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Arts-based initiatives in museums: Creating value for sustainable development[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The challenges to sustainable development (SD) have intensified following increases in terrorism, with catastrophic effects posing threats for security and social inclusion. As Islam is being associated increasingly with terrorism, islamophobia has polarized people in regard to Muslim and non-Muslim integration in secular societies, including Australia. Against this background, using standpoint theory, we consider the Islamic Museum of Australia (IMA) as a case study for exploring the role of arts-based initiatives (ABIs) as a source of value creation for SD and how the value created is retained. Drawing on the standpoints of multiple stakeholders and methods—focus groups, interviews, forums and documentary evidence—our findings highlight how ABIs as ‘soft’ and ‘non-threatening’ tools promote SD, facilitate social inclusion and retain value over time with important policy implications.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development (SD) is a contested term with multiple meanings, but the main tenets of this concept focus on the three interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development (Dugarova & Lavers, 2014; Sakarya, Bodur, Yildirim-Öktem, & Selekler-Göksen, 2012). In recent years, terrorism has emerged as a social and political problem, particularly in Western secular societies, threatening SD, and Australia is no exception. As Islam is increasingly associated with terrorism, perceptions about Muslims have generated a generalized fear of Islam, or ‘Islamophobia’ (Shryock, 2010, p. 13). With the rise in terrorism, islamophobia and increasing community insecurity threatening SD, there has been a greater focus on exploring innovative and strategic ways of dealing with challenges to make the world secure for present and future generations. The use of arts-based initiatives (ABIs) represents one such effort by organizations (Azmat, Fujimoto, & Rentschler, 2014). ABIs are defined as, “organizational and management interventions using one or more art forms that engage people both rationally and emotionally through either active or passive participation” (Schiuma, 2009, p. 3). Using works of art, dance, musicals or theatrical performances, as well as aesthetics, ABIs provide experiences that act as a catalyst, enabling personal and organizational development (profit and nonprofit),

providing both personal and broader collective and societal benefits (Schiuma, 2009).

Past studies on ABIs have focused predominantly on their potential to create economic and social outcomes (Belfiore, 2002; Crooke, 2006; Sandell, 2002); the environmental benefits of ABIs have received relatively less attention. Further, most of the research on ABIs remains conceptual and lacks empirical evidence (Biehl-Missal & Antal, 2011). Research suggests that museums, as major cultural institutions, have the potential to significantly contribute to SD, and therefore need to do more and ‘rethink’ their roles in times of profound social, economic and environmental problems (Crooke, 2006; Janes, 2010). However, museum ABIs and their role in SD have received little attention until now. ABIs in museums are little researched, with few empirical studies examining their value creation and retention (Biehl-Missal & Antal, 2011). Moreover, existing studies on museum ABIs have been inconclusive (Belfiore, 2002; Sandell, 2002), with uncertainty about museum responsibility at the individual, community and societal levels. Hence, there is a need to understand empirically how ABIs adopted by museums create value for SD, particularly from the perspectives of different internal and external stakeholders, which remain under-researched (Antal & Strauss, 2013), a gap which our study fills.

Against this background, we examine the use of ABIs by the Islamic Museum of Australia (IMA), one of few such Islamic museums in the

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world, as a case study to explore the role of ABIs in creating value that leads towards SD. ABIs in the museum take the form of artistic interventions that include works of art and cultural artefacts, events, and public and educational programs. Therefore, the overarching objective of our study is to explore *how ABIs in museums facilitate the creation and retention of economic, social and environmental value over time that contributes to sustainable development.*

We answer this question using the theoretical lens of standpoint theory in a case study framework. Standpoint theory is a heuristic device for understanding the interests and viewpoints of different stakeholders, providing broader horizons for “viewing issues from a multiplicity of perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are the least advantaged” (Adler & Jermier, 2005, p. 941). Thus, our paper examines the standpoints of the IMA’s internal and external stakeholders to provide a rich understanding of how different forms of ABIs create and retain the economic, social and environmental value that contributes to SD.

The paper continues by reviewing Australian Muslim experiences, followed by a brief discussion of standpoint theory to explain our theoretical perspective. Next, we discuss museums, ABIs, and their role in value creation and how that value is retained over time. The methodology used for this research is presented next, after which we report our findings. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, and conclude with the limitations of our study and avenues for further research.

2. Context and theoretical background

2.1. Australian Muslim experiences

Australian Muslims make up at least 1.5% of the Australian population (HREOC, 2004), but the Australian relationship with Muslims and Islam dates back to the 18th century, beginning with the trade, socialization and intermarriage between Indigenous and Indonesian communities, followed by the Afghan camel drivers who worked on inter-state transportation in the 19th century (Fahour, 2011). However, recent research suggests that the social difficulties that those Australian Muslims faced as a result of the negative stereotypes and perceptions of Muslims in Australian society (Yücel, 2011) have led to social exclusion, racism and unfair treatment (Abu-Rayya & White, 2010). Often disturbing results have emerged from studies of Australian Muslims (HREOC, 2004), with 66% of Australians stating that Islam posed a threat at some level (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). Although not all Australian Muslims have experienced discrimination, those who have express feelings of isolation and fear, and a common response is “I don’t feel like I belong here anymore” (HREOC, 2004, p. iii). These recent developments underscore the relevance of investigating how ABIs contribute to social inclusion of the Muslim population to create an inclusive society to facilitate SD.

2.2. Standpoint theory

Standpoints are viewpoints on particular issues which influence how people socially construct the world. Due to differences in individual viewpoints which are shaped by experiences and social positions, standpoint theory challenges notions of neutrality, contending that it is impossible for scholars to speak authoritatively and without bias (Adler & Jermier, 2005). According to Harding (1991, p. 124), marginalized social positions may generate unique perspectives “that are less partial and less distorted” compared to the perspectives of those at the top of social hierarchies and the privileged classes who often lose sight of relations and social reality. While “all standpoints have limitations”, and “all knowledge is partial”, examining the marginalized (i.e., minority) view has the potential to generate knowledge (Adler & Jermier, 2005, p. 943). In this study, we use standpoint theory to represent and articulate the perspectives of multiple

stakeholders—Muslim and non-Muslim, staff, board members, visitors and non-visitors. By exploring multiple standpoints, we aim to provide a more authentic, deeper and richer understanding of the role of ABIs at a museum in creating and retaining value for SD.

2.3. Museums, arts-based initiatives and sustainable development

2.3.1. Museums and sustainable development

Over the past few decades, museums have attracted attention due to their need to be contemporary, relevant and sustainable in the rapidly changing 21st century world (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002). As non-profit organizations focusing on both financial and non-financial measures of performance (Mottner & Ford, 2005), museums are under pressure to be sustainable and rethink their traditional scope and practices (Janes, 2010). These pressures are in response to threats of funding squeezes (Chhabra, 2009; Mottner & Ford, 2005) and increasing concern for competition with other for-profit tourism businesses to attract visitors. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, museums focus on innovativeness through ABIs seeking to balance preserving, conserving and curating arts and cultural material (Chhabra, 2009), as well as providing visitors with emotional and intellectual experiences and promoting cultural tourism (Trinh & Lam, 2016). Increasingly museums also have to demonstrate their “social purpose” as part of non-financial performance measures and become agents of inclusion.

While museums can contribute significantly to society and achieve outcomes for social inclusion at individual, community and societal levels (Crooke, 2006; Sandell, 2003), there is ongoing debate around museums’ role as agents of social inclusion (Belfiore, 2002; Crooke, 2006; Sandell, 2003). Some scholars have suggested that museums play a role in social inclusion by bringing together individuals and communities that promote societal change (Crooke, 2006); others have argued that museums, with their tendency to display more elitist forms of art, can exclude groups within society, acting as barriers to inclusion for a range of societal groups (Belfiore, 2002). In addition, there is limited research on museums and their impact on the third pillar of SD, environmental sustainability. Hence, our study is novel, in that it provides a holistic exploration of the social, economic and environmental value provided by museum ABIs.

2.3.2. ABIs in museums and sustainable development

Based on their duration and purpose, ABIs can be adopted in organizations including museums either as interventions, projects, or programs (Schiuma, 2009). Museums can contribute to sustainable development, adding value to the creative industries sector of the economy; contributing to wealth creation, job creation and employment through innovation, creativity and problem-solving for regional and local economies (Reeves, 2002). ABIs in museums promote cultural tourism, attracting and prolonging visitor stays, leading to economic growth (Trinh & Lam, 2016). Hence, museums can build experiences based on relationship-marketing strategies in a services domain (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002). All these initiatives generate revenue directly and indirectly through museum visitors paying to see exhibitions or participate in public programs such as seminars, or using car parks, cafés, accommodation, venue hire for weddings and other events, and buying gifts and books in museum shops. We thus frame the first proposition:

Proposition 1. ABIs in museums create economic value.

ABIs have the potential to engage people emotionally and intellectually providing social experiences and benefits that have spillover effects at multiple levels—individual, group, organizational and community (Azmat, Ferdous, Rentschler, & Winston, 2015). While the economic benefits of ABIs improve sustainability, are innovative and add value to the experience, social benefits are argued to transform lives (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Schiuma, 2009) on multiple levels. For

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