

Article

Studying COVID-19 Impacts on Culture: The Case of Public Museums in Greece

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Abstract: During the last three years, COVID-19 has had a huge impact on both tourism and culture globally. The function of every kind of cultural activity was inhibited due to curfews in all public spaces, including museums, galleries, monuments, and archeological sites, which were forced to interrupt their operation due to the restrictions that were implemented for the protection of public health. In many cases, also in Greece, museums or archeological sites employed the use of digital systems and social media, always carefully abiding by all the security measures. This study aims to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on public museums in Greece and to pursue possible opportunities in order to improve the museums' extroversion through the application of new strategies based on 'New Technologies'. This is achieved through a qualitative methodology with the use of 17 semi-structured interviews to executives of Greek public museums, in order to examine the situation through various aspects, which will reinforce the sustainability of Greece's cultural domain and its acceptance on the cultural sector. The analysis of data revealed both positive and negative results in this form of investigation.

Keywords: COVID-19; culture; public Greek museums; digital technology; qualitative methodology



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most substantial recent challenges faced by business and governments this century. With museums, cultural institutions, World Heritage Sites, and other historic monuments closed, communities were deprived of culture as well as significant revenues. At the height of the global lockdown, 90% of countries had closed their World Heritage properties [1]. Museums have been particularly affected by the pandemic; 90% closed their doors during the crisis, and as many as one in eight may never reopen. The cancellation of national and local cultural and religious events—such as festivals, rituals, and various forms of traditional practices—has had a direct impact on communities and their social fabric and cohesion [2].

More specifically in Greece from mid-March 2020 until recently, COVID-19, extended social unrest, and a feeling of insecurity and fear disrupted the daily life of citizens, workers, and entrepreneurs, which brought about upheavals, not only in economic activity, but also to a great extent in the health, social, and cultural sectors, especially museums. In order to solve these 'weaknesses', digital technology made its appearance, invading people's daily lives, creating telecommuting, tele-learning, and in the case of museums the 'virtual tour' of its exhibits and spaces in order to maintain contact with their public, especially during lockdown.

This study aims to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on public museums in Greece and to pursue possible opportunities in order to improve the museums' extroversion through the application of new strategies based on 'New Technologies'.

2. Literature Review

2.1. COVID-19 and Culture

According to Micheli [3], the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic ‘paralyzed the modern and global national cultural industry’, thus showing that a possible permanent collapse of the cultural system can change social balances, revealing to us structural components from which the contemporary cultural domain suffers. Therefore, the effects are also evident in the culture network as it received such disturbances. Since March 2020, most states had taken drastic measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 resulting in museums and cultural venues being closed to the public.

UNESCO, ICOM, and NEMO have taken action and initiatives aiming to provide technical and financial assistance in the field of culture, during the pandemic and beyond, covering activities such as awareness campaigns, seminars, online meetings, and good practice guides. An example is Europa Nostra, which was created in the Digital Agora, a digital platform whose purpose is to share and promote good practices related to culture and cultural heritage actions worldwide, but in digital form. The above idea of Europa Nostra is that, through this ‘digital market’, citizens, institutions, organizations in the cultural sector, and people involved in culture are all encouraged to interact with each other and learn things from each other during this difficult time.

In addition, UNESCO, through the establishment of the *Resil Art Campaign*, has succeeded in supporting the people of culture, thus ensuring access to culture worldwide. It was also a platform for digital dialogue between artists and cultural professionals, focusing on the present and future of their artistic creation and cultural production [4]. In developing countries, for millions of people access to culture using digital media has remained unattainable, making it difficult to access collections and operate museums online. The effects of the crisis on cultural institutions as well as on museums require an approach that affirms the central role of culture as a means of revitalizing the economy and the cultural ecosystem to promote a better future for the next generations. The member states that participated in the research conducted by UNESCO applied statistical tools to strengthen the data collection that was conducted and to achieve the full integration of culture as a factor of economic and social transformation to ensure the sustainability of this sector. In particular, the effects of COVID-19 on various forms of culture focused on the following:

Libraries: According to the WIPO survey [5], the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant consequences for libraries and archives. The immediate effects of the restrictive measures, the lockdowns to safeguard public health, led public schools and academic libraries to temporarily close their doors. For example, the American Library Association and the International Federation of Library Associations claimed that full shutdowns occurred from mid-March 2020 to mid-October 2020 in almost all countries. Although most of these libraries have begun to reopen with health and safety protocols in place, the pandemic has reduced access to publications, leaving libraries, authors, and publishers struggling financially. Experts also concluded that COVID-19 has accelerated the process and investment to convert archives and libraries into their digital form. For example, e-lending of books has increased in Estonia, as well as e-audio books in Ireland. Many libraries also expanded digital offers and their collections, providing remote library services focusing on electronic lending models. In addition, they provided courses on copyright protection to facilitate the use of digital material by stakeholders. However, this was not supported in all libraries. According to the WIPO survey [5], in a sample of 212 academic libraries internationally, a large percentage (52.36%) had no concern regarding government policies to support libraries during the pandemic. In addition, COVID-19 led to understaffed libraries, unable to meet the new digital demands. The reduction of the general budget and public health limited the number of qualified employees available to provide new services.

Music sector: In addition, the music industry was greatly affected by the pandemic, especially in the context of the live music industry. According to the OECD report, while there were significant losses, this impact was mitigated because 50% of the industry’s revenue came from recorded music. The remaining 50% consisting of live events such

as concerts, shows, and festivals was much more affected as live events were postponed or canceled. Table 1 shows the number of music festivals that were mostly canceled or rescheduled.

Table 1. The picture of international music events during the pandemic.

Type	Number	%
<i>International Music festivals</i>		
Cancelled	72	64.3
Moved to another date	40	35.7
Total	112	
<i>International Music Concerts</i>		
Cancelled	6	60.0
Moved to another date	4	40.0
Total	10	

Source: Wikipedia [6] (accessed on: 2 November 2022).

The sector of live music has been affected by social distancing restrictions linked to the pandemic and limited financial capacity in many countries. Even as health measures varied due to different stages of confinement, music events suffered from low attendance due to travel and accommodation costs. Industry professionals have tried to respond to the crisis, leaving the traditional model of service delivery behind by turning to various alternative online solutions and digital tools changing the experience, demand, and consumption of customers.

Audiovisual arts: According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the culture and arts sector in the US, both for non-profit organizations (NGOs) and for individuals who work on them. The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society estimated that the non-profit arts, entertainment, and leisure sector lost 36% of jobs in the pandemic crisis between February and December 2020.

The visual arts have been affected by the mixed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular due to the closure of art galleries and museums. Since the sector relies heavily on large events, trade shows, and biases, the restrictions on movement and social gatherings brought about by the pandemic have had a negative impact on the international optical technology market and the related ecosystem. However, the impact of COVID-19 on the audiovisual sector around the world may differ in mature and developing markets, either positively or negatively regardless of location. The pandemic has caused loss of income, jobs, livelihoods, and systemic problems in the audiovisual market. The report of the European Observatory of the Audiovisual Sector suggests that the pandemic has led to a 10% reduction in the revenues of the audiovisual sector. As far as the advertising department is concerned, TV ad revenue fell by 15–20% due to the general decline in the public's financial well-being. In general, the pandemic disrupted the potential of development of the audiovisual sector in several regions such as Africa-Nigeria, China, India, Hong Kong (attractive markets for foreign investment) [5].

2.2. Define the Role of Museums

The examination of the relationship between culture, economy, and place has been a field of great research interest in the last 30 years both in Europe and in the USA, as the role of qualitative and intangible factors gained particular importance in urban economic development [7–11] linking it, especially in the 80s, with the development of cultural policies in Europe as the main strategy of urban regeneration [12]. Museums were an important component in the contribution of culture to the development of places.

Regarding the definition of a museum, many definitions have been formulated over many decades. One of the first attempts was by Bazin [13], almost sixty years ago, who states that all museums must have as their common goal the reception of the public and the promotion of knowledge and education, except their traditional functions (collection,

storage, study, and exhibition) thus function as learning and leisure organizations for every human being. Later, Hooper-Greenhill [14] gave a new dimension to the role of the museum by placing it between the space of research and education, while it is also called upon to respond to the demands of the 'leisure industry' (e.g., cinema, theatre, exhibitions, etc.) but also of consumption. A year later, Ginsburgh and Mairesse [15] in an attempt to give a definition to the museum examine the definitions of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the Museums Association (United Kingdom), and the American Association of Museums, concluding that a common element of all approaches is the character of the museum and the functions that differentiate it from other organizations. These functions are conservation, research, and communication. Additionally, the museum as an organization interprets and exhibits the material culture of a given society [16]. Consequently, the internal character of museums as 'special environments' takes on an increasingly complex structure including the 'commercial function' [17], which makes redefining the role in urban economic and cultural development with a more specialized analysis. In this paper, we will use the most recent, new definition of museum which was decided to be valid by ICOM in Prague on 24 August 2022. More specifically:

'The Museum is a non-profit organization, permanently at the service of the society in which it researches, collects, preserves, interprets, and exhibits the tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums support diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, providing diverse experiences for education, entertainment, reflection, and knowledge dissemination' [18].

This definition gives the museum a distinctly different perspective, incorporating the concepts of inclusiveness, community participation, and sustainability, connecting the museum with them. In particular, research relating museums to local communities has been of intense concern to researchers [19,20] as what they are interested in is ensuring its connection with the community, as it is the only way for the museum to be a living cell of culture but also to be in an organic relationship with the local community and region to which it belongs by designing a participatory regional policy for culture [21–23] while a corresponding focus is also observed on the connection of museums with sustainability [24–27].

Museums are therefore one of the most important factors in the cultural stock both at the national and local levels as they are linked to the cultural, social, and economic development of the places [28]. The explosion of interest in museums was placed in the mid-70s and was expressed through the orientation of many European cities, mainly industrial ones, which in the context of deindustrialization and as they found themselves in an economic recession turned to new models and areas of development, such as civilization. This effort was accompanied by the creation of new museums as well as the expansion of existing ones [17]. Kotler et al. [29], refer to a 'museum mega-wave', interpreting this phenomenon as the result of competition between places/cities and their decision to improve their images and their degree of attractiveness.

International practice records many examples of investment and interest in museums, thus recognizing the important role they play in the economic and cultural development of regions [30,31]. At the same time, they are an integral part of cultural tourism and are recognized as 'one of the most basic forms of tourist flows worldwide' [32]. Museums are considered as a major destination attraction motivator regarding tourists' decision to visit potential destinations [33,34]. Through the development of cultural tourism, museum functions have changed their role from traditional practices such as those of collection, conservation, and display of exhibits, as well as education and research to modern forms of practices such as relaxation, tourism, and entertainment thus upgrading their importance in the economic development of the areas where they are located [35].

2.3. Museums in the Digital Era

Digital Cultural Heritage (DCH) represents a challenging research and innovation field still today, living in a very transforming time [36] [Clini and Quattrini, 2021]. Over the

past 20 years, museums have made digital technologies essential resources for achieving and innovating their operations, while offering them a great possibility to improve cultural democracy, participation, and access to heritage [37] [Carlandini, 2021]. The current pandemic confirms the dependence of museums on digital tools, which have become the only means of reaching the public during lockdowns. Many institutions have been offering hundreds of forms of digital/digitized content generally through their own website, in theory opening the doors to new user groups [38] [Lerario, 2023]. Digital tools and new technologies provide possibilities both to promote the image of museums with the aim of attracting new visitors and to communicate with the public, to remain open, and to display their content online [39–41]. In this way, a museum communication environment is formed which is called a ‘virtual’ museum (virtual museum) or ‘cyber museum’ [42]. The ongoing digital transformation seems to be so pervasive that the concept of the ‘virtual museum’ is being discussed extensively. It is also argued that digital technology has revolutionized the relationship between museums and the public, which now includes both physical visitors and virtual followers. Taking advantage of new digital interactive methods [43,44], visitors are also increasingly active in the production of cultural content [45], moving from mere consumers to co-producers of museum contributions. Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly accelerating digital transformations within museums, which suddenly end up only interacting with digital audiences for long periods. Due to prolonged closures, museums are increasingly forced to reinvent their business models to intelligently exploit digital technologies. An increasingly targeted digital offer can change the physical interaction between museums and the public, leading to innovative digital strategies such as those based on the use of artificial intelligence [46].

Museums are entering the post-digital era, where the use of digital technology is considered an integral element of museums’ structure and operation. It is legitimized through the emergence of new job profiles as well as workflows, but it also influences strategic decisions, for example through budget allocations for digital projects. However, the post-digital condition encourages new research perspectives where digital technology is a ‘normative presence’ [47], regardless of the degree of assimilation and requires an integrated analytical approach in different dimensions: operational, organizational, and strategy [46].

2.4. The Impacts of COVID-19 on Museums

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on museums around the world. Due to lockdown restrictions, physical collections and gallery spaces were inaccessible to the public for extended periods of time, having a severe financial impact on museums internationally [48]. More specifically, according to a survey by the International Council of Museums [18], in April 2020, almost 95% of museums internationally were forced to close to ensure the well-being of staff and visitors, resulting in serious economic, social, and political implications. At the same time, in a global survey by UNESCO [2] (May 2020b) which concerns about 95,000 museums, it is estimated that more than 85,000 museums, or about 90% of museum institutions internationally, have been affected by the temporary closure as part of the measures taken to fight against COVID-19. This international picture is also reflected in the data in Table 2, which concerns the number of museums that were temporarily closed in each continent. It is typical with the exception of museums in Asia and the Pacific Ocean, where the percentage of museums closed is around 60%. In the rest of the continents, it exceeds 90%, and in Africa it reaches (around 88%).

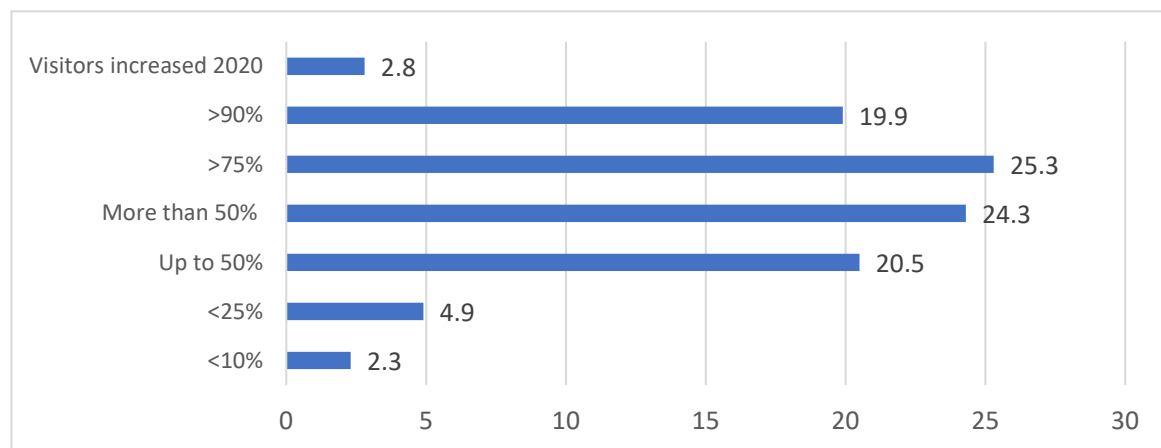
During the lockdown, many museums operated their digital activities to a greater extent. In terms of visitors, online traffic to museums has increased by 70% since they closed, which generally shows that there has been a response to the increase in digital services provided, such as social media as the platforms of choice for their activities. In addition, online services like Facebook and Instagram have played a very big role in the popularity of online services as well as educational material followed by videos, movies, and finally, viewing their collection.

Table 2. The number of museums affected or still affected by the closure measures.

Area	Number of Museums	Number of Museums Temporarily Closed	Percentages of Museums Temporarily Closed
Western Europe and other countries	61,634	58,281	94.6%
East Europe	11,465	11,311	98.7%
Latin America and the Caribbean	8067	8061	99.9%
Asia and the Pacific Ocean	12,195	7237	59.3%
Africa	841	738	87.8%
Arab States	473	473	100%
Total of 195 states	94,675	86,801	90.9%

Source: UNESCO [2].

The economic impact in all its aspects is significant, creating a great sense of uncertainty, with predicted effects such as reduced staff, reduced programs, loss of public and private funding, and museum closures. Overall, the results show that the situation is critical, with serious financial implications for all aspects of cultural institutions' activities. Figure 1 shows the percentage of visitors lost by museums in 2020 internationally. It is observed that over 75% of museums lost 45.2% of their e-visitors.

**Figure 1.** Percentage (%) of visitors that museums lost in 2020. Source: ICOM [18].

2.5. Some Previous Empirical Studies

Museums are an important pillar of cultural tourism. They inform visitors about a country's cultural heritage and cultural expression by engaging them in unique and varied experiences. In addition, the existence of a museum has a positive impact as visitors also have e-alternative options for recreation and experiences of local traditions [49]. In today's competitive environment, museums should define specific objectives as well as develop a marketing plan to enhance their appeal and increase the number of visitors along with their revenue [50,51]. The positive prospects of this market, together with the increase in competition and technological developments, have completely changed the nature of museums introducing a new museum profile and experience [52–54]. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on culture and, in particular, on museums have been studied by many e-researchers who examined the issue from various angles. Undoubtedly, the use of modern technology has contributed positively to the approach of museums during the lockdown period.

More specifically, Agostino et al. [55] carried out a survey concerning the reaction of the 100 largest Italian State Museums to the temporary shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, Magliacani et al. [56], studied how Italian university museums experienced the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was based on legislative documents and polls conducted by museums but also on a literature review on how they managed their service provision through the use of digital technology. In addition,

Cicerchia and Solima [57] (2021), using online questionnaires and primary data from 7000 Italian museum visitors, examine the relations between people and museums during the pandemic in order to explore their participation and use of digital content offered by museums. Additionally noteworthy is the study by Rivero et al. [58], on the case of the Spanish archaeological museums, whose operation stopped on 18 March 2020. Regarding the methodology of this research, information was gathered concerning at least one a sample of 254 Spanish archaeological museums and their collections. Additionally, in the area of digital technology, the e-research of Mas et al. [59] is also focused, and the authors argue that social media produce a strong impact on institutions that are based on culture and promote the concept of a ‘digital social’ museum Samaroudi et al. [60] explored the response of the cultural heritage sector in the UK and the USA during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in which museums as institutions of memory adapted by preparing new digital resources that were available and which allowed visitors access to cultural heritage organizations. The data were collected at 83 major heritage institutions in the UK and USA. In addition, the research of Fitriyani et al. [61] aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of museums and mainly in the area of Jakarta, Indonesia. The method used for the research is descriptive/qualitative. As far as this study is concerned, the sources are based on secondary data from online news platforms, research results, surveys, and other related research reports. The research of Choi and Kim [62] refers to the sustainability of the museums and investigates how museums will be able to ensure sustainable competitiveness, through fifteen semi-structured interviews using the help of a ‘snow sampling’ layer.

Regarding Greece, research on museums and culture is very limited. An important work research is that of Tranta et al. [63], which refers to the restriction of the movement of citizens in closed spaces and mainly in places of cultural interest such as museums. Due to the feeling of uncertainty prevailing in Greece, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during the period of confinement, in particular it focuses on the reactions of young people regarding this new way of life and what their response was to the digital functioning of museums. Grammenou [64] examines the effects of the pandemic on Greek archaeological museums on both an economic and social level but also the introduction of new technologies to continue their operation and their communication with the public. The research carried out was of a qualitative nature and was carried out through content analysis using the relevant literature, in addition to the websites of archaeological museums as well as relevant websites of these museums on social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Table 3 summarizes the studies above.

Table 3. Previous research on the effects of COVID-19.

Study Researchers	Purpose	Sample and Country	Data and Methods
Agostino et al. [55]	Reaction of museums vs. COVID-19	100 Greatest Museums-Italy	Data originating from network platforms—Statistical Analysis
Cicerchia and Solima [57]	Examine the relationships between museums and people during the pandemic	Italian museums	Primary data—Questionnaire
Choi and Kim [62]	Museum Sustainability and Sustainable Development	Korean Museums	15 Semi-Structured Interviews
Fitriyani. et al. [61]	The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on museum operations	Museums of Jakarta (Indonesia)	Descriptive-qualitative research, secondary data from online news platforms, research results, surveys, research reports

Table 3. Cont.

Study Researchers	Purpose	Sample and Country	Data and Methods
Magliacani et al. [56]	Reaction of museums vs. COVID-19	3 Italian University Museums Secondary sources—short	Questionnaires—multiple choice questions
Mas et al. [59]	Understanding how the museum's promotional strategies have been adapted through the communication needs that have arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic	10 Spanish museums	Statistical analysis using SPSS
Rivero et al. [58]	Museum response vs. COVID-19—how digital technology practices respond to sustainability actions related to education and cultural heritage	254 museums in Spain	Data sourced from Twitter using hashtag analysis methods
Samaroudi et al. [60]	Research into the UK and US heritage sector during the period of COVID-19	83 major UK and US heritage institutions	analysis and collection carried out by a multidisciplinary team of researchers - record of evidence
Tranta et al. [63]	Visitor reaction related to museum closures and live vs. digital experience	117 young people (University students)—Greek museums-Greece	Primary data-Questionnaires-Statistical analysis
Grammenou [64]	Highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the use of New Technologies in cultural organizations—archaeological museums in the era of COVID-19	Archaeological museums of Tegea, Aianis, Thessaloniki, and Thermo	Secondary data—use of archaeological museum websites—bibliographic references

Source: Authors editing.

In conclusion, almost all researchers agree on the same point of view, that is, the use of digital technology has led museums to be active even in times of difficult conditions. Therefore, in this way cultural heritage will be preserved and transmitted more enriched to the next generations, always in accordance with the application of competent development policies, with the result that the sustainability of the museums will be strengthened in the future.

3. Public Museums in Greece

3.1. Profile and Character

Speaking of the Greek reality, the role of museums is difficult to define as the Greek public museums and especially the archaeological ones are called to move between a traditional role (safeguarding and preservation of cultural wealth), a fact that was also evident in the previous decades [65], and a new, unknown, and flexible role, that of the 'cultural product' demanded by the needs of the global market [66].

Depending on the collections they have, the bodies responsible for their establishment and management, their exhibition spaces, and the public they address, museums are classified into two categories, general interest/mixed museums, which is to say those that include multi-species collections, and the special museums, which include specialized collections of a group of exhibits (archaeological, art, historical, thematic, folklore, natural history, science, military, numismatic, nautical, or ethnological). Due to privacy and their management body, they are divided into state, public, and private categories, while based on the public in general, there are educational and special interest categories. The places where the exhibits are located are either outdoor archaeological sites or historical buildings/museums in which they are kept and preserved [67] (Table 4).

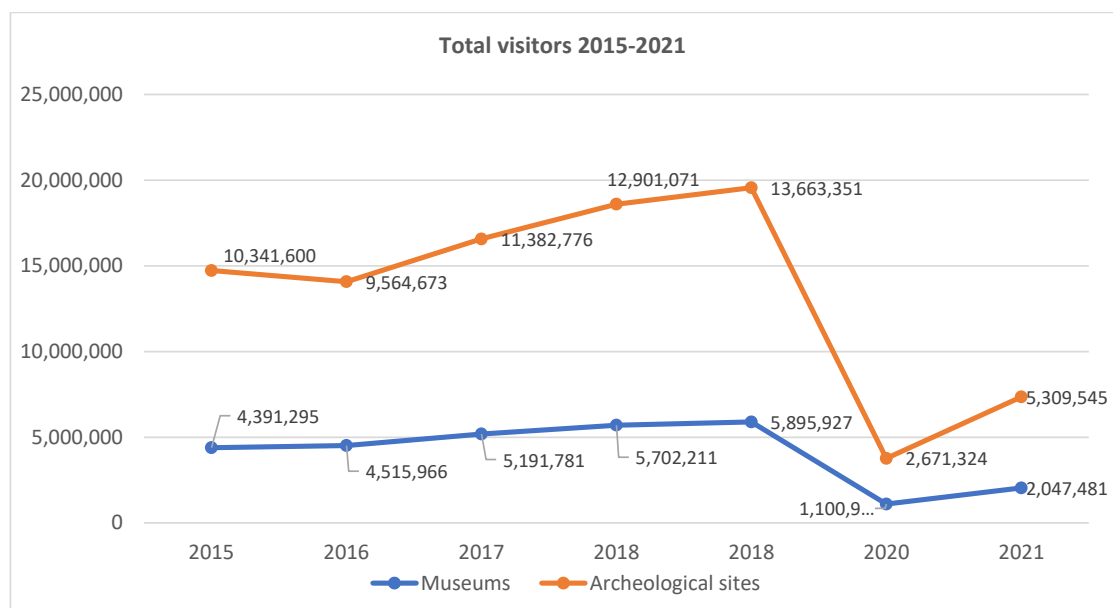
Table 4. Types of Greek public museums.

Thematic Catalog of Museums	
Archaeological museums/collections	207
Byzantine-Post-Byzantine museums and their collections	34
Timelessly	6
Folklore/History museums	49
Visual Arts	18
Theater Museums	3
Cinema Museum	1
Music Museum	1
Museums of Photography	2
Maritime Museums	6
Asian art	1
Science and Technology	12
Museums with topics of special interest	5
Natural History	4
Total	349

Source: Ministry of Culture, Greece [68]—Authors editing.

3.2. Economic Impacts of COVID-19

It is easily understood from the data of Figure 2 that 2020 is a ‘landmark’ not only for Greek museums but also internationally. Examining the number of visitors over time, it is first observed that compared to archaeological sites, they attract more than twice the number of visitors. A second element is that the number of visitors in particular to archaeological sites records an increase of 33.3% from 2015 to 2019. The third element concerns the vertical decrease in visitors in 2020 recording a decrease of >80% in the archaeological sites, a consequence of all the prohibitive measures and the general lockdown. This picture shows clear signs of improvement in 2021 where they are gradually returning to normal conditions resulting in a noticeable increase of >90% in both museums and archaeological sites. With reference to collections, a first element that emerges from Figure 3 is the increase in receipts at archaeological sites relative to museums from 2015 to 2019. Archaeological sites showed an increase of >60%, while museums by 47%. In the year 2020, a total reduction of >84% is observed. This trend starts to change in 2021 where there is a clear improvement compared to 2020.

**Figure 2.** Total number of visitors in public museums and archeological sites in Greece.

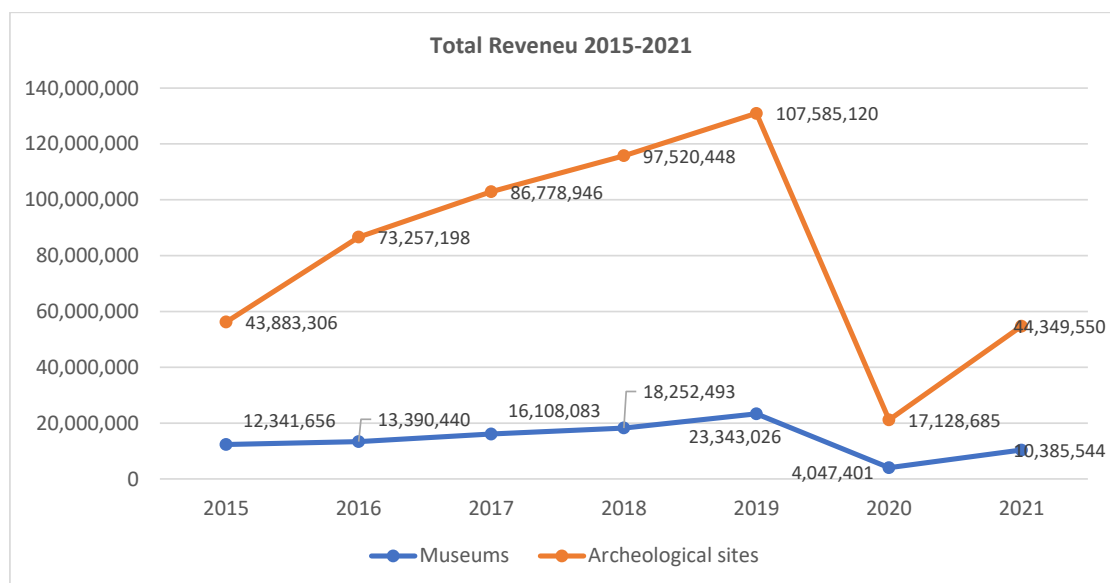


Figure 3. Total revenue of public museums and archeological sites in Greece. INSET-ELSTAT [69]—Authors editing.

In particular, in the top 15 public museums and archaeological sites, the picture of both visitors and collections are tragic. The percentage change of the 2020 data compared to 2019 presents a general vertical drop that exceeds 90% (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. Visitors to the top 15 museums and archaeological sites in Greece (2019–2021).

Museums and Archaeological Sites	2019	2020	% Change 2019–2020
Acropolis of Athens	3,593,586	374,520	89.5
Acropolis Museum	1,755,435	218,406	87.5
Mycenae *	502,619	42,172	91.6
Epidauros *	535,751	45,850	91.4
Ancient Korinthos *	214,023	17,298	91.9
Delos *	172,665	3723	97.8
Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights	263,958	13,659	94.8
Ancient Olympia	159,348	11,110	93.0
National Archaeological Museum	608,876	67,124	88.9
Mystras *	147,713	14,301	90.3
Delphi	405,348	42,072	89.6
Archaeological Museum of Heraklion	660,533	28,846	95.6
Knossos	949,192	58,955	93.7
Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki	135,763	17,448	87.1
White Tower Museum	251,760	43,259	82.8
Total	10,356,570	998,743	90.3

Source: Archaeological Resources and Exportations Fund—Statistical Yearbook of Greece. (From 2019 to 2021) [70]

(*) Archaeological sites that also include a museum—Authors elaboration.

Table 6. Receipts at the top 15 museums and archaeological sites in Greece (2019–2021).

Museums and Archaeological Sites	2019	2020	% Change 2019–2020
Acropolis of Athens	49,691,070	3,202,960	93.5
Acropolis Museum	9,379,505	665,438	92.9

Table 6. *Cont.*

Museums and Archaeological Sites	2019	2020	% Change 2019–2020
Mycenae *	3,150,570	182,198	94.2
Epidaurus *	3,445,836	202,344	94.1
Ancient Korinthos	1,136,960	52,108	95.4
Delos	1,721,964	33,828	98.0
Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights	1,419,406	59,546	95.8
Ancient Olympia	3,561,414	127,854	96.4
National Archaeological Museum	3,021,070	241,379	92.0
Mystras	1,047,498	78,924	92.4
Delphi	2,816,124	174,192	93.8
Archaeological Museum of Heraklion	1,915,613	157,828	91.7
Knossos	10,155,161	465,733	95.4
Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki	351,902	22,684	93.5
White Tower Museum	500,808	68,304	86.3
Total	93,314,901	5,735,320	93.8

Source: Archaeological Resources and Exportations Fund—Statistical Yearbook of Greece (from 2019 to 2021) [70].
 Archaeological sites that also include a museum—Authors elaboration.

4. Methodology and Research Questions

4.1. Choosing Museums Sample

The selection of the museums and archaeological sites that would participate in the research was based on three parameters: The first parameter is related to their size, regarding the number of visitors and their entrance fees. The second parameter is related to their international reach and recognition, as many of them are international cultural brands of Greece. The third parameter is related to the spatial dimension of museums and archaeological sites. That is a question of if the archaeological sites and especially the museums belonged to large urban centers (Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion, Patras) or to peripheral areas. In particular, the regional museums have neither the size nor the scope of urban museums.

Bearing in mind all of the above and based on the historical recording of ELSTAT's data on receipts and tickets at museums and archaeological sites during the year 2019 (see Tables 5 and 6), two groups of museums and archaeological sites were selected:

The first group concerned the first 15 in the ranking in terms of receipts and tickets, and the second concerned a random selection of 15 smaller museums in the Greek region. Out of a total of 30 museums and archaeological sites, it was possible to contact and interview 17 directors of antiquities administrations and heads of museums who were responsible for a total of 24 of the 30 museums and archaeological sites. The aim of this effort was to examine how these two groups experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the actions they took in order to stay true to the role they are called to play. Table 7 shows the two groups of museums and archaeological sites that were selected for the research.

4.2. Research Questions

The first research question focuses on the character of the museum, based on the definition of ICOM [18].

Q1: How possible was it during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic for museums to serve and fulfill their social, educational and entertainment role, exhibiting the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity? Questions 2 and 3 are about the impact that COVID-19 has had on museums. Based on the review of previous empirical research, most of the effects were mainly negative, but at the same time there were also positive ones that greatly benefited and facilitated the operation of museums:

Q2: What are the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums?

Q3: What are the positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums?

Table 7. The museums and archaeological sites of the research.

Team 1	Team 2
Museums & Archaeological Sites	Museums & Archaeological Sites
Acropolis of Athens *	Volos Archaeological Museum
Acropolis Museum	Larissa Archaeological Museum **
Mycenae *	Nauplio Archaeological Museum
Epidaurus *	Argos Byzantine Museum
Ancient Korinthos *	Kythira Archaeological Museum
Delos *	Amfissa Archaeological Museum
Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights **	Pyrgos Museum
Ancient Olympia	Komotini Archaeological Museum
National Archaeological Museum	Alexandroupoli Historical Museum
Mystras *	Thrace Ethnological Museum
Delphi	Dion (Pieria) Archaeological Museum
Archaeological Museum of Heraklion **	Messini Archaeological Museum
Knossos **	Halkidiki Archaeological Museum
Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki	Aegina Archaeological Museum
Byzantine Museum of Thessaloniki	Lemnos Archaeological Museum
White Tower Museum	Chios Archaeological Museum

* archaeological sites also function as a museum, respectively. ** museums and archaeological sites that did not participate in the survey.

Digital technology has evolved more and more with the use of social networks by young audiences and museum staff, who have been able to promote their collections and exhibits online. The following research question answers the extent to which digital technology has replaced the live experience of visitors to places of culture and memory:

Q4: To what extent has digital technology and social media supported communication with the public and . . . digital technology VS physical experience with museums?

Question 5 concerns the opinion of ‘people of culture’ about the post-COVID-19 era in museums and culture in general. Furthermore, they confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a ‘lesson’ to the whole world, which shows that nothing in this life is taken for granted and that the future state of culture and every industry is radically changing and adapting to the new circumstances.

Q5: What are the ‘lessons’ of the COVID-19 pandemic that could help museums in the future?

4.3. Semi-Structural Interviews

Based on the research questions, the questionnaire was formulated, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection are a well-known procedure widely accepted in the field of culture and social research in general [71–73]. The interviews were conducted online using the OBS Studio Program and lasted 30–45 min each. Having as the main objective the greater reliability of our findings, it was considered appropriate that the participants be people who are fully aware of the operation of museums and archaeological sites but also of the measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The respondents were a total of seventeen (17) high-ranking officials of public museums (directors and heads of antiquities departments) throughout the Greek territory and specifically in the regions of Athens, Thessaloniki, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Crete, Western Macedonia, Thrace, and North Aegean. Table 8 presents some characteristics of the responders’ profiles.

Table 8. Profile of the museum executives.

Profile	Response
Gender	13 female–4 male
Age	Mean: 41 years
Education	2 have a PhD degree; 10 have a Postgraduate degree, and 5 have a Graduated degree
Specialisation	All of them were archeologists
Years on management positions	Mean: 9 years
Years at the current position	Mean: 6 years
Foreign languages	3 of them more than two, the other 14 one language
ITCs skills	All declare yes

5. Analysis

RQ1: In the period of the COVID-19 pandemic with the measures that were established, the Greek public museums suspended their operations, were restricted, and could not serve their purposes because there was no possibility of the public coming to them [R1]. This fact was more evident in the large museums of urban centers such as Athens and Thessaloniki [R6 and R11]. Even before the pandemic, efforts were made to adhere to those international terms of the modern museum and its operation, because the character of the museum has changed and is no longer just a place one visits and only sees the exhibits [R8]. Therefore, at the beginning of this period, a status of isolation of the museums from the public was created, especially in the leading museums and the archaeological sites of international scope [R5], with which there was no contact [R4 and 9 and 12].

In particular, R2 specifically mentioned ‘since the museums were closed, there was no possibility of fulfilling their educational and recreational role, nor of promoting the cultural heritage of their region’.

In addition, all kinds of scheduled events such as speeches, conference events, thematic days, lectures, and music events were suspended. More specifically, in the smaller museums of the Greek territory, digital communication was initially limited because the museum workforce was not familiar with its audience [R8]. In contrast, in large museums such as the Acropolis museum, the educational programs were developed on online platforms, in order not to lose contact with the students and the wider public [R7]. However, in addition to educational activities, a significant reduction was also observed in the realization of other events and lifestyle activities, such as the organization of conferences and festivals [R8]. For those that did take place, this happened only during the summer with pre-booked places and a smaller number of participants [R7, R8, and R9]. In leading archaeological sites and in crowded places, such as the Acropolis, Delphi, but also Piraeus, this phenomenon was more intense, indicating in this way the tragic consequences of the pandemic [R14 and R17].

In conclusion, all interviewees agree on the fact that museums and archaeological sites as a whole were decisively affected in terms of limiting the attendance of the public to them. However, on the other hand, their attempt to use digital applications worked especially well in the big museums, adapted to the new conditions, without stopping their work [R6]. R2 and R3, coming from smaller museums in the region, argued that their own museums fulfilled only part of the purpose for which they were established. All the parameters of the ICOM definition were carried out mainly in the summer months when the archaeological sites and museums were open, respectfully observing the restrictive measures.

In particular, R7, coming from a large museum in Athens in terms of the visibility and exposure of museums to the public, aptly uses the terms ‘accessible online’, because even in this way the museum remained an organization ‘open to the public’. Characteristically, R10, representing one of the biggest archaeological brands in Greece, reports that the museum is «Ark of Memory», ‘which guards the possessions of culture, to which one has access for knowledge of humanity, but also a power to transmit global and timeless values of Greek culture to society’.

RQ2: The most common response from all respondents regarding the negative impacts is mainly the reduction of visitation [R1, R3, and R4], especially in the leading and internationally renowned archaeological sites [R5 and R6]. The health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected tourism, which has also decreased due to health restrictions and the need to respect social distancing [R7]. With the continued enforcement of the measures, the effects of lack of visitation remained. Visitor rates were lower due to fear, even when there was the possibility for those who would be interested to see museums and archaeological sites [R10 and R16]. The phrase of R10, a representative of a leading archaeological site, is characteristic, stating that *'for a long time there was darkness, it is a harmful thing for civilization and for society'*.

Two more important negative effects are firstly, the decrease in revenue, something that was reflected in tickets and collections, mainly in the archaeological sites [R4 and R13 and R17] as there was a big difference in tickets compared to the pre-pandemic era, [R15] resulting in their economic sizes being greatly reduced and having numbers confirming that there has been a substantial decline [R12], and secondly, the impossibility of implementing educational programs in museums during the educational period [R2]. It is worth noting that this fact was observed even in the country's major museums. Characteristically, R7 pointed out that *'services and digital applications aimed at visitors during their visits such as (children's corner, touch screens) were no longer accessible' due to the sanitary preventive measures established by the State'*.

As a conclusion, almost all respondents argue that the main negative effects of the pandemic on culture and especially on museums are related to the lack of visitors due to e-closure, the reduction of income, the cancelation of cultural events and educational programs, and the reduction of workers (main reason including special-vulnerable groups).

RQ3: The positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums played their own important role in turn. One of them was the realization of the need to maintain the dialectical relationship between exhibits, curators, and visitors that shape the experiential experience one can have from contact with cultural heritage [R1]. With the onset of the pandemic, time was spent looking for alternative forms of access to museums, something that was previously unfeasible [R5].

In addition, with reference to the large museums of Athens and Thessaloniki, museum officials were given the opportunity to organize files and indexes, to catalog-document and archive works, to maintain exhibits, and to clean hard-to-reach areas in the exhibition spaces, especially when the museums were not open [R6]. While the museum remained closed, this time was essential to carry out maintenance and upgrading works that would have been quite difficult to complete in the presence of the public [R7].

Other communication possibilities beyond physical contact were also created, for example digital contact, with the process of building online programs, with teleworking [R17] that greatly facilitated the staff who became familiar with them, and which helped to implement many other museum works where possible [R3]. R9 reports *'It would be much better to have an online presence to be in contact with the public at any time and in any condition'*, while according to R11 *'posts were made on the museum's website so that everyone could see and read about International Museum Day, about their history and post their opinion'*. The provision of services to citizens, which is also conducted remotely, came from the development of ingenuity for the design of digital actions to approach the public. In the large museums, an effort was made, even though there were adversities, to plan even 'hybrid' actions that combine live with remote in terms of the public's visit to the museum [R6].

RQ4: All museums with a focus on the largest and best organized managed to adapt to the new sanitary conditions, invested in quality technology, and made the most of modern digital capabilities given to them [R6]. To a large extent, the contribution of technology and social networks has helped to maintain contact with the public and promote intellectual contact with exhibits and museological perspective [R1]. Technology has made it much easier for museums to communicate with their public by implementing digital tours and

activities through Facebook, which in any case have been interesting and attractive to visitors that continue successfully to this day with excellent results [R4 and R5].

According to R2's view *'A virtual tour can act as a rudimentary communication link'*. The creation of a digital museum using relevant websites for young and old has become the core of communication between museums and their public, providing equal, free, and unrestricted access to their collections and exhibits, information, and knowledge. It captures their operation and actions in a modern way, while at the same time providing multidimensional information and entertainment through the provision of their quality services. R7 points out that *'tools such as technology and social networks are proving to be helpful in maintaining e-communication with the public'*. Technology has contributed a large percentage, but the physical experience is definitely not replaced by the digital experience of the public with the museum. It is a different sensation, because contact with the exhibit through a screen is a cold and apathetic medium. It does not create any emotion [R11]. R16's opinion was sharp, *'online access is more plastic'. A lifelong visit to a museum is something that a person can have, either as a learner or as a simple visitor'*. Installing digital applications in museums can improve them. Their use should be conducted in parallel with a live visit to them because the interested parties are given the possibility to become visitors when they are presented with an exhibition about a historical event or a find, so that their tour becomes more comprehensible [R12 and R14]. *'Life-to-life contact, walking through space is something unique that no online e-contact can ever fully restore 'it doesn't give you the emotion that one has when facing a cultural exhibit, but only the 'tat-a-tat contact with it' according to R10 and R17.*

Furthermore, experts argue that the digital world has not replaced real-life contact within the museum environment. Museums are considered 'living organisms', and the physical experience is irreplaceable. Museums are not only a series of exhibits but also their people, the geographical space, and the natural environment in which they are part, which once developed the cultures displayed in them.

RQ5: A first lesson is that the visitors of a museum constitute an irreplaceable dialectical pole that brings aliveness to the space and that their movement transforms the landscape according to their searches in time, something that *'museums as 'living organisms' were deprived of'* [R1].

In addition, an important lesson is considered that a new path has been opened for Greek museums, that of technology and social networks, that due to the coronavirus these practices were first adopted and then established even in the post-COVID-19 era. Digital technology was not so e-active in past, but with the possibilities it gives, it nullifies the distances, facilitates the participation and monitoring of actions and cultural events that, under other conditions, would be impossible or problematic, for the promotion of a cultural ensemble at the ends of the world [R3 and R12]. So, R8 thinks it *'can help in better preparation in case of difficulty of direct communication with the public'*.

Referring to the major museums in urban centers, R6 noted that *'a lesson worth noting is the search for and approach to alternative ways of communication between museums and their public, developing online applications because real-life contact with museums is not a given in case of re-incarceration'*. The specialization of the existing staff will lead to the upgrading of the equipment of the museums, until they, in turn, having a well-prepared plan to deal with any difficulty, will provide more electronic services if the data are disturbed [R7]. Digital actions are capable of alleviating this complete absence of cultural cradles from society *'it was a light in the tunnel to see that you could watch programs, exhibitions, concerts, to maintain communication under any condition'* [R10].

As a conclusion, according to the majority of participants, the main lesson of the COVID-19 period is related to the creation of other communication channels for museums to be able to get in touch with their public. Digital practices combined with physical experience provide a comprehensive and adequate way of better knowing museums, with an emphasis on the promotion and protection of cultural heritage. Especially in large

museums, digital technology and even more so the design of hybrid activities became the channel of communication with the public, keeping the museums 'alive' to a large extent.

6. Answering Research Questions

6.1. Maintaining the Role and New Character of Museums

All the representatives of the Greek public museums in the survey stated that the role of museums during the pandemic was not fulfilled to the fullest. Compared to the smaller museums of the region, this fact was more evident in the large museums of the center and also in the top archaeological sites, for which due to their international scope, the lack of the public was clearly more evident.

As a result of this situation, most educational, research, social, and participatory actions were negatively affected. On the contrary, the use of digital applications and innovative technologies has been more widespread in large museums due to the existence of the appropriate specialized managerial potential but also the need created to maintain contact with their public as well as their extroversion.

This outcome also supported from the evidence of the MuSA European program [74] where regarding museology and cultural heritage specializations, hard skills such as digital skills tend not to be sufficiently valued, especially in Italy and Portugal and less in Greece. According to Fiorenzo Galli 'We need to invest in everything, but above all in human resources, educating people not only in digital skills, but in education as a capital value' MuSA project [74]. To this line, the E.U. sets up the CHARTER (Cultural Heritage Actions to Refine Training, Education and Roles) project in order to create a lasting, comprehensive sectoral skills strategy to guarantee that Europe has the necessary cultural heritage skills to support sustainable societies and economies, including transversal competences such as digital/technological and green/blue economy skills [75].

6.2. Negative and Positive Effects

Regarding the negative effects, no differences can be discerned between the largest museums and archaeological sites and the smaller museums at the regional level. The reduction in the number of tickets and, by extension, the receipts had a very negative effect on all the museums in the survey.

In particular, these effects of an economic nature, as well as the cancelation of events, were more pronounced in the major museums and the leading archaeological destinations (Delphi, Epidauros, and Mycenae), as the existence of almost empty spaces was evident due to the limited number of visitors or and closed spaces during the lockdown.

In the overall positive effects, museum representatives emphasized the importance of digital technology and its multiple applications in the museum environment. In this case, again, the big museums in the urban centers benefited more than the smaller ones in the region, as they had the specialized staff and respective departments that took on the task of designing digital platforms, connections, and even hybrid actions.

At the same time, they had the time due to the lockdown, especially in the large museums due to the volume of exhibits, to carry out archiving and conservation actions, something that also took place in the smaller museums but not to such an intense degree.

6.3. Digital Technology vs. Real Life Contact and Experience

As a whole, representatives of museums and archaeological sites emphasize the importance of digital technology in the effort to connect and maintain contact with their audience. It was pointed out, however, the difference in the dynamics of this contact related to the potential size and scope of the large museums and internationally recognized archaeological sites in relation to the museums of the region. Large museums due to their nature, the spatial scale in which they are located, but also the requirements for greater extroversion due to their international recognition as cultural brands have the expertise, the executives, and the necessary budget from the state to design digital applications of

each kind, so as to maintain both their communication and their image to the international general public, something that smaller museums lag behind.

The common recommendation of all the representatives is that digital technology is a necessary and very important tool, but in no case can it replace the real-life contact and the unique experience that the visitor can have in the museum environment and is a coma more of his lifetime tour of an archaeological site.

6.4. Lessons from COVID-19

The main lesson that emerges from the findings of the research and which is a common position of all the representatives of the museums-archaeological sites is that museums are characterized as 'living organisms', that live and interact with their public.

Consequently, they should serve their multidimensional role in the best possible way. The use of digital technology is an effective tool to achieve this goal. According to the general confession of the respondents, COVID-19 will leave this emergence of a new digital age as a legacy for the future of museums and culture in general. A new and multidimensional path is opening for museum and cultural development, through the mobilization of alternative ways of communication and promotion of museums, as well as the search for new strategies to stimulate their extroversion, especially regional museums, as an alternative source of information, Knowledge, and information in times of danger. For Greek public museums, *digital technology is here to stay*, enabling all forms of culture, but especially museums, to maintain their social, educational, and entertainment role, as defined by their nature.

As a conclusion, the training of museum executives in this direction is deemed necessary and necessary in the smaller regional museums, where the specialized executive potential is insufficient.

It is noteworthy that the results from the interviews support the findings of previous research. From the above conclusions based on the interviews and previous studies, it follows that there are no differences in opinion regarding the situation caused by COVID-19, but also the creation of new development policies such as the use of digital technology.

More specifically, the research of Agostino et al. [56], by Rivero et al. [58], and Choi and Kim. [62] particularly emphasize the positive use of digital social media in terms of communication and contact with the public, as confirmed by the present research. At the same time, the research of Mas et al. [59] focuses on the concept of the 'social role' of museums, while regarding the positive effects. The views of the findings of this research converge on the fact that an online service provision results in strengthening the sustainable development and competitiveness of museums resulting in the creation of new strategies, which will help to maintain their role in terms of the cultural heritage they include, but also in its future transmission to new generations, as in previous research [62].

In conclusion, museums as 'living organisms' are internationally recognized as 'memory boxes' or 'memory institutions' according to Samaroudi et al. [60].

7. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the culture and public museums of Greece. In addition, the search was for possible opportunities in order to improve the extroversion of museums by using new strategies such as digital technology, which would strengthen the sustainability of Greek culture. Furthermore, the aim was to research the experience of the effects and search for ways of communication of larger museums internationally compared to the regional ones of the Greek state. Based on the present study carried out for the Greek public museums that participated in the research, the conclusions reached are as follows:

First, in terms of maintaining the role of museums based on the ICOM definition during the pandemic, it was largely unsatisfied because the lack of visitors was clearly more evident in larger and more popular museums compared to regional ones. For Greek museums, of course, the use of digital technology and social media helped to project the

extroversion of the larger museums, because they had specialized staff and the appropriate equipment to maintain contact with their public for as long as the confinement lasted.

Second, the pandemic brought both positive and negative effects to Greek museums, but no difference was observed in the negative effects. The collection of tickets and the lack of visitors have affected all museums, whether regional or top Greek archaeological museums. The positive effects were focused on the following common element, which concerns digital technology that has helped the extroversion of cultural spaces by designing and using digital special platforms for public access to museums online, which was again stronger in with-better museums than in smaller ones. A common element of the opinions of the participating museum executives was that digital technology proved to be a useful tool, but it cannot replace the live contact and experience of the visitor in a natural environment where the museum or archaeological site is located compared to virtual. In addition, because the museum is considered a 'living organism', the training of the executives of the smaller museums is necessary so that the museums serve their role in society the best way possible.

Thirdly, the use of digital technology is 'here to stay', and the COVID-19 pandemic has left future generations with this alternative, in cases of emergency in terms of the promotion of culture. In relation to the previous studies, no substantial difference was observed compared to the results of the present research, because in both cases the COVID-19 pandemic brought the same situation both internationally and within the Greek state, as well as the opening of a new development of culture, using digital technology.

8. Further Research

As a further research approach, it would be interesting to conduct a survey regarding the degree of adoption and use of digital technology and its applications in all museums of the Greek territory. Specific attention should be given on the comparative analysis between the large/brand name museums in Greece and the regional ones. There are strategies, tactics, development policies, marketing practices, and the creation of clusters, by formulating a questionnaire to museum executives as well as those in charge who work with the cultural sector and who are interested in its future development.

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