

# MUSEUM COMMUNICATION: THE REPRESENTATION OF MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MUZIUM NEGARA

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## ABSTRACT

*National identity remains a widely debated topic among scholars and cultural heritage institutions, particularly in multi-ethnic societies like Malaysia. Museums, as key cultural institutions, play a crucial role in shaping and communicating national identity through their permanent exhibitions. Specifically, it explores how these exhibitions communicate narratives of Malaysia's ethnic diversity and the decisions involved in curating national history and heritage. Using a qualitative approach, this study draws on online interviews with nine experts in museum studies, communication, Malaysian history, and culture. The findings revealed three themes: (1) exhibitions function as a communication channel that shapes public understanding of national identity; (2) the representation of the dominant ethnic group is more pronounced in Muzium Negara, leading to concerns about inclusivity; and (3) the political influence plays a significant role in shaping national identity through museum narratives. It also offers a theoretical contribution by applying Social Representation Theory (SRT) to explain how national identity is constructed, institutionalised, and sometimes silenced through museum exhibitions in the Malaysian context. Future research should explore how visitors interpret and engage with these representations to further understand the museum's role in shaping national identity.*

**Keywords:** museum communication, multiethnic, national identity, national museum, political power

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multicultural society composed of various ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities. While this diversity is a defining characteristic of Malaysia, it also presents challenges in fostering national cohesion. Ethnic relations have historically been shaped by colonial-era policies that segregated labour along ethnic lines, contributing to socioeconomic disparities that persist today (Changsong and Yiming 2017). These historical divisions continue to influence national identity, as different communities maintain strong cultural attachments that sometimes complicate efforts to create a shared sense of belonging (Ong et al. 2020).

Since gaining independence in 1957, Malaysia has sought to promote 'unity in diversity' as a core national identity. However, concerns persist about whether certain narratives dominate official representations. The National Cultural Policy of 1971 aimed to establish a cohesive identity by prioritising Malay cultural elements while acknowledging contributions from other ethnic (Sumit 2018). Yet, the policy's inconsistent implementation has led to ongoing debates about inclusivity in national identity construction. These debates are particularly relevant in institutions like national museums, which play a significant role in shaping historical narratives.

Museums serve as platforms for constructing and communicating national identity by curating narratives that reflect a nation's heritage (Weiser 2015). Muzium Negara, the national museum of Malaysia, plays a central role in this process, presenting exhibitions that trace the country's historical trajectory. However, scholars argue that its representations may not fully reflect Malaysia's multiethnic composition, potentially privileging certain narratives over others (Al-Hammadi 2018). Despite the growing recognition of museums as communication tools, limited research has explored how Muzium Negara constructs and communicates national identity within a multiethnic context (Chang 2012; Lyu, Kay and Panal 2024; Cai 2025). By exploring this issue, the research seeks to provide deeper insights into how ethnic dynamics shape the concept of national identity in a multiethnic society. The objective of this study is to construct the national identity of the multicultural nation and to explore the role of the national museum in forming more intricate notions of national identity.

Furthermore, this study addresses this gap by examining how Muzium Negara's exhibitions represent Malaysia's national identity, focusing on the narratives presented and the voices amplified or marginalised in the process. The central research question is: How has Muzium Negara contributed to promoting a positive representation of Malaysia's identity, particularly in celebrating and appreciating its multiethnic cultures? This study contributes to museum

communication research by critically analysing how national identity is represented through exhibitions. Findings from this study provide theoretical and practical insights into museums' role in shaping inclusive national narratives, contributing to broader discussions of cultural representation and nation-building in diverse societies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Museum Communication**

Museum communication is a fundamental function of museums, intricately connected to other essential practices such as collections, conservation, and management (Nielsen 2017). Beyond mere information transmission, museum communication intertwines experience and enlightenment, playing a crucial role in visitor engagement and exhibition interpretation (Christensen and Haldrup 2019). Key components such as learning, meaning-making, and interpretation are integral to how museums engage with their audiences (Nielsen 2017; Hooper-Greenhill 1999), influencing every facet of a museum's operations, from curation to knowledge dissemination. Moreover, museum communication extends beyond exhibitions, impacting visitor experiences, interactions, and long-term learning outcomes (Falk and Dierking 2013).

Physical exhibitions serve as the primary mode of cultural narratives to visitors. These exhibitions are typically categorised into permanent and temporary exhibitions (Yu and Wang 2020). Permanent exhibitions offer long-term displays that contribute to the museum's main narrative, while temporary exhibitions are often thematic presentations lasting a few months. When collection (objects or artefacts) and knowledge (facts or stories) are thoughtfully combined, they generate 'meaning' enhancing visitor engagement and interpretation (Shamsidar et al. 2018; Bennett 1995).

Museums also play a pivotal role in shaping national identity by utilising exhibitions to narrate a nation's story, thereby influencing the understanding of its history, culture, and values. Many museums were established to foster national pride among citizens (McLean 1998). National museums present cohesive representations of national identity, serving as effective vehicles for achieving these objectives (Scorrano 2012; Weiser 2015). Through the curation of objects and narratives, museums articulate national identity by emphasising significant events, diverse populations, and shared values. They present collections designed to inspire visitors' imagination regarding the nation's identity (Chen and Liao 2017), acting as a cornerstone of national identity by linking the present with the past (Dianina 2010). However, it is important to

note that visions of national identity and history are often contested (McLean and Cooke 2008).

### **The National Identity of Malaysia and the Influence of Political Power**

The challenge of shaping a Malaysian identity that embraces all citizens and communities is complex, given the diverse demographics of the national populace (López 2014). López (2014) further defined national unity as a condition in which all citizens feel that their individual and collective identities are valued and intrinsic to the Malaysian identity narrative. Granhenat and Ain Nadzimah (2017) referred to national identity as a process in which individuals within a society may develop both personal and social identities that align with the dominant cultural values of that society. In line with this view, Liu and Turner (2018) noted that national identity can be perceived as the identity of a country's citizens, encompassing its historical and cultural traditions, beliefs, ideals, moral values, national sovereignty, and more.

In other words, national identity is the collective sense of belonging and identity that individuals share with their nation, shaped by shared history, cultural heritage, traditions, values, and beliefs. It reflects how citizens perceive their relationship with their country, fostering a sense of unity and common purpose. This identity can influence national pride, social cohesion, and the way citizens engage with their nation's ideals and aspirations. In Malaysia, national identity is predominantly characterised by Malay culture and is politically linked to ethno-nationalism, which aims to promote the material advancement of *bumiputera*, particularly Malay *bumiputera* (Balasubramaniam 2007). Ethno-nationalism plays a significant role in Malaysian politics, where political power is often associated with ethnic identity, especially that of the Malay majority.

In the same discussion, Ting (2009) emphasised that the central issue in the politics of national identity in Malaysia is Malay political primacy. Malay political dominance has been a fundamental reality of the Malaysian political framework since independence. Noraini and Esmaeil (2017) highlighted that in a multicultural nation, terms such as 'race' and 'ethnicity' carry significant social and political weight, a legacy of British colonial administration. While Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic groups continue to live in the same society, each tends to operate and socialise within its own separate 'compartment' (Noraini and Esmaeil 2017). Although they may share events or celebrate festivals together, these occasions do not necessarily indicate an embrace of one another's values or a complete sense of unity.

To address this, the government has introduced policies to foster cultural assimilation and develop a national culture. Notably, the National Cultural Policy of 1971 and the New Economy Policy of 1971 were initiatives with the shared

goals of creating a single nation by encouraging unity in diversity (Noraini and Esmaeil 2017; Ong et al. 2020). The National Cultural Policy, introduced in August 1971 under Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, aimed to shape a national culture based on three key elements: indigenous culture, appropriate components from non-Malay cultures, and Islam as a fundamental part (Ong et al. 2020). The policy sought to emphasise cultural programmes aimed at strengthening national identity, promoting national integration and unity, and preserving ethnic harmony (Khairul Anuar, Ong and Ahmad Azan 2015). Through these efforts, the government aimed to balance cultural diversity with national cohesion, promoting unity in diversity as a cornerstone of Malaysian identity. Scorrano (2012) indicated that national identity represents the ‘symbolic elaboration’ of the nation, just as the nation itself is ‘imagined’. Therefore, national identity is ‘imagined’ and created by its citizens. These identities, like nations and nationalisms, are products of human creation and imagination.

### **The National Museum of Malaysia**

The National Museum of Malaysia, also known as Muzium Negara, located in Kuala Lumpur, plays a significant role in communicating Malaysia’s national identity and promoting ethnic harmony in line with government policies such as the National Cultural Policy of 1971. The idea of establishing Muzium Negara was mooted by Malaysia’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. In 1958, two years after the country gained independence, Mubin Sheppard was appointed to oversee the project and later became the first Director of Muzium Negara (Kaur 2015). Since its establishment, the museum has actively promoted the nation-building process by emphasising ethnic unity while reinforcing the primacy of Malay culture in the national narrative (Ahmad Farid et al. 2019). Abu Talib (2015) observed that cultural displays in the museum are curated in accordance with the National Cultural Policy, which prioritises Malay and other indigenous cultures that align with Islamic principles. Notably, the museum’s exhibitions place Malays at the forefront of historical representation (Abu Talib 2015).

Muzium Negara features four main galleries spread across two floors, each dedicated to a specific historical period. The first floor includes Gallery A, which focuses on prehistory, and Gallery B, which explores the Malay Kingdoms. The second floor includes Gallery C, which covers the colonial era, and Gallery D, showcasing Malaysia’s post-independence development. Museums are not neutral entities functioning in isolation; they reflect and reinforce the cultural and political contexts in which they exist. There are also spaces where numerous decisions are made about which objects to display, which narratives to present, and which historical figures to highlight or omit (Scorrano 2012). Abu Talib (2015) notes that after the 2007 restructuring of Muzium Negara, the displays were realigned to complement the revised national history curriculum, with the four permanent galleries now structured to present a cohesive, state-approved version of Malaysia’s historical trajectory.

As cultural institutions, museums play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing national values through exhibitions, educational programmes, and public engagement. By promoting an inclusive representation of Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups, fostering a shared historical consciousness, and facilitating cross-cultural understanding, museums like Muzium Negara contribute to national integration and social cohesion. In multiethnic societies such as Malaysia, where historical narratives are often contested, museums serve as platforms for constructing and negotiating national identity, helping visitors develop a deeper connection to the nation's collective heritage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative approach, selecting Muzium Negara as a case study to examine the representation of Malaysia's national identity. The primary objective is to explore how Muzium Negara contributes to portraying a positive image of the nation's identity, particularly in celebrating and appreciating its multiethnic society. Museums serve as unique communication platforms through their exhibitions, making them valuable sites for investigating the representation of national identity. This study is guided by the following research question: How has Muzium Negara contributed to promoting a positive representation of Malaysia's identity, particularly in celebrating and appreciating its multiethnic society?

A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity of Malaysia's national identity, which is shaped by diverse cultural, historical, and social factors. In-depth interviews allow for an exploration of participants' personal perceptions and experiences, uncovering nuanced meanings and cultural significance tied to national identity. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, are effective for investigating specific phenomena and providing clarity on less-understood issues (Sutton and Austin 2015). Through interviews, this study gathers detailed insights from participants based on their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions related to the research topic (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Gani, Rathakrishnan and Krishnasamy 2020).

This study employs thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns (themes) within data. This approach provides a structured yet flexible means of analysing participants' perspectives, uncovering recurring ideas and narratives about national identity representation at Muzium Negara.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the data analysis process in this study consists of six phases: (1) transcription and familiarisation; (2) developing initial codes; (3) identifying themes; (4) validating themes; (5) clarifying and naming themes; and (6) preparing the report. Thematic analysis systematically identifies patterns in how national identity is constructed in museum exhibitions, highlighting dominant narratives and representation gaps such as the limited inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak communities. Additionally, grounded in Social Representation Theory (SRT), thematic analysis helps reveal how identity is framed and communicated through museum displays and narratives, offering deeper insights into the portrayal of Malaysia's diverse ethnic heritage.

## **Data Collection**

This study conducted nine semi-structured interviews with experts in museum studies, communication, history, and Malaysian culture. Participants were purposively selected based on their specialised knowledge to ensure diverse perspectives on national identity representation in Muzium Negara. The sample comprised six females and three males, all aged 30 and above, representing Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic backgrounds. Participants were informed about the study and advised that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Those who agreed to participate signed a consent form and were capable of offering a wide variety of perspectives regarding the representation of national identity in the national museum. The interviews were conducted in English.

Purposive sampling, a non-random selection method, was used to recruit participants with at least five years of substantial experience in museums, communication, culture, or history. Despite their diverse professional backgrounds, all participants had a proven track record in projects related to the study's focus, ensuring their expertise was relevant to the research.

Data collection took place over one month in June 2021, with interviews conducted via Google Meet, each lasting one to two hours. Determining an appropriate sample size for qualitative research, particularly in-depth interviews, can be challenging because there are no strict guidelines (Mohd Faizal 2024). This study applied the concept of saturation, identifying the point at which no new information or themes emerged. Conducting nine in-depth interviews aligned with qualitative research norms and was sufficient to achieve saturation.

## Data Analysis

This study employed semi-structured and open-ended questions to gain richer, more detailed insights. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, involving repeated reading and manual coding to systematically identify, categorise, and label common themes or patterns. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

Additionally, SRT provides a valuable framework for understanding how national identity is constructed, communicated, and maintained in public institutions like Muzium Negara. This theory examines shared beliefs, values, and narratives that shape collective perceptions of national identity. As a communication theory, it connects society with individuals and the media with the public, explaining how ideas are conveyed and transformed into commonly accepted knowledge (Höijer 2011).

In this context, Muzium Negara serves as a bridge between collective national identity and individual identity. Through its exhibitions and narratives, the museum communicates shared historical and cultural values, shaping how individuals perceive themselves as part of the Malaysian nation. By applying thematic analysis within the framework of SRT, this study systematically identifies how national identity is framed, highlighting dominant narratives and representation gaps. Thematic analysis was used to systematically examine the data, ensuring a structured approach to identifying and interpreting patterns. This process involved several key stages, from designing interview questions to analysing participants' responses. Table 1 outlines the key stages of the data analysis process.

**Table 1:** Data analysis process

Stage	Description
Interview design	Questions were structured to explore how participants perceive Muzium Negara's role in shaping national identity.
Data coding	Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring social representations of national identity in participants' responses.
Data interpretation	Findings were categorised based on how different ethnic groups construct, negotiate, and perceive national identity within the museum context.

The interview design stage ensured that participants could express their perspectives freely while staying aligned with the research focus. Data coding allowed researchers to systematically identify key themes related to national

identity representation, while data interpretation helped contextualise these findings within broader societal narratives. This structured process enhanced the depth and reliability of the analysis, ensuring that key themes were meaningfully extracted from the data.

## **FINDINGS**

The thematic analysis identified three themes related to the museum's communication and its representation of national identity in Muzium Negara. These themes, which serve as subheadings in the following sections, are exhibitions as a communication channel; the representation of dominant-group identity in Muzium Negara; and the influence of political power.

### **Exhibitions as a Communication Channel**

Communication is one of the primary functions of museums (Nielsen 2017), and exhibitions serve as a medium of public communication (Shamsidar et al. 2018), acting as powerful tools for conveying curated narratives of Malaysia's history, culture, and identity. Exhibitions at Muzium Negara do more than simply showcase artefacts; they also communicate ideas, values, and national stories to visitors. Through the careful selection and arrangement of exhibits, Muzium Negara constructs a narrative that aligns with its vision of Malaysia's national identity. This approach fosters a dialogue between past and present, allowing visitors to engage with material culture that reflects the nation's diverse heritage. This form of communication shapes public perceptions of history and national identity, reinforcing certain narratives while potentially marginalising others.

From the perspective of SRT, museums act as spaces where collective social knowledge about national identity is produced, reinforced, and circulated. Social representations emerge through communication and shared experiences, shaping how individuals and communities perceive their place within a nation (Moscovici 1988 in Höijer 2011). Muzium Negara, as a national institution, plays a central role in framing the collective understanding of Malaysia's multiethnic identity by selectively presenting historical narratives. This is reflected in the participants' views:

The national museum is a platform for communication about the history and people that connect people through history. (Informant 2)

Muzium Negara is about people and creating a positive image of social diversity. So, how do we embrace this diversity and bring it into our conversations? (Informant 3)

These statements supported the idea that Muzium Negara serves as a channel for shaping national identity, aligning with the study's focus on representation. However, findings from the research indicate that this communication can be selective; in Muzium Negara, the representation of indigenous communities, who are also *bumiputera* in Malaysia, is quite limited. This aligns with SRT's assertion that dominant social groups often influence public narratives, leading to certain perspectives being more visible than others (Höijer 2011). As a result, the representation of national identity in Muzium Negara appears to emphasise certain narratives while unintentionally sidelining others. This underscores the need for more inclusive representations within the museum to ensure that its role as a communication platform extends to all ethnic communities.

Museum communication at Muzium Negara differs from other forms of mass media in several significant ways, reflecting its unique objectives and audience engagement strategies. Communication through exhibitions involves two key elements: the collection of objects and artefacts, and the narratives they convey. Museums disseminate knowledge using tangible items, setting them apart from traditional media, which primarily rely on textual and audiovisual formats. Unlike passive media consumption, museum communication encourages active engagement through immersive experiences. Visitors do not just read or watch history; they physically navigate through exhibitions, interact with artefacts, and form personal interpretations. This role is captured in another participant's statement: "The national museum serves as a platform for communicating history and connecting people through shared narratives" (Informant 2).

From an SRT perspective, museums function as spaces where collective memory and historical consciousness are shaped through social interaction (Jovchelovitch 2007). The narratives presented in Muzium Negara's exhibitions influence how Malaysians understand their shared history, shaping what is remembered and what is forgotten. This aligns with the idea that museums, like other social institutions, actively construct social knowledge by selecting which aspects of history to highlight and which to downplay (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014).

The study's findings revealed that exhibitions, as a communication channel, face challenges, particularly in ensuring that themes are thoughtfully designed and effectively convey their intended messages. Interactive communication is a crucial strategy for enhancing visitor engagement and promoting active learning. One participant suggested that Muzium Negara collaborate with institutions such as the National Art Gallery to enrich its historical narratives by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. Such collaborations could significantly enhance the museum's activities.

Additionally, Muzium Negara could incorporate more hands-on exhibits, digital interactivity, guided tours, and collaborative engagement to meet the evolving needs of younger visitors. Digital storytelling and immersive technologies can offer alternative perspectives and amplify underrepresented voices, aligning with SRT's idea that social representations evolve through communication and exposure to new narratives. By embracing these approaches, the museum can foster lifelong learning and ensure its role as a dynamic platform for cultural dialogue in the digital age.

Thus, museum communication plays a pivotal role in shaping how visitors engage with history, culture, and national identity. Unlike traditional mass media, museums offer an interactive platform that fosters deeper understanding through tangible artefacts, immersive environments, and well-crafted narratives. Effective communication, particularly through well-designed exhibitions, fosters meaningful dialogue, promotes cultural exchange, and ensures diverse representation. By incorporating interactive strategies such as hands-on exhibits, digital tools, and institutional collaborations, Muzium Negara can adapt to contemporary audiences, enhance visitor engagement, and continue serving as a dynamic space for education and cultural enrichment while promoting a deeper understanding of Malaysia's national identity.

### **The Representation of Dominant Group Identity in Muzium Negara**

Muzium Negara plays a significant role in shaping and representing Malaysia's national identity. Central to this representation is the portrayal of the dominant group, curated to reflect historical narratives and cultural elements. The museum's exhibitions emphasise this group's contributions and legacy, positioning it as integral to Malaysia's collective identity. Through artefacts, displays, and narratives, visitors encounter a perspective that aligns national pride with the dominant group's heritage. However, this focus often creates a central narrative that may overshadow the nation's diversity, raising questions about inclusivity and broader ethnic representation. This aligns with SRT, which explains how social institutions like museums actively construct collective memory by emphasising certain aspects of history while marginalising others (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014).

The findings indicate that the dominant ethnic group represented in Muzium Negara is the Malays, whose cultural and historical identity is prominently featured. This is evident in the museum's architectural design, which resembles a traditional Malay palace, and in its exhibits tracing Malay history from ancient kingdoms to the present. A key example is the mural of legendary warrior Hang Tuah in Gallery A, symbolising his role in Malay heritage and loyalty to the Malaccan Sultanate. This artistic representation, along with related artefacts,

further emphasises the central role of the Malays in shaping Malaysia's national identity. In line with SRT, this selective representation reinforces the social positioning of the Malays as the primary custodians of national heritage, shaping public perception of Malaysia's historical narrative, as another participant said: "The gallery that talked about the Malay kingdom needs more improvement because it like selecting some parts of history and omitting others" (Informant 9).

The museum also showcases a rich collection of Malay cultural artefacts, including traditional weapons like the *keris*, traditional costumes, and royal regalia. Given that Islam is the predominant religion among Malays, Muzium Negara features exhibits on Islamic history and culture, highlighting its role in shaping Malay identity and its broader influence on Malaysian society. Another significant representation is the use of Malay language (the national language), for texts and captions, reinforcing its role in preserving Malay culture and heritage (Ab Samad et al. 2012). Due to the established social contract, Malay language has become the main language of the country. This linguistic emphasis reflects SRT's notion of symbolic representation, where language functions as a key tool in shaping group identity and reinforcing cultural dominance.

While the museum prominently celebrates Malay heritage, it also acknowledges the contributions of the Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia's independence, economic growth, and cultural development. However, these representations are less extensive compared to the Malay narrative. The museum's focus on the historical foundation of the nation naturally emphasises indigenous people and early history, but there remains room for improvement in representing Malaysia's multicultural heritage. The Chinese, Indians, indigenous peoples, and other communities should be given greater recognition (López 2014). Enhancing the portrayal of non-Malay communities would provide a more inclusive reflection of Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups, fostering a shared sense of national identity. This supports SRT's argument that social knowledge is dynamic; if representations of identity remain narrow, they risk alienating communities that do not see themselves reflected in the dominant narrative (Jovchelovitch 2007). This concern is reflected in one participant's view: "I did not like the storyline or texts of the exhibitions in Muzium Negara because they do not reflect Malaysia's diversity" (Informant 2).

Findings also reveal a lack of representation of Sabah and Sarawak communities. Despite being part of Malaysia, their unique cultural identities are underrepresented, contributing to a sense of exclusion. Muzium Negara's dominant narrative revolves around Malay identity, reflected in both its exhibits and architectural design. From the portrayal of ancient Malay kingdoms to their contributions to national development, the museum highlights the heritage

and achievements of this ethnic group. This concern is expressed by one of the participants: “It should be inclusive, including those from East Malaysia, such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Bajau, Kadazan, and many more” (Informant 1).

A key limitation identified by participants is the museum’s limited space, which restricts its ability to display Malaysia’s full ethnic diversity. While the museum prioritises Malay cultural and historical contributions, space constraints limit the representation of other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, Indians, and indigenous communities. This raises concerns about inclusivity, as the current layout may not fully reflect Malaysia’s multicultural fabric. If this issue persists, it could lead to dissatisfaction among ethnic groups, with each seeking equal representation (Khairul Anuar, Ong and Ahmad Azan 2015). SRT suggests that collective identity is formed through shared historical narratives, and when certain groups feel excluded from this narrative, it can weaken their sense of belonging within the national identity framework.

To address this, Muzium Negara organises temporary exhibitions, especially during festive seasons, to showcase the cultural heritage of other communities. For instance, exhibitions during Chinese New Year and Deepavali highlight traditions and contributions of these groups. These initiatives help balance permanent displays and offer visitors a more inclusive understanding of Malaysia’s national identity. However, SRT emphasises the need for ongoing dialogue in shaping social representations, suggesting that a more permanent and integrated approach to multicultural representation in Muzium Negara would foster a more cohesive and inclusive national identity.

### **Political Power Has Shaped Malaysia’s National Identity**

Political power refers to the ability to influence public behaviour and decision-making within a state or society. In Malaysia, political power has been predominantly held by the Malay community since independence in 1957. For instance, Barisan Nasional (BN) sustained its rule for 57 years, making it the longest-serving elected government in the world (Leong 2015). As a result, national identity has been shaped by political agendas that reflect the interests of influential actors, aiming to maintain a homogeneous and exclusionary identity. In other words, Malaysia’s national identity is influenced by political power to preserve authority over the long term. This is consistent with SRT, which explains how dominant social groups influence collective identity by shaping public narratives and institutional memory (Jovchelovitch 2007).

I think there is some effort to keep power within the dominant group. That is probably why their identity is so strongly preserved, so people just accept that political leaders will always come from the same group. (Informant 6)

The findings indicate that political power has shaped Malaysia's national identity, favouring the Malay and indigenous groups. Participants highlighted the National Cultural Policy of 1971 as a key factor in maintaining Malay dominance. While recognising Malaysia's multiethnic society, the policy primarily emphasises Malay culture, leading to feelings of exclusion among other ethnic groups, such as the Chinese and Indians. It prioritises Malay heritage, traditions, and language as defining elements of national identity. From an SRT perspective, the National Cultural Policy functions as a social representation tool, reinforcing the dominant group's cultural identity while limiting alternative narratives within public consciousness (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014). Informat 9 expressed: "To keep the country politically stable, leaders need the majority's support. That is why they keep reinforcing the Malay narrative, making sure Malays continue to support them".

Some participants also stressed the need for greater emphasis on the *bumiputera* communities of Sabah and Sarawak, as they are indigenous to the land. However, the policy largely centres on the Malays. As noted by Sumit (2018), the National Cultural Policy has been a source of contention, with cultural organisations arguing that it includes Malay culture but excludes others. The study's findings show that most participants agreed political power, primarily held by the Malay majority, plays a major role in shaping Malaysia's national identity. SRT suggests that dominant social representations emerge through political discourse, reinforcing existing power structures while marginalising alternative identities (Jovchelovitch 2007).

Beyond historical factors, political power influences identity through policies, rhetoric, and actions designed to maintain stability and control. As the ruling majority, Malay political leaders leverage their influence to preserve authority, which affects the construction and representation of national identity. Government institutions like Muzium Negara serve as platforms where these political dynamics are reflected, showcasing dominant narratives and Malay cultural heritage while shaping public perceptions of national identity. This aligns with SRT's assertion that public institutions, including museums, play a key role in legitimising dominant social representations by reinforcing selective histories and collective memory (Augoustinos, Walker and Donaghue 2014).

## DISCUSSION

The study highlights Muzium Negara's important role in representing Malaysia's national identity through its exhibitions, portraying the country's diverse society. By offering accurate information, curated narratives, and inclusive representations, the museum enhances visitors' understanding of Malaysian identity. Additionally, it demonstrates how SRT shapes the collective narratives

presented. This study emphasises the museum's active role in constructing national identity and contributing to discussions on multiethnic representation in Malaysia.

The construction of national identity in Muzium Negara extends beyond historical and cultural dissemination, reflecting political power dynamics. The National Cultural Policy of 1971 and subsequent government policies have significantly shaped the museum's portrayal of national identity, emphasising Malay culture and Islam as central elements. These policies align with nation-building efforts to create a unified identity that resonates with the majority population. SRT is crucial in this study as it demonstrates how collective understandings of identity are constructed and communicated within society. It emphasises that representations are fluid and evolve with shifting societal values. Within this framework, Muzium Negara serves as a space where diverse narratives intersect, allowing for the negotiation of national identity.

While the museum primarily emphasises Malay cultural narratives, SRT suggests that these portrayals can be contested and reinterpreted by various ethnic groups, reflecting Malaysia's diverse society. This fluidity highlights the need for inclusivity in exhibitions, fostering a broader understanding of national identity that embraces all communities. Participants see the museum as a space where history, culture, and political power converge, shaping decisions about what is deemed worthy of national representation. Thus, SRT not only guides the analysis of the museum's exhibits but also encourages ongoing dialogue on representation in Malaysia's multiethnic society.

The findings suggest that Muzium Negara should incorporate stories from all ethnic groups, emphasising the need for inclusivity in museum narratives. According to SRT, museums play a crucial role in constructing and conveying collective identities by presenting diverse voices and perspectives (Shamsul 1996). By highlighting a pluralistic Malaysian identity, Muzium Negara enables individuals to connect their cultural backgrounds to a broader national identity, fostering a sense of belonging. However, the findings also reveal tensions in representing minority cultures, indicating that political influences shape which stories are emphasised or marginalised. Participants stressed the museum's obligation to adapt its exhibitions to include marginalised narratives and contemporary issues, ensuring all voices are part of the national identity discourse.

This study also contributes to theory by expanding the application of SRT in the context of museum communication in a multicultural Southeast Asian society. While SRT has typically been applied in Western or homogeneous contexts, this research demonstrates how the theory can be adapted to explain the institutional construction of identity in postcolonial, multiethnic settings

such as Malaysia. It reveals that representations are shaped not only by public discourse and media but also strategically embedded in cultural institutions such as national museums. In this context, SRT helps explain how state narratives are both asserted and contested, and how the omission of certain ethnic stories becomes part of the representational process. This application enriches SRT by showing its relevance in understanding institutionalised cultural memory and national identity formation in regions with complex ethnic and political dynamics.

While this study has expanded the theoretical application of SRT in this context, a limitation of this study is its focus solely on Muzium Negara, potentially overlooking contributions from other cultural institutions in Malaysia. Different museums may present varied narratives of national identity, offering a more holistic understanding of cultural representation, especially in the context of evolving societal and political landscapes.

## **CONCLUSION**

National identity in museums is constructed and communicated through the curation of objects and narratives that reflect a nation's history, values, and cultural diversity. Museums serve as platforms for fostering a sense of belonging and national pride, while also engaging visitors in public discourse and education about the nation's past, present, and future. This study finds that Muzium Negara contributes to promoting Malaysia's national identity by serving as a key institution for preserving and showcasing the nation's history and heritage. However, its representation of Malaysia's multiethnic society remains imbalanced, with certain ethnic groups receiving greater emphasis than others. To enhance inclusivity, Muzium Negara should embrace a more representative approach, ensuring that the histories, cultures, and contributions of Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous groups, and other communities are equitably featured. Exhibitions should highlight each group's unique traditions, languages, and cultural practices while also reinforcing their collective role in nation-building.

By presenting a balanced, inclusive, and dynamic portrayal of Malaysia's past and present, Muzium Negara can foster a stronger sense of national unity. As a repository of historical artefacts and cultural heritage, the museum plays a crucial role in collecting, preserving, and sustaining the cultural traditions of the nation's diverse communities. It serves as a platform for ethnic integration, strengthening unity through inclusive heritage-based arts and cultural activities. Additionally, Muzium Negara can further contribute to national identity formation by enhancing visitor engagement through interactive exhibitions,

digital storytelling, and participatory experiences. These approaches could encourage visitors to reflect on their identities within the broader national context, fostering a deeper connection to Malaysia's rich heritage.

Future research should explore how visitors interpret and engage with these representations to understand further the museum's role in shaping national identity. Additionally, examining how museums might further promote inclusive narratives, particularly as societal and political landscapes evolve, will provide deeper insights. Expanding digital accessibility and integrating diverse community voices into curatorial practices can further strengthen Muzium Negara's role in shaping a more inclusive national identity.

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