

Maritime Museums Online Presence: Actual Value and Challenges

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Abstract

In the macro-area of contemporary tourism, the coastal one can count on a multiplicity of resources, not only natural, human and physical, but also cultural. Maritime museums have recently been recognized as an important lever for the sustainable development of coastal areas.

The main objective of this short paper is to map all the Mediterranean Maritime Museums specific features and the challenges that are emerging today. Through an exploratory approach, this research lays the groundwork for identifying the key variables for a long-lasting sustainable development. In a prospective view, the research would like to foreshadows the identification of the most relevant factors related to performance indices.

Activating a virtuous cycle between the museum specific features and the territory in which it is located, allows museums to create long-term, multi-dimensional and multi-stakeholder value.

This study contributes to the literature on culture and value creation, providing suggestions for managers, scholars, policymakers and practitioners alike. Findings are focusing on a specific category of cultural institution but can easily be extended to any other kind of museum.

Keywords: maritime museums, value, business strategy, sustainable development, tourism

Framing of the Research

Maritime museums have recently been recognized, as an important lever for the sustainable development, in social and environmental term, of coastal areas and the maritime heritage can represent a significant component for their tourist attraction (Appiotti, et al., 2019).

In a 2001 contribution by Hicks (2001), titled "What is a Maritime Museum?", he is among the first to ask a series of ideological questions on the nature of maritime museums and defines them as a subcategory of museums of history and ethnography. Just like the latter in fact, maritime museums define 1) a collective identity; 2) the identity of the individual, the journey of discovery that leads to self-knowledge.

Indeed, many of those museums are originated as shrines of one's nation's naval supremacy over others, places of veneration of national heroes and containers of antiquities even if there is also a wider amount of museums that see maritime culture as the heritage of a number of human activities, with a focus that is not just on collections, but also on traditional know-how and knowledge (Beneki, et al., 2012).

In recent decades, the prominence of maritime heritage in all its forms has led to efforts to coordinate conservation and interpretation strategies on an international level but, it has then been underlined how little consideration is given to the role of the coastal and maritime cultural heritage in the management and planning of those territorial areas (Ounanian et al., 2021). In fact, one of the main challenges inherent in interpreting maritime heritage, is the difficulty of balancing local and international narratives while satisfying both local stakeholders and potential visitors. Regarding these challenges, the Mediterranean Countries occupy a position of particular importance, as the economic dependence on the coastal tourism sector is greater than in other parts of the world.

Specifically, Italy, being in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, is rightfully among those countries that make a living from seaside tourism and witness its consequences.

Purpose of the paper

This research project aims to deeply analyse Maritime Museums by adopting both the visitors and the management perspectives. The main objective is to map all the Mediterranean Museums specific features and the challenges that are emerging today.

Through an exploratory approach, this short paper lays the groundwork for identifying the key variables (for organizational or business models) by which maritime museums face their challenges. In a prospective view, the research would like to foreshadow the identification of the most relevant factors related to performance indices.

In the light of what has been done up to now in the museum field, there is a need for more discussions of how maritime museums are responding to both the opportunities and obstacles deriving from their specific nature made of a strong linkage with the historical past and the territory in which they are located.

Methodology

The sample of our research project is made of all the Maritime Museums that are relevant for Mediterranean maritime traditions.

The research adopts a multimethod approach by conducting three sequential studies.

- Study 1. We elaborate a Euro-Mediterranean maritime museums classification framework.
- Study 2. According to the results of Study 1, a sub-sample of Maritime Museums with specific identified features is selected. Semi-structured interviews are conducted involving key informants (usually the museum directors).
- Study 3. Online secondary data is downloaded from TripAdvisor platform to evaluate the published reviews in the

sample of museums considered in Study 1. The starting point is a preliminary result obtained in previous studies (Rosin, et al., 2023; Zanibellato, et al., 2018) which showed that the more the city is interesting and attractive from the museums offering perspective, the less the maritime museum visit satisfaction is registered. Other hypotheses are designed. By testing these hypothesis, success and critical factors are found adopting the visitors' perspective.

Results

To proceed with the identification of the sample of maritime museums facing the Mediterranean, several countries are considered and to create the list, a number of guides and volumes published between the early 1990s and the early 2000s are used. Table 1 includes the number of museums per considered Mediterranean Country.

Table 1: Considered Countries and number of Maritime Mediterranean museums

Nation

Albania
Cipro
Croatia
France
Greece
Italy
Malta
Montenegro
Portugal
Principality of Monaco

Slovenia

Spain

Turkey

TOTAL SAMPLE

N. of Considered Maritime Museums 1

3
11
19
16
131
1
2
6
2
1
27
1
221

The final sample is made of 221 Mediterranean Maritime Museums.

In order to develop the Euro-Mediterranean maritime museums classification framework, a careful review of the literature regarding museums is performed. The variables considered in our census are divided into four sections:

- I. General information about the museum and its context;
- II. Relationship between the museum, the public and the offered services;
- III. Relationship between the museum and other institutions;
- IV. Museums' social presence;

This short paper presents some preliminary results regarding Study 1 on the sub-set of the 131 Italian Maritime Museums. Data are collected between January and the beginning of March 2023 from the museums' official websites and social platforms.

About the age of the museums the oldest one is Ships Museum Poggi Palace in Bologna, founded in the first half of the 18th century (only 3 before 1900), 11 museums were founded between 1900 and 1950, 46 between 1950 and 2000, while the rest of the museums has been founded in the last 23 years (3 after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). Looking at the kind of management it is interesting to notice that maritime museums are mostly municipal (33.6%), private (26.7%) or use a mixture between private and public management (16%), the few remaining can be military, university, provincial, regional or statal.

One of the main issues when evaluating a maritime museum is its nature of having a highly local orientation or a wider national viewpoint. In the sample 67.9% have a declaredly local orientation while the remaining 32.1% seems to have a more national approach.

To understand the relation between a museum and its visitors it is fundamental to verify if there is a paid ticket or not. Surprisingly in 27.5% of cases there is not an explicit information about ticketing on the official website, while a same percentage is of free of charge museums. Dealing with ticketing we reported differences with respect to specific targets including children, teens, silver, students, museum's partners, disabled people and carers, tourist guides, journalist, and residents. In around half of the sample, no details are provided in tickets costs for specific targets.

In order to measure the level of activeness, we registered the number of temporary/special exhibitions implemented in year 2022 in each museum. In most of the sample there was no specific initiative (98 museums out of 131) while the most active one was Galata Museo del Mare in Genoa with 13 temporary activities run last year.

The fact that a museum can be part of a network can be relevant in influencing the managerial strategy and business model. Data show that around half of the sample (51.1%) is independent while the rest is part of one association.

Since one of the main issues that must be managed by a maritime museum today is turning the old tradition into something still interesting and up to date, we measured the level of virtual initiatives by dividing them into those implemented online (for example from home) and offline (into the museum). The first are included in 25.2% of the sample while the ones into the physical museum are 28.2%. It can then be stated that there is no big difference in percentage while it is interesting to see that among those having virtual solutions 22.8% implement both online and offline ones.

Furthermore 2 museums are entirely developed as virtual tours: MuMa – Virtual Museum of the Sea in Termoli and the Tide Center – Sea Culture in Gallipoli. The rest of the considered museums have an offline offering and among them 6.9% also offers multimedia collections in the museum.

The museums' social presence is measured by considering the following platforms: TripAdvisor (72.9%), Instagram (36.6%), Facebook (62.8%), Twitter (17.8%) and YouTube (17.6%). Only 9 museums have a presence on all the five considered platforms. A deepened analysis is performed on TripAdvisor and the published reviews are considered in terms of tone (positive, neutral, negative) and mean evaluation of the museum. This last data is missing in 42 museums out of 131. Positive mean judgment (greater than or equal to 4 on a scale 1-5) is provided to 86.4% of the sample.

Implications and Originality

This research project contributes to the literature on culture and value creation, by focusing on Mediterranean Maritime Museums, to provide suggestions for managers, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike. More specifically, the research aims to examine value elements in Maritime Museums by considering both the visitors perspective and the management one.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study that applies such a research approach and adopts it in a specific category of museums and in a wide geographic area.

Each maritime museum (given its location in a specific geographic area), to attract its audience, should first tell the story of that area's relationship with the sea from a local perspective. However, if well-conceived, it should never forget to broaden the view, showing how the sea has been over the centuries a ground for the exchange of ideas and people (Davies, 2012), the first highway that has allowed, by connecting the various parts of the globe, the creation of the modern world economic system (Beneki et al., 2012).

With respect to the pursuit of these goals, the main challenge to be faced lies in the great variety of existing maritime museums and their location in geographic areas of highly variable potential, both in terms of the tourist flows and the influence of local history. What emerges, in conclusion, is that the connection between the local and the global, the past and the present, is to help in making museums as institutions able to communicate something to contemporary audiences.

Future Developments

Thinking at future studies, a similar research approach could be: (a) extended to different kinds of museums; (b) adopted also by taking into account the differences between two groups of visitors as tourist (less involved) or local residents (more involved and considered as opposed to tourists) because both are important targets for museums. Such research would provide further insight into how any category of museum could better adapt its offerings to their respective marketing targets according to today's actual challenges.

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