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## Museum Exhibition Design: Communication of meaning and the shaping of knowledge

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### Abstract

The primary objective of museum management in shaping of knowledge can be achieved by a communication of meaning through quality displays of the permanent collection or temporary exhibitions, the specimens of a continent or the interactive apparatus of science. This paper looks at research derived primarily from the museum scholars and experts with academics working in the field of visitor studies towards developing exhibits that facilitated visitor learning. These findings are recast the approach in order to offer an integrated framework for visitor behavior has implications for service management of the service encounter at the museum in Malaysia.

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*Keywords:* Museum exhibitions design; communication of meaning; shaping of knowledge; quality of life

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### 1. Introduction

Globally, the museum industries have concurred a museum as an organization that a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society. The definition of a museum has evolved, in line with developments in society and in accordance with the realities of the worldwide museum community. The role of museum further as an institution that which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates

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and exhibits for the purpose of study, educational and enjoyment, material and evidence of people and their environment. These roles of museums are not restricted to just providing information. Today, a visitor may develop such traits as seeing, grasping, analyzing, questioning, extracting clues related to life from what they see (Unal, 2012). In Malaysia, apart from agreeing with International Museum Associations, a museum functions are not limited as to preserve and store artefacts of national treasures, but it is also a source of knowledge for a holistic view towards all way of life. Ismail (2011) be of opinion that it was seen vital to gather entire material heritage in the construction of cultural identity and the civilization of a country. Cultural heritage attraction has become one of the niche products in Malaysia tourism industry (Ahmad & Badarulzaman, 2005) and has also been identified as influencing factors in the tourism industry (Mey & Mohamed, 2010). Museum has also been identified in Malaysia as an institution to spread knowledge to the public on the history, culture and natural history (Tambi, 2011). Museums are responsible for the developed as a characteristic part of the cultural heritage which subsist to store selected objects and specimens and in doing offer their own direct and distinctive messages from their object media through their exhibitions and museum education policies (Hooper-Greenhill & Pearce, 1995). Museum exhibitions are goods of research, organized and designed to communicate ideas. They communicate through the senses, the primary sense being visual, by a process that it both cognitive and cultural. This process incorporates the way people think about what they see and meanings the attach to it (Hooper-Greenhill & Kaplan, 1995). Traditionally, museums have communicated collections-based and associated information through a variety of media, but the introduction of new technologies now presents them with the opportunity to expand new ways of communication which allow the visitor to explore the richness and range of collections at their own pace and to their own requirements. This paper seeks, through an extensive literature search, to identify specific museum learning using communication media that promote in shaping of knowledge to the museum visitors. The agenda easily be accomplished by communication of meaning through the richness of display techniques. This paper intends to initiate a discussion on how museum exhibitions communicates to visitors in delivering information by using those communication media. These findings will be a best-practiced for future exhibition making in helping the shaping of knowledge for Malaysian community.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Museum exhibitions as a function of museums*

Museum exhibitions offer to the public as the museums main attraction and their principal benefit. Many previous museum scholars' have agreed that exhibitions as a core function of the museums. They totally agreed museum exhibitions are media of public communication that offer a transformative experience also expanding and altering the visitors awareness, interest and valuation of many aspects of themselves and their world. The Museums as cultural institutions with exhibition functions that collecting, documenting and preserve the objects, artefacts or specimens as assets and perform the activities such research, display and interpret by communicates of meaning through exhibition making for the purpose of learning (Dawson, 2006).

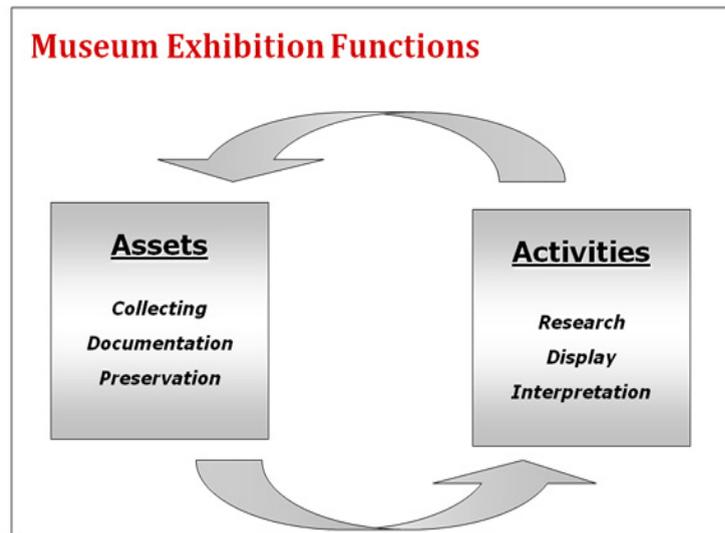


Fig. 1. Illustration of the flow diagram screening on museum functions of exhibition display perform a role to manage museum assets and responsible in execute highly developed learning activities  
Sources: Adapted from Dawson (2006)

Maryrand (2001), has strongly claimed that the museum exhibition must communicate to the visitors deep to their mind and feeling. The key is to develop a view that will perform the interface. The museum has to offer the visitor two things namely:

- collection (objects or archives)
- knowledge (facts or stories)

Those two elements put are together appropriately create “meaning”. If this is not accomplished, then the richness of collections and all knowledge in the world will not grow and not appreciated. Meanwhile, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) has viewed that definition of “meaning” in a museum is constructed in relation to the collections, which the museum holds. Objects as collections in museums are assembled to make visual statements, which combined to produce visual narratives. Hence, the ideas that displays have been mounted to communicate in the texts of the exhibition, which may offer a preferred interpretation from the various visual elements (display techniques).

## 2.2. Museum exhibition as the communication of meaning

The exhibition is the instrument of communication that is unique to the museum. We need to understand the remarkable of worldwide growth towards preservation of our natural and cultural heritage, but as the successful spread of means of public communication. Commonly, both types of exhibitions exhibit objects for display purposes and may include audio-visual images and interactive experiences. There is obviously important difference is that the museum is not attempting to retail a product or service as is the trade show but is what experience that the museum uniquely offers. Previous evident see museum exhibitions primarily as a method of education. Evidently the exhibitions succeed if they can educate the visitor about their subject matter and fail if they do not. Museum exhibitions are educational,

and it is always useful to consider the educative value of any exhibitions as one important criterion for its success.

As museums have become progressively more popular, therefore, adapting many of techniques of other aptitudes including audio-visual shows, multimedia programmes, simulation and other experiences have discussed museum exhibitions as a mode of entertainment. An interactive experience like a science centre may motivate visitors' interest in their environment, or an awareness of factors affecting their enthusiasm. In each instance of these transformative experiences based on confidence in the authenticity of the exhibits, the effective learning can occur only if the museum visitors are truly enjoying themselves.

Lord (2001), claimed that the purpose of museum exhibition is to transform some aspect of the visitors' interests, attitudes or values effectively, due to the visitors' discovery or some level communication of meaning in the objects on display where a discovery that is stimulated and sustained by the visitor's confidence in the perceived of this authenticity of those objects.

Whereas, Dawson (2006) emphasized that the big trends of an idea that museum exhibitions are essentially a medium of communication has led to a new importance placed to promote the visitor experience with contemplative and sophisticated kinds of interactive exhibits with other new means of communicating museum topics. The communication also has conducted with the exhibitions that appeal to the wide variety of learning styles via a mixture of experience types and carry out exciting new forms of architecture as a symbol of a city that portray a character of a city by visible communication on the way to communicate to the surrounding settlement.

### *2.3. Modes of exhibitions apprehension*

Focusing on the purpose of museum exhibition is to transform some aspect of the visitors' interests, attitudes or values effectively, due to the visitors' discovery or some level of meaning in the objects on display where a discovery with the purpose of motivated and maintained by the visitor's confidence in the perceived of this authenticity of those objects. This makes visitor apprehension of museum exhibitions central to their success. Although there possibly as numerous ways of exploring museum exhibitions as there are visitors, modes of visitor apprehension (Lord, 2001) may generally be classified under four headings as follows:

- contemplation

The mode of visitor apprehension, most preferred by art museums aiming at an aesthetic experience, although of course, it may also be utilized by history or science museum. It is stimulated by display of individual works of art, images, artefacts or specimens that are intended to be appreciated in and for themselves and perceived apart from the others around them. By tradition, museum description labels used to provide us a little information as possible namely title, artist, dates, medium, donor that in order to ensure that contemplation of the object in and for itself. Now there is a mode in providing open-ended graphic commentaries on the galleries walls to stimulate thoughtful contemplation of works art and audio tours may also help some visitors to contemplate visitors aspects of the works on display. Currently, several galleries and museums have adopted this approach. Contrast or comparison of work on exhibit may also engage in recreation a function, but even in those instances each individual work is intended to be appreciated on its own, as the basis for comparison. In the contemplation mode, the visitor remain relatively inactive physically although their intellect and emotions may very actively engaged. The transformative experience consists in the enhanced appreciation of the meaning and qualities of each individual work in and for itself.

- comprehension

In contrast, history and natural science museums are more likely to feature contextual or thematic exhibition where the artefacts, specimens or other objects on display are not intended to be studied as

individual objects, but to be associated to each other. Sometime they may be in a room setting or diorama, or they may simply be grouped in thematic or contextual relationships within a display case. Graphic may multi-layered, may combine words and images to aid comprehension. Although the properties of each individual object may still need to be appreciated. The purpose here is to encourage visitors to discover their meaning by relating one object to another, or each object to the overall context or theme. The visitor is more actively engaged in the process of making relationship, studying the graphics and labels as well as relating or comparing the objects to one another. The transformative experience consists in the quality impact discovery of the meaning of objects in their context or in relation to the exhibition theme.

- discovery

A static or motionless of more visually and intellectually active means of visitor engagement with museum exhibition. The visitors can explores a range of specimens or artefacts, appreciating individual examples or noting relationships between them. Traditionally, this model has found in many natural history museums with systematic specimen collections, but now increasingly to be seen in all types of museums that have adapted visible storage means of exhibits, in which object are categorized as in storage but made visually accessible in glazed cases or drawers. Discovery of the artefacts’ or specimens meaning may be further enhanced by the provision of full catalogue entries on the computer screen or laminated cards adjacent to the visible storage cases and cabinets.

- interaction

The most kinesthetically involving mode of visitor apprehension is the one favoured by many science centres and children museums, in which staff, volunteers, exhibitions apparatus, or duplicate specimens identified as hands-on education collection may be used to elicit a visitor respond that triggers the transformative visitor experience, the discovery of meaning that affects the visitors values, interests or attitudes. Visitor surveys shows that the most powerful type of interactive exhibits are those in which visitors respond to an informed guide, a museum demonstrator or an interpret, perhaps in period costume. This person-to-person interaction can be among the most effective experience that the museums can offer, especially if staff or volunteers are trained to elicit questions and involve visitors in their presentations.

Many examples of interactive exhibits are mechanical or electronic devices such as lifting a panel cover to read and answer questions posed by graphics, or push a button to light up the three-dimensional model or map. The development of multimedia programmes, especially the application of computer programs over he past two decades, have made interactive exhibition much more widespread and imaginative, especially in the presentation of the natural and physical sciences, in history and art museums. In the past two decades, interactive exhibition have included rides, simulation and virtual reality experience. There are also an extended range such as programs on monitors that help visitors to visualize a historical building that originally stood on an archaeological site that is now reduced to its foundations. The following Table 1 shows a summary of the mode of visitor apprehension of exhibitions:

Table 1. Summaries the mode of visitor apprehension of exhibitions

Modes of Visitor Apprehension of Exhibitions			
Modes of Apprehension	Types	Common in (but not limited to):	Characteristic
Contemplation	Aesthetic	Art Museums	Individual perception of specific works
Comprehension	Contextual or thematic	History, archeology and Ethnographic Museums	Relation perceptions of artefacts in context or in relation to a theme
Discovery	Exploration – as in visible storage	Natural Science Museums	Exploration of specimens grouped by categories

Interaction	Live demonstration; multimedia	Science Centre	Kinaesthetic respons to stimulus
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Source: Adapted from Barry Lord (2001), *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions: The purpose of Museum Exhibitions*

#### 2.4. Museum learning, communication of meaning and the shaping of knowledge

Museum actives in the shaping of knowledge because it was established over centuries ago. Its actively re-organizing their space and collections especially to the communication of meaning through the exhibition displays sequentially to present themselves as environment for formal learning, self-directed learning and informal learning based on experience frequently to new audiences.

#### 2.5. Defining learning

Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri (2002); Dawson (2006) perceives learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world around them. It may involve enhancing in skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes and capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.

Learning is a dynamic process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it. People be trained to learn as they learn to see as learning consists both of constructing meaning and constructing systems of meaning. The crucial action of constructing meaning is mental where it happens in the mind. Physical actions such as hands-on experience may be necessary for learning that effectively for children. However, it is not sufficient while we need to provide activities which engage the mind as well as the hands. Learning involves language that the language may use influences learning. Learning is a social activity that our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings, our teachers, our peers, our family as well as casual acquaintances, including the people before us or next to us at the exhibit. Learning is contextual as we do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of our lives; we learn in relation to what else we know, what we believe, our prejudices and our fears. One needs to learn the knowledge it is not possible to absorb new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge. It is gradual and takes time to learn which means that learning is not instantaneous. Motivation is a key component in learning (Hein 1991:90-91).

Etienne Wenger (1998: 226-228) perceives learning as a process of engaging in social practice, and that can be applied in all kind of settings.

### 3. Research methodology

The methodology of this research is based on a triangulation method. This paper only uses qualitative methods, which refer the literature review in the purpose the identification of issues from the perspective views of museum scholars and experts toward creating direction in developing museum exhibitions in Malaysia for public learning. Majority of literature review is based on western scholar in knowing the scenario of museum learning within adult visitors. It is required for further enhance and the robustness of this research. This will be the foundation idea towards a study on visitor studies in Malaysia because there is a limited study on museum exhibition design within the scope of research on communication of meaning to the shaping of knowledge.

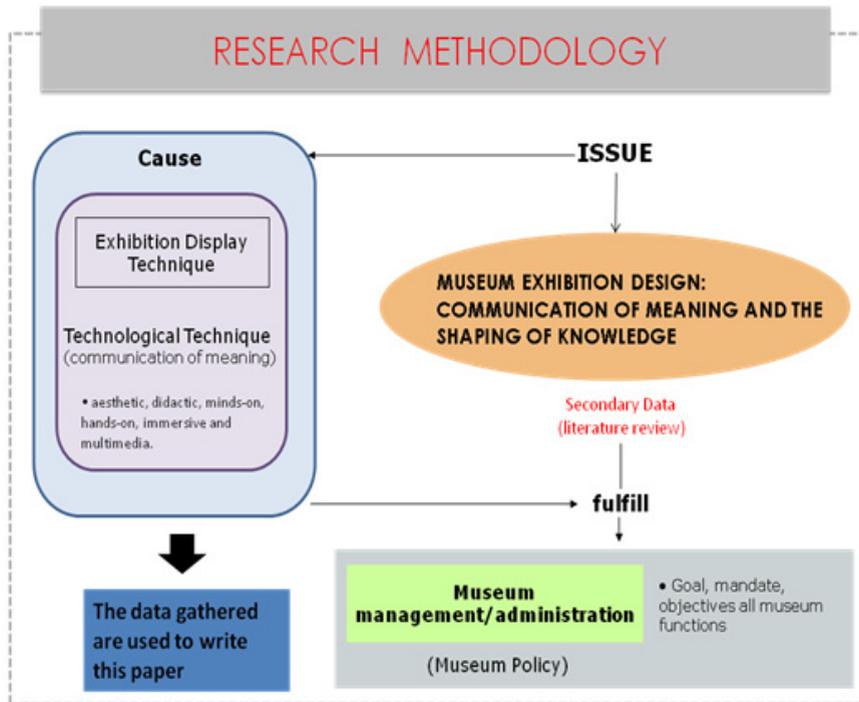


Fig. 2. Illustration of the flow diagram screening on literature review as a secondary data for research and identifies a relationship of communication of meaning in the shaping knowledge

3.1. Research limitations

Covering to parameters set by scholarship and research grant, where funds are only for local site activities (secondary data gatherings) within Malaysia. Any information and data regarding other countries within the enlighten on this paper is totally dependent by relative on the secondary data.

4. Findings

Research findings will be discussed in two phases. Phase one discuss on an identified museum learning and the type of learner involved. Also on phase two will intricate museum communication of meaning which elaborated display techniques in museum exhibitions. Finally, the phase two will discuss and conclude that the communication of meaning to reinforce about shaping of knowledge among the visitors of the museum.

4.1. Findings of museum learning and learner

As exhibition galleries develop closer relationships with their visitors, perhaps through recognizing their need in learning to be more accountable or through the desire to attract the wider range of people by the ways of communication of meaning via display techniques. Dawson (2006) has emphasized that,

within the museum environment, the learner needs to be an active participant in the learning process and not as a passive recipient. Learners construct their own understanding of the world by reflecting on their experiences and interpreting what they see, hear and feel to the objects in what exhibition displays are offered.

Evidently, learning always happen in the museum or may occur in the museum established through exhibitions and programs as well as, outreach programs in the wider community as a school group visitors about cultural groups and the internet. Learning are divided into three categories:

- Formal Learning: School type experience, teacher or staff led, might involve worksheets, often passive and may involve assessment.
- Self-Directed Learning: Led by the learner when they are interested in a subject or motivated by a specific need (e.g. school project, vocational interest).
- Informal Learning: Unplanned casual encounters that lead to new insights, ideas or conversation.

Types of learning that always introduced in a museum setting are related to how well visitors understand and regulate their own thinking process as summarized by the following description:

Table 2. Summary shows on learning behavior that most implemented in a museum setting

Learning Behavior	
Type of Learning Behavior	Description
Cognitive	Assimilation of facts and figures; learning through repetition and concrete experiences; applying existing knowledge through experimentation and problem solving.
Affective	Challenge attitudes, beliefs and values; increases understanding an empathy to other viewpoints.
Social	Develop skill of cooperation and communication; helping others to learn.
Skills (psychomotor and mental)	Manual dexterity, crafts, manipulation, prediction, deduction and measuring.
Personal	Increase sense of identity and self confidence; motivate further investigation; associate curiosity with enjoyable experiences; inspire interest and love of learning.

Source:Dawson, M. (2006), Lord Academy, Museum Seminar, Malaysia National Museum, Kuala Lumpur

Howard Gardner developed a theory on the dissimilar ways that individuals learn and process information, which called the multiple intelligences theory. According to Gardner's theory, visitors might show well-built learning skills in any of seven different style categories that summarized in the following tables:

Table 3. Summaries Howard Gardner Theory of Learning that called 'Multiple Intelligence Theory' in the learning process to perceive information.

Howard Gardner Theory of Learning, 1983

Types of Learner	Behavior of Learner	Communication of Meaning
1. Visual Learner/Spatial Learner  Artists, photographers and architects often exhibit this learning style.	Enjoys by looking at pictures, watching movies, drawing, designing and creating three dimensional representations. Activities that appeal to the spatial learning style include sketching, graphing, creating charts and mapping out stories.	Learns best by visualizing, dreaming, working with colors and pictures.
2. The Linguistic Learning	Enjoys with reading, writing and telling stories, debating, reading aloud, drama and creative writing.	Learns best by saying, hearing and seeing words
3. The Logical/Mathematical Learner	Enjoys doing experiments, asking questions, exploring patters and relationships	Learns best by classifying, working with abstract patterns, categorizing.
4. The Musical Learner	Enjoys singing and humming, listening to music, playing instruments.	Learns best by rhythm, melody, music.
5. The Kinetic Learner	Enjoys moving around, touching and talking.	Learns best by touching and moving, processing knowledge through action.
6. The Social Learner	Enjoys being with friends, talking to people and being part of a group	Learns best by sharing, cooperating, interviewing and comparing.
7. The Solitary Learner/Introspective Learner	Enjoys working alone, pursuing their own interests	Learns best by self paced instruction, reflecting and individual projects.

Source: Dawson, M. (2006), Lord Academy, Museum Seminar, Malaysia National Museum, Kuala Lumpur; [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_5367145\\_howard-gardner-learning-style.html#ixzz2ic121m6R](http://www.ehow.com/about_5367145_howard-gardner-learning-style.html#ixzz2ic121m6R)

#### 4.2. Findings for museum communication of meaning (Exhibition Display Technique)

Brown (2001) has claimed that whether a museum is organizing its permanent collection displays, temporary exhibition or combination of both, the visitors experience of this exhibition will be enhanced if they are supported by a range of educational and other public programs or activities that reinforce communication of the exhibitions' core messages. If exhibitions are intended as communication devices, then the developments of such programs consistent with exhibition theme. The utilizing of alternative media and techniques leads to appeal on the way to a broader range of preferred learning styles, interest level and intellectual capacities.

This research paper has established that the communication of meaning in the ways by providing a choice of media and techniques led to an appeal in the direction of preferred learning styles with the level of interest and intellectual capacity to satisfy the agenda of the museum. The determination of communication of meaning is summarize as follows:

Table 4. Summaries type of communication of meaning devices of exhibition techniques is identified in museum learning

Type of Communication of Meaning.		
Type of Exhibition Technique	Mode of Visitor Apprehension	Type of Learner
1. Aesthetic	Contemplative and reflective	Appeals to visual and solitary learners
2. Didactic	Text based, cases, murals	Appeals to solitary and linguistic learners
3. Hands - On	Low technologies interactive activities	Appeals to mathematical / logical learners, kinetic learners, musical learners, social learners
4. Multimedia	Videos, computer based, audio and projection	Appeals to visual and kinetic learners
5. Minds - On	Encourages problem solving and discussion plus exhibits that ask question	Appeals to social learners, mathematical/logical learners
6. Immersive Environments	Reconstructions that allow visitors to become part of the exhibition plus give context to content and artifacts	Appeals to all learners, especially those who are kinetic and social learners

Source: Dawson, M. (2006), Lord Academy, Museum Seminar, Malaysia National Museum, Kuala Lumpur

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study undertaken in qualitative research design have been discussed under findings related to visitors learning by communicate to the objects in the museum. Findings also related how visitor communicate to exhibition display related to their learning outcomes that the benefit to future research and future exhibition making. Keeping in mind that exhibition are only one form of expression in the spectrum of possible museum programs helps to open fresh up fresh ideas as to what might be the

most effective communication tools for particular subject matter in any given situation. The museum is then in a position to make a decision about which techniques and approaches are been utilized with respect to specific communication goals. A tremendous amount of research had gone into uncovering exactly when humans first began to communicate and how that evolved into the myriad forms of communication we use today. One thing that is clear once the people using objects, the environment around them are tools in satisfying their instinctual impulse to expose, enlighten and interpret aspects of experience. These “environment of communicate” can be seen as precursors of a typology of human experience that recognized as exhibition design. Through the activities of display and the interpretation, using objects, paintings, photographs, model and texts, museum construct a view, present a story and produce resources for shaping of visitors knowledge. These interpretive processes, which involves the attribution of learning. This could be described as the formation of curriculum of the museum which interpretations are being made from the content that museum set out to teach. Learning is viewed as a complex set of processes which every one of visitors is involved in different ways and to a different scale throughout life. It was found that attitudes, values and self – confidence affect learning processes. While, the cognitive knowledge consists an information and facts, which cannot be separated from affective knowledge, which involved emotions, feelings and values (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

Learning theories are verified that communication of meaning setting from exhibition displays, which enable active physical engagement, where the tasks and activities are meticulously selected, designed and measured to match the capacities and interests of the visitors will offer excellent condition of learning. Exciting applications through new communication technologies are an opportunity for the museum to send virtual exhibitions where visitors can explore the museum's website, on the screen through images online. A few institutions are leading the way with the development of interactive with which visitors will be able to interact with the exhibition and also with each other. The use of touch screen within exhibition galleries is now widespread, supplementing the information provided on graphic panels through other means (Lord, B & Lord, G. Dexter, Gosling, K., 2001). As such applications are developed, the visitors will be able to decide from the selection of a different way into the subject, to see the exhibits put into a variety of context and to access the modes of exhibition apprehension of possible interpretations.

## 6. Conclusion

The research indicates that museum education program design with different communication of meaning (educational methods) will provide cognitive learning and more awareness to visitors with various perspectives or outcomes. An examine was done at other contemporary means of communication that helps to explain what is unique about the museum exhibition as their medium of communication is affecting the majority of our emotional and exciting experience. A good exhibition cannot seem to eliminate the boundaries between the audience and the exhibition medium so that it becomes the interface between the visitors and the exhibition content. Mayrand (2001), has claimed that to accomplish a good exhibition, it requires a global vision defining how visitor interact with the collection, knowledge or storyline must be developed. Only through the clear communication approach and a strong visitor experience strategy can deliver worthwhile exhibitions. Making continuous research regarding visitor studies will be produced the learning outcome to develop an idea that will carry out the interface in the shaping of knowledge for lifelong learning.

Hooper-Greenhill (1991; 1995) identifies the provision of interactive experience such as video technology, multimedia, hand-on, and more recent application like CD-ROM which provide the opportunity for further learning and deeper experiences as one way of improving exhibition management.

In the mean time, with the development of communication technology, the museum has challenged to introduce the ‘median devices’ on the museum visit experience and on visitor behavioral intentions. Museum communication with ‘median devices’ (audio guides, interactive terminals, smart-phone, touch-screen tablets, augmented reality, etc); will identify visitors’ behavioral intentions including their intention to return to the museum. In this respect, it will be specifically examining the impacts that are reflect to visitors’ learning outcome to promote future research.

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