

Digital and Sustainability Approaches in the Museum Sector: A Global Policy Review

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Background

Through a review of **published sustainability and digital policies**, we aim to understand current institutional approaches to sustainability and digitisation in museums. Specifically, we are interested in examining **perceptions of digital activities**—whether digitisation is presented solely as a sustainable solution, or if museums also acknowledge its climate impact.

This policy review is intended to aid **museum professionals**, as well as **students and researchers** in the cultural heritage sector.

Research Questions

Of the museums with published sustainability policies, how many mention digital?



53.6% of museums in this data set had published sustainability policies, and **80%** of those policies mentioned digital.

Of the digital mentions in sustainability policies, how many are critical, neutral, positive, or a combination?

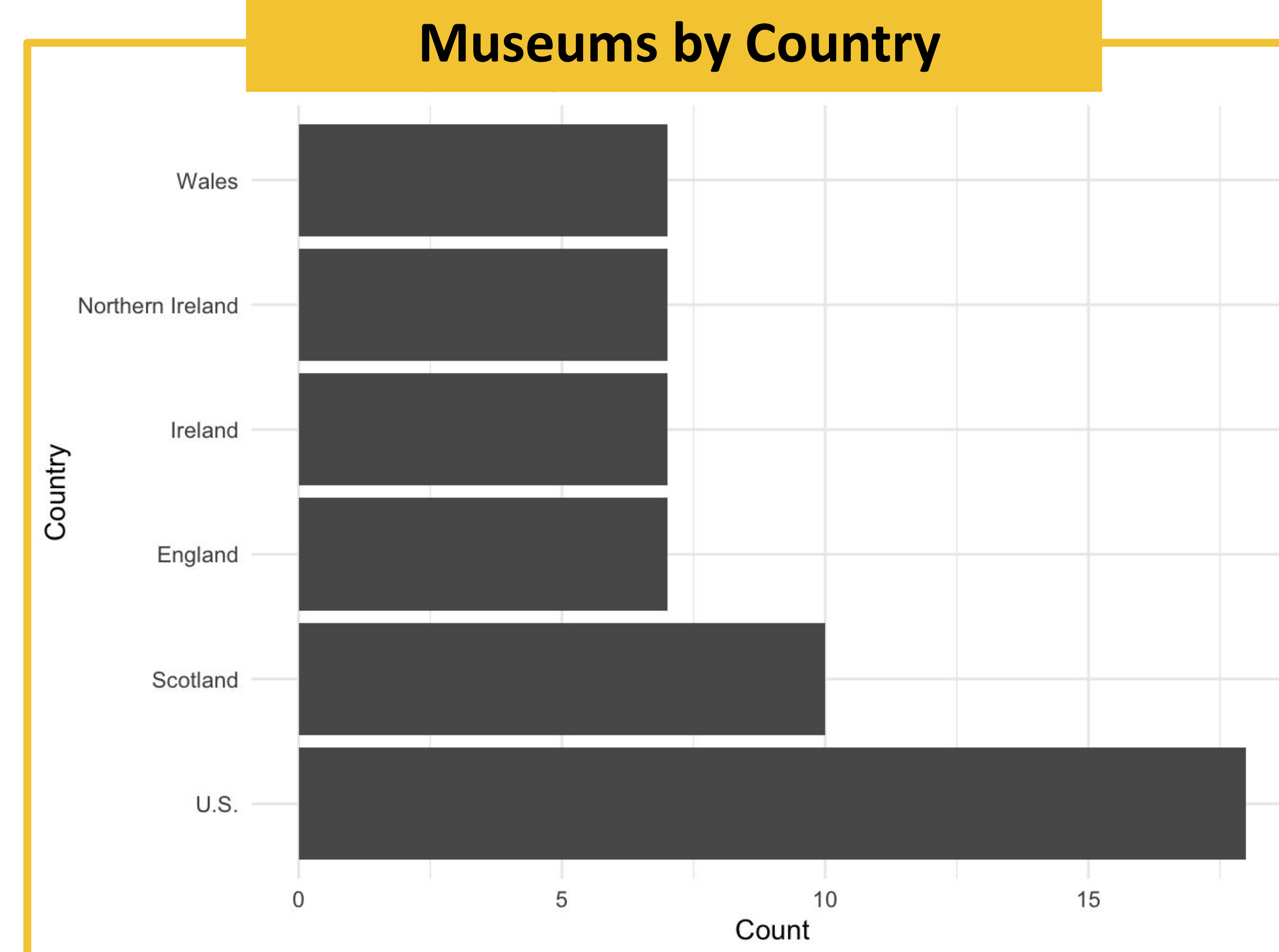


Of the six digital mentions, all of them were either **positive** or had a **combination** in tone, but never completely negative.

Methodology

We analysed **56 museums** across **six different countries**: Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland, and the United States. We prioritised museums with **high visitorship**, typically **well-funded national institutions in urban areas**.

Results



sustainability policy	digital mention	n	prop
yes sustainability policy	no digital mention	24	80
yes sustainability policy	yes digital mention	6	20

institution	country	city	digital mention type
National Museums Scotland	Scotland	Edinburgh	combination
National Galleries Scotland	Scotland	Edinburgh	positive
Irish Museum of Modern Art	Ireland	Dublin	combination
Crawford Art Gallery	Ireland	Cork	positive
Smithsonian	U.S.	Washington D.C.	positive
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum	U.S.	New York City, NY	positive

Digital Mentions

Example from **V&A England Annual Report 2023-24**:
“Reducing impacts from ICT and digital: During the year 2023–24, we **powered off and decommissioned** two legacy storage arrays, four legacy network switches, two physical servers and 48 virtual servers. This work resulted in a **reduction in power consumption and a reduction in heat produced** in our server room, which in turn reduced the power consumed to keep the room cool.” (pg 45)

Limitations

The findings **cannot be generalised** across all museums in these countries. First, the **sample size** is not representative of all museums in the nation. Second, the **scope** is limited to specific types of cultural institutions and collections. Lastly, **national institutions with higher visitorship** were prioritised in the policy review.

Discussion

First, **just over half of the museums analysed (53.6%)** had publicly available sustainability policies. **Larger national museums receiving government funding** were more likely to have **robust sustainability commitments**.

In contrast, digital policies were far less common. **Only two museums** in the data set had published digital strategies. However, the absence of distinct digital policies did not necessarily signal institutional neglect. In many cases, digital activities and sustainability commitments were embedded within broader governance documents. **Around 33.93% of corporate governance and reporting documents** in this data set referenced digital activities.

Future Research

Future research should broaden the **scope and size** of the policy review to encompass a wider range of cultural institutions and collection types. Specifically, including more **small, local museums** in the data set could provide insight into how **nonprofit, non-government-funded museums** differ in both resources and climate action goals.