

Enhancing Community Engagement and Outreach: Strategies for Information Dissemination at the Bangladesh National Museum

Abul Hasanat Md. Fazle Rabbi

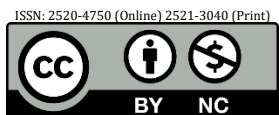
Abstract:

Museums, traditional custodians of cultural heritage, are adapting to the digital age. The Bangladesh National Museum faces the challenge of effectively disseminating information to engage with an evolving, diverse audience. This research explores strategies for enhancing community engagement and outreach through innovative information dissemination. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and interviews with museum visitors, staff, and community members, this study captures quantitative and qualitative data. It emphasizes contemporary roles, such as inclusivity, accessibility, and relevance. Findings offer insights into current community engagement and information dissemination at the Bangladesh National Museum. Recommendations, informed by visitor perspectives and global best practices, empower the museum to navigate the digital era while preserving its core role as a cultural steward and educator. By enhancing information dissemination, the museum can bridge cultural understanding, foster lifelong learning, and contribute to sustainable societal development.



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1. Introduction

Museums stand as dynamic and evolving institutions at the intersection of culture, education, and community engagement. With their collections of historical artifacts, artworks, and cultural treasures, museums have long served as custodians of collective memory, knowledge repositories, and spaces for public exploration. This research article embarks on a journey to explore how the Bangladesh National Museum, nestled in the heart of Dhaka, can enhance community engagement and outreach through effective information dissemination strategies.

The Bangladesh National Museum, established in 1913 and officially opened to the public in 1914, is not only a repository of the nation's cultural heritage but also a testament to the rich and diverse history of the region (Bangladesh National Museum, 2023). Its collections span millennia, encompassing archaeological finds, ethnographic artifacts, fine arts, and a treasure trove of historical documents. As the global cultural landscape shifts, museums are compelled to adapt and reimagine their roles as cultural educators and community hubs. This transformation is driven by the recognition that museums are not ivory towers of knowledge, but living institutions that can catalyze societal change through engagement, education, and outreach (Falk & Dierking, 2016). The evolving role of museums as agents of social change is underscored by the principles of inclusivity, accessibility, and relevance in the 21st century.

To achieve this transformation, museums must navigate a complex web of challenges, including the need to balance preservation with accessibility (Anderson, 2004). These challenges are further compounded by the digital revolution, which has democratized access to information and reshaped audience expectations. In the case of the Bangladesh National Museum, these challenges are particularly salient, given the unique socio-cultural context of the nation and the imperative to serve as a unifying force amidst diversity. Furthermore, the UNESCO Museums and Sustainable Development framework (UNESCO, 2015) emphasizes the potential of museums to contribute to sustainable development by fostering creativity, promoting cultural diversity, and fostering community engagement. Museums like the Bangladesh National Museum are, therefore, not just repositories of history but engines of socio-economic and cultural progress.

Community engagement is integral to the mission of museums, and effective information dissemination is a key driver of community involvement. Museums have embraced digital technologies and social media to expand their reach (Hasan, 2019). The advent of social media has transformed the way museums interact with their audiences, enabling real-time engagement and interaction (Al-Garadi et al., 2018). This research sets out to address the multifaceted challenge of enhancing community engagement and outreach at the Bangladesh National Museum. By investigating current information dissemination practices, understanding visitor perspectives, and analyzing the evolving role of museums in the digital age, this study seeks to identify strategies that can empower the museum to bridge the gap between its rich heritage and the vibrant communities it serves. In the following sections, we will embark on a journey of discovery, delving into the literature to understand the evolving roles and responsibilities of museums in contemporary society. We will then outline the methodology employed in this study, which integrates surveys and interviews to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. Subsequent sections will present our findings, recommendations, and a vision for the future of the Bangladesh National Museum as a catalyst for community engagement, education, and cultural preservation.

1.1 Statement of the problem:

The research need emerges from the intersection of several pressing challenges facing museums in the digital age, particularly the Bangladesh National Museum. As cultural institutions grapple with how to remain relevant and engage diverse audiences, there exists a clear need to examine the strategies underpinning effective community engagement and outreach through information dissemination. This research seeks to address the knowledge gap surrounding the specific practices and opportunities that can empower the Bangladesh National Museum to navigate the complexities of the contemporary world. It responds to the imperative for museums to evolve from static repositories into interactive, inclusive, and educational spaces that foster cultural understanding and contribute to societal development. This study is guided by a set of critical research questions aimed at unravelling the multifaceted dynamics of community engagement and information dissemination at the Bangladesh National Museum. The research questions that frame this investigation include: *Firstly*, how does the Bangladesh National Museum currently disseminate information, and how can it be improved? *Secondly*, what are visitor expectations and preferences for engagement with the museum's information dissemination? And *Thirdly*, what strategies can enhance community engagement and outreach at the Bangladesh National Museum?

2. Literature Review

Museums serve as custodians of collective memory, repositories of knowledge, and spaces for public exploration. The museum has been actively engaged in community outreach programs to promote public awareness of its collections and to encourage greater participation from the local community. In today's digital age, the role of museums has expanded beyond their physical walls, necessitating innovative strategies for effective information dissemination and community involvement. Historically, museums have been revered as the guardians of cultural heritage, safeguarding tangible and intangible treasures for future generations (Anderson, 2004). However, the landscape of museums is rapidly evolving, spurred by technological advancements and changing societal expectations, prompting a re-evaluation of their roles (Simon, 2010).

Information dissemination in museums is a multifaceted process that encompasses various modes and channels. It involves the presentation of exhibit descriptions, event schedules, accessibility information, cultural and historical context, and interactive experiences (Lazer et al., 2009). Effective information dissemination is crucial for attracting and retaining visitors (Rahman, 2017). It is also tied to ethical considerations, as museums must adhere to codes of ethics in providing accurate and accessible information to the public (International Council of Museums, 2018). According to Shonhe (2017), information repositories such as libraries are striving to remain relevant in the 21st century by employing new techniques for information dissemination. In this regard, the BNM can benefit from adopting innovative strategies for community engagement and outreach. In the digital age, the role of museums has expanded beyond static repositories of artifacts to dynamic institutions that actively engage with communities and audiences (Simon, 2010). This transformation reflects a broader shift in the museum sector towards visitor-centric approaches. As Anderson (2004) notes, museums are now tasked with a delicate balancing act between preservation and accessibility. They must find innovative ways to make their collections accessible to diverse audiences while safeguarding the integrity of the artifacts. The adoption of digital technologies offers museums the means to achieve this equilibrium by digitizing collections and creating virtual exhibits that transcend physical boundaries. Falk and Dierking (2012) emphasize the importance of tailoring museum experiences to the needs and interests of visitors. They argue

that museums must evolve into visitor-centered spaces, fostering a sense of ownership and participation among visitors. This shift recognizes that visitors are not passive observers but active participants in the museum experience. By offering personalized, engaging experiences, museums can forge stronger connections with their audiences and enhance their educational impact. Sandell (2002) further underscores the significance of inclusivity and accessibility in the contemporary museum landscape. Museums are challenged to ensure that their offerings are inclusive, welcoming diverse audiences and accommodating varying abilities. This inclusivity extends beyond physical access to encompass digital accessibility, making museum resources available to a broader spectrum of individuals, including those with disabilities. Beyond their roles as repositories of knowledge, museums are increasingly recognized as agents of social change (Sandell, 2002). They have the potential to catalyze societal progress by fostering creativity, promoting cultural diversity, and engaging with local communities (UNESCO, 2015). This perspective elevates museums to active participants in the broader agenda of sustainable development. The UNESCO Museums and Sustainable Development framework highlights the multifaceted contributions that museums can make to society, transcending their traditional boundaries.

In the specific context of the Bangladesh National Museum, these theoretical frameworks take on unique significance. Established in 1913 and officially opened to the public in 1914, the museum boasts a diverse collection that mirrors the rich history and cultural diversity of the nation (Bangladesh National Museum, 2023). However, it faces the complex challenge of navigating the digital age while remaining true to its core mission of preserving and sharing Bangladesh's heritage. The Bangladesh National Museum must grapple with the imperative to connect its rich past with a diverse and digitally connected present. As we delve deeper into our research, our aim is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By aligning these theoretical frameworks with the museum's real-world context, we can uncover actionable insights and formulate effective strategies for enhancing community engagement and information dissemination. Ultimately, our goal is to empower the Bangladesh National Museum to fulfil its role as a vibrant cultural institution that bridges the past, present, and future, fostering cultural understanding and societal progress.

3. Data Analysis and Findings

In the pursuit of enhancing community engagement and outreach through improved museum information dissemination at the Bangladesh National Museum, data was gathered from a diverse pool of participants. Among the total of 519 respondents, 400 individuals chose to engage through offline questionnaires, underlining the significance of in-person interactions in gauging visitor feedback. The remaining participants opted for online surveys, embracing the digital channels offered by the museum. Additionally, nine individuals provided their views through Key Informant Interviews (KII), offering in-depth qualitative perspectives that enrich the quantitative data. The substantial number of participants and the varied modes of engagement demonstrate the breadth and depth of this study, enabling a comprehensive exploration of community engagement and information dissemination practices. In this section, we delve into the data collected, presenting key findings and insights that shed light on the current state of affairs at the Bangladesh National Museum.

3.1 Data Presentation

Visitor Satisfaction with Information Dissemination Methods: The data analysis revealed significant insights into visitor satisfaction with the various information dissemination methods employed by the Bangladesh National Museum. Participants were asked to rate their

satisfaction levels with these methods on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

3.1.1 Type and Quality of Information Received: Participants were also asked to provide feedback on the type and quality of information they received during their museum visits. This included details about the exhibits, historical context, cultural significance, and educational content.

3.1.2 Preferred Modes of Receiving Information: An important aspect of the analysis involved determining visitors' preferred modes of receiving information. Respondents were queried on whether they preferred traditional methods like invitation cards or more contemporary approaches such as emails, website browsing, or telephone queries.

3.1.3 Effectiveness of Exhibition Displays: The effectiveness of exhibition displays in conveying information was another key area of exploration. Participants assessed the impact of visual exhibits and interactive displays.

3.1.4 Perceptions of Mobile Bus Exhibition and Special Exhibitions: The data presented insights into visitors' perceptions of the mobile exhibition bus and special exhibitions conducted on national days. These included assessments of the cultural awareness generated by these initiatives.

3.1.5 Guide Lecturer Services: Visitor feedback regarding the utilization and effectiveness of guide lecturer services was also analyzed. Participants shared their views on the educational value of guided tours.

3.1.6 Information Provided for Researchers: The data included assessments of the information and resources made available to researchers and scholars. This encompassed the accessibility and utility of research materials offered by the museum.

4. Research Methodology

To address the research questions regarding community engagement and information dissemination at the Bangladesh National Museum, a comprehensive research methodology is employed. This methodology is designed to capture a nuanced understanding of current practices, visitor expectations, and opportunities for enhancement. Combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study aims to provide actionable insights that can empower the museum to better serve its diverse community and adapt to the challenges of the digital age.

4.1 Study design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture a comprehensive view of community engagement and information dissemination practices at the Bangladesh National Museum.

4.2 Data Collection:

4.2.1. Surveys: To gain quantitative insights, structured surveys will be administered to museum visitors, seeking their perspectives on current information dissemination methods and their suggestions for improvement. Surveys will be conducted on-site and digitally, allowing for a diverse sample.

4.2.2. Interviews: Qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with museum staff, community members, and key stakeholders. These interviews will provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities for community engagement.

4.3 Sample Selection

For surveys, a stratified random sampling method will be employed to ensure representation across diverse visitor demographics. Interviews will involve purposive sampling to include individuals with expertise in museum operations and representatives from the local community.

4.4 Data Analysis:

4.4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis: Survey data will be analyzed using statistical software to identify trends and patterns. Descriptive statistics and inferential techniques, such as regression analysis, will be applied to assess the relationships between variables.

4.4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis: Interview transcripts will undergo thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, insights, and recommendations. Coding and categorization will be used to distil qualitative data into actionable findings.

5. Findings

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into visitor satisfaction and preferences regarding information dissemination methods and services at the Bangladesh National Museum. A total of 519 respondents actively participated, representing a diverse cross-section of museum visitors. Within this group, 55% were male, while the remaining 45% identified as female, reflecting a balanced gender distribution. The data collection encompassed multiple modes, with 400 respondents opting for offline questionnaires and the remainder engaging online. Additionally, nine individuals shared their perspectives through Key Informant Interviews (KII), providing qualitative depth to the quantitative dataset.

5.1 Visitor Satisfaction with Information Dissemination Methods: The analysis of visitor feedback unveiled a multifaceted landscape of satisfaction with the museum's information dissemination methods. It is evident that the Bangladesh National Museum successfully engages a diverse visitor base, each with distinct expectations and preferences. In general, a substantial portion of respondents expressed satisfaction with how information is disseminated during their museum visits. They appreciated the efforts made by the museum to provide information about its exhibits and collections. Visitors frequently described their experiences as informative and engaging, with many acknowledging the significance of the information in enhancing their understanding of the cultural and historical artifacts on display. However, a closer examination of the data reveals nuanced perspectives on the quality and depth of the information received. While 39% respondents praised the museum's efforts in providing context-rich content, other 61% expressed a desire for more in-depth information. This suggests that while the museum is effective in conveying basic facts about its exhibits, there is an opportunity to further enrich the educational experience by offering deeper insights and narratives. These varying levels of satisfaction reflect the diverse educational and entertainment needs of museum visitors. Some seek concise information that piques their curiosity, while others yearn for a deeper dive into the historical and cultural significance of the artifacts. It is essential for the museum to strike a balance that caters to these diverse needs, ensuring that both novice and experienced visitors find value in their interactions with the exhibits. In the context of enhancing community engagement and outreach, these findings underscore the importance of tailoring information dissemination methods to meet the varying expectations of the museum's audience.

5.2 Preferred Modes of Receiving Information: Understanding visitors' preferred modes of receiving information is crucial in tailoring information dissemination strategies to meet their

diverse needs. The findings indicate a spectrum of preferences among museum-goers, underlining the importance of offering multiple communication channels to engage a broad audience effectively. Respondents exhibited varying inclinations towards traditional and digital communication methods. A substantial portion of visitors expressed a preference for traditional means, such as receiving information through invitation cards. These tactile, tangible artifacts still hold value for many, evoking a sense of anticipation and formality surrounding their museum visits. On the digital front, the museum's website emerged as a prominent and well-received platform for obtaining information about exhibits and events though containing mis-leading information. It serves as an accessible repository of knowledge, offering convenience and the opportunity for deeper exploration. Thus, the view of Simon (2010) becomes coherent in this context. Additionally, emails garnered less favor among visitors, but they expressed happiness to get timely updates and personalized communication. Telephone queries, however, were met with less enthusiasm compared to other methods. This suggests that while digital channels are thriving, the interactive nature of phone conversations may require further attention to align with visitor preferences.

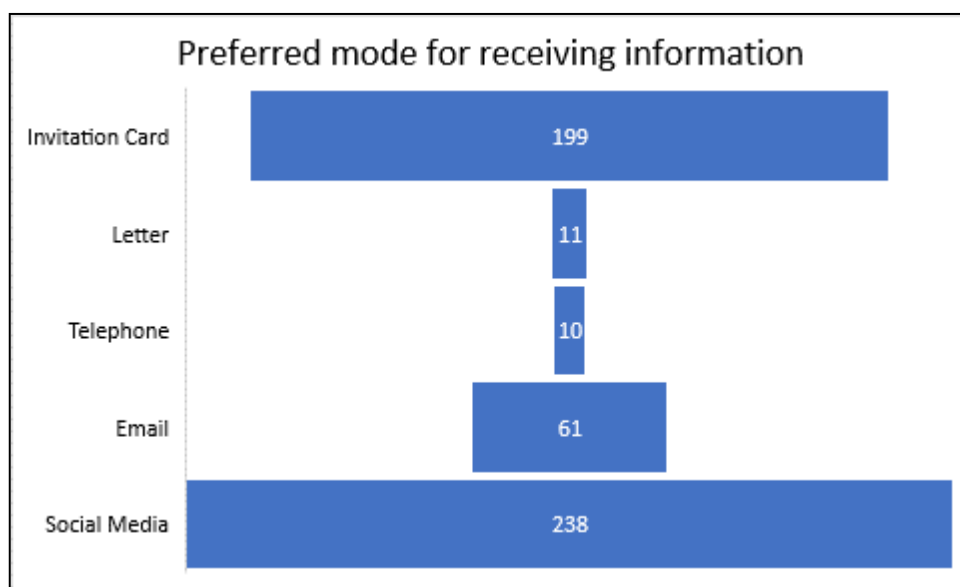


Figure 1: Preferred Modes of Receiving Information

The preference diversity demonstrated in this data emphasizes the importance of adopting an omnichannel approach. Museums can benefit from a balanced strategy that integrates traditional forms of communication with the power and reach of digital platforms. This approach ensures that they cater to the diverse preferences of their visitors, making information accessible to all, irrespective of their preferred mode of engagement. In the quest to enhance community engagement and outreach, museums should continue adapting their information dissemination methods to the evolving expectations of their audiences.

5.3 Effectiveness of Exhibition Displays: The evaluation of exhibition displays within the Bangladesh National Museum provides illuminating insights into their role as vehicles for conveying information about exhibits. The data reveals that these displays serve as dynamic and impactful tools in engaging museum visitors. Respondents commonly acknowledged their effectiveness in conveying information, commending the exhibits' ability to educate and inspire. In particular, interactive displays emerged as key contributors to visitor engagement. These dynamic elements elevate the museum experience, allowing visitors to actively explore

and interact with the exhibits. Such interactive engagement not only enhances understanding but also fosters a deeper connection with the artifacts and their cultural significance. The positive perceptions surrounding exhibition displays underscore their importance in facilitating meaningful connections between visitors and the museum's collections. It is evident that well-designed and informative displays play a pivotal role in fulfilling the museum's mission of education and cultural enrichment. These findings reaffirm the significance of maintaining and expanding upon innovative exhibition design practices as part of the broader strategy to enhance community engagement and outreach at the museum.

5.4 Perceptions of Mobile Bus Exhibition and Special Exhibitions: The study delved into visitors' perceptions of the mobile exhibition bus and special exhibitions held on national days at the Bangladesh National Museum, shedding light on their role in enriching the museum experience. Mobile Bus Exhibition by Bangladesh National Museum started in 1979 and continued till 2002. A statistic from 1979 to 2002 has shown that more than 18 lacs Respondents overwhelmingly viewed the mobile exhibition bus as an innovative and engaging approach to learning about the museum's collections. This mobile extension of the museum was perceived as an accessible means of bringing the exhibits closer to diverse communities, fostering cultural awareness, and providing educational opportunities. Respondents expressed their disappointment not to experience the Mobile Bus Exhibition as that is shut down as of May 2023. Likewise, special exhibitions conducted on national days were widely recognized as contributing significantly to historical and cultural awareness as well as education. Visitors appreciated the curated exhibits, which offered a deeper understanding of the nation's history and heritage. These exhibitions were seen as an effective way to celebrate cultural diversity and promote a sense of national pride among visitors. These findings emphasize the value of mobile exhibition initiatives and special exhibitions as essential components of the museum's community engagement and outreach efforts. They serve as dynamic tools for extending the museum's reach, enhancing cultural awareness, and fulfilling its role as a cultural and educational institution.

5.5 Guide Lecturer Services: The guide lecturer services offered by the Bangladesh National Museum emerged as a noteworthy aspect of the visitor experience. Visitors frequently commended the effectiveness of these services in enhancing their educational journeys within the museum. One distinguishing feature of the guide lecturer services was the engaging and informative manner in which they were delivered. Guides adeptly navigated visitors through the museum's exhibits, weaving captivating narratives and providing valuable insights into the cultural and historical significance of the artifacts. This approach not only enriched the visitor experience but also fostered a deeper connection with the exhibits. However, it's essential to note that some guides had limited proficiency in languages other than their mother tongue. While this presented a challenge for international visitors, respondents recognized the guides' efforts to bridge language barriers through gestures, and their sheer enthusiasm. This demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that all visitors, regardless of linguistic background, could benefit from the guided tours. The guide lecturer services received acclaim for their engaging delivery, while sometimes becoming less informative due to lack of proper knowledge about specific artifact. But they played a pivotal role in elevating the educational aspect of museum visits, contributing to a more profound understanding and appreciation of Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage. As the museum continues to attract diverse audiences, addressing language barriers and having proper knowledge can further enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of these services, aligning with the museum's mission of community engagement and education.

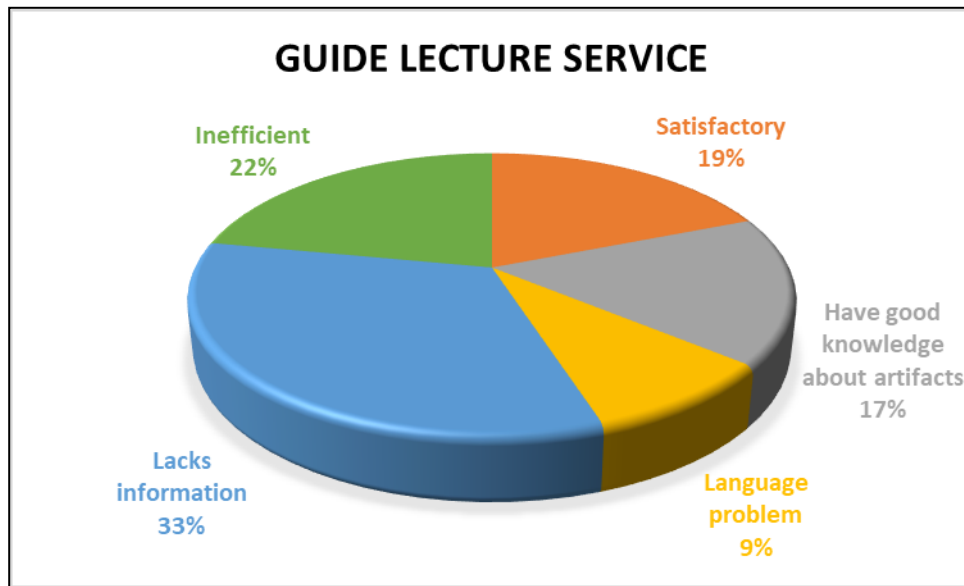


Figure 2: Perception about Guide Lecturer Services

5.6 Information Provided for Researchers: The Bangladesh National Museum extends a welcoming hand to researchers and scholars seeking to delve into the rich tapestry of its collections and historical resources. Researchers often apply for specific information or photographs crucial to their academic pursuits. In adherence to the museum's policy, the authorities are diligent in providing access to these invaluable resources. One notable facet of this service is its flexibility. While some aspects are offered as a complimentary and free service, there are instances where a nominal fee, typically associated with photocopying, applies while fee for photography service seems a bit high. Researchers have the privilege of utilizing the museum's library resources, which includes an extensive collection of materials. While borrowing books may not be possible, researchers can readily access knowledge through photocopies, ensuring that their scholarly pursuits are supported. Visitor satisfaction rates with this service remain notably high, with the majority expressing their contentment with the museum's commitment to research and academia. However, in rare cases where dissatisfaction has been reported, the museum continues to actively seek ways to improve the service to better meet the needs of the research community.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this research unveil a multitude of opportunities for the Bangladesh National Museum to further enhance its information dissemination methods and community engagement endeavors. To foster a deeper and more diverse connection with its audience, the museum should prioritize content diversification. This entails striking a delicate equilibrium between providing introductory information accessible to all and offering more profound narratives for those seeking an in-depth exploration of the exhibits. Acknowledging the diverse preferences of visitors, the museum should embark on an omnichannel approach to information dissemination. This approach would cater to a broad spectrum of visitors, embracing both traditional and digital means of communication. By doing so, the museum ensures that its cultural and historical treasures are readily accessible to all, irrespective of their preferred mode of engagement. To improve the international visitor experience, there is a clear opportunity to enhance the language proficiency of guide lecturers. Proficiency in languages other than the mother tongue would facilitate richer interactions and ensure that

the museum can effectively engage with a global audience. Furthermore, the museum's dedication to researchers and scholars is highly commendable. To bolster its role as a cornerstone of academic research, the institution could consider refining its services. This includes exploring opportunities to reduce fees associated with research-related services, thus removing potential barriers to academic exploration. Additionally, promoting ease of access to research materials and fostering an environment of collaboration can further strengthen the museum's position as a vital resource for academia. In tandem with its commitment to community engagement, the museum should continue to invest in innovative initiatives, such as mobile exhibition buses and special exhibitions on national days. These dynamic and interactive approaches play an integral role in fostering cultural awareness and education within the community. By expanding and refining these initiatives, the museum can sustain and amplify its impact, fostering a deeper connection with the local and national audience.

7. Limitations and Scope of the Study

While this research has provided valuable insights into visitor satisfaction, preferences, and recommendations for the Bangladesh National Museum's information dissemination methods and community engagement initiatives, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. First and foremost, the study primarily relied on survey data and key informant interviews, which inherently carry the risk of respondent bias and may not capture the entire spectrum of visitor perspectives. Additionally, the research focused on a specific point in time and may not account for evolving visitor preferences and museum initiatives. The study also concentrated on the visitor side of the equation and did not delve extensively into the museum's internal processes and resource constraints. Future research endeavors could explore these facets in greater detail. The findings are context-specific to the Bangladesh National Museum and may not be directly transferable to other cultural institutions with different missions and visitor demographics.

In terms of scope, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of visitor satisfaction and recommendations for the museum's information dissemination methods and community engagement strategies. It provides a valuable foundation for the museum's efforts to refine its visitor experiences and cater to diverse audience needs. While the findings have immediate applicability for the Bangladesh National Museum, they also contribute to the broader discourse on cultural institutions' role in community engagement and outreach. Researchers and practitioners in the fields of museum studies, cultural heritage preservation, and community education can draw upon these findings to inform their own work and strategies for enhancing public engagement with cultural heritage institutions.

8. Conclusion

This study has shed light on visitor satisfaction, preferences, and recommendations related to the Bangladesh National Museum's information dissemination methods and community engagement initiatives. The findings reflect the dynamic landscape of visitor expectations, showcasing both satisfaction with current efforts and opportunities for improvement. Visitors generally appreciate the museum's information dissemination methods, finding them informative and engaging. However, the study reveals nuances in the quality and depth of information desired by visitors, emphasizing the importance of balancing introductory content with more in-depth narratives. The diverse preferences for communication channels underscore the need for an omnichannel approach that accommodates traditional and digital means of information dissemination. This approach ensures that the museum remains

accessible to all, regardless of visitors' preferred modes of engagement. Furthermore, language proficiency among guide lecturers can be improved to better cater to the needs of international visitors. The museum's dedication to researchers and scholars is commendable, and the findings support efforts to reduce fees for research-related services and improve accessibility to research materials. Moreover, the study underscores the significance of innovative initiatives, such as mobile exhibition buses and special exhibitions, in fostering cultural awareness and education within the community. In line with its mission, the Bangladesh National Museum can leverage these insights to enhance visitor experiences, engage a diverse audience, and contribute to the preservation and promotion of the nation's rich cultural heritage. While this research is specific to the museum, it also contributes to the broader discourse on the role of cultural institutions in community engagement and education. These findings can inform strategies for museums and cultural heritage institutions worldwide, ensuring their relevance and impact in an ever-evolving landscape of visitor expectations and preferences.

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