Just like anything else under the sun, the virtual museum has its shortcomings. For instance, interpretation of information overshadows the quality of imaging, thus discouraging the audience. Also, though there is a surge in virtual museums, the search for the required source of information is very challenging. Still, the search systems are not flexible enough to help one search using words he or she desires (Hawkey, 2020). Thus, audiences find virtual museums challenging to use since they may find it difficult to get the specific information they want.

Recommendation

Human activity on the globe has been adequately permeated by digital media that shapes interactions. Therefore, virtual museums should adopt advanced technological systems that attract young netizens in a bigger way. This can be done by making virtual museums more colorful and interactive. Also, to improve the accessibility of information, the SEO features of the websites should be improved. Still, the government and well-wishers should be encouraged to increase funding of these heritage institutions so that they can embark on research on how best they can improve the virtual production of the museum activities and content.

Conclusion

In summary, the Covid 19 pandemic has adversely affected the museum sector by affecting on-site visits. This has led to reduced finances, lay-offs of suspension of job contracts. Museum management all over the world has been proactive in their response to the pandemic through the provision of necessities in their communities. Also, museums have adopted technology by improving their virtual services. The few problems associated with virtual museums can be addressed by advancing the features of the website and producing the images

and improving the quality of the content. More research should be conducted to show how 3D

technology can improve the dissemination of museum services and content.

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