

MuseumsForward

Understanding the feasibility of blockbuster exhibits during and after COVID-19

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Abstract

Blockbuster exhibits are extensive, revenue-building, popular topic exhibits that started in the museum field during the 1970s. These exhibits provide something new for the museum and community and increase a museum's prestige in the field, but they are expensive to host and develop and come at a risk for a return on investment. Some museums relied on these exhibits to bring in people and money to their institutions. This model was disrupted in 2020-2021 when the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19) caused financial uncertainty. The purpose of this research study was to explore the value of blockbuster exhibits for museums and their feasibility as a business model during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was done through a qualitative descriptive study using semi-structured interviews with four sites and six museum professionals who have had experience with blockbuster exhibits. Preliminary results indicate that blockbuster exhibits are valued for providing something new and exciting for their community. However, their role and impact are changing due to COVID-19. These changes have brought about disappointment from visitor and show producers' perspectives. Museums had to adapt fast to the changing times, and it is thought that the changes these exhibits are going through now are going to be lasting. These results help the conversation and understanding of the relationship between blockbuster exhibits and COVID-19, but more time needs to pass to fully understand the impact of these exhibits.

Keywords

Blockbuster Exhibits; COVID-19; Disaster Planning

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Introduction

The museum field debates whether the British Museum's *Treasures of Tutankhamen* in the 1970s started the trend of "blockbuster" exhibits that went to the National Gallery and other places in the United States. (Art History, 1986; Royal Academy of the Arts, 2020; West, n.d.). Either way, *Treasures of Tutankhamen* was considered a success due to the amount of money and people it brought into the museum (Art History, 1986). This exhibit led the way for other exhibits such as *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2018 (Heavenly bodies). Over a million people saw this exhibit over the span of five months (Coates, 2019; Heavenly bodies). These kinds of exhibits, generally known as "blockbuster exhibits," are revenue-building, short-term exhibits encompassing topics and others such as past civilizations, specific moments in time, master's in art history, popular culture, and dinosaurs (Coates, 2019; Lord & Piacente, 2014; Skinner, 2006; West n.d.).

Blockbuster exhibits have benefits for museums that impact their operations. The blockbuster exhibit brings awareness and prestige to the host institution in the museum world (Skinner, 2006; West, n.d.). While the museum is concerned with the image they are presenting to other institutions, the community saw these exhibits as a way to be the "first" to see something "new," therefore creating long lines and crowded exhibit spaces (Coates, 2019; Fiskesjö, 2015; Rodriguez, 2015). The topics presented in the exhibits also play a prominent role in driving attendance revenue. In 2018, London's Victoria & Albert Museum "reported a 5% increase in visitors... the same year it had three successful blockbuster exhibitions... on Winnie-the-Pooh, videogames and Frida Kahlo" (Coates, 2019). Not only does this get the audience in the door, but it may get different people into the museum, introducing the museum's mission and values to new members and visitors. These exhibits generate buzz to the public through media or social media and bring prestige to other institutions (dos Santos, 2001; Judkis, 2016). The institutions that develop and host these exhibits believe they encourage audiences to visit the museum, thus positively impacting ticket sales, memberships, merchandising, fundraising opportunities, partnerships, donations, and public awareness of the museum as a whole (Coates, 2019; Merritt, 2009; Skinner, 2006; Tascarella, 2007; West, n.d.). These exhibits bring in many different

revenue sources to the museum while giving the community what they want through the topics presented.

While the benefits and hosting of these exhibits seemed to have continued into the present day, during 2020-2021 though, a disruption happened to society. March of 2020 brought a new kind of disaster, the SARS-CoV-2 respiratory disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which greatly affected society and museums worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021a). COVID-19's impact should be classified as a catastrophic disaster. The pandemic resulted in the prolonged closure of museums and created an unknown future.

Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to explore the value of blockbuster exhibits for museums and their feasibility as a business model during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How, if at all, are the benefits of blockbuster exhibits consistent before and during COVID-19?
2. In what ways, if at all, are museums accommodating blockbuster exhibits into their reopening plans?
3. What roles do museums anticipate blockbuster exhibits are used in the planning of exhibits during and after COVID-19?

The Impact of Blockbusters on Host Museums

To accommodate the size of these exhibits, blockbuster exhibits had traditionally been hosted by larger institutions that have space and money (Lord & Piacente, 2014). The typical blockbuster exhibit's display area ranges from 12,000 to 20,000 square feet in a museum, not including an additional gallery space to sell exhibit merchandise which helps with different sources of revenue (Barr & Bell, 2019; Lord & Piacente, 2014; West, n.d.). This increased size demand of these exhibits and dependence on them create a cycle called "death by curation" or "blockbuster suicide" (Dilenschneider, 2015).

Blockbuster exhibits also require increased money for staffing, ticketing, security, housekeeping, additional open hours, insurance, and marketing (West, n.d.). An example of an initial cost of one of these exhibits is one of the King Tutankhamen (King Tut) blockbuster exhibit tours that went across North America from 2005-2007, starting in Los Angeles, California (Dunn, n.d.; West, n.d.). Each museum that hosted the exhibit had to pay a \$5 million initial fee in the planning stages to the show producers, such as National Geographic and AEG Exhibitions

(Dunn, n.d.; West, n.d.). Fees vary depending on the topic and the institution. Host institutions make up these fees through sponsorships, fundraising, retail sales, and tickets. In the King Tut exhibit example, Egypt got a share of the sales made from the merchandise directly related to the show's topic; additionally, they "receive \$1 million for every 100,000 attendance over 700,000" (West, n.d.). Thus, these exhibits generate money not only for the host museum but also for other cultural organizations. When everything runs smoothly, these blockbuster exhibits create enough revenue to be considered a success, but what happens when disaster strikes?

Museum Disasters, Resilience, and Reopening Plans

Blockbuster exhibits are successful when a museum has an institutional plan and budget in which a blockbuster is a key component to their revenue streams. As museums saw in 2020-2021, a disaster plan is just as important. An institution uses a disaster plan to respond to all types of disasters. This prevents the museum from being stuck in recovery mode forever (Petersen, 2006). These disasters may include natural disasters, human-made mishaps, chronic financial problems, and catastrophic disasters (Petersen, 2006). While a disaster plan focuses on the whole institution, COVID-19 has impacted museums in ways that the field is still learning about.

A museum also needs a resilience plan to understand how an institution can make it through a disaster. Recently, museums have been adding resilience plans to their disaster plans to better understand and recover from the "uncertain future" COVID-19 has caused (Laine, 2020). These plans include cutting travel costs, cleaning costs and, canceling or postponing upcoming exhibits (Laine, 2020). Resilience plans also help to reconsider money allocation. In 2020, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) allowed different distributions of the money raised from deaccessioning; now, the museum can use this money for operating costs (AAMD board of trustees...; Pogrebin, 2020). Understanding the lasting impacts of COVID-19 goes beyond having a disaster plan, but there needs to be a plan to help recover from ongoing disasters.

COVID-19 was a financial disaster for museums. Having disaster and resilience plans in place may help with money reallocation. Before anything else, the museum should "secure your own safety and well-being first" (*Museums and COVID-19*, 2020). Disaster and resilience plans will establish museum safety first and then allow the museum to do what it does best—serve the community. To best serve the

community, there needs to be support from the museum's board of directors to encourage creative solutions, allowing museums to find alternative ways to serve the community (Institute for Policy Research & Engagement, 2020). Even with adapting and thinking creatively, according to a study about the impact of COVID-19 on museums, one-third of museums need more financial support, and most only have 6-12 months remaining of their operating finances (American Alliance of Museums, 2020). The problem with COVID-19 and disaster/resilience plans is a "prevailing assumption is that the insurance company or government will cover the loss" (Petersen, 2006). These entities, either the insurance company or government, are meant for natural disaster damages and loss; however, there is nothing written in this type of insurance policy about extended closures. The disaster and resilience plans need to cover and detail every aspect of museum operations so when a disaster happens, the institutions can be activated to help the recovery process.

COVID-19 constantly changed how museums worked and demanded fast and creative solutions that impacted museums in the long term. As COVID-19 forces aspects of life to be "on pause," staying and working from home, museums closed their doors, not knowing for how long or when and how they could welcome visitors back. To prepare for life after the pandemic, museums worked to create detailed reopening plans incorporating ways that museums can "survive on a smaller budget until the pandemic recedes and traditional sources of income rebound" (Merritt, 2020b). The reopening plans were put into place to cut education programs, deal with a smaller attendance and staff, develop COVID-19 cleaning procedures, and delay/postpone exhibit openings (Merritt, 2020b; *National survey of COVID-19*, 2020). These plans also discussed mandatory mask use, timed admission tickets, 25% visitor capacity, and days opened (American Alliance of Museums, 2021; Denver Art Museum, *Plan Your Visit*; "Museum of Pop Culture"). Since there were inconsistencies between federal and state regulations and even between state guidelines, there were no clear rules for how public spaces could reopen.

In practice, reopening plans are not a one size fits all model, especially in museums' various departments. For example, exhibit departments had to deal with delayed openings, schedule changes, and a growing list of requirements to galleries to safely reopen. Along with cost reductions, the supposed benefits of blockbuster exhibits included increasing attendance, and revenue have been diminished because of COVID-19. However, blockbuster shows often went against safety measures outlined in many museums reopening plans (Fiskesjö, 2015;

West, n.d.). Traditionally, blockbuster exhibits relied on getting many people through the door, but during COVID-19, “the public is unlikely to want to crowd into packed venues may finally end the reliance of some museums on ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions” (Merritt, 2020a).

Psychological/Physiological Impact of COVID-19

The psychological and physiological impact of the pandemic on audiences will affect the traditional model of blockbuster exhibitions. Pandemic triggers causing people to rethink visiting museums include financial insecurities, coming into contact with the virus, and losing people to the virus (Pedrosa & et al., 2020). One way people have dealt with mass illnesses before is to utilize the “behavioral immune system” (Schaller & Park, 2011). The “behavioral immune system” is an “avoidance of things (including people) that superficially appear to pose some risk of infection” (Schaller & Park, 2011). People may then perceive blockbuster exhibits as a place where many people gather, and thus, their behavioral immune system kicks in. The community then stays away from physically visiting the exhibit. The behavioral immune system keeps people safe by physiologically avoiding places or activities that may draw a crowd.

Before museums can address how to get people to blockbuster exhibits, they need to make sure their community feels safe, welcomed, and heard by the museum. By focusing on increased safety measures for the audience, people will see the museum as a safe place to visit, which will go against the changing nature of our psychology due to the pandemic. Since “cultural organizations are trusted entities at the same time that trust in the federal government is low” (Dilenschneider, 2020a), museums can use their standing in the community to help create environments of safety. Museums can serve and reassure the community by providing trusted information about visiting and how to stay safe. Addressing safety and social distancing concerns is a way to encourage people to visit museums because “coronavirus concerns are the biggest barrier to visit cultural entities” (Dilenschneider, 2020b).

Measures such as a mask mandate, cleaning stations, and social distancing are ways to increase visitor safety and satisfaction. According to *Know Your Own Bone*, “mandatory face coverings have overtaken availability of a coronavirus vaccine as the single most important factor contributing to people feeling safe when visiting a cultural organization” (Dilenschneider, 2020a). Enforcing masks is only one factor in visitors feeling safe in public spaces. Still, people have also been practicing social distancing and avoiding large crowds, changing

our physiology and understanding of going to places or exhibits that encourage these same things. Museums can combat this by enforcing mask wearing and listening to the community about how they want the museum to reopen.

Interestingly, traveling and blockbuster exhibits are still being produced and marketed. In a forum in October of 2020 called “ASTC Traveling Exhibitions Forum,” participating institutions, such as the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) and Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), had a history of producing, selling, and sending out traveling and blockbuster exhibits (ASTC, 2021). This two-hour forum was a gathering of museum professionals, business planners, marketers, and exhibit directors who planned on hosting and creating traveling exhibits that have the potential of becoming blockbusters because of the topics presented (ASTC, 2021). There was mention of COVID-19 changing protocols during this forum, such as developing outside exhibits, but nothing explicit on how these exhibits comply with reopening and safety protocols (ASTC, 2021). Professionals conducting studies focused on how museums were affected by COVID-19; however, studies have not yet been conducted about how blockbusters have accommodated changes the pandemic generated.

Apart from various opinion pieces, little literature exists about the nuances, business, and tradition of blockbuster exhibits. The materials written about these kinds of exhibits show that they bring value to the museum and the community. However, COVID-19 has disrupted the traditional model of these types of exhibits. Since COVID-19 seems to have had a significant impact on blockbuster exhibits, the field, especially museums that host, develop, and rent them, needs to understand what this impact consists of and how it will alter the future of these exhibits. The purpose of this research study was to explore the value of blockbuster exhibits for museums and their feasibility as a business model during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive study was utilized to answer the research questions. This type of study allows for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p.4); in this case, first-person experiences of museum professionals who have past/present experience with blockbuster exhibits.

Participants

Study participants were recruited from museums with the following criteria: sites needed to have experience either putting on a blockbuster exhibit, taking in a traveling exhibit, or developing these exhibits. The museum's geographic location was also considered to understand how institutions across the country were handling the same situation. Taking a national approach was a way to understand trends and experiences with museums on a larger scale, and gain knowledge of how COVID-19 has affected museums in different states and cities across the United States.

To qualify for the research, subjects must have experience planning, installation, designing, or procuring blockbuster exhibits at their respective institutions. Job titles were not necessarily indicators of a subject's knowledge or eligibility for this study. Casting a wide net across an institution helped to understand how the whole organization was involved with blockbuster exhibits.

Recruitment took place in 2021 from the end of January to the middle of March. The subjects were first recruited through purposive sampling, then subsequently through snowball sampling. Enacting a purposive sampling, or to "purposefully select" a participant, means that participants were chosen based on how they could help and add to understanding "the problem and research questions" (Creswell, 2014, p.189). Once an initial subject was recruited, they were asked, during their interview, if they knew anyone else who had worked on blockbuster exhibits and if they could be contacted. Snowball sampling allows for a wider breadth of participants and experience not listed on the website.

The intended sample size was 20-25 participants from five locations across the United States. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the sample was reduced. Whether it was because of layoffs or furloughs, challenges of reopening, or more pressing matters at hand, few institutions responded to the recruitment emails. Blockbuster exhibits are already a niche market in museums (Dilenschneider, 2015), and the ongoing pandemic made contacting these employees more difficult. In the end, six participants from four different institutions responded and were interviewed. These institutions participated were the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP) (Seattle, WA), Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) (Portland, OR), Denver Museum of Nature and Science (DMNS) (Denver, CO), and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Services (SITES) (Washington D.C.). Table 1 summarizes the participants in the

study and an understanding of their institution’s relationships with blockbuster exhibits.

Table 1

Participants Role and Institution Designation

	A1	A2	B1	C1	D1	D2
Years in Institution	6 years	9 years	8 years	22 years	17 years	4 years
Institution’s Role with Blockbuster Exhibits	Host and Producer	Host and Producer	Producer	Host	Host and Producer	Host and Producer

Due to COVID-19 and the continued closure and reopening of museums during 2020-2021, the interviews took place virtually from February 12 to March 23, 2021, using the Zoom software platform. The semi-structured interviews include qualitative and quantitative questions which gathered museum professionals’ experiences and opinions on blockbuster exhibits, reopening plans, and the direction of museums on a larger scale. Getting a museum professional’s opinion is critical in understanding the decision making and the possibility of blockbuster feasibility in a post-COVID-19 world.

There was an intention to include document analysis about reopening plans and blockbuster exhibits to help support the qualitative data gathered in the interviews. However, due to the changing nature of COVID-19 protocols, institutions were hesitant to share any definitive plans, and these documents were not collected. Instead, government documents of how the city and state allowed for cultural institutions to reopen were analyzed and compared to interview responses.

Limitations

When thinking about this research, there are some limitations that impacted the results and analysis of answering these research questions. Due to time restrictions and not considering the potential impact of COVID-19 on staffing, a small sample size meant not being able to generalize this study to the field. Instead, this research study is

more preliminary in understanding how blockbuster exhibits were affected through the museum field.

While this may not be a specific study design limitation, it is important to consider the issue of time. Due to the fast-paced and changing nature of COVID-19, many topics discussed in February and March of 2021 had already changed when writing this in April of 2021. COVID-19 demands fast change and adaptability, while blockbuster exhibits are often planned years in advance.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the value of blockbuster exhibits for museums and their feasibility of a business model during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings were analyzed through the lens of finding patterns and similarities based on their transcripts. The data in this section is presented through quotes to keep the interviewees' experiences and opinions in their own words. Filler words such as "like, um" or stutters were removed for reading and clarity; however, these changes did not alter the participants' experiences with their respective blockbuster exhibits.

1. How, if at all, are the benefits of blockbuster exhibits consistent before and during COVID-19?

Interviewees described the purpose, benefits, and challenges and the public's perception of these exhibits. Common themes arose about how the benefits have remained the same and how they have changed due to COVID-19.

How Benefits Have Stayed Consistent

Regardless of COVID-19, museum professionals described a consistent benefit of blockbuster exhibits as providing their institutions with something new. A museum that hosted and developed these kinds of shows said:

(A1) The changing exhibit experience in the museum... So, it is something new. It sticks around for three to six months, and then it leaves, and it usually never comes back. It's limited and temporary, but it's also big and exciting, and it allows the museum to change and stay

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up to date and feature things that are new and different. And always, rotating.

Often, these exhibits present stories that appeal to new or different segments of the public, and this attracts new audiences from the community. Also described in the interview is how their institution conducts research and evaluation in the planning stages of their exhibits to see how they could fit in with the preexisting museum audience while still attracting additional community members to the museum. These exhibits then “help us achieve” those goals of getting new people to the museum (D2).

How Benefits Have Changed

One obvious change these exhibits experienced with COVID-19 was the reduced return on investment between cost and effort. Time, effort, prestige, and valuable partnerships have now been set aside as one participant describes:

(B1) It was difficult. I mean, I’m not going to sugarcoat it. A lot of time and effort (spent) cultivating relationships with these individuals who would be able to put us in connection with these high-profile things, and high-profile people, to really generate the buzz around this stuff.

Another change to the museum experience that impacted blockbuster exhibits has been museum closure and schedule changes of these exhibits. Some of these exhibits have been planned years in advance and the exhibits are being kept on schedule for the most part (B1; C1; D1; D2). Even though these exhibits are still happening, the museum closures and social distancing measures mean that even fewer people could see these exhibits. Since less people are experiencing the exhibits, there is lower community impact. One site said:

(A2) So, a lot of folks have rescheduled or canceled exhibits for various (reasons). But from what I hear from so many of the host sites you (the institutions) have kept the exhibits during this time, they feel so disappointed that more of their community hasn’t been able to benefit from the content.

Compounded with fewer visitors to these exhibits (presumably due to museum closure and social distancing requirements), then for the people who put work into these exhibits, there is an idea that these

exhibits still demand more effort with less reward. When thinking about these two aspects, the overall changes of the benefits are less to both the museum and the community.

(C1) Everything scaled down right. The blockbuster-y type exhibitions are still more popular than the non-blockbuster-y types of exhibition from an attendance revenue standpoint. They are performing better proportionally in terms of community engagement and interests have stronger engagement and interest. So, we're seeing the same benefits that we saw before, we're just seeing them less strong in all categories.

The intention was these exhibits still bring in some of their supposed benefits, but it also brings about disappointment from the visitor and institution standpoint.

2. In what ways, if at all, are museums accommodating blockbuster exhibits into their reopening plans?

Initially, this study intended to answer this question by analyzing museum reopening plan documents and participants' responses to understand the overall ideas from both sources. This would have helped to understand the plans as a whole. The missing plans from this study happened maybe because, as one institution said, "the rules are really fuzzy" (D1), and because of that, there are no clear reopening plans.

This unforeseen limitation provided insight into how much museums relied on state and local guidelines for safety measures. One institution said, "we have in a lot of ways and just been following the guidelines of the governor. And so, we haven't really been trying to make our own rule" (A1). Some of the more prominent guidelines that museums were incorporating were increased cleaning, hand washing, physical (social) distancing, face coverings, clear signage (American Alliance of Museums, 2020; Centers for disease control and prevention, 2021b). COVID-19 demands fast change and being up to date, which means that institutions must "maintain and revise your plan" (Centers for disease control and prevention, 2021b).

The contents of these reopening plans are also dependent on the communities the museums reside in. For example, some museums in California are just opening in April/May of 2021 after being closed for a year, including the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco, the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, and the San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Vankin, 2021; Welcome back to the Walt Disney Family Museum, 2021). These plans could contain guidelines that reflect more current practices and are vastly different than those from sites included in this study, who at the time of writing, have been opened for some time.

To put these plans into motion included an increased visual component, with the visitors seeing the cleaning that is happening throughout the day.

(D2) We assess all the needs from our housekeeping team and took a very strong approach, probably more so, in pretty much all the exhibits, (they) have a permanent housekeeping position, who is constantly going around and wiping things down and spraying things down with an electrostatic spray gun.

Museums were able to adapt these guidelines into their exhibits. One change that museums made during this time was going “touchless.” Changing to touchless caused a challenge for design and planning purposes with the institution that only produces these exhibits. It was mentioned that:

(B1) We are really trying to figure out again if there’s interactive elements. How do we make those less touch-based, and a little bit easier on the museum staff to clean and all that so there are definitely some things that we’re thinking about as we develop shows.

Going touchless also means creativity and an increase in technology use to continue to provide an interactive experience. Also discussed in the interview, going touchless meant the inclusion of “these super fun 3D cameras they’re tracking gestures, and so people can just wave their hands and do things a lot of that was kicked off in the beginning” (D1).

Another significant change was exhibit capacity. This allowed for social distancing to be implemented in the museum.

(D1) We put cameras in many of them (galleries), and there’s a monitor outside the door, so you (the visitor) can see how crowded a gallery is without going in and decide whether or not there’s enough room for you or if you should come back later.

In the interviews, some participants said they had not worried much about the traveling blockbuster exhibits because their partner exhibit

firm was in contact with other host sites about how to change the exhibit design and flow to accommodate safety guidelines (A2; B1; D1). To adapt to these changes, museums also had to change how the admission process worked. Due to COVID-19, museums have relied on a time-ticketing process to allow for exhibit capacity control, therefore social distancing.

One site is attempting a time-ticketing procedure during a current blockbuster exhibit to see what changes to the process they can make to prepare for future experiences.

(D2) That is valuable information for us to understand what that guest experience is and to kind of see what we can anticipate for and plan for, but now, we will never have it all figured out.

No one knows the answers because of the constantly changing nature of reopening, cleaning, and guidelines, but evaluation is vital for understanding blockbuster exhibits and guest satisfaction. One museum describes using the community to understand what would make them comfortable with visiting.

(C1) We did a lot of community engagement to understand what would make people feel safe or not feel safe, and we also very much followed the letter of the line from our local health agencies. And that way, we're not making independent decisions about what's required and not required, we're able to always follow what our health agencies say, which allows us to flex over time as new learnings are happening, but it also gives us a defensible statement, why are we doing this, not us, we're doing this because this is what the experts are saying we need to do for safety.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the museums who participated in this study were already planning and trying to understand the best ways to welcome the community back into the exhibits.

3. What roles do museums anticipate blockbuster exhibits are used in the planning of exhibits during and after COVID-19?

This question aimed to understand the impact of blockbuster exhibits and the feasibility of these exhibits in the present and future.

Participant's responses varied depending on the type of exhibit work their institution was involved in.

Museums/Institutions that Host

Museums that were more used to hosting these exhibits said that these exhibits' future is still happening because of community need.

(A2) I think people are excited about post (COVID-19), they (the community) are really looking at what content they (museums) have on their floor once they open, and they (the museum) want to be ready for folks to come in with (something that is) exciting, different content than what they are used to. So, it seems to be a benefit to them post-COVID-19.

This institution believes that the community is excited about new content that only the museum can present to them. The institution wants to be ready for them and provide that experience of visiting somewhere in person.

Museums/Institutions that Produce

According to institutions with have a history of producing these shows, the future is a little bit bleaker because of the resources and money these exhibits require. They are afraid they will not achieve a return on investment. One institution was already evaluating its capabilities of following the blockbuster exhibit model. "We are working toward a long-term goal of reducing that to one in-house exhibition a year into rentals" (D1). This institution, for example, both produces and hosts blockbuster exhibits, so they see both the benefits and disappointment these shows bring to the museum. These kinds of conversations were happening before the pandemic, but in 2020, these plans were put at the forefront of institutional business planning. The same participant continued with:

(D1) We were a bit overextended, to be honest. And I know for me personally, I do better work if I can really focus on one thing and have more time for that one thing. I imagine there's also business decisions that I am not aware of because thankfully, I'm not included in those discussions about how many people are coming, who is coming when, and sort of studying how much

change do we need to remain vibrant and not lose audience.

Being overextended is echoed in an article that provides advice for how museums can recover from the pandemic. Instead of relying on blockbusters, the author suggests that this model should adapt to focus on museums' permanent collection (Atkins, 2020). This change could possibly increase audience satisfaction, travel restrictions, and resources available (Atkins, 2020).

Similarities Between Hosting and Producing

Even with the differences between the museums and their role with blockbuster exhibits, a common theme is that the model of blockbuster exhibits will have to change. This change could include the size and scale of these exhibits, which will impact which ones are developed and exhibited in the future. It also means host museums have to balance the benefits of these shows:

(A1) Do we not bring in this super blockbuster exhibit? Do we focus on some smaller exhibits like (name of exhibit) that are still obviously engaging and fun and interesting, but maybe are not going to cost as much?

This change could provide different points of access to the content in the museum while maintaining its "exclusivity."

(B1) We are really wanting to allow for different access points to the content to allow for more eyes on it. It is just in a sort of a nontraditional way. So, I think that's kind of how we are starting to approach these types of larger shows. It will not be a larger show because of the physical footprint. It will be a larger show in terms of outreach, the eyeballs that we want to get on it.

The impact of the reopening plans may result in lasting change for the blockbuster exhibits such as the design changing to allow for more space between people. There also might be more discussion of accessibility of these exhibits. Before COVID-19, there was an emphasis on how many can visit the exhibit, which caused crowding and long lines. Instead of only focusing on this form of access, exhibit developers, curators, and host museums have begun developing ways exhibits can be experienced outside the museum's walls.

These exhibits may be changing because the benefits of these exhibits are still there, as discussed before, but knowing that COVID-19 has meant sustained changes for museums may mean the future of blockbuster exhibits will be different. These benefits may evolve the same ways museums adapted to the pandemic: therefore, the meaning of these exhibits has changed as well. Only time will tell about how else these exhibits will have to adjust to maintain visitor demand for the exhibits and the benefits the exhibits provide while matching museum resources.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the value of blockbuster exhibits for museums and the impact of COVID-19 on it as a business model. While these results are preliminary, the overall sentiment among museum professionals interviewed is that the benefits of blockbuster exhibits remain the same as before the pandemic. Blockbuster exhibits are still valuable and will continue to be utilized in museums. However, they have had less impact during the pandemic. This requires museum professionals to adapt and think about different modes of presenting information from the exhibit to the public. And while these exhibits have to change to fit the current climate of museums during and post COVID-19, these changes will need to be examined more critically as the field fully recovers from the pandemic.

Reopening plans are dependent on the community these museums reside in, and these plans need to be flexible and allow for change. They should be evaluated frequently for the best way to get people into these exhibits so when the community visits, it is safe and enjoyable for them. These plans also require museums to understand and communicate government mandates and support internal collaboration between people in different museum departments such as visitor services, curatorial, and operations. The best approaches to reopening still need to be studied as more time passes because, at the time of writing, these plans are not permanent but have adapted fast to what is going on in society during COVID-19.

The traditional model of blockbuster exhibits has to change to include more digital content and online experiences like virtual tours, and gallery exhibits that feature touchless interactives and improved accessibility. These changes are physical, but the structure and business model of these exhibits might have to be adapted as well. Before the pandemic, conversations were happening about making the model of these exhibits more sustainable and less of a risk. The

pandemic has escalated these conversations because resources that sustained this model were no longer available.

Implications

These conversations are important to the museum field because they add another lens to understanding of blockbuster exhibits' complex history. While COVID-19 has brought up these conversations in a meaningful manner, this study adds to the body of knowledge by exploring why these exhibits are a part of the museum model and if they could survive into the future. Blockbuster exhibits encompass so much more than just bringing a popular topic into the museum. People's jobs, institutions, and even communities depend on these exhibits, but the pandemic has caused the field to re-examine its priorities, audiences, financial dependencies, and organizational structures. Thus, museums need to understand how the field is changing to see if blockbuster exhibits can adapt to our new society or bring those benefits in new ways.

Further Research

When thinking about the future of this subject, more conversations need to happen about past disasters and how museums have adapted to survive into the future. Looking at the past through museum resilience in the face of catastrophe can lend to a way of understanding museum's business model adaptability.

Another way to continue this research is to include more people. Even with the small number of participants in this study, and the wide range of job titles it encompassed, results showed that blockbuster exhibits affect multiple people and departments in the museum as well as the exhibit firms that partner with the museums. These differences make an impact on how each department understands and thinks about blockbuster exhibit futures. To understand the impact and changing nature of these exhibits throughout the field, there should be more research done to include more people and job titles instead of being dependent on geographic reach as a primary recruitment criterion.

Since some museums that participated in this study were already considering reducing the amount and dependence on blockbuster exhibits, this study (with more professionals and institutions considered) could be extended to include a longitudinal study that investigates the sustained impacts of COVID-19 on the blockbuster exhibit model. Alternatively, research can also be done by looking at a

hypothetical scenario; examining a museum that stops hosting blockbuster exhibits entirely and determining how this might change their business model. Looking at the financial impact of this and its effect on the whole institution is a way to look at money allocation and disbursement in the museum. This is a radical way of thinking that enables us to consider the financial impact on the museum model of “death by curation.”

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