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Museum Sustainability: Perspectives from Generation Z

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores – considering their values, expectations, and desires for a sustainable future - Generation Z's viewpoint on sustainability in museums. The aim is to offer a young audience's perspective on the different dimensions of sustainability and its importance.

Methodology

Thanks to a quantitative study conducted on a sample of 340 participants belonging to Gen Z, this paper highlights the perceptions of the younger generations (18-30 years) on museums and sustainability.

Findings

The different dimensions of sustainability investigated in this study are the environmental dimension – the ability to protect ecosystems and renew natural resources – the economic dimension – the ability to produce income and long-term work – and the social dimension – the ability to guarantee equity. Based on the data collected, the dimension of sustainability perceived as the most important by Gen Z is the social one, followed, in order, by the environmental and economic dimensions. This mindset should suggest museums to incorporate even more practices of social sustainability into their operations, exhibitions, and programs.

Research limitations/implications

There are several limitations to this study, suggesting areas for further research. First, the convenience sample is not representative and cannot be generalized even if the characteristics of this population are clearly specified. Furthermore, the cultural sustainability dimension was not explored in the present research.

Originality/Value

This is the first paper in Italy on this topic.

Keywords

Museums, Sustainability dimensions, GenZ, Italy

Paper type

Research paper

1. Introduction

Museums are cultural institutions that are considering sustainability as part of their essence. For many museums today, the question is no longer whether or why, but how to become sustainable.

According to International Council of Museum (ICOM, 2022), museums are closely linked to sustainability, as they naturally balance the interests of different generations, dedicate considerable resources to deliver heritage and collections knowledge, built by people in the past, to future generations (Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a).

Since 1992, when at the Rio de Janeiro United Nations conference governments pledged to incorporate sustainable development into their policies (Agenda 21), the museum sector has moved to discuss, although not necessarily apply, relevant issues concerning sustainable development. Australia and the United Kingdom lead the way, from a western perspective, in developing a holistic approach to sustainability within museums (Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a).

The topic is becoming extremely important and contemporary also in Italy where museums are embracing the approach of sustainability with a view to the United Nations Agenda 2030, that points out three main pillars: reconnect with nature; rediscover a sense of community, inclusion and belonging; support long-term economic growth without negatively impacting social, environmental, and cultural aspects of the community.

Museums play a crucial role in the development of sustainability (Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a, 2019b; Pop, Borza, 2016) by establishing clear mission and long-term objectives aimed to:

- establish strong, long-term connections with different audiences – visitors, communities, and other stakeholders – to ensure long-term engagement and support.
- Foster adaptation to changes in society (Recuerto Virto et. al, 2017).
- Educate and empower communities and visitors (ICOM, 2019).
- Foster diversity and sustainability (ICOM, 2022).

Taken the above into consideration, raises the question of building a dialogue with a new generation of museumgoers.

If the interest in the definition and understanding of the theme of museum sustainability has grown over time (Alcaraz et. al, 2009; Sánchez Laws, 2015; Pop, Borza, 2016; Recuerto Virto, et al., 2017, Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a, 2019b), the perspective on museum sustainability of future visitors, and specifically Generation Z, is still largely unexplored in the professional and academic literature.

To bridge the gap, this work, starting from the concepts of economic, environmental, and social sustainability, investigates the perceptions of the young generations of Italians (18-30 years) on museums and sustainability, to advise museum managers to incorporate a coherent their strategies, operations, exhibitions, and programs.

2. Museum and sustainability: literature review

The term sustainability comes from the Latin *sustinere*, which means *support, defend, favor, conserve* and/or *take care of*. It is a complex, inter-, and trans-disciplinary concept, which originally emerged as a social, economic, and political goal. Only later did it spread in the more specific field of resource management and as an ecological term.

The concept of sustainability, which refers to maintaining a given condition also in the future, is often used as a synonym for sustainable development which according to the United Nations World Commission on the Environment and Development (1987) is “a development that satisfies the needs of the present without compromising the possibility of future generations to meet their own.” Sustainable development is based on the centrality of sustainability in decision-making processes.

The concept of sustainable development has become popular with the “Our Common Future” report, released by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). The statement, after investigating the world’s development issues, i.e., poverty and environmental deterioration from a

social point of view, suggested directions to remedy them around the world. The report underlined the relationship between the social, environmental, and economic aspects of human life, and boosted the use of sustainable development theories in all decision-making process.

From the report, a key feature of sustainable development emerges, namely that it includes three elements: environment, society, economy, later also redefined “the three Ps: Planet, People, Profit” (Fisk, 2010; Sutton, 2015). All these three elements originate a system, and they should be balanced so that one doesn’t destroy another, and the system is sane.

Sustainability implies a constant and preferably growing (environmental, social, economic) well-being and the prospect of leaving future generations with a quality of life no lower than the current one. Over time, distinct connotations of sustainability have emerged with as many contents but with the same function: to preserve.

The two terms, sustainability, and sustainable development have become rapidly popular terms in the twenty first century. Despite being different expressions, in common and academic language the two terms have turned into synonyms, have entered the lexicon of global discourse, and are debated in many cultures and languages (Henderson, 2006), becoming a key concept in the management of any organization, including museums (Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a).

Over the last years, many Scholars and practitioners are addressing the sustainable development topic in different contexts and activities. Although the literature on the subject has enriched somewhat in recent years (Pencarelli et al., 2016; Pop, Borza, 2016; Pop et al., 2019; Eppich, Grinda, 2019; Esposito, Fisichella, 2019a, 2019b; Ásványi, Fehér, 2023) it is still scarce. In fact, in the museum field, are more available practice recommendations for museums, mainly deriving from museum associations (Museums Australia 2003; Museum Association 2008, 2009; ICOM, 2022) as well as *green* guidelines (Worts, 2006; Brophy, Wylie, 2013).

According to ICOM (2011), sustainability is a dynamic process that museums use to recognize and preserve tangible and intangible heritage while responding to local needs. By enhancing historical and social memory, museums can add value to communities and fulfil their sustainability mission. Following this concept, Alcaraz et al. (2009) asserts that museum sustainability depends on the museum's management capacity to collect and manage the resources necessary for its sustainable existence and achievement of the museum's goals. In addition, sustainability is tied to the relationship with the community (Pop, Borza, 2016). To fulfil their mission and be sustainable, museums “must be an active and engaging part of a community by adding value to heritage and social memory” (ICOM, 2011). They must also act as agents of sustainable local economic development, promoting social cohesion and protecting the environment (Gustafsson, Ijla, 2017; Pop et al., 2019).

Sustainability of museums is generally considered based on three items: environmental sustainability, contribution to local economic development, and dialogue with the public. These three characteristics can perfectly coexist as different aspects of the same dynamic concept. In other words, it is possible to protect social values and secure economic benefits at the same time. Minimize costs and support the ecosystem. Nurture institutions and traditions and promote environmental protection. Every element interacts and enhances not only the present but also the future possibilities.

From this perspective, museums can become agents of sustainable cultural, social, and economic growth of territories (Brown, 2019).

The importance of sustainability is highlighted also by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) that includes measures to improve the sustainability of museums and other cultural institutions (e.g., theatres, archives) in terms of energy efficiency in buildings, accessibility – that is the removal of physical and cognitive barriers in museums to allow wider access and participation in culture – and heritage digitization, in order to meet today society needs.

A more detailed analysis of the different dimensions of sustainability in museum literature reveals that *economic sustainability* is an important aspect for museums especially after the pandemic crisis that put their long-term survival at risk and forced them to innovations in management and in marketing (Esposito et al., 2020). Many museums still struggle for their economic survival due to public sector financial constraints and increased competition in the cultural sector (Esposito et al.,

2019). For this reason, museums, even when conducting fundraising activities, need to apply sustainable development principles and think about the better use of resources.

Considering *environmental sustainability*, it is inherent in the mission of most museums. Many museums have introduced sustainability as an important part of their identity and are committed to public education and research on environmental issues (Gustafsson, Ijla, 2017). Additionally, some museums incorporate sustainable architecture and technology into their building designs, or organize exhibitions, events, and other programs to create and spread a culture of sustainability in their communities. In addition, as aforementioned, the NRRP has provided funds to improve the energy efficiency of museums.

Regarding *social sustainability*, it concerns the relationship between museums and society. The museum is audience-focused, and much effort has been made to make the museum's activities more attractive to a wider audience, including residents. For this reason, museums engage with many communities and actively approaches new audiences, considering people's interests and needs, and trying to ensure the widest physical and intellectual accessibility (Sutter, Worts, 2005; Merriman, 2008, Pencarelli et al., 2016).

Finally, it has not to be forgotten the *cultural sustainability* that has emerged as generator of a virtuous circle, as it involves the use of museum heritage to create values, attitudes, and behaviors within local communities (Härkönen et al., 2018; Pop et al., 2019; Esposito, Fisichella, 2020). It can be seen as a fourth dimension of sustainability or as a whole new way of thinking about sustainability (Esposito, Fisichella, 2020).

3. Sustainability in Italian museums and the new museums audience: the GenZ perspective

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up in a world where the effects of climate change are becoming apparent, leading to a distinct awareness and concern for sustainability. Studies have shown that this generation places a high priority on sustainability, with over 90% believing that companies should help address environmental issues (Deloitte, 2023). This societal consciousness has a significant impact on their expectations and perceptions of institutions, including museums. Gen Z perceives museums as platforms capable of creating significant change through the promotion of sustainable practices and environmental awareness.

As mentioned above, museums serve as gatekeepers heritage and culture, preserving artifacts and knowledge for future generations. However, as societal norms and perspectives shift, museums must adapt to remain relevant and sustainable. The Generation Z perspective has become crucial to this evolution, as this generation not only represents the future museum audience, but also, they are active contributors to societal change. Engaging them in museums requires a thoughtful approach that aligns with their values, preferences, and tech mindset.

This is the reason why also museums should understand GenZ's values, expectations, and desires for a sustainable future.

3.1 The study: data collection, questionnaire, and data analysis

To better understanding Gen Z's perspective on museum sustainability a study was conducted and here are reported the results of a quantitative study on the perceptions of young generations (18-30 years old) on museums and sustainability. The following describes the survey procedure, sampling, measures, and data analysis.

Data collection

Data were collected through a web survey distributed by e-mail, student's community, and social networks (primarily WhatsApp) between July 2022 and February 2023. Participants were recruited for the survey through a convenience sampling technique based on the relationship networks of the

researchers and their referral contacts. The final sample included 340 participants. The questionnaire was in Italian to enable interviewees to clearly understand the questions and the research context.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire included the following items: dimension of sustainability –economic, social, environmental – more important for museum sector; perceptions of the importance for museums to implement green behaviors, enable ideas exchanges and training on environmental sustainability and be accessible to people with physical and mental disabilities; perceptions of the sustainable behaviors of Italian museums and their communication about it. Except for the first item, the other responses were on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree or nothing) to 5 (strongly agree or very much).

Other information collected were referred to the socio-demographic variables of the sample –gender, age, and geographical area– and their cultural behaviors in terms of number of visit of museums in one year.

Data Analysis

Frequencies, means, and standard deviation were calculated for all variables. The statistical software used for the analysis was SPSS version 28.

Results

This section reports the main findings of the study, starting from the sample key characteristics to descriptive analyses.

Sample key characteristics and cultural behaviors

Respondents were mainly women (88 per cent) with an age between 18-20 (72 per cent) and came from the North of Italy (82 per cent). Most of them visit museums from 1 to 5 times in a year (58 per cent). Table 1 reports the key characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample key characteristics and cultural behaviors

Characteristics	%
Gender	
Female	88%
Male	12%
Age	
18-20	72%
21-24	19%
25-30	9%
Geographical area	
Northern Italy	82%
Central Italy	12%
Southern Italy and islands	6%
Museum visits per year	
Less than 6	58%
6-10	24%
11-20	12%
More than 20	6%

Primary Data. *N*=340

3.2 Prior aspect of sustainability for museums

Interviewees were first asked to answer which dimension of sustainability – environmental, economic, and social – they considered most important for a museum. For the 37 percent of the respondents, the most important dimension is the social one, followed by the environmental (34 percent) and the economic (22 percent).

Table 2. Relevance of aspects of sustainability in museum sector

Type of sustainability	%
Environmental, i.e., the ability to protect the ecosystem and renew natural resources	34
Economic, i.e., the ability to produce income and work for a long time	22
Social, i.e., the ability to guarantee equity	37
I would not know	7

Primary Data. $N=340$

Then respondents' perceptions of desired museum behaviors were surveyed by asking to what extent they believe that museums should implement green behaviour, be a place for the exchange of ideas and training on environmental sustainability, be accessible to people with physical and mental disabilities (Table 3). On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the most desired sustainable behavior for a museum is to be accessible to people with physical and mental disabilities ($M=4.12$, $SD=1.04$), followed for being green ($M=3.49$, $SD=1.04$) and to allow for the exchange of ideas and training on environmental sustainability ($M=3.34$, $SD=1.12$).

Furthermore, respondents were asked if these sustainable behaviors are implemented by Italian museums. Table 3 shows that for the respondent, on a scale from 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much), Italian museums implement these behaviors little ($M=2.85$, $SD=0.61$) and communicate less what they actually do in the field of sustainability ($M=2.41$, $SD=0.86$).

Table 3. Sustainable museum's behaviors: desired, perceived and communicated.

Variables	M	SD
Desired sustainable behavior		
Green	3.49	1.04
Enabling ideas exchanges and training on environmental sustainability	3.34	1.12
Accessible to people with physical and mental disabilities	4.12	1.04
Perception of the implementation of sustainable behaviors in Italian museums	2.85	0.61
Perception of the level of communication of sustainable behaviors in Italian museums	2.41	0.86

Primary Data. $N=340$

4. Discussion

The results of the study are consistent with the literature on Gen Z. Members of Gen Z appreciate institutions that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability by addressing social causes like equality and inclusivity (Miller, Lu, 2018) as well as adopting green behaviour. Not only do they appreciate these attitudes, but they want them to be adopted.

The above calls for museums to be accessible to people of all abilities, including those with physical and mental disabilities. This commitment to inclusivity aligns with the broader goal of social sustainability, which emphasizes the rights and participation of all individuals in society.

Museums globally are increasingly recognizing this demand and are making changes to improve their accessibility. In Italy, considering the needs of people with physical and mental disabilities it is not a widespread practice (Rossi, 2022). The first guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Culture in 2008, then, in 2018, some other indications relating to cognitive and perceptual disabilities were added.

The reception of these rules, however, has been inhomogeneous: if almost everywhere there are ramps, lifts, and other devices for people with reduced mobility, the same cannot be said for other special needs.

However, some museums have adopted strategies to be more inclusive and accessible. Among them, Museo Egizio of Turin that in 2019 has incorporated tactile paths and descriptive panels for visually impaired visitors, who are accompanied by Egyptologists with specific experience. Furthermore, provided subtitles and sign language interpreters for hearing-impaired visitors, and offered simplified language tours for visitors with cognitive and learning disabilities.

Museo Tattile Varese, specifically designed to cater to visually impaired visitors having a collection composed of tactile reproductions of famous artworks, also provides special guided tours for individuals with mental health issues, contributing to a more inclusive and therapeutic experience.

Considering the environmental sustainability, the report “Generation Z: Global Citizenship Survey” (Broadbent et al., 2017) as well as the report “Gen Z Segmentation Study” (Ernst & Young, 2021) suggest that the majority of Gen Z prioritizes the environment as a key societal issue. Considering museums, results of this study put environmental sustainability in second place.

Respondents are asking that museums demonstrate sustainability in their operations, which could mean switching to renewable energy sources, reducing waste, sourcing locally for book and gift shops, and cafes.

In fact, some Italian museums have begun incorporating green initiatives into their operations. For instance, the MAXXI Museum in Rome, designed by Zaha Hadid, employs green architecture principles, such as using natural light to reduce energy consumption. Gen Z not only appreciate these efforts, but they also often expect them because they believe that environmentally sustainable practices are essential to the functioning of any modern and accountable institution.

Furthermore, results point out that with their educational mission and community focus, museum should function as an “agora” –a central public space –for engaging Gen Z in dialogues and actions related to environmental sustainability.

Globally, many museums have taken steps to foster dialogue on environmental sustainability. For example, the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, integrates sustainability into its core mission. Its exhibits explore the future of the planet and humanity’s impact on the environment, stimulating conversations about sustainability among its visitors (Oliveira, 2021).

There are also examples in Italy where some museums are leading the way in leveraging their spaces for dialogue and training on environmental sustainability.

In Rome, Museo MAXXI is renowned for hosting exhibitions that spur dialogue on sustainability. An example is their 'Low Form' exhibit, which explored how human actions affect the planet, invoking conversation about how society can work towards a more sustainable future (MAXXI, 2018). Through such exhibits, the museum nurtures a platform for thought-provoking discussions about environmental issues among its visitors.

Furthermore, the Museo Nazionale dell’Antartide in Genoa, stands out as an example of a museum that offers interactive training on environmental sustainability. The museum uses its exhibits in Antarctica to educate visitors about the impacts of climate change. It displays real-time data from Antarctic research stations, providing an engaging, hands-on learning experience about the immediacy of climate change impacts (Sani, 2010).

From interactive exhibits to the integration of digital technology and embodying sustainable practices, these museums actively contribute to raising environmental awareness and inspiring behavioral change among their visitors, particularly Gen Z.

An interesting result emerged in this study. The research shows that Gen Z does not prioritize economic sustainability among the desired behaviors for museums, although it is important for 22 percent of the sample, and objectively it is the most communicated sustainability.

This could be due to various factors. Gen Z might perceive economic sustainability as a given or an internal concern of the museums, rather than an aspect requiring their active engagement. Alternatively, economic issues may seem less immediate or less impactful to them compared to environmental and social issues.

To bridge this perceptual gap, museums could strive to better communicate the relevance of economic sustainability to their mission and to broader societal objectives. For instance, they could highlight how economic sustainability underpins their ability to invest in environmentally friendly practices, contribute to local economies, and provide inclusive access to cultural and educational resources. By linking economic sustainability to Gen Z's values and interests, museums might foster a broader understanding and appreciation of sustainability's three pillars: environmental, social, and economic. The above introduces the issue of *perception of the level of communication of sustainable behaviors in Italian museums*. In fact, despite the ongoing global discourse on sustainability, Italian museums, to a large extent, seem to be lagging in communicating their sustainability practices — from their operations to exhibitions, programs, and community engagement initiatives.

This scarce perception is probably a result of a gap in communication strategies. The traditional communication tool employed by many Italian museums to communicate sustainability is the Annual report. That instrument fails to connect with Gen Z, whose informational intake is predominantly digital.

Furthermore, considering digital communication, museums focus more on aesthetic and historical narratives, leaving sustainability as a peripheral or absent element in their storytelling.

5. Conclusions

The paper addresses the theme of Gen Z's perception of sustainability in museums considering the environmental, economic, and social dimensions, and taking into consideration the Italian reality.

From one hand, the study returns a picture of a museum system committed to sustainability issues and overall aligned with the values of Gen Z. From the other hand, the research confirms that Gen Z is not really involved in economic sustainability and that museums are unable to reach Gen Z with adequate communication about their sustainable practices.

In fact, despite the efforts on the different dimensions of sustainability, the perception about sustainability communication in Italian museums remains relatively low, particularly among younger generations. This highlights the need for museums to enhance their sustainability efforts and improve the ways they communicate these initiatives to resonate more effectively with their audiences.

The low awareness about sustainable behaviors in Italian museums among Gen Z, due to lack of targeting communication, holds implications both for the museums and the broader goal of societal sustainability. It reduces the relevance of museums to this demographic, potentially leading to diminished visitorship and engagement. This disengagement is especially concerning as Gen Z is poised to become the leading generational segment in the coming years.

However, this challenge also presents opportunities. To engage Gen Z's, museums can integrate sustainability in their discourse, by harnessing digital technologies and social media platforms preferred by Gen Z (i.e., Tik Tok, Instagram), museums can more effectively communicate these efforts and foster a stronger connection with this generation (Diez, 2021). Italian museums should take advantage of online platforms to communicate their sustainability initiatives. Websites, social media, and digital newsletters provide additional ways to share information about green operations, educational programs, sustainable exhibitions, and community engagement initiatives.

Finally, among the limits of the research, it should be noted that the convenience sample is not representative and cannot be generalized even if the characteristics of this population are clearly specified.

Moreover, the dimension of cultural sustainability should be considered. In fact, it has not been explored in this paper because it is closely related to the social and economic dimensions (Pop et al., 2019) and not easily perceived by the sample considered as an autonomous pillar.

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