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Youth Voices in Museums: A Case Study for the Importance of Youth Involvement

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Introduction

Museums play a crucial role in the cultural and social aspects of contemporary society. They provide insight into the past, present, and future of our world through various disciplines, such as art, science, history, and anthropology. Museums provide an unmistakable value to society and to all those who choose to visit. Cultural and historic preservation are vital to the survival of society as we know it, especially in our increasingly globalized world, and the main source of this preservation comes in the form of museums. Most importantly, these preserved histories will be handed down to future generations, as has been done in communities long before the existence of the museum. The key to maintaining a strong and thoroughly preserved knowledge of society is youth outreach. Youth voices create a connection to the past that brings meaning to new generations.

Museums exist as institutions with a variety of purposes. Many organizations have defined what a museum is, and each definition contains a slightly different interpretation. One of the best definitions comes from The International Council of Museums, stating that “a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (Ambrose and Paine 2012). Other definitions further elaborate on the traits that make a museum, including features focusing on their “unique contribution to the public” or their
responsibility to “hold in trust for society” any “artefacts and specimens” (Ambrose and Paine 2012). While the exact characteristics of a museum vary depending on the institution, all museums share in common the goal to preserve history and inform the public (Ambrose and Paine 2012).

In modern day, there exist a plethora of museums that focus on vastly different aspects of human culture, from art to science, and every dimension between. Culture is a concept that has not been agreed upon in its definition, but can loosely be explained as a set of “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired…as a member of society” (White 1959). This definition is very broad, leaving space for interpretation, as is shown through the variety of museum adaptations. Art museums display cultural means through artistic expression, while history and anthropological exhibits focus on the lived past of communities, displayed through material artifacts and the written or recorded record. Most every museum is unique in its focus and presentation, however they each share a common goal of preserving culture and educating the public. Observations can be made on the events of the past, how those influence the present, and what the world can expect from the future. Differences in interpretations of the world which surrounds us can be studied and analyzed to infer the reasoning behind the way societies operate today. Museums, no matter their focus, hold the power to educate the world on all dimensions of the human and natural experience.

Museums are a resource that is invaluable to the continuation of society: experientially, socially, economically, and educationally (Batat 2020). The value of the experience that a museum provides to those visiting varies depending on who that attendee is, and what their goals are. For a young child, perhaps that experiential value will consist of spending time playing with building blocks that teach about city structures of the past, a lesson that may not be absorbed
fully, but could spark curiosity and creativity. For a teenager, the value of the museum comes perhaps from the gift shop or the service learning opportunities offered through after school programs that ask for youth feedback. An added bonus is that service learning and volunteer work offered through museums happens to look appealing on college applications. For other generations, especially those who take their time to absorb all of the information, the value of the experience may come in a more traditional way, leaving the attendee with a new understanding of concepts in which they previously were unaware. Regardless of the result of attending a museum, it always provides experiential value to those who visit.

Additionally, as businesses, museums provide an inherent amount of economic value to the communities in which they exist. For larger museums, such as the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., that value may be significantly higher than museums that operate on a smaller scale or do not attract as many visitors. Most importantly, though, museums provide their audiences with an educational value that can not be overlooked. Outside of traditional education systems, museums may be one of the most impressive education tools. Through interactive methods, museums are able to teach their audiences about matters that interest them. Through their educational value, museums are able to continue to preserve culture and history. As society progresses to become more globalized and technologically advanced, it is increasingly more important to remember the importance of the past. For example, museums can teach their audiences the importance of ethical interaction and knowledge gathering to prepare them for global travels. Such is shown in Batat’s (2020) definition of global cultural tourism as “travel aiming to experience cultural contexts…through socialization and inter-cultural exchanges”. Museums provide such experience in an accessible and informative manner, often catering specifically to this type of visitor. The value of a museum is extraordinary.
In the context of historical preservation and museum studies, youth perspectives are often overlooked or simply not sought out. Traditional museum styles are known to be targeted to the older and elitist generations, as has been the case for many decades (Batat 2020; Schwartz 2005). Younger people, specifically teens, provide fresh and diverse perspectives that can assist in the continuous progress that museums should maintain towards cultural patrimony and ethical and engaging presentation. This group of people will one day exist as the leaders and dues-paying members of society, as such they deserve a voice in the decisions that will affect their lives both currently and in the future. Not only can youth provide new and diverse ideas, they also “‘remind us that multiple perspectives especially from different generations enrich the experience,’” as a member of the education department at the Whitney Museum of American Art states (Schwartz 2005). One conducted study on the subject found that there exists a large difference in the “perception of arts and exhibitions” between younger people and those who hold jobs in museology professions (Batat 2020). That begs the question of the intended impact of the museum: should it be targeted to professionals in the field or to the general public? The answer to this question varies drastically depending on the museum of observation and the audience they intend to reach. Regardless, youth possess the unique ability to provide perspectives and commentary that may otherwise be overlooked.

Not only can museums benefit from a collaboration with the younger generation, but the youth can obtain many benefits as well. Formal education systems are often inflexible and strongly regulated at both state and national levels, leaving little space for interpretation or individualization of curriculum materials (Schwartz 2005). These systems focus more on student preparedness for short term items, such as standardized tests and college applications, and spend less time providing students with opportunity for deeper cultural and community engagement.
This is where museums can step in. By creating programs that collaborate with students, the museum can offer invaluable skills in leadership and professionalism. For example, youth-led museum tours give students experience in public speaking. By creating youth-run museum events students are able to practice skills in event planning and management. Introducing students to the behind the scene tasks of museums can create a life-long passion and lead to potential future career opportunities. Teen internships can lead to college apprenticeships which could then develop into a career, or at the very least contribute to the appeal of any future applications. Collaboration between youth and museums can be mutually beneficial.

**Case Study**

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the undeniable importance of youth perspective within museology using a case study conducted at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington. Additionally there exists a hope that this study can assist in better understanding how to outreach and advertise to youth within communities.

The Whatcom Museum features several permanent and temporary exhibitions that encourage visitors to explore a variety of topics, however this study focuses on only four of such displays. The first two exhibits come from the permanent exhibition titled “Pacific Northwest History” and inform visitors on the history of the logging and maritime industries within Whatcom County. Located on different floors within the Old City Hall building, both exhibits contain photographs, artifacts, and interactives to engage their audiences. The second two exhibits are displayed in the Lightcatcher building of the museum, located along the adjacent city block. On the ground floor is the temporary National Geographic exhibit titled “The Greatest Wildlife Photographs”. Here visitors can observe a collection of some of the best captured
wildlife photographs that have been featured throughout the National Geographic magazine. Visitors can also learn about the history of photography, the background of individual shots, and the stories behind wildlife photography through the screened videos located throughout the space. Located just upstairs, the final exhibit that was explored is titled “People of the Sea and Cedar”. Featuring a rich collection of art, artifacts, and interactive activities, this exhibit focuses on the history of local Indigenous tribes, teaching visitors about their culture, both past and present.

For the purpose of this study, a group of eight local high school students, aged 16-18, were brought to the museum and asked to explore the aforementioned offered exhibits. These students were already involved with the museum through the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) program, a biweekly after school program that encourages collaboration between youth and the museum. The YAC at the Whatcom Museum offers students the opportunity to plan and host events, express creativity through art, and capture a glimpse at the field of museology. Through this study, however, the YAC was given the opportunity to provide their feedback on the museum exhibits, a vital resource that can benefit both the institution and the youth themselves. After having time to explore each of the exhibits, the students were asked a series of questions that revolved around involvement, outreach, and accessibility. The YAC was also sent a survey to determine the engagement and inclusivity of each of the exhibits, information that could be beneficial to reference for any future exhibit planning or restructuring. The dual methodology of this study helps to gain both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the importance of youth involvement in museum institutions.
Interviews

Question 1: How and why did you get involved in YAC?

This question was posed to the YAC members to determine one of two things. First, their personal motivations for engaging with the museum through the program. This information is useful to determine any potential bias the students may have towards museums as a whole and the institution itself. Half of the students mentioned a passion for history or art, some even hoping to “integrate my knowledge or expand my knowledge” (Participant B) as one participant states. Due to these students’ expressed interest in museum studies, their level of engagement will be inherently higher than those students who may be visiting involuntarily. Examples of this engagement would be via school field trips or as a member of a family group. It should be acknowledged that the preconceived interest in the museum by the YAC members may affect their opinions on the subject. Secondly, this question helps to determine how successful past outreach efforts have been for the museum. Five of the eight students stated that they learned of the Youth Advisory Council through their school, proving that as an effective method to gain youth interest. Additionally, several students mentioned an interest in boosting their college applications and resumes as reasons for joining the YAC. Unique extracurricular programs such as this one help build foundational skills that can be applied to many future endeavors as well as add to the value of the museum in the community.

Question 2: What are some things that you would like to see more/less of in the museum as a whole or in specific exhibits?

The goal of this question is to better understand what draws youth attention within museum exhibits. The most common answer, with a mention from five of the participants, was to
include more interactive activities. Whether the purpose is to draw in more young audiences or to ensure the learning process can be more fun, including hands-on examples is a fantastic way to better connect with youth. Another common response to this question is to further expand upon “the connection between history and how that affects us today” (Participant D). While students may learn a significant amount of history during their traditional education, museums are able to provide a much more thorough and specialized knowledge on local history. By asking the students this question, the students are able to offer their perspectives on how the displays can be more engaging to them.

*Question 3: If you had to completely redesign an exhibit or add changes, which would it be and why? What would you change?*

Similarly to question 3, this question aims to better understand how exhibits can be best designed to cater to a young audience. Throughout all four of the exhibits, the most common response from students was a lack of engagement, further indication of the importance of hands-on activity based education tools. The exhibit that received the most feedback was the National Geographic photography exhibition. Whether it was due to an imbalance in the ratio of photographs and textual support or a lack of cohesion, these students were able to provide many solutions (Figure 1). Some students suggested simple changes, such as to “make it a little bit more organized” (H) while others commented that the exhibits required more complex redesigns in order to “have a little more interaction” (D). The most efficient way to better understand how to maintain diverse audiences is to ask for feedback from members of specific groups themselves. While some of the suggestions may be unique to particular individuals, it can be inferred that any commonalities between responses are indicative of the need for change.
**Question 4: What are some examples of outreach to get more people, especially youth, into the museum?**

One of the overarching goals of this study is to better understand how to advertise museums to a younger audience in order to maintain their outreach to contemporary crowds. Previously, in question 1 of the interview, the YAC members were asked how they were initially informed of the program, to which a majority of them answered advertisements through their school. This was also the most common answer to the question of the best outreach practices that the museum should continue to pursue. One such idea that was presented was a collaboration between the museum education department and local teachers to create an extra credit opportunity that revolves around an increase in engagement between students and the institution (Participant H). Other ideas such as setting up tables at school or community events, such as the local “farmer’s market” (Participant E) or concert venues, emphasize on the importance of simply “showing up at other events where people are” (Participant A). As crucial members of the community, museums can lean further into community engagement activities to draw in wider audiences.

**Question 5: How can the museum amplify the youth voices?**

Once the institution is able to attract and engage young audiences, it is equally important to support the developing voice throughout the community (Schwartz 2005). This question was asked to better understand what the YAC members hope to receive from their partnership with the museum, and to help advertise what can be offered to other members of younger generations. Of all the questions asked, this had the most diverse response range, indicating that there is a much more individual perception of the benefits of youth and museum collaboration. Some
students emphasized the importance of access to artistic expression through museum events, such as the recent “Share, Like, Create” art exhibition that the YAC initiated. This project was a display of local youth perceptions of art and photography. One student stated that this event provided “creative freedom to be able to really show yourself and share your voice too” as a powerful resource and an invaluable opportunity to be “vulnerable and open” (Participant B). Other students believed the most valuable amplifier of youth voice is gained through the volunteer opportunities that the museum offers, such as youth-led tours, field trips, and summer camps (Participant G). Most importantly, however, the YAC members believe that the museum has a unique ability to amplify youth voices by ensuring that they are continuously “connecting with the culture” (Participant E) of their own community.

**Question 6: How does digital and social media play a role in museum outreach?**

As modern society continues to become further technologically advanced, media becomes an increasingly useful tool, especially for younger generations who have been raised to utilize the internet to its full potential. The above question was posed to the YAC members knowing that they already believe there exists an important role of social and digital media to museum institutions, but with the goal of better understanding the reasoning behind said importance. Both the museum (@whatcom_museum) and the YAC organization (@whatcomyac) own and operate active Instagram accounts with the goal of community connection. Participants stated the most important role of social media is to inform the public and spread knowledge, claiming that “a lot of information and communication for youth comes through social media these days” (Participant D). Social media can help “everyone find out about events” (Participant E), feature local artists, and “expand…[and] create an opportunity for more
involvement by just getting a bigger, like base of people who are seeing your stuff” (Participant A). As a generation who has grown up with access to the internet, adolescents have a much more thorough understanding of the best ways to utilize media and can provide invaluable perspectives on how museums can and should employ this tool.

Survey

After observing the exhibits within the Whatcom Museum and answering interview questions, the members of the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) were sent a brief survey to numerically visualize the engagement, inclusion, and accessibility aspects of the exhibitions. The students were provided with definitions of the three terms to ensure they each had a thorough understanding of the concept in which they were asked to describe. The first of which, personal engagement, was defined as the level of pleasantness, interest, and entertainment the exhibit offered the visitor. This aspect is important to determine how a display is able to catch and maintain the attention of the viewer. The next aspect, inclusion, focuses on equal representation of people from multiple identities, including gender and age. Inclusive exhibits should be comprehensive in their reached audience. Lastly, the accessibility of the exhibit was defined as the ability to understand by any visitor, regardless of physical, cognitive, or social and cultural identities. Museums should be accessible to any person who may wish to visit. The study participants were asked to rank each exhibit on the above aspects on a scale of 1-5, with 1 representing a lack of the trait and 5 representing a high level of the trait (Figures 2-4).

When looking at the levels of personal engagement that the participants felt, it is clear that the Pacific Northwest History and People of the Sea and Cedar exhibits were significantly more successful at attracting and maintaining audience attention than the National Geographic’s
Photography exhibit. This is most likely due to the variety of material that exists within the former displays, with a mixture of photographs, texts and artifacts. The People of the Sea and Cedar exhibit ranks the highest in terms of inclusion and accessibility as well. The students found this exhibit to be the most well rounded in all three of the observed traits, most likely because it features the most variety in perspective and cultural diversity. The People of the Sea and Cedar exhibit could then be used as a model for any future exhibitions that the institution decides to add. The results of the survey are consistent with those from the interviews, that youth are drawn to exhibits that feature more engaging material.

**Conclusion**

Youth outreach within museums is the key to maintaining the connection of historical, cultural, and social knowledge of society. When perspectives are passed from one generation to the next, they become integral to museum preservation, which in turn provides a backbone to historic preservation and community development. Museum institutions are responsible for preserving the legacy of human culture; not only to educate the public but to hold information of the past that can provide invaluable insight to the present and future moments. An experience in a museum is not only enjoyable, but educational for the public. A museum provides for its community not only economically, but also to develop and grow connections.

Youth in the museum’s local community can play a large and impactful role in the institution’s impact on the public. While youth provide vital perspectives in community engagement within a museum, they are often overlooked. Youth, however, are the future leaders, teachers, and adults of the next generation and are needed for the continuity of museum learning. Not only should youth have the opportunity to collaborate with their local museums, they should
also have the opportunity to be changed by them as well. Youth can receive more thorough history education, and can deepen their understanding of their own home by utilizing a connection with their local museums. By interacting within museums, youth are also able to strongly connect with their community and sense of belonging.

In the interviews and surveys conducted with local youth in Whatcom County, the analysis showed that the People of the Sea and Cedar exhibit was rated not only the most engaging but also inclusive and accessible to the youth. This shows potential to become a model exhibit in how to engage and teach the public for future museum exhibits. By having the students, who are the future of the community, analyze and rate the local exhibits, these often overlooked youth voices become heard. The limits of the case study are mostly based on the reach and size of the impacts; with a small sample size of N = 8, and only 3 exhibits. For future considerations, it would be desirable to have a larger sample of youth and more diversity in exhibits, perhaps from different museums. It would also be quite interesting to see the direct impacts the study has on the youth itself, perhaps asking the youth to complete a self analysis after the study and interviews, to understand if they feel differently about being heard or not. Alternatively, creating a fun exit survey for any member of the public to complete after their visit in order to reach a larger audience. While limited, this study has opened the importance of youth voices in museum construction, function, and preservation. The lifeline of museums rely on the generational continuity that youth play just as important roles in as adults. Youth voices aren’t the end of the world, but in fact, the beginning of the next one.
**Figures**

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit</th>
<th>Suggestion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maritime (Pacific Northwest History)</td>
<td>“Make it more like the logging one because I like all the information everywhere and I think the diorama was really cool” (Participant A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think the logging exhibit was laid out really well. It had lots of pictures, lots of really cool artifacts, and I think the maritime exhibit had a little bit less of that or wasn't as intriguing” (Participant B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s laid out a little bit weird” (Participant C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Geographic’s The Greatest Wildlife Photographs</td>
<td>“I thought it’d be cool to have a little more interaction... and just sort of bring out, like, the connection between the viewer and the photos.” (Participant D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It's kind of hard to read the subtitles and I feel like the subtitles, like the story behind the pieces, are kind of like the most fun part of it” (Participant E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The layout is kind of funky” (Participant F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I don't know if it's just like a bunch of photographs. It's a little dry... like spice them up a little bit.” (Participant G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logging (Pacific Northwest History)</td>
<td>“I would probably like just move stuff around and make it a little bit more organized” (Participant H)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: A table describing the specific suggestions that the YAC members gave on the exhibits within the Whatcom Museum.*
Figure 2

Figure 2: A chart outlining the ranking of personal engagement, inclusion, and accessibility levels for the Pacific Northwest History (Logging and Maritime) exhibits at the Whatcom Museum.

Figure 3

Figure 3: A chart outlining the ranking of personal engagement, inclusion, and accessibility levels for the National Geographic’s *The Greatest Wildlife Photographs* exhibit at the Whatcom Museum.
Figure 4

Figure 4: A chart outlining the personal engagement, inclusion, and accessibility levels of the People of the Sea and Cedar exhibit at the Whatcom Museum.
References


