The Socially Inclusive Role of Curatorial Voice: A Qualitative Comparative Study of the Use of Gatekeeping Mechanisms of Curatorial Voice and the Co-Creation of Identity in Museums

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Abstract

Museums, and museum professionals engage in a significant role within society. This poster visually represents new work within museum informatics: a qualitative exploratory study of the ways in which museum professionals promote or hinder the social inclusivity of a museum through curatorial voice. Through a series of exhibit evaluations and intensive interviews, I investigated the mechanisms used to craft curatorial voice within museums handling contested subject material. This research seeks to broaden the understanding of curatorial voice, as viewed through the theoretical lenses of gatekeeper theory and co-creation of identity, with the explicit purpose of aiding in the development of professional guidance to help make museums more socially inclusive. Preliminary analysis, aided by the curator participants, suggests that are multiple vantage points for viewing the socially inclusive role of curatorial voice, the co-construction of identity, and the gatekeeping mechanisms at play within museums.

1 Overview

Information plays a key role in the construction of individual and collective identities. It is inherently understood that without access to cultural information, that we as individuals and as communities will be barred from constructing a holistic identity. As a people, we have institutionalized culture in the format of museums, and we rely upon museums, and by de facto museum professionals, to provide an authoritative representation of our culture. Museums, in service to humanity, must preserve and provide access to those objects which convey the information necessary for identity construction and in doing so exemplify their status as socially inclusive institutions.

Museums exist to be in "the service of society and its development," and the professionals who work within those museums are charged with the mission to serve society ("Museum Definition- ICOM," 2007). Yet little is understood concerning the socially inclusive role of museums as information preservers and providers for the purpose of identity construction. Additionally, the previous investigation into identity creation within museums has focused primarily on the role of the museum visitor (Falk, 2009; Rounds, 2006). While it is undeniable, based on prior studies, that museum visitors engage the information of a museum with preconceived notions of identity, little work has focused on the significant role of museum curators as identity information gatekeepers. This research endeavors to fill a gap within both researcher and practitioner knowledge, and aid in the development of socially inclusive museums.

2 The Research Questions

The specific research questions developed for this research were based upon an over-arching question concerning the role of museums and museum professionals in the generation of a socially inclusive museum: How can our understanding of curatorial voice, as viewed through the theoretical lenses of gatekeeper theory and co-creation of identity, help museums become more socially inclusive when handling contested subject matter? In order to explore this over-arching question, research questions were developed for two independent but parallel studies: intensive interviewing and exhibit evaluation. Research questions one and two will be explored through an analysis of the data set: intensive interviews of curatorial staff. Research questions three and four will be explored through an analysis of the data set: exhibit evaluation. The two independent studies will then be combined in a qualitative comparative analysis of both data sets in an effort to explore research question five.

RQ.1.What are the perceptions of museum professionals concerning curatorial voice in a museum responsible for handling contested subject matter?

RQ.2. How might two theoretical lenses: gatekeeper theory, co-creation of identity, better help us to understand the perceptions of museum professionals?

RQ.2.A.What are the gatekeeping mechanisms employed by curatorial staff in a museum handling contested subject matter?

RQ. 2. B. How does curatorial staff perceive their role in the co-creation of identity in museums handling contested subject matter?

RQ.3. What does curatorial voice look like in museums handling contested subject matter?

RQ.4. How might two theoretical lenses: gatekeeper theory, co-creation of identity, better help us to understand the manifestations of curatorial voice in museums handling contested subject matter?

RQ.4.A. What does use of gatekeeping mechanisms in the curation of exhibits look like in museums handling contested subject matter.

RQ.4.B. What does the co-creation of identity look like in the exhibits of museums handling contested subject matter?

RQ.5. In what ways does curatorial voice, co-creation of identity, and gatekeeping mechanisms, thematically connect with the socially inclusive goals of museums handling contested subject matter?

3   Methodology

The nature of this research is qualitative and exploratory. At each of the participant museums, two distinct methods of data collection have been conducted: intensive interviewing and exhibit evaluation. The exhibit evaluations were performed at each museum prior to conducting the intensive interviews with their curators. In essence, this research design is a parallel study of the same sample: five museums handling contested subject matter. The two data sets, intensive interviews and exhibit evaluations, are coded separately. After the coding process, the two data sets will be triangulated and compared for similarities and differences.

Each museum examined is unique, and the community that the museum exists within is also unique. It is therefore important to recognize the differences between the exhibits while also locating the similarities between the museums of various sizes and missions. In an effort to explore RQ3 and RQ4, the researcher conducted an exhibit evaluation: the researcher examined and evaluated the contents of the exhibits within the five sample museums. The researcher documented the contents of the exhibits displaying contested subject matter using an exhibit evaluation rubric. When permissible, the researcher also collected photographs of the exhibit, transcripts of docent scripts, museum catalogues, and museum publications. The exhibit evaluation is limited to the items on display within the five sample museums, and does not extend to past or future exhibits.

The intent of the exhibit evaluation data collection is to discern the manifestation of curatorial voice within the public exhibit. In order to explore the curatorial voice of the exhibit, the researcher applied two theoretical lenses to the documentation of the exhibit: Gatekeeper Theory and Co-Creation of Identity Theory. The researcher also documented the exemplars of objects that represent the use of gatekeeping mechanisms and the co-creation of identity. A clearly articulated identity creation dialogue might be written in an exhibit label, object description, or docent script. Examples of clearly articulated identity creation dialogues may speak to personal or collective identities, e.g. 'This is what American is,' or 'This is our struggle as African Americans'.

The intensive interviews focused upon the perceptions of museum professionals concerning their role in the generation of curatorial voice (RQ.1). Qualitative intensive interviews were conducted with the curatorial staff of five museums: five museums will be examined, yielding a total of ten interviews. The researcher utilized a series of carefully constructed questions concerning curatorial voice in each of the qualitative intensive interviews. These interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of curatorial staff at five museums handling contested subject matter. The purpose in limiting the participant scope of the study is to capture the relationship, in an in-depth manner, between curators and the gatekeeping mechanisms they employ to express curatorial voice within museums handling contested subject matter.

The transcripts of the intensive interviews were coded using open coding and NVivo software. The transcripts were then analyzed for thematic content and for curatorial vocabulary usage

The triangulation of data collected from both the interviews and the exhibit evaluations allowed the researcher to explore RQ.5., and illuminate the connections between curatorial voice and exhibit reality. This triangulation, or bridging of data, will compare across the five museums sampled to explore similarities and differences in the manifestation of curatorial voice.   The combination of curator

perceptions, exhibit reality, and theory will lead to suggestions for development of more socially inclusive museums.

4   Findings

4.1   Comparison of curatorial perceptions of Curatorial Voice

Curator participants defined Curatorial Voice in a multitude of ways: Curatorial Voice is a "message" or a "voice" that you hear in an exhibit; Curatorial Voice is comprised of multiple "authentic" or "first person" voices; Curatorial Voice has many "dialects" and a "spectrum" of translations; Curatorial Voice is a "story" or a "script"; Curatorial Voice is a "shared polestar" around which an exhibit and the museum visitors orbit around. The curators interviewed considered the definition of Curatorial Voice to be context specific – a term that they would change the meaning of based upon the context.

4.2   Comparison of curatorial perceptions of Gatekeeping Mechanisms

The curator participants identified 16 information gatekeeping mechanisms utilized to craft curatorial voice. For example, the gatekeeping *localization* was identified by each of the curator participants All of the curators were keenly aware of their museum's physical presence in the local community. For the 9/11 Memorial Museum, the significance that museum is built on an "unplanned cemetery" is not lost on the curators. The Arab American National Museum began from a local Dearborn Michigan social organization, ACCESS. The Japanese American National Museum formed from local community organizations within Little Tokyo, Los Angeles. The Wing Luke was formed by Seattle's local international (formerly Chinatown) district. The National Center for Civil and Human Rights was built to leverage local Atlanta history to tell a national story. Localization, in museums, meant that curator participants acknowledged community stakeholders, and in some cases partnered with the community on an on-going basis.

	9/11 Memorial Museum	Arab American National Museum	Japanese American National Museum	The National Center for Civil and Human Rights	Wing Luke Museum of the Pacific Asian American Experience
1 : Accessibility	6	3	0	1	3
2 : Addition	2	0	0	1	5
3 : Channeling	0	1	3	4	1
4 : Deletion	2	0	0	3	1
5 : Dispel	2	4	0	0	4
6 : Display	3	2	2	8	8
7 : Disregard	3	0	0	1	0
8 : Integration	5	3	4	10	9
9 : Localization	6	3	1	8	16
10 : Manipulation	2	2	0	2	1
11 : Repetition	6	0	3	3	0
12 : Selection	11	2	5	5	9
13 : Shaping	2	1	3	5	5
14 : Timing	1	0	2	2	1
15 : Transferrable Mechanisms	5	0	0	1	0
16 : Witholding	2	2	1	2	1

Table 1. Number of Information gatekeeping mechanisms identified as significant to the creation of curatorial voice by the curator participants at each museum

4.3   Comparison of the Co-Creation of Identity and the Socially Inclusive Goals of Participant Museums

The curators interviewed remarked upon the range of participatory activities available to museum visitors. In particular, four of the five museums involve the community in the development or presentation of curatorial voice. One museum, the Arab American National Museum (AANM), was perceived by curator participants to be socially inclusive of Arab American communities but not necessarily inclusive of other communities in the construction of curatorial voice. The researcher identified an exemplar for the socially inclusive role of curatorial voice, and the co-construction of identity: the Wing Luke Museum.

5   References

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