

Cultural Heritage Interpretation in Museum - Its Relation to Visitors' Experience and Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Apart from being the place to preserve unique and diverse cultural heritage resources, museum also function as an attraction to visitors. In parallel with the development of museums as tourist attraction, public funded museums have been encouraged to focus on the needs of their visitors. They need to be places that people want to go to, see and experience the important aspects of the community within the destination. Museum presentations should be able to connect the visitors with the heritage values of the community. In this sense, the process of communicating or explaining to visitors the significance of the place or resources they are visiting is important. Such process is known as heritage interpretation. An effective interpretation should be able to reveals meanings behind historic places, their people and their stories. In this paper, the role of interpretation process on the experience and satisfaction of visitors to museum is explored. Location of the study is at Paddy Museum (Muzium Padi) in Alor Setar Kedah. Findings revealed that positive associations between effective interpretation and visitors' satisfaction are important. Academic and managerial implications are discussed.

Key words: museum, heritage interpretation, visitor experience, visitor satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Heritage is defined as consisting of traditions or living expressions that are inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. Today, the term heritage is increasingly attached to present-day activities linked to the past. Present-day activities, furthermore, have expanded during recent years in their range and scope, with the recognition of the growth of the so-called 'heritage industry' (Hewison, 1987). The heritage industry is defined by Ashworth and Tunbridge (1994) as the sale of goods and services, with the heritage component as the core element. It also highlights the commodification of heritage, with tourism development as the prime objective in the heritage industry. According to the writers:

...heritage can be considered as a specific aspect of tourism supply (resource) to be marketed to an identified visitor demand. The demand, furthermore, is created by visitors' intrinsic feelings of the past, and the need for an authentic experience. The drive to satisfy their motivation(s) triggers the demand for heritage displays, which transform heritage resources into a product.

In support of the phrase above, several authors (Bendix, 2009; Du Cross, 2007; Arthur & Mensah, 2006) indicate that higher demand for cultural heritage tourism may be due to three factors. First is an existing dissatisfaction of the market concerning present-day product. Second is a rising focus on learning while travelling in order to enhance one's knowledge and appreciation of other cultures. Finally, is the realization on the part of governments about the demand for cultural heritage tourism and the creation of facilities to assist the development. As cultural heritage tourism product is getting momentum, museum as a part of heritage industry, is experiencing the same scenario as tourist attraction.

MUSEUM

In addition to preserving and studying collections, 'museums exist for the purpose of serving the community' (Ambrose & Paine, 2012:11). Visitors who visit to heritage sites have been shown to have an economic impact on the destination (Johnson & Thomas, 1998), and museums today play a significant role in heritage tourism worldwide (Prentice & Anderson, 2007). Through museums, societies represent their relation to their own history and to that of other cultures and people. In another words, museums give meaning to the present lives through interpreting the past.

With increased levels of competition in the tourism industry, it is becoming more important for museum managers to identify the variables that will enhance the attraction and retention of museum visitors (Johnson & Thomas, 1998). Research has shown that satisfaction is an important predictor of intention revisit (Ambrose & Paine, 2012; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Millar, 1989). Johnson & Thomas (1997) state that public sector museums are encouraged to become more market oriented because public funding has to be justified more and more in terms of visitors' satisfaction. However, regardless of growing pressure to become more competitive and self-reliant, museums, particularly in the public sector, have been slow in subscribing to the idea of customer orientation (Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; 184). In fact, lack of understanding of visitors' need and expectation is a significant factor that leads to the failure of heritage management including museum (du Cross, 2007; McKercher and du Cross, 2002; Moscardo, 1996).

De Ruyter, Wetzels, Lemmink and Mattson (1997) explain that there are six different components in the delivery process of museums. The components include: permanent collection, temporary collection, restaurant, museum shop (souvenir shop) and wardrobe. According to them, the combination of the components would influence the level of satisfaction of visitors visiting museum. Pekarik, Doering and Karns (1999), also discuss about the satisfaction of visiting to museum. They, however, stressed on the kind of experience visitors find in museum. The authors further explained that there are four kind of experience which includes:

- Object experiences – permanent and non-permanent exhibitions
- Cognitive experiences – knowledge and information learned
- Introspective experiences – ability to imagining other (past) time
- Social experiences – togetherness with family, friends and loved ones

Driven by the motive to enhance visitors' satisfaction levels, museums today are encouraged to engage visitors through the way objects are displayed (Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011). Museum management across the globe has utilized a variety of ways to engage visitors and provide them with intrinsic rewards, learning experience. Central to any considerations of the objects being displayed is the notion of interpretation.

INTERPRETATION

A review of the literature suggests that interpretation can be generally defined as the transmission of information from the presenter to the viewer in an attempt to educate the latter (Poria, Biran & Rechel, 2009; Bonn, Joseph-Mathews, Hayes & Cave, 2007; Beeho & Prentice, 1997). Howard (2003:244) stresses that interpretation 'covers the various means of communicating heritage to people.' Most interpretive activities fit within one of two (or both) categories: personal and non-personal. Personal categories are those that utilize a living person as the actual medium for disseminating information, and non-personal categories are mechanisms and set-ups that require no intervention on the part of staff for visitors to obtain the information they need (Vijayah, 2011; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Today, heritage management and interpretation is one of the key issues in tourism studies including museums (Biran et al., 2011; Prentice & Anderson, 2007; Garrod and Fyall, 2000; Nuryanti, 1986)

THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION IN HERITAGE TOURISM

Interpretation is not just about facts and figures. It is the way in which the interest, value, significance and meaning of heritage is communicated to people. In heritage tourism, interpretation is viewed as 'a process of communicating or explaining to visitors the significance of the place they are visiting' (Timothy & Boyd, 2003: 195). It is a learning activity that communicates the stories and ideas behind the heritage. At the same time, interpretation provokes the audience to think for themselves, coming to their own understanding about what the exhibition means to them. In line with this, Moscardo & Ballantyne (2008) explains that the role of interpretation is to assist visitors in experiencing a resource or event in a way they might not otherwise experience without it. Thus, the objectives of interpretation is not instruction but to influence new attitudes and behaviour, to motivate and inspire, and to take information and make it meaningful and exciting. Ultimately, this style of presenting information makes visitors more sensitive and aware. This is much in keeping with how Uzzell (1989:10) views interpretation in heritage tourism as:

...the role of interpretation is to make people more aware of the places they visit, to provide knowledge which increase their understanding and to promote interest which leads to greater enjoyment and perhaps responsibility.

The phrase above is also supported by Beck & Cable (2002:1) who defined interpretation as an informational and inspirational process designed to enhance understanding, perception and protection one owns cultural and natural legacy.

Based on the discussions above, it can be contended that interpretation aims to fulfil three main roles. First is to educate people about the place they are visiting. Second is to provide enjoyable and entertaining experience for visitors. And three by combining the two roles, it is hoped that interpretation able to increase visitors' respect for heritage and at the same time, take responsibility for caring for it. In short, interpretation plays an important role in heritage tourism, in assisting the visitors' process of learning. In line with the discussion, Poria et al. (2009) has called for further research in the field of interpretation as a mean of revealing the complex, yet important, relationships of interpretation, place and visitors' satisfaction. As such the objective of this paper is to explore on how interpretation process influence on the experience and satisfaction of museum visitors.

PADDY MUSEUM KEDAH

The research involved Paddy Museum located at Gunung Keriang, which is about nine kilometer away from the city center of Alor Setar in the State of Kedah. Opened in October 2004, the museum covers the history of paddy plantation in the state. It is claimed that the paddy museum in Kedah is the fourth paddy museum in the world after Japan, Germany and the Philippines. The museum is built with an area of 12,000 square meters that consist of three floors. The architecture of the building is designed to symbolize bushels of harvested rice stalks. Paddy museum display the history and production items related to paddy. It explains the rice cultivation process, displays different varieties of rice which are produced in Malaysia, as well as overseas. It also showcases equipment and tools used in rice cultivation throughout the ages.

Paddy Museum can be categorized as 'local historical museum' since it houses artifacts of local importance (Timothy & Boyd, 2003: 24). The establishment of such museum, furthermore, is sometimes seen as a validation of a specific heritage or a statement of importance on the part of local communities, and for this museum, it is about agriculture. One major attraction in Paddy Museum is its spiral staircase which leads to the top floor of the museum which holds a revolving platform. The platform is equipped with seats from which visitors can admire a 360 degree diorama and mural which has been painted on the entire interior wall of the upper level. The mural display a panorama of paddy fields found in this part of Kedah. It takes visitors 20-minute to experience a complete view of the diorama.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research is based on a survey conducted from March to May 2015. Convenience sampling method was adopted as there was no sufficient information on the characteristics of visitors to that museum. Prior to that, a pilot survey was carried out to test the questionnaire in order to avoid bias related to its structure and wording. Interviews were held with visitors exiting the museum after their visit, in selected working and weekend days of the three months. Only one person per travel party was selected. The questionnaire was anonymous and, the questionnaire set is consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Enumerators were appointed for the interview session so that probes may be used by them to extend responses on the open-ended part. The questionnaire, furthermore, is designed to capture visitors' experience and satisfaction with the interpretation of the permanent exhibition in the Paddy Museum.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 284 visitors to Paddy Museum were successfully interviewed. Majority of the visitors to Paddy Museum are Malaysian (95%). Visitors from the northern region (Perlis, Kedah and Penang) area formed the largest group, while the international visitors are mostly from Thailand. Visitors to the museum consist of 51.4% male and 48.6% female. More than half of the visitors (58.3%) are within the age of 31 to 50. A considerable number of visitors is from the younger population (35.6%), and only a small number represents the oldest group (6.1%). Out of the 284 respondents, 19% of them are students (30 secondary students and 24 university students), while 73% are employed. The demographic background of the visitors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Information of Museum's Visitors



Demographic information	Total (N = 284)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	146	51.4%
Female	138	48.6%
Age group		
16 -20	35	12.2%
21 - 30	66	23.4%
31 - 40	85	29.9%
41 - 50	81	28.4%
50 and above	17	6.1%
Academic Level (n = 230)		
Degree	93	41%
Diploma	70	30%
Secondary school	67	29%
Occupation		
Employed	206	73%
Retired	10	4%
Student	54	19%
Unemployed	14	4%

Respondents who visit the museum are accompanied on average by three or four people. While 75% of them make the visit with children up to 15 years, 20% of them make the visit with an organized group and/or with friends. More than half of the visits are made during weekend (Friday, Saturday and Sunday). Table 2 further explain the profile of the respondents. Respondents are asked to identify three reasons why they visit the museum. Three most common reasons include: 'to occupy some leisure time', 'to accompany friend/family member', and 'to learn something new about local heritage'.

Table 2 Reasons for Visiting Paddy Museum

Reason	Frequency
To occupy some leisure time	239
A specific interest in such an attraction	53
To learn something new about local heritage	198
Something that one ought to do (own heritage)	128
To accompany friend/family member	201
To satisfy curiosity	33

In this survey, respondents are also asked to describe about their museum experience. Many of them have positive experience and this is evidence by the number of respondents who choose three specific positive statements: 'learn something new', 'feeling at ease', and 'having fun'. On the other hand, the statement: 'feeling bored' is chosen by many with negative experience. Nonetheless, it is important to note that only a very small number of respondents agree to the statement 'having the feeling of wasting my time'. It probably indicating that respondents are acquiring something but they require more effort from the management to stimulate their senses. Table 3 presents the complete description.

Table 3 Museum Experience

How do you describe your museum experience?	Frequency
Learning something new	229
Losing the notion of time	25
Feeling lost or disoriented	86
Feeling at ease	168
Having fun	138
Feeling astonished by something	43
Feeling bored	126
Having the feeling of wasting my time	34

Visitors are also asked to identify any exhibition that holds their interest the most? Many vote for the mural (83%). Words like 'beautiful', 'incredible', 'interesting', 'my kampung' (my village), 'unique heritage, and 'nostalgic' are among the examples used by the visitors to describe their feeling. As stated earlier, it takes about 20-minute for the rotation to come to a full circle. However, from researcher's observation, very few visitors would wait until the rotation is completed. Many would just walk for a couple of distance, take few photos and walk down the spiral staircase.

Others claim that the exhibition on traditional equipment and tools used in rice cultivation have captured their attention. However, there are a number of visitors who have voiced their disappointment with the way the equipment and tools are displayed. Many of the disappointment was on the way the exhibitions are interpreted. Words like 'wordings are small to read', 'I want bigger labels and easy-to-read fonts', 'do not understand what the word says', 'I know what the word says, but I cannot imagine how', are among the remarks made by the visitors to describe their feeling. Interestingly, the phrase 'I know what the word says, but I cannot imagine how', is commented by not only the youngest age group (16 – 20) (26%) but also by the second age group (21 – 30) (9%) and few from the third age group

(31- 40) (4%). The comment signify that introspective experience (Pekarik et al., 1999) is not only a problematic to the young visitors who are visiting Paddy Museum but also to the much older visitors as well. Apart from the comments describe above, other comment is made pertaining to the way information is posted on the pillars on the first floor of the museum. Specific comments include: 'not strategically posted' and 'too many pillars with writings'.

Table 4 Visitors Preference in Experiencing Museum

Preference	Frequency
On our own	45
On our own, but availability of staff around, in case question emerge	227
Availability of staff in character (costumed interpreters)	125
Guided tours	7
Through demonstrations	197
Through hands-on activities	114
By watching video	67
By interacting with computer, that has more database	53

Table 4 represents visitors' preferences in experiencing Paddy Museum. For this question, respondents are asked to choose three most preferred approach of experiencing the museum. Guided tour is the least favoured by the respondents. It may be because of the size of the museum, and also because the museum itself is designed to be a self-guided one. Table 4 also explains that although respondents prefer to be on their own, many like the idea that staff are around and available. In other words, majority of visitors to Paddy Museum wants to explore on their own with little staff facilitation. But they are happy to know that staff are available in case they want to interact or ask questions. Based on researcher's observation, museum staff are available at every floor of the museum, and they are ready to assist the visitors whenever needed.

Other experience preferences reveal even more interesting findings. Many would prefer to have more interaction with the exhibition. In another words, they want to have a connection with the exhibition. For example many identify: 'costumed interpreters, 'through hands-on activities', and 'through demonstrations' as approaches in experiencing museum. There are several comments made by the respondents pertaining to this section, but one particular aspect has captured the researcher's attention. Twenty comments (7%) are made specifically referring to food that can be produced from rice based ingredient. One section of the museum displays some traditional sweets (*kuih*) that are made from rice flour. Respondents suggest that it would be more interesting if museum staff could demonstrate on the making of the sweets. According to one respondent, 'through demonstration, visitors can understand how it is made, and more importantly, have the opportunity to taste it'. The respondent even suggest that museum can sell the freshly made sweets at the souvenir shop located at the ground floor of the museum. Another respondent suggests that museum management should work together with the restaurant owner, whose restaurant is located within the museum complex, on the menu offered to the visitors. According to him, menu should have a theme that consist of rice or rice flour as the main ingredient. For him, it would be even more interesting if the dishes offered can represent some of the traditional Kedah delicacies. This finding is in line with De Ruyter et al.'s (1997) explanation, where they argue that the combination of six components (where restaurant and souvenir shop are part of the components) in the delivery process of museums would have an effect to the level of satisfaction of the visitors.



From the discussion above, it is clear that creating a positive experience for museum visitors is important, as it will lead to visitors' satisfaction. From an academic point of view, given the limited empirical evidence on this topic to date in Malaysia, this work has attempted to explore the issue that permits continued progress in developing a better understanding of the museum visitors' preferences and satisfaction with the interpretation approach. For the management of the museum, findings of the research provide evidence of the need for them to understand their visitors. The fact that visitors learn and enjoy the exhibition in a variety of ways signaling that more emphasis should be given to the interpretation process. A process that can offer a more meaningful experience for visitors of all ages. The management not only need to identify the level of knowledge that their visitors bring with them but, to think about the messages/knowledge it wants the visitors to take away. Museum should also explore on the variety of interpretation approach available. It does not have to be expensive in order to be effective. Nonetheless, whatever Paddy Museum does to accommodate visitors' preferences, the museum cannot just focusing on the educational element only. It has to have an entertainment value as well since visiting museum is a social event.

CONCLUSION

Heritage tourism can be considered as a marker of identity and sense of belonging. And among the objectives of museum, which is part of the heritage tourism resources, is to create access to heritage, culture and education in an informal environment for the community and population in general. Within this framework, it is clear how important the role of interpretation can be to museum management, as well as to museum visitors. Museum interpretation is everything the management does to helps visitors make sense of the museum's collection. In general, visitors at Paddy Museum have enjoyed their visit, and have experienced feelings of satisfaction and happiness. Furthermore, they also considered the museum as unique. Nonetheless, for many the exhibitions are static. They believe the exhibitions can be livelier through a more effective interpretation exercises. In short, findings of this study support the literature that claim current museum visitors require more connection with the objects presented. In other words, they are willing and ready to learn about something new because the degree of knowledge acquisition among the visitors are high. As such, in order for Paddy Museum to be successful and competitive in the tourism industry, it has to be proactive in planning its visitors' activities, particularly in making the visitors engage with the exhibition. Interpretation is about communicating and knowledge, but at the same time, it is also has to be concerned with visitors' enjoyment; making them happy, entertained and satisfied with their visit. In short, visitors and museum management can both benefit from a good and effective interpretation process. At the same time, the management of Paddy Museum can channel their visitor-centered as its promotional tools, and enhancing its brand image. More importantly, as visitors can have better and more quality experience from it, museum management at Paddy Museum can achieve their objective in delivering knowledge. Knowledge that concerns with the past and future of our heritage: the paddy industry in Kedah.

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