Branding Cultural Institutions
a New Era for Italian Museums?[1]

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Abstract

Brand as an evolving concept can be applied to different fields, as the museum sector. Literature contributions increasingly suggest that branding is a meaningful frame for museums, although brand orientation could be often hindered by internal barriers.

A brand embodies tangible and intangible qualities, creating value and influencing both how an organization functions and is perceived, internally and externally.

Effective brand strategies enhance general awareness and develop brand-visitor relationships, but mostly they allow museums to develop different alternative revenue streams, such as membership programs, gift shops, cafés, licensing, franchising, donations, even attract investments. So, although brand strategies must be carried out while preserving the cultural mission, marketing topics come up. Nevertheless, museum branding may represent a way to reach greater efficiency/effectiveness and reduce dependency on public financial support, while creating new connections with audience.

What about Museums in Italy? This question arises especially after the Italian reform promoted in 2014, that gives more financial independence to the biggest State museums in Italy.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Italian Museums are embracing brand, thanks to 15 Italian Museums in-depth interviews and the analysis of their annual reports.

The research design allows to gain a picture of the Italian way to manage the brand in Museums, and to understand the role of branding.

This paper is to be considered a starting point for wider investigations on this new topic in Italy and it is useful for managers and practitioners who want to go through innovation in museum management.

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1. Branding, the New Frontier for Museums

According to the American Marketing Association (2012) «A brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary. A brand often includes an explicit logo, fonts, color schemes, symbols, sound which may be developed to represent implicit values, ideas, and even personality».

The term brand is vague, especially in museum's context, where it is often used as a synonymous for corporate logo. But actually, brand is much more than that. Brand is the public face of museums, the character that museums present to the world and, in the same time brand, is about experience, it's the *how* museums present art, *how* visitors experience art, and what they say about it.

Recently, brand is even more important because of significant changes in museum sector that have contributed to accentuate its complexity.

In fact, one of the most disruptive phenomenon that has involved the sector is the globalization, favored by the diffusion of the Internet, new digital media and rapidly evolving technologies.

In addition, three basic things have changed in the museum arena: firstly, museology has changed. The science and practice of organizing and managing museums have changed the approach: from collections to the public, and from objects to stories, adopting a narrative approach (Sandell, Janes, 2007).

The new approach, on the one hand, assigns new roles to museums as agents of economic development, innovation and social inclusion, in addition to the traditional ones of conservation, protection and enhancement of cultural and educational heritage; on the other hand, it launches challenges that cannot be postponed, such as, for example, the relationship with the relevant public that goes beyond the concept of participation and embraces the idea of co-creation of value and content. Co-creation is a process, the result of conversations between the museum, visitors, communities and other stakeholders, which originates precisely in the digital revolution, the result of which are increasingly interactive and personalized relationships capable of generating intellectual and emotional engagement.

Brand unveil the museum DNA, better brand is the DNA of a museums: any organization has a personality, has a core idea and the brand is the way in which that is represented to everyone and everything with whom it comes into contact. From this standpoint, the environment in which the art experience happens is part of the brand, the product is part of the brand, the way staff behave is part of the brand, and the way museums communicate is part of the brand. So, brand belong in museums, and museums are brands. And it is not about art, science or history commodification, as many people could think. Brand is far from that. It is an effort to make clearer to understand and more available to an audience what museums are and are doing, which reflects on what people feel inside the organization. Furthermore, branding helps an institution to be different from others and considering the brand as a beacon strengthens coherence internally and externally. Museums should engage in branding efforts to stress the qualities that make them distinct from other museums and other local institutions, and not to leave their brand essence, their emotional connections, their unique purposes, both unstated and unexpressed. What about Italian museums?

Branding is a new issue in Italian museums and in presents still evanescent boundaries. Internationally, it is still an evolving topic in the academic and professional field, where it has recently emerged (Caldwell, 2000; Scott, 2000; Caldwell, Coshal, 2002; Colbert, 2003; Baumgarth, 2009).

While discussing whether the concept of corporate brand is transferable to the world of art and culture and consequently to museums, at the international level there are many branding experiences in the museum's sector, even if the orientation to the museum brand is hindered by internal barriers, such as financial constraints, complexity of the organizational structure, and institutional dimensions museum (Evans, Bridson, Rentschler, 2012).

Branding is strategic to meet the challenges of museums as nonprofit organizations, particularly regarding to fundraising and crowdfunding, partnerships and sponsorships. In fact, following the reduction of public funding, museums are looking for a balance between the offer of a memorable experience and the achievement of success in terms of visitors' participation and others strategic stakeholders' engagement.

Branding is a driver for reaching the aforementioned subjects, involving them, activating conversations with them as well as developing meaningful and long-lasting relationships (Wymer et Al., 2006; Padanyi, 2007; Esposito, Besana, 2017).

2. Literature review

Literature on branding embraces both psychological and marketing approach. Museum marketing received considerable attention from scholars (Kotler, Scheff Bernstein, 1996; McLean, 1996; Kotler, Kotler, 1998; Butler, 2000; Colbert, 2003, 2009; Fillis, 2002, 2003, 2006; Baumgarth, 2009), unlike other lines of study, such as organizational and managerial ones, which have been more neglected (Pusa, Usitalo, 2014).

The first contributions on branding in the field of art and culture – regarding to branding strategies and brand identity in opera and theater (Scheff, Bernstein, 2007) and co-branding and brand extension (Colbert, d'Astous, Fournier, 2007) – have been realized with no specific focus on museums.

From a psychological point of view museum brand represents a symbol of identity and status (Scheff Bernstein, 2007; Rentschler, Gilmore, 2002).

Then, some empirical researches dealt with the study of the museum brand. Some of them studied the relationship between the museum brand and visitors - and more particularly the association between brand, meanings and values they associated with museums - (Caldwell, 2000; Caldwell, Coshall, 2002; Scott, 2000, 2007); a small number of articles has shown the brand orientation by the museums (Baumgarth, 2009, 2014, 2018), the manifestation of this orientation and the brand management for positioning museum (Evans, Bridson, Rentschler, 2012).

Furthermore, from a marketing standpoint branding is considered as booster of awareness and loyalty among audiences, encouraging and reinforcing partnerships (King, 2015), and as "bridge" between the organization and the relevant public.

The concept and the meaning of brand in museums' management did not find a systematic attention in the literature, and this contributed to the lack of awareness of branding strategies of museum managers and curators, although they recognize their importance.

To overcome this limitation and to place conceptually museum's brand in a more defined context, here we will consider the literature on the corporate brand. In fact, a museum is an

organization, and then, it seems not to be any contrast between the concept of corporate brand and the concept of value brand promoted by Scott (2000, 2007). Alongside marketing, strategic management and organizational studies also deal with the topic, and from this multidisciplinary perspective the conceptual profile of the museum brand will be outlined.

According to the experiential and relationship marketing approaches (MacMillian et al., 2005; Arnett et al., 2003; Berry, 1983; Grönroos, 1994, 1996, 2004; Morgan, Hunt 1994; Gummesson, 2002; Schmitt, 1999; Pine, Gilmore, 1999), brand represents the set of beliefs and perceptions in the minds of visitors and other stakeholders related to a museum. These beliefs and perceptions contribute to build the brand equity (Aacker, 1992; Keller, 2000). From this standpoint, not only is museum brand about visiting experience, collections, building or the scenography of the exhibition space, but also a means to build individual identities, a sense of community, and to strengthen the social role of the institution.

From a managerial and organizational point of view, branding is a crucial asset for the museum stewardship as it contains important intangible assets such the museum history, the experience gained by the target audience, the level notoriety of collections, temporary exhibitions, and complementary and ancillary services - the expectations of potential visitors, potential collaborators, and other stakeholders, the museum reputation.

The museum brand, therefore, summarizes the identity of the museum and in order to be credible it has to be authentic, and the above-mentioned elements must be coherent and congruent. Meaningful, in this sense, is the holistic definition offered by Knox and Bickerton (2003) who, offering a strategic point of view, define the corporate brand as expression of the museum unique business model.

Embracing branding approach, museums (Wymer et al., 2006) must therefore unequivocally declare their core values and objectives, they also must create a value proposition to the various target segments, reflecting their needs and expectations and creating a framework on how the brand connects with prospects and how offerings are provided. The value proposition explains then the functional, emotional, self-expressive, and/or social benefits delivered to the audience.

In addition, particular attention must be paid to the design and quality of the offer, which can integrate various services and transform into a memorable event what once was only a visit.

The same care must be paid to the definition of the brand communication system, that is the combination of name, logo, images, signs and sounds that a cultural institution uses to differentiate itself from others. The brand communication system helps to increase the recognition of the museum and to strengthen the role of the brand as a positioning lever in the cultural context and make it interesting for residents and tourists (Bull, 1991; Petr, 2009).

It has not to be forgotten, that building and developing museum brand means revealing what already exists. In fact, many museums have a strong identity characterized by a positive reputation and are able to satisfy coherent expectations about what they offer; however, in most cases this occurs spontaneously, nullifying the advantages and benefits that would result from branding.

So, while the term brand has traditionally been associated with products and services, in this paper not only is it considered at corporate level, but also at organizational orientation.

Actually, corporate brand is the heart of an organization and it encapsulates its mission, culture, structure, staff, and processes (Hatch, Schultz, 2003; Ind, 1998; Urde, 2003); furthermore, since brand is an evolving concept, it has been extended from corporate entities to organizational orientations (Bridson, Evans, 2004; Ewing, Napoli, 2005; Hankinson, 2001;

Urde, 1999). So, brand operates as a driver for decision-making processes, and represent the degree to which museums manage itself as a brand.

Museum brand is the essence of the institution and basically it answers to two questions "Who you are?", and Who I say you are?"

With respect to the first question, the museum brand has a strategic value because it is an intangible and inimitable resource on which the museum lays competitive advantage (Evans, Bridson, Rentschler, 2012). Museum brand is connected to the intimate history of museum and to its values and business model (Janes, 2010; De Chernatony, 1999; Tilley, 1999; Urde, 1999; Knox, Bickerton, 2003) and involves stakeholders at both cognitive and emotional level. Its role is crucial in the development of relationships with visitors, funders, employees and volunteers.

Regarding to the second question, the museum brand represents the maintenance of the coherence between values of the museum brand, their explicit communication and the visiting experience.

Visitors define museum brand by sharing contents among virtual communities, to which the museum brand ultimately emotionally belongs (Gregory, 2007).

To summarize, museums are brands. Brand is considered a strategic lever to manage relationships with stakeholders: it represents and contains the history, the visiting experience gained by the target and the expectations of potential visitors, the quality of the coll ections, exhibitions and services, the reputation of the museum (Balmer, 2001; Balmer, Greyser, 2003; Anisimova, Mavondo 2010). Museum brand emerges thanks to *behavior* - experience and unique value proposition, business model, touch points – *signs* – brand communication system, media relationship and press office, special initiatives, storytelling about values, identity, mission – *networking* – virtual places and communities, digital museum.

Unfortunately, many Italian museums are actually very adept at branding their products – exhibits, events, programs, etc. – but not themselves as institutions. Even if they do a tremendous job of telling the stories from their collections, they are not ready to tell their own story. As a result, the audience engages with the things they brand and promote well–they show up at exhibits, engage in education, and attend events. But there is very little engagement with the brand of the institution itself and with the mission of the museum as an institution.

In any case, this paper, starting from the results of a broader study, will highlight the efforts on branding currently undertaken by directors of Italian museums.

3. Economics of Museums in challenging times: both A New Era and a Golden Age

Museums have struggled, in order to survive in a very competitive scenario since the latest crisis. The global economic crisis has affected their performances for more than five years: endowments have diminished, program service revenues and contributions have collapsed, public grants have fallen due to spending review and deleveraging, donors have been targeted by a pressing good-cause related marketing and the competition for resources has been particularly keen.

The museums have been then confronted with different marketing tools: some of them are *the tradition* of cultural marketing and concern customers, their segmentation and their purchasing-power exploitation; some are, instead, innovative and aim to grasp the attention and gain the propensity and trustworthiness of donors, sponsors and private fund-givers. The

economic and marketing literature counts several contributions about the implementation of marketing in museums: from draft application to mature strategies, marketing is exploited by the 'museums board' who copes with the eternal trade-off between cultural-artistic purposes and an efficient allocation of resources. Social media are the latest tool, fundraising is a recent awareness. Branding is the New Frontier.

According to the approach of applied economics, branding is a signaling behavior (Pepall, Richards, Norman, 2014) inside the museums for employees being the first ambassadors of mission, values and vision and outside museums for stakeholders, competitors, actual and prospect targets. Branding is an expensive effort, cost and investment, whose aim is to catch the attention, when competitors do not grasp the same attention and they are not able to build the same competitive barrier. Branding is effective, when the signal is such a sunk cost that customers, sponsors, grant-makers and new targets are engaged. In museums, branding is the new tool, in order to test new targets and, at the same time, maintain mature audiences.

When branding is effective, revenue diversification is granted. For Italian Museums, revenue diversification means ticketing, sale of services (bookshop, merchandise, café) next to the main experience, private contributions, sponsorships, international friendships (corporate and not-corporate). Effective brand strategies enhance general awareness and develop brand-visitor relationships, but mostly they allow museums to enable different alternative revenue streams, such as membership programs, gift shops, cafés, licensing, franchising, donations, even international friendships as big donors and for capital campaigns. So, although brand strategies must be carried out while preserving the cultural mission, marketing, fundraising and other communication priorities come up. Revenue diversification can reduce dependency on public financial support, while creating new connections with audiences, both offline and online, both visitors and international tourists, both friends and sponsors.

4. The study

The main objective of the study is to investigate the efforts on branding of Italian museums. Specific research objectives are represented by the following research questions:

RQ1: Is museum brand a lever for supporting competition between cultural institution in Italy?
RQ2: If yes, what are benefits of branding in Italian museum?

4.1 Cases selection
This study was carried out taking into account 15 museums, some with a public form of governance and some private, by interviewing museum directors, except in two cases where the directors of communication were interviewed. In the meantime, the annual reports were in-depth analyzed.

These museums have been chosen because they have topped the Italian ranking for the number of visitors for at least one decade and are the ones that, at present, could reap the greatest benefit from managing their corporate brand.

The research involves the analysis of the Annual Reports related to the considered museums, as the purpose of the present paper is to gain an understanding of brand efforts put

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in place by Italian museums the Italian and the role museum brand in supporting competition in cultural field.

The paper considers a combination of *field research* – interview method– *desk analysis* – analysis of annual reports. The Annual Reports' data have been the foundations for conducting a cluster analysis to understand the relationship between brand efforts, advertising expense and revenues from sources other than public financing.

4.2 Method

The sample includes 15 Italian Museums, which have topped the Italian ranking for the number of visitors for at least one decade. Taking into consideration that increasing efforts of marketing, fundraising and branding can be signaled by the advertising expense, it is here meant that this kind of expense can cause revenue diversification. Apart of public grants, which can be prevailing in Italian museums of well-known and well-grounded public generation, revenue diversification includes private revenues: from own revenues as for ticketing, ancillary revenues for merchandise and any other next-to-main-experience of museum visiting and private contributions from sponsors, citizens, friends, grant-making foundations, international sponsors, etc.

According to 2016's Reports of this sample and thanks to an in-depth analysis of accounting lines of revenues and expenses, own revenues from ticketing, ancillary revenues from merchandise, bookshop, edutainment and other complimentary services, private contributions and public grants were calculated next to the advertising expense and the personnel expense. Both the advertising expense and the personnel expense, they are considered as signals of the branding efforts. Above all and though quite a comprehensive accounting line for every role and competence in the museums, the personnel expense is here considered as a signal of employee branding.
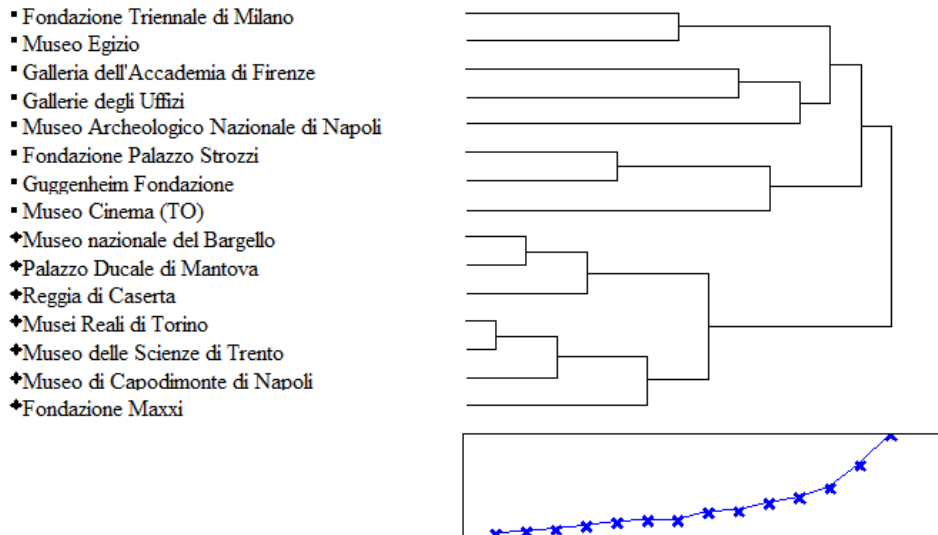
Expenses and revenues were then estimated as shares of total expenses and revenues.

Ward clustering was, as a consequence, implemented for revenue and expense shares. Cluster analysis is a well-known methodology in biology and other natural sciences in order to classify populations (species) into significant groups (subspecies), according to specific features or selected variables (Ward, 1963). In microeconomics and industrial organization, cluster analysis is very useful in order to rank industries, districts, networks, strategic groups and any other aggregate that reveal significant and differentiated patterns (Hair et Al., 2009; Harrigan, 1985). We adopted the Ward clustering method that uses an analysis of variance approach to evaluate the distances between clusters and takes account of proximity so that all items are, finally, aggregated in a unique dendrogram.

4.3 Findings

Clustering museums expense and revenue shares with *JMP IN The Statistical Discovery Software*, we obtained two clusters (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Dendrogram of Italian Museums according to 2016's Performances

- Fondazione Triennale di Milano
- Museo Egizio
- Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze
- Gallerie degli Uffizi
- Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli
- Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi
- Guggenheim Fondazione
- Museo Cinema (TO)
- Museo nazionale del Bargello
- Palazzo Ducale di Mantova
- Reggia di Caserta
- Musei Reali di Torino
- Museo delle Scienze di Trento
- Museo di Capodimonte di Napoli
- Fondazione Maxxi

Source: elaboration with JMP Software

The ■ cluster with museums from Fondazione Triennale to Museo Cinema shows the lowest public grants: Gallerie degli Uffizi shows the highest percentage of this cluster, 45%. Nevertheless, on average, this cluster profits by a modest share of 19.11% of public grants. This cluster shows the highest advertising and personnel expenses of the sample. If summed up, advertising and personnel cost 22,59% for these museums. Revenues from ticketing (53.79%), ancillary services (5.03%) and private contributions (21.39%), they are the highest one.

The + cluster is the opposite. With very modest advertising and personnel expense (5.41%), this cluster shows the highest public grants (78.70%) and the lowest revenues: from ticketing, on average 14.49%, ancillary services, 1.27% and private contributions 1.63%.

4.5 Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to understand if and how the Italian way of museum branding and to understand the role of brand in Italian museum. Even though branding is not a widespread practice in Italy, it is an emerging issue among Italian museums. The study demonstrates that some museums are pursuing brand orientation and it is reflected in their expenses, revenues and behaviors. Especially the cluster analysis gives an insight about branding in Italian museums.

These emerging clusters are poles of Italian museums, whose boards are now discovering potentials of branding. Some of them still rely on public grants, with a branding in a start-up phase. Their risk propensity for branding is now not so high as in the cluster where, with the highest advertising expense and employee branding (signalled by the personnel expense), museum boards can rely on visitors who pay for the experience and ancillary services, next to sponsors, friends and grant-makers who donate to these museums. If the added value of branding is appreciated by the museum board, willingness-to-pay (for main and ancillary services) and willingness-to-donate result into revenue diversification.

Is branding effective only for private targets? Public grant-makers do not usually focus on the leverage of their brands. They grant subsidies for public goals, as culture is meant as a public and merit good. Co-branding is suggested by sponsors, who combined their signals with public ones for co-marketing. Italian public administrations do not estimate branding as a strategy, though they screen projects for co-financing, when project managers invest in advertising, communication and branding. Branding can be an effective strategy in order to raise public funds, above all, matching grants.

Nevertheless, as emerged from interviews, branding could be prevented by different internal barriers such curator supremacy and skepticism, lack of a specific branding culture and competencies in managers, low importance given to brand the cultural institution, ethical issues, and resources – money, time, personnel.

5. Conclusion

Branding can be a competitive tool in a turbulent economic landscape, where entertainment substitutes are available to audiences, whose tastes constantly change. Branding can engage and develop trustworthiness. This can be both for paying visitors and for donors, sponsors, national and international friends. Public grant-makers do not look for brands, though they participate to co-marketing and co-branded cultural projects with private grant-makers and sponsors.

Museums can benefit from branding orientation by engaging in alternative sources of revenues, such as membership programmes, merchandising, licensing, franchising, and donations, useful for strengthening bottom lines. Furthermore, branding is an opportunity to enhance awareness and bridge the gap between museum and local community, as well as to gain a clear understanding of who are the audiences and what benefits they seek, and eventually get them involved in loyal relationships.

Obviously, branding requires investing resources, and ask museum directors to take the risk of a trade-off between communication expenses (marketing, fundraising and branding) and operational costs. This behavior can benefit museums both in a long term and short-term perspective.

Actually, the cluster analysis confirmed that ■ museums show revenues from ticketing, donations, sponsorships much more than public grants, which are prevailing in + museums where the advertising and personnel expenses are together with private revenues fewer than in ■ museums. Branding is an effort and an expense, whose goal is revenue diversification. Revenues can include public subsidies. Nevertheless, branding is, above all, committed to private stakeholders' engagement, so that visitors pay for the main experience and next-to-the-main-experience and so that sponsors ensure their matching grants.

Among the limitations of this research, the sample must be considered, the short-term investigation period and, at certain level, the rules governing museums in Italy. Another limitation is the time-frame, as one-year Report analysis period is too short to identify more in-depth specific branding behaviors.

Many questions remain unanswered, thus leaving room for thought on forthcoming research. The research should be extended to perform a mapping at national level and appreciate other aspects of museum branding that could be found.

As far as manager implications are concerned, this study emphasizes that branding may contribute to museums survival in turbulent economic landscape, as it becomes an

opportunity for museums to bridge institutional gaps, differentiate their organization from others', engage employees and stakeholders, attract prospects, and strengthen bottom lines. Unfortunately, not all Italian museums may gain these opportunities because the curators' skepticism, lack of competencies, understaffed museums.

This suggests the need of an evolution in museum governance – diarchy? – the design of new roles and new skills for museums staff, and the need of communication managers among the museum's human resources.

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