

Attendance Rates of Museums in Uzbekistan: Strategies to Attract More Visitors Post COVID Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper offers suggestions about how to increase the number of visitors who visit Uzbek museums. Before the independence of Uzbekistan from the Soviet Union in 1991, museums had been largely neglected. However, since 1991 they have begun to receive increasing attention, especially from the government of President Mirziyoyev when he was elected in 2016. Since this time, he has taken positive measures in order to improve the quality of services of museums in Uzbekistan, however these changes have not significantly increased the number of visitors over time. Based on the research literature, a number of strategies have been suggested to increase the number of museum visitors, and to improve the safety for historical artifacts. Specifically, it is crucial that museums in Uzbekistan introduce advanced technologies, especial Virtual Reality (VR) in the context of creating virtual museum exhibitions. This paper also provides a discussion of the historical objects that have been stolen from museums in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, and are now in other museums of different parts of the world. Politically, it has proved impossible to return these historical artifacts to Uzbekistan at the present time. (187 words).

Keywords: Museums; attendance; Uzbekistan; visitors; advanced technologies; government policy.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are regarded as key places that collect the art and science of humanity in one place for public display. A museum is defined by the International Council of Museums on 24 August 2022, as a, “Not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” Museums play a leading role in supporting the creative economy, both locally and regionally. They are also increasingly active in the social sphere, acting as platforms for debate and discussion, often tackling complex societal issues and encouraging public participation (UNESCO, (n.d) Museums <https://en.unesco.org/themes/museums>).

Uzbekistan is a central Asian country that is surrounded by five landlocked countries: Kazakhstan to the north, Kyrgyzstan to the northeast, Tajikistan to the southeast, Afghanistan to the south and Turkmenistan to the southwest. In 1991 it seceded from the Soviet Union and was declared an independent republic. Uzbekistan is now a secular, unitary constitutional republic consisting of 12 provinces (vilayats) and one autonomous republic Karakalpakstan. The capital and largest city in Uzbekistan is Tashkent which is situated in the Eastern part of the country (Encyclopedia of the Nations, n.d).

In 2019 there were approximately 100 museums in Uzbekistan that attracted more than seven million visitors, which has remained roughly at the same level since 2017. By January 2022, the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan reported that the number of museums had increased to 127, that contained a total of 2.2 million objects including 265,400 paintings (Daryo, 2022). Many are located in Tashkent the capital of Uzbekistan. According to the current legislation, museums in Uzbekistan are divided into state and non-state according to their form of ownership (Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "On Museums" 2008). State museums include museums created by decrees of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, decrees and orders of the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as museums that are financed from the state budget.

There are different kind of museums in Uzbekistan. The most common ones are museums of local lore and art. There are three large preservation museums in Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, and three large art museums of which the State Arts Museum in Tashkent is regarded as the national treasury of Uzbekistan with its beautiful collection of works of fine and applied arts. Statistics have shown that in the past, that the highest number of visits to museums were by schoolchildren and students from academic lyceums, colleges and universities which consisted of almost half of the overall number of visitors. This meant that most of the visitors were under 30 years of age. After 2019, due to the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictive decisions of government and health authorities, the rate of the visitors showed a strong decreasing trend (Guli Rashid Kizi & Hoffmann, 2021).

The aim of this paper is to outline several new strategies to improve the attractiveness of museums for visitors in Uzbekistan (including local and international tourists), so as to increase their visitation rates post COVID pandemic, and as a result to help stimulate the tourism industry.

METHODS

This conceptual paper will focus on the state of museums in Uzbekistan. Since the advent of the COVID pandemic, the numbers of visitors to museums have dropped substantially because of the restrictions imposed in regard to the control measures imposed by the government and health authorities of Uzbekistan. Now, tourism and travel is re-opening up once again. Uzbekistan has now lifted all COVID -19 entry requirements for unvaccinated visitors from June 8, 2022, and there now needs to be a coordinated campaign to support an increase in visitor numbers to museums in Uzbekistan. This conceptual paper will make suggestions to encourage both domestic and international tourists to visit museums once again.

Gilson and Goldberg (2015, p. 128) concluded that a conceptual paper, “seeks to bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking”. In an attempt to link existing theories and research findings, this paper identifies a number of sources that include: an iterative search of the multiple literature databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar.

A five-stage process was used because this study sought to synthesize the body of knowledge so as to increase the generality and applicability of the findings, and to develop new knowledge through the process of integration (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). These stages include:

1. defining research objectives for data collection;
2. differentiating searched keywords, databases, and formulating review protocol;
3. searching literature in databases according to the selection criteria;
4. extracting pertinent materials from qualified sources; and to
5. synthesize findings

Databases were accessed and searched using a predetermined set of keywords which were modified to reflect their findings and to ensure their relevance to the research. A total of 24 research studies published between 2000 and 2022, using the key words of: museums, tourists, digital technology, visitors, Uzbekistan, COVID-19 pandemic were identified, retrieved and analysed to identify research gaps and research development on the topic. The purpose of the classification was to provide an organized conceptual framework of the museum studies literature to highlight the areas of interest and findings of different researchers. Each of the published articles that were selected used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods and each of the variables was scrutinized through an in-depth analysis.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

Government Regulations

On the 23rd of May, 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan signed a resolution to promote the historical and cultural heritage of the country. It stressed the importance of, "Increasing the efficiency of marketing activities of museums and theatres of the Republic of Uzbekistan". However, it soon became clear that resolutions alone did not solve the question of increased visitation. That is, museums themselves must be proactive as well, and one of the key tasks of museum curators is to develop key ways to attract visitors. To remain relevant, Uzbek museums need to understand the needs and requirements of visitors who come to them and if they do not come, they need to ask the question "why not"?

There have been several positive changes that have been instituted to stimulate greater interest in museums by the government of Uzbekistan. One of these changes includes the decision that from the beginning of September 2020, it was agreed that the first Sunday of every month in the Republic there will be an "open door day", in which citizens will be admitted free of charge to the state museums to see objects and collections (yuz.uz 2020). Another positive change that occurred was that more than 10 new museums had been established during the past three to four years, such as the Moynaq Ecology Museum (yuz.uz, 2021).

Lack of trained and qualified staff for museums

However, despite these positive changes, it is no secret that currently, Uzbekistan lacks lacks experienced top and middle managers of museum institutions who have the ability to develop long-term strategies for the advancement of museums. As a result, because of the incomplete introduction of information and communication technologies has not allowed the field to be integrated into international cultural processes. In addition, due to the low wages paid in the museum sector, many of the more highly qualified employees who work there have found themselves better paid jobs. There also has been a lack of adequate funding which is a huge

problem for museums, especially for those located in smaller rural cities, far from the larger cities in Uzbekistan. This is because smaller museums do not have the necessary funding to acquire new exhibitions or create the appropriate conditions for their maintenance. Because of this, many of the exhibitions often become monotonous, boring and do not arouse much interest among museum visitors (Yuldasheva, 2021).

Need to better understand the needs of visitors

Museum management needs to use various marketing techniques in their activities. First of all, it is necessary to determine the target audience of the museum, and then, based on this to choose a communicative approach that suits this audience (Yuldasheva, 2021). Most of the public who visit museums come with different motivations and because of this, there needs to be a greater attempt to understand every person's requirement by the completion of surveys at the museum to determine what they liked and disliked, and how the displays could be improved in the future. This is because events and exhibitions that satisfy the needs and interests of visitors become potential motivators for future visits.

To increase the number of visitors, a museum also needs to determine what would interest people who indicate that they are not interested in visiting museums. Thus, it is necessary to constantly develop and educate the public, to prepare them for modern trends in the field of culture, which often requires additional costs and time. A museum should be regarded as a 'brand' that needs to be promoted. An analysis of various areas of museum activity makes it possible to classify the products offered by museums, as well as to assess the possibilities of using new marketing strategies to attract visitors (Moore, 2000).

Need for more advanced digital technologies

The traditional way of promoting museums in the past has been by distributing booklets, posters, advertisements, museum presentations, leaflets, etc. However, contemporary innovative technologies in museums can significantly expand and improve the quality of museum services. The use of social networks such as by Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram provide an excellent opportunity to actively communicate with museum visitors as well as to create a platform for informing the public about the holding of seminars, lectures, conferences, etc. Visitors also need to share their experiences of visiting the museum with other people (Russo, Watkins, et al. 2006).

Museums need to have a good Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which determines whether the museum will show up on a search engine when a user searches for a specific topic. It is likely that if the museum does not appear on the first page of the Google results, visitors are less likely to find the website, which equates to lost revenue and missed opportunities. Video marketing is another way to get your message across to a target audience in a naturally engaging format. People enjoy video content, and seek it out for entertainment and to help them make purchasing decisions. Video content is more likely to make a lasting impression as it taps into humans' ability to remember visual and auditory content better than text.

The creation of a museum website or channel in the public domain also allows the display of an almost unlimited amount of video material collected by the museum. This channel would allow the posting of interview videos, documentary chronicles, video clips, student project work, etc. The site would be seen as the visiting card for the museum, so it is in the interests of the museum to make it bright, interesting and easy to read. Mobile applications for smartphones are also another means of attracting attention to create a visual tour of the scale of the museum, and/or a specific exhibit on

display. The main idea of such mobile applications is a ‘museum in your pocket’, as the visitor will always have access to museum treasures (Economou & Meintani, 2011).

Recently, unexpected events such as the global coronavirus pandemic have resulted in border closures and restrictions to the travel and tourism industry, while at the same time caused the closure of many cultural institutions such as museums. This has shown the importance of digitising museum artefacts and making them available online. New methods of receiving and transmitting information have made it necessary to change the mechanism for the functioning of the museum. The internet allows visitors closer access to their audience, to pay more attention to already loyal visitors and to reach out to those who have indicated that they are not interested in actually going to a museum (Sayre & Wetterlund, 2008). A digital environment provides museums with the opportunity to express themselves, conduct new memorable experiments and to attract the attention of visitors (Li et al. 2012). Therefore, the role of new technologies is essential to attract a new audience because it gives museums the opportunity to express themselves, to conduct new and memorable experiments and to attract the attention of visitors.

One type of technology that has been found to be suitable for use in museums is virtual reality (VR), which enables museums to build virtual exhibitions presenting digital representations of real objects in their 3D surroundings. The person who uses the specialised VR headset is put into a state of total immersion while enjoying the immersion into a 3D setting. However, presently, all the museums in Samarkand, Uzbekistan do not have advanced digital infrastructure or collections that are digitised using 3D technology.

Because of the lack of digitized technology in museums in Samarkand, an exploratory study was designed by Zyla, Montusiewicz et al., (2020) who prepared a virtual exhibition that presented digital copies of real objects owned by the Silk Road museums in Samarkand. The objects were 3D scanned on site and transformed into precise 3D models. At the completion of the trial, the researchers conducted individual interviews with museum professionals, and surveyed a small sample of young adults belonging to Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2001) from Eurasia who had viewed the virtual exhibition using the VR headset. Their results from the respondents clearly stated that they valued the potential of VR technologies in the context of creating virtual museum exhibitions; and there was general agreement that this could potentially increase interest in traditional exhibitions. It was further suggested that where distance was a factor, virtual exhibitions could provide a substitute for onsite visits, or they can complement materials (such as photos and films) that are available on the museum’s website. Zyla et al., (2020) concluded that the use of VR technologies could be used as an extension to existing museum exhibitions to improve the availability of the exhibition, and create increased interest in the exhibition.

The importance of an attractive setting

The experience of visiting a museum is also influenced by many factors including the architecture, setting, and interior of the museum. Architecture creates a certain aura as the style of the building represents a specific time, and perhaps a kind of grandiosity projecting a sense of atmospheric space (Giebelhausen, 2003). The museum is a building that commands authority because of the ‘authentic’ fragments that it contains, and is seen as a dynamic space that is made meaningful through the interactions of space, objects, social, and the very meanings that flow from these interactions. That is, museums can be seen as, “social spaces used by lots of different people in lots of different ways” (Jones & McLeod, 2017, p. 212). The research evidence further suggests that as visitors move through museums, they map their experiences physically, as well as emotionally and imaginatively (Bagnall, 2003). Tröndle (2014) argued that the economy of attention in an art

museum depends on the correct arrangement of the patterns of movement of visitors around the museum. Jones et al (2017) concludes that museum architecture is not an object floating free of the social world; architecture is itself a social production shaped by, and giving tangible form to social relationships and structures.

Over the last few years, reconstruction, repair and restoration works have been consistently carried out in approximately 15 museum buildings in Uzbekistan. These include the reconstruction of the Surkhondarya State Museum of Regional History and Culture, and the Sadriddin Ayniy Memorial House-Museum in Samarkand. However, because of the short period of time that was allocated for completion that was written into in the building contracts for the renovation of these museums, this has led to poor quality finishes of the building work.

Eliminate theft and increase the safety of artifacts

Another way of increasing the number of visitors to Uzbek museums is to ensure the safety of these precious artifacts so that they can be passed down to future generations. This is because of the uniqueness and originality of exhibits are also important for museum visitors. However, problems associated with the theft of some of these valuable artifacts have been reported. The Guardian reported (December 12, 2014) that several employees from Uzbekistan's top museum, the Uzbek State Arts Museum in Tashkent, including the chief curator, Mirfayz Usmonov received a nine-year jail sentence and two other museum staff received eight years each, for selling original art works and replacing them with copies between the years of 1999 and 2014.

Furthermore, on April 26 2022 at a government session, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev admitted to the massive theft of valuable artifacts worth about 355 million dollars from Uzbek museums. He emphasized that further burglaries had been committed that also needed to be investigated. He added that at least 81 items in the National Museum of Bukhara were found to be fake (Euroasia, 2022).

Further cases of theft have also been reported in the media. In October 2020, the Guardian reported that the British Museum was making efforts to repatriate six glazed tiles stolen from the Shahi Zinda memorial complex in Samarkand. The newspaper reported that the tiles were smuggled into the UK via Dubai in a suitcase (The Guardian, 2021). In December 2021 the local news site Kun.uz reported that at least 56 manuscripts and six lithographs worth millions of dollars were stolen from the library of the National University named after Mirzo Ulugbek. After the disclosure of the report, this issue attracted media attention, and an investigation is still ongoing (Kun, 2021). Another case was reported in Fergana Museum where valuable exhibits were replaced with fake ones. A total of 70 unique exhibits with a total value of \$250,000 USD in the museum were forged, consisting of 56 paintings, while the remaining 14 are items were related to numismatics (Daryo, 2022).

These reports are very disturbing and unfortunate, especially for the younger generation of students and visitors will not have the opportunity to study and research the historical objects and cultural heritage of Uzbekistan, because they have been stolen and displayed in other foreign countries. Many of these Central Asian historical artefacts have been dispersed into numerous establishments and private collections over the world such as the Hermitage Museum and Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg; Oriental Institute, Moscow; Dunhuang and the National Library, Beijing; Nara, Japan; National Museum, India; Museum for Indian Art, Berlin; Musee Guimet and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Library, London; the Metropolitan Museum, New York, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington and The Fogg Art Museum, and Harvard University, USA (IGNCA, n.d.).

Among these irreplaceable artifacts, there are items belonging to the Great Emperor Amir Temur and the Timurid period, including antiques also belonging to Temur's grandson, ruler and scientist, great astronomer Ulugh Beg. A compass and a globe are among the main astronomical instruments that were used in the study of celestial bodies in the observatory of Ulugh Beg (1425-1427), that are now in the exposition of the British Museum. The bowls made of black and green jade belong to Ulugh Beg (BBC, n.d) are also kept in this museum. In addition, the carved tile which is presented to the audience in the Ethnography Museum of Berlin, was taken from the wall of the Ulugh Beg's madrasa in Registan, Samarkand (Gorshenina, 2004). Ulugh Beg's scientific work "Zizhi Koragony" is currently in Oxford, England (Tasci, 2020).

Because of the impossibility of repatriation as these original copies have not been recovered, the government of Uzbekistan obtained photocopies of some of these rare artifacts that were scattered around the world. It is only natural that these exhibitions of antiques will give rise to much greater interest among museum visitors if they were still in the collections that remain in Uzbek museums.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the above suggestions are likely to expand the target audience for museums. It is advised to approach these issues comprehensively, because the correct algorithm for using these tools will allow for the promotion of a museum brand with minimal investment, so as to attract new visitors who are attracted to new exhibits in the fields of art and culture. Museums have to constantly host new exhibitions, to keep them new and interesting as their target audience is constantly changing. The task of preserving its target audience as well as attracting the interest of a new audience with its activities is the challenge that needs to be faced by all museum administrators and curators.

Furthermore, in order to support the activities of museums in Uzbekistan, it is important to develop and apply new marketing strategies that include innovative technologies, as well as to create modern new expositions on popular themes such as for example: the history of the Uzbek people and statehood, and the life and activities of the great scholars. The transition of the museum to incorporate the needs of visitors is a key factor to create the desire to visit for the first time, or to be a repeat visitor.

Museums must find a way to 'grab the attention' of visitors. Virtual reality technology has been trialed in the Silk Road Museums in Samarkand, and has been shown to have great potential in the context of creating virtual museum exhibitions; and there was general agreement that this could potentially increase interest in traditional exhibitions. Museum exhibits are tangible objects while the emotions they evoke are intangible, so emotions in museum communication need to be made more tangible so that they will affect the experience of visitors, and attract them to return for future visits.

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