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Museum as a Laboratory of Knowledge towards Local Culture Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate museums' roles that reflect the culture of Malaysia. It discusses Malaysian museums' challenges in meeting audience needs and enhancing the local culture. The four main topics covered are the museum as an informal learning institution, knowledge lab in a museum environment, the crucial role of museums in preserving and empowering culture, and museum impact on local communities. The main objective of this research is to identify how museums act as a knowledge lab within Malaysian culture. Observations, private conversations and interviews with personnel in the museum field are carried out for the purpose of gathering data. The findings of this study are based on observation and discussions with several local museum professionals.

Keywords: museums; knowledge lab; culture; empowerment

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1.0 Introduction

In this increasingly developed era, it is undeniable that museums are now seen as a place of pleasure or entertainment. Museums, which can find a place in the hearts of visitors or audiences, are those that combine education and entertainment. In a way, a visit to a museum is likely to be a search for meaning in our lives.

A museum is generally known as a building or institution that collects artifacts or specific collections. Various types of museums have existed with their objectives and concepts. The management of a museum is based on established and defined policies in line with its objectives, such as its vision, missions, and functions. Meanwhile, the concept of conservation is the central aspect of managing a museum's collection, whereas the collections of artifacts become the museum's identity. Museums in Malaysia are categorized by:

Table 1. Categories of Museums in Malaysia

i	Federal Museums	Museums are administered by the Department of Museums Malaysia (JMM)
ii	State Museums	Museums are administered by the State government and are usually under the management of the Corporation Board
iii	Private Museums	Museums which a private agency sponsors
iv	Department Museums	Museums are also known as museums of federal and state government agencies such as the Military Museum, Geological Museum, and others.
v	Institutional or University Museums	Museums which a university administers. Consists of a repository of collections conducted by a university and is typically established to assist teaching and research within the institution of higher learning.

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The earliest museum began in Malaysia at the end of the 19th century, in 1883, during the British Colonial period. This museum was established in Taiping, Perak, also known as Perak Museum, founded by Sir Hugh Low, the fourth British Resident in Perak. As of this study, Malaysia is understood to have 240 museums of all kinds.

Indirectly, a museum contains various information behind the arrangement of artifacts on display. The museum plays an essential role as an agent for the community and national development. As an institution responsible for conserving various forms of artifacts, a museum also serves as a building that holds a historical and cultural treasure of a nation or country. Museums have been transformed into various publications for public dissemination. In addition, a museum also functions as an institution or a place for researching, gathering information, and conservation and for research and public use. Through this method, it is expected that museums may be able to help enhance the knowledge and uplift the community's spirit towards a nation's cultural values.

As an institution responsible for disseminating, sharing information, and educating the public through various forms of exhibition activities and knowledge sharing, the museum should consider all levels of society. Museums should make every effort to plan and ensure the success of mobile exhibitions in schools, delivering talks, seminars, and other related activities.

In line with the development and sophistication of technology, museums need to be technology-friendly by utilizing various social media platforms to disseminate information and promote organized activities. Current technology, especially social media, has become the most appropriate platform over time and in today's contemporary world.

For the sake of instilling the spirit and awareness of the community towards the history and culture of its own through various artifacts and information, the activities in the museums should be in line with the objective, which is to create a sense of affection towards the nation's cultural heritage. Efforts in conducting research, conservation, and documenting processes will create awareness and attract the community's interest and attention. This awareness is necessary so that the public knows about the importance of preserving culture and heritage and to be shared as information as a guide to anyone in need or researchers.

It is particularly alarming when nowadays, museums are seen as not performing as agents for disseminating information in cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. Society still labels museums as nothing more than ancient artifact storage places. Sadly, some even consider museums just shelters while waiting for the rain to stop or just stop-by places. Besides that, most museums can only attract small and specific groups who pay interest in museums.

In today's era, museum institutions in Malaysia are changing paradigms and are seen to be developing rapidly. Awareness of its role and function is seen to experience changes in tandem with the rapid advancement of technology and globalization. Many in the community are aware that not only Malaysia but other countries around the world set museums in different categories. Furthermore, it is well known that museums have first existed and developed in other developed countries, very much earlier and ahead of Malaysia.

A museum is as significant as other administrative, educational, and social agencies. Not to mention, the Malaysian government and private sectors are no exception in playing their parts, contributing to the process of museums' establishment. Like other museums, each museum in this country has its objectives and is built with strength based on its collection of artifacts. Nevertheless, the exposure, awareness, and understanding of the role of museums as institutions are still at an early stage. In general, understanding and awareness of the role of museums are limited to recreational venues and visits to these entities.

This paper looks at the role and contribution of a museum in the context of education as an information dissemination tool in socio-cultural contexts and several others. It also discusses the museum as a knowledge lab for empowering local culture. As is customary, museums are places for scholars and experts to gather and exchange views in discussions and critique sessions. Artifacts related to history, culture, art, and many others are collected, preserved, and conserved as evidence for the existence of certain cases or incidents.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The changing roles of museums in the 21st century

Over fifty years ago, the museum was described by ICOM as a 'non-profit institution,' which 'acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study and enjoyment. However, the description is being identified as a sorely insufficient reflection of 21st-century museums' practice.

In July 2019, ICOM's executive board proposed a new definition of museums two years ago. Currently, ICOM is believed to revise a new definition, which will be voted on at a general ICOM meeting in 2022 in Prague. The new definition of museums is now stated as 'democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future, which should be 'participatory and transparent and 'contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality, and planetary wellbeing.' Nevertheless, there had been critics of this reformulation as overly politicized. In 2019, ICOM-Canada had also proposed a definition and stated that a museum is a non-profit, permanent 'dynamic and responsive' institution in the service 'of a living planet.' Also added to the definition is that a museum 'welcomes all people, fosters cooperation, cross-cultural exchange and public understanding of human and environmental interdependence.'

Museums' missions, roles and responsibilities, and methods of engagement with communities are in a continuous transformation process in response to economic and social necessities, not only at local but national and international levels. The crucial issue is how museums could stay relevant and be responsive to the current social and environmental issues.

2.2 Museum as an informal learning institution

In either well developed or slowly developing countries, museums are becoming increasingly important; more and more have been and are being built lately. Hundreds of new museums were built and established, and indirectly, had increased the number of visitors to museums in most countries in the world (Wahiza Abdul Wahid, 2018). These visitors are beginning to realize what museums offer and how they can develop their minds and thoughts with new experiences through their visits.

Willard L. Boyd, the president of the Field Museum of Natural History Chicago (1991), suggested that museum visitors will return to the same museum if they benefit more. These returners to the same museums could have felt they gained much new knowledge from their previous visits. In a way, the returners are not only visiting, but they are using or utilizing and making the most of every visit to the museums for their benefits and various reasons. This view shows that visitors will appreciate the role played by the museums in promoting activities related to learning and broadening knowledge. It is more appropriate for the management of the museum to be more creative in designing and implementing various activities that are contemporary in accordance with the latest technological developments.

In his article 'The New Museum Jargon,' Hudson (1970) pointed out that museums should no longer be regarded as merely warehouses or agents of preserving the nation's cultural heritage alone. Furthermore, museums should be acknowledged as a "power instrument of education." Not all historical facts or events are found in published materials. Facts and information can sometimes be found on objects or artifacts being displayed at the museums.

Kelly (2007), Przesmitzki and Prenier (2008) further suggested that a museum stands in its position as an experience-based learning instrument in an informal learning environment. Museums play a considerably significant role in educating the community. When asked to visit, the average person would often reply 'to learn' (Harvey, 2014; Wand & Yoon, 2013; Seligmann, 2014; Silverman & Bartley, 2013).

Hands-on interactive exhibitions and activities are also among favorable methods for sharing information and knowledge in museums today that suit the requirements of time passage. The museum is seen as an informal learning institution for intellectuals or scholars. It consists of various sources of knowledge and where teaching occurs indirectly, assisted by the existence of artifacts and objects exhibited. Activities such as curatorial forums are vital in distributing and sharing the latest information and new knowledge. These activities will benefit and impact various social groups, such as knowledge lovers, researchers, and academicians. Ongoing discussion can be the best method or platform for disseminating knowledge. For a developed country, education is undoubtedly the main agenda.

In this paper, discussing knowledge and learning in the museum environment, it is essential to know that museums have long been regarded as informal learning institutions. The authors are more likely to use a specific term, 'museum users' at some parts, to replace and refer to museum visitors or audiences. By this, the authors hope that the visitors or audiences realize that their visits to the museums will not merely observe objects on display but will use and apply the knowledge they gain through each visit. As a result, they may share the information with others from their visits and information. Indirectly, they are also prone to develop the knowledge they gathered with new inventions after exploring more. Therefore, they are the 'users' who utilize or take advantage of what they see and experience, as opposed to those audiences who only come as visitors and simply seek pleasure or kill their time.

Although the key word here is 'learning,' it is hoped that the readers' minds will not only be restricted to thinking that the targeted audiences are merely students, researchers, or educators. The main reason here is that 'learning' is commonly meant for all, and the museum users here are made up of different categories, statuses, and age levels.

2.3 Knowledge lab in a museum environment

In the context of this writing and a museum environment, a knowledge lab refers to a museum that stores various information and where activities are carried out to preserve and conserve artifacts either displayed or stored. Most big-sized museums will provide at least a laboratory for this purpose. In a way, conservation and preservation processes usually require special laboratories.

The knowledge lab stated here does not just refer to publications in the libraries or resource centers but also a variety of information in visual forms. These visual data are interesting to research and are found on all museum artifacts. Exhibits or artifacts displayed in a museum are usually classified according to their suitability or specific themes in the gallery's spaces, whether placed in cases, on panels, or any other display methods. The care for collections is a museum's primary responsibility in preserving a nation's heritage or culture.

The rapid, sophisticated, and challenging development of various technologies should be seen as an advantage that should be manipulated or cultivated by the museums. Smartphone technology needs to be seen as an advantage offered by various parties, including museums, and it is a tool for widespread knowledge in a museum environment. In other words, similar to the Science laboratories that conduct experiments to obtain research findings and discoveries or information, museums serve as knowledge laboratories by using all available collections with the support of sophisticated tools and high technological instruments, applications, and education-based software.

Recently, more museums have started to provide QR codes, making it easier for the audiences to gather more information regarding the displayed objects or artifacts in the exhibition areas. The QR codes usually are included and displayed next to the objects of art or artifacts on display, and these QR codes require the use of a smartphone. Furthermore, audio-video technology and applications are also needed to act as learning tools in museums. Thus, it is undeniable that today's technology can facilitate and expedite the process of delivering information to audiences in museums.

With the inclusion of the 21st century, there has been a transition to the museum's objectives, from providing technological information systems within museums' organizations to emphasizing the utilization of information technology among museums' personnel and audiences.

2.4 Crucial role of museums in preserving and empowering culture

Museums play an essential role in preserving local culture. Through careful documentation and preservation of artifacts, a culture can be recorded and remembered in the future. More than that, it can also be shared and understood by those from different cultural backgrounds. Several reasons to explain the importance of museums in preserving culture are shown in the following diagram.



Fig. 1: A museum's role in preserving culture

Recording everyday life is one of the most important ways to preserve a culture. In situations where culture is increasingly forgotten, keeping memories of everyday activities is the only hope there is to defend and preserve a culture. A culture becomes unique as it can be seen daily, including religion, rituals, foods, arts, and others. No matter what type a museum is categorized as, it is likely to display cultural, artistic, music, or any technological display.

Exhibitions that can attract attention and look attractive can be an effective way of educating the audiences about local culture. With a knowledgeable populace who respects minority cultures, there will be a high possibility of a decrease in culture loss. In recent years, more museums have been providing various hands-on experiences with the help of museum officials and visual aids to attract children's attention and increase their enjoyment during their visits.

Understanding the impact in the cultural context has been of great interest among researchers in recent decades (Evan, 2001; Parker, Waterston, Michaluk & Rickard, 2002; Persson, 2000; Sandell, 1998; Bille, Olsen, 2018). In discussing culture, it is challenging for museums to measure impact and meet the audience's needs within the local communities. The role of museums in contemporary society at present is also a debate. Museums undeniably play a crucial role in preserving and empowering culture.

Preserving culture needs documentation, which comprises the study of languages, preserving and restoring any historical relics of cultural and heritage significance.

2.5 Museum Impact on local communities

Unity between various races in a country is a recipe for creating harmony and precious living. This can become a reality by promoting all the facilities and activities a museum owns. Initiatives in exposing or introducing ethnic and cultural diversity, especially for a country of different races, are of paramount importance. A museum can contribute to the good health and well-being of a community (OECD-ICOM, 2018).

Table 2. Creating a healthy community

Museum Exhibits and activities for a healthy community	
Occasionally changing the methods and strategies of display, activities, marketing, and events for regular audiences and those with health risks.	Providing activities targeted at small groups. This includes the unemployed, those who have been or are in prisons, those suffering from social isolation and loneliness, the less fortunate, refugees, and those with difficulties in learning or physical deficiencies.

Museums need to learn new skills. This can be worked out by providing services to specific groups, as mentioned above, who often cooperate with social organizations and have expertise and relationships with these communities.

Conflict resolution and reconciliation are important elements in achieving sustainable peace and solidarity. There have been too many conflicts occurring around the world in recent decades. This stems from a lack of understanding of cultures in the community. From a broader perspective, museums should try to promote cultural diplomacy, which can create a better understanding among the societies in a country. Besides this, it can also create a sense of pride among the public.

Museums must consider more effective methods to increase the impact on the surrounding communities. The following diagram suggests several important steps as a guide for this purpose.

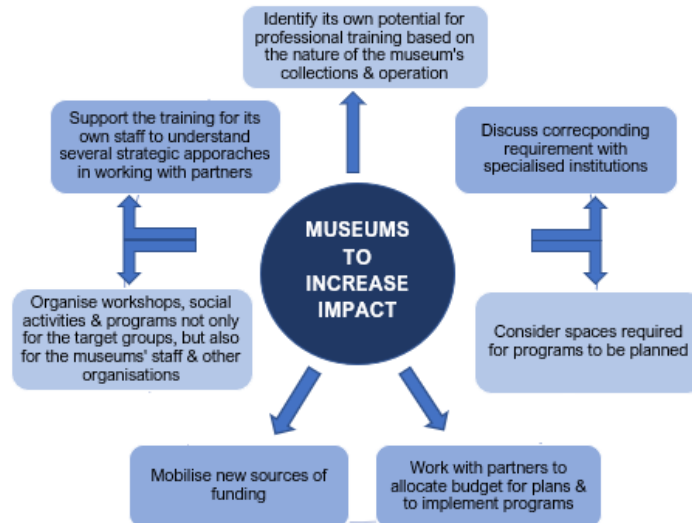


Fig. 2: Museums to increase the impact

Cultural and creative sectors are the ones that are seriously affected by the current pandemic situation, and museums are no exception (ICOM, April 29, 2020). Through observations and discussions with several staff from different local museums, many museums and museum professionals face financial challenges to defend and maintain the relevance of their respective museums. ICOM has proposed four crucial points in taking into account to address this concern:

- i. Keeping the museum safe and well in the vicinity. Every museum needs to keep abreast with developments during Covid-19 locally and around the world, as well as take note of other museums' situations and development, especially locally.
- ii. Strive on paying attention to the best things to the extent that the museum itself can offer or provide. Museums should look for alternative methods to carry out activities or works and try new things.
- iii. Monitoring every development and change to the needs of today's society. Museums and museum professionals should listen to the voices of the community and identify ways to help.
- iv. It should always be remembered that museums do not make just stand alone. Every museum should be in close contact and communicate with other partners, collaborators, and community initiatives.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data collected for the literature review are from books, journals, and research articles. This study focuses on four topics such as, which are: the museum as an informal learning institution; the knowledge lab in a museum environment; the crucial role of museums in preserving and empowering culture; and museum impact on local communities.

The information for this descriptive research is collected based on writings, transcripts, photos, historical documents, notations, and interviews relevant to the study. Descriptive research is unique in the number of variables employed. Like other types of research, descriptive research can include multiple variables for analysis, yet unlike other methods, it requires only one variable (Borg & Gall, 1989). Observation and private conversations and discussions with several local professionals in the museum field are carried out for this study.

4.0 Findings

The role and function of museums have changed over time and following technological development. It began as an institution collecting only local historical, cultural, and sociology artifacts. At this point, museums have transformed rapidly, in line with current needs and technological development. Through this research, several findings are discussed in this paper. The findings obtained from this study are focused on the functions and responsibilities of museums to uplift the economic sector of the country and also the environmental conditions of the museums. Besides that, since Malaysia is known to be multi-racial and rich in culture, traditional values also play a role in attracting visitors from outside and among the surrounding community.

The initiative to hold various activities accompanying the exhibition has had a dramatic impact on the public perception that the museum is just the center of storing artefacts. Organizing activities involving teenagers is an attraction to bring the group closer together and expose them to museums. Friends of the museums, for example, play a part and become a channel of exposure to the functions and roles of the museum.

5.0 Discussion

The functions and roles of museums have been expanded and enhanced as informal educational institutions. Museums become laboratories of knowledge loaded with information and data in various forms. The museums are now open to all groups, be it researchers, academics, and the public, who can benefit from what the museums offer. Nevertheless, the visitors or audiences must first plan before visiting the museums and understand their aims. This is important so that their visits can feel the maximum impact and, at the same time, achieve their goals. These visitors or audiences to the museums are not only casual visitors but also informal researchers who visit to gather information. Differences between casual audiences and casual researchers can be traced by reference to a number of indicators.

The environment of a museum is very important to attract the interest and attention of any group of researchers, academicians, and the general public. The set-up of a museum's environment is capable of showing its image and functionality and acts as a catalyst and attraction for the target groups. A knowledge laboratory needs to be implemented according to the suitability of a museum's theme. It can be designed through the layout plan of a gallery or museum and considers specific concepts. This is to have an impact on researchers. Interactive methods can also impact the museum as a knowledge laboratory.

Malaysia is one of the unique and wealthy countries in terms of racial and ethnic diversity. Each race and ethnicity have its traditional values. As the agency that has been responsible for the conservation work of various artifacts, museums need to construct and implement a number of contemporary strategies. This is to attract the interest and attention of new groups to admire the uniqueness and wealth of each ethnicity and culture. This role and responsibility must be maximized for the survival of its function. Digitization processes must be carried out to save all information and data of all available artifacts for future use.

The impact on communities is bound to happen directly or indirectly. The effects will be visible over a short and long period. The short-term impact is on target groups such as students. This is closely related or depends on their purpose of visiting a museum, for example, for academic assignments. The long-term impact will refer to the survival of the museum. This is important so that the local community can visit the museums to observe, appreciate and study the new artifacts.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The museum needs to work out long-term strategies for its sustainability. Activities that are encouraging should be organized and implemented, especially for youths. This group is the one that should be given priority and targeted by museums to continuously visit and utilize all the facilities offered.

The information and data should be transformed into digital formats for future references and studies. Times change and the current generation is more likely to deal with anything that uses the latest technology, and they can also master electronics and computer equipment well. Since the target museums nowadays are more on the new generation, it is appropriate for museums to employ digital formats for their data storage and use them for reference and study purposes.

A more up-to-date method of displaying is necessary to maximize the current technology facilities offered. Both physically and virtually exhibiting methods should always be taken into account and focused on so that the targeted visitors will be wider and from different groups. Visitors will be more interested in the diversity of exhibiting in a museum. By the way, the probability of visitors returning is high. This is because some visitors may not be able to move out freely. This factor is likely due to various aspects of distance or potential. With the efforts of museums to hold virtual exhibitions, visitors from this group can also enjoy the exhibitions without having to leave their homes.

"Museum in your phone" is an approach to adapting to future communities. This aims to bring the museum closer to the community, especially target groups and those of interest. There are many more studies on museums that need to be carried out. With all the obstacles and current issues facing the world today, museums and professionals should pay interest in continuing to work creatively and innovatively in order to empower the museum field. Simultaneously and in this way, museums will be successful knowledge laboratories and, at the same time, offer learning experiences for the communities and preserve the local culture of a country.

Technology is moving fast, and various applications are beginning to be created in meeting current needs. In the meantime, in the context of museums, the question of whether conventional museum management methods will remain relevant in the future begins to exist. Studies should be conducted from time to time to obtain the latest data and feedback and related to the governance of the museum according to the current situation.

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