

Using library events, exhibitions and technology to inspire your art library visitors

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Abstract:

The Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) Library is using events, technology, and exhibitions to attract and influence patrons. MIA Library opened its doors six years ago to a society with a limited background in libraries, and no clear definition of Islamic Art, which meant a moderate number of visitors. Currently, the Library has an average of 2000-3000 visitors per month, including school students who participate in Library programs; Tourists visit to inquire about art and culture; Private Collectors, Curators; educators, academics, and artists who conduct research into Islamic Art and find inspiration from Islamic art books.

The MIA Library and its patrons have a mutually symbiotic relationship that influences each other to continually answer the community's needs. A museum library's main role is to serve the museum staff, but it has a vital role toward the public (Benedetti, 2007). MIA Library takes responsibility for developing events and investing its resources to fulfil needs of the Qatari community. The Library runs an average of eight events per month that are originated by the library staff or initiated by the visitors. Further, the implementation of technology is essential to provide and enhance access to library resources to answer the needs of the patrons. Technology is used to market events via Social Media and their website; provide support for research via the OPAC and electronic resources, and digitization of important rare books and manuscripts.

This paper includes an introduction to the MIA library and its context. It presents relevant literature around the subject of art museum libraries. It also illustrates the use of events, exhibitions and technology in relation to resources versus results. Finally, there is discussion and analysis to support future strategic planning for MIA Library.

Keywords: Qatar, Museum Library, Exhibitions & Events, Technology, Islamic Art

Introduction

MIA Library is a significant representation of Qatar's direction toward art and culture as a pillar of its development. Qatar is entering a new era in knowledge and art in a series of projects initiated by the government who adopted a national vision of knowledge to be achieved by 2030. This national vision aims to transform the country by creating an educated population. This is reflected in the work of HRH Sheikha al Mayassa, the chair of Qatar Museums (QM) who, since 2014, was one of the ten most powerful women in the art world (Davies, 2016). Her journey is reflected via QM opening several museums in Qatar including The Museum of Islamic Art, Mathaf, National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ), Fire Station, and several other museums in development. Four of the museums within QM have a dedicated museum library. Their collections focus on the scope of the museum and include rare books and manuscripts. MIA Library is the largest library focusing on Islamic Art in the Gulf with a collection of 21,000 titles.

As one of the first museum libraries in the region, it can be considered a blueprint for other QM libraries opening in Qatar in the future, and possibly for other museum libraries in the Gulf. With the opening of the Qatar National Library (QNL), MIA Library will face continuous competition to maintain its patrons which will be reflected in a series of rich and creative activities and programs.

Literature Review

The MIA Library's use of the tools (events, exhibitions and technology) to attract the community is not new in the field of library science but it is new for the country of Qatar. This means there is a lack of literature written about the subject in relation to Qatar and even in the Gulf region. This literature review will explain how these tools will support art museum libraries to connect with its patrons and answer their needs.

Oliver (2016) observes how book clubs are one of the only activities taking place in art museum libraries even though events and programming are one of the best forms of special collections' education and one of the best ways to increase visitor numbers. MIA began with a book club but has expanded its programming to include much more. MIA has created a full range of programs around its special collections and areas of expertise and this has been successful in attracting new visitors to the library and in creating unexpected results, such as a high-profile museum exhibition.

Using exhibitions to attract the community to the library is not a new concept according to Berenback & ARL (2010), but in Qatar, this is something new which it is seen happening at MIA and at the newly opened QNL. Libraries often display materials from their rare book room, but it is also a common practice to integrate exhibition programs of new artworks created by students or the public (Beal, 2007). MIA has also been using this approach to create exhibitions in the library which focus on artworks inspired by the collection.

Swanick (2015) provides practical steps regarding how exhibitions can be an invaluable way for museum libraries to showcase hidden collections, commission new artworks and work directly with the community to create an enriching activity for all. Success can be measured by the increase in visitors to view the library exhibition, but it can also be viewed in the engagement, creativity and in-depth research that are carried out by all involved with the exhibition. Another benefit based on Lo (2014) that exhibitions help moves the library closer

to the museum and build an ongoing museum-library collaboration which is to foster ongoing lifelong learning within their communities.

According to Koots (2018) museum research libraries are currently in a transformation phase going from print to electronic media, including both digitized copies of print materials and electronic resources. MIA Library finds itself in a position of making available the full range of materials, from ancient manuscripts, to online databases, and digitized content. The Library has many links with QNL, making its digitized manuscripts available via the QNL portal and QNL gives MIA Library access to many online databases. The museum collection is now following the path of the Library and working with QNL to make the museum objects also available as 3D digital images. Such collaboration between the libraries and the museums should, in the future, make it seamless for researchers to dig into the content relating to the museum objects.

Elaina (2002) discusses how the problem with library websites is that librarians have a "we know best" philosophy when designing them. Librarians commonly organize their web sites in a detailed manner with an endless amount of information. MIA Library has attempted to organize its website around the events and needs of the visitors, with lots of images and visuals to make it easy to navigate.

Past literature shows that events, exhibitions and technology are effective methods for increasing numbers and improving visitor engagement. In the next section of this paper, more detail will be given about how MIA Library is using these tools and analysis of their success levels.

Library Events

In this section, we are presenting the various activities MIA Library introduced since its opening, which also highlights the mutual relationship and various overlaps and interactions between the modalities of patrons and library programs. Figure 1 shows the number of patrons from 2017-2018. MIA Library reports to the Education Department of the museum. This provides the library with the opportunity to work with Community Outreach, Academic Programs and the Art Workshop teams. Over the last five years, the library has created a rich range of educational programs relating to Islamic art and its gastronomy collection. The library has six programs that are mostly run monthly. The programs include Majlis book club, Collectors Club, Gastronomy club, Children's story time, Inspired by... and The Rare Book workshop. Currently, exhibitions clearly function as the most efficient way to draw crowds extending across all types of patrons. Collectors Club and Story time also appeal to several people indicating a large amount of interest from families and artists. Book Clubs function as an important way to bridge the gap between the public, the artist and the collector. Rare Book Workshops, however, currently do not appeal to collectors, artists or academics. Also, one-to-one experiences are not as prevalent among children & families, or high-school students. This implies that the students probably rely either on casual or academic information on the internet or make use of their own school libraries that may also carry a small collection that could be relevant.

-The Majlis Book Club

Using a book club as a way to engage the art library visitors with books, artist and curators of exhibitions is a way to create a dialogue about art and encourage a relationship between the

artist and the audience. It is one of the few chances for the museum curators to really sit down and hear feedback about their exhibition and answer specific questions about both the exhibition catalogue and the exhibition.

The book club usually attracts an average of fifteen members per gathering (see Fig. 1). It is run by one librarian and it involves reading a book, preparing questions and promoting the event. At a recent meeting, Dr Chekhab-Abudaya, author of “Qajar Women: Images of Women in 19th-Century Iran” (2017) talked about the exhibition and exhibition catalogue. Feedback from the club was that members had a much deeper understanding of the artwork and the exhibition.

-The Collectors Club

In 2013, the Library founded the “MIA’s Islamic Art Creators & Collectors Club” to provide a venue for makers, artists, collectors, and anyone who loves Islamic art, to explore ideas and learn more about Islamic artworks, their creation, display, and conservation. This attracted Qatari private collectors in particular who wanted to research their objects and have a chance to meet other collectors and discuss their collections and knowledge. Collectors club is run by three members of staff; it can take up to a week to prepare all the material for the event. Depending on the speakers and the subject, it can attract around 15-30 attendees, plus a large online following.

The collectors club extended its audience to include children collectors who were invited to present their collection as an approach to enable children and enhance their abilities to acknowledge objects aesthetics, categorization and thinking skills.

An example of Collectors Club that developed into something influential was a presentation by Fadel Al Mansoori, a local Qatari collector of Islamic arms and armour. After, presenting his collection at the club, he was asked to prepare a proposal for a museum exhibition. This is a rare occurrence that a private collector is asked to have a solo exhibition in a museum. The final outcome was the exhibition “Powder and Damask” which ran at MIA from August 2017 until May 2018.

-The Gastronomy Collection Events

Understanding that the specialization of the MIA library is Islamic art does not mean refusing opportunities to expand the scope of the collection. This happened when one of the largest collections of antique Latin and Italian gastronomy books were acquired for the NMoQ Library. The collection is temporarily housed in the MIA Rare Book Room until it will relocate to the new library next year. This temporary collection inspired MIA staff to link art and food to attract a different kind of patron. The events have been run on an ad-hoc basis by one staff member and one volunteer. The number of attendees to these events ranges from ten to over sixty people.

Some examples of events relating to the Gastronomy Collection include: "A Night of Culture" organized between the library and IDAM restaurant, a book talk held inside an art exhibition about food and an evening of reading and sharing recipes. These types of events attract large numbers of visitors and also generate revenue for the museum restaurant.

-Storytime

The library encourages children’s education and expression through art. Main services for children are the storytelling in English and Arabic. After the Storytime, the children are encouraged to participate in a library activity such as writing a book review, colouring or other such tasks. The librarian spends a short time preparing for the Storytime, probably a maximum of 15 minutes to select a story and prepare the activity relating to the story.

The library plans "Open Days" for children such as "International Book Day" and "ICOM Day". These are all day, drop-in events and include story times, puppet shows and other fun activities for children. They take one week to plan and organize and usually involve all six members of staff. They are time-consuming, but they attract large numbers of visitors and create a good introduction to the library for children and families.

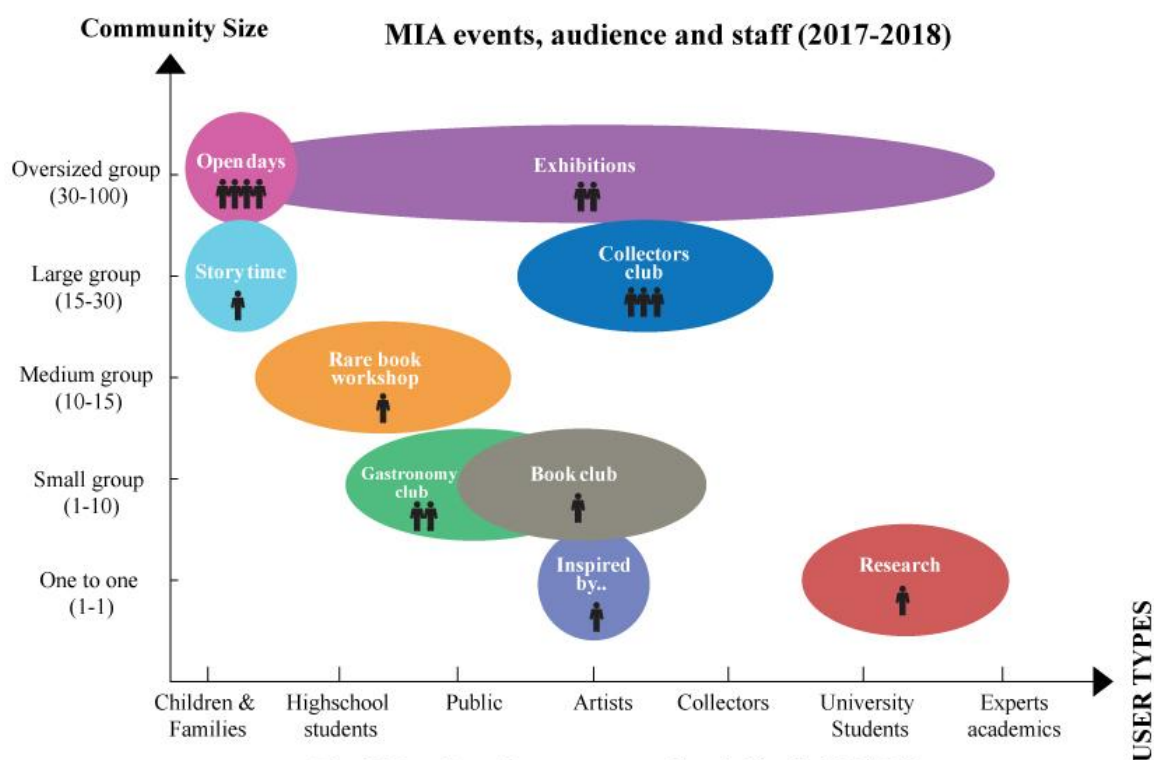


Fig.1.Mapping of user types and activities in MIA Library

Library Exhibitions

The library has installed museum showcases in the reading room to exhibit rare books, museum objects, and works of art. The library changes its exhibitions every two months. The exhibitions usually take a week to organize and are low cost/effort for the library team, but they do attract on average 60 visitors per week and they create a way to educate school groups about the library and museum collections.

A recent example of a MIA Library exhibition is “Fasting of the Heart and Soul” this was organized in Ramadan 2018 by a Librarian and two members of the curatorial department. The exhibition showcased Quranic manuscripts and rare Hadiths relating to fasting. The exhibition opening was attended by senior museum staff and several tourists. This exhibition included a Ramadan evening lecture and scheduled tours of the exhibition. It is difficult to

measure the value of this exhibition, but the feedback was extremely positive in the sense of giving Muslims a chance to reflect on why they are fasting and for non-Muslims to have a better understanding of why fasting is such an important part of Ramadan. The exhibition was the first time that many of these copies of the Quran have been on display.

Technology

MIA Library uses its OPAC, website, digitization project, online databases and social media as ways to: connect with its audience, market its events and exhibitions, assist with research, inform about services and generally to educate and entertain the public. The website and social media are tracked on a monthly basis. The website has on average 500 English visitors and 250 Arabic visitors per month. The three most popular pages are the rare books, inspired by... and the children's collections. As might be expected the popularity of these pages appears to mirror the popularity of the events offered by MIA Library.

-The OPAC

SirsiDynix Symphony is the system used by MIA Library for its OPAC. The library cataloguers have created a note in the 500 field to allow for searching of library objects within the system. This means that it is possible to search the OPAC by the museum object numbers and find books relating to the object. This is useful for museum staff and visitors interested in finding out more about a particular object. The library has created a printed study guide which shows star objects from the museum collection and bibliography with the books relating to that object. This guide is used often by university students who have assignments to visit the museum and write a report about one of the objects. The library works closely with the museum registrars to ensure that the content about the objects is kept up-to-date.

-MIA Library website

MIA Library is present on both the QM and the MIA website. The library is one of the main facilities of the museum on its menu banner. The main page gives a general idea of the collection, its opening hours and promotes the reference service.

-Digitization project

Libraries are not museums and they need to make rare materials accessible to their patrons. In 2014, MIA library had a small collection of manuscripts and rare books. After reviewing these books and prioritizing which would benefit Qatar, the digitization process began. MIA Library created a partnership with QNL who have advanced facilities for digitizing manuscripts and a portal for searching the digitized manuscripts. The digitized copies of MIA manuscripts are used in many ways within the library, for example, the library has developed a manuscripts' workshop for school students. The schools can book a one-hour session in the rare book room which includes: training in how to handle a rare manuscript, a slide presentation on manuscripts and training on how to search the digitization site of QNL. We do not yet have statistics on how many times our digital assets have been downloaded on the QNL website, but it will be interesting to see in the future the uptake of this new offering.

-Electronic resources

MIA Library used to subscribe to online databases such as JSTOR, EBSCO and Oxford Online. QNL has a national subscription to almost one hundred databases thus it became redundant for MIA to have its own subscriptions. MIA has access within the building to all the key online electronic resources available via QNL. MIA Library is beginning to offer workshops and training to high school students and museum staff to encourage online research. There is a plan to develop more of these online research workshops in the future.

-MIA on Social media

The MIA library has no social media accounts of its own but it's seen through the Museum's social media accounts on Instagram, Twitter, Google plus and Facebook. These accounts promote the library services as a reference library and a place with events and exhibitions.

When, the Library holds an event, like Collectors Club, social media is used first as a free way to promote the event and then during the event, there is live streaming the lecture or discussion. Usually, the live streaming attracts up to 2,500 to 3,000 views which means that our international reach is high. Most of the viewers are coming from other countries in the Gulf, Egypt, and Europe.

The Library uses the MIA Instagram account to publish book recommendations and to promote the books of local authors and artists. These are published as an ongoing feed on the website. The library team create educational videos such as "how to handle rare books"; "enemies of books" these videos continue to be popular and have attracted around one thousand views since published.

Discussion

Based on the reviewed methods to attract visitors, the MIA Library proved it has the ability to accommodate the needs of the visitors and at the same time excel in providing the professional services of an art museum library.

"MIA events, audience and staff 2017-18" (fig.1) provides a snapshot of the monthly events at MIA Library. It shows the number and type of attendees at events compared to staff members involved in organizing that event. From the chart, we can see that "Open House Events" and Exhibitions are attended by the largest number of participants and that they take the least amount of time and staff to manage. While other events like Inspired by.... take a long time and are attended by a small number of participants. Both of the events cover a different audience, but it is logical that the level of preparation for children will be much less involved than preparing an event for experts.

Collectors Club was originally set-up to meet the demands of private collectors wishing to connect with museum experts. In the end, it exceeded expectation by not only connecting the private collector to the library and other collector but also became a major exhibition within the museum.

The collectors club was a success, but to critically evaluate, it has a limited future. This limitation is because it has an extremely narrow audience as there are only around 30 collectors of Islamic Art in Qatar. After the success of Fadel's experience, many private

collectors thought they could also have an exhibition in MIA, which changed the objectives behind the club from sharing knowledge and connection with other collectors, to trying to use the library as a bridge to the museum. While this may be legitimate, the continuous refusal for many collections created disappointment and it put the library in a difficult position.

Children represent an important audience, as the children's events and collection attract the largest number of visitors. The children's program presents the first engagement for a child with Islamic Art and is important for building a foundation for future lifelong learning in the library and museum.

By programming different types of events for different target audiences, the library has increased the number of visitors from 1200 in 2012 to a steady average of 15,000 visitors each year from 2013-2017, despite visitor numbers to Qatar decreasing due to the blockade in 2017. The library programs have created a core group of members who support the library and encourage others to join events. This creates a virtuous circle of the library creating programs, adapting the programs to the visitors, and the visitors suggest additional programs they would like to see added. Future analysis is needed to fully understand the impact of Library events in order to create a strategic plan for future programs.

SWOT Analysis

Based on the analyses of the activities and the discussion above, we can summarise the current situation with user engagement in MIA activities in the following SWOT analysis.

Strengths

- The location of the library in an international museum makes it an attraction for both locals and tourists. The museum and library building were designed by the architect I.M. Pei, who created a pleasant space to spend time.
- The MIA library has an extensive collection on Islamic art, rare books and manuscripts in addition to online resources. The library has a children collection that ranges from preschool books to high school books that attract daily bookings from a wide range of schools, families, and the public. The library holds a collection of archival papers, ephemera including author's private notes and manuscripts that attract researchers and are used for exhibitions.
- Qatar museums provide an adequate budget to support the library acquisition programs and public services. QM provides centralized support for marketing, social media and information technology which made it easy for librarians to focus on their tasks.

Weaknesses:

- MIA Library's location inside the education wing far from the main museum means it is difficult for patrons to physically find the library.
- Limited staffing resources to support development and maintenance. Some staff was transferred to new museum libraries which affects programs such as Collectors Club. This may result in cancelling of the program and the loss of interested patrons.

- Library open space allows sound transmission and affects patrons use for the library for study purpose during events.
- There is a misunderstanding of libraries and the librarian's role within the region. Libraries for some people are places to find books only.

Opportunities:

- MIA Library successfully networks with a wide range of local institutions, for example, QNL, Qatar University, University College London, and Qatar Foundation in addition to being part of the education department. Those collaborations mean a diversity of patrons, programs and access to different resources such as collections and venues.
- Volunteers and interns who seek experience in a significant art institution can support MIA Library. Volunteers contribute their expertise to the Library and can be a future path to recruitment.
- Expand research as it has become secondary because of the library focus on events and children's activities. The Library should utilize its collection to initiate research projects that will benefit MIA, and both national and international academics institutions.
- The World Cup 2020 will encourage library development programs to attract visitors from all over the world as they will visit the museum as a tourist's attractions.

Threats:

- The political situation in the region has a negative impact on the library. The loss of visitors and engagement from the blockading countries does not affect the library's main tasks, but it will affect the library statistics over a longer period of time.
- The opening of the QNL and other museum libraries, such as, NMoQ will impact the number of visits from school and will create competition between libraries' programs and collections.
- The transfer of the Gastronomy collection back to NMoQ, as it added new varieties of events to MIA Library, attracted new kinds of visitors and enriched the library collection. This will threaten the visitor's number and current activities.
- Decrease in staffing levels within the library is a threat to the opening hours and to the potential to develop new programs and research.

Conclusion

As Qatar is growing, MIA Library is responsible to grow too. The Library succeeded in creating an inviting environment for its visitors through the use of events, exhibitions and technology. This was possible because of its assets such as collection and staff. MIA Library was fortunate to reside in a country that encouraged its growth through funding, collecting and a national vision that focus on art and culture. While some of the programs provide an example of success, to improve this performance level, an ongoing recruitment, space development and collection growth is needed. The experience of MIA Library, synthesized in the user engagement along the modalities of types of communities and the sizes of groups

involved in various activities, and, considering the implications of technology, can help other museum libraries to plan its activities and engagement with the public and avoid facing the same issues.

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