



Brand Museum Networking in Between Criticism and Affirmation: Analytical and Critical Review for Cultural Destination Developers

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of brand museum networking, examining how franchised museums such as the Guggenheim Bilbao and Louvre Abu Dhabi influence global cultural landscapes. Through a balanced analysis of the economic, social, and cultural impacts of museum networking, the study highlights both the affirmations and criticisms of this model. Critics raise concerns over cultural homogenization, commercialization, and the loss of authenticity, while proponents emphasize increased accessibility, economic revitalization, and the role of museums in cultural diplomacy. Key trends shaping the future of museum franchising include digital expansion, the adoption of sustainable practices, and the need for inclusive and participatory models that engage local communities. This study also identifies several avenues for future research, including the impact of franchising on local cultural identity, the long-term economic effects on host cities, and the use of digital technologies in extending museum experiences. Ultimately, the paper provides insights for cultural destination developers on how to navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by museum franchising in a globalized world.

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INTRODUCTION

Museums, traditionally seen as non-profit cultural institutions, increasingly adopt business models like commercial brands. The rise of "franchise", "replica" and/or "satellite" (Figueruelo, 2022) museums in the global cultural landscape is a relatively modern phenomenon, often tied to the globalization of cultural institutions, urban regeneration strategies, and the commodification of culture. These types of museums are characterized by either the replication of existing museum concepts in new locations or the establishment of branches as part of a larger institutional network.

Museum franchising and/or networking allow for the extension of their brand and reach, but they also raise concerns about commercialization and the commodification of culture (DesRoches, 2015; Ampuero-Canellas et al., 2018). It is seen as a strategy to globalize museum experiences (de Vries & Shields, 2021; Gómez-Pérez, 2015). While franchising and/or networking can help preserve and share cultural heritage on a global scale, they also risk cultural homogenization. Host cities may adopt foreign cultural practices, possibly sidelining local traditions in favor of a more universal (and marketable) culture (Figueruelo, 2022; Giannini & Bowen, 2023). The franchised museum needs to provide consistent experiences, which may involve curatorial oversight, staff training, and adherence to brand standards (Bertoli, Busacca, Ostilio & Di Vito, 2016; Pulh, Mencarelli & Chaney, 2019). While the balance between cultural integrity and financial sustainability often sparks debates. Host countries often invest heavily in such projects, expecting cultural and economic returns (Ajana, 2015; Ortega, 2020).

Despite museum franchising having been introduced so far, this review sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the dynamics of museum networking as a growing trend in destination development. Since none of the renowned museum models identify themselves as franchise or replica museums, this study will avoid framing them in that way and will instead refer to them as brand museum networks or brand museum networking as a business model. However, as a term, this is not the first-time use of brand museum networking, several studies (Grefe, Krebs & Pflieger, 2017; Ampuero-Canellas, Tarazona-Belenguer, Gonzalez-del-Rio & Jordá-Albiñana, 2018; Mermiri, 2018) have already introduced it before.

Research Method and Question

This study employs an analytical review approach, which involves systematically examining and synthesizing existing literature on brand museum networks. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of current knowledge, identify key trends, and highlight gaps within the field. The analytical review method allows researchers to critically evaluate past studies, draw interpretative conclusions, and assess the theoretical advancements within a particular domain (Torraco, 2016).

According to Torraco (2016), an analytical review extends beyond mere description by integrating findings across multiple studies and making judgments about the reviewed work. This method is particularly useful for fostering deeper insights and addressing potential biases in previous research. Additionally, Grant and Booth (2009) argue that analytical reviews offer a structured process for synthesizing diverse methodologies, enabling a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis.

According to Cooper (1988), an analytical review in research focuses on synthesizing existing knowledge and offering new insights by interpreting patterns and gaps. This method often applies to literature reviews, where the

goal is to evaluate theories, methodologies, and findings comprehensively. Hart (1998) emphasized the importance of clearly defining criteria for evaluation, such as clarity, relevance, coherence, and originality. Analytical review has three components:

- **Critical Analysis:** Identifying strengths and weaknesses in arguments or methodologies (Booth et al., 2016).
- **Contextual Evaluation:** Understanding the work within its academic or social context (Hart, 1998).
- **Comparison and Synthesis:** Linking findings across studies to construct a coherent narrative or argument (Webster & Watson, 2002).

The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the key trends in brand museum networking, and what can cultural destination developers learn from the criticisms, affirmations, and emerging trends in this field?

To answer this question, the study critically evaluates literature from various perspectives, comparing methodologies and findings. This process helps to uncover recurring themes and identify the implications of brand museum networking on cultural destination development. By examining both the positive and negative aspects of museum franchising, the study aims to offer a balanced view that can inform future research and practical applications in cultural tourism and museum management.

Insights of Brand Museum Networking

Renowned Examples of Brand Museum Networks

Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain)

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is a widely recognized example of how cultural institutions can drive urban transformation and cultural tourism. Since its opening in 1997, it has become a focal point in discussions of architectural and urban renewal. The Guggenheim Foundation, headquartered in New York City, collaborated with the Basque government, which funded the museum's construction and initial operations. The museum showcases both the Guggenheim's global collection and works by Spanish and Basque artists, maintaining a balance between local culture and international appeal.

The success of the Guggenheim Bilbao is often referred to as the "Bilbao Effect," illustrating the capacity of iconic cultural landmarks to rejuvenate struggling urban areas (Plaza, 2006). However, scholarly studies emphasize the importance of integrated urban planning, cautioning against over-reliance on cultural spectacle at the expense of sustainable development and social inclusion (Greenberg, 2009; Rugg, 2004).

Louvre Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates)

The Louvre Abu Dhabi, established in 2017, represents a unique cultural partnership between France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Unlike a simple franchise, it operates under a 30-year agreement allowing the Abu Dhabi Museum to use the Louvre brand while borrowing artworks from French institutions such as the Musée d'Orsay and Centre Pompidou. Designed by architect Jean Nouvel, the museum's innovative dome structure symbolizes both modernity and tradition, creating a striking visual presence on Saadiyat Island.

This partnership serves as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy, but it has also been critiqued for commodifying culture. Meskell (2018) warns that the Louvre Abu Dhabi risks becoming a branded cultural commodity rather than a hub of independent cultural exchange.

Centre Pompidou Metz (France) and Málaga (Spain)

The Centre Pompidou in Paris expanded through the creation of satellite branches in Metz (2010) and Málaga (2015). These mini-Pompidous extend access to modern art by offering temporary exhibitions from the main museum's collection. While this decentralization has been successful in increasing access to art, critics argue that it risks diluting the authenticity and cultural significance of the collections (Chong, 2000). The Centre Pompidou's expansion was part of a broader cultural decentralization policy in France aimed at reducing Paris's cultural dominance (Anheier & Isar, 2012; Baudelle & Krauss, 2014).

Besides, renowned three examples which are introduced above, there are/were some other unique museum networking operations like the Tate Network in the UK includes Tate Britain and Tate Modern in London, Tate Liverpool, and Tate St Ives and the Hermitage Amsterdam, being used to be a branch of the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Tate Museums, while not a franchise in the international sense, this expansion represents the strategic decentralization of a national cultural institution. The Tate network has been widely praised for its innovative programming and for making contemporary art more accessible to the public (Hennebury, 2014).

The Hermitage Amsterdam, opened in 2009, has been considered a success, attracting international audiences and fostering cultural dialogue between Russia and the West. However, in March 2022, a week after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Hermitage Amsterdam Museum severed ties with the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Now, H' Art Museum, rebranded, is an independent and autonomous legal entity (H' Art Museum, 2024).

Criticisms to Brand Museum Networking

The expansion of museums through franchising and networking has sparked both praise and criticism. Critics argue that franchising may shift museums' focus towards commercial success over their traditional roles in education and preservation (Zolberg, 1995; Sappa, 2022). This shift risks transforming museums into "temples of commerce" rather than institutions of scholarly inquiry (Carrier, 2006). Additionally, the replication of museum experiences across locations raises concerns over the dilution of authenticity, with some suggesting that the original cultural significance is lost in these franchised settings (Zukin, 1996; Sassen, 2001). As museums expand through franchising, Woodruff (2018) argued that what makes a museum special is its connection to place and history, which can be lost in the pursuit of global expansion.

Critics also highlight the risk of cultural imperialism, especially in cases where Western institutions dominate global cultural narratives, potentially marginalizing local traditions and voices (Miles, 1997). Smaller, local museums may struggle to compete with the visibility and funding enjoyed by their franchised counterparts, further contributing to the homogenization of global culture (Macdonald, 2012). Hewison (2015) argues that this accessibility is often only for the wealthy or tourists, not for local or underserved communities.

Affirmations of Brand Museum Networking

Proponents of brand museum networking argue that it democratizes access to world-class art and culture. In regions where access to major cultural institutions is limited, franchising brings important collections and exhibitions to underserved audiences (Macdonald, 2011). Additionally, the replication of institutions like the Louvre and the Guggenheim has been shown to boost tourism and contribute to economic revitalization, as seen in Bilbao (Plaza,

2006). Brand museum’s contribution to local development has multiplier effects (Greffé, Krebs & Pflieger, 2017). McClellan (2008) noted that expanding a museum's brand through franchising can help generate additional income through ticket sales, licensing, merchandise, and even real estate development.

Brand museum networks also play a critical role in cultural diplomacy. By establishing branches in foreign locations, museums foster cross-cultural dialogue and serve as symbols of international collaboration (Isar and Triandafyllidou, 2021). Moreover, these networks enable the sharing of expertise, promoting best practices in conservation, curation, and education across institutions (Vlachou, and Demestiha, 2006). Belting (2003) views this as a positive development that reflects the increasingly interconnected nature of the world, where cultural institutions must evolve to remain relevant on a global scale.

After reviewing literature, cultural destination developers can find the thematized analytics of criticisms and affirmations as insights of brand museum networking on Table 1. Before discussing the foresights for cultural destination developers, Table 1 helps for holistic view of phenomena.

Table 1. Thematized Analytics of Criticisms and Affirmations

Criticisms		Affirmations	
Commercialization and profit motive	(Zukin, 1996; Sassen, 2001; DesRoches, 2015; Ampuero-Canellas et al., 2018; Meskell, 2018)	Diversified revenue streams	(McClellan, 2008; Greffe, Krebs & Pflieger, 2017)
Loss of authenticity	(Zukin, 1996; Sassen, 2001; Carrier, 2006)	Economic revitalization and tourism boost	(Plaza, 2006; Greffe, Krebs, & Pflieger, 2017)
Cultural imperialism and homogenization	(Miles, 1997; Figueruelo, 2022; Giannini & Bowen, 2023)	Cultural destination development	(Sudjic, 2005; Plaza, 2006)
Undermining local museums	(Macdonald, 2012)	Globalizing the museum experience	(Belting, 2003; Gómez-Pérez, 2015; de Vries & Shields, 2021)
Decreased curatorial integrity	(Macdonald, 2011; 2012)	Increased access to culture / cultural decentralization/ cultural democratization	(Whitehead, 2005; Macdonald, 2011; Anheier & Isar, 2012; Baudelle & Krauss, 2014).
Dilution of institutional identity	(Chong, 2000; Macdonald, 2012; Figueruelo, 2022)	Shared expertise and resources	(Vlachou & Demestiha, 2006)
Cultural accessibility or exclusivity?	(Hewison, 2015; Rugg, 2004; Greenberg, 2009)	Cultural diplomacy and soft power	(Grincheva, 2019, 2020, 2021; Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Priewe, 2021)
The politics of cultural exchange	(Figueruelo, 2022).	Expanding urbanization and urbanist culture	(McNeill, 2000; Llop & Garrido, 2007)
		Encouragement for local artists	(Slak Valek, 2022)

Foresights for Cultural Destination Developers

As museums adapt to a rapidly changing world, several key trends may shape the future of brand museum networking:

Digital and Virtual Expansion

The rise of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies offers new opportunities for museums to extend their reach without the need for physical expansion. Through immersive digital experiences, visitors can

engage with exhibitions remotely, allowing museums to increase their accessibility while reducing operational costs. This hybrid approach is likely to redefine the future of museum franchising (Marini, Agostino & Simoni, 2022; Mantzou, Bitsikas & Floros, 2023; Díaz-Kommonen, Svinhufvud, Thiel & Vishwanath, 2024; Massari, Del Vecchio, & Degl'innocenti, 2024).

Decentralized Museum Models

Instead of creating physical franchises, regional museums may increasingly collaborate with larger global institutions through networked models. These partnerships allow smaller museums to maintain their local identity while benefiting from the expertise and resources of established institutions (Jones, 2021). This decentralized model promotes local engagement within a global framework, offering flexibility and reducing the financial strain that traditional franchising models might impose.

Sustainable and Ethical Practices

With growing awareness of environmental issues, museums face increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. This includes green building designs that reduce carbon footprints, as well as ethical considerations around the cultural exchange and preservation of heritage. Future museum franchises will need to uphold these sustainability standards across their network to meet both environmental and cultural expectations (Marstine, 2011; Gobbato, 2024).

Inclusive and Participatory Models

Museums are being called upon to reflect the diversity of their audiences by presenting marginalized histories and promoting community involvement. For franchised museums, this means maintaining a delicate balance between global branding and local relevance. Incorporating local culture and voices into exhibitions will help preserve authenticity while fostering community engagement in host cities (Abiodun & Abiodun, 2024).

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Museums will continue to play an essential role in cultural diplomacy, enhancing relationships between countries and projecting soft power through cultural influence (Grincheva, 2019, 2020; 2021; Priewe, 2021). Governments may support museum franchising as part of broader diplomatic initiatives, using cultural institutions to foster positive international perceptions. Museums like the Louvre Abu Dhabi already serve as prime examples of how franchising can be leveraged for diplomatic and economic gains.

Adaptive Reuse of Urban Spaces

As urban environments evolve, the trend of adaptive reuse—repurposing vacant commercial or historical buildings into cultural spaces—presents a cost-effective opportunity for museum expansion. Through the preservation of cultural heritage, economic stimulation, community engagement, and effective place-making, brand museums significantly contribute to the revitalization of urban areas, making them integral to contemporary urban development strategies. This practice not only helps reduce construction costs but also contributes to urban regeneration, attracting tourists and revitalizing local economies (Grazuleviciute-Vileniske & Urbonas, 2011)

Multi-disciplinary Integration

Museums are broadening their focus beyond traditional art and history to include interdisciplinary exhibits that integrate science, technology, and other fields. These multi-disciplinary exhibitions can appeal to more diverse audiences and foster cross-disciplinary learning, making museums more dynamic and relevant in today's fast-evolving cultural landscape (Furferi, Di Angelo, Bertini, Mazzanti, De Vecchis & Biffi, 2024). Table 2. systematically summarizes what has been discussed so far.

Table 2. The Foresights for Cultural Destination Developers

Trend	References	Adoption	Foresights
Digital and virtual expansion	(Marini et al., 2022; Mantzou et al., 2023; Díaz-Kommonen et al., 2024; Massari et al., 2024)	Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are being used to create immersive, remote museum experiences.	Brand museum without opening physical locations, thus reducing costs and increasing accessibility.
Decentralized museum models	(Jones, 2021)	Decentralized, networked models of museums.	Operation under shared brand, allowing smaller museums to benefit from global expertise and resources while maintaining their local identity.
Sustainability and ethical practices	(Marstine, 2011; Gobbato, 2024)	Museums are being pressured to adopt sustainable practices.	Green building practices, reduce carbon footprint, and ethical cultural exchange.
Inclusive and participatory models	(Abiodun & Abiodun, 2024)	Presenting marginalized histories, promoting community involvement, and enhancing accessibility.	Ensuring local relevance while maintaining global identity.
Cultural diplomacy and soft power	(Nye, 2004; Grincheva, 2019, 2020, 2021; Priewe, 2021)	Strengthening relationships between countries and enhancing soft power.	Governmental supports as part of broader efforts to project cultural influence abroad.
Adaptive reuse of spaces	(Grazuleviciute-Vileniske & Urbonas, 2011)	Many urban spaces are being repurposed for cultural activities.	Expanding into urban areas cost-effectively, while contributing to urban regeneration.
Multi-disciplinary integration	(Furferi et al., 2024)	Expanding scope beyond art and history to include science, technology etc.	Attracting diverse audiences and foster cross-disciplinary learning.

Conclusion

Brand museum networking, though a relatively recent development, presents a transformative model for the global cultural landscape. By replicating or establishing new branches of prominent museums, institutions can extend their reach, democratize access to world-class collections, and support cultural exchange. However, this model is not without its challenges, as it raises significant concerns regarding commercialization, the dilution of institutional identity, and the potential loss of authenticity.

The findings of this study demonstrate that brand museum networking offers a powerful model for cultural institutions to expand their global influence, foster cultural exchange, and contribute to economic development. While the benefits of franchised museums, such as increased tourism, cross-cultural dialogue, and economic revitalization, are clear, concerns regarding commercialization, the dilution of cultural identity, and cultural imperialism persist.

Looking forward, digital technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality will play an essential role in museum expansion, enabling institutions to reach wider audiences without the constraints of physical space.

Moreover, the rising emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices will require museums to adopt greener operational models that align with both environmental and cultural responsibilities.

Future Research Directions

While the paper discusses cultural homogenization and the potential dominance of global brands over local traditions, a deeper examination of how host cities navigate the tension between local authenticity and global branding is needed. Future research could focus on case studies from various regions, particularly in non-Western contexts, to assess how local cultures are either integrated into or sidelined by brand museum networks.

The paper briefly touches on digital expansion as a future trend, but this could be explored more deeply. Future research could examine the effectiveness of virtual exhibitions in engaging global audiences and compare the visitor experience between virtual and physical museum branches. This study could include surveys or experimental designs to measure visitor satisfaction, engagement, and learning outcomes in digital vs. physical spaces.

The paper discusses the economic benefits of museum franchises like Guggenheim Bilbao, but future research could provide a longitudinal analysis of these impacts. Research could assess whether the economic revitalization attributed to these museums is sustainable in the long run and how it affects local populations in terms of employment, gentrification, and social inequality.

The paper mentions sustainability as a key trend, but future research could focus specifically on how global museums implement sustainable practices in construction, energy use, and exhibit design. This study could also explore the challenges and trade-offs faced by museums in achieving both financial sustainability and environmental responsibility.

While the paper emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, there is an opportunity to explore specific models and frameworks that franchised museums can adopt to ensure community participation in the curation process. Future research could evaluate how community engagement is implemented in different cultural contexts and its effectiveness in fostering local ownership of museum projects.

The paper raises concerns about the loss of authenticity in franchised museums, but more research is needed to understand how visitors perceive these spaces. A comparative study could investigate whether visitors find museum franchises less authentic or valuable compared to the original institutions and how this perception impacts visitor engagement and satisfaction.

The paper highlights the role of museum networks in cultural diplomacy, but further research could explore the strategic motivations behind these initiatives. How do governments use museum franchises to shape global perceptions, and what role do museums play in diplomatic relations between countries?

Managerial Recommendations

Balancing global branding with local authenticity to ensure cultural relevance: Cultural destination developers should ensure that brand museum franchises do not overshadow local cultural heritage. While global brands like the Louvre or Guggenheim bring international recognition, it is crucial to integrate local culture, traditions, and voices into the museum's programming and exhibits.

Leveraging digital technologies to expand reach and reduce costs: Cultural destination developers embrace digital

platforms such as virtual reality and augmented reality to extend the reach of museums beyond physical locations.

Adopting sustainable practices in the design and operation of museum spaces: Cultural destination developers should ensure that new museum buildings adhere to green building standards, reduce energy consumption, and promote environmentally friendly practices such as using locally sourced materials.

Engaging in inclusive models to involve local communities in exhibition curation: Cultural destination developers should ensure that museums adopt inclusive and participatory models that involve local communities in the curation process and exhibit development.

Utilizing museums as tools for cultural diplomacy to foster international relations: Developers can use franchised museums as instruments of cultural diplomacy, fostering positive international relations and enhancing the cultural reputation of the host country.

Considering the long-term economic and social impacts on host cities: Developers conduct thorough economic and social impact assessments before developing a museum franchise, ensuring that the museum's presence will bring long-term economic benefits and social inclusion.

Fostering multi-disciplinary exhibits to attract diverse audiences: Cultural destination developers can expand the scope of brand museums to incorporate multi-disciplinary exhibits that blend art, science, and technology to attract a more diverse range of visitors.

Prioritizing the adaptive reuse of existing spaces to reduce costs and preserve heritage: Where possible, developers should prioritize the adaptive reuse of existing historical or commercial buildings to house new museum branches.

The recommendations provide practical strategies for cultural destination developers to capitalize on the benefits of brand museum networking while mitigating its challenges, ensuring both cultural sustainability and economic viability. The ability of museums to adapt to emerging trends—balancing commercial interests with their educational and cultural missions—will ultimately determine the success and sustainability of brand museum networks in the years to come.

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