

**أهلا و سهلا/Ahlan wa Sahlan: Exploring the ways that visitors engage in cultural intelligence
through exhibits at the Arab American National Museum**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to understand how cultural museum exhibits depicting Arab-American history and cultures can encourage the development and experience of cultural intelligence through objects. The study was framed by two research questions: To what extent and in what ways do non-Arab visitors engage in cultural intelligence while visiting museum exhibits about Arab-American cultural practices and experiences? What specific aspects of these museum exhibits encourage the development of cultural intelligence? This study used an exploratory case study design to identify which components of cultural intelligence visitors developed and/or experienced during their visit and what aspects of the museum encouraged that development/experience. All participants experienced some form of cultural intelligence during their visit to the museum, namely metacognition, cognition, and motivation. Exhibits depicting history of the Arab world and Arab immigration to the United States encouraged these forms of cultural intelligence in visitors. Additionally, exhibits that included Arab-Americans' personal stories and interactive elements encouraged the experience of cultural intelligence in visitors. This article contributes to research on cultural intelligence and its use in understanding visitor interpretation, specifically culturally-specific and community-based museums.

Keywords: Arab American National Museum, Arab-Americans, cultural intelligence, visitor interpretation

Introduction

Upon entering the Arab American National Museum, visitors are greeted with the phrase *Ahlan wa sahlán*. Translated to English as “hello” or “welcome”, it carries a much greater weight in its greeting. To invoke *Ahlan wa sahlán* is to invite someone to a place of comfort and ease, to say that in this space, they are family. Often when entering an Arab household, guests, regardless of their identity, are treated with the best of what the residing family has to offer. The museum’s use of this phrase signifies more than the display of a common greeting within the shared language of the Arab-American community. It is both a signifier of the community’s values of generosity and friendship, and an active resistance against the misconceptions of Arab-American values embedded within the larger American culture.

American media representation of the Arab world often distorts the region’s history and range of cultures as violent, misogynistic, and uncivilized. Namely, many Americans believe the stereotypical portrayals of Arabs that they see in media (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019), and as a result, Arabs are often erased, vilified, and othered on the basis of cultural misunderstandings and the idea that there is no way for them to exist within American culture (Najib Ibrahim, 2021). These misunderstandings negatively impact the wellbeing of individuals in these communities and limit the opportunities for connections between Arab-Americans and other American communities (Purdue, 2024).

History and cultural museums are taking on efforts to accurately and respectfully depict marginalized communities, as well as present historical narratives that have often been hidden, removed, or excluded. Museums can provide mutual connection and learning between communities through their exhibits, and are in a prime position to provide multiple perspectives of American cultures and history by displaying the voices of the wide ranges of communities

living within the U.S. This article describes a research study designed to explore how cultural museum exhibits can encourage the development and experience of cultural intelligence.

Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence (CQ) is broadly defined as the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings (Van Dyne, Ang, and Koh, 2015). It consists of four components, three of which are relevant for this study: metacognition, cognition, and motivation.

Metacognition indicates an individual's consciousness and awareness during interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, whereas the cognition indicates an individual's knowledge of cultural norms, practices, and conventions in different cultural settings. This includes both a knowledge of general cultural universals along with a knowledge of various cultural differences to one's own culture(s). Finally, motivation indicates an individual's capacity to direct attention and energy towards cultural differences they encounter in their lives (Van Dyne, Ang and Koh, 2015).

Though it is unclear exactly how it develops, cultural intelligence is mainly obtained through cross-cultural experiences (Ott and Michailova, 2018). One possible theory is that CQ is cultivated through international experience and cultural exposure. In studies involving university students, Crowne (2008, 2013) and Takeuchi et al. (2005) found that the number of countries a university student visited for work predicted higher levels of metacognitive and cognitive CQ, whereas the number of countries visited for non-work reasons predicted higher levels of cognitive CQ. However, other studies found that international experience only affects cognition and metacognition (Ott and Michailova, 2018). Another theory revolves around cross-cultural training and education, where MacNab et al. (2012) emphasize that experiential training-based

programs with a contact component significantly impacted university students' CQ, with metacognitive CQ showing significant improvements.

Regardless of how it is developed, CQ is shown to have a positive, significant and direct impact on effective cross-cultural communication capabilities. It is considered valuable for positively influencing an individual's capabilities for intercultural cooperation, intercultural negotiations, intercultural creative collaborations, and reduction of anxiety during cross-cultural interactions (Ott and Michailova, 2018).

Historical Thinking

Historical thinking is another framework to understand the ways in which people interpret different cultures or modes of living. Seixas (2017) describes six components of historical thinking, two of which are most relevant for this study:

1. Primary Source Evidence - interpreting primary sources by using questions and lines of inquiry along with previously held knowledge and context of the history being represented.
2. Historical Perspective Taking - a method for better understanding how people in the past lived despite their lives appearing and often being different than our own. There is an emphasis that despite scenarios and living conditions being different, human behavior has been consistent throughout history.

Historical thinking methods have been implemented in museums to encourage more complex interpretations of different cultures and modes of living. The use of historical perspective taking and primary source evidence within public history institutions has proven helpful in encouraging young people to consider the past through multiple lens' and understand the importance of being active members in their communities (Munn and Wickens, 2018).

Similarly, utilizing historical perspective taking through direct engagement with personal artifacts from everyday people could influence visitor's understandings of past peoples on an interpersonal level (Nilsen, 2024).

In a case study of George Washington's Mount Vernon and the National Archives, Munn and Wickens (2018) identified multiple aspects of historical perspective taking that could be implemented within these institutions, with the goal of strengthening student's understandings of historical issues, and in turn, contemporary issues. One aspect they identified is utilizing primary sources that depict young people's voices within advocacy and civics spaces. They argue that by finding similarities between themselves and young people of the past, students can make connections to their everyday lives and find encouragement to participate in advocacy surrounding modern issues. They also argue that by including historical perspective taking in conversations about ideologically contradictory historical figures, such as George Washington, students can learn to contemplate multiple, competing ideas of history that broadens their ability to critically evaluate modern issues (Munn and Wickens, 2018).

A recent study explored the ways that museum visitors interpreted the California Gold Rush through primary source documents, such as diaries and letters, from the people involved in this history, with the goal of understanding if this form of interpretation could encourage interpersonal connections (Nilsen, 2024). The exhibit featured no form of curatorial interpretation in its labels or placards. Findings from this study determined that by interacting directly with images and historical documents from the people depicted in the exhibits, participants were forced to take part in their own sensemaking, which often appeared as a desire to understand the people depicted in the exhibit on an interpersonal level.

Object-Based Learning in Historical and Cultural Contexts

Object-based learning helps to facilitate historical thinking, explaining how museums can make learning abstract historical concepts easier, trigger student's imaginations, and increase their motivation to learn through tangible objects and socializing with fellow students (Yilmaz, Filin and Yilmaz, 2013). Additionally, object-based learning encourages multi-sensory engagement, a major component of information retention (Banning and Gam, 2020). Object-based learning in museums help students to see the connection between the past and the present, or how history relates to today (Paris and Hapgood, 2002; Yilmaz, Filin and Yilmaz, 2013).

Research has shown that students' interest in history shifted following their experiences with object-based learning in museums. Students were taught three units in school by their teachers, then visited four museums with exhibits that aligned to those units. Before the trip, they were provided with study sheets that contained questions and activities that encouraged looking at the objects through multiple perspectives, imagining themselves using the objects, and reflecting on their own feelings about the objects. Questions were also asked about objects' functions and comparisons to objects used in the present. Following the visits, researchers found that the most impactful museums involved direct interactions with the objects through touch and play. Encountering objects directly connected to the past in-person, seeing the structures of different objects (i.e. their shape, color, design, size), and participating in museum activities contributed to students' curiosity and interest in what they were learning in class (Yilmaz, Filin, and Yilmaz, 2013).

Additionally, knowledge and appreciation for different cultures can grow through object-based learning activities. Banning and Gam (2020) analyzed American university students' reflections on their interactions with garments from a diverse range of countries while taking a world dress course, seeking to understand how students' learning benefited from direct

interactions with objects being studied in class. The student's artifact analyses were based on sensory judgments (sight, sound, smell, touch) and personal reactions, such as considering how the artifact would feel to wear, whether or not the student would want to wear the artifact, determining an emotional reaction to the artifact, and acknowledging any personal biases that may derive from the student's emotional reaction. Findings determined that seeing up-close details of the artifacts helped students better understand how each garment was used within the specific country/culture. Furthermore, interacting with objects directly resulted in students better appreciating and valuing different cultures, with one student noting how they better appreciate the countries and people who make these garments after direct, tangible interactions with them (Banning and Gam, 2020).

Arab-Americans and American Media Influence

American media has shown increased levels of hostility towards the Arab world following major events such as 9/11, with these hostile and one-sided portrayals of Arab culture directly impacting how those living mainly within American culture perceive and connect with Arab-Americans (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). These issues surrounding the highly negative perceptions and misunderstandings of the Arab world were further exemplified as Donald Trump became more active in American politics. The anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric introduced by Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign, much of which feeds into common stereotypes of Arabs as violent and misogynistic, has also deeply impacted Arab-American communities (Hong, Maitner and Ratner, 2024).

American-produced TV shows have had a significant influence on the ways that Americans view and understand Arab culture (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). Shows that depict the lives and work of law enforcement and government officials often portray Arabs

through a distorted lens, with these distortions falling into three major themes: 1) the distortion of language; 2) the characterization of women; and 3) representations of terrorism. Each of these themes lead to a constructed stereotype of Arabs as violent, misogynistic, and driven by extreme terroristic ideologies (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). Trump's first administration further exploited this common stereotype, striking a chord with a large segment of Americans who were shaped by news and popular culture that reflected these stereotypes (Hong, Maitner and Ratner, 2024).

These cultural practices and events have had a significant impact on Arab-Americans' mental wellbeing. Arab-Americans in southeast Michigan report high levels of depression and anxiety as a result of perceived discrimination. Generally, Arab-Americans state that they feel unsafe in public spaces, whereas Arab-American high school students exhibit higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety linked to perceived racism. These issues are often intensified for Arab Muslims, who face an additional level of religious discrimination (Kader et al., 2020). This perceived discrimination is often linked to American news reports on the Gulf War and 9/11 attacks (Kader et al., 2020), along with more recent issues such as Trump's travel ban on primarily Arab Muslim countries (Hong, Maitner and Ratner, 2024). These findings are consistent with studies on other racial groups in the U.S. who also face high levels of racism and discrimination (Kader et al., 2020), suggesting that these experiences are a consequence of large-scale discrimination.

With each of these elements of American media portrayals and the reality of Arab-American culture and experiences, there is a significant struggle for both Arab-Americans and Americans who align with dominant cultural beliefs surrounding the Arab world to form healthy connections and understandings of one another. Since Arabs are often negatively represented in

American news media, it could be assumed that anti-Arab rhetoric impacts American attitudes towards Arabs on a large, general scale (Hong, Maitner and Ratner, 2024). This is amplified for Americans who do not know or interact with those who identify as Arab-American, with their perceptions likely shaped only by media portrayals (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019).

While there is evidence that political rhetoric and policies do not significantly influence attitudes towards different groups alone (Hong, Maitner and Ratner, 2024), much of the stigmatization and related mental health struggles that Arab-Americans experience (Kader et al., 2020), along with perceptions of Arab-Americans from those unfamiliar with Arab culture (Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019), can be tied to American media influence (Kader et al., 2020; Melham and Punyanunt-Carter, 2019).

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how cultural museum exhibits can encourage the development and experience of cultural intelligence through objects. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways do non-Arab visitors engage in cultural intelligence while visiting museum exhibits about Arab-American cultural practices and experiences?
2. What specific aspects of these museum exhibits encourage the development of cultural intelligence?

Methods

This study utilized an exploratory case study design to understand how non-Arab visitors are developing cultural intelligence through visits to the Arab American National Museum drawing on multiple data sources, including a post-visit survey administered to university students and document analysis of general visitors' reviews of their visit.

Positionality

The Arab American National Museum

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) was developed in response to the growing anti-Arab sentiments in the United States following 9/11 and subsequent War on Terrorism. The museum opened in 2005, with the goal of being a “touchstone that connects communities to Arab American culture and experiences” (AANM). Its four core galleries, rotating special exhibits, and various programs and events aim to depict the lives and stories of Arab-Americans with truth and accuracy (Stiffler, 2019).

Sampling

Sampling for this research study began with recruiting university students around the greater Detroit area. A flyer with study information and participant qualifications was sent to professors at University of Michigan Dearborn, University of Michigan Ann Arbor, Wayne State University, and Eastern Michigan University. Students were invited to visit the museum and fill out a post-visit questionnaire. Participants were required to be aged 18 years or older, enrolled in a university, and not self-identify as Arab-American. Arab-American students were not excluded from participating in the study if they wished to be involved. All participating students were instructed to visit the museum as they would if they’d chosen to go independently, experiencing the exhibits through their own interpretations and without the influence of a museum educator or guide.

Participants

Half of participants were somewhat familiar with the Arab-American community due to their proximity to Dearborn and subsequent influences from living in that area. Each participant

that lived around Dearborn indicated some level of awareness of Arab-American culture, either through intentional interactions such or by proximity to the general area. Some participants had family, friends, or partners who identified as Arab or Arab-American from which they learned of and participated in Arab culture. A few participants had academic connections to the Arab-American community, such as taking classes on Arab-American history and learning Arabic.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through a questionnaire completed by students, which included long-form questions about their museum visit and a cultural intelligence survey (see Appendix A for the survey). The first part of the questionnaire delved into each participant's experience from a qualitative standpoint, asking broad open-ended questions. Participants then completed a cultural intelligence survey that asked them to rank on a scale of 1-7 how the museum impacted specific aspects of their perspectives, knowledge of and behaviors towards Arab-Americans along three core components of cultural intelligence.

Supplemental data were collected through regional news articles based in Detroit, student newspapers based in Michigan universities, video reviews, and online reviews from Google and TripAdvisor. These were found using keywords such as "Arab American National Museum", "Museum", and "Arab-American". In total, 33 reviews were found and six were used in the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Long-form questions in the survey were analyzed using content analysis to identify themes that characterized participants' indicators of CQ and aspects of the museum that fostered CQ. Document data was also analyzed using content analysis. The CQ survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics to find the summative mean of participants' responses to specific

elements of the museum. To thank participants for their time and efforts, they were offered a Tango gift card in the amount of \$40 funded by the UW Museology program.

Results

1) To what extent and in what ways do non-Arab visitors engage in cultural intelligence while visiting museum exhibits about Arab-American cultural practices and experiences?

The vast majority of participants stated that the museum influenced their understandings of the Arab-American community. These understandings derived from three aspects of cultural intelligence: a) metacognition; b) cognition; and c) motivation.

a) Metacognition

Metacognition is an individual's cultural consciousness and awareness during interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds, with these skills allowing them to reevaluate and revise their understandings of a cultural group (Van Dyne, Ang and Koh, 2015). Participants exhibited fairly high levels of metacognitive CQ in terms of the museum's impact on cultural consciousness and accuracy of their understanding of the Arab-American community (see Appendix B for survey data).

Several participants expressed metacognitive CQ while viewing exhibits depicting challenges faced by the Arab-American community. One participant felt that the museum's discussion of these challenges influenced their understanding of Arab-Americans:

“I[t] definitely has influenced my understanding because the basement really opened my eyes to the atrocities that have plagued the Middle East and continue to plague them, while we forget about it after one week.”

This acknowledgment that the issues plaguing the Arab world, which are often forgotten or left unrecognized by American media, persist for Arabs in the Middle East and Arab-

American communities in the United States, is indicative of metacognitive CQ. The participant utilized active thinking about where their and Arab-American's cultural backgrounds differ in regards to issues of persistent violence, genocide, and war.

This was also reflected in a review of a temporary installation by Palestinian artist Qamar Abdulmalik. Titled *Asylum of Dreams*, it incorporates an interactive claw machine where visitors can win a passport with a random citizenship embossed on the cover. The reviewer explains how the exhibit explores the complexities of citizenship and how it offered a new perspective on the ways that some nationalities can carry more advantages than others, a strong indication of metacognitive CQ:

“Depending on which country you snag — choices include Lebanese, German, Israeli and American passports — your fortunes may or may not improve. As a comment on the arbitrary nature of international asylum, it's pretty winning — and only costs 25 cents to play.”

Exhibits depicting the atrocities and challenges that the Arab-Americans have and continue to face contributed to participants and visitors' experience of metacognitive CQ. This form of CQ also appeared in exhibits discussing the value of diversity within the community and Arab-American perspectives on identity. One participant explained how the museum encouraged their reflection on the complexities of racial categorization in the United States:

“There was also a lot that made me think of the problems they face with immigration or identity, and how historically they were categorized all over the board racially. I also learned the difference between what is considered Arab and Middle Eastern, and just how diverse the Arab culture is, which may also play a role in the Arab identity.”

Similarly, Participant 6 mentioned the concept of a monolithic cultural narrative imposed on the Arab-American community, and how the museum works against this notion. Both of these responses indicate the use of metacognition. In gaining new knowledge of Arab-American cultural experiences, these participants used this knowledge to critically think about the ways that Arab-Americans' identities are perceived within American culture.

Additionally, a visitor's review on TripAdvisor identified elements of the museum that could be relatable across multiple communities, specifically acknowledging the experience of having an identity that shifts within and between cultures:

“The focus is assimilation, the contributions of Arabs in America, and how individuals with a foot in two worlds (or more) define their ethnic identity -- which is something that everyone, regardless of heritage, can relate to.”

This visitor is also indicating the use of metacognitive CQ in their review. They have identified significant themes within the museum such as assimilation, contributions, and identity, and used critical thinking to consider the ways that these experiences go beyond ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage, instead acting as universal themes that everyone can relate to.

b) Cognition

Cognition is an individual's knowledge of cultural norms, practices, and conventions across different cultural settings, with an acknowledgment of both cultural universals and differences (Van Dyne, Ang and Koh, 2015).

Cognitive CQ was highly prevalent in study participants and general visitors (see Appendix B for survey data). Multiple participants expressed cognitive CQ learning from

exhibits depicting history of Arab-Americans, both in the far and recent past. Participant 2 explained how they learned several historical facts that shaped their understandings of the community, specifically in regards to the ways that many Arabs came to the United States through chattel slavery. Similarly, Participant 13 expressed interest in Arab history dating back “hundreds and thousands of years”. Each of these examples articulate the participants’ displays of cognitive CQ. Both participants stated that they gained new factual knowledge on Arab history, something that, in Participant 2’s case, provided new contexts for their understanding of the community.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 14 found it helpful that the museum included Arab-American’s immigration stories, with Participant 1 specifically explaining how they felt they could better understand Arab-Americans’ backgrounds without crossing potential boundaries:

“It’s really nice that the museum had [personal stories] so I know more background on their culture and a lot of achievements that they’ve done . . . I think that was really interesting because . . . I would never go up to ask someone ‘How did that work out?’ It’s just that’s too personal.”

Participant 14 expressed a similar sentiment, stating that learning the community’s history was “enlightening”. Participants’ cognitive CQ were in use through the inclusion of personal stories in relation to the larger story the museum is telling about Arab-American history, culture, and living experiences. Specifically, these personal stories helped to fill non-Arab participants’ gaps in knowledge, whether that be as a result of their own hesitancy to ask Arab-Americans about their backgrounds or the exclusion of Arab-American history within the larger American historical narrative.

Exhibits on Arab-Americans' impacts and contributions also contributed to the experience of cognitive CQ. Participant 14 found that learning about Arab-Americans' impacts expanded their understanding of the community within the context of American history:

“I feel like I've definitely learned a lot more than I knew before as far as knowing people who have made such impacts on everyday life. Many things I did not know were invented or started by Arab Americans. More often than not Arab American history is left out of the American story so it was enlightening to see and learn about all the things that came from this community.”

In their consideration of Arab-Americans' contributions being excluded from American history, Participant 14 indicated cognitive CQ with some metacognitive CQ. They critically considered culturally-bound assumptions within American culture about the importance of Arab-American contributions within the larger American historical narrative, though overall their response mostly indicated the use of cognitive CQ in obtaining new factual knowledge.

These new understandings were also reflected in online reviews from Google and TripAdvisor. One visitor's Google review noted the museum's emphasis on famous Arab-American individuals:

“There are lots of interesting displays on this floor highlighting Arab Americans and their contributions in music, business, charity, science, humanities, etc. (you must walk away from this museum able to list at least five famous Arab Americans if you could not before you went)”

Additionally, a visitor who reviewed the museum on TripAdvisor expressed interest in the contributions Arab-Americans have made to significant moments in American history and popular items in American culture:

“I found it very educational, especially the last section noting famous contributions by Arab Americans to American history and culture ranging from JFK's famous speeches to chess.”

Both of these reviews indicate the use of cognitive CQ. The first visitor's emphasis on knowing several famous Arab-Americans upon leaving the museum reflects the expansion of cultural knowledge that CQ represents. Similarly, the visitor who posted the TripAdvisor review exhibits an expansion of cultural knowledge, but instead within the context of objects that have become synonymous with American culture.

c) Motivation

Motivation is the ability to direct attention and energy to cultural differences, specifically in regards to an individual's interest in unfamiliar cultural settings and their willingness to be in those settings (Van Dyne, Ang and Koh, 2015). Some participants and visitors indicated the development of motivational CQ after their museum visit, usually in combination with metacognitive or cognitive CQ (see Appendix B for survey data).

A student review of the museum indicated high levels of both motivational and metacognitive CQ. The student took part in an interactive performance art piece titled *As Far As My Fingertips Will Take Me*, where Palestinian-Syrian artist Basel Zaraa draws his sister's journey from Syria to Sweden on participants' arms in black ink. They explained how the piece

significantly impacted their perspective on refugees and the imposed violence many Arabs in the Middle East experience:

“It felt almost disrespectful to erase an experience like this. I felt that it deserved to linger and be on the forefront of my mind for at least the time the ink remained on my skin. After the performance, I told Zaraa that it felt like going to confession. Something about the separation with the white walls and the shadows of the room recalled a kind of spiritual cleansing, an acknowledgement of the vastness of the world and human experience . . . in the days following ‘Fingertips,’ I looked up how the refugee crisis has evolved in the past few years. I also lamented the drawing’s slow fade on my skin, saddened every time a shower or sweater rubbed a certain part away.”

This student’s response is indicative of both metacognitive and motivational CQ. They displayed both active and critical thinking in trying to understand the emotional struggles that refugees experience on their journeys, something that the student themselves does not know from firsthand experience. The comparison to a confessional booth, a confined space where someone divulges highly personal and often fraught parts of their lives, emphasizes the emotional aspects of metacognitive CQ that encourages people to revise their understanding. Additionally, their experience with the performance art piece encouraged them to research the Syrian refugee crisis, a strong indication of motivational CQ.

Participant 12 felt that the museum did not fully address the long history of Arab civilizations in the Middle East:

“[The museum] didn’t focus on the impacts of past Arab civilizations enough. I feel like they had a lot of information on a variety of waves of immigrants including those who fled genocide pre world war 1 due to the Ottoman Empire.”

Participant 12’s criticism of the museum articulates an importance/value on including these histories within the overall story the museum is telling. By including a vast survey of Arab history, there is potential for visitors to obtain new contexts that could contribute to their understandings of modern Arab-Americans, thereby showcasing cognitive and motivational CQ.

2) What specific aspects of these museum exhibits encourage cultural intelligence?

Three aspects of AANM’s exhibits encouraged the development and/or experience of participants’ cultural intelligence: a) personal stories from community members; b) depictions of everyday life; and c) interactivity.

a) Personal stories from community members

A major element of the museum’s exhibits that seems to encourage the use of CQ is the telling of personal stories from community members. Multiple participants and reviews referred to personal stories as an impactful aspect of the museum they feel contributed to their understandings of the community through different components of CQ.

A significant example is the life of Ahmed Ibrahim, a Palestinian man who, upon being exiled from his home during the establishment of the state of Israel, fled to the United States. There, he worked as a traveling salesman, and eventually made enough money to bring his wife and children to the United States. A student review of the museum highlighted Ibrahim’s story

and the ways in which they believe it encapsulates the overall message the museum is sending to visitors:

“The museum also features an upper floor that focuses on the portrayal of early Arabic immigrant life . . . these ideas culminate in a statue of an Arabic man in a brown suit with a red tie, tan loafers and cusped hands sitting on a shelf of stairs. He has a desolate yet ever determined expression . . . This piece in particular seems to capture what this museum has strived for; a progressive, worldly man with a traditional essence about him. The museum appears to echo this in its very foundations.”

This student’s review indicates metacognitive CQ through the connections made between Ibrahim’s story (who is portrayed through the statue described above) and what they perceive as the museum’s core themes. They took part in actively thinking about the cultural differences and similarities between theirs’ and Ibrahim’s life, potentially revising their own understandings of the Arab-American community’s values.

Multiple participants also spoke about how personal stories influenced their understanding through the ways these stories were told. Participant 14 explained how they appreciated this focus on personal stories and how it helped them to better understand the community beyond struggle and suffering:

“Personally, I appreciated how the museum didn’t focus on the stereotypes or negative assumptions placed on Arab Americans. It acknowledged the judgments and hardships but chose to focus more on the stories of the individuals themselves.”

Participant 6 also felt that the personal stories they read influenced their understanding of the community outside of a purely historical lens:

“While I am largely unfamiliar with the culture directly, I felt that this museum gave me a further understanding of the modern culture through personal stories. Each one of these stories has parts that I can relate to, while not being Arab American myself, I can relate to motivations of wanting to better my community and follow my dreams.”

Through the prevalence of metacognitive CQ, these responses indicate that telling personal stories is not only a pathway for visitors to reevaluate their previous knowledge of Arab-Americans, but a form of connection through commonalities that surpass cultural bounds. This connection through commonality also appears in the museum’s depictions of everyday life.

b) Depictions of everyday life

Participants stated that depictions of everyday life influenced their understanding of Arab-Americans. These depictions focus on the mundane and ordinary activities, cultural practices, and living spaces that Arab-Americans inhabit in their daily lives. One example mentioned by participants is the special exhibit *Seeing the Southend: A Photography Exhibition by Tony Maine*. Maine grew up in Dearborn’s Southend neighborhood, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s photographed the daily lives of working class Arab-Americans during a time when the community was mostly invisible within the larger American cultural awareness.

Participants who mentioned this exhibit in their responses noted that it influenced their responses to questions relating to metacognitive and motivational CQ. It encouraged them to

revise their cultural knowledge of Arab-Americans, as well as encouraged their enjoyment in learning about a culture that is unfamiliar to them.

The kitchen set in the core gallery *Living in America* was mentioned multiple times by participants. Participant 14 pointed to specific elements of the kitchen that encouraged their understanding of the community:

“They had displays and exhibits which took the time to specifically highlight each of the aspects of life listed above. For example, there was a kitchen area set up where you could smell the different spices used often, look at the style of cookware, and learn about a few food traditions in the community.”

The kitchen set features several elements depicting Arab foods and cooking traditions that Arab-American families have integrated into their lives in the United States. Photographs of tables filled with food and surrounded by large families fill the kitchen’s walls. There are culturally-specific pieces of cookware scattered throughout, such as a gold-adorned tea set and detailed pottery plates from various Arab cultures. The fridge has a blend of Arab food items, such as hummus and rosewater, alongside standard American food staples.

Participants who referred to the kitchen set in their responses are linked to questions relating to cognitive and motivational CQ. They gained new knowledge in cultural norms and practices regarding the Arab-American community’s food traditions, which could potentially help with understanding in cross-cultural interactions. Learning through this exhibit also encouraged one participant to further their knowledge of people and traditions within the community, an indication of motivational CQ.

Through depictions of Arab-Americans participating in everyday activities, non-Arab visitors are able to establish commonalities between themselves and a group which they may be unfamiliar with.

c) Interactivity

The museum does not have a significant number of interactive elements, however participants exhibited new understandings and components of CQ when they did encounter something interactive. Participant 6 mentioned the Arab music exhibit within the *Contributions from the Arab World* gallery, where visitors can press buttons and hear what various Arab instruments, such as a tabla (drum) or oud (lute), sound like. This participant linked this to questions relating to cognitive CQ, indicating they found cultural similarities and differences between them and Arab-Americans through music.

The kitchen set in the *Living in America* gallery is another interactive element. In the museum's portrayal of an average kitchen in an Arab-American household, visitors are able to open cabinets, shelves, and a mock refrigerator to learn more about Arab-American foods and cooking traditions. As stated in the previous section, participants found that this exhibit influenced their understandings in relation to cognitive and motivational CQ. The kitchen's interactive aspects, such as directly opening shelves, could have contributed to the development of these aspects of CQ.

Finally, the art pieces by Zarea and Abdulmalik incorporate interactive elements that participants found impactful in their understanding of Arab-American history and perspectives. Visitors who participated in these performance pieces indicate strong elements of metacognitive CQ, specifically in active and critical thinking of cultural backgrounds that differ from their own.

The student review of *Fingertips* involved visitors having artwork depicting refugees' stories painted directly on their bodies; the act of watching an artist depict highly personal experiences with the visitor's body as a canvas is highly interactive, which likely contributed to the student's strong emotional response and shift in understanding of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Though not as directly interactive, depicting the complexities of seeking asylum through the lens of a notoriously fickle arcade game, especially for Arabs who come from countries that powerful Western nations deem dangerous, encouraged non-Arab visitors to reconsider their own understanding of a significantly high risk experience that is unfamiliar to them through the lens of an arcade game that they likely find familiar. In turn, this could encourage the development of metacognitive CQ.

Discussion

Although there are several theories as to how CQ develops, most identify cross-cultural experiences, and especially those with a contact component, as experiences that significantly improve an individual's CQ (MacNab et al., 2012; Ott and Michailova, 2018). For non-Arab visitors, AANM provides a cross-cultural experience that has encouraged the expansion of CQ, and in turn, stronger understandings of the Arab-American community. This is particularly evident in exhibits depicting the history of the Arab world and the challenges faced by Arabs immigrating to the U.S., specifically those that combined historical thinking methods like primary source evidence and historical perspective taking.

Cognitive and metacognitive CQ were prevalent among both participants and general visitors. Participant's interactions with personal stories from the community and tangible, interactive elements in exhibits depicting the history of Arab-Americans, whether that be of the distant or recent past, proved the most influential in expanding CQ. Personal stories as a point of

understanding between communities has been explored in previous research. A recent study explored the ways that museum visitors interpreted the lives of people in the past through primary source documents, such as diaries and letters, understanding the exhibits independent of curatorial interpretation. Findings from this study determined that by interacting directly with images and historical documents from the people depicted in the exhibits, participants expressed a desire to understand the people depicted from an interpersonal angle (Nilsen, 2024).

The direct interactions with these personal documents and objects encouraged visitors to take part in historical perspective taking, specifically in finding similarities between themselves and past peoples, despite their lives appearing significantly different from one another. This curiosity and keenness to know these people interpersonally is a strong indicator of overall CQ, an aspect of exhibit interpretation shared with visitors to AANM. Participants' CQ often appeared as a desire to better understand the community and improve their interpersonal connections with Arab-Americans, usually following their interactions with exhibits depicting Arab-American history through personal stories and everyday objects. It could be argued that by utilizing primary sources in exhibits and encouraging visitors to consider the lived, emotional experiences of people who are commonly perceived to live significantly differently from visitors' own lives, could encourage the development of CQ in visitors.

The interactive elements available in AANM's exhibits proved to be effective in developing CQ. This aligns with studies on object-based learning, where people who worked directly with objects through sensory interactions developed more in-depth understandings of the cultures, places, and time periods these objects came from (Banning and Gam, 2020). The findings of this study determined that seeing up-close details and directly touching culturally-significant objects resulted in university students better appreciating and valuing the various

cultures represented through the objects. Another study found similar results in high school students who visited multiple history museums.

Participants who used sensory-based interactive elements in AANM's exhibits displayed expansions in their CQ, specifically in cognition and motivation. Similar to the students who interacted directly with culturally-specific and historical objects through sensory means, participants who used interactive exhibits that engaged touch, scent, and sound indicated elements of CQ, notably in their considerations of how the museum's depictions work against common perceptions of Arab-Americans and their willingness to research the community's cultural traditions post-visit. The ability to feel experiences through the senses, as opposed to solely watching or reading about a person's experiences, could help with expanding participant's CQ. Direct interactions with objects, tied with interpretative tools that encourage historical perspective taking, could be argued as an effective means for museum visitors to expand their CQ, and in turn better understand and connect with a culture that is unfamiliar to them.

Limitations

This study was conducted with a small sample of non-Arab and Arab-American participants living in and around Dearborn, and cannot encompass the full perspectives and understandings of every non-Arab and Arab-American individual who visits the museum. Other factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, and place of origin, which could have an influence on non-Arab participant's understandings of Arab-Americans, were not taken into consideration, and if they were, could have provided different results and/or more in-depth analysis.

Additionally, it is important to note that museum exhibits are not the sole way for individuals to engage with underrepresented communities. AANM is both a repository and representation of the Arab-American community's history and cultural practices, and provides

several programs, events, and discussions that bring visitors in direct, active connection with the community. With many participants based in and around the Dearborn area, it is likely that they have encountered and interacted with the Arab-American community through more direct and active means, contributing to their overall experience and responses within AANM's exhibits.

Implications

Arab-Americans have existed within a strange dichotomy in American culture: watched yet unnoticed, othered yet erased. As the community's stories and cultures have become growing points of interest, to have CQ of Arab-Americans at this specific moment is to better understand a large, diverse group of people who have been severely misrepresented within American culture. As an Arab-American, and growing up in an area with little to no Arab population, I've been a direct witness to the ways that a lack of exposure to different cultures, and therefore perspectives, harms communities. For us, when we see our community, whether in the U.S. or abroad, actively subjugated based on these long-perpetuated misunderstandings, it is all the more important that these be revised and Arab-American perspectives be truly understood.

Although there is still much work to be done regarding this issue, this project has, for me, illuminated people's curiosity towards cultural differences, and desire to find ways to relate to people in those cultures within that curiosity. While it is important to acknowledge that participants likely already accepted Arab-Americans into American society, their willingness and openness towards learning is something that can be placed into action in their own communities, placing their understandings beyond just themselves. By harnessing both of these traits, curiosity and relatability, people can find appreciation for and understanding of one another, and in turn, find potentials for resolving the long held misunderstandings impacting the Arab-American community.

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Appendix A

Cultural Intelligence Questionnaire

Long Form Questions

- Who do you think this museum is for?
- This museum is about Arab-American history, culture, and living experiences. With that, how would you describe your connection to the community?
- Do you think your museum visit has influenced your understanding of the Arab-American community? If so, how? If not, how?

Cultural Intelligence Survey Questions

Metacognitive CQ

- The museum made me feel like I could better interact with people within the Arab-American community.
- The museum encouraged me to be conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply in cross-cultural interactions with Arab-Americans.
- The museum made me check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge of the Arab-American community.

Cognitive CQ

- After visiting the museum, I know the cultural values and religious beliefs within the Arab-American community.
- After visiting the museum, I know the food and cuisines of the Arab-American community.
- After visiting the museum, I know the arts, crafts, and design styles of the Arab-American community.

- After visiting the museum, I know the languages and dialects spoken among the Arab-American community.
- After visiting the museum, I know the music of the Arab-American community.
- After visiting the museum, I know the history of Arab migration and settlement in the United States.
- After visiting the museum, I know the scientific, political, artistic, cultural and athletic contributions of Arab-Americans.
- What aspects of the museum specifically influenced your answers to the above questions?

Motivational CQ

- The museum encouraged my enjoyment in learning about the Arab-American community.
- The museum made me feel confident that I could socialize with Arab-Americans.
- The museum made me feel confident that I could adjust to an Arab-American cultural space.
- The museum encouraged my enjoyment in learning about and experiencing a culture that is unfamiliar to me.

Appendix B

Cultural Intelligence Survey Results

Table 1

| Metacognitive CQ | |
|--|-----|
| The museum made me feel like I could better interact with people within the Arab-American community. | 4.9 |
| The museum encouraged me to be conscious of the cultural knowledge I apply in cross-cultural interactions with Arab-Americans. | 5.9 |
| The museum made me check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge of the Arab-American community. | 5.5 |
| Cognitive CQ | |
| After visiting the museum, I know the cultural values and religious beliefs within the Arab-American community. | 5 |
| After visiting the museum, I know the food and cuisines of the Arab-American community. | 4.9 |
| After visiting the museum, I know the arts, crafts, and design styles of the Arab-American community. | 5.8 |
| After visiting the museum, I know the languages and dialects spoken among the Arab-American community. | 4.6 |
| After visiting the museum, I know the music of the Arab-American community. | 4.9 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| After visiting the museum, I know the history of Arab migration and settlement in the United States. | 5.6 |
| After visiting the museum, I know the scientific, political, artistic, cultural and athletic contributions of Arab-Americans. | 5.8 |
| Motivational CQ | |
| The museum encouraged my enjoyment in learning about the Arab-American community. | 6 |
| The museum made me feel confident that I could socialize with Arab-Americans. | 5.1 |
| The museum made me feel confident that I could adjust to an Arab-American cultural space. | 5.1 |
| The museum encouraged my enjoyment in learning about and experiencing a culture that is unfamiliar to me. | 6.2 |

Note: The data in the final statement of the Motivational CQ table (“The museum encouraged my enjoyment in learning about and experiencing a culture that is unfamiliar to me”) is the summative mean of 13 responses instead of 14. One participant did not respond to this specific statement.