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Internationalisation and marketing strategies for university museums

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Abstract

University museums play an important role in the university marketing strategy, which is increasingly concerned with internationalisation. However, the extent to which academic belonging has affected university museums' communicative approach is not clear: scant attention has been paid to the identification of university museums' intended audience at a global level, including international researchers, students, tourists and migrants. This research focused on six university museums as case studies from five European countries: text analysis of a corpus of web pages and semi-structured interviews with staff from the selected university museums were carried out to collect data regarding strategies for audience engagement. Text analysis indicated that university museums have started offering contents in English on their websites, which may ideally serve a broad range of online users. However, results from both text analysis and interviews suggested that university museums have a vague image of the intended audience that they aim to attract at an international level, as texts do not seem to be written for a specific audience and with an accurate marketing strategy. The relationship between museum and university was also explored during the interviews, revealing insights on academic belonging. This study hopes to shed light on the intended audience for university museums and on the communicative and marketing strategies adopted to engage with an international audience.

Keywords : marketing, communication, internationalisation, academic identity, audience.

Résumé

Les musées universitaires jouent un rôle important dans la stratégie d'internationalisation et de promotion des universités. Cependant, il n'est pas évident que l'appartenance du musée à une structure académique influence son approche de communication. De plus, peu d'attention a été accordée au public international de ces musées, composé aussi bien de chercheurs que d'étudiants, touristes et citoyens. Afin de rendre compte des stratégies mises en place par les musées pour communiquer avec leur public, cette recherche propose une analyse textuelle d'un corpus de pages Web et des entretiens semi-structurés avec le personnel de six musées universitaires dans cinq pays européens. L'analyse textuelle montre que les contenus proposés en anglais sur les sites des musées semblent avoir comme objectif de toucher à un public large. Toutefois, les résultats des entretiens laissent entendre que les musées universitaires ont une image vague du public qu'ils cherchent à attirer, leurs textes n'étant pas écrits avec une stratégie de marketing précise. La relation entre le musée et l'université a également été explorée au cours des entretiens, ce qui a permis de mieux comprendre l'importance du rapport entre les deux. En conclusion, cette étude a comme objectif de montrer la manière dont les musées universitaires conçoivent leur public international et quelles stratégies de communication ils mettent en place à travers un cadre méthodologique varié.

Mots-clés : marketing, communication, internationalisation, identité académique, public.

Introduction

University museums play a crucial role in the university marketing strategy, which is increasingly concerned with internationalisation in order to attract international students and researchers. However, the extent to which academic belonging has affected university museums' communicative approach is not clear: in particular, scant attention has been paid to the commitment made by European university museums to engage with an international, multicultural audience, spanning from tourists to international researchers and students, as well as people moving to a new country.

This article, which is part of a wider PhD research (BARTOLINI 2020), aims to reflect on the communicative strategies adopted by university museums within a broader internationalisation effort when providing an English-version website.

1. Context

University museums seem to struggle to understand the role they are supposed to play within the university and in society (LOURENÇO 2015). Research has stressed that they are expected to create a bridge between academia and society in general, and thus accomplish the « Third Mission » within the university's strategic plan (TALAS *et al.* 2018, p. 17), as a result of a call for their public-oriented potential. The position of university museums is key within « the public service and outreach mission of the university » (KING 2001, p. 19), as they have the power to promote academic values and « establish new links with the society » (DREYSSÉ 2015, p. 58). In order to become « third mission incubator(s) », university museums need to deliver activities based on a citizen science approach oriented towards « dissemination and social engagement » (DONADELLI *et al*. 2018, p. 33-34).

University heritage may be the perfect showcase in order to develop the brand and « communicate the "corporate identity" » of the university itself (BULOTAITE 2003, p. 450). As such, university museums may contribute to interacting with and mediating between two different communities, i.e., the internal, academic community and the external, public community. Due to their different target groups, the need for an effective communication requires university museums to adopt strategies aimed at every single group, as « one size usually does not fit all » (KREMER 2014, p. 130). Museum marketing, intended as an « overarching philosophy » centred on the public (SANDELL & JANES 2007, p. 292), is thus extremely relevant for university museums.

Due to the emerging status of English as a lingua franca, universities around the world have committed to a great internationalisation effort: as a result, universities « increasingly

produce English-language versions of a wide range of materials », including their websites (PALUMBO 2013, p. 95). However, scarce attention has been paid to the internationalisation effort made by university museums as part of a wider university strategy and to the « communication philosophy » (GIL-FUENTETAJA & ECONOMOU 2019, p. 34) adopted on their websites, which may yield results regarding engagement with different target groups, including visitors and non-visitors.

2. Research design and methods

This research aimed to shed light on the extent to which academic belonging affects university museums, especially in terms of marketing, communication and internationalisation strategies. The objective was to investigate the communicative approach adopted by university museums to reach a « global » audience through their institutional websites, and thus understand 1) whether their communication is informed by academic belonging, and 2) what target groups university museums hope to reach. This article will mainly report on results regarding the first issue.

Firstly, websites of university museums in Europe were examined to understand how many of them offered an international version in English: 30 university museums per country were randomly selected from the database provided by the International Council of Museums Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC) to assess whether they offered English contents.

By starting from the list of university museums with an English-version website, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff from a subset of such museums to get insights into the processes underpinning the creation of web contents in English. Interviews were carried out with 13 members of staff from six different university museums (Table 1). Participants were purposefully selected in order to conduct interviews with people who may be to some extent involved in the process of writing texts for the website. The data collected through the interviews were first transcribed and then coded through NVivo by carrying out a thematic analysis (BRAUN & CLARKE 2013).

Participant	Institution	Team
MM1	Manchester Museum, Manchester	Visitor Team
MM2	Manchester Museum, Manchester	Collections
MM3	Manchester Museum, Manchester	Marketing & Communications
MW1	Manchester Museum & Whitworth, Manchester	Visitor Team
MW2	Manchester Museum & Whitworth, Manchester	Marketing & Communications
MW3	Manchester Museum & Whitworth, Manchester	Collections
WG1	Whitworth, Manchester	Collections
WG2	Whitworth, Manchester	Learning & Engagement
WG3	Whitworth, Manchester	Learning & Engagement
DK	Natural History Museum, Copenhagen	Marketing & Communications
FI	Helsinki University Museum, Helsinki	Collections
HR	Botanical Garden of the Faculty of Science, Zagreb	Collections
IT	Museum of Human Anatomy, Turin	Collections

Table 1 – Interview participants.

3. Findings

3. 1. Internationalisation of European university museums

The survey revealed that 48% of the websites examined provided an English version alongside the « original » version in the local language(s). Most of the websites with an English version belong to university museums located in countries where the official languages are Germanic or Ugro-Finnic, while countries where Romance languages are spoken display fewer university museums with an English-version website. Although the situation in Europe seems heterogeneous, almost half of the university museums having a website offered contents in English, and thus seemed to have committed to an internationalisation effort, at least to some extent. No further information was collected, e.g.,

on the type of pages provided in English, but a close textual analysis of a selection of texts from websites with an English version offered other insights, e.g., on the target groups addressed by university museums, which will hopefully be presented in other contributions.

3. 2. Academic belonging: to what extent does it affect communication and marketing strategies?

The interviews with staff from the selection of university museums provided a variety of insights, which are only partially reported here, dividing them into different themes. During each interview, the institution's academic belonging was discussed in order to explore the relationship between museum and university: in particular, participants shared their perceptions on the extent to which such relationship has shaped the identity of the museum and affected its communicative and marketing strategies.

3. 2. 1. Sense of belonging

Most of the participants expressed a sense of belonging to the university. MM3 acknowledged that the Manchester Museum (Manchester, UK) is part of the university, and that their collections and activities are also used for research. From the same institution, MM1 stressed that, as a museum, they "represent" the university, and thus share the same values. The participant described a close relationship between the two institutions, as the university is proud of the work carried out by the museum. Similarly, IT explained that academic identity is very important to the Museum of Human Anatomy (Turin, Italy): they care about being recognised as a university museum when they give items on loan to other museums abroad because this is part of their identity (extract 1). Nonetheless, the interview with IT showed that their relationship with the university is not all roses: IT claimed that the museum is not always appreciated by the university lecturers, although it may be a fundamental resource for education.

> (1) « […] we are very keen to stress the fact that we are university museums. We export our museums abroad a lot through exhibitions. […] And this is the occasion in which we underline our identity. » [IT] (Author's translation)

On the other hand, being part of the university may not be an everyday thought for MW3, who did not seem to be concerned about their academic belonging, although acknowledging the need to consider the university's mission and objectives, e.g., by ensuring that students can access the collections.

3. 2. 2. Which audiences for university museums?

In terms of target groups that university museums want to reach, MM3 claimed that the academic audience is a priority for the Manchester Museum, although it may be difficult to cater to that group. In a similar vein, WG2 stated that although the Whitworth (Manchester, UK) is conscious of the need to target the academic community, this is not the *only* community with whom they aim to engage. According to WG2, their « universitiness » further contributes to going in the other direction, i.e., « more towards communities and wider audiences », for instance by activating projects with schools. The same idea is stressed by MM1, who claimed that the museum identifies itself as « a part of Manchester as a city » and aims to be « a museum for anyone ».

According to the participants from university museums outside the UK, the target audience of their institutions mostly seemed to coincide with the general audience, although specific groups are also mentioned, such as researchers and teachers. As far as the English version of the website is concerned, most of the participants mentioned international tourists, as shown in extract 2 from the interview with DK, from the Natural History Museum of the University of Copenhagen (Denmark).

(2) « I: But when you think about your audiences, do you think about-
P: Tourists.
I: International tourists?
P: Absolutely. That is international tourists. » [DK]

On the contrary, FI claimed that at the Helsinki University Museum they think of international students and researchers from abroad.

3. 2. 3. Conforming to university guidelines

Data shed light on whether the museums involved are supposed to conform to university guidelines for creating their website and writing texts for it. MM1 commented that texts produced by the Manchester Museum do not need to be approved by the university. This is supported by MM2, who said that being a university museum does not affect the way they write their online texts.

HR, from the Botanical Garden of the University of Zagreb (Croatia), explained that being a university botanical garden does not affect their language use, as they are not expected to follow any guidelines provided by the university. HR further emphasised their autonomy from the university by explaining that the creation of the website was their own idea at the

botanical garden: hence, they independently carried out this process, without any requests being made by the university.

Similarly, IT stated that the Museum of Human Anatomy was not required to follow specific guidelines from the university. The participant also reported that they managed to get the university's permission to outsource the creation of the website: although the domain of the museum website still belongs to the university, having their own site allows them to internally manage and update it.

DK did not explicitly mention university web writing guidelines used by the Natural History Museum but explained that when writing texts for the museum website they need to « speak with absolute authority » and check that content is « correct » with researchers before publishing it online: this is supposed to contribute to ensuring scientific credibility, which is a priority.

On the other hand, FI stressed that the Helsinki University Museum follows the university guidelines. First, they are required to provide contents in three different languages, i.e., English, Finnish and Swedish, which confirms the importance of using English. This is linked to a second aspect, i.e., « internationality » (extract 3): FI claimed that the university pays attention to being international, e.g., by attracting international students and researchers. Third, when asked about the main aims of the museum website, FI pointed to « the whole university strategy », describing accessibility as one of their priorities, e.g., by enabling blind users to access the contents on the website. Finally, the participant explained that a university office, i.e., « Communications and Community Relations », provided the museum with specific web writing guidelines, which they followed when they created the museum website. Therefore, university belonging seems to encompass different decisions made at the Helsinki University Museum.

> (3) « I think in the University of Helsinki strategies this international […] role is very important and universities try to get also money from abroad, students, researchers […] it's very important for the university, this internationality. And that's why it's maybe […] we also […] think it's important to us. » [FI]

3. 2. 4. What brand for university museums?

Other comments (especially by staff from UK museums) focused on brand, and more specifically on the relation with the university brand. MW1 clearly stated that their brand is the university's brand. Although other participants' opinion confirmed that the brands of the Manchester Museum and the Whitworth were developed along with the brand of the

university, MW2 revealed that the two institutions also have their own brand, which is « a sub-brand of the university's own brand ». Nonetheless, MM3 pointed out that the university took part in the creation of the museum brand guidelines by validating them (extract 4).

> (4) « So, the University of Manchester were an integral part of helping us to […] produce and sign off the brand guidelines, so we needed to make sure that […] the University of Manchester were also happy with our brand guidelines and that it fits within the university as well, and that they were aware of our values, our messaging, our tone of voice, how it looks as well. So that's all being signed off by the university. » [MM3]

WG3 further stressed that the university guidelines informed the « look » and « feel » of the Whitworth website: extract 4 seems to suggest that being a university museum has had an impact on the creation of the website, especially in terms of visual communication. DK mentioned that they intended to start « a branding process » at the museum and acknowledged that they « need a brand » and « need guidelines » defining it.

3. 2. 5. Sense of limitation

Finally, some participants mentioned limitations that their institution has experienced due to their academic belonging in relation to the development of the website. WG3 defined the Whitworth website as a « micro-site » of the university, as it was developed as part of the bigger academic website. For this reason, WG2 claimed that the gallery was limited in its possibility of creating its own identity and being digitally « innovative » (extract 5).

> (5) « I'm quite critical about our website. I think we struggle at the Whitworth because obviously, we're trying to be […] an international art gallery that it's relevant to […] the local community, you know […] trying to be a lot of things for a lot of different people […] and we're quite restrained because we sit within the framework of a website which is within the University of Manchester's broader […] set-up, so you can't be maybe as innovative in terms of your digital content as maybe an independent art gallery could be. » [WG2]

Similarly, DK mentioned university guidelines related to the design of the website of the Natural History Museum: they have been required to adhere to these guidelines, although they actually « need something different » to promote what they do at the museum « visually content-wise ». The participant confessed that this has been difficult for them, as until that moment the university had not given them this freedom. In particular, DK advocated for the removal of some elements which refer to the academic sphere and may thus be

« confusing » for families and general visitors. Since the research centre and the museum have been separated, DK hopes the university will let them make their own decisions in terms of web design without mounting « resistance ». This description conveyed a struggle between the university's interests and the museum's need for a more independent, open approach to the construction and use of the website.

Conclusion

Different museums seem to have different approaches to being part of the university, spanning from a close, dependent relationship to a more autonomous one: although overall a sense of belonging to the university pervades the data, the participants acknowledged the importance of considering their own identity as a separate institution, which aims to address both an academic and a general audience. While being a university museum does not seem to have a particular impact on some institutions, for others this may either directly affect the construction of the website or result in the compliance with university guidelines in terms of general strategies, design and style. The relationship between museums and universities is generally a positive one, although some participants mentioned constrictions due to their academic identity. Overall, university museums' communication seems to be connected only partially with being a university museum. Further research is needed to explore the special position occupied by university museums within and beyond the academic ecosystem: for instance, a study comparing university museums with museums that are not affiliated to academic institutions may reveal thought-provoking details about the peculiarities of academic belonging and its real impact on online communication.

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Biographical note

Chiara Bartolini is a Research Fellow in Translation Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy. She obtained a PhD in Translation, Interpreting and Intercultural Studies in 2020, with a thesis on audience-oriented communicative practices in museums. Her research interests mainly involve museum communication and translation, and more recently museum audio description.