

Through the Public's Lens: Are Museums Active Members of Society? An Investigation During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Abstract Traditionally, museums have cultural and educational roles. Increasingly, however, museums are also assuming a social role in engaging with visitors and communities and strengthening social involvement coherently given the changing expectations of the public. Museums have become participatory organisations that contribute to the well-being of society. Considering the global health challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter investigates the way museums have responded to support their communities, as well as the public's perception of museums' civic profile. An online survey was applied in Italy, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova to identify the dimensions of the activity of museums regarding how the support offered by museums is visible and appreciated. The study shows that museums reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, developing online and digital sources to adapt and deliver their offers, to have a voice within society. Generally speaking, it seems that the public does not pay much attention to museums concerned in contemporary societal debates. Understanding the public image of museums helps museums redesign their organisation and activities to meet the expectations of contemporary audiences coherently, given the recent societal developments. This investigation is among the first to highlight the way museums have assumed an activist role, providing support to the wider public, by reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Museums' public perception · Museums' activist and social role · Museums as communities

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1 Introduction

Contemporary museums have a social role (Knell 2019) within communities (Watson 2007) and society overall (Janes and Sandell 2019), promoting cultural heritage by involving wider audiences in cultural production and awareness of social justice and inclusion, thus strengthening participation and activism, which can enhance the wealth of communities (Black 2005; Janes and Sandell 2019). As an active part of the community, museums stress participation dealing both with the cultural environment and social themes that concern the evolution of communities within society (Simon 2010; Watson 2007; Janes and Sandell 2019).

Museums build relationships and collaborative processes within the community, thus preserving and providing information and knowledge regarding cultural heritage that refers to the history, values, and traditions of a community (Karp 1992; Watson 2007).

Contemporary museums involve the communities by managing and studying heritage together with the public, connecting with the social and political environment in which they are active. They are powerful voices and take a stand against injustice and oppression, contributing to community values becoming activists to support the communities to which they cater, rather than only offering culture.

Activist museums, concerned both with heritage and the existence of a better society, contribute to creating dialogue, promoting ideas, and creating networks to support continuous social and civic involvement. Museums evolve, playing a social role in society, and focusing on culture as well as education and social activism (Emery 2001; Sandell 2003; Black 2005), thus strengthening the relationships between themselves and the community (Simon 2010), attracting visitors to museum offers and enhancing said visitors' experience (Packer and Ballantyne 2002). Museums develop better relationships with and within communities, enabling personal and individual contributions from users of museum collections and heritage because "museums want to have a greater role in our changing society, they must do more than store and present our collective works, they must find a way to make personal connections" (Kopke 2011, p. 411).

The changing practices of museums have led to both new and more significant experiences and expectations, but even to challenges for the museums' audiences. The public, especially those more interested in and connected to the cultural and social environments, requires museums to be both participative and active in society. Museums have begun to be evaluated not only in terms of collections but also concerning their involvement in society. Bearing this in mind, the present chapter, in accordance with the main objective of the research, tries to chart how museums are seen by the larger public as active members in the society. The main objective of the research is to map how the public perceives museums as active members of society. This is achieved by taking part in discussions on the main concern of contemporary society. Understanding the public's perceptions would help museum managers both better design their activity and communicate with their communities.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to a new *coronavirus*, led to global health emergency, museums and cultural institutions being forced to stop onsite visits and adopt online and digital strategies (Agostino et al. 2020) to strengthen relationships with audiences to create community engagement (Tully 2020) and bring communities together (Potts 2020) while rediscovering a way to debate questions about the values of society (Christiansen 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative overall impact on society, organisations, and individuals. The influences are not only connected to health but also economic and social frameworks. Museums, which depend on their visitors, are among the organisations which have been very hard hit. The managerial efforts to adapt to the new situation are significant. Additionally, as per the new framework, pictured above, the museums are expected to be voices supporting the communities as they go through these troubled times. Therefore, we also aim to investigate how the general audience perceives the extent to which museums have been helping society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To reach our goals, we developed an investigation of the way museums in Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Italy are perceived by the wider public, in terms of activism and contribution during the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey reveals the degree to which museums are considered participatory. Understanding the public image of museums would help managers, curators, educators, and other museum professionals to better design their activity, and adapt to the expectations of the contemporary audience as well as the developments of present-day society.

The present chapter is structured in the following way. After the introduction, museums are presented as people-centred and community-oriented organisations that are embedded within society and which move from participation to activism. In the third section, the theme of museums dealing with engaging visitors' experience and perception is elucidated. In the fourth section, a documental analysis using indirect data sources presents how the museums are coping with the pandemic and, still engaging with their public. The fifth section investigates the public's perception of the museum as a social and proactive agent within society, both generally and specifically, in the times of COVID-19. Finally, conclusions and discussions are outlined.

2 Towards People-Centred and Community-Oriented Museums Embedded Within Society: From Participation to Activism

Production-centred/audience-driven museums support two-way communication, participatory and dialogic interaction; they also contribute to collective expertise using technology to construct a *shared* authority on cultural heritage contents through social media for networking and collaboration between the museum and the public users (Bonacini 2012; Rentschler 2007; Kelly 2010), thus driving the

audience, as an active agent, to become the community (Karp 1992). As dynamic educational, cultural, and social-engagement locations and cultural malls (Zbucea 2015), museums as organisations (Bagdadli 1997) are embedded within the *milieu* of their communities (Janes and Sandell 2019) and develop a community service strategy to support participation involving new audiences (Kotler and Kotler 2007), thus providing a context and space which can bring the past into the present for discussion, critique, and contestation (Lord 2006).

As people-oriented and visitor-centred organisations serving a changing society (Bagdadli 1997; Simon 2010; Falk 2016; Rentschler 2007), museums empower the community, thus contributing to its development and engaging the public in value identification and creation to build the widest possible constituency for ongoing museum support (Scott 2010). Museums enable visitors to contribute their ideas and discuss what they see and perceive during their visit; these visitors can also share knowledge, experience and conversations, thus developing effective relationships with their stakeholders within communities, which build the museums into a community that engages with audiences (Watson 2007).

As civic spaces and agents of social change museums provide an informed debate (Casey 2007) and contribute to social value creation by engaging the community in preserving their knowledge, identity, memory, values, and traditions (Burton and Scott 2007). As sites for critical reflection on the past and the preservation of truth and rights, (Hooper-Greenhill 1995), museums contribute to strengthening the participation and activism of people, groups, and communities, thus giving voice to their audience, and dealing with global challenges that concern society in terms of ethical behaviours, social injustice, and inequality (Sandell 2007).

As drivers of social change, inclusion, regeneration, and justice (Sandell 1998), museums promote activism, mobilising people to co-generate value by relying on a shared authority regarding cultural heritage (Legget 2018) and using collections to support and enable communities to feel a sense of place and control over their cultural heritage (Mears and Modest 2013) through “collaborative participatory ways of working that build relationships and strengthen networks well beyond the museum” (Janes and Sandell 2019, p. 9).

In the twenty-first century, museums involve the community by challenging social inequality, marginalisation, and injustice, thus making people sensitive to environmental questions and opposed to pollution practices. The role of an activist museum is to “act as a catalyst for social regeneration and as a vehicle for empowerment with specific *communities* and also contribute towards the creation of more equitable *societies*” (Sandell 2002, p. 4).

Museums develop effective relationships with communities within society by enhancing those communities (Watson 2007) to develop the potential offered by the collections and exhibitions to “construct more inclusive, equitable and respectful societies” (Sandell 2002, p. 4) increasing social justice (Mears and Modest 2013) and creating inclusive environments which are opposed to social exclusion (Taylor 2017).

As agents of social inclusion, museums promote social responsibility and combat social inequality and exclusion highlighting the challenges of global problems and

matters the society is dealing with (Sandell 1998). Museums “must consider their impact on society and seek to shape that impact through practice that is based on contemporary values and a commitment to social equality” (Sandell 2007, p. 110), fostering democratic engagement through participation in museums mobilising local cultural and social activism (Lynch 2011).

3 Museums Dealing with Visitors' Experience and Perception

Traditionally, a museum is defined as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of education, study and enjoyment” as stated by the 22nd General Assembly of the International Council of Museums in Vienna, Austria, on August 24, 2007. Nowadays, museums play a social role and contribute to local development and well-being of communities (Brown and Mairesse 2018), strengthening the community building in an interactive and experiential framework and providing “a community space where citizens can share their objects and their stories” (Kopke 2011, p. 399).

As already discussed, museums are changing, becoming more audiences-oriented and people-based institutions where people can enjoy and learn from collections that are placed in a trust for society (Rentschler 2007). Thereby, visitors perceive museums as user-friendly and welcoming institutions that democratise cultural heritage contents, promoting *edutainment* as a blend of education and entertainment (Addis 2005) for an improved and co-produced museum experience, where the individual interprets the message in the interaction. Indeed, all these have a positive impact on visitors' experience, as well as the perceived authenticity of the experience (Komarac et al. 2020). Museums can improve visitors' experience and provide community service to address the needs of the audiences, while also cultivating new visitors (Kotler and Kotler 2007). Museums create exhibitions to satisfy a diverse range of leisure-related goals following a visitor-centred perspective (Falk 2016) because “people visit museums in order to satisfy a suite of self-related reasons, reasons associated with the relationship between their own roles and needs and the affordances they perceived the museum possessed” (Falk 2016, pp. 359–360). Museums must also pay attention to attracting new audiences because the ways visitors and non-visitors perceive a museum influences their decision to visit, or not visit, said museum (Stylianou-Lambert 2009). Museums aiming to strengthen the authenticity of the visitor experience have to understand visitors' preparedness to participate in their visitor experience and enable visitors to co-create their experiences in a meaningful way (Hede et al. 2014). Museums must take into consideration both the perceived values of museum experiences and the visitors' mindfulness (Kim Lian Chan 2009). Museums provide benefits and restoration for visitors in terms of well-being as they leave the museum and return to everyday life

(Packer 2008). This is because visitors are expected to live museum experiences so as to improve learning, and thus they perceive the museum as a place where important information is presented in an interesting way (Packer and Ballantyne 2002).

Museums need to offer a context to meet the needs of a broader audience and allow people to live a global experience (leisure, culture, education, and social interaction) (Brida et al. 2016b) supporting increased loyalty and involvement of the visitors in the future (Antón et al. 2018), while also promoting inclusion in the museum's community (Zbucea 2015) and enabling value to be co-created and personalised experiences to be had, thus increasing the general appeal of museums. Indeed, this could be critical in the case of young people (Nowacki and Kruczek 2020; Manna and Palumbo 2018) and probably of those generally not so interested in museums and culture.

As forums, museums create tailored experiences for visitors who appreciate how the museum becomes a platform and a place where they can talk and engage in discussions. These visitors also expect a societal relevance and agency from museums so that they can transform their views, opinions, and concerns into higher conversations (Bandelli and Konijn 2015).

4 Museums Engaging Visitors and Involving the Community in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis

With a rising global health emergency due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, museums as cultural institutions ceased onsite visits, facing a dramatic long-term decrease of income. The museums then increased and relaunched their online presence and digital and audience-oriented strategy to ascertain what people were looking for from cultural institutions. Indeed, the museums achieved this by providing accessible information and materials, strengthening participatory initiatives and conversations through focusing on the community (Potts 2020), and learning to become a space for reflection and meditation (Verdon 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic health emergency crisis has accelerated digital transformation and stressed the need for people-centred museums that support interaction and participation engaging visitors in active co-production and sharing of cultural contents. The museums have created a new business model by strengthening social value and the potential for innovation with communities in post-pandemic society. The COVID-19 pandemic has driven museums to strengthen their relationships with the public, creating richer digital presentations of collections and exhibitions by reaching broader audiences and reinforcing the social aspect of the museum experience by transforming lives through culture (Potts 2020).

Since museums were forced to briefly stop providing onsite services, they have started to use, with increased frequency, digital technologies and social media for

public service delivery online to retain user engagement and ensure that said users have a voice and that the quality of the online experience is high (Agostino et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, digital tools have been helping to support community-driven museums that have increasingly developed public engagement to maintain their relationship with users who are expected to consolidate online experiences through in-person visits, which will help museums to counteract financial threats “proving their social value to each other, as well as their communities, beyond anything seen before” (Tully 2020, p. 235).

Museums across Europe closed for visitation in March 2020 for approximately 2 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the museums in Italy were closed by March 8, 2020, while those in Romania closed on March 11, 2020. This inflicted not only a significant negative financial impact but also affected the public missions of museums. To continue to educate and contribute to the cultural development of their communities, and to facilitate access to collections, many museums, all around the world, including in Italy and Romania, enhanced their online communication and developed their online activity, especially on social media. We observe that being active in the times of the pandemic is related to the survival of museums since certain local authorities which finance museums believe that, without visitors, museums will lose their significance and utility; there are several countries where all museum employees have been temporarily fired to save funds which will instead be used to fight the pandemic. Arguments related to the need to preserve and protect heritage, as well as to continue to research collections seem to be not so relevant for some local authorities in countries such as Romania and possibly others.

We will briefly present the approaches used by museums in Romania to adapt to the new situation. A similar evolution has also been registered in other countries. Adapting the online facility has not been simple, since no specific funding was previously considered and the process had to be designed and implemented in a few weeks. Therefore, the approach chosen by museums, at least in the first month following the “shutdown”, was to promote and adapt materials they already had (virtual tours, working materials used for educational programs with children were presented online to be downloaded and used at home, etc.). Nevertheless, some museums developed completely new educational programs. For instance, the Bucharest Municipality Museum started 3 weekly online educational programs for children at the beginning of April: a weekly workshop on cartoons developed around the museum and its collections, a weekly interdisciplinary program on “stories and experiments” starting from collections and books, as well as a more traditional colouring program which also highlights the appeal of the museum’s art collection. Another example of adaptation is the transfer of the “Reading corner” from the National Museum of Maps and Old Book in Bucharest to YouTube, while also offering additional resources for families. The National Museum of the Romanian Literature is encouraging children (but not only) to read poems and post the records online. Many Romanian museums have transferred their children-focused education to the internet, all of which are free of charge. There are also a few cases that target an adult audience. Ipotesti Museum, a memorial house dedicated to Mihai Eminescu, the most praised Romanian poet, and located in a remote village, launched the



Fig. 1 Easter FB posters of the Antipa Museum in Bucharest, part of a #stayhome campaign

project #stayathomeandtellstories. Also, an innovative example would be the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant which collects from the wider public personal stories and experiences related to old and dear objects, developing a “museum at home” (<https://arhiva.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/jurnal/particular>).

The list of Romanian museums that took their educational and cultural activities online is rather long. Offering online education in this period is helping teachers but especially parents to educate their children at home. Nevertheless, there exist only a few museums that are directly addressing the negative impact of the pandemic and trying to help their audience cope with these times in a more significant way. The National Art Museum of Romania launched an original online guide regarding how to protect against the threat of the virus, illustrated with paintings from the museum’s collections. Moreover, the Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural History launched a #stayhome campaign, necessary considering that part of Romanian society feels that the restriction of movement is not needed and there are debates on how Easter should be celebrated in a period of social distancing (see Fig. 1). Further, the Museum of Visual Art from Galati launched a form of public therapy through an art challenge—inspired by the Italian movement *Andrà tutto bene!*. A more consistent campaign to stimulate proper attitude and behaviour in times of pandemic was proposed by the National Museum of Romanian History (Fig. 2).

In Italy, a group of children’s museums (Children’s Museum Verona, MUBA—the Museum of Children from Milano, Explora—the Museum of Children from Roma, La Città dei Bambini e dei Ragazzi in Genoa) with the support of several public bodies, developed a “Galactic Guide for Coronavirus for Curious Children” (Fig. 3). In Italy, as in other countries, museums went online as fast as possible and adapted their discourse to the context while also preparing for a long-term “cultural resistance”. For instance, their messages contained words such as virus, contagion, etc. (see Fig. 4).

At the beginning of April 2020, the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO) (<https://www.ne-mo.org/>) published the first systematic analysis of how museums are adapting to the pandemic. The sample consisted of 650 museums in



Fig. 2 A selection of the visuals of the National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest, part of a #stayhome campaign based on images from the museum's archives, developed on Facebook and Instagram

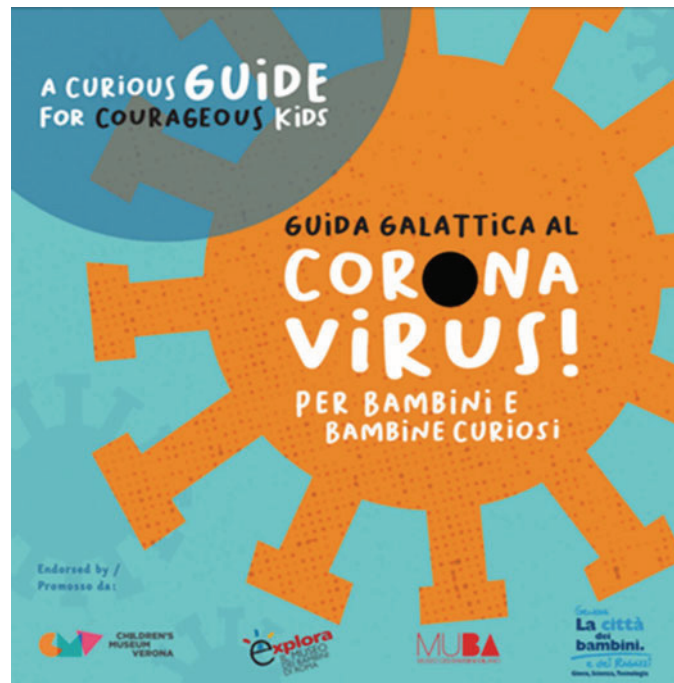


Fig. 3 The cover of a museum-developed Coronavirus guide for children

41 countries. The closure of the museums led to a decrease of around 75% in the funding for museums, while the lending and borrowing activities stopped, most important future exhibitions were postponed, as well as the long-term investments in infrastructure development. Almost two-thirds of the museums ceased their volunteer programmes, and approximately half terminated their contracts with freelancers. Most of the museums had increased their online presence, and almost 14% of them allocated additional funds for online activities, while more than 30% changed staff's responsibilities, making them more online-focused. In a follow up report on the



Fig. 4 A sample of messages developed by the Italian museums during the pandemic in March 2020 (Zardini Lacedelli 2020)

pandemic, in January 2021, NEMO (2021) documented that after seven months from the beginning of the pandemics 70% of the museums part of the survey (600 museums from 48 countries) did not reopen and did not have definite plans for this. After reopening, significant drops in the visitation figures have been reported, of even more than 75% in the case of 20% of the respondents. Museums also benefited from support - two-thirds declaring they had received emergency government support from national, regional or local level. Despite this gloomy situation, with significant on museums' budgets, only about half of the respondents looked for alternative founding. This figures museums' budgets, only about half of the respondents looked for alternative founding. This figures suggest a less flexible management, lack of initiative and innovative approaches for pressing managerial and financial aspects. More flexibility was documented in the case of online public activities - for 40% of museum the staff received new responsibilities related to the online activity of the museum. Most of the large museums increased their digital capacity, while less than half of the smaller museums could manage this.

NEMO also offered examples of digital initiatives undertaken in March 2020. Some museums proved very innovative and agile moving online in a significant way. Even during the pandemic, and with no onsite visits, museums continued to focus on their missions in various ways. They offered online educational programs

and increased Web-based access to collections. Some museums have started documenting the corona pandemic for future research and understanding (Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Italy, Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Germany, Minnen in Sweden, as well as other museums in the US, Denmark, Slovenia, etc.—see also Abend 2020; Cascone 2020; Passy 2020), or donating materials to hospitals (Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, MOMA in the US, the National Museum of Finland, and several museums in the UK). Another example of solidarity and support is the campaign *#ARTWORKS 2.0 per Brescia* developed by the Brescia Musei Foundation. This is an innovative digital project which aims to generate funding for the city by presenting 3D animation of Brescian heritage (<https://www.bresciamusei.com/>). Another significant involvement of museums is the case of the Smithsonian in the US. It offers updates and provides access to relevant and correct information on the pandemic and the virus (Sholts 2020).

A new museum was launched on Instagram in March 2020 by three advertisers from Barcelona, Spain: The Covid Art Museum. It presents various artistic visions of how life and even values have changed during the pandemic (Latorre 2020).

Since museums have been gravely affected by the pandemic, besides trying to continue serving online their audience, they are increasingly concerned about their survival after the pandemic. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for instance, has launched a lobbying campaign entitled *#CongressSaveCulture*. The Romanian Network of Museums is also holding active discussions with the Parliament, the Government, and other public bodies regarding the initiation of measures for supporting, in a significant way, cultural organizations, which are among the most affected parties. Various professional associations have been offering support and resources to cope with the pandemic disruption. Added to this, certain initiatives are debating the future of museums and looking for practical approaches to be more effective and inclusive, even in difficult times, such as pandemic crises. An example in this regard is an initiative by Musei Civici Fiorentini which has been launched on Instagram and other social media platforms every week there are live debates on redefining museums (Firenze Today 2020).

Since museums face many difficulties, in some countries public and/or private schemes of support have been proposed. For instance, in the UK and the US, special lines of funding have been instated. In Italy, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism initiated a weekly campaign to raise the visibility of interest in, but also compassion towards museums (or tourism objectives and places), to show that culture is still relevant. The campaign, called *#ArtYouReady?*, consisted of a digital flashmob initiated in March (Agostino et al. 2020). Other forms of public support emerged as crowdfunding campaigns, auctions for the benefit of museums, or artists-lead initiatives (see for instance Cook 2020; Kendall Adams 2020; Smee 2020; Valentine 2020). The great and unexpected financial toll of the pandemic determined some museums to sell part of their collections, as in the case of the Brooklyn Museum (Pogrebin 2020).

Nevertheless, some museums tried to contribute directly to ease the impact of COVID on society, on the medical system or on the artists—who have been also hardly hit by the pandemic. For instance, some museums donated to hospitals

medical supplies (Harper 2020). Other museums bought arts or initiated projects to support the local artists. Such is the case, for instance, of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Romania—see RFI 2020), or the Baltimore Museum of Art (see Artforum 2020).

Some museums aimed, besides developing their audiences and remaining relevant in times of COVID-19, to support the entire sector in coping during the pandemic. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Arts proposed #MuseumCrushModay blog entries every Monday to show support for museums around the globe (Christiansen 2020). Some other museums followed suit, informing on other museums' initiatives or challenges, but not in a systematic way. For instance, in Romania, this was the case for the Romanian National Museum of Art and the National Museums of Maps and Old Books.

Some museums tried to be empathic with their visitors, while also attempting to present their collections and offer support through culture. An example in this regard is the short-films cycle entitled “Antico Presente” posted on Facebook by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, which explores in the context of the famous Neapolitan museum quite common emotions the public face today: desire, fear, inspiration, etc. (Culturefor 2020).

5 The Public's Perception of Museums as Active Members of Society in Italy and Romania

5.1 Methodology

The main aim of the present study is to map how the general public perceives the way museums are active in addressing the main concerns of contemporary society and in contributing to the public discussion on topics such as minorities, migration, global warming, social inclusion, and education. We focused on those issues based on the fact that they represent concerns held by contemporary European society, and are also hot topics in media across Europe.

Global warming has now been a public concern for several years in Europe and conversations on social media are continually increasing (Ellis 2019), which gives rise to the idea that museums have a reasonable amount of time to approach—if they choose to do so—this topic in an adequate manner, as demonstrated by the remarkable initiative of the Natural History Museum (Stephens 2020). Migration and its consequences are felt daily by large portions of Italian, Romanian, and Moldavian societies. However, this occurs differently in each country, with Italy being a country of destinations for economic migrants coming from Eastern European countries as well as migrants from African countries or war zones in the Middle East (Varella 2020). Both Romania (OECD 2019) and the Republic of Moldova are facing many social and economic consequences related to an exodus of the workforce, comprising both high skilled and low skilled labour. We see social inclusion and minorities

as being intimately interconnected with the issue of migration, as well as being high on the European agenda (Atkinson et al. 2017). Education is another aspect that is critical for the development of society. Educated citizens contribute to the sustainable development of their communities. At the same time, an increased number of voices are discussing the need to change the education paradigm. Therefore, we chose to include education as an independent sub-dimension in our study.

Special attention is given to the way museums are perceived as reacting in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period of great uncertainty and concern for many European countries, especially Italy. Romania, although less hit by the virus at the time of the current research, reacted strongly from the first signs of the pandemic.

In the second half of March 2020, we conducted an online survey using a convenience sample method. We targeted respondents from three countries: Italy, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova. While aware that neither Western Europe nor Eastern Europe are compact blocks and, therefore, differences within their respective nations and societies are considerable, our intention was, nevertheless to come with a comparative perspective on people's perceptions of museums and their degree of connection to topics of interest across society. Italy might be considered a representative of Western Europe, while Romania is an example of Eastern Europe, and the Republic of Moldova, a partner country, is representative of the non-EU European countries.

In terms of cultural profile, considering the six dimensions of national culture, there are strong similarities between Romania and the Republic of Moldova (which is a Romanian-speaking country, with a long shared history). Between Romania and Italy are large differences, especially in terms of power distance, individualism, and masculinity (Hofstede Insights). In terms of museums and cultural infrastructure, there exist essential differences between the three countries, with Italy presenting the best situation. Concerning cultural consumption, including interest for museums, Romania shows some of the lowest figures in the EU, while Italy is close to the EU average (EC 2017; Eurostat 2016). In terms of attitude towards cultural heritage and its importance, Italy and Romania present similar scores, with figures slightly higher in the case of Romanians (EC 2017, p. 32).

We also included a comparison between the perception of museums abroad and that of museums at home. This allows for a glimpse into the preferences of visitors and how satisfied museum-goers are with their experience since the museum image is connected to the level of satisfaction and gives a competitive advantage. It also suggests a wider view of the satisfaction experienced in museums at home compared to museums abroad, since it is influenced by the overall image (Moreno Gil and Ritchie 2009).

We were aware that our prospective respondents must have been experiencing a considerable degree of screen-fatigue induced by many factors, including an increased number of solicitations to participate in all kinds of pandemic-related online surveys. Therefore, we proposed an 11-items, easy to fill-in questionnaire, with simple questions that, in our opinion, did not require a lot of effort to process. At the beginning of the form, we included a paragraph describing the kinds of activities a museum organises when it chooses to become involved in the current

Table 1 Structure of the initial sample

Country	Respondents working within a museum	Lay respondents
Italy	5	207
Romania	47	220
The Republic of Moldova	10	59

concerns of a community or the society at large. To further ensure a broad panel of respondents, we translated the questionnaire into Romanian and Italian respectively.

The survey was promoted on Facebook (mainly through sharing in various Facebook groups but also by being promoted via Facebook ads with texts addressing a wide audience, and not only those interested in culture/museums). It is worth noting that the number of responses obtained as a result of the Facebook ads was significantly higher in Italy than in Romania. Besides, the Facebook ads proved to be almost ineffective in the case of Romania and the Republic of Moldova. They were, therefore, abandoned as a method for increasing the rate of response. The lowest rate of responses was registered for questionnaires coming from the Republic of Moldova ($N = 69$). In Romania, the total number of valid questionnaires was 267, while in Italy it was 212 (Table 1).

Our initial intention was to investigate the concepts from a broader perspective, by also looking into how museum professionals are considering the notion of participation—when applied to their field of activity. As a comparatively higher number of respondents were affiliated with museums in Romania than in Italy (47 and 5), we decided to eliminate their responses. Finally, for the current analysis, we took into consideration only answers coming from people that were not affiliated to a museum in a professional capacity.

5.2 Respondents Profile: A Comprehensive View

The disparity between the number of female and male respondents was higher for the Romanian respondents ($M = 33.8\%$, $F = 66.2\%$) and Moldovian ($M = 35.6$ and $F = 64.4$) respondents when compared to the Italians ($M = 50.2\%$, $F = 49.8\%$).

Regarding the distribution of respondents by age group, the best-represented category for the Italian respondents was in people aged 35–50 years (37.7%), while for Romania the highest number of questionnaires was equally filled in by people under 25 and by people aged 35–50 (32.%). Respondents in the Republic of Moldova aged 35–50 were also the best-represented category, with a higher percentage than in Romania and Italy (50.8). The lowest number of respondents by age group for Romanian respondents was registered within the category of senior citizens (over 61 years old, 2.3%), and the situation was the same in the Republic of Moldova (6.8%). However, the Italian senior citizens, although less numerous than other age groups, accounted for 14% of valid responses, which is approximately 4 times higher than the number of questionnaires filled in by older people in

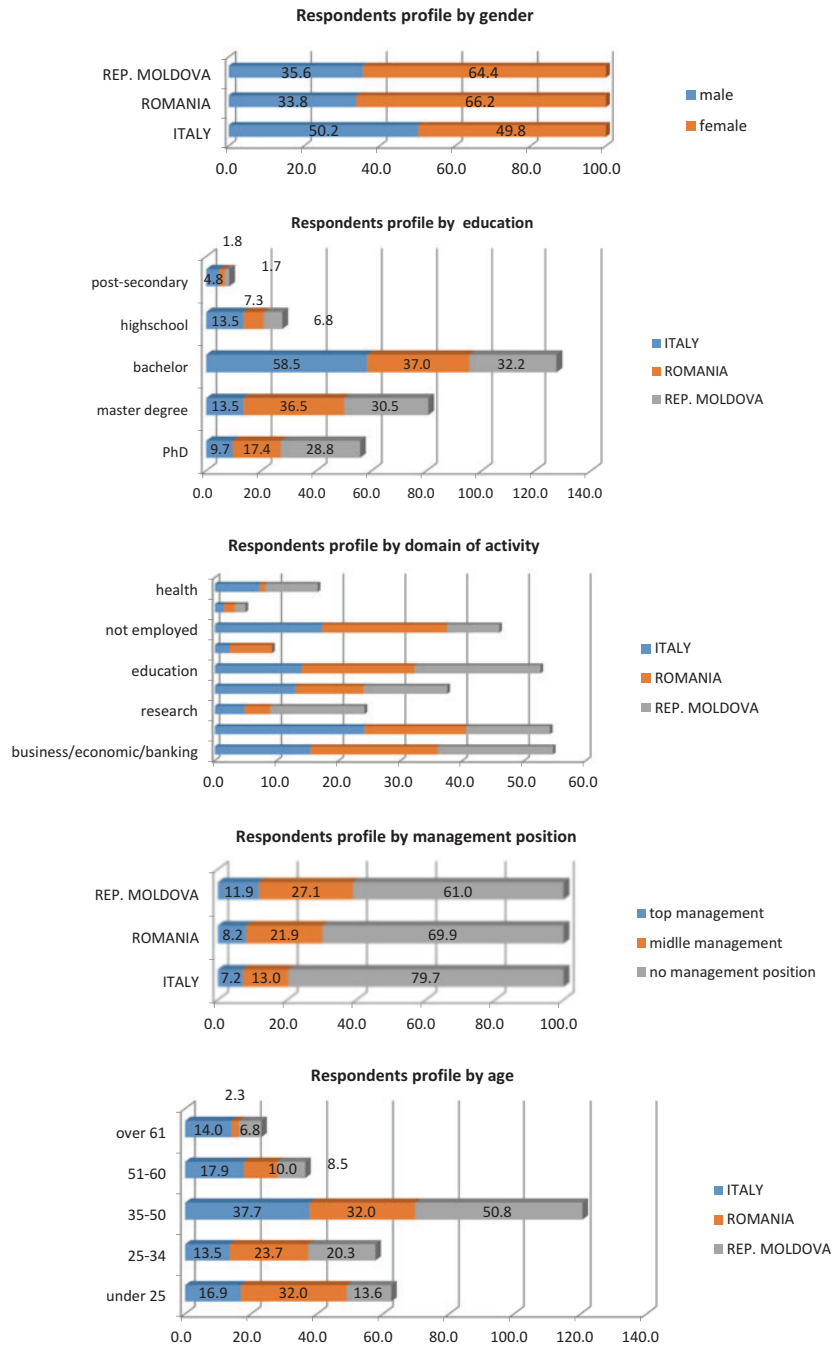


Fig. 5 Respondents' profile

Romania. Another notable disparity between the two samples was registered when it came to young adults (people aged 25–34 years old): the Italian sample contained only 13.5%, while the Romanian sample contained 23.7%.

When it came to formal education, the highest differences between respondents in Romania and the Republic of Moldova on the one hand and Italy on the other hand were registered at both “ends” of the scale, as it can be easily observed in the charts below (Fig. 5). The distribution of respondents by sector of activity was quite similar, with two notable exceptions: more people filling in the questionnaire in Italy were employed in the health sector than in Romania (0.9 vs. 7.2%) and, on the other hand, more people working in education and IT were found among respondents in Romanian (6.8%) than Italy (2.4%), and none in Moldova. The percentage of respondents with managerial positions also varies, with Italy having the lowest rate and the Republic of Moldova the highest.

Although the sample was diverse, respondents were not representative of their societies, rather reflecting the position of the more educated and culturally-active segments, as presented below.

5.3 Visiting Museums and Expressing Interest in Society Matters

Exploring people’s perceptions of how museums are participating in current conversations related to what matters in society is ultimately an inquiry into people’s expectations of museums. Nowadays, museums are increasingly open to wider audiences: they have enlarged the universe of “legitimate” exhibition topics and they approach “classical” subjects in a fresh manner. However, the way visitors or prospective visitors are perceiving all of these efforts is at the crossroads between how they see the role of a museum within contemporary society/the community and how they see themselves as participants to both cultural events and societal concerns.

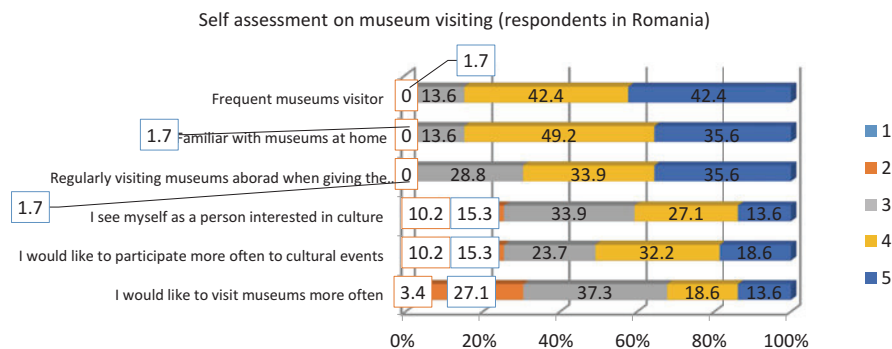


Fig. 6 Self-assessment of museum visiting—Romanian respondents

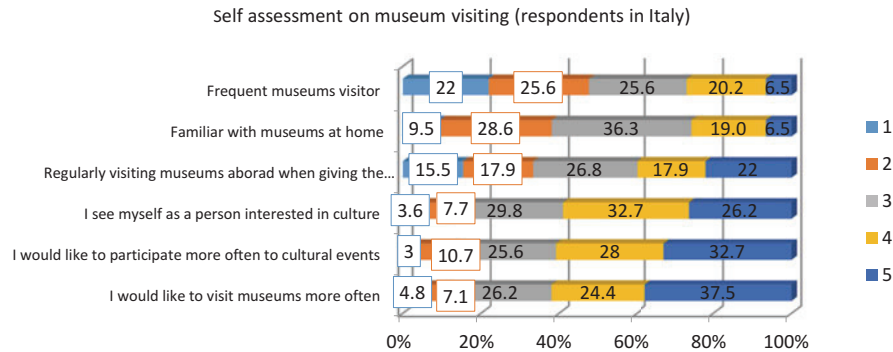


Fig. 7 Self-assessment of museum visiting—Italian respondents

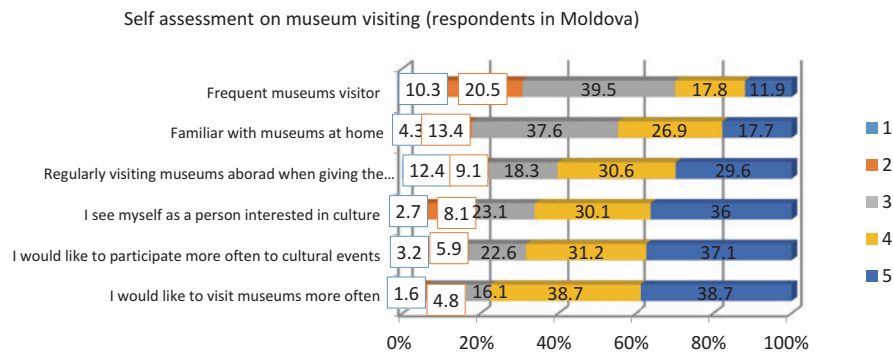


Fig. 8 Self-assessment of museum visiting—respondents from the Republic of Moldova

Therefore, to address our main research question, we devised two sets of questions that we will discuss below.

The first battery of questions aimed to draw a self-portrait of our respondents, by exploring how they see themselves along the general lines of “museum-goers” as well as regarding their interest in participation in cultural activities. This profile helped us to understand better their attitude towards museums and their level of expectation.

The respondents were asked to assess with grades from 1 to 5 (*To what extent do you consider that . . . 1 = no; 5 = to a very high degree*) a series of 5 affirmations that would characterise their perceived behaviour and their attitude towards cultural events (including visiting museums at home and abroad). We intended to explore the perceived exposure of our respondents to current exhibitions and recent cultural events, as well as the general overview of their role as participants in cultural events (Fig. 6 for Romanian respondents, Fig. 7 for Italian respondents, and Fig. 8 for the respondents from the Republic of Moldova).

When it came to their perceived behaviour, the Romanian respondents felt that they are more inclined to visit museums while being abroad than when in their own

Table 2 Main statistics

	Italy		Romania		Republic of Moldova	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
I would like to visit museums more often	2.75	1.1567	3.078	1.240	3.12	1.068
I would like to participate more often in cultural events	2.91	1.0716	3.457	1.062	3.34	1.240
I see myself as a person interested in culture	3.21	1.2936	3.635	1.349	3.19	1.167
Regularly visiting museums abroad, when given the opportunity	3.76	1.0818	3.936	1.055	4.03	0.850
Familiar with museums in Italy	3.81	1.0791	3.973	1.111	4.19	0.730
Frequent museums visitor	3.87	0.9418	4.110	1.118	4.25	0.756

country: only 29.73% and 44.62% respectively saw themselves as “frequent museum-goers” and quite “familiar with museums in Romania”—as opposed to almost 60% who felt that they are regularly visiting museums abroad (grades 4 and 5 on the 5 points ascending scale for assessing behaviour related to museum visiting—see Figs. 1 and 2). In addition, the aspirational self-portrait drew a picture whereby 65% of respondents considered themselves interested in culture and cultural participation. Last, but not least, 77.42% of people assessed gave 4 and 5 out of 5 points for the affirmation: “I would like to visit museums more often”—which seems to indicate a gap between behavior and aspiration.

A similar situation was found in the Italian sample, although the extent to which respondents from Italy considered themselves familiar with museums from home was less than for their Romanian counterparts (26.8% frequent visitors and significantly smaller at 25.6% for being “familiar with museums in Italy”). When it came to aspirations related to cultural consumption, the Italians were slightly more moderate: only 60.7% (Italy) and 61.9% (Romania) wished they had more time for cultural participation. (see Fig. 7).

For the respondents in the Republic of Moldova (see Fig. 8), a larger portion considered themselves frequent museum visitors, and more culturally involved and concerned. Nevertheless, 85% stated that they would like to visit museums more often, to a wider degree than in the other two countries. The only item where they scored lower than the Italian or Romanian respondents was related to visiting museums abroad.

To obtain an overall idea of how respondents from Italy, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova see themselves as active museum-goers, we also calculated the mean (see Table 2).

The other two affirmations aimed to examine the (perceived) level of one’s civic participation. We have explored perceptions related to self-representation as an *active citizen*, to further consider a possible correlation between paying attention to societal concerns and interest in exhibitions on current “hot” topics on the global agenda. Therefore, respondents were asked, like in the previous example, to assess on a Likert scale (from 1 to 5) to what extent they considered that the affirmations: “I

Table 3 Correlations between self-assessment of respondents as active citizens and museum participation in conversations relevant for society. Respondents from the Republic of Moldova

		Assessment of museum participation at home	Assessment of museum participation abroad	Self-assessment regarding interest in matters of society	Self-assessment regarding being an active citizen
Assessment of museum participation at home	Pearson correlation	1	0.220	0.027	0.066
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.121	0.840	0.614
	<i>N</i>		51	60	60
Assessment of museum participation abroad	Pearson correlation		1	0.203	-0.060
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.154	0.676
	<i>N</i>			51	51
Self-assessment regarding interest in matters of society	Pearson correlation			1	0.613**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				0.000
	<i>N</i>				60
Self-assessment regarding being an active citizen	Pearson correlation				1
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	<i>N</i>				

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

am paying attention to what is happening in society” and, respectively, “I am an active citizen” suits them. As shown in the tables below (Tables 3, 4, and 5), there are several significant correlations between respondents’ assessment of their interest in matters of society and the way they perceived museums as being involved in conversations that are relevant for society. For respondents from the Republic of Moldova, there is no significant correlation between their perception of museums being participative institutions and the perception of their civic engagement (Table 3). However, for respondents in Italy and Romania, there are several significant correlations between how people are seeing museums as being participative and how they see themselves as active citizens.

Table 4 shows that the more respondents in Italy consider museums at home to be participative, the more they consider museums abroad to also be participative (Pearson correlation: 0.482 at 0.01 level). In addition, a high perceived level of participation when assessing museums abroad implies a higher self-appreciation when it comes to self-assessment regarding features such as “active citizen” and “paying attention to what is happening in society” (Table 4 shows a low significant correlation at 0.318 and 0.275 respectively). Table 5 presents the same types of

Table 4 Correlations between self-assessment of respondents as active citizens and museum participation in conversations relevant for society. Respondents from Italy

		Assessment of museum participation at home	Assessment of museum participation abroad	Self-assessment about interest in matters of society	Self-assessment about being an active citizen
Assessment of museum participation at home	Pearson correlation	1	0.482**	0.136	0.096
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.054	0.176
	N		184	202	202
Assessment of museum participation abroad	Pearson correlation		1	0.318**	0.275**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	0.000
	N			184	184
Self-assessment regarding interest in matters of society	Pearson correlation			1	0.630**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				0.000
	N				207
Self-assessment regarding being an active citizen	Pearson correlation				1
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N				

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

correlations for respondents in Romania, but at other values. To sum up, there is a significant (although low) correlation between how respondents see museums abroad and their involvement in conversations relevant to society, and how they see themselves as citizens interested in matters of society. The more they think about themselves as “active citizens”, the more they tend to consider museums abroad as equally involved with topics which are important for society. When it comes to museums at home, there is no such correlation, in none of the categories of respondents (Moldova, Italy, Romania). This finding is consistent with the rest of the study, as museums at home are constantly receiving “lower grades” compared to their counterparts from abroad when they are evaluated in terms of participation in conversations relevant to society.

The second set of questions focused on uncovering whether respondents associate with museum participation with specific themes and revealing their perception of the performances of museums at home vs. museums abroad (Table 6). The themes explored were assessed by respondents against an evaluation scale with 5 degrees, where 1 was the lowest grade and 5 the highest. We looked into topics on the European agenda (e.g. migration, education) on specific topics such as minorities but

Table 5 Correlations between self-assessment of respondents as active citizens and museum participation in conversations relevant for society. Respondents from Romania

		Assessment of museum participation at home	Assessment of museum participation abroad	Self-assessment regarding interest in matters of society	Self-assessment regarding being an active citizen
Assessment of museum participation at home	Pearson correlation	1	0.457**	-0.025	-0.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.719	0.318
	N		197	211	211
Assessment of museum participation abroad	Pearson correlation		1	0.281**	0.214**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	0.002
	N			199	199
Self-assessment regarding interest in matters of society	Pearson correlation			1	0.627**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				0.000
	N				219
Self-assessment regarding being an active citizen	Pearson correlation				1
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N				

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

also into topics on the world agenda, such as global warming and the current pandemic, as well as how museums are adapting to it.

Generally speaking, the respondents in Romania had the feeling that museums at home are addressing global issues to a lesser degree than museums abroad. The highest difference in perception was found in addressing global warming (1.27% points of difference), while the lowest perceived difference was found in education (0.59% points). There was a significant difference in general perception, referring to the overall rating of museum participation in conversations on relevant topics (2.72 museums at home vs. 3.90 museums abroad). The participatory treat of a museum refers to determine the public to engage in dialogue with the museum, to participate in the development and delivery of the museum's offer. It generally refers to a museum that is part of discussions of interest to the society in which it operates.

Respondents in Italy tended to consider that museums at home are closer to what "museums abroad" are currently doing in terms of programs and exhibitions: they also gave lower points for Italian museums, but the differences were small, at less than 0.50%, and sometimes barely noticeable. It is worth mentioning that when assessing museums' perceived behaviour related to the current pandemic, Italian

Table 6 Comparison between the means calculated for the respondents from the three countries and their assessments of museums participating in current conversation within society

	Participation		Minorities		Migration		Global warming		Education		Social inclusion		Others		Pandemic	
	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out	In	Out
RO	2.72	3.90	2.39	3.20	2.13	3.10	1.90	3.17	3.29	4.00	2.38	3.33	2.83	3.57	2.82	3.66
IT	3.05	3.45	2.36	2.76	2.30	2.72	2.25	2.67	3.10	3.13	2.59	2.86	2.51	2.62	3.20	3.07
RM	2.77	3.88	2.55	2.01	1.84	3.14	2.37	2.67	3.13	2.81	3.15	3.75	3.22	3.48	2.06	2.92

Table 7 Correlations between the perception of the respondents from Romania over one's cultural consumption and the assessed level of pandemic. A view on museums from home-country and from abroad

	Frequent museums visitor	Familiar with museums at home	Regularly visiting museums abroad	Interested in culture	I would like to participate more often in cultural events	I would like to visit museums more often	Interested in society matters	Active citizen	Museums at home involved in pandemic	Museums abroad involved in pandemic
Frequent museums visitor	1	0.700 ^{***}	0.589 ^{***}	0.664 ^{***}	0.564 ^{***}	0.502 ^{***}	0.375 ^{***}	0.481 ^{***}	0.128	0.306 ^{***}
Familiar with museums at home		1	0.564 ^{***}	0.611 ^{***}	0.475 ^{***}	0.509 ^{***}	0.483 ^{***}	0.460 ^{***}	0.072	0.209 ^{***}
Regularly visiting museums abroad			1	0.609 ^{***}	0.505 ^{***}	0.553 ^{***}	0.395 ^{***}	0.383 ^{***}	0.015	0.320 ^{***}
Interested in culture				1	0.725 ^{***}	0.718 ^{***}	0.533 ^{***}	0.549 ^{***}	0.085	0.374 ^{***}
I would like to participate more often to cultural events					1	0.793 ^{***}	0.512 ^{***}	0.485 ^{***}	0.153 [*]	0.379 ^{***}
I would like to visit museums more often						1	0.518 ^{***}	0.492 ^{***}	0.167 [*]	0.406 ^{***}
Interested in society matters							1	0.627 ^{***}	0.130	0.314 ^{***}
Active citizen								1	0.083	0.294 ^{***}
Museums at home involved in pandemic									1	0.620 ^{***}
Museums abroad involved in pandemic										1

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 8 Correlations between perception of the respondents from Italy over one's cultural consumption and the assessed level of museums' involvement in current effort related to the pandemic. Perception about museums from home-country and from abroad

	Frequent museums visitor	Familiar with museums in Italy	Regularly visiting museums abroad	Interested in culture	I would like to participate more often in cultural events	I would like to visit museums more often	Interested in society matters	Active citizen	Museums at home involved in pandemic	Museums abroad involved in pandemic
Frequent museums visitor	1	0.739 ^{***}	0.676 ^{***}	0.611 ^{***}	0.507 ^{***}	0.445 ^{***}	0.415 ^{***}	0.335 ^{***}	0.191 ^{***}	0.189 ^{***}
Familiar with museums in Italy		1	0.613 ^{***}	0.661 ^{***}	0.520 ^{***}	0.477 ^{***}	0.472 ^{***}	0.420 ^{***}	0.189 ^{***}	0.217 ^{***}
Regularly visiting museums abroad			1	0.602 ^{***}	0.462 ^{***}	0.466 ^{***}	0.464 ^{***}	0.410 ^{***}	0.074	0.139
Interested in culture				1	0.752 ^{***}	0.669 ^{***}	0.689 ^{***}	0.558 ^{***}	0.201 ^{***}	0.253 ^{***}
I would like to participate more often to cultural events					1	0.839 ^{***}	0.618 ^{***}	0.598 ^{***}	0.178 [*]	0.285 ^{***}
I would like to visit museums more often						1	0.631 ^{***}	0.502 ^{***}	0.238 ^{***}	0.312 ^{***}
Interested in society matters							1	0.630 ^{***}	0.138	0.224 ^{***}
Active citizen								1	0.049	0.155 [*]
Museums at home involved in pandemic									1	0.733 ^{***}
Museums abroad involved in pandemic										1

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 9 Correlations between the perception of the respondents from Moldova on one's cultural consumption and the assessed level of museums' involvement in current effort related to the pandemic. Perception about museums from home-country and abroad

	Frequent museums visitor	Familiar with museums in Italy	Regularly visiting museums abroad	Interested in culture	I would like to participate more often in cultural events	I would like to visit museums more often	Interested in society matters	Active citizen	Museums at home involved in pandemic	Museums abroad involved in pandemic
Frequent museums visitor	1	0.456 ^{***}	0.437 ^{***}	0.455 ^{***}	0.461 ^{***}	0.277 ^{***}	0.110	0.256 ^{**}	0.310 [*]	0.032
Familiar with museums in Italy		1	0.354 ^{***}	0.452 ^{***}	0.427 ^{***}	0.358 ^{***}	0.254	0.388 ^{***}	0.078	0.106
Regularly visiting museums abroad			1	0.338 ^{***}	0.211	0.343 ^{***}	0.255 [*]	0.144	0.049	0.066
Interested in culture				1	0.772 ^{***}	0.716 ^{***}	0.541 ^{***}	0.488 ^{***}	0.269	0.149
I would like to participate more often to cultural events					1	0.707 ^{***}	0.430 ^{***}	0.400 ^{***}	0.275 [*]	0.229
I would like to visit museums more often						1	0.605 ^{***}	0.446 ^{***}	0.063	0.154
Interested in society matters							1	0.613 ^{***}	0.022	0.125
Active citizen								1	0.095	0.133 ^{***}
Museums at home involved in pandemic									1	0.623 ^{***}
Museums abroad involved in pandemic										1

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 10 Perception of the respondents from Italy on the museums at home and from abroad. Correlations between the assessed level of museums' involvement in current effort related to the pandemic and the overall perceived level of museum participation in conversations about social concerns

Correlations—respondents from Italy					
		Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns
Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	1	0.733**	0.310**	0.104
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.167
	<i>N</i>	197	168	194	178
Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	0.733**	1	0.249**	0.257**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.001	0.001
	<i>N</i>	168	168	168	160
Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	0.310**	0.249**	1	0.482**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.001		0.000
	<i>N</i>	194	168	202	184
Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	0.104	0.257**	0.482**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.167	0.001	0.000	
	<i>N</i>	178	160	184	184

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

respondents appreciated the efforts made by museums at home and felt they were more consistent than those made by museums abroad (see Table 6).

The respondents from the Republic of Moldova (see Table 6) presented a different attitude towards museums when evaluating how present they are in connection with society's concerns. They felt that minorities and education are of greater concern for the museums at home. Migration was perceived as being almost of no

Table 11 Perception of the respondents from Romania on museums at home and from abroad. Correlations between the assessed level of museums' involvement in current effort related to the pandemic and the overall perceived level of museum participation in conversations about social concerns

Correlations—respondents from Romania					
		Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns
Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	1	0.457**	0.441**	0.125
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.087
	<i>N</i>	211	197	200	189
Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	0.457**	1	0.303**	0.375**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000
	<i>N</i>	197	199	189	184
Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	0.441**	0.303**	1	0.620**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000
	<i>N</i>	200	189	206	191
Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	0.125	0.375**	0.620**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.087	0.000	0.000	
	<i>N</i>	1	0.457**	0.441**	0.125

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

concern for museums in the Republic of Moldova. They also believed that museums are generally poorly engaged in pandemic-related issues, especially those at home.

As seen in Table 7, there was a moderate positive correlation between aspirational cultural consumption behaviour when it came to museum visiting and general cultural consumption (0.718). There were also several other moderate correlations between being a frequent museum visitor and being familiar with museums. Data for Romania suggested that, to some degree, those who are interested in culture and active in cultural activities, also tend to be concerned citizens. Additionally, those

Table 12 Correlations between the assessed level of museums' involvement in current effort related to the pandemic and the overall perceived level of museum participation in conversations about social concerns

		Correlations—respondents from Moldova			
		Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns
Museums at home involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	1	0.220	0.227	−0.032
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.121	0.103	0.820
	<i>N</i>	60	51	53	53
Museums abroad involved in efforts related to the current pandemic	Pearson correlation	0.220	1	0.276	0.231
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.121		0.063	0.114
	<i>N</i>	51	51	46	48
Museums at home generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	0.227	0.276	1	0.623**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.103	0.063		0.000
	<i>N</i>	53	46	53	48
Museums abroad generally involved in conversations on society concerns	Pearson correlation	−0.032	0.231	0.623**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.820	0.114	0.000	
	<i>N</i>	1	0.220	0.227	−0.032

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

more interested in culture and active in this field tend to perceive museums abroad as being more involved in the pandemic challenges. The same expectation is not projected onto the Romanian museums.

A similar situation was found for respondents in Italy, as shown by the table below (Table 8), illustrating a very low correlation between the level of perceived museum participation in the current pandemic and people's assumed behaviour in terms of cultural participation. In the case of the Republic of Moldova (Table 9), these aspects were not documented, except in the case of frequent visitors, who gave some credit to local museums as being concerned with society's challenges in times of the pandemic.

We also tested for correlations between the overall perception of museums as being involved in conversations of general concern and the perception of their involvement in the current pandemic situation. There were low correlations between those aspects in Italy and Romania (Tables 10 and 11).

In the case of Italy, the data suggested that the general perception of museums influences both the way museums at home and those abroad are perceived, especially in the case of the involvement in times of the pandemic. A somewhat similar situation was seen with the data for Romania (Table 8) while in the case of the Republic of Moldova was a relationship documented only in the case of civic involvement (Table 12).

6 Conclusions and Discussions

The entire museum community agrees that museums are dynamic organisations, changing from keepers of heritage and old-fashioned educators into active members of their communities. This shift has transformed museums into organisations that actively address critical concerns of their audience and are supporters of society. The aforementioned means that museums offer more than interactive exhibitions; they are relevant for their public in a more significant way. They create content while not only bearing in mind their communities but also involving them directly. This evolution is tightly connected with the changing role(s) of museums. From researchers and guardians of heritage, they have become both educators and members of their communities. They not only create experiences but also meaning for their public. As well as being presenters of history and cultural heritage, they are also active citizens, and part of the debates of interest for society, helping to shape the public space.

Key to museums' success, i.e. being able to attract more visitors and have a significant social and educational impact on their audience, is how they are perceived by their public. This sets the levels of interest and expectations, as well as the openness to museums' discourse and also levels of interaction on the social framework. Nevertheless, the subject is more complex. For instance, the Eurobarometer on culture (EC 2017) indicates that, at least for some countries, there is a gap between the attitude towards culture and the actual cultural consumption. Still, developing a better understanding of visitors, and the way they perceive museums helps the museum management and professionals to better design their strategies and offers, and to communicate more effectively.

The wider public in Italy, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova feel that museums are participatory to some degree, but not substantially. The Romanians prove to be more critical of their museums and to appreciate, to the highest degree, the gap between museums at home and those abroad. Moreover, museums are perceived as not being so involved in presenting and being part of discussions on the subjects of concern in society. The public feels that museums pay the most attention to education and the least to global warming and migration. Considering

that these two are the hottest topics of discussion, the study reveals that the public believes that museums are not so connected to the concerns of contemporary society. The research also illustrates that audiences interested in museums feel that museums abroad are more participative and connected with the actual concerns of society than museums at home. Bearing in mind that an affective image influences the overall image more than the cognitive image (Moreno Gil and Ritchie 2009), museums should invest more in developing this affective image among their communities. Museums should also act to close the (perception) gap between their image and those of museums abroad, to increase their appeal, as well as the level of satisfaction of their visitors. This would also create conditions for a more significant impact on visitors and communities. This aspect would probably become extremely relevant in the following 2–3 years when, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, museums will cater more to local and national audiences, which will have more difficulties accessing museums abroad.

From a theoretical perspective, more attention could be given to understanding the extent to which “activism” is a drive for museum visits. Previous research concentrated more on educational and recreational aspects—“light consumption” (Brida et al. 2016a). Since more frequent museum visits are connected more to “heavier” motivations than the topics associated with museum activism are, a developed image in this vein might lead to increased visitation.

The reaction of museums to the COVID-19 pandemic is similar in Europe and the US. In March 2020, after closing their doors for on-site visitation, many museums stressed on online visits—they enhanced collection presentations and proposed different types of online guided tours or virtual museums. The online educational materials increased in terms of numbers and typology. Many museums adapted and even proposed new educational programs for children. Educators, families and children seemed the most common online visitors of museums in times of pandemic, but some museums also developed special online programs for adults. Certain museums have more significant involvement, such as donating medical materials and equipment, raising awareness of COVID-19 related aspects, or documenting the times for future presentation and understanding, as well as by supporting independent artists or cultural organizations. Especially museums considered more dynamic and promoters of good practices, that tend to be more connected to the societal framework seem to have been more solidary, both with other museums and with society affected in so many ways by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the respondents of the present research, Italians are those who most appreciate museums’ reactions during the pandemic, while in the Republic of Moldova people observe the lowest involvement both at home and abroad. The study shows that museums are not perceived as being too involved in the pandemic, and therefore they do not seem to be a voice during these times. Generally, the public, at least those more culturally-involved and concerned, do not perceive museums at home as being very involved in debates relating to contemporary society, whereas museums abroad seem to be more concerned and connected to their communities.

The overall findings reveal that even if in the field of museum studies, as well as in the museum practice, social support, inclusion, and even activism are the current assumed perspectives, the wider public perceives them in relative terms. To some extent, museums are considered participatory, but not so active in terms of being active members of society. The data suggests that even those more interested and active when it comes to museums and culture have this perception. Therefore, museums should communicate more regarding their contribution to the debates concerning contemporary society.

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