

Paused Renaissance: Factors Affecting the Athens Byzantine and Christian Museum Branding



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Abstract This paper examines the socio-political factors affecting the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens (B&CMoA) brand transformation through the theoretical lens of Service Science using a triangulated mixed methods case study approach. Primary data comprised documents (critical discourse analysis of policies, laws, and regulations), physical evidence (participant observation of exhibitions and peripheral services and netnographic study of its websites and social media), and visitor experience (content analysis of online reviews and critiques). It demonstrates that only the B&CMoA core services have shifted from the ‘Museum as Mausoleum’ paradigm toward that of a co-creator of meaningful experiences which facilitate the personalized interpretation of how the past lives in the present. Government decision, archaic laws, and Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) socio-political conditions have obstructed the full deployment of a coherent omnichannel phygital brand. Guidelines are proffered for reimagining the museum as a visitor-centric servicescape and navigating challenges to develop resilient museum brands.

Keywords Museum branding · Core and peripheral museum service design · Servicescapes · Museum relevance · Interpretation of exhibition · Service-dominant logic · Resilience

JEL Classification M31 Marketing

1 Introduction—Setting the Context

The national Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens (B&CMoA) documents the transition of the wider Greek, Asia Minor, and Balkan region from Antiquity to Modernity (3rd to twentieth century), thus covering one of the three ‘canonized’ periods of Greek history and interpreting it in a publicly acceptable and recognizable way to prove the unbroken continuity between antiquity, Byzantine era and modern

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times (Gazi, 2008). The museum houses more than 25.000 exhibits (Gazi, 2008; Poullos & Touloupa, 2018). In this sense and as decided by political priorities, the B&CMoA is one of the three national museums that have molded the Greek modern national identity through the interpretation of their collections (Gazi, 2008).

Much of its strategic decisions through the years have been directly linked to the museum's legal status; Greek national museums are directly affected and managed by the Ministry of Culture with little to no possibility for initiatives and decision-making. More precisely, most Greek state museums are managed by the different local ephorates that fall under the Ministry of Culture. One ephorate can manage more than one museum, and most decisions are still centrally taken. As for the most emblematic museums, such as the B&CMoA, these fall directly under the Ministry, which appoints their directors from the community of archaeologists. Directors can make decisions for the institutions they manage but the decisions need to be authorized by the Ministry (Poullos & Touloupa, 2018). In general, the dependence on the Ministry is problematic, and obfuscates the decision-making with time consuming and highly bureaucratic processes (Poullos & Touloupa, 2018).

The museum has been going through a series of metamorphoses, many of which reflect dramatic geopolitical events. For example, the Asia Minor refugees in 1922 brought with them heirlooms which were immediately accepted in the B&CMoA collection. Yet, at that point its museographical set-up resembled what is described and defined as a Mausoleum: a simple container of artifacts, whose meaning was communicated through explanatory labels on the walls (Witcomb, 2003), attributing a passive role to visitors who were not given the option to critically reflect on the exhibits (Bolognesi & Aiello, 2020) or to build upon them to construct one's different layers of complex identity (Maalouf, 2012). Despite such drastic additions, the museum itself followed the traditional display approach, focusing on academic information and archaeological displays rather than interpretation (Gazi, 2008) until its major transformation which coincided with the turn of the twenty-first century and heralded its rebranding. This transformation is the subject of our investigation.

2 The Major Transformation of the *B&CMoA* Core Activities: From Mausoleum to a Modern Museum

The major transformation of the B&CMoA is taking place since the early 2000s. Two factors affected this: first, it was then that Greece was receiving a constant flow of generous European funds that due to political pressure were partly channeled to the formation of new, peripheral museums (Poullos & Touloupa, 2018), instead of being used to format a central strategy on museum management, a decision that attracted much criticism. This fact affected the management of museums on a national level and their future, in ways that will be underlined through the case of the B&CMoA.

But most importantly, the new director decided to retell the story adopting a fresh look at Byzantium and what it meant for modern Greece. His purpose was

to modernize the museum following proved best practices and to accommodate different visitor needs and expectations. The permanent exhibition was to now project a modern interpretation of the transition from the ancient world to the Byzantine one, and Christianity in the modern era and art. The aims of the interventions have been (a) to attract the visitors' attention and create a space, whether exhibition-wise or related to the complementary or peripheral services, where they would like to hang out (Andoniadis, 2010), (b) to support their 'identity work' (Rounds, 2006), (c) to learn in their own social, personal and physical contexts (Falk, 1994), and to (d) enjoy being and learning in an aesthetically sound and modern museum space (Bedford, 2014).

To achieve the above, the new director displayed exhibits related to Egyptian Copts and the period of Frankish occupation in Greece that were put on display for the first time. So were exhibits of the life of Greek communities during the Ottoman rule, along with interpretations of what constituted the 'Greek' identity before the 1821 revolution (Gazi, 2008). Overall, this is considered a breakthrough for the B&CMoA as the display change also put visitors in the center for the first time, understanding that people may visit with different purposes in mind but expect to learn, and to be seen in the museum space (Kwon, 2015). This display change also helped the visitors who felt uncomfortable defining themselves by a single layer of pre-described identity (Maalouf, 2012).

2.1 Reflection and Critiques on the Permanent Exhibition Updates

It should be noted here that the new director chose to tread carefully in this process rather than advocate for a fully critical approach of the country's historical relation to Byzantium (Gazi, 2008). Even so, the updated museology and museography, even though it followed the universal shift of views on the subject—a clear change of views on this historical period in academia and museums alike (Gazi, 2008; Tziouvas, 2008)—caused negative reactions as well. The visitors' comments, documented in 2007, clearly show how they considered this new exhibition approach as a threat to the common Greek understanding of the past and the links between society and the Orthodox Church (Konstantios, 2007). Emotions, mixed in this case, are extremely important for the modern museum scenographer, but so is securing a balance between the display of content in a tailor-made way that will be well-accepted, and its proper communication in a way that the public will understand and accept the offered perception (Greppi, 2021). What was made clear at this point of the museum's existence was that up to its latest transformation, the focus had been on memory and not on the reflection of the past (Sontag, 2003), and that eventually the shift of public opinion was very hard but not impossible. In this sense, what the former museum director aimed to do was to balance the B&CMoA role as a national museum with its operation as a memorial museum that would preserve the past in order to 'tell the truth

about what happened to present and future generations and to preclude those who might deny the history' (Sodado, 2018). Thus, visitors were now given the tools to in order to face the facts and use them to re-construct their identity in a multifaceted, based-on-facts manner (Maalouf, 2012).

2.2 Greek Crisis and Pandemic: The VUCA Period

A few years later though, following the Olympic Games, the Greek crisis struck affecting every sector and activity. Museums, as was the case worldwide, were not immune to this change. On the contrary, they experienced harsh measures that affected their personnel and planned activities, cultivating a sense of volatility and uncertainty. Moreover, they were suddenly expected to increase their income and they did so at first by adopting controversial strategies such as the reinstatement of the entrance fee. The volatility of this financial crisis resulted in a complete shift of the museums' international landscape. One example coming from the other side of the Atlantic is that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which faced a 2.2 million cut in its 220 million funding in 2009, thus being forced to fire about 250 employees, or 10% of its workforce (Kearney, 2009). On a Greek national level, the budget of the Greek Ministry of Culture allocated to museums was reduced by half between 2010 and 2011 (Poulios & Touloupa, 2018). The state museums, including the B&CMoA, confronted significant salary cuts and reduced or even cancelled budgets for temporary exhibitions. Moreover, the B&CMoA was then about to re-open some of its galleries after a major renovation project but found it impossible to operate smoothly due to lack of guards for its exhibition space (Poulios & Touloupa, 2018). Overall, due to the aforementioned factors, the B&CMoA experienced a decrease of visitors from 56,610 in 2005 to 13,270 in 2010 (Poulios & Touloupa, 2018).

When the ten-year long crisis came to an end, no-one was the same. Mindsets had shifted, new approaches were already implemented or planned, private donors were located. And then the worldwide pandemic came. Though it was expected by markets and politicians alike to last only a few months, the medical community knew it would stick around for two to three years; as it did, only adding to the VUCA conditions the museum sector and in particular the B&CMoA would have to face.

2.3 After the Decade-Long Crisis: A Critical View of B&CMoA's Peripheral Services

When it comes to its peripheral services, the B&CMoA, does not manage the profit generated by the shop and restaurant because these are pooled with those of all Greek state museums (with the exception of the Acropolis Museum that due to a different legal status enjoys a higher level of individuality), by the Hellenic

Organization of Cultural Resources Management fund, and re-distributed to various cultural projects according to the priorities and set goals of the Ministry of Culture (Poulios & Touloupa, 2018). So, these state museums deeply affect the local and state economy; yet unfortunately, for a number of reasons including central government decisions, archaic laws, their peripheral services were not allowed to evolve following international trends and good practices. Could this be linked to the archaic perception that museums are 'cultural institutions and thus above and beyond such lesser practicalities'?

The new restaurant was opened in a carefully redesigned vast garden that celebrated the building's and area's history and could be used as a retreat from the Athenian heat and extreme noise. The fact that the Restaurant enjoys an individual Facebook account (though dormant) is evidence of a will to allow it to operate as a semi-autonomous activity that affects deeply the brand and reputation of the museum and also its relationship with its visitors. Being the last stop before a visitor's exit, the café along with the shop may deeply affect or even improve the visitors' view of the museum and their lasting impression (Wallace, 2016). In some cases, visitors only come for the peripheral services that provide pleasure and satisfy their need for a haptic connection with the museum objects (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

With respect to the shop, current research increasingly argues that it is an activity directly linked to a museum, and in essence part of it (Albuquerque & Delgado, 2015; Kaya, 2015; Latta, 2019). In 2015, the Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Management announced a reformation of its merchandize offered through the state museum shops. Though the system of profit collection and funds allocation would remain the same, the new products were expected to increase the museum income and add to the museum's positive externalities or have no negative effect (Maden, 2020). The new lines that resulted from an international contest were to become objects of desire whose acquisition add to their owner's status; thus, the museum shop becomes a brand with enhanced symbolism (Aaker, 1996). Besides, being reputable and respectable, the B&CMoA (as any of the other state museums for that matter) can certify some objects as attention-worthy and offer them for sale, using discreet yet effective marketing techniques (Chernick, 2017).

But the Ministry's attempt was not fruitful due to legal approach used by excluded parties that froze the process for years, and in the worst possible period: in 2017 when a new record number of 30M tourists chose Greece for their vacations. For years, the state museum shops remained tragically empty and, in many cases, closed, adding to the overall uncertainty. And that followed a McKinsey research published a few years earlier, explaining how the average visitor of archaeological sites in France spends 6.5 euros in the shop, whereas the average visitor of archaeological sites in Greece only spends 0.2 euros in the shop (McKinsey & Company, 2012).

Unfortunately, by the time the issue was only partially resolved with the re-introduction of older lines and the production of limited new items, in late 2019, the pandemic was at its beginning, and it greatly affected tourism. But overall, museums seem to understand nowadays that the formation of steady relationships with the museum visitors is vital for the fostering of the level of customer loyalty that generates a steady income (Andoniadis, 2010) and the expected personalized experiences

that today's museum visitors demand (French, 2011), the Byzantine Museum of Athens tried to extend these shifts to its services to the extent allowed.

Yet, when in 2020 the Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Management decided to use some known but little-used loopholes to bypass the bureaucratic ordinary path and produce some face masks, it was confronted with public accusations of shady practices and had to publicly explain itself by stating both the laws allowing his recent decisions, and by making a comparison with masks sold in other, private, museums in terms of quality and final cost.

3 Results—Proposed Actions and Guidelines Through the Service-Dominant Logic and Value Co-creation Lenses

The museum's peripheral services, which could have acted as a lever of recovery were facing their own ordeal. During the financial crisis the B&CMoA had to learn how to be resilient in order to overcome current and future obstacles in this volatile and uncertain environment. For example, it investigated the context and limitations of their soft power and ways to use it. Soft power brings change and deeply affects individuals and communities, and it is now being investigated how the recent economic changes shifted the way museums use their soft power worldwide (Decker, 2016). One such way is to influence the visitors' demand by offering specific services and activities and eventually connect the museum's expectations to those of the visitors (Blankenberg, 2015).

It is true though that if the museum doesn't manage its brand, then the world will do it for the museum, and most probably erroneously (French, 2011). The Byzantine Museum seemed to grasp this notion early on mostly thanks to a series of visionary directors that pushed forward the modernization of all its services, core (including the exhibitions and offered learning activities) and peripheral (mainly the shop and café) (Gazi, 2008). What is quite unfortunate for the B&CMoA is that museum visitors may nowadays spend more time enjoying the museum's peripheral activities, and namely the shop and restaurant, than the actual exhibition.

The ministry's noble goal was to render the B&CMoA shop a brandscape, symbolic space where all the elements, tangible and intangible, affect among other things how the visitors/consumers see the world (Sherry Jr., 1998). Unfortunately, it has not yet succeeded; perhaps the recently announced initiative in 2021 to change the legal status of five major museums (with B&CMoA being one of them) from state to legal entities of public law, will act as a solution to the museums' problems deriving by their legal status. The museum employees are deeply dissatisfied with this decision, for understandable reasons. Firstly, they will lose their job permanence, a major advantage of working in the Greek public sector, though their contracts will still be indefinite. Secondly, they are afraid for their salaries as well as any additional benefits. Despite the government's reassuring for their protection, recent history has

shown that in times of financial crisis it is easier to terminate the contract of employees of legal entities of public law due to the respective legislation.

But the Ministry of Culture insists that this change will give the museums freedom to operate, to manage their own profits from any core or peripheral activities and to set up their brands as they wish and proceed in the value co-creation with their visitors instead of expecting the inexplicably slow bureaucratic system to operate. The requested outcome is of course balancing the need for money-making to the not-for-profit status of museums, while satisfying the impulse for hedonic consumption that surpasses utilitarian consumption, stepping on the consumer's need for a sentimental and imaginative contact with the products (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

4 Conclusion

In the case of the B&CMoA, the full scope of consumer engagement is not at all achieved as a result of the institution accepting the old way of operation dictated by the Ministry of Culture despite new managerial advances in the sector (Zarkada, 2014). When it comes to the exhibition and to other object-centered services alike, such as the museum shop, although objects are always a central part of the display approach and are aimed to be interpreted without the, nowadays expected, aid (Bedford, 2014), the new exhibition demonstrates how the past lives in the present in an aesthetic manner rather than a historical approach.

As the next step and following the status update, value co-creation needs to be analyzed on the level of consumer engagement and the motivation behind it. Issues in need of in-depth study are whether people visit the museum in order to express loyalty, or as part of their identity construction through conspicuous membership of aspirational brand communities (Zarkada, 2014). At the same time, the B&CMoA needs to hear the different stakeholders' changing expectations of the museum and its overall activities (including the shop) and correspond to them.

Eventually, following developments in its field, the B&CMoA has pioneered in breaking the national norm of historical continuity (Gazi, 2008). The museum is above all a service provider that has shifted away from the paradigm of the service provider whose role is providing joy (Panigyrakis & Zarkada, 2013) and has rather become a value co-creator that acts as the facilitator of personalized, deeply meaningful customer relations, (Cascella, 2012), that offers societal and financial value along with a more advanced though publicly accepted view on history, and the possibility to enjoy a leading museum's peripheral services.

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