

## COOPERATION AND CO-CREATION IN THE SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITY OF MUSEUMS

### Abstract

Museums are more often analyzed from diverse perspectives, which include the multiplicity of their functions performed. The biggest interest regards cultural, social, or tourism activities. Nevertheless, educational activities, addressing especially the school youngsters, are of importance as well. Among the multifunctionality and diversity of functions performed, less is explored about the cooperation within the framework of scientific projects, which is closely connected to the basic museum duties: collecting and researching. The main aim of the article is to recognize the importance of cooperation initiated by museums within the area of scientific activity. It was specified by two research questions: 1. What entities are engaged in scientific-based cooperation? 2. In which ways effects of such activity are co-created? Within the qualitative research approach applied, the multiple case study method was selected. During the research, the semi-structured interviews were applied, as also observations and content analysis from social media sites. Although the focus on the scientific activities depends on the specific institution, yet is important while looking at the basic activities performed by museums. Scientific cooperation very often connects similar organizations, but also opens for new relations. Despite strict scientific dimensions, the benefits may also affect less involved entities. Field research and conferences, especially visible parts of scientific activities, have an aspect of co-creation as well.

**Keywords:** co-creation, cooperation, management, museum, scientific research

### Streszczenie

#### Współpraca i współtworzenie w działalności naukowej muzeów

Muzea coraz częściej analizowane są z różnych perspektyw, uwzględniających wielość pełnionych przez nie funkcji. Największe zainteresowanie widać w odniesieniu do aktywności kulturalnych, społecznych bądź turystycznych. Niemniej jednak aktywności edukacyjne, kierowane do dzieci i młodzieży uczęszczających do szkół, również mają znaczenie. Wśród wielofunkcyjności i zróżnicowania form współpracy mniej uwagi poświęca się współpracy w ramach działalności naukowej, która łączy się z podstawowymi zadaniami muzeów: gromadzeniem i badaniem. Celem artykułu jest rozpoznanie znaczenia współpracy podejmowanej przez muzea w ramach działalności naukowej. Został on doprecyzowany przez dwa pytania badawcze: 1. Jakie podmioty angażują się we współpracę o charakterze naukowym? 2. W jaki sposób współtworzone są efekty działalności naukowej? W ramach zastosowanego podejścia jakościowego zastosowano wielokrotne studium przypadku. Przeprowadzone zostały wywiady częściowo ustrukturyzowane, obserwacje oraz analiza treści z mediów społecznościowych.

Chociaż stopień, w jakim zwraca się uwagę na działalność naukową, zależy od specyfiki danej instytucji, to jest to aktywność mająca znaczenie z perspektywy podstawowych zadań realizowanych przez muzea. Działalność naukowa przyczynia się do łączenia i utrzymywania kontaktów między podobnymi organizacjami, ale otwiera również na nowe relacje. Poza wymiarem *stricte* naukowym korzyści mogą odczuwać także podmioty mniej zaangażowane w konkretne projekty. Badania terenowe i konferencje, szczególnie widoczne elementy działalności naukowej, mają w sobie również wymiar współtworzenia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** badania naukowe, muzea, współpraca, współtworzenie, zarządzanie

## Introduction

Scientific discussion around museums regards many aspects, yet, the common part is about that they nowadays perform many functions. It is especially noted, that apart from collecting and preserving artifacts, museums have to be open to the environment and take into account the diverse needs of the audience [e.g. Evans et al., 2012]. Hence, apart from the core purpose of existence, and because of the growing expectations of stakeholders, museums become an increasingly more relevant partners in social, cultural, educational, and tourist activities [e.g. Jaremen, Rapacz, 2018; Hutchinson, Eardley, 2021]. The pandemic situation made it even more visible that museums are connected to the environment and share common problems. The closing of the museums was a barrier in conducting almost all activities, yet it was also a time to show creativity in terms of maintaining relations with the environment only online. However, the practice revealed that not all activities can be conducted in the online form without problems. Yet, despite the difficulties faced, museums still cooperate with a variety of entities. Although the necessity of being open to the environment is indisputable, it can be also observed that not all of the cooperation's directions are analyzed to the same extent. Hence, the article aims to recognize the importance of cooperation initiated by museums in scientific activities. The article is structured as follows. It starts from a theoretical background, including the perspectives and functions to which museums can be connected. There, the specific roles that museums perform are mentioned, including the importance of cooperation. Then, the research gaps are presented, focusing on scientific cooperation. In the following parts, the research methods and results obtained are presented. The article is finished with the conclusions, discussion part, and summary, which includes research limitations and possible future research directions.

## Background

Nowadays, the scientific discourse around museums becomes gradually more extended. The extension of museum-related topics covers both management issues, as well as the socioeconomic area [e.g. Bryan et al., 2012; Davies et al., 2013;

Murzyn-Kupisz, Działek, 2016; Najda-Janoszka, Sawczuk, 2018]. It can be seen that all of these aspects are interconnected. Due to changes in political decisions and financial situations, museums started looking for other sources of funding. Therefore, visitors' needs and expectations cannot be omitted in the current competitive environment. Moreover, if museums want to prepare an appropriate offer and adapt to the current situation, they have to gain knowledge about the environment, hence, conducting research is relevant [Ćwikła et al., 2023]. In terms of visitors' behaviors, research may regard frequency of attendance [e.g. Kruczek, 2016] or more specific opinions about the exhibition or institution [e.g. Stefanik, Kamel, 2013].

Hence, while discussing the role of contemporary museums, two perspectives are mentioned. Foremost, museums are institutions dedicated to the collecting of artifacts and the preservation of heritage, but also more often perform as business and service institutions. The crucial point is to find a balance [e.g. Levine, 2013] and put a cultural mission in the first place. There are observations and research made not only by the scientists from the management field but also by museologists.

A good example of how the museum sector looks at the changes that occurred and how notes the necessity of implementing modifications in the offer is the work made by the International Council of Museums. They started a debate around the creation of the new museums' definition, yet, it is still an open issue, due to the lack of common acceptance of new proposition [e.g. Folga-Januszewska, 2020]. Currently, the museum is defined in the following way:

museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment [<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed: 3.12.2021].

Hence, although preserving and conserving the heritage is the primary function, museums are also dedicated to enjoyment, study and education. It means that museums are connected to social activities [e.g. Hutchinson, Eardley, 2021], cultural and creative activities [e.g. Jaremen, Rapacz, 2018; Sawczuk, 2020], tourism [e.g. Brida et al., 2012; Stefanik, Kamel, 2013] and also education [e.g. Gaylord-Opalewski, O'Leary, 2019]. Regardless of what area is considered, the importance of relations and the necessity of cooperation always can be noticed.

Although the importance of relations as well as the possibility of creating a common value is recognized in museums' context, not each issue is explored to the same extent. Firstly, value is explored rather from the perspective of the recipient and the last effect of the project, whilst omitting the course of the co-creation process [Williams et al., 2020]. It can be also noticed that cooperation within the scientific area is less explored, as it is not the synonym of the education activities. Moreover, the whole idea of "doing research" is multidimensional [Ćwikła et al., 2023]:

it regards research about the audience, the environment, and also research closely connected to the museum's core collection. While there are many studies regarding educational tasks performed by museums [e.g. in *Journal of Museum Education*], it is more about programs addressed to schools or universities. Hence, universities and research centers tend to be overlooked as participants in knowledge creation processes, although this type of research activity especially supports essential museum functions. The question of within-science cooperation earns more exhaustive exploration, also due to the fact that conducting research is one of the museums' definition elements, as it is pointed out in the ICOM's definition mentioned above [<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed: 3.01.2022]. Moreover, under the term "conducting research" different activities can be considered, hence – different stakeholders can be involved. It is also possible to identify „science museums” as one of the museums' categories [e.g. Skydsgaard et al., 2016; Brown Jarreau et al., 2019], yet other institutions (open-air, artistic, historical, etc.) are dedicated to conducting the scientific duties as well. Moreover, the transmission of knowledge represents one of the museums' crucial functions. Hence, in each museum, scientific area and conducting the research will be relevant [Ayala et al., 2020].

The conducted research was part of a bigger research project, dedicated to the exploration of the value co-creation in museums within the multi-stakeholder approach. Thus, within this project, a few smaller activities were conducted. The main aim of this study was to identify the importance of the museums' cooperation initiated within scientific activities. The research purpose was precise by two research questions:

- 1) What entities are involved in scientific cooperation?
- 2) In what manner are the effects of scientific cooperation co-created?

## Method

To realize the assumed research aim, the qualitative approach with the multiple case study method was chosen. Due to the high contextuality and strong embeddedness with the environment, this approach was considered as the most appropriate [e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989]. Moreover, the research has a longitudinal form. It was selected because of the museums' work specificity and some season-oriented activities, as also because of the possibility of more in-depth exploration of the cooperation processes.

Hence, due to the longitudinal form, the study was divided into phases. The preliminary phase took place between November 2019 and February 2020, involving three cases. The first main phase started in March 2020 and lasted till November 2020, while the second phase was from December 2020 to September 2021. This crucial phase of the study involved six cases, selected in a purposive way. The research assumption was to get maximum differentiation of the examined cases [Yin, 2015]. Within the criteria obtained, there is also some level of similarity within

the cases. The criteria used during the process of the selection of the cases are as follows: localization of the museum, organizational form, age of the institution, market position, structure and accessibility. Although the research narration is guided mainly by the museums' perspective, these institutions are central points of the cases, not the cases themselves.

According to the above-mentioned research assumptions, the research has a qualitative character. Therefore, the semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations and qualitative analysis of the social media content were used in the study. Social media content was analyzed especially from the perspective of six central museums from cases: whether they inform about conducting any research, what was the form of the research, and what entities were involved in those projects. All six central museums are active mostly on Facebook, thus this platform was especially taken into consideration. The analyzed content was from 2020 and 2021. Regarding observations, they were connected with personal visits to institutions: during observation, it was verified whether any information about research cooperation is presented in the museum area. Whilst the triangulation was applied, the especially relevant were semi-structured interviews, as they helped to reach an in-depth understanding of the context of cooperation processes. The first group of interviewees was employees from six central museums representing museum departments of education, promotion, exhibition, or tourism coordination (37 interviewees). In two cases, museums have scientific departments, hence they were also included in the research process. During the exploration, new interviewees were asked to participate in the research. The "snowball technique" was used for this (other employees gave their suggestions), but also a result of collecting secondary data. Independently of which museum departments are taken into consideration, interviewees were managers or people who are responsible for particular, relevant projects. Apart from the museums' perspective, also external stakeholders were interviewed (employees from other museums or other cultural/science institutions; 15 interviewees). Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Since the beginning of the first main stage of the research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, the way of interviewing had to be changed. Therefore, personal interviews were conducted only if the interviewees agreed to that and if the epidemiological situation was better. Apart from that, interviews were conducted via phone or tools like Skype and Zoom. In some cases, the responses were sent back in written form. Independently of the online or onsite interviews, interviewees were always asked if they agreed to record an interview. If they consented to, the recordings were used to prepare a transcription of the interview. Then, transcriptions and written responses were analyzed by coding the text involving the grounded theory assumptions. The approach used is the "incident-to-incident" approach. The obtained results showed categories regarding i.e. relations within the organization and barriers in the cooperation processes. Analysis was conducted both within each case and also in form of the cross-case analysis. In a further stage of analysis, each of the respondents received a special code: number of case, type of institution, and institutional department, e.g.: 5.M.PU.

## Results

The issue of what entities are engaged as well as how the effects are co-created depends on what area of scientific activities is considered. Therefore, all results obtained can be divided into four interrelated thematic fields. However, the collected data revealed that by the term “scientific activities/cooperation” there are considered activities supporting museum core duties, not exactly marketing or audience research. Through such a division it is possible to have an in-depth look at what cooperation looks like and what connections can be noticed. That type of intertwining was even mentioned by one of the interviewees:

This is, of course, collecting and exhibiting the objects, research activity also, which pulls all the publications. Within the research activity, we also have conferences and sessions, both those organized by us and those for which we have invitations. We have educational activity as well. (...) Each of the area is a bit different, but they all can be connected to each other. (February 2020; 3.MP.WYST)

Therefore, the first identified area concerns **research studies** and **museum queries**. As was mentioned, each of the functional areas related to the scientific activity can be connected to each other. By “research and queries” are meant actions performed to prepare especially for the exhibition:

(...) it is not possible to conduct an exhibition without a query, as it is not possible to prepare a research paper without appropriate preparation. (February 2020; 3.MP.WYST)

Employees’ publications are an effect of conducting research topics (both generally museums as well individual), results of queries national and abroad. (June 2020; 4.M.N)

The purpose of preparing the exhibition is one of the most relevant, but not the only one. Yet, even without this purpose conducting research forms one of the museums’ employees’ duties. It is indicated both in the Museums Act from 1996 and also in organizational statutes. As the study was conducted amid the pandemic, this difficulty in conducting statutory tasks could not be overlooked by the interviewees:

Constraints caused by the epidemic really hindered conducting of the scientific activity. Here, we could mention impossibility to have a business trips in order to make queries and collecting information in that way (such queries, also abroad, were planned with tickets and hotel reservations booked). (June 2020; 4.M.N)

In each case during the interviews the difficulties caused by the pandemic were mentioned, but in different contexts. Thus, it regards organizing events and educational activities, having exhibitions open and especially conducting research. What was mentioned as a secondary option it was interviewing online, which is important while the research purpose assumes the participation of local communities. While

it is more about visits to archives, then the situation and possibility of cooperation were more difficult.

The abovementioned quote about pandemic-related constraints regards scientific departments, yet similar observations were presented also by employees representing a bit different departments, like art or ethnographic. Hence, even if the museum does not have a separate Scientific Department, the scientific-related tasks are always performed. In this situational context, the exploration should start within the particular institution in where:

The author of the exhibition asks for and conduct a queries in different institutions. He has an idea for the exhibition, has a title. (February 2020; 3.MP.WYST)

Thus, the first engaged entity is the museum's employee, which starts the process:

Negative query is query as well, but to the greatest extent, the employee who created this idea has an orientation on this topic. (...) You know, the topic is mainly created as people know that these specific objects exist. (February 2020; 3.MP.WYST)

The statutory tasks are always considered in the first place, but also individual's creativity and competencies are relevant factors.

Moreover, this process is two-sided. On the one hand, there is an employee who looks for appropriate artifacts and places where museum queries can be conducted. On the second, there is a perspective of the institution which receives a question if conducting a query will be possible. Hence, it is even impossible to analyze engagement within scientific activity without other institutions – foremost, museum directors and museum employees. The director is important due to the possibility of deciding about queries' acceptance:

There is also arranged in this way that there is an official letter to the director and there is no problem to welcome other employees on query or consultation. (November 2019; 1.MP.PRO)

If from any museum somebody calls to us, the director sends this official letter to me to make a query if we have something and then we respond. (December 2019; 1.MP.ETHN)

Other employees may help during the research process. There, it is a positive recognition of how this cooperation looks like:

Museologists have this attribute, that they are very supportive of each other and if they know anything, they will prompt this to one another. (February 2020; 3.MP.WYST)

In our work it is normal, we are not "lonely islands" and we take advantage of possibilities of queries or even advice. (April 2021; 3.M.HB)

The next functional area regards **conferences and publications**. As it was mentioned in previous parts, in order to have a publication, the query is inevitable

as well. The interviewees noted two perspectives: conferences organized by the museum and conferences in which museum employees participate or can be invited. The museum jubilee is perceived as a good occasion to have a conference, but it is not the only option. For example, the Folk Museum in Kolbuszowa organized such a conference in 2019 [<http://www.muzeumkolbuszowa.pl/wydarzenia/1074-podwojny-jubileusz>, accessed: 09.01.2022]. After that event, the publication was issued. Hence, firstly other museums are engaged in such types of projects:

Those conference invitations, which we prepare, firstly are sent to the other open-air museums, because the major topic is rather associated with open-air museums, thus, somehow automatically it is transferred to them. Then, those museums decided if they send employees or represents of the museums, according to which topic is proposed. (November 2019; 1.MP.PRO)

This comment reflects the importance of cooperation within the one group of museums: open-air museums. However, it is rather a personal perspective instead of an institutional one. A similar response was received in one of the martyrdom museums, although those profiles are very different. Cooperation within specified groups is relevant, yet it does not mean that there is no cooperation with other institutions. Apart from the other museums, universities and university employees were noticed as relevant while considering their engagement:

From the perspective of the Scientific Department, I can say that this cooperation with universities is truly relevant, and it regards, among others, the organization of the conferences as also preparing reviews for our publications. (July 2020; 2.M.N)

It was in the form that we together organized a scientific conference after which we published a publication. (October 2020; 5.M.PU)

This cooperation is truly helpful and truly legitimate. They give us a substantive background, scientific support, whereas the museologists and ethnologists conducted the practical part. (October 2020; 5.M.PU)

Thus, while discussing the engagement involving conferences and publications, it may be said that the possibility of scientific consultations and support is an especially valued form of engagement. It is also hard to discuss conferences without previously conducted museum queries; hence, the intertwining of all identified dimensions can be visibly observed. Besides this observation made by one interviewee, there is also a differentiation within the area of “museum research”. As it is described, “museum research” can be carried out within the “research projects”:

We have two types of projects. One is that, which is realized through financial support as also projects, which we realize at our own pace, without the time regime, which is really important. The time is really important and hence, we can operate in different ways- if we go somewhere today or tomorrow is not as really relevant. Instead, in the project, we have “from-to”, so we must go and do the research. (April 2021; 2.M.OB)



This coincides with the previous citation regarding statutory tasks, but also reflects the importance of projects realized through external sources of financing. In this quote, the perception of “doing research” is presented, and researching audience or marketing research is not included here. Similar observations were observed in other cases (although in case six a short questionnaire was conducted, aimed to verify visitors’ perspective on online offers during the pandemic).

Thus, it is also possible to show both research focused on archives or other museums and finished by exhibitions, as well as **field research which since the beginning especially involve the local community**. However, even in this model, theoretical recognition is of importance. Such mode of scientific activity is connected also to the conferences and publications, which means that apart from local community cooperation with universities is also important within this field:

The thematic area discussed in this research is also situated within the research interests of the University. (October 2020; 5.M.PU)

Research, in which the local community was placed at the central point, was identified in two cases: in one open-air museum and one regional museum. This is an interesting case, as it broadens up the area of engaged entities by local communities and mayors:

A few years ago, we formulated our principal aim to study the entire district, which comprises six communes. (...) First, I go to talk to the head of the commune head and councilmen. For that meeting, the commune head invites councilmen and village chiefs. During that meeting, I present our main idea, what are the benefits for them, what will be their tasks, what we expect but also what they can expect from us- we discuss. (...) At the end of the project, we invite everybody for the summary, and for each of the informants, we have a publication. Part of the books is given away into the field, part is given to the museums. Moreover, some books are given at promotional meetings or in the libraries. (July 2020; 3.M.BP)

Hence, as the research has to be centered on a particular territory, there is no option to realize it without the engagement of those territories’ representatives. The form of participation depends on what entity will be discussed, and the interviewees noticed that there is no one rule. Hence, the commune head may even prepare a list of interviewees in the village (e.g. “Often we have contact from someone on the spot – the commune head or a person from the group of rural housewives – for one person and this one person leads us further, directs us to people” – April 2021; 5.M.ET) or it can be only the agreement, and then researchers rather work independently. However, it is perceived as a good option where the researcher is introduced by someone from the community (“Yet, if somebody from this community introduced us, then people are rather willing to share their knowledge and experience” – April 2021; 5.M.ET). The network of the contacts, experience, and knowledge which representatives of local communities can transmit is of the greatest importance, yet they do not take part in the process of shaping the research plan (“It is difficult for the participants of this culture to

be at the same time researchers and be examined” – April 2021; 5.M.ET). Yet, even with this observation, the participants of this folk culture are placed at the central point in this form of scientific activity. The research plan and research assumptions are made by museologists, and local community representatives can suggest some ideas, yet they are not part of the research team. Although the purpose of conducting field research is mainly associated with statutory purposes, the field project is not ended with the closing date but can have positive effects on the museum and local community also in the future (promotion, dissemination of the heritage).

## Discussion

Although museums today are perceived as multifunctional institutions, it is more about visitors’ reactions to exhibitions, social events, or educational programs [e.g. Robinson, 2020]. Thus, the focus is rather around part visible to the audience [e.g. Greffe et al., 2017], although without a scientific component, it will be even impossible to present any of the above-mentioned projects. Cases analyzed revealed that scientific tasks lead to audience-oriented programs, hence, all areas within the museum functions are interconnected. Interviewees noticed that “research impetus” may arise both within the organization and after the propositions are received. Hence, without cooperation, tasks will not be started or completed. Although external cooperation looks like a more relevant issue, the first part regards relations in the organization, which was also mentioned by the interviewees and seems to be a rarely explored issue.

Analysis of the scientific cooperation broadens also the discussion about museum stakeholders and value co-creation in museums. The results showed that not so much attention is paid toward the visitors within this area (research regarding collections), yet other museums, universities, local institutions, local communities, and commune heads are rather perceived as stakeholders. Although visitors can be mentioned, conducting scientific tasks within the examined cases regards not studying the visitors, but examining objects and heritage in order to present them to the audience.

As museums are involved in various forms of activities nowadays [Barron, Leask, 2017], it may also bring a risk of problems in communication or loss of trust [e.g. Půček et al., 2021]. Such difficulties could be more visible, while expectations and needs of partners involved are highly different and while partners represent considerably different sectors. Yet, results obtained showed scientific cooperation does not represent that kind of problem. Even if the museum does not cooperate with other museums, there are no problems with communication. Pointing the elements of trust, dialogue and consultations are connected to the DART model [Pralhad, Ramaswamy, 2004], described in the context of value co-creation. Although the findings do not show the risk assessment, it can still be noticed that the effects of scientific cooperation are co-created by trust,

dialogue, and consultations. Interviewees connected dialogue and consultations with engagement, which is reflected by resources shared and time devoted to the consultations and interviews. Regardless of whether engagement in scientific projects is more pragmatic or emotion-driven [Gustafsson et al., 2005], the dialogue and discussions about expectations are rather a crucial form of co-creating the effects of scientific duties. Such an observation regards the varied types of museums. Moreover, none of them are profiled as “science”, hence, the main profile does not correspond with how much focus they put towards the scientific and research.

## Conclusions

The idea of conducting research can be analyzed from a few dimensions, nevertheless, results obtained are focused on research regarding collections and statutory duties. Lack of interest in marketing or audience research may be connected to the resource limitations or individual perception of this issue (ongoing analysis of the audience, informal activities, which may be considered appropriate). Nevertheless, current findings do not focus on this issue. Even if the scientific activity represents rather that part of the functioning less visible to the visitors, results revealed that this activity always is of importance for museums. However, the focus on this area depends on the institution. Such differences regard, for example, organizational structure (does the institution have a Scientific Department) and amount of scientific projects. Regardless of how research projects are created and understood, there are always consistent with the main purpose of the museums’ existence. Exploring the scientific activities conducted by museums coincides also with the diversity of museum stakeholders and possible forms of engagement. It also represents forms of cooperation, in which both partners receive some benefits and in which dialogue, trust, and consultations are applied. Even if particular expectations can differ, to a great extent they can be similar, so cooperation between partner’ projects is not complicated or endangered by distrust.

Although this study presents a deeper exploration of cooperation within the scientific area, it has limitations as well. The study involved a certain group of entities, which represent public cultural institutions. Hence, in the future it may be good to conduct research in which private cultural institutions will be examined, but also valuable will be perspectives of the rest of the entities: hence, for example, universities. Moreover, results obtained are focused only on one type of research and scientific activity, and even if the research or marketing audience is not examined, it would be valuable to know about the motives of not doing research as well [Ćwikła et al., 2023]. Apart from the type of organizations examined, the future study may involve a larger number of cases and also may be repeated the other time. It can be beneficial to examine similar situations after the pandemic or examine at the end of some previously recognized projects.

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