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Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in museums in Andalusia. Statistical analysis and evaluation of digital and economic resources in the dynamization of visits

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19
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Statistics

SUBJECT

The subject of this article develops an analysis focused on the impact of the pandemic caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus, commonly known as Coronavirus or Covid-19, and its scope as a social phenomenon in the field of museums managed by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of the Andalusian Regional Government. After the declaration of the state of alarm for the management of the health crisis, a series of actions had to be deployed that transformed not only the possibilities of accessibility to museum institutions, but also the way of disseminating and communicating the artistic and cultural heritage to society. The development of new information and communication technologies (NICT) has allowed open access to artistic information, encouraging an increase in the number of virtual visits to museums.

279

Methodology

Methodologically, the repercussion of physical visits is analyzed through statistical data. In this way, it has been possible to verify and quantify their decrease during the pandemic period. Likewise, the procedures followed by the different museums studied to continue offering the virtual exhibition of their collections through digital platforms and the different applications focused on interaction with the public are also evaluated. The evaluation of the results should provide information on the weaknesses of the new context of museums in the digital era. Finally, the economic measures adopted by the Autonomous Government of Andalusia and the Government of Spain to boost cultural visits and especially visits to museums are studied.

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Objectives

Specifically, the present study aims to analyze quantitatively the evolution of the number of visitors and to study qualitatively the main aspects of virtual interaction with the public, as well as to evaluate the economic measures adopted by the public authorities responsible for museum centers. To this end, we have methodologically examined three determining aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on visits to museums. Firstly, statistical data on visits to museums managed by the Andalusian Regional Ministry of Culture and Historical Heritage are evaluated, through which the incidence of individual visits, in general, and of school groups, in particular, is observed. Secondly, the websites of the museums belonging to the Andalusian geographical area are reviewed in order to detect weaknesses in the supply of digital and/or virtual resources. Thirdly, the economic measures adopted by the Autonomous Government of Andalusia and the Government of Spain to boost cultural visits to museums are studied.

Results and conclusions

Among the main results and conclusions of the work, it is concluded that the museums analyzed suffered during the pandemic a decrease in visits of 69.66% during 2020 and 36.33% in 2021 with respect to the average of the last five years (from 2015 to 2019). Gradually, the museums of the Department of Culture and Historical Heritage have seen an increase in the number of attendees, and right now, according to data from the IECA the recovery of visitors since the first months of the year 2022 (data from January to August) have meant an increase of up to 49.75 % compared to the same months of the year 2021, being at present the most visited the Museum of the Alhambra, followed by the Museum of Fine Arts of Granada, the Archaeological Museum of Cordoba and the Museum of Fine Arts of Seville, thus recovering its economic activity and placing the cultural and heritage sector as the third pillar of wealth of the Andalusian Community.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted more and more museums and museum institutions to offer other ways to showcase their collections to the public. For some time now, museums have been sharing many of their works online, representing an opportunity for the promotion of their heritage. In this way, the digitization of the collections of the museums analyzed would bring audiences from other communities in Spain and other countries, expanding their expectations and offerings to attract new sectors of the population.

The Smithsonian Institution, which has published 2.8 million high-resolution images of all its collections through an open access online platform (<https://www.si.edu/openaccess>), is a good example of American museum management practices. Similarly, at the European level, the Paris museums offer nearly 300,000 digital reproductions of works of art in open access thanks to their collection's portal (<https://www.parismuseusecollections.paris.fr/en>).

It is unquestionable the effort undertaken by Andalusian museums to update their resources, with the purpose of offering didactic materials according to the interests demanded by the public. However, most of the museums studied (57.90%) do not even offer a minimum of educational services through their web pages. In this sense, as possible lines of improvement for the development of future research, the budget allocated by the corresponding departments should be analyzed to assess the degree of involvement of the museum in this point. Likewise, it would be necessary to evaluate the achievement of the objectives of the teaching/learning process to determine if they are adequate at the curricular level with the resources available in these heritage spaces.

Another of the aspects that the results collected in this text show how the websites of the museums analyzed mainly use their links for the promotion of exhibition programs, this Internet service being necessary for the dissemination of their content. To this end, it is noted that the interaction of museums in social networks should not be reduced to promotional publications but should provide extra value to the activity of the physical museum itself and, in this sense, the use of podcasts, QR codes and gamification resources is missing on their websites.



On the other hand, in relation to the economic measures adopted to boost cultural visits and especially visits to museums, it is noted that the Governing Council of the Government of Andalusia, being aware that the recovery of the Andalusian museum sector is coupled with the general tourism, had to adopt the agreement of May 5, 2020 approving the formulation of the General Plan for Sustainable Tourism in Andalusia META 2027 (Strategic Framework for Andalusian Tourism). It is well known to all, the convening power of cultural tourism, understood as a form of tourism that obeys the needs of tourists to know various elements of cultural heritage (Caro et al., 2015, p. 933). In this sense, it should be highlighted that, in 2019 the cultural segment attracted 11 million tourists (33.8% of the total number of tourists received by Andalusia). For its part, the number of users of the Andalusian museums studied amounted to 2.5 million in that year, with the Fine Arts museums of Seville and Granada as the most visited in 2019.

Today, the globalized world in which it is immersed is undergoing accelerated changes in all areas (cultural, scientific, economic), appreciating in turn the emergence of new social needs. Hence, museums, as institutions at the service of citizens, are not left out of the recent contexts, having to adapt and respond to the new concerns that visitors demand. Museums, understood as a dynamic element, must contribute to the transformation of society and their functionality cannot be limited to the exhibition nature of their contents.

Faced with the new social realities, one of the great challenges for museums must be to respond to the cultural demands of an increasingly globalized society, taking advantage of technological advances, it being undeniable that the consultation of heritage content and interaction with museum spaces will in the future be based on technological applications. This will make it possible to advance along the line of connecting museums-territories-heritage. The current times are marked by change as the only viable alternative and this pandemic period should be rethought as a time of learning; a good opportunity to reformulate the function of the museum in accordance with the complexity of the era to which it belongs and to take up the challenge of reorienting its gaze in the 21st century.