

Modern Museum Communications as a Means of Visitors Attracting

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to analyze the websites of museums in Russia in the European context. The Fine Arts museums in five regional centers of Russia and European Union, namely, in France, Germany, Poland, Croatia, and Lithuania were chosen for the assessment of their websites by four criteria: design, content, usability, and dynamism. A rating of the target Russian museum websites was compiled based on a comparative analysis of their compliance with these criteria. The findings allow concluding that some of the web resources of Russian regional museums meet the European standards, which let them powerfully join the modern virtual space and win both Russian and foreign audiences. The science-based approach to a single virtual cultural space, which is currently on the focus of the museum institutions, supports the assumption of the museum websites to be a potent tool for the art communication with society. The practical value of the study is determined by possible uses of the results in streamlining and upgrading the museum sites, as well as in courses and training programs on museology, management, and marketing of social and cultural activities.

Keywords: Museum Communications, Museum Site, Virtual Museum, Audience, Museum of Fine Arts, Regional Museum.

INTRODUCTION

The museum website is a signature of a cultural institution on the worldwide web. It is precisely the website that is regarded as the principal channel for giving information about the Museum, building its positive image as a cultural institution and the way to attract the audience and further promote the Museum in the market.

The museum websites are an essential element of modern communications, speaking of the society's culture and the public sphere performance. Being an effective means of interaction with the audience, public organizations, mass media, they open access to the national and world cultural space (Schweibenz 2019).

The museums' presentation capacity increased significantly with the Internet's growth, which offered additional opportunities in terms of practical information about their foreign counterparts and adoption of the best foreign practices to improve the quality of the museum service (Aiello, Fai and Santagati 2019).

In developing the website, each Museum drew upon its status and stated objectives, which generally cover: the positive image buildup, engaging with the target audience, internal networking, marketing communi-

cations (advertising, promotion). Any cultural event that a museum is involved in should be made known to the broadest possible public, stimulating further interest in the Museum's activities and ensuring a sustainable positive public awareness and increased number of potential visitors (Kabassi, Amelio, Komianos and Oikonomou 2019).

The website developers should provide for its multiple functionalities. In the first place, it is meant to perform an image-building and advertising function. Moreover, the website's information serves to establish cultural communication targeting the general public, which covers both real and potential visitors. The museum website is often the first to project an image that potential visitors capture. Therefore, a website must contain up-to-date information and reflect the Museum's objectives and mission. It should proactively contribute to the interaction between different groups of people, be an efficient channel of internal and external networking (Vasilina 2016).

Additionally, In the era of pandemics like COVID-19, and subsequently, restrictions to visit museums, thanks to the spectacular advances in technology, one can go on a virtual tour of some museum websites. On such websites, one can also tour the Museum virtually and pay a visit to ancient or modern treasures and wisdom. one also can enjoy the 3D photo tour from those official websites (Winesmith and Anderson 2020).

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It was not until fairly recently that the museum sites appeared in Russia as compared with similar online resources in the European countries. Consequently, the study of the European practices in the development of the museum web pages to get the audience involved seems appropriate through the comparative analysis of Russian and European museum websites, as well as their assessment by the criteria of design, content, usability, and dynamism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical grounds of the research are laid by scientific works of Russian and international scientists focused on museum communications (Yaroshenko, 2000; Marstine, 2008; Sapanzha, 2017), issues and prospects of digitization of museum management (Giannini & Bowen, 2019; Gil-Fuentetaja & Economou, 2019; Winesmith & Anderson, 2020). The museum websites were explored as a means for displaying museums' collections by Rygalova (2018) and Wilson (2011). The virtual museums phenomenon (Vasilina, 2016; Dzyuba, 2017) as well as approaches to their classification (Dzyuba, 2016) were given special attention in the previous research. The virtual museums were viewed from the diachronic perspective (Pescarin, 2014; Povroznik, 2018; Schweibenz, 2019), in the context of the information technology (Barbieri, Bruno and Muzzupappa 2017; Kabassi *et al.*, 2019), and through the lens of cultural sphere management (Mateos-Rusillo & Gifreu-Castells, 2017; Dragicevic & Bagarić, 2019). Noteworthy are the recommendations on a virtual museum space development (Bowen, 2003; Maksimova, 2016; Bentkowska-Kafel, 2016) and peculiarities of the virtual museum space visitors highlighted in the papers of and Marty (2007).

Study of the potential to expand the outreach on new visitor segments (primarily, youth and children) through the access to the virtual space is on top of the museum studies agenda. Thus, Rygalova (2018) notes that "museums strive to enhance awareness about them to engage new visitors. Structurally, the typical museum website comprises sections that inform about the access to the Museum, its history, and exhibitions, less commonly, relating to collections, tours, and publications. Through the website, a museum implements the function of presenting information about itself, and its services" (Rygalova, 2018).

It should be noted that the museum site functions currently tend to expand, which entails the need for the site's concept revision. As Dzyuba (2016) points out,

the first static websites, providing information about the Museum's areas of activity, a brief overview of the foundation history, data about exhibitions, working hours, and contact information, were followed with the full-fledged virtual museums. The museum websites came to include online exhibitions, temporary exposition teasers. They opened access to entirely digitized archives and 3D representations of artifacts, (Dzyuba, 2016), thus becoming full virtual analogs rather than pure attachments to the real-life museums.

According to Croatian scientists Dragicevic and Bagarić (2019), virtual reality technology can be an effective means of achieving the goals of relevance and sustainability. At present, the focus is on the relationship between museums, artifacts, and digital technologies. The interaction of real objects of material culture and the virtual ontologies (their digital representations) create opens new perspectives in terms of data analysis, exchange, contextualization, and cultural translation (Dragicevic & Bagarić, 2019: 182). The above allows researchers to qualify a museum as a meta-museum since artifacts and objects exist by interacting with cultural processes. Thus, "in the digital field, a museum exhibit is viewed as the result of complex information and communication processes, contextualized in virtual social networking. The Museum and its collections generate new contexts and knowledge territories in the virtual environment" (Dragicevic & Bagarić, 2019: 182).

Aiello *et al.* (2019) argue that "the potential of virtual and mixed realities offers new perspectives for the visual rendering of cultural heritage, including presentation, interaction, handling, improvement, and dissemination. The virtual sector can be seen in terms of the new audiences' outreach, introducing new ways of interaction, changing as well as updating perceptions and understanding of cultural values" (Aiello *et al.*, 2019).

Empirical studies evidence the effectiveness of museum web resources in working with the audience. Thus, the experiment, performed by the museum specialists from St. Petersburg, allowed the team of scientists to make some valuable scientific conclusions: "the web statistics, surveys, and social network data should be kept in mind when working with museum communications; integrating the website and the exposition enhances the effectiveness of museum communications; a museum can not only handle information but also form an audience drawn on the feedback; social networking as a source of information

comes to have the upper hand; social networks should be studied and used as a resource for museum communications" (Hookk, Opređenov and Kharitonova 2016).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study of the available research on museum-related online resources gave insight into the role of the website in working with visitors and outlined the critical scientific challenge. The review of publications of Russian and foreign researchers allows to conclude that the museum site as a means for attracting the audience is in the spotlight of museologists; however, there is an absolute lack of comparative and analytical studies of the Internet resources in Russia, which would examine the quality of the Russian museum sites in terms of their design, functions, content, usability for different visitor categories, and technical performance by comparing them with best foreign analogs.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Russian museum sites in the European context.

A set of objectives to support the achievement of this general goal, includes identification of the functional features of the museum site as a modern communication channel; defining a set of criteria for evaluating the museum website in terms of its impact on the audience, make the analysis of museum websites by the selected criteria, and a comparative analysis of Russian and European museum websites followed with the rating assessment of the quality of the target Russian museum resources.

The present study covers the websites of Russian and European regional museums of fine arts as the subject of research.

Within the scope of the research the compliance of Russian museum sites with the criteria of the practical impact on the target audience is studied through the lens of the European best practices.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

A range of theoretical methods was applied to explore the extent of prior research of the issue, to define the conceptual and categorical framework, sum up and organize scientific provisions in the research field, including the analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparison, analogy, and juxtaposition; a set of specific methods underlying the study, in

particular, includes the system analysis used to assess the compliance of museum sites with the selected criteria; comparative analysis used to compare museum sites; and the rating method used to evaluate the qualitative characteristics of the museum sites.

The study relies upon the research of the websites run by museums of the same profile (Fine Arts) located in five regional centers of Russia and the same number of regional centers in European countries — France, Germany, Poland, Croatia, Lithuania. — as targets. Representative purposes guided the choice of foreign countries: two countries (France and Germany) make for the "old" Europe, two are relatively young EU members (Poland, Croatia) and one country derives from the former Soviet space (Lithuania), all the three being fairly new to the EU, thus having the initial conditions very similar to those of Russia. The criteria for choosing the specific museums included the museum profile (picture gallery) and the location (not the capital city, but a regional center). When selecting Russian museums, the geographical factor was taken into account (the museums had to be from different parts of the country).

It should be noted that the design, content, and feature set of the specific sites are much different. Therefore, there was a need to figure out clearly which of the websites is regarded as an effective one, and offering them opportunities for innovations in the focal area and attracting the audience, that is, criteria for evaluation of museum sites had to be defined. The sites assessment under the present study followed four criteria: design, content, usability; and dynamism. This choice was due to specifics of the site perception by potential users, presumably engaged with the design and technical performance, content, usability, and the regular update of information on the Internet resource. Sites were rated on a five-point scale, with five being the highest score corresponding to the quality of the best focal European museum sites.

RESULTS

Analysis of museum sites by the first criterion (design) showed that Russian sites are slightly different from their European counterparts. The French, German, and Polish museum websites are most refined, bright, and attractive in the author's opinion. All photos and videos that are used on these sites were made at the highest professional level. Typically, the home page offers a slide show of chief masterpieces from the museum collection. Russian sites often

feature formalistic and outdated visuals that do not meet the state-of-the-art requirements. From the viewpoint of design solution, the sites of the Volgograd and Yekaterinburg Museums of Fine Arts appear most relevant. Generally, technical traits like graphics, page loading speed, clarity, external and internal links, hierarchy, and pagination of materials in all target websites meet the appropriate standards. It is essential to realize that the wider technical possibilities are involved, the more popular is the museum web resource. Simultaneously, very few of the target European and Russian websites offer functions like adding podcasts and broadcasting audio and video information, placing illustrative material, conducting surveys, running instant messaging service and adding comments, beyond the mere placing of the texts information. Such an extensive technical arsenal is proper to the websites of Pinakotheka, the National Museum in Krakow, and the Volgograd and Yekaterinburg Museums.

Study of the sites' content (the second criterion) reveals that the latest news and events are covered in more detail on Polish, Lithuanian and Russian sites. Those resources are often used as a news portal or online newspaper. This kind of a museum site turns out a full-fledged communication channel providing the target audience with detailed information about the museum-related social activities like scientific, cultural, educational programs and events, achievements, and successes. By way of example, the Krakow Museum website even has a particular heading "What is new?" The website of the Volgograd Museum of Fine Arts under the heading "Projects and programs" provides up-to-date information on the meet-the-artist events, concerts, master classes, lectures, conferences. The Russian websites are noted to increasingly use multimedia. For instance, the current news on exhibitions on the website of the Kuzbass Museum of Fine Arts are provided in the video format (50-10-minute video clips on various subjects like "The theme of spring in paintings," "A Pioneer of Kuzbass")

By the third criterion of evaluation — usability — the searched European museums' websites meet the highest standards. The blocks of information are structured (those called "Visit," "Exhibitions," "Collection," "Research," "About Us" are only few examples from the website of the Munich "Pinakothek"), which makes much more natural the navigation on the site. The logically structured site is typical for most Russian museums like the Volgograd, Yekaterinburg and Kaliningrad Museums of Fine Arts.

The situation is somewhat worse with the use of feedback tools, which makes hardly possible the site functioning as a communication channel. While all target European museums websites integrate the feedback function (chats and forums being typically placed in social networks linked to the sites), two out of the five focal Russian sites do not have these tools (Museum of Fine Arts of Kuzbass and Orlov Museum of Fine Arts).

Inclusion is regarded as an essential factor in the site's usability. Therefore, the Museum's website should target the particular segments of the market, such as students or minorities, through the specific sections designed for that. It may be a section in a different language (for foreigners or national minorities), special-purpose software that allows people with disabilities to use the site (for example, audio-reading for the vision-impaired people) and alike. The Museum can not only bring service to these groups but also additionally assist the potential visitors, which enhances its public image of an advanced innovative cultural institution. In this context, the Munich "Pinakothek" website is worth noting as far as the foreign sites are concerned, and the Volgograd and Orel museums sites among the Russian websites. Thus, the website of the Volgograd Museum of Fine Arts has a special section for the children's audience, the inclusive project page — "Museum for All", and a section with online courses for schoolchildren. The Orel Museum offers the special version of the website for the vision-impaired people.

The fourth criterion (dynamism) is for the regular update of the website. The average rate of the news update on the Munich, Marseille, and Krakow museums' websites is once every two days. The Dubrovnik Museum of Modern Art and the Ciurlionis National Museum of Art in Vilnius are slightly behind (one news every four or five days). Approximately the same update dynamism is proper to the Russian museum sites, although there are exceptions: Volgograd, Yekaterinburg, and Kemerovo museums post the updates on their sites even faster.

The comparative analysis by four criteria, as mentioned above, allowed to set up the rating of the focal Russian museum sites given in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The analysis and evaluation of Russian museum sites, relying on the best practice available in the

Table 1: Rating Evaluation of the Focal Russian Museum Sites

| | Design | Content | Usability | Dynamism | Mean score |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|------------|
| Mashkov Volgograd Museum of Fine Arts | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4,5 |
| Museum of Fine Arts of the Kuzbas | 3 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 4 |
| Kaliningrad Museum of Fine Arts | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Orel Museum of Fine Arts | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3,75 |

European countries, shows that Russian regional museums keep up with the global trends. However, they are somewhat behind in implementing innovative technologies to reach out to a broader audience.

The comparative study has shown the importance of the more explicit definition of the "museum site" and the "virtual museum" concepts, which are on the focus of discussions between Russian and international museum experts, even though the very concept of the virtual Museum is not something new, as Bentkowska-Kafel (2016) points out. Historically, the term was introduced in the early 1990s "to cover the new intellectual constructs and cultural phenomena reflecting changes induced by technological advances in information and communications." (Bentkowska-Kafel, 2016).

Schweibenz (2019) highlights the fact that in modern museum studies virtual Museum is also mentioned as digital, electronic, online, hyper-media, web- or cyber-museum. The scientist notes that the basic concept of a virtual museum is still not clearly defined and needs to be differentiated from digital collections and online archives (Schweibenz, 2019). The key to all listed term variations is in their belonging to a virtual environment and information, computer-aided technologies.

It is necessary to emphasize that Schweibenz suggests distinguishing between a virtual museum with digitized collections and archives. In turn, Maksimova (2016) defines a virtual museum as "an Internet resource where collections are posted in line with the concept and goals of its authors" (Maksimova, 2016). Thus, from the scholars' viewpoint, a collection posted on Internet resources with specific purposes automatically qualifies as a virtual museum. However, this definition seems somewhat broad, blurring the true meaning of the concept.

Such a broad definition is suggested by Lebedev (2010), who calls a virtual museum any sample of

images (set, collection), either compiled by amateurs or collectors. The scientist also refers to all museum websites as virtual museums (Lebedev, 2010: 6). According to the scholar, a virtual museum includes such diverse phenomena in terms of functions, content, and quality as the official web pages of museum institutions and any (even non-professional) collections posted on the online resources.

At the same time, attempts to narrow the concept of a virtual museum also occur. Thus, Vasilina (2016), suggests that solely a resource offering 3D virtual tours should be called virtual museums (Vasilina, 2016: 97). Against this background, the increasingly improving technology may cause this definition to become irrelevant in the not-too-distant-future. Generally, just that fast pace of technological transformations, which also impact the socio-cultural institutions' virtual representation activities, seem to be a reason for such variances in definitions.

Under the present study, the virtual Museum is defined following the interpretation offered in the "Russian Encyclopedia of Museums" — the "virtual Museum is information posted in a digital media about the Museum that exists in real life (museum sites) or the network environment only. Virtual museums have interactive features proper to digital media, which in particular, allow the users to "move" through the 3D halls, capture any information and image, model on his own the computer-aided collections and exhibitions. The ongoing feedback from visitors is deemed to be a key trait of such sites" (Sundieva, 2001). Thus, the museum sites may be regarded as the virtual museum variety.

The reference, which seems entirely appropriate, was made by Dzyuba (2017) on the virtual museums as a "postmodernist form for the modern museums to seamlessly adapt its traditional functions to the new cultural environment of the digital age. The interactive environment in the museum sphere is not only

associated with the website but with a unique approach to presenting information on the Internet, as a new cultural space having the virtual nature" (Dzyuba, 2017).

The above is supported by researchers arguing that the virtual museums (and museum websites as a variety) have an exceptional role in the promotion of cultural assets and engaging the audience (Aiello *et al.*, 2019). Concurrently, the development of a museum's marketing strategy to expand the target audience without due regard to the virtual space potential (Shekova, 2016) is not justified from the modern communications theory perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of Russian and European museum websites allowed to highlight their strengths and weaknesses across different countries. The study revealed that European museums' websites are made by efforts of high-end professionals in design, photo and video shooting, and visual animation. This approach seems relevant since the singular design is the first thing capturing the attention of the visitors of the site. A lovely, positive, and inspiring website helps gain trust and respect for the Museum. Creative approach and technical performance, no doubt, attract the audience. Among the Russian museum resources, the websites of the Volgograd and Yekaterinburg Museums of Fine Arts proved to be the most successful in terms of design.

A study of the content of the website showed that Russian museum sites strongly focus on keeping the information up-to-date. By their content body, the Russian museums' websites compare favourably with their European counterparts.

The usability feature of the Russian museum websites is also almost as good as that one of European resources, though they are somewhat behind in terms of the feedback instruments embedding. Usability is a feature that needs to be thought out from the very onset of the upgraded website development, to ensure the logical and clear layout, the convenient controls and menus, and optional inclusiveness. The European practices in designing the sites with due respect to the needs of different audiences are worthy of attention in Russia's context.

The comparative analysis of sites within the framework of this study shows that there are regional

museums in Russia, whose web resources are entirely aligned with the European samples in harnessing the new virtual space potential to capture both home and foreign audience's adherence.

While the present research does not exhaust all aspects of museum sites function as an effective communication channel, the science-based approach to a single virtual cultural space, which is currently on the focus of the museum institutions, supports the assumption of the museum websites to be a potent tool for the art communication with society.

The practical value of the study is determined by possible uses of the results in streamlining and upgrading the museum sites, as well as in professional training courses and workshops, management and marketing of social, and cultural activities.

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