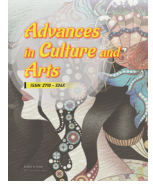




ISSN: 2710-334X

## Advances in Culture and Arts (ACA)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7508/aca.02.2021.19.23>

## ARTICLE

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITES OF MUSEUMS ON SUSTAINABILITY

Jiaqi Liang

Faculty of Foreign Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing 100083, China

\*Corresponding Author E-mail: [ljqstudy97@163.com](mailto:ljqstudy97@163.com)

This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## ARTICLE DETAILS

## ABSTRACT

## Article History:

Received 27 June 2021

Accepted 28 July 2021

Available online 30 August 2021

The theme of International Museum Day in 2015 is "Museums for a sustainable society", and ICOM President Hans-Martin Hinz notes the increasingly important role that museums are playing as educational and cultural intermediaries in contributing to the definition of sustainable development and the realisation of its practice. A prerequisite for museums to contribute to the sustainable development of society is their own sustainable and stable development. In this paper, the discussion of "sustainability" is therefore divided into two main categories: the sustainability of the museum itself and the role of the museum in the sustainability of society. In recent years, scientific and technological developments and advances in mobile devices have accelerated the extension of social media from a privatised space to a public space of dialogue, and have increasingly wrapped cultural institutions such as museums into social and public interaction. In this process, social media and websites play an important role in the sustainability of museums. This paper takes the Palace Museum in China as an example to analyse its successful use of social media and websites, including its official website, Weibo and WeChat official accounts and cultural and creative online shop, and further explore the challenges faced by museums in terms of sustainability, in the hope of contributing to the sustainability of museums.

## KEY WORDS

Museums; Sustainability; The Palace Museum; Social Media; Websites.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The main concern of sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs<sup>[1]</sup>. With the deepening of research, the discussion of sustainability has broken through the environmental and economic field and developed towards human and society. Seyed and Khaled (2018) propose that the realization of social sustainability deserves more attention, as it relates to the dignity of mankind and has a reciprocal relationship with their well-being and quality of life (p.1)<sup>[2]</sup>. In the museum sector, the theme of "Museums for a sustainable society" was adopted in 2015 for International Museum Day, prompting more and more research by scholars and people from all walks of life around the world.

However, the premise that museums can promote the sustainable development of society is to ensure their own sustainable and stable development. In recent years, the development of science and technology and the advance of mobile devices accelerate the extension of social media from the private to the public, and also increasingly involve museums and other cultural institutions in the interaction between society and the public. Nowadays, museums put more emphasis on dialogue and democracy with the audiences, and the "tools" to promote this practice are the museum websites and social media platforms. Social media refers to websites and technologies for people to write, share, comment, discuss and communicate with each other, mainly including social networking sites,

microblogs (Weibo), WeChat (WeChat Official Account), online forums and other forms<sup>[3]</sup>. Kelly (2009) proposes that social media tools offer new ways to learn about the public through direct interaction with them. In this process, curators and exhibition development staff can act as motivators and guides (p. 7)<sup>[4]</sup>. She goes on to explore how social media has changed as they encourage innovation in exhibitions; provide more meaningful content; promote fair dialogue between staff and visitors; and provide more social activities for younger audiences (p. 11)<sup>[5]</sup>. This essay takes this view as a starting point and argues that websites and social media play a crucial role in social sustainability.

## 2. SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES OF WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As a symbol of the modernization of museums, websites and social media break through the limitations of traditional museums in terms of time and space, improve the relationship between museums and the public, and further expand the social influence of museums, which inevitably play a practical role in the sustainable development of museums. However, the performance of the use of websites and social media by museums in China are uneven. In terms of impact both domestically and internationally, the Palace Museum has had more significant achievements by using social media to practice and realize sustainability than other museums in China. Therefore, this paper takes the Palace Museum as an example to analyse its successful practice of social media, discuss the challenges faced by the

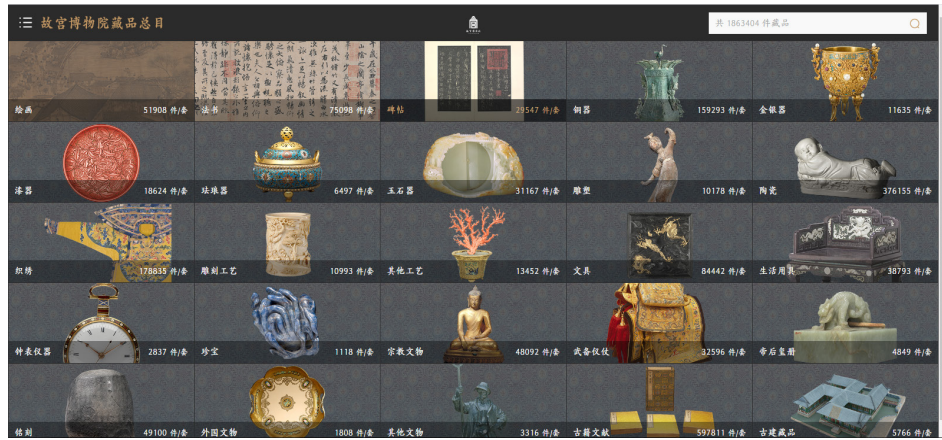


Figure 1: The category of collections in the Palace Museum.

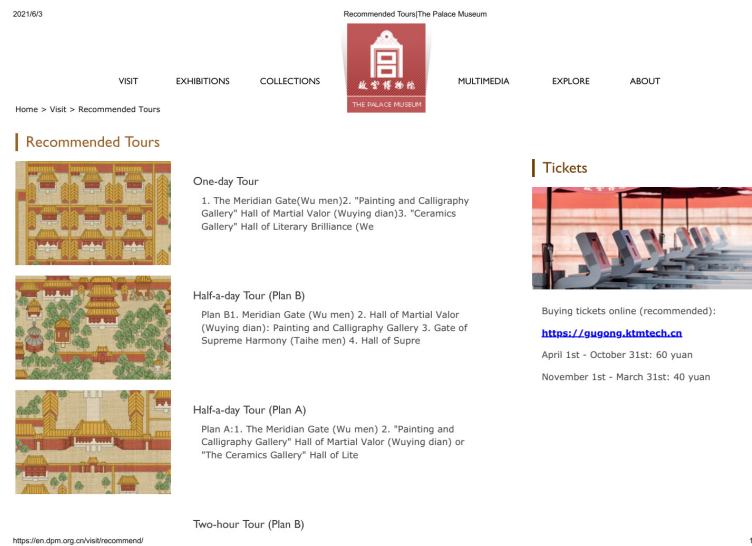


Figure 2: The recommended tours provided by the official website.

museums in their sustainable development, and further explore the role of the museums in social sustainability.

Given the special exhibition space and the huge amount of collections in the Palace Museum, the digitization of its collections is of great significance. Therefore, the Palace Museum takes the "Digital Palace Museum" as one of the key strategic goals of its long-term development [6]. In addition to digital exhibitions within the museum, the official website<sup>1</sup>, official microblog (Weibo)<sup>2</sup>, WeChat official account<sup>3</sup> have been established outside the museum, relying on the Internet and social media platforms. A series of mobile applications with social functions have also been developed, such as *Twelve Beauties of Prince Yong* with the theme of palace life, *Forbidden City 600* with the theme of architecture, *The Qing Emperor's Wardrobe* with the theme of costume culture, etc. There is also the Palace Museum Cultural and Creative Flagship Store<sup>4</sup> on Taobao, which specializes in the marketing of cultural and creative products. This chapter will analyse its successful practice in the sustainability of the museum itself.

The existence of museum websites enables the relevant information of all the collections and relics to be preserved longer, which contributes to the sustainability of the museum. The Palace Museum has a huge collection of relics, all of which cannot be displayed due to limited exhibition space. Thus, The General Catalogue of the Palace Museum Collection was published on its website, which is "one of the major achievements of the fifth cleanup (2004-2010) of the Palace Museum<sup>5</sup>." This is conducive to both the research and use needs of the public and the supervision of the society. As

shown in Figure 1, the cultural relics in the museum are categorised and labelled with specific information, including serial number, name, and era. When visitors click on the collection category they want to browse, they can see all the collections recorded under that category, or they can simply type in the name of the collection they wish to study and then the high-definition pictures of the collection will be shown. Images of the collection can be freely zoomed in and out to examine details.

In addition to the reasons mentioned above for the limited exhibition space, the nature of the cultural relics themselves also promotes the work of integrating information on the website. To keep the precious information intact has always been one of the key missions to preserve cultural relics as they are valuable and non-renewable resources [7]. The collections in the museum require strict preservation conditions because of the specific nature of the materials used, as well as the protection against uncontrollable factors such as fire, earthquakes and theft. Therefore, not all cultural relics can be exhibited for a long time without being exposed to the risk of damage. While the establishment of the digital repository for collections on the websites provide the best ways to save the information. UNESCO (2003) states that "the digital heritage of all regions, countries and communities should be preserved and made accessible, so as to assure over time representation of all peoples, nations, cultures and languages<sup>6</sup>." The website thus makes a great contribution to the sustainable preservation of museum information.

Museum websites and social media have also increased the openness

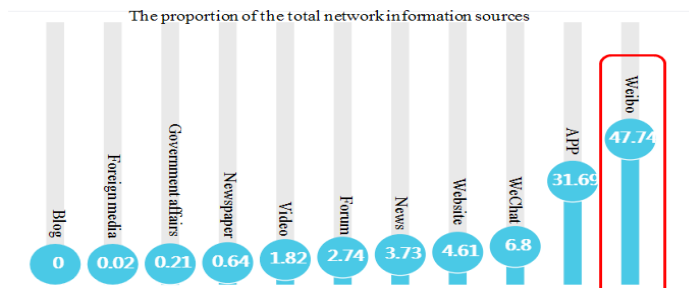


Figure 3: The proportion of the network information sources.



Figure 4: 2021 Zongzi gift box by Taobao Mall.

of information, which improves the efficiency of visitors and indirectly promotes the development of museum work. Both the official website and the WeChat official account of the Palace Museum have a section that contains detailed information such as opening hours, ticketing services, tour guides, and exhibition descriptions as well as *Recommended Tours*. Visitors can browse the necessary information and book tickets online before visiting, which reduces the time spent on buying tickets on site. They can also plan the tour routes in advance, making their trips more planned and further improving the quality of their experience (Figure 2).

Furthermore, the museum website and social media have increased the transparency of information. In addition to visiting information for tourists, more news is released on the websites for public scrutiny. For example, the annual work report and financial budget documents of the Palace Museum are released on the website every year to inform the financial situation of the museum to the public. It also issues solemn statements on the phenomenon that damages the reputation of the museum and some infringement acts, such as the fraudulent use of the name of the Palace Museum to sell alcoholic products, the use of registered trademarks of the Palace Museum without written authorisation. Therefore, the museum websites and social media have improved the openness and transparency of information, which not only improves the efficiency and quality of tourists, but also ensures the standard level of the work of museums, and better promotes sustainable development in society.

Additionally, social media and websites provide more efficient interaction and feedback channels for the visitors, which is conducive to the museum to conduct research and further promote the development of the museum cause. Ambrose and Paine propose (2006, p. 25) that the future success of a museum depends on how well they are positioned and how well they meet the needs of the public<sup>[6]</sup>. In the past, the common methods of surveying visitors to understand their needs and suggestions were paper questionnaires and visitor guest books. There were some problems such as inadequate samples recovered, delayed feedback and high consumption of manpower and material resources, which affected the progress of museum improvement to a certain extent. The Palace Museum has made good achievements in audience research: on its website and WeChat platform, there is a web-based questionnaire portal with questions about their online products and WeChat platform, aiming to collect impressions, perceptions, comments and suggestions from netizens about the Palace Museum

in order to provide better content and services<sup>7</sup>. In addition, Weibo is a social platform for a large number of users in China to access news and information. The Palace Museum updates and releases tweets related to what's happening in the museum, which also fills a gap for users who do not often visit the official website. As it can be seen from the bar chart below (Figure 3), according to the whole Internet search<sup>8</sup>, Weibo accounts for 47.74% of the information sources related to "the Palace Museum" on the whole Internet within 24 hours. Therefore, Weibo is the most popular social media platform in China. The Palace Museum interacts with visitors simultaneously on these multiple platforms, greatly improving the overall efficiency of the work of the museum.

What's more, the normal operation and sustainable development of museums cannot be separated from the financial support, and cultural and creative products and online shopping platform are one of their key economic sources. The online creative shop and Taobao flagship store developed by the Palace Museum largely satisfy people's desire to "take cultural relics home". The Palace Museum has a wide range of cultural and creative products, including cosmetics, accessories, clothing, and stationery and so on. For example, near the Dragon Boat Festival in China, Taobao Mall launched a product "2021 Zongzi Gift Box" (Figure 4). The theme of the gift box is revolved around Chinese traditional festivals, and the making of Zongzi is inspired by the story of the Chinese emperor. The emergence of cultural and creative products and museum stores can not only provide a wealth of knowledge about cultural relics and meet the shopping needs of visitors but also serves as a source of funding for the sustainable development of museums.

The above is about the impact of websites and social media on the sustainability of museums. This is followed by an analysis of the successful practices of websites and social media for social sustainability. The main function of museums is education. By combining museums with the Internet and multimedia, the medium of communication can be expanded and the methods of realizing the educational function of museums can be broadened. In addition to the websites which can permanently preserve the information of cultural relics, another major information resource of the museum is educational resources. By analysing the official website of the Palace Museum, it is found that the successful experience is reflected in providing more educational resources, expanding the scope of the target audience and promoting the awareness of people to protect the heritage. In the "Academic Information" section of the Palace Museum website, people can learn about the latest academic research in the Palace Museum. The Palace Museum often invites outstanding figures from different fields to give lectures and seminars to the public. The "Palace Museum Forum" section of the website also provides information about preview, content and video and text materials of lectures, so that visitors can transcend the barriers of time and geography and receive relevant knowledge of the museum without having to go to the site. For professionals and academics, the website also provides an academic publications section, which contains academic research resources and provides a professional learning channel for scholars, researchers, curators and students of related disciplines. Furthermore, it promotes the development of the academic research in the museum, and furthers the museum to play the social education function.

Secondly, social media allows museums to expand the scope of the audience for education. The most direct practice is that it is established corresponding sections for teenagers and foreigners on their websites and WeChat official accounts. As shown in the Figure 5 below, a screenshot of the youth version of the Palace Museum, with bright and childlike cartoons that fit the theme of the recently passed International Children's Day. Each section of the website features interesting text and cute illustrations to support the interpretation of the cultural relics, which stimulates the interest of young people in learning. Teenagers are the main audience of museum education, and therefore the good development of youth education is an important pillar for the sustainable development of museums. In addition, an English version of the website is designed for foreign visitors. Unlike the Chinese version, the English version of the website is more concise in language and appears to be more picture-oriented. As the most famous museum in China, the Palace Museum aims to make education available to all. It takes advantages of its website to provide education tailored to the needs



Figure 5: The youth version of the official website.

of different groups of people, interprets the concept of stratified education, and constantly expands the scope of the audience, so as to better facilitate the museum to play its educational function.

Finally, the museum promotes the protection and restoration of cultural relics and cultural heritage through social media and websites, which also enhances the public awareness to preserve and protect, thus promotes the sustainability of cultural relic protection. Rosa suggests that museums and art institutions could raise people's awareness and interest in these particular artworks by presenting theories and processes of digital media preservation on their websites [9]. The Weibo and WeChat official account of the Palace Museum have a lot of fans, and they regularly updating articles and sharing topical knowledge on social media every day. People can learn about the importance of preserving heritage while browsing their phones in their spare time, further popularising ideological education and subtly influencing people's behaviour in life. This plays a positive role in guiding the public towards sustainable participation in the cause of museums and cultural heritage, with a more far-reaching impact on society.

### 3. THE CHALLENGES FACING MUSEUMS

To sum up, the above are the positive contributions that the Palace Museum has made to its own sustainability and to social sustainability through the use of social media and websites. But social media and websites also bring more challenges to museums. This is reflected in the following aspects.

There are certain disadvantages to conducting research with visitors via the internet. Online questionnaires and feedback channels often lack the opinions of older groups who lack the skills needed to complete them, or who are not sufficiently equipped. The use of social media platforms also requires a high level of literacy. In addition, the Palace Museum has not yet developed a separate section for visitors with disabilities, which could be improved. In my opinion, the museum could, if it is well funded, hire relevant professionals to design a separate copy of the official website for groups of people with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments. On this website, there is a button next to each label that can be clicked to play the sound, and once the visually impaired person clicks the button, they can hear the content of that label and that of the page they are about to enter after clicking. However, it is a pity that information about the colours and materials of the cultural relics may not be truly perceptible to these disabled people simply by listening to the audio descriptions.

Secondly, social media and online platforms are under the supervision

of the whole society. If there are misinformation and negative news, the damage will be rapidly expanded, which will not only affect the reputation of the museum, but also potentially mislead the public. For example, in 2011, the Palace Museum presented a banner to the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau to thank the police for quickly finding the stolen exhibits. However, there was a typo in the banner, and the museum did not promptly acknowledge the error at the time, which made it the target of public opinion. An analyst from the public opinion monitoring office of People's Daily Online analysed that due to the Palace Museum's inappropriate response and lack of skills in this situation, the cultural image of the Palace Museum was damaged and faced greater public opinion pressure<sup>9</sup>. In response to public opinion in crisis events, the official media platform should not only correct its attitude and mentality, but also actively respond to issues and establish the credibility of the government.

In addition, people's demand for the security of private information is increasing, so the issue of network security cannot be underestimated. Therefore, in the face of the sophisticated "network fraud", there is more work to be done by museums.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the social media and website of museums play a positive role in sustainability. For the museums themselves, websites and social media platforms ensure the safe storage of information about their collections and contribute to their sustainability; they increase the openness and transparency of information, allowing museums to develop their work under public scrutiny; they provide more efficient interaction and feedback channels for visitors and facilitate their research work; and they provide financial support for museums through the construction of cultural and creative shops. All of these contribute to the sustainable development of museums. On the other hand, for society, the museum websites preserve a complete range of educational resources and are open to different social groups. It is an important platform for museums to give full play to its educational function; the publicity on the preservation and restoration of cultural relics and cultural heritage on social media has also raised public awareness. Therefore, websites and social media perform an important role for museums to fulfil their educational function and to influence society in a sustainable and positive way. While the Palace Museum is a prime example of a museum that has strong financial backing and has gained a great deal of attention, there are still numerous smaller museums in China that are temporarily unable to achieve the same results as the Palace Museum due to a lack of funding, technology and relevant

professionals. In the face of the future development of museums, personnel training and fundraising should also become the focus of sustainability.

#### NOTES

1. <https://www.dpm.org.cn/Home.html>
2. [https://weibo.com/gugongweb?is\\_all=1](https://weibo.com/gugongweb?is_all=1)
3. WeChat ID: weigugong
4. <https://palacemuseum.tmall.com/?spm=a1z10.1-b-s.1997427721.d4918089.4cc07e28Br1BaF>
5. Zm-digicol.dpm.org.cn. 2021. General Catalogue of Collection of the Palace Museum. [online] Available at: <<https://zm-digicol.dpm.org.cn/>> [Accessed 15 June 2021].
6. [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17721&URL\\_DO=DO\\_PRINTPAGE&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html)
7. <https://www.dpm.org.cn/questionnaire/detail/1.html>
8. <https://www.yqt365.com/queryPassword.action?extendType=115404&searchKeyword=%2525E6%252595%252585%2525E5%2525AE%2525AB%2525E5%25258D%25259A%2525E7%252589%2525A9%2525E9%252599%2525A2&userPhone=13313540737>
9. <http://news.sohu.com/20110519/n307977749.shtml>

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Brundtland, G. H. 1987. UN World Commission on Environment and Development. Our Common Future. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Seyed, Y., Khaled, G.A. 2018. Social Sustainability in Recent Government-Developed Neighbourhoods in Dubai: Al Barsha North Case Study.
- [3] Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Wang, X. 2016. What is Social Media? In How the World Changed Social Media. London: UCL Press, 1-8.
- [4] Kelly, L. 2009. The Impact of Social Media on Museum Practice. Paper Presented at the National Palace Museum, Taipei.
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Feng, N. 2017. The Inevitable Meaning and Necessity of the Digital Palace Museum. Journal of the Imperial Palace, (01): 181-187.
- [7] Guan, B. 2015. The Application of 3D Photography into 3D Data Construction of Museum-Preserved Cultural Relics. Journal of Guizhou University (Art Edition).
- [8] Ambrose, T., Paine, C. 2006. Museum Basics, 2nd Edition. New York, NY: Routledge.
- [9] Rosa, C. 2015. Preserving New Media: Educating Public Audiences through Museum Websites. Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America, 34(1): 181-191.

