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The European network on cultural management and policy

2026

Congress Proceedings

Artists and Cultural & Creative Professionals at the Centre: Rethinking Work, Policy, and Cultural Ecosystems

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Table of Contents

Creative Ecosystems and Cultural Labour: Youth-Led Practices, Sustainability and New Policy Imaginaries 1
Dr. Aleksandra Bajde[1]
1. Regional Network of Centers for Advanced Studies in Southeast Europe & Culture and Sustainability Lab

Culture-Led Regeneration in Oil-Based Urban Landscapes: The Case of Al-Ahmadi, Kuwait — Exploring Possibilities and Structural Constraints 9
Dr. Kostica Dragana[1], Mr. Lina Silisty [1], Dr. Kathrin Schmidt [1]
1. Independent researcher

Cultural Impact Assessment: A Sustainable Development Framework for Mid-sized Live Music Venues in Taiwan 22
Ms. Tzu Jung Chen[1]
1. National Taiwan University of Arts

Small Live Music Venues as Labour Infrastructures: Policy Frameworks in Finland 30
Dr. Violeta Simjanovska[1]
1. Sibelius Academy, University of Arts Helsinki

The manifold relations between culture and democracy 40
Dr. Johan Kolsteeg[1]
1. Groningen University

Ecosystem thinking to understand CCI's work with impact and its evaluation 46
Prof. Pille Pruulmann Vengerfeldt[1], Dr. Pille Runnel [2]
1. University of Malmö, 2. Estonian National Museum

Governing for Social Sustainability: Impact Measurement and Identification Processes in a Museum-Based Cultural Ecosystem 54
Dr. Julia Römhild[1], Ms. Selina Kahle[1]
1. Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

Mediating Materiality: Young Tech Artists and Creative Ecosystems in Contemporary Taiwan 63
Prof. Hsin-Yi Wu[1]
1. National Taipei University of Technology, Taiwan

Rethinking Cultural and Creative Industries through the Lens of Collective Action: A Management Perspective 69
Mr. Nicolas Ricci[1], Dr. Sophie Hooge [1]
1. Mines Paris - PSL Research University

Negotiating Aspirations and Realities: The Role of Artist Management in Vernacular Folk Music Industries 77
Ms. Anuracti Sharma[1]
1. College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati

How the framing of artistic professionalism on a BA Fine Art programme can influence whether students intend to pursue careers as professional artists **86**
Dr. Sarah Rowles[1]
1. Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki

Analysing the 'Strategic Situation' of a Cultural Player: Conceptual Framework and Method **94**
Prof. Mario D'Angelo[1]
1. Université Bourgogne Europe, Burgundy School of Business

Digital Heritage as an Ecosystem: A Practice-Based Study of Croatia's eKultura Model **104**
Ms. Jelena Rubić[1], Ms. Matea Kolendic[1], Ms. Laura Šejić [1]
1. Ministry of culture and media Republic of Croatia

Navigating Frictions in Creative Ecosystems: A Critical Analysis of the Total Solution Model for Heritage Reuse in Taiwan **115**
Dr. ChaoShiang Li[1], Mr. Ting Hsiung Hsiao[2], Mr. Chien-Sen Huang [2], Mr. Yi-Nuo Guo [2]
1. China University of Technology, 2. X Basic Planning Co., Ltd.

Inclusive Intercultural Museology and Sustainability? From the (In)-Visibility of Competencies to International Cross-Fertilization **126**
Prof. Idjéraoui Linda[1]
1. (SIC.Lab, Université Côte d'Azur)

Emerging Skills for Digital Cultural Mediation: Rethinking Local Heritage Narratives through the Museum Serious Game "I Codici del Tempo" (Monteprandone, Italy) **135**
Prof. Mara Cerquetti[1], Dr. Concetta Ferrara [1], Ms. Sara Verducci [1]
1. University of Macerata

Artist Collectives as Communities of Practice: Professionalisation, Collective Infrastructure and Pathways to International Cooperation **144**
Ms. Inês Pinto de Faria[1]
1. University of Barcelona

I Say No: A Study of the Domestic and International Artists Withdrawals in the U.S. during 2025/2026 **152**
Ms. Audrey Shon[1]
1. New York University

Digital Competences and Inclusive Practices in Museums: Training Cultural Professionals for Autism-Friendly Heritage Experiences **159**
Prof. Antonella Poce[1], Dr. Luca Contardi [1], Prof. Carlo De Medio[2]
1. University of Rome Tor Vergata, 2. Università di Roma Tor Vergata

Tensions in the discourses of professionalism in the arts: How can higher arts education support students in navigating these complexities? **167**
Prof. Kai Lehikoinen[1], Dr. Sarah Rowles [2]
1. Theatre Academy, Uniarts Helsinki, 2. Fine Art Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki

Using City Prototyping to Create Open Innovation Ecosystem in, for and with CCIs **175**
Ms. Charlotte Lorentz Hjorth [1], Dr. Marcin Poprawski[2], Dr. Lena Holmberg[1], Ms. Birgitta Persson [3], Ms. Katarina Scott [3]
1. Lund University, 2. HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, 3. Future by Lund

Reconfiguring Music rights: digital transformation and the evolution of Copyright Management in Italy 184
Dr. Martina Manzo[1]
1. IUL Digital University

Digitalisation and Audience Diversification in Opera: Measuring Access, Participation, and the Limits of Technology 193
Mr. Filip Babic[1]
1. Sibelius Academy, University of Arts Helsinki

Formalisation without security: contractual stabilisation, bargaining power and well-being in Romania's cultural labour field, 2018–2025 199
Dr. Rarita Zbranca[1], Dr. Cristian Pop [2], Ms. Lorena Copil [1], Ms. Karla Elkan [1]
1. Cluj Cultural Center, 2. Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca / Interdisciplinary Centre for Data Science

Painting Over the Cracks: Street Art Labour, Structural Precarity, and the Contradictions of Creative City Governance in Berlin 205
Ms. Alisha Lynch[1]
1. Queen's university Belfast

From Access to Circulation: Bridge Actors as Missing Cultural Infrastructure 218
Ms. Winnie Lam[1]
1. Plinth BV

Mapping Cultural Mobility: A Reflexive Teaching Method for Sustainable Cultural Futures 226
Dr. Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio[1]
1. University of Barcelona

The Transformation of Aesthetic Editorial Processes in the Age of AI: Influence at the Periphery 233
Mr. Adrien Christ[1], Prof. Anthony Hussenot [2]
1. Université Côte d'Azur, 2. (Gredeg/ CNRS), Université Côte d'Azur

Reframing Craft Education through Dual Learning Sites: Ceramic Talent Development and Ecosystem Transformation in Yingge, Taiwan 244
Prof. Yihui Wang[1]
1. National Taipei University of Technology

Rethinking Artistic and Cultural Impact: Where we are and where we are headed 250
Mr. Francis De Bonnaire [1], Dr. Francesco Chiaravalloti[2], Prof. Martin Piber[3], Mr. Stefan Schöggl[4], Prof. Annick Schramme[5]
1. Sento Group, 2. University of Amsterdam, 3. University of Innsbruck, 4. Vienna University of Economics and Business, 5. University of Antwerp

Cultural Sustainability Impact Evaluation and Reporting 256
Prof. Elena Borin[1], Prof. Jerry C Y LIU[2], Dr. Wen-Ling Lin[3], Dr. Maria Antonietta Cipriano[4], Prof. Michela Marchiori [4], Dr. Alfredo Valeri [5], Prof. Paola Demartini [4], Dr. Martina Manzo [6]
1. UniPegaso, 2. National Taiwan University of Arts, 3. Board Member of the Chinese Association of Museums (Taiwan), a Board Member of the Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies, 4. Roma Tre University, 5. Associazione Civita, 6. IUL Digital University

Rethinking the Legal Status of Artists in Bulgaria: Towards a New Framework for Decent Work in the Cultural and Creative Sectors 279
Dr. Diana Andreeva -Popyordanova[1]
1. UNWE/Observatory of Cultural Economics

(Il)legitimacy and Economic Exclusion: Policy Frameworks and the Precarious Status of Freelance Artists in South Africa. 287
Mr. Nolo Mmeti[1]
1. SA Chamber of Arts

Bridging the Art-in-Education Competence Gap: From Systemic Barriers to Site-Specific Experimentations 302
Mrs. Marine Masson[1], Dr. Maria Kyriakidou [2], Dr. Guillaume Pellerin[3], Ms. Paula Pazos[4]
1. Science For Change, 2. Anatolia American University | American College of Thessaloniki, 3. Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation - Centre Pompidou, 4. Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association

Cultivating Territorial Resilience: The Role of Cultural Micro-Enterprises as Catalytic Intermediaries 319
Dr. Federica Pesce[1], Dr. Maura Romano [1], Dr. Ludovica De Angelis [1], Dr. Laura Bove [1]
1. Melting Pro

Prof. Dr. Birgit Mandel: Artistic interventions in social contexts. The role of arts and culture for community building in polarized societies 325
Prof. Birgit Mandel[1]
1. University Hildesheim

Between Patronage and Power: Rethinking Governance and Decision-Making in Collaborations Between Public Museums and Private Art Collectors 333
Ms. Laura Dhoore[1], Prof. Annick Schramme [1]
1. University of Antwerp

Hybrid Governance and Special Public-Private Partnerships (SPPP) in Italy: Redefining Participation and Sustainability in Cultural Heritage 343
Dr. Giovanna Muraglia[1], Dr. Giorgia Dato[2], Prof. Mariavittoria Cicellin [3], Dr. Adriana Scuotto [3], Prof. Stefano Consiglio [3]
1. Univerisity La Sapienza, of Rome, 2. University of Bari Aldo Moro, 3. University of Napoli, Federico II

Funding Ecologies and Power Dynamics in Projectified Cultural Fields: A Nordic Comparative Study 352
Dr. Tomas Järvinen[1]
1. ProCult Productions Ab

The Project-Based Structuring of Ecological Engagement in French Museums: A Cartographic Representation 359
Mrs. Camilla Schianchi[1], Mrs. Lucie Marinier [2], Mrs. Isabelle Brianso [3]
1. Lirsa, CNAM and Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon Université, 2. Lirsa, CNAM, 3. Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon Université

Encouraging individual knowledge management practices as a way of professional empowerment for creatives. Perspectives from the internationalisation experiences of Estonian musicians. 370
Dr. Kristina Kuznetsova-Bogdanovish[1], Dr. Virgo Sillamaa [1]
1. University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy

Higher Education as Ecosystem Anchor: Co-Designing Cultural Production Education in a Peripheral Finnish Region 379
Dr. Laura Päiviö-Häkämies [1], Dr. Laura Päiviö-Häkämies[1]
1. HUMAK University of Applied Sciences

From Precarity to Dignity: A Decalogue for Fair Working Conditions in Cultural Management. The Catalan Case 385
Mr. Pepe Zapata[1]
1. APGCC (Association of Cultural Management Professionals of Catalonia) / Universitat de Barcelona / ppz · pepezapata

The Generative Role of Arts Management in Artist Residencies: A Comparative Study of Cité Internationale des Arts and 59 Rue de Rivoli (Paris) 391
Ms. Yu-Chih Chang[1]
1. Department of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU)

The infrastructural labour of accommodating arts and cultural work in difficult heritage sites 398
Dr. Marthe Nehl[1]
1. Lund university

Segmented Audiences, Shared Institutions? Generational Tensions, Audience Work, and Market Logics in Museums 403
Dr. Anders Parment[1], Prof. Martin Piber [2]
1. Stockholm University, 2. Universität Innsbruck

Strategic configuration and digital maturity of museums: an analysis of organizational dynamics prior to immersive mediation 407
Mr. Vincent Mathiot[1], Dr. Juliette Passebois-Ducros[1], Dr. Pierre Poinsignon [2]
1. Université de Bordeaux, 2. Université Bourgogne Europe, Burgundy School of Business

Immersive technology adoption in cultural consumption. Integrating technological and psychological perspectives 418
Dr. Chuan Li[1], Dr. Mónica Edwards-Schachter [2], Dr. Ximo Diaz Boils [1]
1. Universitat de València, 2. Valencian International University (VIU)

Configuring Financial Health: Dependency and Strategic Trade-offs in Dutch Museums 430
Ms. Fabiana Basili[1], Dr. Carolina Dalla Chiesa [1]
1. Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Precarity, Meaning and the Spiritual Vertical: Freelance Actors in Latvia Between Cultural Policy and Existential Commitment 440
Mrs. Lauma Inovska[1]
1. Latvian Academy of Culture

The Role of Actors in Artistic Co-Determination and De-Hierarchical Decision-Making 446
Prof. Julia Glesner[1]
1. University of Applied Sciences Potsdam

Framing the Artist: How Policy Frameworks Shape the Recognition of Artists in the Nordic Countries 453
Dr. Maria Hirvi-Ijäs[1], Dr. Vappu Renko [1], Dr. Sakarias Sokka [1]
1. Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore

Designing a Research Program for the Polish Capitals of Culture: Frameworks, Stakeholders, and Policy Impact **462**

Mr. Antoni Głowacki[1]

1. *National Centre for Culture Poland*

Between Education and Cultural Practice: The Role of the Faculty of Visual Arts **469**

Dr. Natasa Kraljevic[1], Prof. Milena Dragutinović[2]

1. *Institute for Science, Culture and Art, University Mediterranean,* ***2.*** *Faculty of Foreign Languages, University Mediterranean*

Beauty Influencers as Cultural Professionals? Rethinking the Boundaries of Cultural and Creative Industries in Platform Capitalism **476**

Mr. Julien Fauqueux Albanese[1]

1. *SIC.Lab, Université Côte d’Azur*

Introduction

The **ENCATC 2026 Congress** held in collaboration with Université Côte d'Azur in Nice (23-25 September 2026) under the theme *"***Artists and Cultural & Creative Professionals at the Centre: Rethinking Work, Policy, and Cultural Ecosystems***"* brought together researchers, educators and cultural professionals to examine how artistic and creative work is organised, valued and supported in changing social, economic, technological and policy environments.

The Congress's **17th Education and Research (E&R) Session focused on a central question: how can we rethink the conditions under which artists and cultural and creative professionals work and develop their careers today?** This question requires looking not only at working conditions and professional trajectories, but also at the frameworks and the ecosystems through which cultural work is defined, recognised and supported.

A first area of discussion concerns the **status and recognition of artists and cultural workers**. Across different national and regional contexts, definitions of artistic and creative work remain uneven, while statistical systems frequently fail to capture the diversity of cultural labour. Freelancing, portfolio careers, project-based employment, unpaid work and hybrid professional roles are common across the sector, yet remain difficult to reflect through conventional classifications and policy instruments. The contributions to the E&R session examined these questions from different perspectives, including social protection, artistic freedom, precarity, diversity and inclusion, and the changing boundaries of cultural and creative work.

A second strand addresses **career development, skills and learning**. Technological change, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, ecological transition and internationalisation are reshaping professional practices and expectations. New forms of expertise are emerging alongside established artistic, managerial and mediation competences. The papers presented explored how professionals navigate these transformations and how higher education, vocational training and informal learning environments can respond to changing professional realities. Challenges imposed by technological advancements and how they redefine artistic and cultural work were also part of the programme.

The E&R Session also highlighted the **collective and ecosystem dimensions of cultural work**. Artists and cultural professionals increasingly operate through networks, collectives, cooperatives, cultural hubs, community organisations and other forms of shared infrastructure. These practices challenge the idea of the creative professional as an autonomous entrepreneur and raise questions about mutual support, collective governance, care, resource sharing and alternative organisational models. Contributions examined how such ecosystems can create more sustainable conditions for cultural and creative practice, as well as the role of intermediaries, institutions and local and regional policies in enabling them.

Funding and economic sustainability formed another important area of inquiry. Traditional funding systems continue to play a central role, while new entrepreneurial and financing models

are developing across the cultural and creative sectors. The session provided an opportunity to critically examine both the opportunities and limitations of these models, particularly where entrepreneurial expectations may transfer structural risks to individual artists and professionals.

Finally, several contributions considered the role of artists and cultural professionals in addressing **social and ecological challenges**. Cultural and creative practices increasingly intersect with community development, civic engagement, social justice, climate action and ecological transition. This raises questions about the responsibilities placed on cultural professionals, but also about the capacity of artistic practice to generate new forms of knowledge, participation and collective imagination.

As in previous ENCATC Congresses, the **17th Education and Research Session** was characterised by its **international and interdisciplinary character**. Contributions brought together perspectives from different geographical contexts and disciplinary traditions, including cultural policy and management, sociology, economics, communication, education, cultural studies and the humanities. This diversity is particularly relevant when discussing cultural work, since professional conditions, policy frameworks, definitions and support systems vary significantly across contexts. Comparative and situated perspectives can therefore help challenge assumptions based on a single model of cultural production or professional practice.

The present **Book of Proceedings** brings together the papers selected for publication following the E&R session. They reflect the methodological and intellectual diversity of the contributions presented during the Congress, including empirical research, case studies, conceptual analyses, comparative perspectives and practice-based approaches. While addressing different questions and contexts, they share an interest in understanding the changing realities of cultural and creative work and in questioning the frameworks through which this work is recognised and supported.

The **17th E&R Session highlights** the role of **ENCATC as a space connecting research, education, policy and cultural practice**. The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the diversity of perspectives and approaches that characterise this field. They contribute to a shared reflection on the changing realities of cultural and creative work and on the policies, organisations, educational practices and ecosystems needed to recognise, support and sustain the people who make this work possible.

Such an endeavour would not have been possible without the engagement and expertise of the ENCATC network. On behalf of ENCATC and in our capacity as research delegates of the ENCATC Advisory Board, we would like to thank all authors for their contributions, all reviewers for their valuable work, as well as all members of the Scientific Committee for their support and commitment.

Leticia Labaronne (Professor, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, ENCATC Board Member)

Matina Magkou (Associate Professor, Université Côte d'Azur, ENCATC Board Member)

Creative Ecosystems and Cultural Labour: Youth-Led Practices, Sustainability, and New Policy Imaginaries

Dr. Aleksandra Bajde

Culture and Sustainability Lab

Author Biography

Aleksandra Bajde, PhD, is a cultural manager and interdisciplinary researcher working at the intersection of international cultural relations, EU cultural policy, and sustainability in the cultural sector. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna and brings a practice-based perspective to her research, engaging with ecological thinking and cultural governance from within artistic practice as well as academic and policy contexts. She has over a decade of experience in international cultural cooperation and is co-founder of the Culture and Sustainability Lab. Her engagements include the Global Cultural Relations Programme, the European Music Council Fellowship, the RECAS Fellowship, and the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Relations and Diplomacy at the University of Siena.

Abstract

This paper explores how youth-led cultural initiatives are reshaping creative ecosystems and redefining cultural labour under conditions of precarity, ecological transition, and uneven policy environments. Drawing on a qualitative comparative study in Slovenia and Serbia, it examines how young cultural actors cultivate practices that combine artistic production, social engagement, and sustainability-oriented imaginaries in ways that exceed existing policy categories. The findings indicate that these initiatives function as laboratories for emergent models of cultural organisation, foregrounding collaboration, ecological responsibility, and democratic engagement while navigating policy structures that insufficiently account for their values and forms.

Keywords: cultural labour, creative ecosystems, youth-led initiatives, cultural policy, policy imaginaries

Introduction

Over the past decade, sustainability, fair working conditions, and ecosystem approaches have become increasingly prominent within European cultural policy. Frameworks such as the EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 and, most recently, the Culture Compass for Europe position these priorities not merely as thematic concerns but as strategic objectives shaping funding mechanisms, institutional practices, and modes of cultural production (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2025). In practice, however, artists and cultural professionals across Europe operate within unstable funding structures and policy environments that often remain poorly aligned with the hybrid, cross-sectoral[1] realities of contemporary cultural work.

Within this context, youth-led cultural initiatives occupy a distinctive and insufficiently theorised position. While scholarship on precarious work and independent cultural practice has grown considerably (Banks, 2017; Gill & Pratt, 2008), comparatively little attention has been paid to how such initiatives articulate and enact alternative policy imaginaries, particularly in comparative research on an EU member state alongside a candidate country. This paper addresses that gap by examining how youth-led cultural initiatives in Slovenia

[1] Cross-sectoral is used to refer to practices that operate across artistic, scientific, environmental, and civic domains, rather than in the narrower EU policy sense of different creative industries or artistic disciplines.

and Serbia navigate the conditions of cultural work and develop organisational practices, ecological and democratic imaginaries, and new approaches to governance.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural labour studies has extensively documented the precarious, self-exploitative, and passion-driven dimensions of work in the creative industries (Banks, 2017; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016), foregrounding the absence of stable employment, the normalisation of unpaid labour, and the inadequacy of social protection for self-employed practitioners. Recent scholarship has moved toward collective and ecosystem-oriented analyses, examining how networks and infrastructures of care and solidarity can constitute different modes of cultural production (Banks, 2017).

The concept of social and sociotechnical imaginaries, developed by Taylor (2002) and Jasanoff (2015), addresses this gap. Imaginaries are shared background understandings through which certain practices come to be experienced as legitimate or possible — not only articulated but enacted, not only held but lived. Applied to cultural policy, this highlights how funding systems tend to privilege measurable, project-based, and institutionally established forms of cultural production while making others more difficult to recognise and sustain (Belfiore, 2004). Policy imaginaries, as used here, designate the shared frameworks through which practitioners, policymakers, and institutions understand what cultural policy should support — embedded in funding logics, evaluation criteria, and institutional routines, and open to contestation through practice.

This synthesis draws on Erić (2025), who understands artistic practice as a horizontal and solidarity-based exchange of knowledge capable of prefiguring more just social relations, and emphasises art's role as a catalyst for imagining and enacting eco-social transformation in contexts marked by crisis and structural instability. Following an expanded conception of ecology — understood not only as an environmental issue but as a relational, social, and material condition permeating infrastructures, institutions, and lived experience — this paper asks under what conditions prefigurative cultural practices generate policy imaginaries and gain governance traction. In doing so, it extends broader approaches emphasising the co-constitution of cultural practice and governance structures (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Vestheim, 2012).

Methodology

The empirical basis is a qualitative comparative study conducted within the RECAS Fellowship between December 2025 and April 2026. Sampling was purposive and snowball-based, drawing on existing professional networks and practitioner referrals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 artists, cultural workers, curators, and researchers, including practitioners from both countries currently based abroad, whose transnational experience provides comparative insight into domestic governance conditions. The study focuses on young cultural practitioners in early- to mid-career stages, predominantly between 28 and 35 years of age. Interviews were conducted in person and online between February and March 2026, recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and analysed through thematic coding. Interview data are cited using anonymised identifiers (e.g., Interview 1, 2026); where participants gave explicit consent, named artists and specific works are discussed in the Findings section. Document analysis of key European and national cultural policy frameworks provides the governance context within which the empirical material is situated. Slovenia and Serbia offer a productive comparison given their shared post-socialist trajectories alongside markedly different degrees of EU integration, allowing the study to examine how differing governance environments shape youth-led practices and the emergence of alternative policy imaginaries.

Comparative Cultural Governance Context

Slovenia operates within an EU-aligned governance framework that frames culture as a societal subsystem contributing to democratic development and sustainability. The national cultural programme explicitly integrates sustainability through cultural landscapes, the circular economy, and low-carbon transition

(Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022), with cultural expenditure at approximately 1.5% of the national budget in recent years (Asociacija, 2025).

Serbia’s cultural policy presents a more internally differentiated picture. The 2020–2029 strategy positions culture primarily through identity, heritage, and cultural cohesion (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, 2020), while also acknowledging cultural diversity and international cooperation. Ecological sustainability remains peripheral, funding structures are fragmented with limited infrastructure investment, and public investment in culture stands at approximately 0.7% of the national budget (Vreme, 2024).

Table 1

Comparative Overview of Cultural Governance Dimensions in Serbia and Slovenia

Dimension	Serbia (Strategy 2020–2029)	Slovenia (ReNPK 2022–2029)
Strategic framing	Culture as national priority and unity of cultural space	Culture as societal subsystem shaping an inclusive, sustainably oriented democracy
Governance model	Strategy and action plan; acknowledges limited public debate practices	National programme and government action plan; clearer system criteria
Ecology / sustainability	Largely peripheral; appears mainly in heritage and EU-related contexts	Explicit integration through cultural landscape, circular economy, and low-carbon transition
Cultural labour	Recognition of precarity; fewer structural mechanisms	More detailed regulation of self-employed status and social contributions
EU alignment	Focus on Creative Europe, mobility, and promotion	Structurally embedded in EU cohesion and recovery frameworks
Funding logic	Fragmented project funding; emphasis on evaluation	Greater emphasis on stable financing and infrastructure investment
Public cultural funding	0.68% (2024) / 0.67% (2025)	1.49% (2024) / 1.59% (2025)

Note. This table summarises key differences in cultural governance frameworks between Serbia and Slovenia based on national cultural strategies and policy documents (Asociacija, 2025; Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022; Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, 2020; Vreme, 2024).

Findings

Across both contexts, youth-led cultural initiatives adopt organisational forms that combine artistic practice, research, community engagement, and advocacy in ways that transcend conventional sectoral classifications. In Serbia, initiatives rely heavily on informal networks, transnational partnerships, and unpaid labour. Practitioners describe the near-disappearance of regular funding calls and opacity in decision-making (Interview 3, 2026), with one interviewee explaining how production models built on friends, borrowed equipment, and personal connections serve as substitutes for absent institutional infrastructure (Interview 3, 2026). Mobility provides access to external resources, but interviewees are explicit that such strategies are compensatory: ”working transnationally is the only way to sustain the work” (Interviews 1, 7, 2026). Precarity functions as both a material and epistemic constraint, while self-organised projects arise from necessity rather than choice and are ”not a sustainable or long-term solution” (Interviews 1, 5, 2026). In Slovenia, precarity manifests less as scarcity than as acceleration. Lara Reichmann (*Disposable Bodies*) and Ana Likar (*Myriad Tentacles Will Be Needed Again and Again*) respond to hyper-production through reuse, material circulation, and long-term research—alternatives to a system that, as one interviewee observes, ”rewards finishing” new works over sustained inquiry (Interview 10, 2026).

Ecological responsibility emerges not as a funding requirement but as a principle shaping artistic questions, working methods, and organisational choices. In Serbia, ecological concerns are grounded in lived material experience: ”ecology here is not an abstract concept — it is what you breathe, what the river looks like, what

happened to the town where your family lives” (Interview 5, 2026). Sara Stevanović’s *I Thought God Can Be Found in the Danube*[2] translates this into sonic form through orchestral writing and scientific river-monitoring data, approaching the Danube as a shared transnational ecological infrastructure and exposing the mismatch between environmental systems and nationally bounded governance. One of the interviewees identifies the absence of cross-border collective responsibility as a central democratic challenge in ecological governance (Interview 1, 2026). Stefan Đorđević’s *Wind, Talk to Me*[3] extends this through embodied sensory experience of the industrial landscape of Bor, where pollution and extraction are woven into family memory.

In Slovenia, interviewees consistently distinguish between substantive ecological commitment and its instrumentalisation within funding frameworks — a dynamic in which ecological framing risks becoming decoupled from genuine artistic inquiry: ”you might get more funding if you do such a project, but then you also lose some authenticity” (Interview 11, 2026). This critique is sharpest in the observation that ”the problem is not that institutions talk about sustainability — it is that they ask you to change your travel habits but not to question who funds the festival” (Interview 12, 2026). Žiga Divjak’s *Gejm / The Game*[4] enacts this directly, rendering the EU border regime as an ecological system organising mobility, life, and exclusion. Ajda Kadunc (*Feel Grid*, 2025[5]; *Trespassers*, 2025[6]) extends ecological thinking into embodied multispecies spatial practice (Interview 11, 2026).

Social and democratic engagement across sectoral boundaries constitutes a third defining feature. In Serbia, artists are increasingly ”shifting towards community-based practice” — enacted in Jug Marković’s *#itistime*[7], which transforms protest against corruption into cultural expression within broader civic mobilisations (Interviews 5–6, 2026). In Slovenia, PlateauResidue’s *Ex Topia*[8] produces ecological knowledge through scientific collaboration and participatory experience, while Ana Likar’s work situates ecological systems within archival infrastructures, revealing what she terms an ecology of invisibility. Interviewees simultaneously express scepticism toward institutional frameworks (Interview 10, 2026). As one interviewee notes, the most productive collaborations emerge from ”an incredible solidarity that comes from a desire of different people to collaborate with limited resources” (Interview 12, 2026). Social engagement thus emerges, across both contexts, as a central organising principle positioning cultural practice as a site of collective care, democratic

[2] *I Thought God Can Be Found in the Danube* is an orchestral work with fixed media by Serbian composer Sara Stevanović, commissioned by Radio Österreich 1 in cooperation with ORF Musikprotokoll and premiered on 3 October 2025 at ORF Musikprotokoll in Graz with the ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien. The work juxtaposes findings from the ICPDR Joint Danube Survey 4—which detected pharmaceuticals, illicit drugs, microplastics, industrial chemicals, and antibiotic-resistant bacteria across 51 sampling sites in 13 countries—with the romantic imagery of Danube cruise ships, rendering the river as a shared transnational ecological infrastructure of pollution and governance failure (Stevanović, n.d.).

[3] *Wind, Talk to Me* is a 2025 docudrama written and directed by Stefan Đorđević. A Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian co-production, the film draws on the director’s own experiences and features members of his family, exploring grief, memory, and the relationship between a mother and her son. Set in the industrial landscape of Bor, the film situates personal grief within the environmental conditions of extraction and contamination, grounding ecological experience in family memory and bodily vulnerability.

[4] *Gejm / The Game* is a devised theatre production directed by Žiga Divjak, co-produced by Mladinsko Theatre and Maska Ljubljana, with its première on 10 June 2020. Based on testimonies from the Border Violence Monitoring Network database, the performance examines the experiences of people attempting to cross the Bosnian-Slovenian border into the EU—a journey refugees refer to as ”the game.” The production renders the EU border regime as an ecological system of organised violence, mobility, and exclusion, extending ecological thinking into the domain of governance and human rights.

[5] *Feel Grid* (14 March–9 May 2025, 2^32 Space, Ljubljana) is a solo exhibition by Ajda Kadunc exploring environmental perception, spatial governance, and human–non-human relations. Combining painting, installation, and walking as a method of artistic research, the work traces how biological, social, and technological systems shape experiences of landscape and space, challenging anthropocentric understandings of the environment (Praznik, 2025a).

[6] *Trespassers* (13 August 2025, Šentvid pri Stični) is a site-specific installation by Ajda Kadunc built from biodegradable materials including mycelium, wax, wood, and clay. The work investigates spatial boundaries and multispecies relations, conceiving the landscape as a fluid field shaped by human and non-human bodies alike, and explores the ethics of care and reciprocal presence across species (Praznik, 2025b).

[7] *#itistime* is a work for video, electronics, and two voices by Serbian-born composer Jug Marković, composed in 2025/2026. Drawing on drone footage of the mass protest in Belgrade on 15 March 2025, the work responds to the student and civic mobilisations that followed the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024. The repeated phrase vreme je (”it is time”) positions artistic practice as an act of political witness and solidarity (Neue Vocalsolisten, n.d.).

[8] *Ex Topia* (2017) is a research-based multimedia installation by Slovenian duo PlateauResidue (Eva Pavlič Seifert and Aljaž Celarc), created in collaboration with scientists from the Anton Melik Geographical Institute ZRC SAZU. The work documents an artistic intervention in the postglacial landscape of the Triglav glacier in the Slovenian Alps, which has shrunk from 36 to 1 hectare over 70 years. Combining filmed footage, participant interviews, and music by Norwegian composer Magnus Bugge, the project produces ecological knowledge through embodied and participatory experience (PlateauResidue, n.d.).

experimentation, and the enactment of alternative futures.

Discussion: Towards New Policy Imaginaries

The findings point to a persistent gap between the practices of young cultural actors and the frameworks through which cultural policy supports and evaluates cultural work — not primarily a matter of funding levels but of conceptual and structural misalignment between how cultural labour is understood within these initiatives and how it is recognised by existing policy frameworks. Understanding this requires returning to the concept of policy imaginaries.

The youth-led cultural initiatives documented here do not merely adapt to existing policy conditions — they actively contest and reimagine them. The practices identified in this study — from Stevanović's use of river-monitoring data to reframe ecological governance, to Reichmann's critique of hyper-production and Likar's foregrounding of institutional invisibility, to the collective organising logic of *#itistime* — enact new understandings of what cultural work is, what it is for, and who it serves. They prefigure different ways of organising cultural and social life, instantiating what Jasanoff (2015) would describe as co-produced visions of social and institutional order. The gap is therefore not only technical or financial but imaginative — existing policy logics reflect a particular understanding of cultural value that is structurally misaligned with the imaginaries generated from within practice.

Three dimensions of this misalignment merit attention. Temporally, youth-led initiatives emphasise long-term, process-based inquiry yet are constrained by short-term project cycles. Sectorally, they operate across arts, research, community, and civic domains while funding structures remain sectorally organised. In terms of valuation, they generate social, ecological, civic, and epistemic value — including new forms of knowledge production at the intersection of artistic practice, scientific inquiry, and civic engagement — that conventional evaluation frameworks cannot capture (Belfiore, 2004), requiring a shift from procedural to structural sustainability. Notably, solidarity-based organisational models — from informal production networks to collective civic mobilisation — represent forms of cultural labour that existing policy frameworks structurally fail to recognise or support.

Crucially, policy imaginaries do not travel evenly across governance contexts. In Slovenia, the central paradox is not absence but misalignment: comparatively stable funding and policy alignment with sustainability objectives coexist with dominant production logics that can actively undermine the very ecological and social commitments that policy seeks to promote. In Serbia, equally compelling new imaginaries exist but lack the institutional conditions for policy translation. Alternative policy imaginaries do not automatically translate into policy change: their capacity to reshape governance depends on institutional mediators, stable structures, and protected spaces for dialogue. The ambitions of the EU Work Plan for Culture and the Culture Compass for Europe depend on whether these national and local conditions are in place — and, where they are not, on what it would take to build them.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how youth-led cultural initiatives in Slovenia and Serbia navigate and reimagine cultural labour within uneven governance environments, and what that navigation reveals about the limits of existing cultural policy frameworks.

The comparison reveals a striking paradox. In Serbia, cultural actors operate under conditions of scarcity, marked by institutional instability and fragmented support structures. In Slovenia, they confront a different challenge: acceleration, where comparatively stable funding environments coexist with production pressures that can undermine long-term ecological and social commitments. Yet these contrasting conditions produce a similar outcome. In both contexts, policy frameworks struggle to recognise and accommodate forms of cultural work that are process-based, cross-sectoral, and oriented towards ecological and social

transformation.

What emerges from the comparison is that the central challenge is not simply one of funding levels or institutional capacity. Rather, it concerns the assumptions through which cultural value is defined, recognised, and supported. Whether through production models built on informal solidarity networks, artistic engagements with environmental data, or cultural responses to democratic contestation, the initiatives discussed here generate forms of knowledge, care, and collective organisation that exceed conventional policy categories. In doing so, they point not only to gaps in existing approaches but also to policy imaginaries that are already being enacted in practice.

The challenge for cultural policy lies in creating the conditions under which such imaginaries can move beyond isolated initiatives and gain institutional traction. If sustainability, fair working conditions, and ecosystem approaches are to become more than policy aspirations, cultural governance must become capable of recognising and supporting the forms of cultural labour through which these ambitions are already being realised.

Impact & Engagement

Cultural policy in Europe faces a structural knowledge gap: despite growing rhetorical commitment to sustainability, fair working conditions, and ecosystem approaches, insufficient empirically grounded evidence exists on how these ambitions are experienced, negotiated, and enacted at the level of practice — particularly among youth-led and independent cultural initiatives operating outside formal institutional structures.

This research contributes to addressing that gap by generating practice-based, qualitatively rich evidence from Slovenia and Serbia — two contexts that offer a productive contrast between a well-institutionalised, EU-aligned cultural ecosystem and one marked by structural precarity and fragmented governance. The findings are directly relevant to cultural policymakers at national and EU levels, funders and grant-making bodies, cultural practitioners and organisations, educators and researchers, and civil society actors engaged in democratic and ecological transition.

The primary pathway to impact is policy contribution: this paper provides policy-relevant, evidence-based insights for cultural policymakers, funders, and advocacy organisations at national and European levels. A dedicated policy brief, developed through the RECAS Fellowship, will be publicly available through the University of Belgrade’s RECAS platform (forthcoming July 2026), ensuring accessibility for cultural practitioners, researchers, and policymakers across the region without institutional barriers. The research also serves as a conceptual input for Composing Futures: Creative Impact on Eco-Social Transformation, an international forum featuring co-creation labs taking place on 6–7 November 2026 at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, thereby extending the research’s reach beyond academic and policy audiences to engage cultural practitioners, institutions, and wider publics while reflecting the paper’s argument that arts-based knowledge constitutes a legitimate form of policy learning.

Expected changes operate at two levels. At the level of awareness and discourse, the research aims to shift how policymakers and funders conceptualise structural misalignments between existing policy frameworks and cultural practice — moving beyond rhetorical commitment toward recognition of the specific organisational and temporal conditions that make such commitments substantive. At the level of structural change, the goal is increased recognition of process-based and cross-sectoral cultural work within funding criteria, and strengthened advocacy capacity for independent cultural actors in both national contexts. Indicators of impact include citation of findings in advocacy materials produced by independent cultural sector organisations, uptake of policy brief recommendations in national or EU-level policy processes, and adoption of more flexible and qualitative evaluation frameworks by cultural funders.

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Interview List

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Interview 2 (2026). Serbian researcher and former curator. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 3 (2026). Serbian filmmaker and photographer. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 4 (2026). Serbian theatre director. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 5 (2026). Serbian interdisciplinary artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 6 (2026). Serbian composer. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 7 (2026). Serbian artist and curator. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 8 (2026). Slovenian interdisciplinary artist. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 9 (2026). Slovenian visual and digital artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 10 (2026). Slovenian visual artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 11 (2026). Slovenian visual artist working in painting and installation. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 12 (2026). Slovenian theatre director. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 13 (2026). Slovenian artist–research duo. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 14 (2026). Slovenian musician and composer. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Culture-Led Regeneration in Oil-Based Urban Landscapes: The Case of Al-Ahmadi, Kuwait — Exploring Possibilities and Structural Constraints

Dr. Dragana Kostica; MA Lina Silisty; Dr. Kathrin Schmidt
Independent researcher

Abstract

Al-Ahmadi, established in 1946 by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) and designed by Wilson Mason & Partners, represents one of the earliest modern planned towns in the Persian Gulf. Conceived as a company town, it translated Garden City principles—zoning, green landscapes, and spatial hierarchy—into the emerging oil-based economy of Kuwait. The town's urban form symbolized industrial modernity, combining administrative, residential, and civic functions within a coherent spatial model adapted to desert conditions.

Following Kuwait's independence in 1961, Al-Ahmadi gradually evolved from an expatriate enclave into a more socially mixed community. Cultural infrastructure played a vital role in shaping its identity. The Al-Ahmadi Cinema, designed by Egyptian modernist Sayed Karim, and the Al-Ahmadi Souq (1961) anchored the town's social and cultural life, reflecting a period of prosperity, internationalism, and collective leisure and cultural activities.

However, demographic shifts, the gradual departure of expatriate populations, and the Iraqi invasion of 1990–1991 marked a turning point. The invasion triggered cultural stagnation, weakening investment flows and institutional coherence. Over the subsequent decades, limited governance capacity, fragmented institutional responsibilities, and reduced engagement by Kuwait Oil Company (KOC)—despite its position as the majority landowner and one of the city's principal stakeholders—contributed to the decline of cultural facilities and activities. By the early 2010s, both the cinema and the souq had fallen into disuse, transforming key symbols of Kuwait's modernity into abandoned heritage assets. This trajectory—from oil-driven modernist planning to post-invasion fragmentation—frames Al-Ahmadi as a critical case for examining culture-led regeneration and the role of creative ecosystems in oil-based urban landscapes, particularly in contexts where governance structures and institutional continuity remain key structural constraints.

The research examines the opportunities and structural constraints of culture-led revitalization in Al-Ahmadi, focusing on key heritage assets including the Souq, Cinema, Union Building, Al-Ahmadi Library, Kuwait Little Theatre, and selected oil-history infrastructures with the potential to anchor a future cultural and creative district. The study also investigates how different actors perceive the role of culture in the town's transformation.

Methodologically, the research applies Social Network Theory and Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map stakeholders' relations and decision-making capacity, alongside discourse and frame analysis to examine competing narratives surrounding the revitalization of Al-Ahmadi town. The theoretical framework draws on concepts of cultural districts and culture-led regeneration, assessing whether Al-Ahmadi's assets can shift from isolated heritage sites toward an integrated cultural and creative ecosystem.

This transformation unfolds within a broader GCC context marked by accelerated urban restructuring and economic diversification strategies. Across the Gulf, culture-led regeneration has emerged as a policy tool linking heritage, tourism, culture, and creative economies. Yet unlike iconic, state-driven flagship developments elsewhere in the region, Al-Ahmadi presents the possibility of developing a more holistic, modern heritage-based cultural district and creative ecosystem that supports cultural participation, creative

production, and sustainable opportunities for artists and cultural professionals —if cross-sectoral governance, institutional commitment, and local engagement can be effectively aligned.

Introduction

Urban environments embody the dynamic interaction of social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental forces. They function as living systems—arenas of negotiation, aspiration, and collective creativity that continually redefine the urban condition (Kostica, 2024). Rather than static entities, cities evolve through phases of growth, decline, and renewal, reflecting broader transformations in governance, culture, technology, and economic systems. Urban regeneration has therefore emerged as a critical response to spatial, social, environmental, and economic decline, while fostering new forms of vitality, resilience, and participation (Evans, 2005; Vanolo, 2022; Kostica, 2025).

Within this framework, culture and creativity have increasingly been recognized as drivers of urban regeneration. Beyond their cultural value, they can act as catalysts for social empowerment, community engagement, and economic diversification, particularly in places seeking to redefine their identity and future development trajectories (Romein, Nijkamp & Trip, 2013). By reactivating underused spaces and reinterpreting heritage assets, culture-led regeneration transforms not only the built environment but also the meanings and functions attached to urban places. As Remesar (2016) argues, successful regeneration extends beyond physical renewal to include socio-economic restructuring, institutional innovation, and new governance arrangements.

These considerations are particularly relevant for Al-Ahmadi in Kuwait, a planned company town whose urban form and identity were historically shaped by the oil industry and modernist planning principles. Today, the challenge lies in reactivating this mid-twentieth-century heritage through a culture-led, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable strategy. The UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach offers a valuable framework by integrating tangible and intangible heritage into contemporary development processes. Following this approach, Al-Ahmadi's souq, cinema, Union Building, public library, Kuwait Little Theatre, and selected oil-related heritage sites are understood not merely as historical artifacts, but as active assets capable of generating social, cultural, and economic value.

Realizing such transformation requires the mobilization of multiple forms of capital that operate in an interconnected manner. Political capital, expressed through institutional leadership and governance capacity (Bourdieu, 1986; 1991), provides the foundation for coordinated action. Social capital, reflected in civic participation, trust, and collaborative networks (Putnam, 2000), strengthens community engagement, while human capital—represented by professional expertise, creativity, and entrepreneurial skills (Florida, 2005)—supplies the innovative capacity necessary for long-term transformation (Kostica, 2024). Economic capital, embedded in Al-Ahmadi's built heritage, provides the material foundation for regeneration (Ward, 2016; Kostica, 2024). However, these forms of capital can only generate sustainable urban transformation when activated through strong human and organisational ecosystems.

Heritage assets alone cannot ensure long-term regeneration. Their success depends on the presence of artists, cultural professionals, creative entrepreneurs, cultural organisations, and community actors capable of activating spaces, producing cultural content, and building meaningful connections with diverse audiences. In this sense, culture-led regeneration extends beyond the preservation of buildings and physical infrastructure; it also requires the creation of social, professional, and institutional conditions that enable cultural and creative activities to flourish. Understanding how these actors interact with heritage assets and governance structures is therefore essential for assessing Al-Ahmadi's future development potential.

Case Study: Al-Ahmadi Town

Al-Ahmadi (Map 1) was established in 1946 by KOC and designed by Wilson Mason & Partners as one of the earliest modern planned towns in the Persian Gulf. Conceived as a company town, it translated Garden City principles into Kuwait's emerging oil economy through zoning, green landscapes, spatial hierarchy, and a clear separation of administrative, residential, civic, and recreational functions. Its urban form represented a model of industrial modernity adapted to desert conditions (UNESCO, 2026).



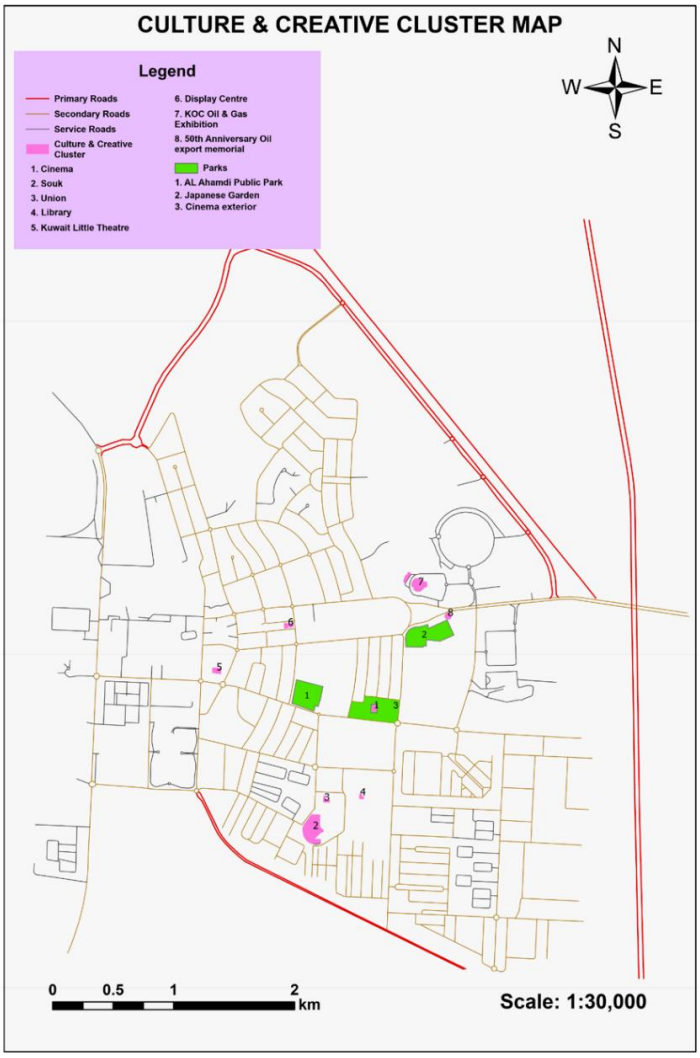
Map 1: Al-Ahmadi Location | Source: GIS by UNESCO Experts

After Kuwait's independence in 1961, Al-Ahmadi gradually evolved from an expatriate enclave into a more socially mixed community. Cultural infrastructure became central to the town's identity and quality of life. The Al-Ahmadi Cinema, designed by Egyptian modernist architect Sayed Karim, and the Al-Ahmadi Souq became focal points of social interaction, cultural exchange, and collective leisure, reflecting a period of economic prosperity, internationalism, and civic life.

However, demographic changes, the departure of expatriate populations, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990–1991 marked a significant turning point. The invasion and its aftermath contributed to economic and

cultural stagnation, weakening investment flows and institutional coherence. Over the following decades, fragmented responsibilities among stakeholders, limited governance capacity, and reduced engagement by KOC contributed to the decline of cultural facilities and activities. By the early 2010s, both the cinema and the souq had fallen into disuse, transforming two of the town's most important landmarks into underutilized heritage assets (UNESCO, 2026).

Against this background, the research explores both the opportunities and structural constraints of culture-led revitalization in Al-Ahmadi. Particular attention is given to the Al-Ahmadi Souq (see Figure 1), Al-Ahmadi Cinema (see Figure 2), Union Building, Al-Ahmadi Public Library, Kuwait Little Theatre, and selected oil-history infrastructure, which together could form the basis for a future cultural and creative district (see Map 2). The study further investigates how key stakeholders—including KOC, the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL), local community, Ahmadi Governorate, the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development (GSSCPD), Kuwait University, Cultural NGOs & Art Collectives, and international organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP—perceive the role of culture and heritage in the town's transformation.



Map 2: Culture and Creativity Cluster Map | Source: GIS by UNESCO Experts



Figure 1: Ahmadi Souq, current state. Source: UNESCO experts.



Figure 2: Ahmadi Cinema, current state. Source: UNESCO experts.

Theoretical Framework

This research is situated at the intersection of culture-led urban regeneration, cultural and creative district theory, and governance studies. It adopts a qualitative case study approach, enabling an in-depth exploration of how spatial assets, governance structures, stakeholder relations, and competing narratives shape regeneration outcomes in a unique oil-based urban context.

The theoretical foundation draws on literature that understands culture not merely as an outcome of development but as a catalyst for urban transformation, economic diversification, social cohesion, and place-making (Evans, 2005; Romein, Nijkamp & Trip, 2013; Kostica, 2025). Within this perspective, heritage buildings, cultural institutions, public spaces, and creative activities can generate new urban functions while strengthening local identity and collective memory. This is particularly relevant for industrial and mono-functional urban areas seeking to diversify their economic base and reposition themselves within broader regional networks.

A related body of literature concerns cultural districts, creative districts, and creative ecosystems. Early contributions by Mommaas (2004) and Lazzeretti, Boix, and Capone (2008) emphasized the role of spatial concentration and clustering of cultural activities in generating innovation, collaboration, and economic development. More recent scholarship has shifted from viewing cultural districts as isolated clusters toward understanding them as interconnected ecosystems of institutions, creative professionals, cultural organizations, educational institutions, businesses, and public authorities. Such ecosystems operate through interaction, knowledge exchange, and collaboration, producing benefits that extend beyond the cultural sector itself (Sacco, Ferilli, & Blessi, 2018).

The research also draws on governance and policy network theory (Kenis & Schneider, 1991), recognizing that successful regeneration depends not only on physical assets but also on stakeholder relations, institutional alignment, and decision-making capacity. Social Network Theory and Social Network Analysis (SNA) are therefore used to examine patterns of collaboration among main stakeholders.

To complement SNA, the study applies discourse and frame analysis to investigate how different actors interpret and communicate the future of Al-Ahmadi. Particular attention is paid to competing narratives regarding the most appropriate regeneration pathway for the town. In this research, these concepts are not treated as separate analytical domains but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of urban transformation. The study assumes that heritage assets generate value only when embedded within governance structures capable of supporting cultural production, cross-sector collaboration, and long-term institutional continuity.

Methodology

Data collection

Interviews were conducted by UNESCO experts with members of the local community, including current and former residents of Al-Ahmadi from diverse professional backgrounds, as well as employees of NCCAL occupying relevant positions. In addition, formal meetings and discussions took place in Al-Ahmadi and Kuwait City with stakeholders from KOC, academia—particularly the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies of Kuwait University, governorate representatives, and community members.

The research also included a review of historical archives, literature, maps, planning documents, and strategic policy frameworks. Key reference documents included *Kuwait Vision 2035*, *the ICOMOS Upstream Process: Ahmadi Company Township – Upstream Report, Kuwait*, *A Creative Economy Framework and Roadmap* (Fleming, 2019), *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization* (UN-Habitat, 2020), and *Urban Heritage for Resilience: Consolidated Results of the Implementation of the 2011 Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO, 2023) and was more broadly informed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda and its specific goals (SDGs).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was supported by discourse and frame analysis (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Matthes, 2009; Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015) to examine how stakeholders construct and negotiate narratives surrounding Al-Ahmadi's future within existing institutional structures. In line with relational perspective, actors were analyzed as embedded within a broader social structure composed of formal and informal rules, institutions, and inter-organizational relations. Interview transcripts, meeting notes, and relevant public statements were coded inductively, compared, and grouped into thematic categories. SNA was then used to identify stakeholder relations, decision-making influence, and perceived opportunities and constraints within the governance structure.

Results

Competing regeneration narratives

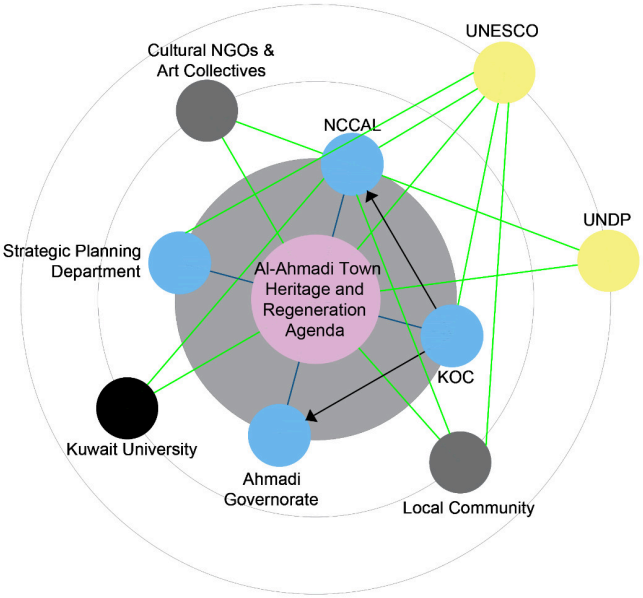
The analysis identifies two dominant narratives regarding Al-Ahmadi's regeneration. The first advocates safeguarding and adaptively reusing the town's twentieth-century modern heritage as a strategic resource for the creation of a cultural and creative ecosystem, economic diversification and local tourism. From this perspective, heritage assets are not isolated monuments, but active components of sustainable urban development and community life. The second narrative supports redevelopment without safeguarding or reusing significant portions of the twentieth-century urban fabric, prioritizing modern research, development, and innovation facilities linked to the oil and energy sectors. Within this approach, only selected cultural assets, particularly the souq and the cinema, are considered priorities for preservation due to their symbolic, architectural, and community value.

Governance structure and power asymmetries

SNA indicates that actors supporting the first narrative include NCCAL, Kuwait University, local community representatives, GSSCPD, and international organizations such as UNESCO and UNDP. However, these actors operate within a governance structure shaped by KOC's extensive ownership, operational role, and decision-making influence in Al-Ahmadi. This creates an asymmetry in institutional power: while cultural and planning actors advocate for a broader heritage-led regeneration strategy, KOC remains central to implementation due to its historic and material role in the town. The roles of Ahmadi Governorate and national-level public authorities appear less clearly articulated, suggesting the need for stronger institutional coordination and shared strategic priorities.

At the same time, the ownership of the cinema and souq by NCCAL provides an important opportunity for targeted cultural regeneration. These assets are expected to be redeveloped as cultural and commercial anchors, potentially through public tender processes. Their revitalization could establish an initial foundation

for a broader cultural district, although wider integration with other twentieth-century heritage assets remains dependent on governance alignment and long-term institutional commitment.



Key	
Actor size	**Types of ties**
Al-Ahmadi Town Heritage and Regeneration Agenda – Central Actor	- Strategic link
- Field of influence	- Advisory and knowledge exchange
- Institutional Core (strong influence in decision-making)	- Hierarchical direction
- Local & National Stakeholders	
- Kuwait University	
- International Organizations (UN-affiliated)	

Figure 3: The diagram is conceived as a conceptual actor (policy) network rather than a conventional one-mode Social Network Analysis composed exclusively of social actors. The Al-Ahmadi Heritage and Regeneration Agenda is positioned at the centre as the shared territorial and policy focus around which governmental institutions, local stakeholders, knowledge actors, and international organizations interact. The central node does not represent an autonomous decision-making actor; rather, it serves as a conceptual representation of the common heritage and regeneration objectives that structure governance relations within the network.

Opportunities for a cultural and creative ecosystem

Kuwait Vision 2035 provides a strategic framework for repositioning Al-Ahmadi as a contributor to national ambitions centered on human capital development, quality of life, economic diversification, and a sustainable urban environment. Within this framework, Al-Ahmadi has the potential to evolve beyond its historical role as an oil company town and emerge as a hub for modern heritage, innovation, and cultural and creative sectors.

Beyond the adaptive reuse of heritage assets, such a transformation would require investment in the people and organisations that constitute a cultural and creative ecosystem. This includes opportunities for artists, designers, cultural practitioners, creative entrepreneurs, and community-based organisations to access affordable spaces, professional networks, skills development, and platforms for cultural production and exchange. By linking heritage revitalisation with talent development and creative entrepreneurship, Al-Ahmadi could contribute not only to cultural tourism and place-making, but also to the development of sustainable cultural and creative careers in Kuwait (see Figure 4).

This transformation also reflects broader GCC trends. Across the Gulf, culture, heritage, and creativity are increasingly being repositioned as drivers of sustainable development, economic diversification, and social cohesion rather than solely instruments of place branding. In Kuwait, however, the development of a resilient cultural and creative ecosystem remains challenged by gaps in education, infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, entrepreneurial support, and talent retention (Fleming, 2019).

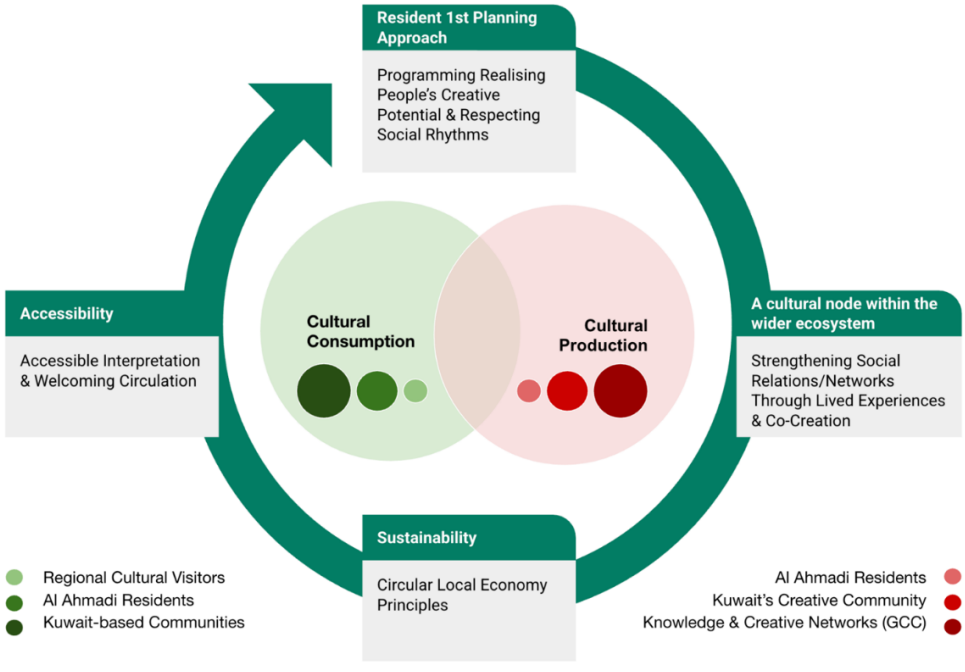


Figure 4: Conceptual model of the Al-Ahmadi cultural and creative ecosystem | Source: UNESCO experts

Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate that Al-Ahmadi’s future is shaped by competing regeneration narratives. These narratives influence policy priorities, stakeholder coalitions, resource allocation, and the legitimacy of particular development pathways (Kostica, 2025). The diagnostic phase therefore highlights the need for an integrated and place-based approach that recognizes Al-Ahmadi as a living heritage and cultural ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated assets (UNESCO, 2026).

Within this perspective, culture-led regeneration should not be understood as a sectoral intervention, but as a structural development approach combining heritage safeguarding, cultural production, community participation, and socio-economic development. Such an approach is particularly relevant in Kuwait’s current cultural and creative ecosystem, which benefits from grassroots creativity and community-based initiatives (Fleming, 2019). Recent NCCAL strategies addressing systemic weaknesses further demonstrate growing institutional recognition of culture’s role in national development (KUNA, 2022).

Al-Ahmadi presents a unique opportunity to be repositioned as a contemporary expression of modernity in the Gulf region. Its future development could demonstrate how cultural and creative sectors and industries, when integrated with heritage safeguarding, innovation, and community participation, can contribute to the revitalization of oil-based towns while maintaining local identity, community life, and heritage values. Such transformation would position Al-Ahmadi not only as a model for Kuwait, but also as a transferable example for other mono-industrial urban environments undergoing economic diversification and urban restructuring (UNESCO, 2026).

The central challenge is not the absence of heritage assets, but the need to align governance capacity, institutional priorities, and stakeholder networks. At the same time, the development of a cultural and creative district – and a wider creative ecosystem in the long-term – requires governance arrangements that extend beyond heritage safeguarding and infrastructure management. Sustainable regeneration depends on creating enabling conditions for cultural production, participation, and professional development. This includes supporting artists and cultural professionals through access to resources, collaborative networks, learning opportunities, and decision-making processes. As creative ecosystems are ultimately shaped by the people who inhabit and activate them, future regeneration strategies should be inherently participatory and inclusive and place cultural practitioners and local communities at the centre of planning and implementation processes.

If these conditions are addressed, Al-Ahmadi could move from fragmented heritage preservation toward an integrated cultural and creative ecosystem capable of generating social, cultural, and economic benefits. Unlike many GCC culture-led projects driven by large-scale flagship investments, Al-Ahmadi offers the possibility of a more incremental, place-based and holistic model rooted in modern heritage, community life, and cross-sector collaboration.

Impact and Engagement

This research addresses a significant knowledge gap concerning the role of culture-led regeneration in oil-based urban landscapes, particularly within Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Using Al-Ahmadi as a case study, it examines how twentieth-century oil heritage can be transformed into a cultural and creative ecosystem while identifying the governance and institutional constraints that shape this process. The findings

provide practical insights for policymakers, urban planners, cultural and heritage institutions, including the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL), UNESCO, and UNDP, Kuwait University by supporting evidence-informed decision-making, strategic planning, and cross-sectoral collaboration among public and private actors. More broadly, the study contributes to regional debates on how heritage, culture, and creative ecosystems can foster economic diversification, placemaking, and sustainable urban development in the GCC and other mono-industrial cities.

Biographies

Dr Dragana Kostica is an urban planner and consultant specialising in urban regeneration, cultural heritage, and sustainable urban development. She holds a PhD in Urban Planning from HafenCity University Hamburg and is an accredited URBACT expert collaborating with UNESCO on heritage-based urban regeneration projects in the Gulf region.

MA Lina Silisty is a cultural policy specialist and strategy consultant with over 20 years of international experience. She advises governments, cultural authorities, and institutions on cultural strategies, placemaking, and the development of sustainable creative ecosystems.

Dr Kathrin Schmidt is a cultural and creative sectors consultant, researcher, and member of the UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators Expert Facility. She specialises in cultural policy, international cultural cooperation, and culture for sustainable development, with extensive experience across Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

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Cultural Impact Assessment: A Sustainable Development Framework for Mid-sized Live Music Venues in Taiwan

Ms. TZU JUNG CHEN
SUB Live House

Author Biography

Tzu-Jung Chen is a PhD student at the Graduate School of Arts Management and Cultural Policy, National Taiwan University of Arts. Her research focuses on cultural governance, cultural impact assessment, cultural space management, and the sustainable development of cultural infrastructure. Drawing upon professional experience in Taiwan's cultural and creative sectors, her work explores the relationship between cultural value, organizational strategy, and public policy. She is particularly interested in the development of evaluation frameworks that connect cultural participation, social impact, and sustainable cultural ecosystems.

Introduction

Existing evaluation frameworks for live music venues continue to privilege economic performance while underrepresenting cultural and social value, leaving operators, funders, and policymakers with limited tools to demonstrate what such venues actually contribute. Analyses of the UK and Canadian live music sectors report billions in gross value added and tens of thousands of jobs (Economics Observatory, 2025; Canadian Live Music Association, 2025), yet such figures say little about how venues foster social connection, nurture artistic talent, or shape urban cultural life.

This gap is particularly acute in Taiwan, where mid-sized live music venues face rising rents, post-pandemic pressures, and competition from digital entertainment, while lacking any operational framework capable of evaluating their multidimensional cultural impact. International tools developed in the UK, North America, and Australia offer valuable principles, but none has been adapted to the institutional and policy conditions of Taiwan's, or more broadly Asia's, mid-sized live music sector.

This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual assessment framework — the Operational Cultural Impact Assessment Framework (OCIAF) — designed to be both theoretically grounded and practically operable. Rather than evaluating a single venue's performance, the paper's contribution is the framework itself: a set of dimensions, indicators, and measurement principles capable of translating cultural value into assessable, comparable, and strategically useful evidence. SUB, a mid-sized venue at Taipei Music Center, is used throughout as an illustrative case to demonstrate how the framework's dimensions could be operationalized in practice, rather than as an empirical evaluation of SUB's performance.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews four strands of literature underpinning the framework's design. Section 3 outlines the conceptual framework design process. Section 4 presents the framework's four dimensions, indicators, and measurement logic. Section 5 illustrates the framework's application through SUB. Section 6 discusses the framework's contributions, and Section 7 concludes.

Literature Review

This study draws on four strands of literature.

Cultural value. Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital provides a foundational lens for understanding why a venue’s contribution to artists’ and audiences’ cultural capital — and its conversion into social and symbolic capital — constitutes value that economic indicators cannot capture. This anticipates Meyrick, Phiddian, and Barnett’s (2020) characterisation of cultural impact as multidimensional, intangible, cumulative, and context-dependent, and is echoed institutionally in Arts Council England’s (2021) tripartite framework of creative people, cultural communities, and a creative and culturally rich nation, which likewise treats economic and cultural value as distinct but interdependent goals requiring separate, parallel indicators rather than a single composite measure.

Cultural impact assessment. At the policy level, UNESCO’s Cultural Impact Assessment methodology evaluates how public policy affects citizens’ cultural rights, identity, and development (UNESCO, n.d.), while the European Commission integrates economic, social, and environmental impact across the policymaking process through broad stakeholder participation (European Commission, n.d.). Both demonstrate that multidimensional impact assessment is an established and credible policy tool capable of comparing heterogeneous forms of value within a single evaluative structure, but neither offers indicators specific to live music infrastructure or to the institutional position of mid-sized venues within a wider cultural ecosystem.

Live music studies. A growing body of practice-oriented research and sector tools addresses this gap directly. The UK Music Venue Trust’s social value framework assesses small venues across cultural, social, economic, and health and wellbeing dimensions (Toulouse Lautrec, 2025). Van der Hoeven and Hitters (2019, 2023) show that venues generate social and cultural value by fostering connection and creative experimentation within urban live music ecosystems, while their spatial value framework (2020) conceptualises venues as creating a distinctive “sense of musical place” grounded in both physical design and social interaction. In North America, the National Independent Venue Association (2025) combines economic multiplier analysis with dedicated artist career-development tracking and venues’ function as music incubators, and London’s Roundhouse (n.d.) demonstrates a participatory, youth-led model of mixed-method evaluation that combines quantitative data with long-term qualitative tracking. Behr, Brennan, and Cloonan’s (2016) pluralist value theory further argues that small venues’ value lies primarily in their contribution to the wider music ecosystem — nurturing emerging artists and sustaining musical diversity — rather than in economic indicators alone.

Framework design. Taken together, these strands converge on the dimensions that matter — cultural, social, economic, and spatial value — but reveal a persistent gap: existing frameworks are largely designed for, and validated within, UK, North American, and Australian contexts, with little adaptation to the institutional, regulatory, and cultural conditions of Asian mid-sized live music venues. No framework yet specifies indicators that are simultaneously theoretically grounded in cultural capital and pluralist value theory, locally adapted to a specific policy context, and operable as a day-to-day management tool. This study responds to that gap.

Conceptual Framework Design

This study adopts a conceptual framework design approach, in which theoretical synthesis and sector analysis are used to construct an assessment instrument rather than to test a hypothesis empirically. The design process follows five sequential steps. Literature synthesis draws together cultural value theory, cultural impact assessment methodology, and live music sector frameworks to identify candidate dimensions and indicators. Dimension extraction consolidates these candidates into a coherent, non-overlapping set of dimensions appropriate to the live music context. Framework construction assigns weights and indicators to each dimension, balancing international comparability with the institutional and policy conditions of Taiwan's live music sector and the differing priorities of venue stakeholders — shareholders, management, staff, artists, and audiences. An illustrative case then demonstrates the framework's applicability: SUB, a mid-sized venue at Taipei Music Center, is selected for its representativeness as a venue developed under government cultural policy, and for the completeness with which its operating model engages all four proposed dimensions. Finally, future validation is identified as a distinct subsequent stage, separate from the conceptual contribution presented here.

This sequencing reflects a deliberate methodological choice. Because the framework's dimensions, indicators, and weights had not yet been specified, expert consensus methods were judged premature at this stage: meaningful expert deliberation over indicator weighting presupposes a structured framework to deliberate over. The present paper therefore constitutes the framework-construction stage of a longer research programme, with empirical and expert validation treated as a necessary next phase rather than part of the current contribution.

The Operational Cultural Impact Assessment Framework

The Operational Cultural Impact Assessment Framework (OCIAF) comprises four dimensions: Cultural Value (35%), Economic Impact (30%), Social Impact (25%), and Spatial and Environmental Sustainability (10%). This weighting prioritises cultural value while treating economic sustainability and social responsibility as necessary complements rather than primary drivers, reflecting the orientation of mid-sized venues as cultural rather than purely commercial spaces. Each dimension below is specified according to four elements: why it matters, the indicators through which it is assessed, how those indicators are measured, and the contribution the dimension is expected to make.

Dimension	Weight	Key indicators
Cultural Value	35%	Genre diversity; support for emerging artists; experimental programming; local-content promotion; international artist participation
Economic Impact	30%	Revenue growth and diversification; job creation; spillover effects on adjacent industries and the creative economy
Social Impact	25%	Audience return rate; cross-group interaction; youth artist and audience development; public-interest activity
Spatial and Environmental Sustainability	10%	Acoustic and visual experience quality; accessibility; energy use and green operations

Table 1. Overview of the Operational Cultural Impact Assessment Framework

Cultural Value (35%). Live music studies and cultural capital theory converge on the claim that venues generate value through artistic innovation, the transmission of local musical culture, and cultural exchange — value that economic indicators cannot capture, and that Bourdieu's (1986) account of cultural capital frames as a distinct form of capital accumulated by artists and audiences rather than as a by-product of commercial transactions. Indicators: genre diversity, support for emerging artists, and the proportion of experimental programming; local-content promotion and music education outreach; the proportion of international artists and evidence of multicultural collaboration. Measurement: programme records and ticketing data quantify genre range and artist origin, while structured audience and artist surveys capture perceived support and cultural exchange; indicators are reported both as raw counts and as proportions of total annual programming to allow comparison across venues of different scale. Contribution: positions cultural value as a measurable, trackable strategic objective rather than a rhetorical claim, operationalising the multidimensional, intangible character of cultural impact identified by Meyrick et al. (2020) into indicators a venue can monitor on an ongoing basis.

Social Impact (25%). Social space theory holds that venues function as sites of social interaction and identity construction whose value is independent of, and as significant as, their performance function, particularly for community connection and youth development. Indicators: audience return rate and cross-group interaction; youth artist and audience development; the frequency of public-interest activity and equity-related practice. Measurement: ticketing and customer-relationship data track repeat attendance over time; audience surveys assess sense of belonging and cross-group interaction; programme records document youth-targeted initiatives and public-interest events against an annual benchmark. Contribution: operationalises a venue's social function as a set of trackable indicators usable in funding applications and impact reporting, addressing a recurrent gap in sector self-assessment where social value is asserted but rarely evidenced.

Economic Impact (30%). While economic indicators alone cannot capture cultural value, stakeholder theory suggests that shareholders' and management's legitimate concern with financial sustainability must be integrated rather than dismissed, and that economic performance remains necessary evidence of a venue's contribution to the wider creative economy. Indicators: revenue growth and diversification; job creation and wage competitiveness; spillover effects on adjacent industries and the local creative-industry ecosystem. Measurement: financial records and standard economic-impact multiplier methods, supplemented by surveys of audience spending in surrounding businesses and simple before-after comparisons where baseline data exist. Contribution: situates financial performance within a broader ecosystem perspective, enabling venues and policymakers to evidence economic sustainability without reducing a venue's overall value to revenue alone.

Spatial and Environmental Sustainability (10%). The physical and environmental quality of a venue shapes both audience experience and its broader social and environmental responsibility, and is the dimension most directly amenable to technical audit. Indicators: acoustic and visual experience quality; accessibility and inclusive design; energy use, waste reduction, and green operations. Measurement: technical audits of sound and lighting systems; accessibility checklists benchmarked against universal-design standards; utility and waste data tracked against sector benchmarks where available. Contribution: ensures the framework captures venues' physical and environmental performance alongside cultural, social, and economic value, supporting alignment with broader sustainability goals without requiring disproportionate weighting relative to the other three dimensions.

Illustrative Application: SUB

The OCIAF’s applicability can be illustrated through SUB, a mid-sized venue established in November 2024 within the southern campus of Taipei Music Center. SUB’s documented operating model — including explicit local-content quotas, high-specification technical infrastructure, and a defined stakeholder structure — offers a concrete substrate against which each dimension’s indicators can be illustrated, without constituting an empirical evaluation of the venue’s actual performance.

Under Cultural Value, SUB’s policy of requiring at least 75% Taiwanese performers across its annual programme, rising to 80% for specific genres, illustrates how the genre-diversity and local-content indicators could be operationalised using programme records alone; its policy of including Taiwanese teams in at least half of international collaborations similarly illustrates the international-exchange indicator. Under Social Impact, SUB’s stated aim of building deep fan loyalty suggests how community-connection indicators such as audience return rate could be tracked through its ticketing system, while its location within a publicly funded cultural infrastructure project illustrates the kind of context in which youth-development indicators would be particularly salient. Under Economic Impact, SUB’s 800-person capacity, positioned between small live houses and large concert arenas, illustrates how revenue-diversification and job-creation indicators could be assessed against a defined market segment, while its location within Nangang District’s multimodal transport hub illustrates how spillover indicators on surrounding businesses could be operationalised. Under Spatial and Environmental Sustainability, SUB’s investment in high- specification sound, lighting, and broadcast infrastructure illustrates the technical baseline against which acoustic and visual experience indicators could be audited.

This illustrative application demonstrates that the OCIAF’s indicators are not abstract constructs but can be mapped directly onto the kind of operational data that mid-sized venues such as SUB already generate or could readily collect, supporting the framework’s claim to practical operability.

Discussion

The OCIAF makes three contributions. Theoretically, it operationalises the convergence identified across cultural value, cultural impact assessment, and live music studies literatures, translating Bourdieu’s (1986) and Meyrick et al.’s (2020) accounts of multidimensional, intangible cultural value into a structured set of measurable indicators, addressing a long-standing tension between theoretical richness and practical applicability in cultural value research.

Methodologically, the framework demonstrates that conceptual framework design, grounded in literature synthesis and illustrated through a single case, can produce an operable assessment tool without requiring prior empirical validation. This sequencing — framework construction prior to expert or empirical validation — offers a transferable model for researchers designing context-specific cultural assessment tools in settings, such as Taiwan and other parts of Asia, where existing frameworks have not been adapted.

For policy, the OCIAF offers cultural authorities and funding agencies a tool capable of evidencing the cultural, social, and economic contribution of mid-sized live music venues in terms more substantive than attendance and revenue alone, supporting more equitable allocation of cultural policy resources.

The framework’s principal limitation is that it has not yet been empirically tested or weighted through expert consensus; its dimensions, indicators, and weightings reflect theoretical synthesis and illustrative application rather than validated measurement. Future research will validate the framework through

Delphi-method consultation with industry experts and policymakers, alongside empirical testing across multiple venues, to refine indicator definitions and weightings beyond the conceptual contribution presented here.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed the Operational Cultural Impact Assessment Framework (OCIAF), a four-dimensional instrument — Cultural Value, Economic Impact, Social Impact, and Spatial and Environmental Sustainability — designed to translate the cultural value of mid-sized live music venues into indicators that are theoretically grounded, locally adapted, and operable as strategic management tools. By treating SUB as an illustrative rather than evaluative case, this paper has demonstrated the framework's capacity to be mapped onto the kind of operational data that mid- sized venues generate, without depending on a single venue's measured performance. The framework's significance lies less in any specific weighting than in establishing that cultural, social, economic, and spatial value can be assessed within a single, comparable structure suited to Asian live music infrastructure. Subsequent validation through expert consultation and empirical testing will determine the framework's refinement, but its conceptual architecture already offers a usable foundation for venues and policymakers seeking evidence-based cultural governance.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a structural gap in cultural policy and arts management practice: the absence of an operational framework capable of evaluating the multidimensional cultural impact of mid-sized live music venues in Taiwan and, more broadly, in Asian cultural policy contexts where existing international tools have not been adapted. Without such a framework, venues and policymakers remain reliant on narrow economic indicators that underrepresent cultural and social contribution.

The framework is designed for direct use by a wide range of stakeholders. Venue managers can use it as a strategic planning and self-assessment tool linking organizational objectives to measurable indicators. Government cultural authorities and funding agencies can use it to evidence-base investment and subsidy decisions across mid-sized venues. Creative hubs and festival organisers operating comparable mixed cultural-commercial spaces can adapt its dimensions to their own contexts, while policy evaluators can use it as a comparative instrument across venues and over time.

The most likely pathway to impact is adoption of the framework's indicators in venue reporting, funding applications, and policy evaluation criteria, supported by dissemination of this conceptual contribution to researchers and practitioners through ENCATC's network. The expected change is a shift in how mid-sized live music venues and their funders evidence value — from economic reporting alone towards multidimensional, comparable evidence of cultural contribution.

Indicators of impact may include the framework's uptake by venues such as SUB and comparable organizations, its incorporation into funding or policy evaluation criteria, and engagement from cultural policymakers and researchers following its presentation. Over time, frameworks of this kind can support the evidence base needed for sustainable cultural governance, contributing to the broader objectives of UNESCO's agenda for culture as a pillar of sustainable development.

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Title: Small Live Music Venues as Labour Infrastructures: Policy Frameworks in Finland

Dr Violeta Simjanovska
Head of Arts Management Department
Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki

Keywords: live music venues; musicians' labour; cultural ecosystems; cultural policy; Helsinki; Finland

Abstract

Small and medium-sized live music venues are an important but insufficiently recognised component of musicians' working conditions and career development. Contemporary music policy increasingly emphasises entrepreneurship, export growth, digital innovation and monetisation (Goldman Sachs Research, 2024; IFPI, 2025), while the local infrastructures through which musicians gain performance experience, develop audiences, build networks and earn income remain only partially recognised. In this paper, I examine small live music venues as labour infrastructures within Finland's live music ecosystem, using Helsinki as an illustrative case in a culturally supportive yet structurally shifting context.

I aim to (1) analyse the interdependence between venue sustainability and musicians' working conditions, (2) consider how digitalisation and market concentration shape access to performance circuits, and (3) identify policy blind spots within current cultural governance frameworks. The analysis is informed by cultural ecology approaches (Behr et al., 2016; van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019, 2020) and scholarship on creative labour, inequality and platform power (Banks, 2017; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018; Nordgård, 2018).

Methodologically, I adopt an exploratory, theoretically informed case-study approach combining document analysis, descriptive secondary quantitative data and practice-informed interpretation. I draw on Finnish and European reports on music-sector development, artists' working conditions, cultural funding and live music venues, together with selected industry and corporate sources. Helsinki is used as an illustrative case within the wider Finnish music ecosystem, and quantitative indicators are used descriptively rather than to establish causal relationships.

The analysis identifies four interconnected functions through which small venues can operate as labour infrastructures: professional entry and situated learning, employment and income-generating opportunities, networking, and artistic experimentation and audience development. These functions are increasingly important in a context of rising costs, uneven public support and growing corporate involvement in promotion, ticketing and venue operations. The available evidence does not establish that these pressures directly cause venue closures or musicians' precarity, but it indicates that venue sustainability and labour conditions are closely connected.

I argue that musicians' working conditions cannot be adequately addressed without recognising the interdependence between artistic labour and venue sustainability. By reframing small live music venues as labour infrastructures rather than ancillary cultural amenities, the paper contributes to debates on fair working conditions, ecosystem governance and sustainable creative careers. It also offers policy implications for municipal cultural policy, urban planning and arts management education.

Introduction

In this article, I examine small live music venues as labour infrastructures within the Finnish music ecosystem. My point of departure is a contradiction in contemporary music policy. The sector is increasingly described through growth, innovation, export, digitalisation and entrepreneurship, while the local institutions through which musicians gain stage experience, develop audiences, build

professional networks and earn income remain financially fragile and only partially recognised by policy.

At its most elementary level, the music business is understood as the institutional and economic space connecting creators and audiences. It connects artists and audiences through a changing constellation of intermediaries, infrastructures, rights systems, technologies and markets. Historically, it was organised around recorded music, music publishing and rights administration, and live music. Digitalisation and globalisation have made these value chains increasingly interdependent. Streaming services, social media, ticketing systems, promoters, venues, rights organisations, educational institutions and public authorities now operate within overlapping networks. The result is better understood as a music ecosystem than as a linear sequence of production and distribution (Becker, 1982; Behr et al., 2016; Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018; Morrow et al., 2022; Nordgård, 2018).

An ecosystem perspective asks not only how much economic value music generates, but where value is created and captured, which actors bear risk, and which infrastructures allow cultural work to continue. Live-music scholarship emphasises that concerts emerge from interdependent relations among artists, promoters, venues, audiences, regulators and technical workers (Behr et al., 2016; van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019). Aggregate growth may therefore coexist with weakened organisations responsible for professional entry, local circulation and talent development. I analyse Finnish sectoral growth, public funding change, musicians’ precarity and the role of small venues as interdependent dimensions of the same policy challenge. I first establish the national economic and labour-policy context and then consider how these broader conditions are reflected in Helsinki’s venue infrastructure.

Research Approach and Materials

In this paper, I use an exploratory, theoretically informed case-study approach, with Helsinki as an illustrative case within the wider Finnish music ecosystem. I combine document analysis, descriptive secondary quantitative data and practice- informed interpretation to examine small live music venues as labour infrastructures.

The materials include Finnish and European reports on the music sector, artists’ working conditions, cultural funding and live music venues, together with relevant academic literature and selected industry and corporate sources. These include Live DMA’s European venue survey and post-pandemic assessment, Live Nation Entertainment’s 2023 annual report, Brown’s (2023) policy analysis of vertically integrated promotion and ticketing, and announcements concerning new or expanded entertainment infrastructure in Helsinki (Business Wire, 2023; Nordic Urban, 2024). I use national Finnish data to situate the Helsinki case within the broader economic and policy context. Jääskeläinen’s (2026) trend analysis of Finnish rhythm-music venues is treated as practice-based sector evidence and used cautiously because it is unpublished.

I review and synthesise the materials through themes including professional entry, employment and remuneration, learning, networks, artistic experimentation, audience development, venue sustainability and policy recognition. Quantitative indicators are used descriptively and not to establish causal relationships. My analysis is also informed by my involvement in the Small Music Venue Initiative in Helsinki, which connects higher education, professional practice and urban cultural development. I use this contextual and practice-based knowledge interpretively rather than as a separate dataset.

The study relies mainly on secondary materials produced for different institutional and research purposes. National-level data do not always allow me to draw conclusions specific to Helsinki, and venue-level evidence concerning artist fees, unpaid performances, ownership changes and closures remains limited. I therefore present the study as an exploratory and conceptually informed policy analysis rather than a comprehensive evaluation of all small live music venues in Helsinki or Finland.

The Finnish Music Ecosystem: Growth and Uneven Development

Music Finland estimated the total value of the Finnish music industry in 2024 at EUR 1.4 billion, an increase of 9% from the previous year. Live music was the largest core segment, valued at EUR 655 million, and grew by 17%. The private live music sector, including clubs, concert venues, festivals and major events, accounted for EUR 415 million, while publicly funded live music organisations accounted for EUR 239 million (Music Finland, 2025a). These figures demonstrate the economic importance of live music. However, aggregate growth does not reveal how income, employment security or bargaining power are distributed.

The Coldplay concerts at Helsinki Olympic Stadium illustrate both the scale and the limits of headline growth. In July 2024, the band performed four sold-out concerts for approximately 170,000 spectators (Yle, 2024). According to data used by Lavender (2026), the Helsinki concerts generated approximately EUR 62.7 million in visitor spending. The same case situates Helsinki within the global scale of Coldplay’s Music of the Spheres tour: 225 shows in 80 cities across 43 countries, 13.1 million tickets sold and a reported gross of USD 1.52 billion. The concerts demonstrate music’s capacity to generate tourism, hospitality income and city visibility. The available evidence does not, however, demonstrate that they strengthened the everyday performance circuit for emerging and mid-career Finnish musicians. These arrangements also raise questions about how revenue, intellectual-property value and organisational power are distributed between global and local actors. Live Nation Entertainment’s 2023 annual report illustrates the scale of corporate integration: the company reported interests, operating roles or exclusive booking rights in 373 venues worldwide, while Ticketmaster distributed more than 620 million tickets during the year (Live Nation Entertainment, 2024). Its consolidated revenue reached USD 22.75 billion, of which concerts generated USD 18.76 billion and ticketing USD 2.96 billion. These figures do not demonstrate a specific causal effect on Finnish small venues, but they illustrate the bargaining asymmetry between globally integrated corporations and locally embedded organisations.

This asymmetry coincides with reductions in public cultural funding. Taike awarded EUR 46.4 million in grants, subsidies and prizes in 2024, EUR 3.4 million less than in 2023, a decrease of almost 7%. Music received EUR 6.2 million of this support (Taike, 2025). Music Finland was also affected by public funding reductions and reported a substantial impact on its core operations, including organisational restructuring (Music Finland, 2025b). This creates a policy tension: public discourse promotes growth and internationalisation while organisations supporting development, professional networks and local cultural work face reduced resources.

Helsinki’s infrastructure trajectory further illustrates this uneven development. In 2023, ASM Global and Suvilahden Areena Oy announced plans to explore the conversion of the historic Hanasaari power plant area into a multipurpose arena and festival complex for culture, live entertainment and potentially large-scale sport (Business Wire, 2023). In 2024, Nordic Urban announced that Live Nation would operate the programme at Allas Live, a 2,500-capacity outdoor venue that had attracted 95,000 visitors across 54 events during that summer (Nordic Urban, 2024). These developments may expand Helsinki’s cultural offer. However, they also demonstrate how new venue capacity can be organised through major international operators. The policy question is whether comparable attention is paid to the smaller stages that support early-career development and year-round local work.

The issue is therefore not whether the Finnish music sector is growing, but how growth is distributed. Stadium-scale events and globally successful artists can flourish while small venues and independent organisers face rising costs, limited capacity and audience price sensitivity. Aggregate growth may coexist with infrastructural fragility among smaller organisations. This distinction reflects wider criticism of cultural-policy approaches that privilege measurable economic outputs while obscuring cultural value and the institutional conditions that produce it (Behr et al., 2016; Belfiore, 2012).

Musicians’ Precarity as a Structural Condition

I approach musicians’ precarity as a structural condition rather than as a consequence of digitalisation alone. Artistic labour has long been shaped by uncertainty, portfolio careers, competition and uneven prospects of recognition (Banks, 2017; Menger, 2014). Musicians have historically relied on freelance engagements, multiple income sources, self- promotion and professional networks. Existing scholarship suggests that contemporary platforms may intensify these pressures by expanding access to production and distribution while increasing dependence on data-driven visibility and continuous promotional labour.

Haynes and Marshall (2018) describe musicians as reluctant entrepreneurs because self-management, promotion and audience development are often undertaken as conditions of survival rather than as freely chosen commercial identities. Research on early-career musicians likewise demonstrates that creative work combines performance with extensive organisational, relational and promotional labour (Everts et al., 2022; Prokop & Reitsamer, 2023). Precarity extends beyond low income to fluctuating earnings, intermittent work, unpaid preparation, multiple-job holding, uncertain progression and gaps in social protection. The affective rewards of cultural work can also normalise overwork and self-exploitation (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011).

European evidence confirms these patterns. Cultural professionals experience high rates of self-employment, short-term and seasonal work, part-time employment and multiple-job holding, despite the sector's growing economic contribution (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2019). The European Union reported a self-employment rate of approximately 32% in cultural employment, compared with 14% in total employment (European Union, 2023). The EENCA study similarly concludes that artists are highly likely to freelance, work part-time, combine jobs or lack permanent contracts, leaving many only partially covered by social protection (European Commission, 2020). Systems organised around stable distinctions between employees and self-employed workers are poorly adapted to careers that move between salaried work, freelancing, entrepreneurship, grants, unemployment and unpaid activity.

Finland reflects these wider conditions. The 2023 Arts and Culture Barometer shows that artistic careers require extensive enabling work, including communication, marketing, administration, funding applications, pricing and the management of pension and social-security matters. This labour consumes substantial time and is frequently uncompensated. More than half of respondents worked as grant recipients or freelance artists during 2022; 45-63% received fees, wages, working grants or copyright income, and more than one quarter received unemployment benefits at some point. Artists estimated that, on average, only about half of their income came from artistic work (Ruusuvirta et al., 2024). This is not a new phenomenon: an earlier Finnish study reported that artistic work accounted for 52% of artists' taxable income in 2010, confirming the long-standing dependence on arts-related and non-arts income (Rensujeff, 2014).

Register data sharpen this picture. The median taxable income of Finnish professional artists in 2019 was EUR 27,983. Among artists registered as self-employed, median entrepreneurial income was EUR 6,990, while 57.2% reported either no entrepreneurial income or less than EUR 10,000 (Hirvi-Ijäs et al., 2023). Existing research indicates that access to performance work is shaped by venues, promoters, networks and opportunities for visibility. Lahtinen et al. (2020) found that foreign-born arts professionals experienced limited long-term employment, weak networks, language barriers and poor recognition of qualifications. Small, locally embedded venues may therefore be especially relevant to professionals without established access to institutional gatekeepers.

Analytical Findings: Small Live Music Venues as Labour Infrastructures

Against this background, I conceptualise small live music venues as labour infrastructures. This term shifts attention from venues as buildings, hospitality businesses or leisure amenities towards the

functions they perform in musicians’ careers and local labour markets. Ecological approaches identify venues as central nodes where the relationships constituting live music become materially active (Behr et al., 2016; van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019). Based on the documentary evidence and theoretical framework, I identify four interconnected labour-infrastructure functions of small venues.

First, small venues can provide accessible entry points into professional practice. They allow musicians to transform rehearsed material into public performance, develop stage competence, test repertoire and learn to collaborate with technicians, promoters and other artists. Digital visibility does not provide the same forms of stage experience, audience interaction and situated learning as repeated live performance under professional conditions.

Second, venues generate employment beyond performers. They are workplaces for sound and lighting technicians, producers, photographers, promoters, bookers, managers, security staff and hospitality workers. Concert promoters and other intermediaries do not merely transact between artists and audiences; they coordinate risk, knowledge, spaces and professional relationships (Brennan & Webster, 2011). Venues thus connect formal education with situated and informal learning, much of which develops through repeated participation in real production environments.

Third, small venues can operate as networking infrastructures. In project-based labour markets, recommendations and informal relationships influence access to future work. Regular proximity to musicians, organisers and intermediaries allows reputations and collaborations to develop. The music-scenes literature demonstrates how local spaces sustain shared practices, identities and connections that can later extend into translocal and virtual networks (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). This function may be especially relevant to young, migrant and otherwise underrepresented professionals who lack established industry contacts.

Fourth, small venues are infrastructures of artistic experimentation and audience formation. Larger venues generally require demonstrated ticket demand. Smaller spaces can programme artists whose audiences and professional identities are still developing, sustain niche genres and minority-language expression, and enable audiences to discover unfamiliar performers. Whiting (2021, 2023) describes small venues as sites where social, cultural and symbolic capital are created before being converted into economic value. Tai (2023) similarly demonstrates that economically marginal venues can contribute disproportionately to innovation. These functions correspond to the creativity, cultural vibrancy, identity and talent-development values identified in urban live-music ecology research (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019).

Live DMA’s comparative evidence makes the labour dimension of venues particularly visible. Its 2023 survey estimated that the 33 Finnish venues represented by LiveFIN involved almost 2,000 workers in 2019; 56% were paid workers and 37% were volunteers, while 53% of the venues also organised festivals (Live DMA, 2023a). The same study reported that pandemic support received by the Finnish venues covered only 13% of the income they lost in 2020. These figures predate the present cost pressures, however, they demonstrate that venues are mixed labour infrastructures sustained through paid work, volunteering, commercial income and public intervention, rather than simple ticket-selling businesses. Live DMA’s separate post-COVID assessment identifies audience recovery, loss of skilled staff and volunteers, local advocacy and long-term sustainability as continuing challenges across European live-music scenes (Live DMA, 2023b).

The relationship between venue precarity and musician precarity can be understood as mutually reinforcing. Small venues often operate with low margins, rising rents and production costs, uncertain attendance and limited possibilities for increasing ticket prices. These pressures may encourage door deals, unpaid performances and the transfer of commercial risk to musicians. Yet musicians depend on

these venues for work, networks and professional development. Venue vulnerability may therefore contribute to labour vulnerability.

This argument should not romanticise small venues. Developmental value must not justify non-payment or routine risk transfer. Venue support that does not address remuneration risks reinforcing precarious labour practices. Conversely, fair-fee requirements may place additional pressure on under-resourced venues unless they are accompanied by adequate structural support. A credible policy framework must address venue sustainability and artists' labour rights together.

The contrast with stadium-scale production is significant. Corporate integration also matters because promotion, ticketing, artist representation and venue operation can reinforce one another. Brown (2023) argues that Live Nation/Ticketmaster's presence across these business lines gives it the ability to use advantages in one market to secure or defend power in another, including through exclusive venue-ticketing arrangements. Live Nation's own reporting confirms the breadth, though not Brown's interpretation, of this integrated structure across concerts, ticketing, sponsorship, artist management and venues (Live Nation Entertainment, 2024). I do not infer from these sources that corporate integration directly causes Finnish venue closures. Rather, they provide evidence of the market environment within which independent venues negotiate artists, audiences, ticketing services and visibility.

Major events capture attention and generate visible economic effects, while small venues often host the less visible work of experimentation, audience development and career formation. The benefits of this work may later be captured by larger promoters, festivals, platforms or rights holders. If venues are evaluated only through ticket revenue, attendance and short-term profitability, these positive externalities remain invisible, reproducing the tendency of cultural policy to privilege readily measurable economic impact over dispersed cultural and social value (Behr et al., 2016; Belfiore, 2012).

The loss of a small venue can therefore remove a stage, a workplace, a learning environment, a network node, an audience-development mechanism and a space for locally specific cultural expression at the same time. Small venues are not peripheral amenities after the 'real' work of creation. They are institutions through which artistic activity becomes professional labour.

Policy Implications

A labour-infrastructure approach requires ecosystem governance. Policy should evaluate small venues not only through turnover and attendance but also through the diversity of artists programmed, payment practices, technical learning, accessibility, local partnerships and contribution to sustainable career pathways. Such criteria reflect the cultural, social, spatial and economic dimensions through which live music contributes to cities (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019, 2023). They also respond to the European policy recognition that professional cultural work must be treated as work, with fair pay, social protection and collective representation rather than exposure being offered as substitutes for remuneration (Voices of Culture, 2021).

Multiannual operating support, affordable premises, targeted programming grants and urban-planning protections can reduce instability. Fair-remuneration requirements should be paired with funding adequate to meet them. The European Union's fair-practice framework emphasises fair pay, fair distribution of resources across production chains and the interdependence of the cultural ecosystem; it also notes that self-employed artists often occupy weak bargaining positions (European Union, 2023). This is directly relevant to small venues: labour standards without structural support may increase financial pressure on vulnerable venues, while venue support without labour conditions may institutionalise low-paid work. Municipal planning must also consider rent, licensing, transport, noise regulation, gentrification and residential development (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2020, 2023).

Redistributive instruments should also be explored. A small levy on arena and stadium tickets, contributions from major promoters, or a dedicated grassroots fund could channel a fraction of large-event growth into the infrastructure that develops future artists, workers and audiences. This is not charity. It recognises that commercially successful circuits benefit from talent, expertise and demand developed elsewhere in the ecosystem.

Finally, Finland needs better longitudinal evidence on venue closures, ownership, artist fees, unpaid work, programming diversity and pathways between small and large circuits. Regular live music censuses and venue barometers would allow policymakers to distinguish genuine ecosystem health from growth concentrated in a small number of major events.

Conclusion

The Finnish music economy demonstrates that aggregate growth and labour sustainability are not synonymous. Live music reached EUR 655 million in 2024 and major concerts generated substantial urban spending, while musicians continued to experience fragmented income and smaller organisations operated under funding and market pressures. The Coldplay case illustrates the capacity of large events to create economic impact, but it does not by itself provide evidence of wider ecosystem health.

This analysis conceptualises small live music venues as labour infrastructures because they can provide work, learning, networks, experimentation and audience development. Their vulnerability may affect musicians’ livelihoods and the capacity of Finnish cities to sustain diverse musical cultures. Artist policy should therefore be considered together with venue policy. A sustainable framework requires venue support, fair labour standards, urban planning, redistribution and improved evidence. The future of Finnish music depends not only on its largest concerts, but also on whether emerging and early-career musicians can find places to perform, develop and earn a living.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a gap between the economic measurement of the music sector and the infrastructures that sustain musicians’ everyday working lives. Aggregate indicators demonstrate the value of live music, but they rarely capture the developmental, labour-market and cultural functions associated with small venues. The concept of small live music venues as labour infrastructures offers policymakers and practitioners a framework for identifying these less visible contributions.

The findings are relevant to municipal cultural departments, national cultural agencies, urban planners, venue operators, musicians’ organisations, promoters, higher education institutions and students of arts management and music business. They can inform funding criteria, cultural infrastructure strategies, land-use planning, fair-remuneration policies and partnerships between universities and local music scenes. In particular, the research can support funding models that recognise venue sustainability and musicians’ labour rights as connected rather than competing concerns.

Potential pathways to impact include dialogue with Helsinki cultural policymakers, dissemination through music-sector networks, integration into arts management education and the development of the Small Music Venue Initiative as a practice-based research platform. The framework could also inform future live music censuses and venue barometers by evaluating emerging-artist programming, payment practices, professional learning, accessibility and audience development.

Expected change would include stronger recognition of small venues in cultural and urban policy, improved evidence for targeted support, and closer coordination between artist policy and venue policy. Indicators might include the number and diversity of artists programmed, the proportion of paid performances, venue survival rates, progression from small to larger performance circuits, partnerships with educational institutions, and the participation of migrant, minority- language and underrepresented

artists. The broader objective is to strengthen the capacity of the Finnish music ecosystem to sustain diverse professional careers rather than merely maximise aggregate turnover.

Author Biography

Dr Violeta Simjanovska is Head of the Arts Management Department at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. Her teaching and research focus on arts management, cultural policy, music business, cultural and creative industries, and sustainable cultural ecosystems. She has worked as an international consultant, researcher and evaluator for cultural organisations and public bodies, including UNESCO and the British Council. Her recent work examines the relationship between cultural policy, professional working conditions, local cultural infrastructures and regional development, with particular attention to the Western Balkans and Finland.

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The conceptual framework, research approach, selection of materials, interpretation and final content decisions were developed, reviewed and approved by the author.

The manifold relations between culture and democracy

Dr. Johan Kolsteeg
Groningen University

Johan Kolsteeg works at Groningen University. Before joining academia he worked in the international field of contemporary music. His current interests are organisation and communication theory in the `arts, cultural leadership and cultural democracy, more specifically the question how to sustain effects of cultural participatory projects in local democratic structures.

This contribution continues earlier work on cultural-democratic thinking observed in the Netherlands. I will present instances which can be characterised as the emancipation of the importance of the cultural experience in relation to the “system” of production and support of culture (Kolsteeg, 2022). They are topics of ongoing research in the Netherlands on generational and cultural-genealogical divides in thinking about a future cultural ecosystem.

The programme named *Gezond met Cultuur* (Health and Culture) consists of cultural participatory projects in five districts of the city of Leeuwarden, in the province of Friesland, the Netherlands. The ongoing interest of the researcher in the connection between the offer of cultural institutions, the position of cultural policy makers and the cultural preferences of GenZ manifested in a conference on the topic *GenZ and the Arts*[1], in Groningen, May 2026, in cooperation with the Institute for Art, Culture and Related Policy Boekman.

The Leeuwarden programme *Gezond met Cultuur* (2025-2026) is approached through participatory action research (Mihaljinac & Đorđević, 2025) and the Most Significant Change approach (Davies & Dart, 2005). The researcher was involved in an early stage of the programme. In the Leeuwarden case this meant the project owners were informed about available academic insights. Also the researcher was involved in co-designing the contours of the programme and monitoring the various projects in the five districts by embedded (student) researchers. The researcher will subsequently be involved in developing a follow up project (2027-2028) that will specifically look at securing effects of the participatory projects in local democratic structures.

During the programme artists were stimulated to adopt a future-oriented perspective on their work, guided by the question ‘what change will remain after my project is finished?’. By asking this question the researcher aimed to create awareness of the preparatory character of cultural participatory projects, based on the assumption that changes or effects will become visible after the project and will require continued support to sustain them. Since only towards the end of the programme it becomes clear where to look for the effects to be secured while simultaneously the rationale for the financing of the follow up project needs to be formulated, opportunities for sustaining effects were theorised earlier in the process on the basis of developing insights.

Another methodical issue concerns the point that local policy makers generally require quantitative information to underpin decisions to instigate or continue cultural participatory projects, while the monitoring and evaluating participant experiences are best done through qualitative methods. In order to produce knowledge that can inform decision makers a method has been designed in which qualitative

knowledge is iteratively escalated into constructs that can be longitudinally monitored in the city’s annual surveys.

[1] https://artsinsociety.net/genz-conference-program/

A brief history of cultural democracy starts with its introduction in the early twentieth century in the United States (Kolsteeg 2025) as a suggestion for a multicultural reaction to influx of culturally diverse European immigrants after the First World War (Drachsler, 1920). In Europe, in the 1970s as well as more recently, the term was used to acknowledge the diversity of cultural identities and democratic processes in defining culture, while in the 1980s in the United Kingdom the term was suggested in relation to addressing cultural and societal differences. The term is not systematically employed in Dutch cultural policy discourse but the relationship between culture and democracy as such is regularly thematised. I label cultural democracy in the Netherlands and Europe as referring to dynamics that are the consequence of pressure exerted on the foundations of Western culture systems, originating out of democratisation and emancipation of cultural agency over the past half century, with ramifications for the understanding of democracy at large. Earlier (Kolsteeg et al., 2025) I described the Niteshop in Rotterdam, a group of young professionals connected by The Culture, and its participation in the local cultural-democratic discourse by operationalising insights from the immigrant life world and talents of marginalised groups to enrich the understanding of inclusion, thus elaborating on Drachsler’s original proposition. Cultural democracy addresses the relationship between the system of production and policy on the one hand and the cultural life world on the other, and manifests in cultural policy, curatorial practices, cultural institutionalisms, education, participation, generational cultural conflicts (Kolsteeg 2026) and also in populist contributions to cultural policy (Kolsteeg 2024).

Over the past decades, the Dutch government has taken initiatives to improve the livability in some problematic areas in Dutch cities. The most recent national programme is the Nationaal Programma Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid (“National Liveability and Security Programme”) which runs from 2023 tot 2043 and which also involves five of the districts in the city of Leeuwarden. While culture or cultural activities are absent in the starting discussions around the national programme, the city of Leeuwarden did include culture as a means for social improvement. A two year project (2025-2026) was instigated in which artists in a diversity of disciplines were invited to work with participants in five districts. The research does not look at the effects of cultural participation on health and wellbeing per se. They are sufficiently defined in a rapidly growing body of research (see Fancourt & Finn, 2019 for a meta analysis). More relevant to the research is the question how effects can be secured in local democratic structures, based on the assumption that cultural participation is a starting point of developing cultural democracy.

Often in cultural participatory projects the securing of effects is not sufficiently taken into account and monitoring can be ineffective (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2020). Preparations of participatory projects are usually top down processes, as the contours of the projects are determined by an interplay of policy ambitions, financial restraints and a variety of practical issues. Potential participants may not have the possibility to contribute to the projectdesign and may experience being overcharged. Finally, financiers do not always support qualitative monitoring and evalation research as part of a project or the sharing of knowledge between projects.

The Leeuwarden programme started with a substantial qualitative inventory of social and personal problematics in all involved districts before deciding what type of artistic intervention was required. Residents were actively involved in the process of choosing artists. Once started, makers were given a lengthy preparatory period to build a safe space so that trust could be built among potential participants.

On the basis of ongoing observations and experiences in the programme, a preliminary hypothesis is that securing of effects is to be developed in four different ways, together shaping the contours of a local cultural democracy.

The first is a change in the participants’ level of resilience vis à vis their social context, including local governance. Projects led to participants find their voice through creative activity and discuss aspects of their life world that they felt they could not easily share otherwise. This created an openness which,

when effectively supported, improves participants’ capacity to make their voice heard, a fundamentally democratic quality.

Second, and related to the first point, is the integral vision of the local policy. The programme has made it clear that cultural policy cannot be seen separate from other policy fields. Several projects ewre developed around topics that were relevant to several other policy fields, and therefore departments in the city’s administration. This illustrates that culture has a role in the recently widely discussed need for local governments to have an “integral approach” to complex societal problems, thus countering policy compartimentalisation and improving accessibility for citizens.

Third is the role of existing cultural institutions. The two largest cultural institutions in the city, the theater / concert hall and the city museum, acknowledge responsibility for a future role in providing platforms for presentations and support, technical and otherwise. This movement towards becoming a place[…] of openness and relationships’ (Portuguesa, 2021, p. 7) is a fundamental step towards realising spaces where people can actively create culture in a democtatised cultural infrastructure.

A fourth aspect of sustaining was added, which is the de-stigmatising effect of the project. It was observed that designating five districts for the cultural programme inadvertently labelled these districts as being in need of help. The subsequent project mentioned above (2027-2028) a.o. looks at enforcing opportunities to counter that imago.

A view[2] of GenZ’s position vis à vis the cultural system (Kolsteeg 2023) starts with understanding the contradictory demands on identity that this generation needs to deal with (Gao, 2023; Lundskow, 2020; Stahl & Literat, 2023). While ‘born digital’ and spending a lot of time online, they are critically aware of the addictive effect of social media, the overwehlming abundance of possibilities and choices offered online and the superficiality of online contact. In a sensivite age of identity formation GenZers need to manage the tension between individuality and collectivity. When it comes to generational conflicts, research in the Netherlands indicates growing social and cultural divides between generations (SCP 2024). GenZ see themselves to be ‘underestimated, unseen and antagonised by older generations, particularly GenX and Boomers’ and insufficiently supported in their mental health needs (Stahl & Literat, 2023, p. 942). Having experienced the Covid 19 crisis, GenZ responded by increasing cultural activity in the context of home. Mutual unfamiliarity between the cultures of GenZ, older generations and cultural institutions (Ivanov et al., 2021) may lead to further cultural separation.

An element that complicates the relation between GenZ and the cultural system in the Netherlands is that older generations are still dominantly present in the cultural sector. The general discomfort of GenZ with older generations likely does not work beneficial to the connection GenZ can feel with the sector. Also, I observe that cultural institutions experience that it is difficult to reach GenZ with their regular communication style. The way cultural institutions increasingly use social media in their communication may however be insufficiently sensitive to the generation’s complex relation with the medium.

[2] This paragraph is based on Kolsteeg (2026).

The relation of GenZ with culture is fundamentally democratic, in the sense that there is a pressure exerted on traditional Western culture systems, originating out of a growing democratisation and emancipation of cultural agency with ramifications for the understanding of democracy at large.

GenZs thinking along cultural-democratic lines is visible in three aspects. First there is a focus on the meaning of active cultural experiences, more than on form and passive cultural consumption. Second there is a willingness to democratically share curatorial decision making processes and realise cultural inclusion, and third there is less need, and respect, for (canonical) hierarchy in culture.

Scenario research in the Netherlands (Handleiding Publiek van de Toekomst, 2023) indicates that an important question for GenZ is who gets to decide what the value of culture is and this may have consequences for the future organisation of culture. The scenarios are projected to the year 2040. GenZ will then have reached the age roughly between 25 and 45, and they will likely occupy key positions in the cultural field. A GenZ theatre director with a good sense of the needs of the generation will create an open space for creating and sharing culture(s) (Juncker & Balling, 2016), much like the movement of cultural institutions in Leeuwarden sketched above. In 2040 the professional roles in cultural institutions will have different contents. The need for inclusivity in programming will change curating; learning through experience will influence the education department, and equal communication will influence the marketing department (Kolsteeg, 2023).

Additional to the studies discussed above, a locus in the Netherlands for discussion about the relation between culture and democracy is populist thinking (Kolsteeg, 2024). This is not often touched upon in traditional culture policy discourses, and in general culture is not much included in discourses on the quality of democracy in the Netherlands. The Dutch Council for Culture however issued a warning in 2011 that care for democracy was the ultimate argument in favor of government support for the arts: diversity and freedom of speach are needed ‘to avert a continuous threat of a violent clash between cultures’ (RvC 2011, 11).

We now, in 2026, do see violent cultural clashes, for example bringing forth cultural arguments to oppose immigrant influx, ironically again the topic that triggered Drachsler to start the discussion on cultural democracy a century ago. And we observe a persistent discomfort in cultural political discourse between institutional, canonical ideas about culture, associated with the cultural centres in the west of the Netherlands, and those found in the perifery. An example is the plea for more attention for “folk culture” and respect for regional differences in cultural policies, which was picked up in parliament. A motion (Tweede Kamer 36410 VIII, Nr. 82., 2024) stating that the Code for Diversity and Inclusion no longer should be enforced in relation to the allocation of state subsidies for culture was one of the first motions adopted after the installation of a parliament with a centre-populist majority, illustrating how important this point was considered to be. Several parties represented in government at the time had made the point in their election programmes that cultural devaluation is experienced as a democratic deficit, and the devolution of cultural policy was seen as an instrument of rehabilitation. This indicates that characteristics of cultural discourse in illiberal states (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021) may also be implicit in the cultural policy / democratic discourse in states that qualify themselves as liberal. A solution which is suggested by the Council for Culture is devolution of cultural policy, which can also be seen as a useful instrument to bring a cultural democratic discourse further, as long as it acknowledges the cultural foundation of a lived democracy as a society of cultural identities. It is up to a government to facilitate this conversation and prevent further culture clashes.

Recently, the Institute for Art, Culture and Related Policy Boekman in the Netherlands instigated a discussion programme to investige the possibilities of a more democratic cultural policy, in which democracy as a lived experience and democracy as a system can find eachother in a third space for debate.

This exposes an opposition between two classic views on democracy underlying the phenomenons discussed above: the idea of democracy as a perfectly functioning institution (the “white collar democracy”), and the idea of democracy as a lived, and foremost cultural, reality, which can only be understood if the role of passion and affects in daily reality are acknowledged. This opposition relates to elements discussed above.

The Leeuwarden case illustrates that culture and democracy are experiential and that there is a need for better understanding the contours of cultural cum political agency. The GenZ case illustrates that culture is inherentaly democratic and traditional power relations and hierarchies are no longer relevant. The populist position to the debate illustrates that if well managed could theoretically benefit from a peaceful discussion about cultural differences but instead leads to polarisation in which a critique of the cultural establishment has developed into a revenge reducing the possibility for a peaceful solution. The democratic debate about culture is anything but culture-democratic.

In the material I presented, common elements are at work. The cases address the difference between culture as an experienced life world and cultural as a system. They fundamentally question patterns in cultural systems that are formal, and enrich them with experienced practices of cultural expression and inclusivity.

There is an additional argument to investigate routes along which system world and embodied worlds can be brought together. Earlier I addressed the ‘centre-perifery’ tension between what is considered to be canonical culture in the urban centres of the Netherlands, and the reality of regional cultural experiences (Kolsteeg 2024).

The impact of contribution lies in providing an understanding of several ways in which culture and democracy are related. It is relevant for cultural institutions and policy makers to be aware of the growing emancipation of the importance of the cultural experience as opposed to the present system of production and support of culture.

Three strongly differing examples illustrate this. In cultural participatory projects more attention is given to better supporting and long term securing the impact of cultural participatory projects on local democratic structures. First is the change in the participants’ level of resilience vis à vis their social context, including local governance. Second, as a response to this, is the vision that integrates cultural activities to tackle issues in other policy fields. Third is the role of existing cultural institutions developing into democratic platforms for presentations. A fourth aspect of sustaining is the de-stigmatising and democratic integration of districts which are designated for the cultural programme.

A second example of the bottom up democratising of the cultural system is that various signals predict that a future organisation of culture by GenZ based on new ideas about meaning and function of culture.

A third example is the populist voice in the political arena which causes cultural polarisation.

These dynamics may lead to fundamental changes in how culture is organised and supported in the near future, yet the present cultural system is insufficiently aware or prepared. Communities, policy makers and institutions can benefit from these insights. Possible pathways through which the research may be used are active and agenda setting engagement in political deliberations, observation to increase awareness of patterns that point towards more intercultural and intergenerational cultural understanding.

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Ecosystem thinking to understand CCI's work with impact and its evaluation

Prof. Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt | University of Malmö
Dr. Pille Runnel | Estonian National Museum

Abstract

Cultural and creative organisations (CCOs) operate under intensifying pressure to demonstrate impact, yet dominant frameworks situate impact work within the single organisation. This paper proposes an alternative: understanding impact work through an ecosystem lens. Drawing on Adner's (2017) ecosystem-as-structure framework and on two rounds of qualitative interviews (n=27, 2021 and 2025) with CCO practitioners and impact specialists across nine European countries, we identify five actor categories distributed across the impact ecosystem. We argue that impact governance is not contained within any single organisation but is shaped by relationships, incentives, and information flows that extend well beyond it. We conclude by proposing a multi-actor impact model that accounts for this distributed character.

Introduction

Cultural and creative organisations (CCO) occupy an ambiguous position in contemporary governance structures. They are mission-driven rather than profit-oriented, yet they operate in funding landscapes shaped by New Public Management logics that not only demand measurable performance (Hood, 1991), but also expects CCOs to demonstrate societal impact in terms that were designed for a different kind of organisations.

Existing impact frameworks offer useful scaffolding, but they share a common limitation as they place the focal organisation at the centre of the impact process. Many of the most common discussions see impact as something that an organisation produces and reports. This framing systematically underestimates the degree to which impact work is shaped and produced collectively, through relationships between actors who are not all under the same organisational roof.

This paper proposes that the concept of the ecosystem provides a more adequate analytical frame. Specifically, we draw on Adner's (2017) definition: an ecosystem is the alignment structure of a multilateral set of partners who need to interact for a focal value proposition to materialise. Applied to impact work, this means asking not only what a CCO does, but who else participates in making impact legible, valued, and consequential and how the structure of their relationships shapes what counts as impact at all.

We first situate the paper theoretically, reviewing some of the dominant impact frameworks addressing particularly cultural and creative organisations. We then present findings from two rounds of qualitative interviews, using Adner's structural elements to identify activities, actors, positions, and links. We close by proposing a distributed impact model and drawing implications for cultural policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Impact logic and its limits

The logic model, as standardised across public and third-sector practice, maps a linear chain from inputs through activities, outputs, and outcomes to impact (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). It offers a practical planning and accountability scaffold: organisations can set measurable indicators at the output and outcome stages, even where direct measurement of long-term impact remains unfeasible. The theory of change extends this architecture by making explicit the causal assumptions linking activities to desired social change (Weiss, 1995). Rather than treating the pathway from activity to impact as self-evident, the theory of change asks practitioners to articulate why they believe their activities will produce the intended outcomes. Together, these two frameworks have shaped a generation of impact planning and evaluation practice across the public, third, and cultural sectors.

A critical conceptual distinction sits at the heart of both frameworks. Maas (2009) clarifies that while outputs and outcomes are associated with the provider of a product, activity, or service, impacts properly understood are associated with the user and with other affected stakeholders (Kolodinsky et al., 2006). This distinction complicates any assumption that the producing organisation is the natural unit of analysis for impact work. Impact, by definition, occurs in the lives and contexts of beneficiaries and measuring it therefore requires attending to those actors and their experiences rather than solely to organisational activity.

Both frameworks have been widely adapted for cultural contexts. The Europeana Impact Playbook (Europeana Foundation, 2021) structures impact work across four phases: design, measurement, narration, and evaluation. The Impact Playbook emphasises mixed-methods approaches to assessing cultural, educational, and social change in heritage institutions. The Museums of Impact (MOI) framework, developed under the Creative Europe programme, provides a holistic tool developed specifically for museums, structured around enabler and impact modules, to support institutions in developmental self-evaluation – assessing their societal relevance, strategic development and public value creation (Network of European Museum Organisations, 2020). The Social Return on Investment framework (Social Value International, 2012), as applied in practice through tools such as the SROI Value Map, seeks to translate multi-dimensional social value into monetised terms, linking inputs, outputs, and outcomes to a financial proxy for impact. The Balanced Value Impact Model (Tanner, 2012) similarly adapts the logic model tradition for digital cultural heritage, incorporating five iterative stages and multiple value lenses (utility, existence, community, education, and inheritance) to capture the breadth of value that single-indicator approaches miss.

Across this landscape of adapted frameworks, two tensions recur. First, the cultural and creative sector generates value that is multi-dimensional, including social, aesthetic, environmental and relational dimensions, yet the logic model tradition tends toward outputs that are countable within a project cycle (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). In organisational and funder practice, frameworks based on logic model tradition often become performance-measurement instruments because they translate complex social change into organisational activities, outputs, outcomes, indicators, and reporting cycles. The switch to multidimensional assessment is widely acknowledged as necessary but remains unevenly implemented. Second, and more fundamentally, all of these frameworks retain the focal organisation as the origin and primary reporting agent of impact. The question of who else participates in defining what impact is, and in governing how it is assessed and communicated, remains outside their analytical scope. It is precisely this question that the ecosystem-as-structure perspective, developed in the following section, is designed to address.

Datafication and metrification pressures intensify this problem. Governance-through-objectives frameworks encourage CCOs to reduce multi-dimensional cultural value, which includes social,

environmental, aesthetic, and relational aspects, to indicators that can be tracked over a project cycle (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). In practice, interviewees in our study frequently noted that impact reporting had been reduced to outcome counts that told funders what they needed to hear rather than capturing meaningful change.

Ecosystem-as-structure

Adner (2017) distinguishes between ecosystem-as-affiliation (a loosely bounded community of actors) and ecosystem-as-structure (a specific alignment of actors required for a value proposition to materialise). The structural definition is more analytically precise. It directs attention to four elements: the activities that must be performed; the actors who perform them; the positions they occupy relative to one another; and the links that connect them. Links can mean flows of information, resources, and legitimacy. Crucially, Adner's framework accommodates actors who are not visible to the focal organisation. Structural positions and links exist whether or not the CCO is party to them. For instance, government agencies, funders, and local politicians can revise what counts as cultural impact, thereby repositioning the CCO's work without any interaction with the CCO itself. Applying the ecosystem-as-structure framework to CCO impact work broadens our perspective on what constitutes the impact space for organisations. We ask: whose activities are necessary for impact to be defined, measured, communicated, and governed? What links between them shape what impact means at any given moment?

Methods

The empirical material draws on two rounds of qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted as part of two EU Creative Europe projects. The first round (n=12) took place in 2021 and included museums, festivals, cultural governance officials, and consultants from Austria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Latvia, and the United Kingdom. The second round (n=15) was conducted in spring 2025 with a deliberately broadened sample, including impact consultants from outside the cultural sector, game developers, academic researchers, and publishing professionals, as well as CCO practitioners from the same European countries.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically, guided by sensitising concepts drawn from Adner's framework: activities, actors, positions, and links. The analysis examined how interviewees understood impact, whom they identified as relevant parties to impact work, what activities they associated with it, and how they described the relationships among actors. Given the exploratory character of the second-round analysis, findings are presented illustratively rather than exhaustively.

Findings: The Impact Ecosystem

Impact as a distributed activity. A recurring theme across interviews was definitional instability. As one Dutch impact consultant observed, impact had become a term that everyone used, and no one could define with precision. Definitions ranged from visitor satisfaction numbers to moments of cognitive change in individual audience members. This instability reflects a structural feature: different actors in the ecosystem operate with different definitions, and those definitions carry different implications for what data matters, what stories are worth telling, and who bears responsibility for outcomes.

The interviews consistently identified impact work as extending well beyond the data collection and reporting activities typically associated with evaluation. Storytelling — the crafting and communication of impact narratives to specific audiences — was identified as a critical phase, distinct from measurement and carrying its own set of actor relationships. An interviewee from Spain described the tension between authentic impact communication and empty marketing as a constant navigational challenge. Impact narrative, in this account, is a product co-constructed with the expectations of funders, governing bodies, and the general public.

Actors in the impact ecosystem. Across both rounds of interviews, five actor categories recurred as structurally significant.

First, the core CCO and its staff constitute the site at which cultural activities are produced and from which beneficiary engagement is initiated. Second, direct and indirect beneficiaries that are the proximate pathway to impact are labelled differently, but include audiences, participants, and communities. Their engagement is not merely an outcome but an input to impact definition: several interviewees noted that co-designing impact indicators with beneficiaries produced more meaningful data. Third, intermediary actors include consultants, evaluators, co-creation facilitators and impact designers. This category forms an emergent sector in its own right. Multiple interviewees noted that this sector had grown substantially, to the point where CCOs increasingly externalise impact work to specialists, with the risk of organisational alienation from their own data and processes. Fourth, governing and funding agencies set the incentive structures and narrative frames within which impact is defined for accountability purposes. Fifth, meta-level institutions — national bodies, supranational agencies such as UNESCO, sector associations — aggregate impact narratives for purposes of sectoral positioning and policy legitimation.

Positions and links. The structural significance of Adner's framework lies in its attention to positions and links independently of the focal actor's perspective. Several interviewees described situations in which their understanding of what counted as impact had been materially altered by changes in funder guidelines. Yet these changes had not involved them at all, even though they could radically alter how CCOs prioritised their work and what was considered relevant. The link between a funding agency and a meta-level institution had shifted the narrative frame for the entire sector.

Impact governance refers to the processes through which impact is defined, valued, and enforced, and it is distributed across the ecosystem rather than flowing from a single centre. A CCO may produce activities and collect data, but the meaning assigned to that data, and the implications it carries for funding, reputation, and mission legitimacy, depend on links and positions it does not control.

Towards a Distributed Impact Model

The model proposed is a distributed ecosystem approach to impact work. It is systems-informed in the sense that it recognises impact as relational, non-linear, and shaped by actors and conditions beyond the focal organisation. This approach resonates with Jung and Vakharia’s (2019) argument that arts and cultural organisations are best understood as open systems, whose structures and performance are shaped by exchanges with their wider environments. However, the contribution of the present model is analytical rather than interventionist. The aim is not to offer a systems change framework or to prescribe leverage points for transforming the cultural and creative ecosystem as a whole. Instead, the model re-specifies the unit of analysis for impact assessment: from the individual CCO to the wider ecosystem of actors, positions, activities, and links through which impact is defined, measured, communicated, and legitimised.

The ecosystem-as-structure perspective suggests that an adequate impact model for CCOs must do three things that existing frameworks do not. First, it must account for multiple actor categories, not just the focal organisation and its beneficiaries. Intermediary actors, governing agencies, and meta-level institutions all participate in producing impact, and any model that omits them will misrepresent both the processes and the stakes involved.

Second, impact work has a set of phases: planning, data gathering, communication, and organisational learning, each of which involves different actor configurations. The empirical material shows that these phases do not proceed in a linear sequence. Organisations enter the cycle at different points depending on project stage, funding cycle, and capacity. An adequate model must accommodate this non-linearity.

Third, the impact model must represent the links between external actors as structurally relevant even when the focal CCO is not party to them. This includes raising awareness of links between beneficiaries and governing agencies, between funding bodies and meta-level institutions. These links shape the conditions under which impact work is performed, the definitions enforced, and the narratives that confer legitimacy. Treating them as background noise, as most existing frameworks implicitly do, can limit the support that impact models can offer.

The model we propose is a work in progress, co-created with CCO practitioners as part of the Data Conversations project. This paper outlines the conceptual architecture: a multi-actor, phase-sensitive, structurally attentive framework that situates the CCO within, rather than at the centre of, its impact ecosystem.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that impact work in cultural and creative organisations cannot be adequately theorised or practised within frameworks that treat the single organisation as the unit of analysis. The empirical material points to a richer, more distributed reality: impact is defined, measured, communicated, and governed through a set of actor relationships that extend well beyond any single CCO.

Adner's (2017) ecosystem-as-structure framework provides the conceptual tools to map this reality. Its emphasis on activities, actors, positions, and links directs analytical attention to the structural conditions of impact work, including conditions the focal organisation does not control. The practical implication is that CCOs, funders, and policy actors who wish to improve impact work should attend not only to what individual organisations measure and report but to the ecosystem conditions under which impact is defined and valued. Changes in funder guidelines, shifts in sector-level narratives, and the growth of an intermediary consultancy sector all constitute structural forces that shape impact work as directly as any organisational capacity-building programme.

Impact & Engagement

Cultural and creative organisations across Europe face a persistent gap between the multi-dimensional value they generate and the impact frameworks available to them. Existing tools, built on single-organisation logic models, systematically underrepresent the distributed character of impact work and the role of actors — funders, intermediaries, meta-level institutions — who shape impact governance from outside the focal organisation. This gap has practical consequences: CCOs are assessed against frameworks that do not match how impact actually works, and practitioners lack conceptual resources to articulate or address the structural conditions of their work.

This research addresses that gap by proposing an ecosystem-level analysis grounded in empirical data from 27 interviews across nine European countries. The findings are relevant to multiple communities. CCO practitioners and managers may use the actor typology and the distributed model to better understand the external forces shaping their impact work and to identify where in the ecosystem advocacy or collaboration could be most productive. Funders and governing bodies may recognise that the incentive structures they set are themselves ecosystem actors, with constitutive effects on what gets measured and communicated. Impact consultants and evaluators may reflect on the structural position they occupy as intermediaries and on the risks of organisational alienation that externalised impact work can produce. Policy researchers and cultural policy actors will find the ecosystem framing useful for moving sectoral impact discussions beyond output counting.

The research feeds directly into the development of the Data Conversation digital tool within the EU-funded Data Conversations project (https://dataconversation.eu). The conceptual framework presented here informs the design of a digital impact tool that will be co-created with CCOs, piloted across multiple organisations, and made available as a practical resource. Evidence of uptake and change in impact practice across participating organisations will provide initial indicators of the research's practical reach. Publication in the ENCATC Congress Book of Proceedings ensures visibility within the European cultural management research and policy community.

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Dr. Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt is Professor of Media and Communication at Malmö University, Sweden. Her research focuses on digital participation, audience studies, and the social and cultural impact of creative and cultural organisations. She has led and participated in several EU-funded projects examining how cultural institutions understand and communicate their value and impact, including the Data Conversations for Impact project. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt has published widely on participatory culture, museum communication, and digital engagement. Email: pille.pruulmann.vengerfeldt@mau.se

Dr. Pille Runnel is Research Director at the Estonian National Museum, Estonia. Her work centres on museum research, cultural participation, and the evaluation of cultural impact in heritage and memory institutions. She has contributed to multiple European research and development projects addressing how museums and cultural organisations generate and demonstrate social value. Runnel brings extensive experience in qualitative research methodologies and in translating impact research into practice within the museum sector. Email: pille.runnel@erm.ee

Governing for Social Sustainability: Impact Measurement and Identification Processes in a Museum-Based Cultural Ecosystem

Dr. Julia Römhild | Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf
Ms. Selina Kahle | Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

Dr Julia Römhild is Senior Lecturer and Programme Coordinator in the MA programme Arts Education and Cultural Management at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany. Her teaching and research focus on cultural management, sustainability, audience research and impact measurement in the cultural sector. Her work explores how cultural organisations can integrate evidence-based management approaches, social sustainability objectives and impact-oriented governance into their strategic development. She has been involved in several research and transfer projects addressing audience engagement, cultural participation and the measurement of social outcomes in museums and other cultural institutions.

Selina Kahle is Research Associate and Lecturer in the MA programme Arts Education and Cultural Management at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany. Her research focuses on sustainability and impact measurement in the cultural sector, with particular attention to the transferability of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to cultural organisations. Her work examines how museums and other cultural institutions can operationalise social sustainability and assess their societal contributions through impact-oriented evaluation approaches. She is involved in research and teaching projects at the intersection of cultural management, audience research and sustainable cultural development.

Abstract

This paper examines how impact measurement can become embedded in the governance practices of a museum-based cultural ecosystem through collaborative teaching and organisational learning. Using an outreach programme at a municipal art museum as a case study, it analyses the development and transfer of an impact-measurement framework from a university-led teaching project into organisational practice. Two survey waves (n = 71; n = 66) indicate largely stable outcome patterns regarding orientation and wellbeing, community building, institutional identification and behavioural intentions. The findings suggest that impact measurement can support organisational learning, capacity building and evidence-informed governance for social sustainability.

Introduction

Growing social inequality, migration and declining trust in democratic institutions are transforming the conditions under which cultural organisations operate and increasing expectations regarding their societal role. Within this context, cultural institutions are expected not only to provide aesthetic and educational experiences but also to contribute to accessibility, participation and social inclusion (Brown, 2019; Römhild & Heinzelmann, 2023; Soares & Bonilla-Merchav, 2026). As a result, questions of social sustainability have become a central concern in cultural policy and cultural management, particularly within the framework of the United Nations Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

At the organisational level, these developments raise the question of how cultural institutions can make their social contributions visible and integrate them into strategic decision-making processes. Impact measurement offers one possible approach, drawing on approaches such as the Theory of Change and the Impact Value Chain (Clark & Rosenzweig, 2004; Funnell & Rogers, 2011). However, while impact measurement has become more prominent within the cultural sector, less attention has been paid to how such approaches can become embedded in the everyday governance practices of cultural organisations.

This paper addresses this gap through the case of Dein Kunstpalast, a museum-based outreach programme developed by Kunstpalast Düsseldorf (Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, 2021). The programme combines low-threshold access to the museum with district-based engagement and opportunities for social interaction, making it a suitable context for examining social sustainability outcomes such as community building, institutional identification and wellbeing. The study draws on a research-based teaching project at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf and examines how an impact-measurement framework was transferred into museum evaluation practice and contributed to organisational learning and governance for social sustainability.

Against this background, the paper asks:

How can impact measurement become embedded in the governance practices of a museum-based cultural ecosystem through collaborative teaching and organisational learning?

Theoretical Background

From the perspective of social sustainability, cultural participation can be understood as a social context of experience and impact. Cultural participation is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond the reception of cultural content and includes experiences of social encounter, exchange and connection (Mandel, 2014, 2019, p. 71; Wallen & Docherty-Hughes, 2022, p. 99). In this paper, it is operationalised through participation in a museum outreach format, without reducing the theoretical breadth of the concept, but on the assumption that participation can serve as a necessary precondition for more extensive experiences such as belonging, identification and social connectedness.

Empirical studies indicate that cultural participation is linked to well-being, and Blessi et al. (2016) argue that cultural provision has a positive effect when it is embedded in contexts that support cultural activity and participation. This contextual dimension is key, as museum outreach formats do not produce social effects in a uniform way; rather, their impact depends on situational conditions such as atmosphere, orientation, accessibility and opportunities for interaction. Accordingly, well-being is conceptualised here as an individual, short-term affective response to a cultural experience, distinct from longer-term forms of loyalty or identification (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Jeavons et al., 2025; Morse, 2019; Šveb Dragija & Jelinčić, 2022; Wallen & Docherty-Hughes, 2022). In this sense, well-being can be understood as a subjective outcome of the encounter between the individual and the cultural offering.

Community building, by contrast, refers to the social dimension of this encounter. It captures perceived opportunities for exchange, encounter and situational connectedness, but always in a context-dependent manner (Blessi et al., 2014; Brown, 2019; Crooke, 2008; Galloway, 2006; Golding & Modest, 2013; McGhie et al., 2018; Pop & Borza, 2016; Wallen & Docherty-Hughes, 2022). It should therefore not be understood as belonging to a static group but as a process through which shared experiences and perceptions of belonging are formed (Juárez, 2011). Social identity theory offers a coherent explanation for this process, as individuals define themselves through their being part of social groups (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Applied to cultural institutions, both institutional identification and local identification can be understood as components of self-concept (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, pp. 78–80; Römhild, 2017, p. 67). Identification is therefore a key construct for explaining how cultural participation may translate into behavioural intentions and longer-term institutional attachment.

Conceptually, impact measurement is based on the logic of the Theory of Change (Daldrup et al., 2022, p. 8; Funnell & Rogers, 2011) and links goals, causal assumptions and effects to organisational learning and strategic planning (Clark & Rosenzweig, 2004, p. 4; International Controller Association, 2020, p. 3; Birnkraut, 2024, p. 61). Following the logic of the Impact Value Chain, resources (inputs) enable activities, which generate outputs, contribute to changes among target groups (outcomes) and ultimately produce broader societal impact (Birnkraut, 2024, p. 57f.). Impact measurement thus provides a framework for systematically assessing and reflecting the social dimensions of cultural participation.

Case Study Design

The empirical setting is Dein Kunstpalast, an outreach initiative developed by Kunstpalast Düsseldorf in cooperation with the Fritz Henkel Foundation. Kunstpalast is a large municipal art museum located in Düsseldorf, the capital of the German federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia and one of Germany’s largest and most densely populated cities and is characterised by considerable social, cultural and demographic diversity.

Outreach in this case is understood as the active engagement of diverse demographic groups who, for various reasons, do not independently access cultural offerings (Scharf et al., 2018). Since 2021, Dein Kunstpalast has sought to broaden cultural participation by inviting residents from different districts to museum evenings that are free-of-charge and combine exhibition visits with guided tours, workshops, music and community-oriented activities. To reduce barriers of participation, visitors get free public transport tickets. The programme combines low-threshold access with district-based engagement and opportunities for social interaction.

The case study forms part of the teaching and knowledge-transfer project Impact Measurement in Arts Education, conducted between 2023 and 2025 within the MA programme Arts Education and Cultural Management at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. Over three years, cohorts of approximately twenty students collaborated with museum staff to develop an impact-measurement framework for the outreach programme. Drawing on the Theory of Change, the project employed tools such as the WTT Impact Canvas (Daldrup et al., 2022) and the Logical Framework Matrix (LogFrame) (Birnkraut, 2024) to identify impact pathways, formulate assumptions and derive key performance indicators (KPIs). The resulting framework was subsequently adopted and further developed by the museum.

Empirical Design and Research Transfer

Building on the impact-measurement framework developed through the teaching project, the empirical investigation was conducted in two consecutive stages of the study. The first study was carried out within the collaborative partnership between Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf and Kunstpalast Düsseldorf. Following several editions of the outreach programme, a sequential mixed-methods design was implemented between April and May 2025. Qualitative methods—including mystery visiting, participant observation and expert interviews—were combined with a quantitative online survey. The qualitative phase helped identify key experiential dimensions, such as atmosphere, orientation and social interaction, which informed both the survey instrument and the project's Theory of Change.

The survey operationalised five central constructs using five-point Likert scales. Orientation and wellbeing captured visitors’ perceptions of information, spatial orientation and comfort during the event, reflecting established approaches to cultural participation and subjective wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Jeavons et al., 2025). Community building was conceptualised as a situational outcome of cultural participation, capturing perceived opportunities for social interaction, local connectedness and social contribution within the event context, drawing on community-building approaches and Social Identity Theory (Juárez, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Institutional identification measured emotional attachment, value congruence, institutional pride and cultural belonging, informed by research on organisational and consumer–institution identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Behavioural intentions included revisit and recommendation intentions as established outcome variables in consumer behaviour research (Oliver, 1999). In addition, district identification was included as a contextual control variable capturing place attachment and local belonging within respondents’ residential district (Dwyer et al., 2019; Scannell & Gifford, 2010).

Beyond generating empirical findings, the teaching project aimed to develop impact-measurement capacities that could be adopted by the museum after the project's completion. Based on the methodological experiences of the first study, the survey instrument was revised and streamlined in

collaboration with museum staff to increase practical applicability and reduce respondent burden.

This led to a second study, conducted independently by the museum following two additional editions of the same outreach programme between January and February 2026. While the conceptual framework and core constructs remained unchanged, the adapted instrument was integrated into the institution's regular evaluation practice. The second study therefore represents a concrete step in transferring impact measurement from a university-led research project into an organisational setting.

Table 1. Overview

Study	Context	Data Collection	N	Responsibility
Study 1	Teaching Project	Apr–May 2025	71	University
Study 2	Organisational Follow-Up	Jan–Feb 2026	66	Museum

The findings are presented in two steps (Table 1). First, key results from the original teaching-project survey (Study 1) are reported. Second, findings from the institution-led follow-up survey (Study 2) are examined and compared to assess the stability of the observed patterns and to reflect on the opportunities and challenges of embedding impact measurement within organisational learning and governance processes.

Findings: Study 1

The first survey yielded 71 fully analysable responses. Data collection took place between 23 April and 25 May 2025 and referred to all editions of the outreach programme held between November 2021 and May 2025. The survey link was distributed by the museum via email to a pool of 819 registered participants. However, this figure does not correspond to the actual number of unique attendees, as registrations exceeded attendance figures and some individuals participated in multiple editions of the programme. The sample was predominantly female (76%) and concentrated in middle and older adulthood, with more than half of respondents aged between 45 and 64. Participants were drawn from a wide range of Düsseldorf districts, reflecting the outreach programme's city-wide approach. At the same time, the sample showed a high affinity for cultural participation: 86% visited museums at least three times per year, and only 13 respondents were first-time visitors to Kunstpalast. Most participants attended the event together with partners, friends or family members (87%), underlining the strongly social character of the format.

Attendance motivations further support this interpretation. The most frequently selected motives were sharing an experience with family or friends (59%), discovering new aspects of art and culture (49%), and enjoying a special cultural event (45%). Social and experiential motivations therefore appeared to be at least as important as educational motives.

Across all constructs, respondents reported generally positive evaluations. Particularly high mean values were observed for orientation and wellbeing ($M = 4.43$; $SD = 0.56$) and behavioural intentions ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 0.56$), indicating a highly positive event experience and strong willingness to revisit and recommend the museum. District identification was also comparatively high ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 0.72$), suggesting strong local attachment among participants. Institutional identification achieved positive values as well ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 0.72$). By contrast, community building received more moderate ratings ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 0.92$), indicating greater variation in how visitors experienced opportunities for social connection and local engagement.

Qualitative comments help contextualise these findings. Respondents described the programme as welcoming, accessible and conducive to social exchange, while also suggesting that opportunities for meeting new people could be further strengthened. Overall, the comments reinforce the positive assessments of orientation, wellbeing and institutional attachment, while indicating that community-building effects were experienced more heterogeneously.

Findings: Study 2

Following the completion of the teaching project, the survey instrument was adopted by Kunstpalast Düsseldorf and implemented as part of the museum's own evaluation practice. To increase feasibility and reduce respondent burden, the questionnaire was streamlined while retaining the original conceptual framework. Several items were removed from the constructs of district identification, community building and institutional identification, resulting in two-item measures for all constructs except orientation and wellbeing. The revised instrument was subsequently applied to two further editions of the outreach programme.

The second study generated 66 analysable responses. The first survey wave followed an event held in September 2025 and yielded 56 responses from approximately 320 invited participants. A second survey was conducted after a December 2025 event and generated a further 10 responses. Due to changes in the registration procedure, participants now had to actively consent to being contacted for research purposes, substantially reducing the number of available email addresses. Similar to Study 1, data collection took place several months after the respective events.

The profile of respondents remained remarkably stable across both studies. The sample was again predominantly female (74%), and 82% of respondents were older than 45 years. Museum affinity remained high, with 58% visiting museums more than three times per year. As in the first study, only a small proportion of respondents were first-time visitors to Kunstpalast (n = 6), despite observations by museum staff suggesting a larger share of newcomers among event attendees.

Attendance motivations showed a similarly consistent pattern (Table 2). Sharing experiences with family and friends remained the most frequently reported motive (64%), followed by the desire to attend a special cultural event (53%). Motivations related to meeting new people from one's district became more prominent than in Study 1 (34%), further underlining the social dimension of the programme.

Table 2. Comparison of Attendance Motivations

Attendance Motivation	**Study 1 (2025) % of Respondents**	**Study 2 (2026) % of Respondents**
Sharing an experience with family or friends	59.4	64.1
Discovering new aspects of art and culture	49.3	34.4
Attending a special cultural event	44.9	53.1
Relaxation and enjoyment	42.0	42.2
Professional or personal interest in arts and culture	18.8	10.9
Meeting new people from the district	17.4	34.4
Other	5.8	4.7

Note: Multiple responses were possible; percentages therefore exceed 100%. Values represent the percentage of respondents selecting each motivation.

The comparison of construct means indicates a high degree of stability across both measurement waves (Table 3). In the second study, respondents again reported high levels of orientation and wellbeing (M = 4.15, SD = 0.72), institutional identification (M = 3.76, SD = 0.63) and behavioural intentions (M = 4.18, SD = 0.54). Community building achieved a mean score of M = 3.50 (SD = 0.93) and was the only construct to show a slight increase compared with the first measurement wave. Overall, the observed differences between the two studies were small, suggesting that the central outcome patterns remained largely stable following the transfer of the instrument into organisational practice.

Table 3. Comparison of Construct Means

	2025			2026		
Construct	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**N**	**M**	**SD**
Orientation & Wellbeing	70	4.43	0.56	64	4.15	0.72
Community Building	70	3.36	0.92	64	3.50	0.93
Institutional Identification	71	3.98	0.72	63	3.76	0.63
Behavioural Intentions	71	4.46	0.56	63	4.18	0.54

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Differences in N result from item non-response and listwise aggregation of construct scores.

Open-ended responses largely confirmed the findings of the first study. Respondents particularly appreciated the guided tours, cultural programme elements, music and informal atmosphere. Several comments highlighted opportunities for social exchange and encounters with neighbours and acquaintances from their district. Participants also expressed a desire for more structured interaction formats, such as facilitated discussion rounds or “speed-dating” activities, in order to foster new social connections. Interestingly, several respondents also called for a stronger and more visible connection between the programme and the participating district itself.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the central outcome patterns identified in the teaching project remained largely stable after the transfer of the instrument into organisational practice, while also revealing methodological and organisational challenges associated with its long-term implementation.

Discussion

The findings from both measurement waves suggest that the outreach programme generated a solid pattern of outcomes across different implementation contexts. Orientation and wellbeing, institutional identification and behavioural intentions remained consistently positive, while community-building effects were perceived more heterogeneously. Attendance motivations also showed a high degree of continuity, with shared experiences with family and friends remaining the dominant reason for participation. At the same time, motivations related to meeting people from one's district became more prominent in the second study, reinforcing the programme's role as a space for local encounter and social exchange.

Beyond these substantive findings, the transfer of the survey instrument from a university-led teaching project into the museum's own evaluation practice demonstrates how impact measurement can become embedded in organisational governance. Rather than functioning solely as a retrospective evaluation tool, the framework became part of an ongoing process of programme development, organisational learning and evidence-informed decision-making.

The transfer process also revealed important methodological and organisational challenges. Response rates remained low despite high attendance figures and declined further when active consent procedures were introduced during registration. First-time visitors appeared to be under-represented in both studies, despite observations suggesting a larger share of newcomers among participants. In addition, the generally high construct scores indicate potential ceiling effects, limiting the ability to differentiate between highly satisfied participants and to detect further positive changes over time. The time lag between participation and survey completion may also have affected response behaviour and recall. These limitations suggest that future applications could benefit from shorter survey intervals, more direct recruitment strategies during events and further refinement of measurement instruments. More broadly, the findings underline that sustainable implementation of impact measurement requires not only appropriate tools but also analytical competencies and continued collaboration between cultural practitioners and researchers.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how impact measurement can become embedded in the governance practices of a museum-based cultural ecosystem through a process of collaborative teaching and organisational learning. The teaching project provided a space for developing and testing an outcome-oriented measurement framework, while the museum subsequently adapted and implemented the instrument within its own evaluation practice. The largely stable findings across both measurement waves suggest that research-based teaching can contribute not only to methodological innovation but also to the institutionalisation of impact measurement as a governance, learning and capacity-building instrument for social sustainability.

Impact & Engagement

Cultural organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate their contribution to social sustainability, yet many lack practical approaches for measuring and integrating social outcomes into organisational decision-making. This study addresses this gap by examining how impact measurement can be developed, implemented and embedded within the governance practices of a museum-based cultural ecosystem through collaborative teaching and organisational learning.

The research is relevant for cultural organisations, museum professionals, educators, cultural managers, funders and policymakers seeking to strengthen evidence-informed approaches to cultural participation and social sustainability. It provides a transferable example of how outcome-oriented measurement frameworks can be co-created between universities and cultural institutions and subsequently integrated into organisational practice. In particular, the study demonstrates how research-based teaching can serve as a mechanism for methodological innovation and knowledge transfer.

The primary pathway to impact lies in the practical adoption of impact-measurement approaches within cultural organisations. In the present case, the framework developed through a university–museum partnership was subsequently adapted and implemented by the museum itself as part of its regular evaluation practice. This process enabled the organisation not only to generate evidence on programme outcomes, but also to develop internal capacities for reflecting on social impact and programme development.

Observed impacts include the institutional uptake of the measurement framework, the continued collection of outcome data beyond the teaching project and the integration of impact-related questions into organisational learning processes. Potential indicators of longer-term impact include the repeated use of the framework, the incorporation of findings into programme design, the development of staff competencies in impact measurement and the adaptation of similar approaches by other cultural organisations. More broadly, the study illustrates how impact measurement can move beyond evaluation and become a governance, learning and capacity-building instrument for social sustainability in the cultural sector.

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Mediating Materiality: Young Tech Artists and Creative Ecosystems in Contemporary Taiwan

Prof. Hsin-Yi Wu
National Taipei University of Technology

Hsin-Yi Wu is Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural Vocation Development at National Taipei University of Technology, Taiwan. Specialising in film and moving-image studies, new media, visual culture, and curatorial practice, her research examines art–technology intersections through sensory images and material culture. She leads cross-disciplinary projects integrating new media technologies with Taiwanese vernacular culture and intercultural frameworks. Her current research focuses on young tech art collectives as emerging cultural mediators within Taiwan’s creative ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Taiwan occupies a distinctive dual position in the global economy: a world-leading node in semiconductor manufacturing and precision engineering, and an increasingly dynamic site of cultural production in which manufacturing and artistic practice have developed in close, generative proximity. This structural condition has given rise to a cohort of young tech art collectives whose practice sits at the intersection of kinetic fabrication, interactive installation, and live performances. These artists translate technology elements into profound public and civic meanings. Among these, Hey Mechanic! (黑碼藝識) — established in 2020 — signals a distinctive shift in Taiwan’ s creative ecosystem. Rather than treating technology as decorative or peripheral, Hey Mechanic! positions kinetic installation as a form of infrastructural mediation that bridges physical materiality and live somatic experiences.

This paper argues that Hey Mechanic! and its contemporaries — Luxury Logico (豪華朗機工), WHYIXD (何理互動), and ZAP (雜波) — function as “material mediators” within Taiwan’s creative ecosystem: cultural actors whose distinctive competence lies in translating between the logics of manufacturing and art, between industrial materials and public meaning, and between specialist technical knowledge and broad civic experiences.

2. Theoretical Framework: Material Mediation

2.1 Art, Technology, and Embodied Materials

The foundational insight of this study derives from a historical analysis of the interplay between art, technology and science (Smith, 1970). Within this framework, aesthetic curiosity — rather than utilitarian need — is understood as the primary historical driver of material innovation, and the craftsperson’s intimate engagement with matter is understood to precede and enable technological discovery. This reversal of the conventional hierarchy between fine art and applied technology is illuminating in the Taiwanese context, where manufacturing expertise and artistic experimentation have developed in structural proximity.

Richard Sennett (2008) extends this into contemporary practice. In his landmark publication, The Craftsman, Sennett contends that skilled material engagement involves embodied cognition — “thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making” (Sennett, 2008, p. 7) — in which dialogue with physical matter generates knowledge that cannot be reduced to abstract instruction. Applied to Hey Mechanic!, whose practice bridges kinetic mechanical materiality and somatic performance, Sennett’s framework illuminates how the tactile and technical dimensions of making are inseparable from the conceptual and cultural dimensions of the artwork. Stephen Wilson (2001) provides the further bridge: tech artists occupy a distinctive epistemic position as active producers of knowledge at disciplinary boundaries, reframing Taiwanese collectives not as consumers of global technological trends but as generators of locally grounded, materially specific creative knowledge.

2.2 Cultural Ecosystems and Intermediation

The ecology of culture framework (Holden, 2015) establishes that healthy cultural systems depend on the circulation of intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional value across multiple actors and sectors, and that this circulation requires the active participation of intermediaries operating across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries. Systematic review of cultural and creative ecologies and ecosystem (CCEE) theories and methods (De Bernardi et al., 2022) extends this ecological thinking in three directions relevant to this paper: it calls for greater interdisciplinary collaboration in CCEE research; it identifies the contestation of value — between cultural and economic logics — as a generative tension within the field rather than a problem to be resolved; and it explicitly proposes that future ecological analyses must engage more fully with the “material” dimensions (ibid, p. 348) of cultural and creative practice.

This paper responds directly to that third proposal, arguing that Taiwan’s young tech art collectives offer a privileged site for examining how material practice — grounded in fabrication expertise, kinetic installation, and manufacturing collaboration — constitutes a distinctive form of cultural mediation within a living creative ecosystem. Furthermore, the concept of the “project ecology” (Grabher, 2002) describes how temporary, project-based collaborations in creative industries generate both innovation and precarity. The Taiwanese collectives examined here exemplify this logic: they coalesce around specific commissions and mobilise different combinations of manufacturing partners, institutional hosts, and policy frameworks for each iteration.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist multiple case study design examining four young tech art collectives in contemporary Taiwan. Primary interview data for this study was collected with Dudu Zhan, co-founder of Hey Mechanic!. Analysis of the remaining three collectives draws on published interviews, artist statements, and institutional documentation. This paper represents an initial stage of a larger ongoing research project, with expanded fieldwork and comparative analysis planned for subsequent phases.

Further, secondary data includes published artist documentation, institutional case studies, and policy documents. Tertiary data consists of fieldwork observations of selected art pieces. Triangulation across these data types enables the analysis to identify both convergences and productive tensions between artists’ self-accounts, institutional representations, and the material evidence of the works themselves. As an Associate Professor at National Taipei University of Technology, the researcher’s institutional position provides privileged access to the art–technology interface central to this study, while also necessitating reflexive awareness of potential interpretive predispositions towards valorising technological integration.

4. Findings

4.1 Self-Directed Formation and Choreographic Co-Creation

A recurring motif in the interview data is the insufficiency of formal education as the primary site of technical formation. For Dudu Zhan of Hey Mechanic!, the acquisition of fabrication and programming skills was fundamentally self-directed — driven by the imperatives of specific creative problems rather than institutional curricula. This trajectory resonates with Sennett’s (2008) account of the craftsperson’s learning: knowledge accumulated through repeated material engagement, mistake, and improvised solution. The sensibility embedded in Hey Mechanic!’s practices reflect a broader ethos in which self-directed is understood as both creative method and critical autonomy from disciplinary gatekeeping.

What distinguishes Hey Mechanic!’ s developmental trajectory is the early integration of collaborative practice with performing arts practitioners. From the outset, Zhan worked alongside young choreographer Wei-Po Hsu (許瑋博) from the College of Performing Arts at National Taiwan University of

Arts, through the annual “Cross-field Artistic Imagery” (跨界藝象) performance series since 2020. Works such as The

Move (落子, 2025) and The Landlord’ s Game (地產大亨, 2025) demonstrate this dialogic method: each project begins with a rudimentary concept from the choreographer and is co-constructed through iterative exchange between new media tech and choreography. Zhan notes that if a choreographer arrives with a completely pre-fabricated structure, the role of tech art risks being relegated to mere accompaniment, foreclosing richer cross-disciplinary possibilities.

Central to Hey Mechanic!’s theatrical methodology is real-time projection — visual output adjusted instantaneously on stage in direct response to performers’ physical positions. When asked why she chooses this technically demanding approach over stable pre-recorded images, Zhan explained that theatrical performers undergo years of rigorous physical conditioning to stand on stage for a few minutes; for accompanying technology to fail to respond to the performers’ immediate corporeality represents a profound missed opportunity. Audiences enter the theatre not to consume a polished broadcast but to co-experience the unfolding moment in a shared physical environment. New media projection, within this framework, functions as an extension that amplifies live bodily perception rather than as passive background.

This convergence of technological fabrication and choreographic practice finds international parallels. A pioneering Australian performance, Chunky Move’s Mortal Engine (2008), brought together choreography, real-time body-responsive interaction and laser technology, receiving acclaim via the Helpmann Award for Best Visual or Physical Theatre Production. Similarly, British choreographer Wayne McGregor has pursued sustained collaborations with cognitive scientists and, subsequently, with Google Arts & Culture’s Lab on movement-generating algorithms. What distinguishes Hey Mechanic!’s formation, however, is the institutional route through which the convergence occurs. Where McGregor’s collaborations were brokered through research fellowships and established arts funding bodies, and Chunky Move’s emerged within an institutionally supported contemporary dance sector, Zhan’s convergence with choreographic practice arose through informal peer networks within art university contexts, without equivalent institutional scaffolding at the formative stage. This distinction matters for the ecosystem analysis: it suggests that in Taiwan, the creative formation of material mediators occurs despite rather than through formal institutional support. This represents a significant policy gap: if the most generative site of cross-disciplinary formation is informal and peer-driven, then support frameworks that concentrate resources on commissioning and exhibition may be arriving too late to shape the ecosystem’s generative core. A reorientation towards developmental-stage investment — in the informal spaces where material knowledge is first encountered, tested, and shared — is arguably the most consequential intervention available to Taiwan’s cultural institutions.

4.2 Animating Public Space

The public-facing practice of these collectives is marked by a consistent ambition to transform how shared spaces are inhabited. Luxury Logico’s immersive installation The Poetry of a Swing (2024) at the Taipei Dome situates tech art within one of Taiwan’s most culturally charged public venues and its most embedded national ritual: baseball. Founded in 2010 by four artists born in the 1980s, Luxury Logico describes its practice as “hybrid” cross-disciplinary creation across sculpture, kinetic installation, music, spatial design, and performance (Luxury Logico, n.d.). Baseball in Taiwan carries a weight of collective memory and national identity that extends well beyond sport; by embedding tech art within this context, Luxury Logico translates the language of contemporary installation art into a register accessible to publics who may never enter a gallery.

Similarly, WHYIXD also successfully animates public rituals through a unique interplay of geography and technology. Their installation Mount Ali (2018), developed for the 2018 Taiwan Lantern Festival,

translated the mountain ridgelines of Alishan into experiential technological form for urban festival audiences. Through this work, the Group recontextualized a collective regional landscape into a dynamic sensory

experience, bridging environmental memory and contemporary media. This exploration of physical geography and perception was also evident in #define Moon_(2018), a work constructed around the mechanics of visual illusion. Consisting of nine rotating kinetic light installations, the piece continuously alters its configuration to present the shifting phases and postures of the moon, thereby generating a completely new sensory experience for the viewers. What unites these works is a consistent orientation towards the body of the audience as the site of cultural transmission — constituting what the ecology of culture framework terms the “engaging” (Holden, 2015, p. 31), in which cultural value is generated through participation rather than consumption. These collectives are not merely producers of cultural goods but designers of conditions for cultural encounter. Meanwhile, ZAP — a collective formed by former members of Luxury Logico and WHYIXD — extends this mediating function through more experimental media practice explicitly oriented towards new and younger audiences. ZAP, presenting an even younger trajectory than Luxury Logico and WHYIXD, performs a crucial generational dimension of cultural ecosystem renewal—an evolutionary dynamic that remains an ongoing object of inquiry for this research.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that Taiwan’s young tech art collectives cannot be adequately understood through existing creative ecosystem frameworks alone. The concept of material mediation proposes a specific sub-type of cultural intermediary practice — constituted at the intersection of fabrication expertise and cultural translation — that is particularly legible in contexts where manufacturing capacity and creative ambition exist in structural proximity. Taiwan’s position as a global manufacturing hub is not incidental to its tech art ecosystem; it is generative of it. The availability of manufacturing partners, polariser producers, and electronics companies as potential collaborators creates conditions for creative practice that is simply not available in the same way in purely service-based economies. This is what Smith (1970) anticipated: material capability and aesthetic curiosity co-evolve, each enabling the other in ways that neither discipline can account for alone.

A second contribution concerns what might be called the mismatch within the ecosystem’s institutional support structure. The most generative moments of creative formation — self-directed material learning, informal peer collaboration with choreographers and craft design students, chance encounters at industry exhibitions — occur largely outside institutional channels. By contrast, the institutional scaffolding provided by Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture and its related agencies arrives most powerfully at the point of public presentation and commissioning. The ecology of culture framework (Holden, 2015) suggests that a support structure concentrating resources at the dissemination stage while leaving the formative stage unscaffolded creates a structural vulnerability within the ecosystem. For the ENCATC community’s concern with alter-organising frameworks, this suggests that resilient creative ecosystems require institutional investment not only at the commissioning stage but at the formative stage — in the informal spaces where material knowledge is first encountered, tested, and shared.

A third dimension concerns the internal organisational logic of the collectives. In each case, the collective form is not simply an organisational convenience but an epistemological choice — a decision that knowledge-production in this domain requires multiple material intelligences working in sustained dialogue. The creative act is irreducibly relational — Hey Mechanic!’s real-time projection decisions, for instance, exist only in live dialogue with the choreographer’s body and cannot be attributed to any individual. Organisational funding, meanwhile, assumes stable administrative structures — legal registration, board governance, annual budgets — precisely the institutional apparatus that project-ecology collectives deliberately forgo in favour of flexibility. The tech art collective, somehow, falls

between existing policy categories, qualifying poorly for individual artist support and incompletely for organisational funding. The Taiwanese tech art collective represents precisely such a hybrid, requiring policy frameworks that can hold both its artistic and experimental dimensions simultaneously.

6. Conclusion

This paper has proposed material mediation as a theoretical concept to analyse the role of young tech art collectives in Taiwan’s creative ecosystem. Drawing on interviews with Hey Mechanic! co-founder Dudu Zhan, alongside documentation of Luxury Logico, WHYIXD, and ZAP, it has argued that these collectives constitute a distinctive status within the ecosystem — one whose mediating competence is constituted through hands-on engagement with fabrication technologies, manufacturing processes, and physical installation spaces, rather than through discursive or curatorial practice alone.

Three contributions emerge. First, material mediation extends existing cultural intermediary theory by foregrounding the physical and technical dimensions of brokering cultural value. Second, the Taiwan case reveals a mismatch in creative ecosystem support, with institutional scaffolding concentrated at the commissioning stage while the formative stage remains structurally unscaffolded and precarious. Third, the collective organisational form — informal, project-based, materially grounded — requires policy frameworks capable of holding both artistic and experimental dimensions simultaneously.

Future research should pursue comparative analysis across creative ecosystems in Asia and Europe to test the generalisability of material mediation as a theoretical concept, and longitudinal study of these collectives’ trajectories as Taiwan’s institutional landscape continues to evolve.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a significant gap in creative ecosystem scholarship: the theoretical and policy invisibility of practitioners whose mediating competence is constituted through material and fabrication practice rather than discursive or curatorial labour. Existing cultural intermediary frameworks do not adequately account for actors who translate between industrial manufacturing and artistic production — a gap with concrete policy consequences, as support mechanisms calibrated for conventional arts organisations systematically under-serve the hybrid, project-based collectives examined here.

The primary beneficiaries are cultural managers, curators, policy-makers, and interdisciplinary educators working at the intersection of creative practice and manufacturing or technology sectors. The identification — whereby institutional support arrives at the commissioning stage while the formative stage remains structurally unsupported — offers a reorientation of funding logic for cultural policy bodies. Findings are being developed into two impact pathways: co-created design toolkits addressing the societal integration of tech artists, developed with practitioners and policy briefs for cultural-technology funding frameworks addressed to the Ministry of Culture and comparable bodies. The expected change is a shift in funding criteria towards recognition of informal, peer-driven creative formation as a legitimate and fundable stage of ecosystem development, tracked through adoption of recommendations in future cultural funding calls.

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Rethinking Cultural and Creative Industries through the Lens of Collective Action: A Management Perspective

Mr. Nicolas Ricci
Mines Paris - PSL Research University

Dr. Sophie Hooge
Mines Paris - PSL Research University

1. Introduction

“Are craft activities truly part of the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)?”

What initially appeared to be a straightforward question quickly became a source of disagreement during a workshop organised within ICCARE, a French national research programme funded under the France 2030 initiative and dedicated to advancing knowledge on the Cultural and Creative Industries. Beyond the diversity of individual opinions, the discussion exposed three more fundamental issues. First, who has the authority to define the boundaries of the CCIs? Second, what theoretical assumptions and empirical observations underpin these definitions? Third, and perhaps most importantly, what is gained —and what is lost—when highly diverse activities are grouped under a single category?

These questions are particularly salient when examining the organisation of creative labour. While the label “CCIs” has become widely institutionalised in public policy, academic research and economic statistics, its analytical value remains contested among specialists of several sectors commonly included within its boundaries. For some, the category illuminates common challenges related to creativity, innovation and symbolic value creation. For others, it obscures profound differences in production processes, occupational structures and forms of collective action. As a result, the concept often appears less as an explanatory framework than as a pragmatic compromise bringing together heterogeneous activities under a common policy label.

The aim of this article is both to revisit the origins of the Creative Industries framework and to offer a perspective that helps explain why such a strong sense of heterogeneity persists at the level of work and organisation. To do so, we first return to the intellectual and political foundations of the concept. On the one hand, the notion of Creative Industries emerged in public policy—most notably in the United Kingdom—as a rationale for identifying and supporting activities considered capable of generating economic growth through creativity, talent and intellectual property. On the other hand, economists contributed to its consolidation by highlighting the distinctive characteristics of cultural and creative goods compared with conventional market products, including uncertainty of demand, symbolic value and the centrality of singularity.

Taken together, these two foundations help explain both the success and the limitations of the concept. The rationale underpinning the Creative Industries was primarily developed around economic specificities and policy objectives rather than around a theory of work, organisational forms or sectoral structures. As a result, the concept provides relatively little guidance for understanding how creative

activities are organised, coordinated and sustained in practice. This helps explain why the label is sometimes perceived as disconnected from the heterogeneous realities it seeks to encompass.

Yet the concept has become increasingly influential within management and organisation studies. This raises an important question: to what extent do organisations grouped under the CCI label actually share common collective action problems? Conversely, which differences remain sufficiently significant to challenge the idea of a coherent organisational field? In other words, does studying the organisation of a publishing house, a craft workshop or an audiovisual production company amount to examining variations of the same phenomenon, or fundamentally different forms of organising creative work?

Drawing on insights developed throughout a broader doctoral research programme dedicated to the organisation of creative activities, this article argues that both perspectives contain part of the answer. We show that the management literature reveals a number of recurring organisational challenges across CCIs, while simultaneously highlighting enduring differences in production systems, professional structures and coordination mechanisms. Rather than asking whether a given activity belongs to the Creative Industries, we therefore suggest examining the conditions under which the category constitutes a meaningful analytical framework for understanding collective action in creative contexts.

2. The origins of the Cultural and Creative Industries Concept

The concept of Creative Industries is generally traced back to the publication of the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Creative Industries Mapping Document in 1998 (DCMS, 1998), itself building on earlier initiatives such as Australia's Creative Nation report (1994). Emerging in a context marked by the rise of the knowledge economy and the increasing importance of intangible assets, the concept was initially conceived as a policy category rather than an academic one. Its objective was to identify sectors capable of generating growth, innovation and employment through the production, circulation and exploitation of symbolic and intellectual resources. In this perspective, creative activities were no longer valued solely for their cultural contribution but also for their capacity to stimulate wider economic development and knowledge creation across society (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007; D. Throsby, 2008). This institutional category rapidly diffused beyond the United Kingdom and progressively expanded its scope from traditional arts and culture to design, digital media, software, video games and other knowledge-intensive activities, reflecting the broader transition from industrial to knowledge-based economies (Abbasi et al., 2017; Lee, 2016).

This evolution was nevertheless accompanied by substantial criticism. Several authors have argued that the Creative Industries framework progressively displaced earlier concerns for cultural development toward economic objectives, transforming culture into a resource for competitiveness, territorial attractiveness and innovation policies (Garnham, 2005; Hesmondhalgh & Pratt, 2005; O’Connor, 2000). Under the influence of New Public Management and neoliberal reforms, public support increasingly became conditional upon demonstrable economic impacts, leading to concerns regarding the commodification of culture and the marginalisation of artistic, non-commercial and heritage-oriented activities (Banks & O’Connor, 2009; Oakley, 2009). As a consequence, the concept simultaneously became one of the most influential and one of the most contested categories in contemporary cultural policy.

In parallel with these policy developments, Richard Caves' seminal book Creative Industries: Contracts Between Art and Commerce (2000) provided one of the first comprehensive economic frameworks for analysing creative activities. Building on earlier contributions in arts and cultural economics (e.g. Baumol & Bowen, 1965; Throsby & Withers, 1979), Caves identified a set of recurring characteristics distinguishing creative production from conventional markets, including demand uncertainty, the importance of intrinsic artistic motivations, the diversity of specialised skills involved in production, and the difficulties associated with evaluating quality before consumption. His contribution was particularly influential

because it shifted attention from sectoral classifications toward the underlying economic mechanisms governing creative production.

Yet, as later scholars have noted, the framework proposed by Caves should be understood as a stylised ideal type rather than a description of all activities grouped under the Creative Industries label. Empirically, these sectors encompass highly heterogeneous organisational forms, ranging from art-oriented activities driven primarily by symbolic value and cultural missions to market-oriented activities structured around scalability, innovation and economic performance (Cunningham & Flew, 2019; Garnham, 2005). While some fields closely correspond to Caves' original model, others have progressively developed managerial practices, production systems and coordination mechanisms specifically designed to reduce uncertainty and align creative outputs with more conventional market logics. Consequently, Creative Industries may be better understood as a continuum between artistic and economic rationalities than as a coherent category sharing a common set of organisational properties.

3. From Creative Industries to Organising Creative Work

While the Creative Industries concept has traditionally been defined through policy objectives and economic characteristics, a growing body of research has progressively shifted attention towards the organisational conditions under which creative production takes place. This evolution reflects a broader recognition that understanding creative activities requires moving beyond questions of sectoral boundaries and economic outputs to examine how creative work is collectively organised and sustained.

This shift is particularly important because cultural and creative production has long been associated with images of individual genius and artistic inspiration. From the romantic figure of the artist to contemporary narratives celebrating entrepreneurial creativity, creative outputs are often attributed to exceptional individuals. Yet sociological research has consistently challenged this representation. Becker (Becker, 1982) demonstrated that artistic production relies on “art worlds” composed of interconnected actors whose coordinated contributions make creative work possible. Similarly, Heinich (1991, 1998) highlighted the role of intermediaries, institutions and evaluation processes in shaping artistic careers and the recognition of works. From this perspective, creative production appears less as the outcome of isolated talent than as the result of collective arrangements that organise cooperation, resources and legitimacy.

Management scholars have extended this insight by examining the organisational mechanisms supporting creative activities. Research has investigated project-based organisations (DeFillippi, 2015), creative communities (Cohendet et al., 2010), innovation routines (Cohendet & Simon, 2016; Svejenova et al., 2007), collaborative networks (Jones et al., 2016), and the management of creation process (Paris & Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, 2019). Rather than treating creativity as an individual attribute, these studies analyse how organisations structure exploration, coordinate specialised expertise and sustain the production of novelty under conditions of uncertainty.

Such an approach also offers a different interpretation of Caves’ (2000) influential framework. While his seven properties are often presented as economic characteristics of creative markets, they can equally be understood as collective action challenges (fig. 1).

Economic interpretation

Diverse specialised skills

Organising creativity without excessive standardisation

Caves CCIs properties (2000)	**Economic interpretation**	**Related collective action challenge**
Nobody knows	Demand uncertainty	Managing uncertainty and subjective evaluation
Arts for art's sake	Intrinsic motivation	Aligning heterogeneous motivations
Motley crew	Diverse specialised skills	Coordinating interdependent

		expertises
Infinite variety	Product uniqueness	Organising creativity without excessive standardisation
A-list/B-list	Unequal rewards	Managing reputation and legitimacy
Time flies	Time-sensitive markets	Synchronising activities under temporal constraints
Ars longa	Long-term value generation	Balancing short-term production and long-term asset management

Synchronising activities under temporal constraints Long-term value Balancing short-term production and long-term generation asset management Fig. 1 : Reinterpreting Caves’ (2000) Creative Industries Properties as Collective Action Challenges

These challenges have become increasingly visible as creative activities undergo significant transformations. Projectification fragments work into temporary collaborations (Bérubé & Gauthier, 2023), industrialisation introduces more formalised production processes (Bandinelli et al., 2013; Tschang, 2007), and digital technologies increasingly reshape creative practices and professional identities (Chu et al., 2025). At the same time, environmental and societal transitions impose new expectations regarding the legitimacy and sustainability of creative work.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the central question is no longer whether diverse activities belong to the Creative Industries category, but rather whether they face comparable collective action problems. A management perspective therefore provides an opportunity to rethink CCIs through the organisation of creative work itself. By focusing on coordination mechanisms, performance criteria and value systems, it becomes possible to identify both the common challenges shared across creative activities and the enduring differences that continue to distinguish them.

4. Unity and Diversity in the Organisation of Creative Activities

The growing influence of the Creative Industries framework has often encouraged scholars and policymakers to search for common characteristics shared by highly diverse sectors. Yet a management perspective suggests a different conclusion. The most striking feature of creative activities is not their homogeneity, but the coexistence of fundamentally different ways of organising the production of symbolic, aesthetic and cultural value.

A first source of diversity lies in the value systems underpinning creative activities. While Creative Industries are frequently discussed through their economic contribution, organisations are rarely driven by identical objectives. Some prioritise artistic experimentation, others commercial growth, heritage preservation, political engagement, territorial development or social transformation. Creative organisations therefore do not merely produce cultural goods; they also embody particular conceptions of what should be created, for whom, and why. These value systems shape the actors involved in creation, the audiences being addressed, the forms of legitimacy being sought and, ultimately, the criteria used to evaluate success. What appears as performance in one context may be perceived as failure in another.

The dominant assumption within the Creative Industries literature often associates creativity with novelty. Comparative evidence collected during the doctoral research, however, suggests that organisations do not pursue the same form of creative performance. Some primarily seek standardisation and reliability, aiming to reproduce recognised formats efficiently. Others pursue originality by introducing new combinations, variations or propositions within established conventions. Others seek singularity, not by maximising novelty itself, but by developing propositions perceived as distinctive, non-substitutable and difficult to compare directly with existing alternatives. The central distinction is therefore not between more or less creativity, but between different conceptions of what makes a creative output valuable.

These differences are reflected in the organisational arrangements supporting creative work. Comparative analyses across creative sectors reveal multiple stable configurations combining distinct

forms of reasoning, resource mobilisation and coordination. Some organisations rely on highly structured processes designed to reduce uncertainty and ensure repeatability. Others depend on professional networks, temporary collaborations or exploratory arrangements that preserve flexibility and experimentation. Rather than converging towards a single organisational model, creative activities appear characterised by a plurality of design regimes adapted to different value systems and performance objectives.

Consequently, the apparent tensions surrounding the Creative Industries concept stem less from disagreements about sectoral boundaries than from the coexistence of heterogeneous organisational realities under a common label. Publishing houses, craft workshops, luxury maisons, audiovisual studios or independent artistic collectives may all contribute to the production of symbolic value, yet they do so through different definitions of performance, different coordination mechanisms and different understandings of what creation itself should achieve.

From this perspective, the unity of the Creative Industries does not reside in a shared organisational model. It resides in a common challenge: organising the production of symbolic, aesthetic and cultural value under conditions of uncertainty. Their diversity, meanwhile, reflects the plurality of value systems, performance logics and organisational designs through which this challenge is addressed.

5. Conclusion

The Cultural and Creative Industries framework has become a widely institutionalised category in public policy, academic research and economic statistics. Yet its success has often been accompanied by persistent debates regarding its coherence and analytical usefulness. This article suggests that these tensions stem partly from the fact that the concept was originally constructed around policy objectives and economic characteristics rather than around questions of work, organisation and collective action.

A management perspective invites a different interpretation. Rather than treating Creative Industries as a homogeneous sector, it becomes possible to understand them as a set of activities confronted with recurring collective action challenges. Demand uncertainty, heterogeneous motivations, interdependent expertise, singular products, unequal recognition, temporal constraints and long-term value creation can all be interpreted as coordination problems that organisations must continuously address. From this perspective, the relevance of the Creative Industries category lies less in the activities it includes than in the organisational challenges it helps reveal.

At the same time, our review highlights the limits of any attempt to reduce Creative Industries to a single organisational model. Our contribution suggests that the most significant differences across Creative Industries may stem from the forms of creative performance being pursued. While some organisations seek to reproduce established propositions efficiently, others aim to generate original variations, and others pursue singular outputs whose value depends precisely on their non-substitutability. These different ambitions generate distinct forms of organising, coordinating and evaluating creative work.

Ultimately, the question may not be whether a particular activity belongs to the Creative Industries, but whether it faces similar collective action challenges in organising creative work. Such a perspective offers a common analytical language capable of connecting highly diverse activities while preserving the organisational differences that continue to distinguish them. In doing so, it shifts the debate from sectoral classification toward a more fundamental question: how can collective action be organised to sustain creativity, singularity and symbolic value under conditions of uncertainty?

Impact & Engagement

Debates surrounding the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) often focus on sectoral boundaries: which activities should be included, which should be excluded, and how public resources should be allocated accordingly. Yet these discussions frequently obscure a more practical question: what organisational challenges are actually faced by the actors involved in creative work? This article addresses this gap by proposing a shift from sector-based definitions towards an analysis of collective action challenges.

Such a perspective may be relevant for several stakeholder groups. For policymakers and public agencies supporting CCIs, it provides an alternative framework for designing support programmes that takes into account the organisational realities of creative work rather than relying exclusively on sectoral classifications. For example, a craft workshop, an independent publishing house and an audiovisual production company may belong to different sectors while facing similar challenges related to coordinating specialised expertise, managing uncertainty or sustaining singular forms of value creation. Identifying these common challenges may help public agencies design support mechanisms that better reflect organisational needs.

The framework may also be useful for intermediary organisations, incubators, clusters and professional associations working with creative practitioners. Rather than organising support exclusively around sectors, these organisations could develop training programmes, communities of practice or collaborative initiatives addressing shared issues such as project coordination, legitimacy building, intellectual property management or the evaluation of creative work. Similar implications emerge for higher education institutions and professional training programmes in cultural management, creative entrepreneurship and innovation management.

The expected impact of this research lies in its ability to facilitate dialogue across activities that are often treated separately despite confronting comparable collective action problems. Evidence of such impact could include the incorporation of these ideas into research programmes such as ICCARE, the development of training modules addressing common organisational challenges across creative sectors, or the mobilisation of this framework by cultural agencies and professional networks seeking to support creative workers. More broadly, the article contributes to a more reflexive understanding of how creativity is collectively organised, coordinated and sustained in contemporary societies.

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Biographies

Nicolas Ricci is a PhD in Management Science from Mines Paris – PSL and a member of the Centre for Management Science (CGS), i3 UMR CNRS 9217 and the FIT² Chair (Futures of Industry and Work). His research focuses on value management in the Cultural and Creative Industries and on the organisational

mechanisms through which creative activities are coordinated, evaluated and sustained. He has explored creative processes across a variety of settings, including French rap music, independent publishing, craft-based luxury and visual arts.

Sophie Hooge is Professor of Management Science at Mines Paris – PSL and a member of the Centre for Management Science (CGS), i3 UMR CNRS 9217. She is co-holder of the FIT² Chair (Futures of Industry and Work). Her research focuses on innovation management, mobilising value management and design theories, with particular attention to organisational capabilities, performance management and collective design in contexts of industrial and societal transitions. She has led numerous longitudinal research partnerships with organisations across a wide range of industries, including the Cultural and Creative Industries, to study the management of innovation and creative activities in these organisations.

Negotiating Aspirations and Realities: The Role of Artist Management in Vernacular Folk Music Industries

Ms. Anuracti Sharma
College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati

ABSTRACT

As the market for commercialized folk music continues to grow across South Asia, marginalized vernacular folk artists navigate music market forces through intermediaries like artist managers within the "new music industries" (Hughes et al. 2016). This dissertation project underscores the significance of the relationship between the artist manager and the folk artist. It investigates changing folk artist management practices in twenty first century India, including broadcasting and digital media industries, and their impact on the live music sector, both nationally and internationally. Using ethnographic case studies of young and established folk artists, this study interweaves qualitative narratives of aspiration and innovation into wider theories of cultural labor and culture industries. By highlighting the competing notions of value and authority that condition their relationship between managers and folk artists, I showcase a comprehensive image of opportunities and challenges shaping the commercial folk music landscape of contemporary India. To the extent that these values are out of alignment, folk artists will continue to struggle to find self-determination, dignity and equity in the music industry.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of the relationship between artist manager and the folk artist in contemporary India. By examining the role of artist managers in shaping the visibility, viability, and market positioning of folk artists, this study showcases the ways that traditional artistic practices and professional management interact. This project will contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which folk artists navigate commercial opportunities to generate capital and seek economic sustainability while maintaining community-based identities, ideologies and traditional lifeways.

With the diversification of commercial opportunities, the role of artist managers has become vital to the success of artists. The first aim of the dissertation is to explore the personal and professional motivations of the managers when balancing business decisions for the artist and for themselves as part of management. I will examine how managers navigate the thin line between protection and guidance versus control and exploitation of artists when tackling issues of music copyrights, royalty income, digital literacy, brand building and authentic representations of folk musical heritage. I will analyze the strategies utilized by artist managers and examine the importance of legal representation for folk artists. I will support my arguments with literature emerging from theories of artistic citizenship (Ambedkar 1936; Babiracki 1991; Silverman and Bowman 2016). Artist management caters to both the artistic and business-centric aspects of the final creative product, and this critical link between folk artists and artist management remains acutely understudied in the broader field of ethnomusicology.

A second aim is to explore how folk artists make and defend certain professional choices, and what those choices reveal about values associated with artistic innovation and tradition. Folk arts are not static; rather, they are continually reshaped in relation to broader religious and economic aspects of society. Incorporating the perspectives of folk artists from a range of gender, caste, regional and class positions, as well as ethnomusicological literature that prioritizes the intersection of these factors (Morcom 2013; Neuman, Chaudhuri, and Kothari 2006; Jairazbhoy 1977; Ayyagari 2012; Fiol 2017; Deo 2020; Basu 2023; Bakhle 2005; Joep 1999), I aim to learn about their aspirations and expectations, and how these measure up to their experiences in the music industry. The normalization of predatory practices within the music industry, such as gatekeeping, restrictive access to information, and lack of professional advancement can lead to further exploitation of folk artists. I intend to add to the body of knowledge regarding caste

politics, discrimination (Ajotikar 2019; Paik 2016, 2018; Schultz 2013; Weidman 2003) and the function of artist managers in facilitating Dalit artists' inclusion by conducting interviews with Dalit artists.

My study will shed more light on folk artists’ experiences releasing original music, approaching media channels during music promotions, and performing in political rallies, religious fairs and festivals, heritage music festivals. Despite the increased digital accessibility and growth of regional music listenership, there is little understanding of how a folk musician utilizes this information and makes decisions about their commercial output. This project critically explores how artists interact with media technologies and how their views about censorship, politics, nationalism, religion, and creative industry shape the storytelling, poetry, songs, and slogans that they ultimately decide to publish and promote, thereby expanding the musical repertoire of India’s folk music industry. In this context, I ground my work in the scholarship on performativity, instruments, sound, and digital media (Feld 1974; Sterne 2012; Taylor 2015; Drott 2023). The third and final aim of the dissertation is to address changing trends in the production and commodification of folk music in India’s Mumbai-based industry. In comparison to the twentieth century broadcasting period, artists and managers today are exploring a wide array of marketing and digitization strategies outside of the more conventional route of generating income through studio recordings, music label partnerships, and live performances. These include royalties, licensing, merchandising, and digital streaming, amongst others. Understanding such changes in industry and community engagement is vital to the broader question of how artist managers and folk artists navigate a relationship of trust and mutual benefit. By making this distinction, my work articulates opportunities and challenges of the folk music industry in twenty-first century India, amidst encounters with digital technology, internet and smartphone infrastructure, and dynamic music business models. I refer here to Georgina Born’s volume Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology (2022).

BACKGROUND

Early ethnomusicological discourse on the transmission of folk music relies on collective memory of societies and cultures. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl questions how the oral legacy of folk music is impacted by a society's ideas of stability and change (1983, 104). Therefore, the folk aesthetic is frequently defined as a combination of multiple renditions rather than a single, stringent, unique music style. In the Indian context, ethnomusicologist Stefan Fiol (2015) provides three frameworks for historicizing the category of folk. In the late nineteenth century, folk was regarded as a representation of a rural Indian essence, separate from and in stark contrast with the Western culture. This intervention was part of the ethnological compilations of indigenous culture made by colonial administrators and their Indian collaborators. In the middle of the twentieth century, Indian governmental and non-state cultural organizations worked to define the folk domain through its regional associations, emphasizing the various forms over those who practice it. Towards the end of the twentieth century, folk music genres spread in decontextualized forms

through commercial media and musicians' creative practices, reaching a wide range of audiences from local to global, and they started to be quickly assimilated in India's neoliberal context.

The diverse array of indigenous musical arts practiced across the country by various ethnic groups from rural, semi-urban, urban communities can be denoted as Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). Over the past four decades, India has witnessed a remarkable change across its CCIs. In the early 1980s, Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi significantly expanded the scope of the state-run terrestrial television and radio networks. Many folk artists were able to first disseminate their music through these channels. Under the neoliberal economy, multinational companies have absorbed all major television networks and film studios, along with the majority of prominent record labels (Taylor 2015, 48). Folk performing arts, including musical arts, are envisioned as a part of national heritage, and are used as drivers of the rapidly expanding economy. Folk music-based recording studios (Jaipur Virasat Foundation Recording Studio, Anahad Foundation), recording labels (Amarass Records, Beat of India), national and

international music festivals (Virasat, Blue Lotus Festival, Rajasthan International Folk Festival, Kolkata International Folk Music Festival), and music-based reality television shows (Indian Idol, MTV Sound Trippin, NDTV Imagine’s Junoon) have all grown significantly. In order to compete and win, contestants must perform songs from a folk genre. Workshops and publications devoted to the preservation of India's "vanishing folk cultures" have been funded by both foreign funding organizations like the Ford Foundation and Indian government organizations like Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Indira Gandhi Centre for the Performing Arts. In both physical and virtual settings, independent folk music archives have developed, such as the ARCE in Gurugram and Lokayan Sansthan in Rajasthan (Dalmia 2008). The desire to profit from the folk music phenomenon is evident at all levels of the music and entertainment industry due to the wide range of commercial activities and interests—private and public, for-profit and not-for-profit, local and translocal.

The music business model in India has largely been divided into those who make music (artists, lyricists, music directors, music engineers), who produce music (filmmakers, advertisers, music producers, music record labels, media houses), and who consume music (fans, moviegoers, OTT and television-based audience, consumers of memorabilia, internet, and culture). Artist management exists as a form of intermediation between all the above stakeholders, and the dynamics of artist management are critical to understanding the retentions and transformations in the sound and presentation of folk music. Depending upon the aspirations of the manager and artist, their working relationship, and the demands of a myriad facets of the industry in which they are working, folk music and the folk artist are branded in particular ways. With this expansion of media infrastructure, a rise in the average Indian consumer’s purchasing power, and lower costs for mobile phone devices, recordings of folk artists have proliferated through this multi-faceted digital soundscape.

Vernacular music is gaining immense popularity due to its increasing accessibility through the rise of vernacular short-video platforms such as Moj, Josh, Chingari, Roposo, and MX TakaTak showcasing regional audiovisual content (Wadhwa 2022; Biswas 2022). The “region”—corresponding to individual states within federalist India—is the predominant scale at which industry and user activities are organized in the digital media sectors (Mohan and Punathambekar 2019, 330). With the boom of the telecom industry at the turn of the twenty-first century, new laws like the Copyright (Amendment) Act 2012 passed to fight for the rights of musicians (Reddy 2012), and the digitalization and platformisation of Indian music industry quickly made YouTube the destination for the highest music consumption in India (Lal, Hesmondhalgh, and Umney 2023). However, it is important to note that young, independent musicians are still hesitant to question unfair contracts out of concern for their future employment, the nation still lacks an organized music publishing industry, and there is ongoing confusion regarding musicians' royalties from radio and television broadcasts (Reddy and Chandrashekaran 2017; Ithurbide 2020).

One of the challenges that artists and managers face is how to commodify folk art forms that are often communally owned and maintained, deeply enmeshed with local spaces, rituals, and divinities. As depicted by author Colin Lawson, “In many cultures the artificial division between performer and audience has never existed; as the player or singer improvises, the audience responds, whether by toe-tapping, finger-drumming, hand-clapping, singing or dancing. Musicians are as likely to be found in streets, markets, fairs, or taverns as in more formal surroundings, since music has remained intimately associated with such ritual events as weddings, funerals or the agricultural calendar, dealing with perennial subjects like the personal wounds of love (2002: 4).” While some worry that the widespread alteration and commercialization of folk cultures may erase their unique identities, others think that technological advancements and digitalization offer chances for both the proliferation and increase in sale of vernacular musical artifacts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The complexities surrounding the definition of folk music, as highlighted by debates on folklore, heritage, and intellectual property, have direct implications for the folk music industry and its relationship with artist management. The reason that vernacular artists appeal to me is that they blur the lines between “folk” and “commercial,” “old-fashioned” and “modern.” This allows me to transcend—and, in fact, to challenge—strict definitions of “pure” folk music, while also highlighting the existence and arbitrary nature of such boundaries. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and UNESCO organized the World Forum on the Protection of Folklore in Thailand in 1997, where the indigenous members of the Australian delegation protested the term “indigenous folklore” because it

“connotes inferiority” (Perlman, 2011: 122). Furthermore, the holistic approach that indigenous communities take to explain their cosmological beliefs, which align with the “communal nature of indigenous societies,” contradicted the narrow understanding of folklore as intellectual property (Perlman, 2011: 121). The conflict between inclusive “intangibleness” (Hafstein 2009) and exclusive “documentation” (Byrne 2009), as well as the paradox between “heritage as goods” and “heritage as identity” (Bendix 2008), are just a few of the conceptual conundrums that have been brought about by critiques of UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Lists program. These arguments have consequences when defining the folk music industry and how it is separate from mainstream arts. According to Smith and Akagawa, “the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible," therefore calling for a "re-theorization of ‘heritage.’” (Smith and Akagawa, 2009: 6).

Beyond folk music, this balancing act between tradition and business also permeates larger debates over the composition and operation of the music business. Most frequently, media studies, communication studies, and cultural studies have been used to theorize and study the music industries as well as the creative and cultural industries. I borrow Hughes et al. and Morrow’s (2016) concept for understanding the changing trends within creative industries. Morrow explains that the needs and objectives of the two parties (artist and music label heads) usually clashed in the old music industries. This is because the record label's primary business was creating “hits,” which are by definition short-term, and the artist's (or manager's) goal was to establish a long-term career (2006, 172). The function of a manager has been historically and methodically associated with contemporary bourgeois society, which is composed of the public and private sectors. Peter Bendixen (2000) argues that there are several examples throughout the history of the classical arts (music, theater, painting, and literature) of artists who established their own relationships and agreements with influential people and entities (patrons, guests, and royal courts). However, this does not constitute exhibition or performance in the contemporary sense of the word, nor does it constitute arts management as we currently know and practice it.

Several cultural groups are reclaiming previously excluded oral histories and fostering anti-caste consciousness through songs and stage plays. These performative traditions entail innovative approaches to public remembering and the insertion of what was not part of the popular imagination. Fiol’s research on the evocation of Himalayan folk music in mainstream Hindi films and the vernacular Garhwali music industry reveal the feedback and interdependence of these industries (2011). Ethnomusicologist and archivist Komal Kothari provides an example of a song recorded by the rural artist Gazi Khan from Rajasthan, which was later appropriated and copyrighted for use in the Hindi film Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (Bhansali 1999). Thus, if Gazi Khan sings his own song today, he would be infringing on the film’s copyright (Bharucha 2003, 286). Ayyagari’s work details the cooptation of Rajasthan’s folk tunes by mainstream Hindi film music labels to sonically symbolize scope for development and social change (2016).

Gregory Booth’s Behind the Curtain: Making Music in Mumbai's Film Studios explores migrant narratives from the perspective of the musicians, composers, arrangers, assistants, and studio performers, who both

experienced and formed the history of Mumbai’s film industry (2008). Booth’s work offers a framework for thinking about migrant artists in Mumbai in search of employment opportunities.

Even though folk traditions have long been intertwined into Hindi film music, the folk musicians themselves frequently face marginalization and struggle to obtain the same professional and financial possibilities as their classical and popular music counterparts. Dwyer (2006), Ganti (2013), Gopal and Moorti (2008) argue that the song-and-dance sequences in Hindi films are deeply inspired by the folk music and dance traditions that have been omnipresent within the cultural ethos of India. The years from 1940s to 1970s are recalled as the golden era of film music in India. As detailed by Morcom, “the musical style of Hindi film songs and most of the film industry personnel were also initially taken from the urban theatre traditions. Many composers came to the film industry from the theatre, and used existing theatre songs, or songs of a similar style, containing a mixture of classical, light-classical and local folk traditions for the films (2007, 4).” While established popular music and classical music artists generally rely on formal and informal professional and social networks to monetize their talents, folk artists on the other hand, are met with additional obstacles because of stigma and discrimination perpetrated by industry gatekeepers at different stages of their careers. Language, literacy, technological, caste, class, gendered, political barriers weaken the socioeconomic position of artists.

Caste-based oppression, discrimination, and violence have, for centuries, been a critical aspect of India’s social reality and thought. By interviewing Dalit artists, I hope to contribute to existing scholarship about issues of caste discrimination, caste politics, and the role of artist managers in mediating inclusion for Dalit artists. Paying attention to the utilization of regional music as a political tool, Wafa Asher (2021) traces the protest music of Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), a troupe of Dalit students, singers and poets in her article Ambedkarite Protest Music and the Creation of a Subaltern Counterpublic: An Analysis of Kabir Kala Manch’s ‘Aye Bhagat Singh.’ Lead vocalist and working-class Dalit woman Sheetal Sathe writes about pro-democratic themes, anti-fascist themes, and performs with her troupe KKM using a tambourine and ghungroos as musical accompaniments.

The questions emerging from Maharashtra folk music traditions necessitate understanding of how caste violence disguised in the garb of puritanical patriotism has played a role in controlling and capitalizing local musical knowledge, auctorial voices, and hereditary artist genealogies. Rege’s (1995) work on Dalit Marathi women performers of Tamasha and Lavani explores how their musical knowledge and performance traditions were illegitimized by all-male members of panchayats when the compositional and authorial roles shifted from Dalit women to dominant class Peshwa court men. Largely a Brahminical patriarchal society, it stigmatized the hereditary

musicianship of Dalit women as vulgar and practitioners of prostitution and removed female performers from subsequent classical dramas, the first being produced by Vishnudas Bhave in 1843.

It is important to point out here that there is scarce analysis of industry mediation, and any manner of artist management is a crucial part of the dynamic that is left out of many ethnographic accounts. K. Kalyani’s article Music as an Anti-Caste Counterpublic: Notes From North India analyzes the acts of resistance found in the repertoire of anti-caste musical performances. Kalyani builds upon Rege’s concept of ‘Ambedkarite counterpublics’ by situating music as a form of everyday resistance. Dalit-Bahujan singers and performers critically assess dominant and hegemonic cultural practices and 'talk back' to the structures of caste. “She refers to ‘Ambedkarite counterpublics’ as a space that adopted a dual strategy by making new claims in publics in which they were previously invisibilised (2024, 5).” Fusion music band The Casteless Collective from Tamil Nadu; Jan Natya Mandali, a group of singers from Andhra Pradesh; music of Kasturi Baudh, are some of the musical acts that capture the spirit of resistance and instill ideas of equality and democracy by engaging with public memory within public spheres like carnivals, music festivals, Dalit congregational meetings. Furthermore, it would be interesting to find cases where those who become managers have previously been folk artists' patrons and how folk artists view the manager's

position in comparison to the conventional patron. Despite their differences, these jobs can potentially overlap. For instance, in addition to interacting with Kabir singers, followers, and fans in Malwa, professor and author Linda Hess contributes to the globalization process by accompanying the leading folk singer Prahlad Tipaniya and his troupe on tours in the United States, and operates as an artist and repertoire (A and R) manager to them (2015).

Impact and Engagement

The music business model in India has largely been divided into those who make music (artists, lyricists, music directors, music engineers), who produce music (filmmakers, advertisers, music producers, music record labels, media houses), and who consume music (fans, moviegoers, OTT and television-based audience, consumers of memorabilia, internet, and culture). My project posits that artist management exists as a form of intermediation between all the above stakeholders, and the dynamics of artist management are critical to understanding the retentions and transformations in the sound and presentation of folk music. With this expansion of media infrastructure, a rise in the average Indian consumer’s purchasing power, and lower costs for mobile phone devices, recordings of folk artists have proliferated through this multi-faceted digital soundscape.

My project builds upon the work of ethnomusicologists studying India’s changing musical landscape, particularly the intersections of folk traditions and commercial industries. Several cultural groups are reclaiming previously excluded oral histories and fostering anti-caste consciousness through songs and stage plays. Ethnomusicologist and archivist Komal Kothari provides an example of a song recorded by the rural artist Gazi Khan from Rajasthan, which was later appropriated and copyrighted for use in the Hindi film Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (Bhansali 1999). Thus, if Gazi Khan sings his own song today, he would be infringing on the film’s copyright (Bharucha 2003, 286). Folk performing arts are envisioned as a part of national heritage, and are used as drivers of the rapidly expanding economy. This study has implications for artists, musicians, technicians, music industry professionals, and for the fields of media studies, cultural anthropology and ethnomusicology. I propose that a more comprehensive understanding of the folk artists’ community, traditions, and cultural praxis is needed for managers and other industry insiders to gauge the folk artists’ goals and expectations from the music industry.

Author Biography

Anuracti is a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, where her research explores South Asian music and digital media cultures. A trained vocalist in the North Indian classical tradition, she performs with the Indian Classical Fusion Ensemble, 'Kafi and Chai'.

Her scholarly work has been recognized through her appointment as the South Asian Performing Arts Bibliography Fellow (2025-2026). Currently, she serves as Communications Specialist at the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS). Before beginning her doctoral studies in 2022, Anuracti worked in Mumbai's film and music industry as a singer-songwriter, music researcher, and writer, bringing a practitioner's perspective to her academic inquiry. She was awarded the Nazir Jairazbhoy Prize for best paper presented on South Asia at the 2023 SEM Annual Meeting in Ottawa, Canada. She is currently based in Mumbai, conducting doctoral fieldwork.

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How the framing of artistic professionalism on a BA Fine Art programme can influence whether students intend to pursue careers as professional artists

Dr. Sarah Rowles
Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki

Introduction:

In England, BA Fine Art is the first level of post-compulsory art education that explicitly aims to prepare students to become professional artists (Rowles, 2024). However, with around 240 BA Fine Art programmes producing 20,000 graduates per year (ibid), not all who enrol will become artists, even if this had been their aspiration at the start. This paper presents findings from my pilot study and then central thesis study (ibid) which used interviews with 8 staff and 13 final year students, and a thematic and discourse analysis of the data, to examine the factors that influenced whether final year students on a BA Fine Art programme in London intended to pursue careers as artists. The paper will concentrate on one finding in particular: that the model of artistic professionalism presented to students during their time on the programme influenced whether they could imagine themselves becoming professional artists.

Context and motivation for the study:

In 2019 I was one year into my doctorate and working as a lecturer on a BA Fine Art programme in England. I was teaching professional practice (a unit designed to prepare students for exit) and wanted to learn more about student career expectations and aspirations and how they were navigating the conflicting discourses that surrounded making a living in art. For example, 'home' students were paying annual tuition fees of circa £9,000 and the University website signalled a potential return on investment by highlighting the burgeoning creative industries and a 94% graduate employment rate (not necessarily in the field). However, research showed that fine art graduates are consistently the lowest graduate earners (Sutton Trust, 2014) and that it is common for artists to hold down multiple jobs to subsidise their developing art practice (Claudwell-French and Easton, 2017), from which they make little, if any, income (Abbing, 2004). Additionally, the University promoted enterprise and employability support for students, whilst staff on the fine art programme were reticent to teach this and sceptical about whether such provision had a place in the fine art curriculum or in education more broadly.

To investigate this I conducted a pilot study where I surveyed 54 and interviewed 18 students on the programme about their motivations for studying art, their career expectations, and how they navigated this complex landscape (Rowles, 2020). I drew my theoretical framework from Lehikoinen's (2018) proposition that there are three discourses that frame discussions of making a living in higher education art programmes. These are: liberal humanism, which I labelled 'autonomy' – a Romantic view that artists should produce pure work untainted by commercial influence; 'entrepreneurialism' - the view that artists should generate profit from their artwork; and 'utilitarianism' - the view that art should be socially useful. I also considered the notion of the 'hybrid' (ibid) artist that works across these positions either by taking on related portfolio work to support their developing practice (Abbing in Lehikoinen, 2018, 28) or by combining their 'artistic knowledge and skills with a range of competencies and skills' from areas such as 'pedagogy, research, consultation, entrepreneurialism' (ibid). I conducted a thematic analysis of the data taking into account how these discourses may be shaping students' ideas of their professional futures.

A significant finding in this study was that 15/16 students that did not expect to pursue a professional art practice after the course had an autonomous idea of the artist as someone that makes art full time for little or no money and felt that this was 'unrealistic'. By contrast 16/20 students that did intend to practice as an artist had a hybrid idea of the professional artist and intended to teach or work in a gallery to

support their practice. This suggested that the ideas students hold about how artists professionally practice may effect whether they can imagine themselves becoming professional artists in the future. This led to my main thesis study which looked at the factors that influenced whether final year students on a BA Fine Art programme in London intended to pursue careers as artists given the ways that artistic professionalism had been presented to, and understood by them, during the degree. I present findings from this next.

The term ‘professional artist’:

In the UK ‘professional artist’ is listed in BA Fine Art prospectuses as a graduate outcome (Rowles, 2021). Whilst not explicitly defined, images of artworks on these websites and my own experience in the sector, indicate that the term denotes a type of artist that makes work in dialogue with the contemporary art sector. Whereas occupations like law or medicine have set criteria to define the profession, the criteria that distinguishes the professional artist apart from the amateur is more nebulous and has been described as ‘diffuse’ (Lindström, 2015), ‘informal’ (Svensonn, 2015) and ‘incomplete’ (Scarsbrook, 2021). As a result, authors, including me, have used the sociological frameworks offered by Becker (1982) and Bourdieu (1993) to articulate the workings of a sector whose norms, values and rules are acquired through a long period of socialization into the sector (Gaunt and Westerlund, 2022).

Becker (1982) and Bourdieu (1993) understood artistic professionalism as a form of ‘ritualized social behavior’ (Paquette, 2012, 5). Both viewed the production of art not as the outcome of gifted individuals working in isolation but as something that is socially produced and given value through the combined efforts of ‘critics’, ‘dealers’, ‘patrons’, ‘museums, galleries’ and ‘academies’ (1993, 37). They posited that artworld participants share an understanding of the conventions of the discipline, such as its histories, ways of making, and Romantic beliefs in the artists specialness, and described art as an object of belief which only exists so long as these agents recognize it as such. Bourdieu described the field of art as an ‘upside-down economic world’ (1993, 40) because competition is not about gaining the most money but about acquiring ‘recognition’ (ibid, 35) for their ‘pure’ artwork, which he referred to as ‘symbolic capital’ (ibid, 75). This understanding, which I recognise from my time working in the field, is characteristic of the discourse of autonomy and is a central discourse of artistic professionalism.

Discourses in the undergraduate fine art curricuum:

The undergraduate fine art curriculum is a site where students are socialised into the norms of the profession (Gaunt and Westerlund, 2022). This happens through accreditation, pedagogy, and ideas of the artist that circulate in the curriculum (Rowles, 2024). The discourse of autonomy, that is central to the professional field, has been observed as dominant within the fine art curriculum (Kenning, 2019; Lindström, 2015; Scarsbrook, 2021). Evidence of this can be seen for example in the ‘structureless pedagogies’ (Lindström, 2015; Scarsbrook, 2021) of selective fine art programmes where up to 80% of a students’ time is spent alone in the studio (Rowles, 2024). Scarsbrook (2021) argued that this foregrounds an idea of the artist that makes work in the studio all day and found that that such curricula causes tension for graduates long after they graduate as they try to live up to a mythologised idea of the artist who ‘only makes’. This corroborates Lehikoinen et al’s (2022) assertion that dominant discourses of professionalism in the curriculum can regulate the type of professional artist that students feel they can become.

Lehikoinen (2018) advocated that higher education arts curricula embrace utilitarian, entrepreneurial or hybrid models of the artist so that they can better sustain a future practice. My diagram below outlines these four types of professional artist:

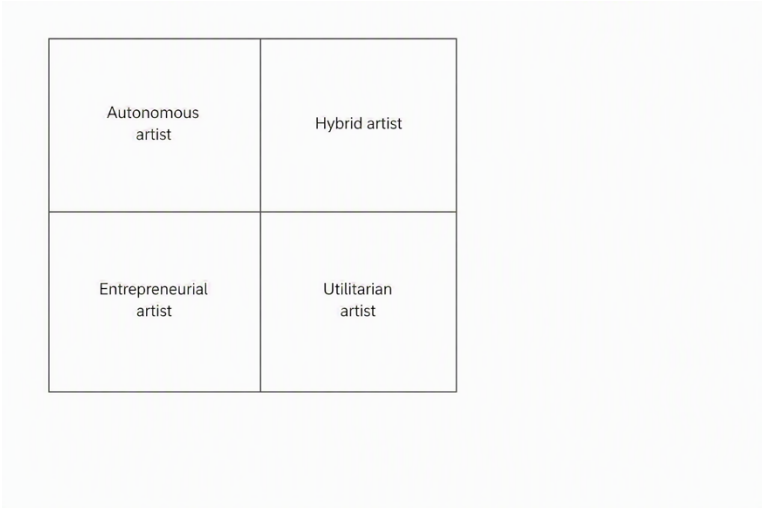


Figure 1: Rowles, S. (2024). Four types of professional artist (adapted from Lehikoinen's 2018 framework).

Whilst utlitarianism was not acknowledged as a major discourse in the fine art curriculum in any of the studies that I came across, 34/54 students in my pilot study expressed a desire to work in socially useful ways (Rowles, 2020). Although support for this was not reflected in the curriculum, this interest is mirrored in the professional sector where there has been a rise in art practices and policies that encourage collaboration between arts and healthcare (APPG, 2017). Entrepreneurship has been present as a discourse in higher education fine art in England since the mid-nineties when under neoliberalism, the New Labour Government introduced a tuition fee and loan system for undergraduate courses (Hjelde, 2015), and universities were encouraged to invest in entrepreneurship education so that their graduates could drive economic growth and contribute to an increasingly flexible labour market (Gibb 2005; Mandelson, 2009). Nine students in my pilot study expressed an interest in entrepreneurialism as they wished to set up a gallery or arts organisation although did not find support for this within the curriculum. Entrepreneurialism has long faced resistance by fine art staff who worry it will dilute the traditionally critical, autonomous, and leftist mindset of art students (Kenning 2019; Malik, 2015). However, attitudes have softened over the last decade (Rowles, 2013; Allen and Rowles, 2017) as staff acknowledge the precarious financial realities that graduates face.

Methodology:

In my main thesis study my research questions were:

RQ1: How is artistic professionalism understood by staff teaching on an undergraduate fine art course and presented to students? RQ2: What ideas do students have of artistic professionalism and how might these have evolved during the course? RQ3: What factors influence whether students intend to pursue a professional art practice after the course?

I conducted my study on a non-selective undergraduate fine art course in London. I examined curriculum documents and interviewed 8 staff and 13 final year students. I thematically analyzed the data and considered where it related to the discourses of autonomy, entrepreneurialism and utilitarianism. I combined interpretations from Foucault (1972), Gee (2018), and Wetherell (1998) to define discourse as 'a set of historically rooted ideas that circulate within a field and influence the way that participants in that field might talk, act, or present themselves' and acknowledged that there can be more than one discourse in a social setting and that these may become dominant, naturalised, or rejected by participants.

Next I summarise those findings which suggest that the model of artistic professionalism presented to students during the BA Fine Art programme, shape whether they intend to pursue careers as artists.

Findings:

RQ 1: The staff identified as professional artists and said that professional artists participate in the field of contemporary art. Inkeeping with Bourdieu’s (1993) description, this field was said to consist of art galleries, museums, journalism and biennials that recognise and are recognised by the field and play a role in assigning value to contemporary artwork. Participating in the field was said to involve exhibiting in and visiting its art galleries; working in a studio; undertaking residencies; having an online presence; and keeping up to date with what is being shown, discussed, and written about in this space. Professional artists were said to have a ‘commitment to developing their practice’ and seek ‘recognition’ of its value from field participants. Recognition functions to increase an artists’ profile and offer further opportunities to develop and show work. Recognition was not associated with financial gain but with an acknowledgement of the work’s contribution to existing dialogue in the field. Whilst artistic autonomy was valued highly, the staff felt that the singular model of the artist working in the studio all day is an outdated notion of how artists work and hard to achieve for those without substantial economic capital. Reflecting on their experiences as artists who had worked other jobs to support their developing practice, they presented ‘hybrid’ and ‘utilitarian’ models of professional practice to students. This involved inviting in artist-speakers that used the skills developed through their practice to earn money through related work such as curating, writing, teaching, and gallery education.

Alongside their teaching, one staff member had an education-centred 'utilitarian’ (ibid) practice, five had an ‘autonomous’ (ibid) practice, and two had a commercial gallery practice. I added the commercial artist to my diagram as several professional artists sell their art through commercial art galleries.

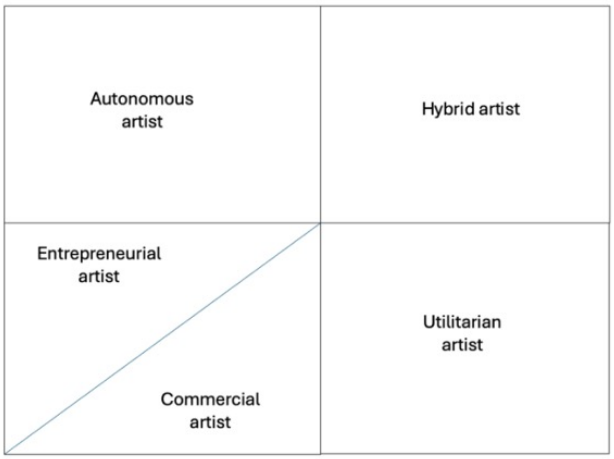


Figure 2. Rowles, S. (2024). Adapted version of Lehikoinen’s types of professional artist.

That the staff worked as hybrid artists and presented this model to students, countered Lehikoinen’s (2018) assertion that autonomy dominates higher education art curricula, at least in this case. Promoting a hybrid model of artistic professionalism represents a shift from the singular model of model of the autonomous artist that BA Fine Art courses, including this one, foregrounded as recently as 10 years ago (Rowles, 2024; Scarsbrook, 2021). This shift can be attributed to the need to address the increased financial pressures that students now face. Acknowledging the eb and flow of their own artist-careers, and periods when they needed to dedicate more or less time and resources to making art, the staff offered students a long-term view of success. They wanted students to realise that they could be artists even if there are times when they must take a break from their practice to focus on other work or life events, so long as they retain an intention to make art in dialogue with the field.

In each year of the BA Fine Art programme there were three units: studio practice – where students are tasked with developing an independent studio practice predicated on a methodology 'not knowing' (Fisher and Fortnum, 2013); professional skills – where students consider how they might sustain their practice; and contextual studies – where students locate their practice in relation to relevant contemporary artists and theories. This structure is typical of undergraduate fine art degrees in England (Rowles, 2021) and these skillsets were also held by the artist-staff. As such, a central argument in my thesis was that these skills should be considered as part of an expanded definition of artistic professionalism. I proposed a holistic model of artist professionalism that looks like this:

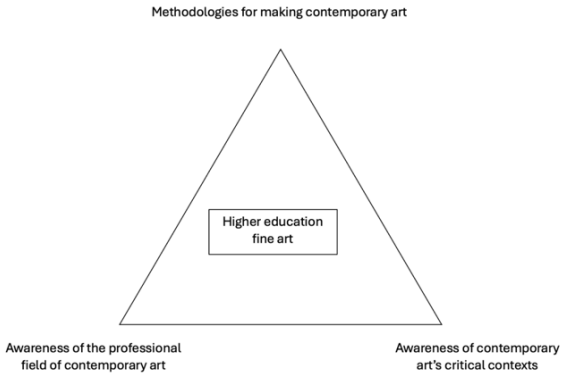


Figure 3: Rowles, S. (2024). A model of artistic professionalism

RQ2: Students' ideas of artistic professionalism shifted as they journeyed through the course. Most had arrived with a commercial of the artist as one who sells aesthetically pleasing work via Instagram and high street galleries to make a living. These ideas were informed by popular notions of the artist that foreground talent (Gibson and Von Lehn, 2017), an enjoyable lifestyle (Littleton and Taylor, 2008), and a notion of the artist as one who makes work in a studio all day (Tate, 2008-2020). They were leaving with an understanding of the professional artist as one who 'works hard' to make critically engaged work in dialogue with the professional field, and an acknowledgment that many artists in the professional sector do other work to support their practice. More holistically students were also developing the skills outlined in my triangle above.

RQ 3: By the end of the programme, students' awareness of the professional field of art varied. Some had completed a work placement year whilst independenly maintaining their studio practice and these students had the greatest awareness of the field and of how they could sustain their practice after the programme. The 'hybrid' model of the professional artist presented to students enabled those who might have turned away from becoming an artist, to imagine themselves pursuing this path. In my pilot study 16/54 (30%) of the students I interviewed had an 'autonomous' idea of the professional artist as one that makes work full time for little or no financial reward and 15 (94%) of these did not expect to pursue professional practice as an artist because they thought this was financially 'unrealistic'. By contrast, 85% students in my central thesis study were leaving the course with a hybrid idea of artistic professionalism and were considering how they might sustain their practice in this way. This reflected the work the course was doing to broaden ideas about the ways artists professionally practise and make becoming a professional artist more attainable.

Nevertheless, even when hybrid models of professional practice were presented to students, autonomy remained a dominant discourse as it was implied that an artists' main activity of producing work should be kept 'at distance' from how they generate income (Littleton and Taylor, 2008). Although two staff had a commercial practice, the business of selling contemporary artwork was little mentioned in the curriculum. This may reflect the complex value systems in the field, a preference for students to develop

their practice before seeking representation, or the disruption of traditional gallery-based representation by platforms such as Instagram (Dawson, 2020). Whatever the reason, the two students who hoped to earn money through commissions no longer saw a future as a professional artists and were looking at the field of commercial illustration. This suggests that ideas of artistic professionalism endorsed by staff and the curriculum impact whether students intend to pursue careers as artists.

Other factors influenced whether students intended to pursue a professional art practice after the course, including a sense of belonging, family support, confidence, economic capital, and the extent to which students had developed the skills outlined in my trianglular model of professionalism above.

Conclusion:

This paper has presented a section of findings from my doctoral thesis that indicate that the models of artistic professionalism students encounter during a BA Fine Art programme can shape whether they intend to pursue careers as professional artists. It found that when students leave the programme with an understanding of the professional artist as one who makes work full time for little or no money, they are more likely to turn away from pursuing a career as a professional artist. By contrast, when other models of artistic professionalism such as the ‘hybrid’ artist are encouraged, students are more likely to imagine themselves sustaining careers as professional artists. I recommend that higher education fine art programmes widen the models of artistic professionalism they present to students so that all students that wish to can aspire to a career as an artist and not just those with the greatest amount of economic capital.

Impact & Engagement

As BA Fine Art programmes in England are recognised as an important first site for the production of professional artists, it is important that educators and policy makers understand the factors that shape whether students feel able to pursue careers as professional artists. This paper has focussed on one finding from my research into these factors: that the model of artistic professionalism presented to students during their time on a BA Fine Art programme can shape whether they can imagine themselves pursuing careers as artists after their degree. This has implications for higher education fine art teachers who are encouraged to widen the models of artistic professionalism presented to students in the curriculum and for policy makers who are encouraged to consider how expanded ways of working as an artist can be supported and better represented in the field.

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Biography:

Dr Sarah Rowles is a postdoctoral researcher in higher education fine art pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki where she is looking at how the MFA at the Academy of Fine Arts prepares students to become professional artists. In 2024 she completed her Doctorate at the Institute of Education, University College London where her thesis examined ‘The role of undergraduate fine art education in the production of professional artists’ in a UK context. Sarah is the Founding Director of Q-Art, an events and publishing organisation that shares approaches to teaching art across higher education institutions. She has worked as a lecturer in MA art education and BA fine art, and as a higher education arts researcher and report writer for various organisations and higher education institutions.

Analysing the 'Strategic Situation' of a Cultural Player: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Mario d'Angelo
Université Bourgogne Europe, Burgundy School of Business

Introduction

Strategic management has examined environments, organisational configurations, and resource constraints, yet it has rarely treated the strategic situation as an analytical object. Contingency theory (Hofer, 1975) linked structure to uncertainty but reduced context to variables. Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) analysed external constraints without integrating internal resources or temporal dynamics. Configuration theory (Mintzberg et al., 1998) proposed organisational "configurations" without operationalising the concrete situation of a specific actor. Dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007) emphasised adaptive capacity rather than situational structure, while prospect theory connected the situation to decision-makers' experience, preferences, and biases under uncertainty (Wakker, 2010). Classical strategy approaches (Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1965; Porter, 1980) emphasised deliberate alignment with the environment, whereas later work showed strategy emerging from distributed organisational processes (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2023; Whittington, 2017).

These approaches address structure and dynamics, but separately and under different labels. They also remain centred on firms in competitive markets, whereas cultural and creative sectors involve more diverse actors—Not-for-profit organisations, public institutions, self-employed creators—whose resource dependencies, governance forms, and strategic modes differ markedly from those of firms (Caves, 2000). While every situation underlies action, not every action is strategic; yet every strategy is situated, within a configuration of systemic interdependencies (Morin, 2008).

This paper clarifies the concept of a strategic situation and proposes a framework for analysing it in the cultural field[1]. It synthesises dispersed insights into an analytical lens, making explicit what has so far been treated implicitly or in fragments.

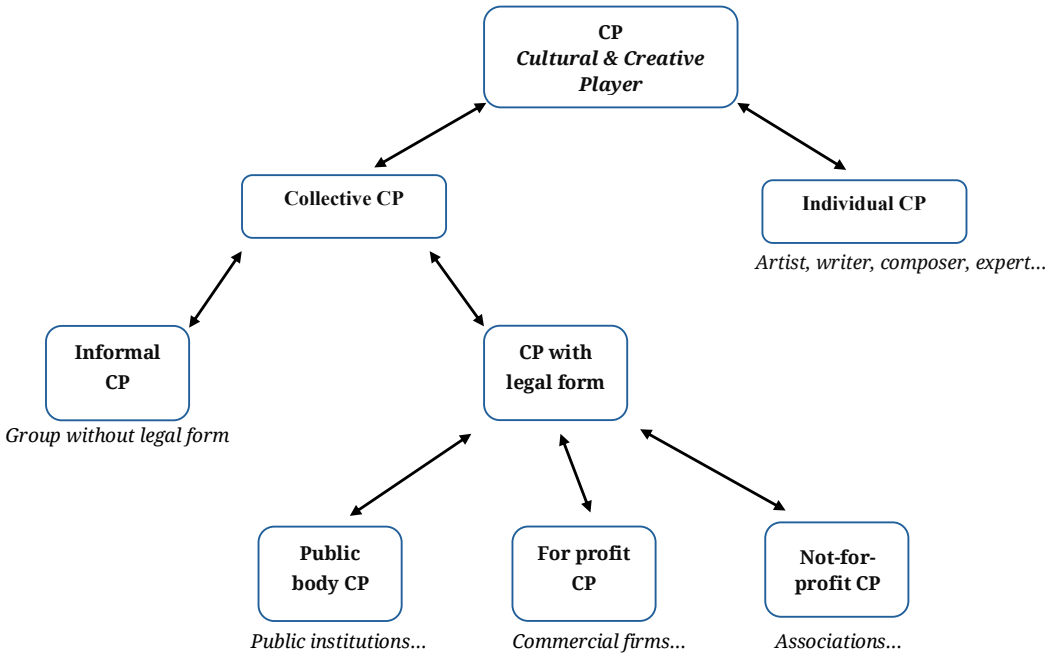
1. Methodology

The term Cultural Player (CP) refers to either a collective or an individual player (Figure 1). Yet every CP enacts under uncertainty and incomplete information, which ultimately bears on individuals— whether creators (individuals) or managers and leaders of cultural organisations—whose perceptions shape strategic reasoning and capital-to-resource conversion.

[1] By drawing on game theory's contribution to the logic of a player's strategic reasoning under interdependence and rules (Hammoudi, 2018).

[2]

Figure 1 – CP (Cultural Player): A generic term designating players that may take various legal forms



A CP becomes a strategic unit when it acts to create value through the provision of a good or service. This provision, together with the upstream activities that enable it, may form part of an external value chain (Porter, 1985), in which the CP is one contributor among others to a final cultural product or service. Individual CPs therefore occupy a genuine position in these chains, just as collective CPs do (D'Angelo, 2025).

To understand the durability of a CP, it is essential to distinguish between its value proposition (what it offers), value creation (user-perceived worth), value capture (exchange value obtained), and value sharing (how this value is distributed among contributors) (Lepak et al., 2007; Pitelis, 2009; Verdin & Tackx, 2015). At the core of value lies the question of contracts and bargaining power.

Characterising a CP's strategic situation, requires crossing theories and empirical analysis, drawing on strategic management theories—introduced earlier—and on more transdisciplinary theories: open systems, learning, capital, game, prospect, and collective action. It requires also a dual analysis: a structural perspective (focusing on situational dimensions) and a strategic perspective (addressing adaptive processes). Key questions include how a CP forms, endures, develops, or even disappears, especially given that it faces multifaceted competition (Wolfmayr, 2024).

To address these questions, a methodological approach derived from the theoretical framework is required, capable of incorporating all relevant factors. It is applied to a primary case study, BARSO (a music ensemble established in 1985), with comparisons to an individual CP, the artist Pierre Soulages (1919–2022). BARSO, a regionally renowned performing arts ensemble—offering intangible concert experiences—, contrasts with Soulages, an internationally acclaimed artist—that offered mostly tangible goods. BARSO receives public support, whereas Soulages operated independently, deriving income from market sales. These differences demonstrate the framework's applicability.

Three dimensions will be analysed:

i. The CP's essential interdependencies—its partnerships and supportive or unsupportive stakeholders—within which organised action has emerged, both as a legally established organisation and as a cooperative ecosystem sustaining value creation and comparative advantages.
ii. The CP's capital (financial, tangible, and intangible/intellectual), accumulated through capitalisation processes that anticipate its conversion into appropriate resources.
iii. The CP's strategic actions, processes, and capabilities, expressed through coordinated practices and situated strategic reasoning that, via tacit or explicit plans balancing resources, constraints, and objectives, generate incremental change and occasionally disruptive reconfigurations.

For BARSO, data were gathered via documents (press articles, internal documents, website presentation…), semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. For Soulages, sources include interviews given by the artist, biographies, exhibition catalogues, press articles, auction records, and documentary films.

2. The CP's situation as an open and learning organisational system

From a systemic perspective, a CP emerges from interdependent relations shaped by power dynamics. It may be an individual creator such as P. Soulages or a coordinated collective entity such as BARSO. In both cases, it is embedded in a web of relationships, interactions and transactions required to produce and deliver goods or services, thereby generating economic and cultural value, including aesthetic, spiritual, social and identitarian dimensions (Throsby, 2001).

For a collective CP with legal personhood, value creation and capture are run by de jure authority, hierarchy, and rules. This organisation distinguishes itself from external players and develops its own perception and representation of its situation. Yet, organisational-legal boundaries remain for many CPs fluid, expanding or contracting according to partnerships and stakeholder engagements (Argano, 2024; Jung & Vakharia, 2019).

BARSO was founded in 1985 by the current artistic director (AD) as a not-for-profit association. At the time, the founder brought together trained musicians specialising in the Baroque style, supported by local friends eager that the city and the Département hosts such concerts. Historically informed performance was innovative within the classical music field: Baroque soloists and ensembles were gaining momentum worldwide (François, 2005). The project aligned with the local authorities' desire to showcase the rich Baroque architectural heritage on their territory. BARSO operates without permanent musicians[2]; its stable core consists of the AD, and two administrative staff. The non-permanent musicians and technicians, as well as the volunteers are 'boundary spanners' (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981), contributing their skills, contacts, or information to the organisation's development. Although legal authority rests with the president of the board, real authority is also recognised as lying with the AD, and functional relationships dominate (e.g. between the office manager and the volunteers, or the president over the musicians).

Between the broader environment and the CP lies the ecosystem, formed through the interactions with the key external contributors and external influential stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010), which underpins the CP's value creation. Not pre-given, an ecosystem evolves through trust-based exchanges and cooperation. An individual CP, such as Soulages, has outsourced the commercial, promotional and distribution functions to trust-based partnerships with galleries and art dealers. Likewise, BARSO chooses its external partners—musicians, soloists, Baroque-heritage venues, graphic designer, accountant, and caterer. A CP builds its "ecosystem-as-structure" (Adner, 2017). BARSO's ecosystem is also territorial (Borin & Fabiano, 2015), as most partnerships and stakeholders are local. Among them are public authorities (city, département, region), which provide two-thirds of income, and around forty volunteers, who influence governance by electing the board through the general assembly.

In a music ensemble, learning is multifaceted: between musicians and staff, musicians and volunteers, and above all between the musicians and the AD and principal conductor. The repertoire is an outcome of this ongoing learning process (Faulkner & Becker, 2009). Since its inception, BARSO has also had to meet legal and financial obligations, liaise with local governments, and manage its relations with the public—particularly season subscribers and individual donors. As recognition grew, BARSO was able to employ skilled staff, reducing the administrative burden on the volunteer executive committee and enabling wider promotion of its season and festival.

3. Capital and Capitalisation in the CP's Strategic Situation

Capital refers to accumulated stocks—financial, material, and intangible (knowledge, experience, reputation, copyrights). Numerous theories have sought to characterise intangible capital, often to formalise it as assets for firms or incorporated entities. In the cultural and creative field, financial capital may include reserves, investment funds, and endowments, while material capital encompasses historical monuments and sites; buildings used for performances or exhibitions; equipment required for artistic production; and unique artefacts such as a Baroque soloist's ancient instrument or canvases stored in Soulages' studio awaiting exhibition. This material capital constitutes CPs' fixed assets.

Intangible capital plays a decisive role for many CPs, generating revenues and externalities: authors' rights, museum collections, built heritage, film inventories, etc. It also reflects symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993),

[2] Their status grants autonomy but also fragility (Menger, 2006).

such as peer recognition, labels, awards, and prizes. Soulages's artistic standing, for example, is reinforced by distinctions like the Praemium Imperiale and by retrospectives in major museums.

From Lewin's perspective on intertwined material goods and knowledge (2011), the capital mobilised in BARSO's production extends beyond artistic skill to include the expertise of instrument makers and the human capabilities required in non-routine collective interpretation. Capital goods—scores, instruments, venues, technical equipment—acquire value only through the specialised knowledge of those who use them. A similar interplay between knowledge and particular tools, such as brushes, rakes or brooms, emerged through cumulative, experiential learning, leading Soulages to develop his 'Outrenoir' concept, which took shape on his canvases.

Among intangible capitals, intellectual capital (IC) offers a particularly relevant lens for understanding how CPs sustain artistic creation, organisational continuity, and long-term viability. It constitutes a dynamic set of capabilities built from three interrelated components: human, structural, and relational capital (Matos, 2024).

In BARSO's case, musicians enter with artistic/IC acquired through training and early careers. This human capital is continually developed through collective work and learning (in rehearsals and concerts). Musicians' competencies are coordinated through shared practice, conventions and mutual adjustment (arrangements) structuring cooperation (Becker, 1982; Faulkner & Becker, 2009; Sawyer, 2007). Structural capital refers to organisational routines, expertise, and codified knowledge that support production. BARSO's office manager, for instance, mobilises contractual expertise to secure partnerships and manage musicians—an illustration of how structural capital stabilises and enables collective action.

As of the relational dimension of IC, it encompasses trusted collaborations with the supportive stakeholders and partners and support knowledge exchange and mutual learning (Carmeli, 2004). Similarly, the relationships with audiences rely on forms of attachment and mediation central to cultural production, particularly in music (Hennion, 2015).

Capital becomes strategically meaningful only when transformed into a resource—capital activated to address a constraint, seize an opportunity, or respond to a stake. In the resource-based view (Barney & Hesterly, 2014), resources arise only when capital is mobilised at the right moment, in the right context, and with the necessary competences. BARSO's reputational/relational capital became a resource when a Baroque Palace Organisation entrusted the ensemble with producing four chamber-music concerts. This transformation depended not only on reputation but also on relational and structural capital, notably the collaboration between the two office managers whose expertise ensured contractual reliability.

Capital-to-resource transformation results from a broader process of capitalisation: the intentional construction, accumulation, and maintenance of relationships, information, skills, knowledge, experience, creativity, and reputation that may later become actionable resources. A partnership, for example, is not given; it is co-constructed over time and becomes a resource only when relevant to a specific challenge. In Soulages's case, the capitalised relationship (1954-1966) with gallerist Samuel Kootz proved decisive when entering the American market.

4. The CP's Strategic Architecture: Situated Reasoning and Strategic Change

This dimension reflects the CP's dynamics, development, sustainability and the changes it undergoes. Strategy is not a static framework but a process through which a CP transforms, adapts and improves its structural position by converting capital into resources and deploying situated reasoning in response to external developments, with varying degrees of agility. It is intrinsically linked to governance and leadership.

Strategy involves deliberate choices to allocate resources in ways that optimise the likelihood of achieving the CP's goals. Bounded rationality illuminates how players cope with uncertainty: they rely on simplified models and act in situations they cannot fully grasp, despite the proliferation of new computational substrates and vast amounts of data (Clark, 2013; Simon, 1965). Game theory has provided a framework for understanding rational strategic behaviour in contexts where CPs act to achieve their goals (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1995; Saloner, 1991). The choice of legal structure—such as BARSO's not-for-profit association—constituted an initial strategic move and charted a course for development, as it required two further elements: volunteers to run the organisation and public support. This act opened up a path to interdependencies for BARSO.

While strategizing underlies every CP's behaviour, strategic discourse grounded in academic concepts may be absent. Soulages and BARSO lack this formal discourse, yet their actions reflect implicit strategies and long-term vision[3].

Strategy emerges from intentions shaped by anticipation of threats or opportunities (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). It does not always take the form of explicit plans: For example, BARSO never formalised a strategic plan but has remained true to its founder's perspective (an association subsidised by public authorities), operating within a relatively stable ecosystem until the recent years, which has therefore required few changes. Its routinised operations centred on the annual concert season and summer festival, alongside promotion, grant applications and budget meetings.

Strategy cannot be separated from the CP's perception and interpretation of its situation, as it emerges from "context embedded, socially accomplished activities" (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Structural and strategic dimensions are therefore inseparable (Chandler, 1962): every strategy is shaped by a given situation, and every situation reflects the past strategies.

The overarching goal of a CP is to generate, consolidate and appropriate economic, artistic and cultural value to secure long-term viability. This constitutes its strategic horizon, against which it recognises the need to foreground comparative advantages—artistic and cultural uniqueness, institutional legitimacy, networked partnerships or market differentiation—to strengthen its position. Thus, for BARSO, funded by local authorities, the logic of sustainability rests on collective efforts to support the artistic proposition, develop educative partnerships and cultivate a local audience to enhance the value of the region's Baroque heritage. Conversely, for an artist such as Soulages, who is dependent on the market, the sustainability logic rests primarily on his artistic and aesthetic vision and on a professional trajectory supported by an influential cooperative ecosystem that enables intellectual and symbolic capitalisation.

Strategy and decision-making are inextricably linked. In collective CPs, the strategic process resembles a "stream of decisions" and, more broadly, a set of practices shaped by leaders (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Whittington, 1993). However, individual players are not overlooked when we account strategy from the interactions between the player and their ecosystem. Nevertheless, decision-making becomes a balancing act. For BARSO, the reduction of public funding presented a dilemma: raise ticket prices, seek sponsors, reduce concerts, or programme smaller ensembles. The AD opted for the latter, leveraging the flexibility offered by employing non-permanent musicians. His objective was to maintain both the quality and the volume of the season. A CP's strategy, therefore, involves calculating and navigating probable long-term gains or losses (Powell, 2006).

The concept of room for manoeuvre (Friedberg, 1997; 2012) clarifies the tensions inherent in decision-making, arising from CP's perception of resources, constraints and threats, jointly assessed with goals it maintains or reshapes. Strategy rests on situated reasoning that may occur through explicit collective processes in organisations or tacit coordinated processes in ecosystems.

[3] Other CPs (e.g. private concerts producers, transnational auction houses, etc.) employ explicitly strategic language (D'Angelo, 2025).

Reduced government funding affected BARSO's development, traditionally concert-focused, compelling it to diversify its revenue streams. The CP seized the opportunity offered by the EAC programme (arts education in schools) to develop a second line of value-creation alongside its concert activities. This project-based approach secures new public grants, introduces new expertise and provides an additional source of legitimacy. Thus, while BARSO's path dependency limits its core activities, its dynamic capabilities enable it to reconfigure its capitalisation and resources (Teece, 2007; Garud et al., 2010).

Strategy not only encompasses plan, ploy, position and pattern, but may also involve a shift in perspective (Mintzberg, 1995) that brings about durable change. Digitisation is often associated with disruptive effects (as in the recorded music industry), forcing many CPs to rethink their models. Yet for BARSO and Soulages, core production processes remained largely untouched while support functions were significantly reshaped by digitisation.

From its foundation to today, BARSO shows only incremental changes that have not profoundly altered its interdependencies or its capitalisation anticipating new resources and competences. Its path dependency—marked by a 15-year absence of recordings, limited venue capacities (250–300 seats, or 600 in the cathedral) and low-ticket prices (average €15 per concert)—shapes and limits its strategic options. Diversification through the EAC activity is not a profound change in its strategic situation but an adaptation to funding cuts.

The case of Soulages, meanwhile, shows that an artist's career undergoes a major change when they become part of a supportive and actively engaged collaborative ecosystem. From a fragile strategic situation, the individual gains economic and intellectual capital, fuelling experimentation, production and reputation.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to conceptualise the strategic situation of a cultural player (CP), either an individual or an organisation. A strategic situation comprises three interrelated components: (1) coordinated interdependent relationships constituting an open, learning organisational system, marked by omnipresent competition, and through which the CP's capitalisation processes are enabled; (2) a mechanism, intrinsic to this system and guided by long-term vision and viability concerns, through which financial, tangible and intellectual endowments are capitalised by the CP, who anticipates their potential relevance and mobilisability; and (3) strategic action within and upon this situation, through which the CP seeks to influence circumstances and address specific challenges. It consists in a capital-to-resource conversion: transforming the constructed outputs of capitalisation—partners, stakeholders, information, skills, experience, reputation, creativity—into resources when they prove relevant to a specific challenge. It is realised through situated strategic reasoning—calculations in formulating plans, often tacit and invariably flexible, as circumstances evolve. Most of the changes resulting from strategies are incremental and do not affect the system of interdependencies nor the strategic capitalisation. This triadic definition underpins a three-step method enabling the practical apprehension of a CP's strategic situation.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a major gap in cultural management and strategic studies: the absence of a clear analytical concept for diagnosing the strategic situation of a cultural players (CP) that may be a not-for-profit organisation, a public institution, a commercial firm, or a self-employed creator. Despite

their diversity, all CPs operate under uncertainty, evolving ecosystems, and the need to mobilise contextual advantages to sustain viability and long-term development.

Building on the triadic framework, a structured method is proposed for analysing a CP's strategic situation. It enables users to map essential interdependencies, assess how financial, tangible and intangible capital are transformed into relevant resources, and identify strategic choices with long-term effects. The notion of situated strategic reasoning further clarifies constraints, threats and opportunities within decision-making streams, helping to understand how CPs articulate plans —often tacit—to reassess their objectives. In doing so, the framework supports reflection on degrees of change indicating: when incremental adjustments are sufficient for durability, and when deeper transformations become necessary.

The concept benefits multiple communities: CPs undertaking self-assessment; consultants conducting audits or evaluations; educators and students analysing CPs sustainable value creation and development through case studies; and public agencies designing support schemes. Although this article is conceptual, the framework is operationalised through grids, matrices, and diagrams to examine elements such as legal form, governance indicators, funding structures, diversification, reputation, or regulatory effects.

Early applications in professional training and university courses show that practitioners and students use the framework and its analytical tools to diagnose cultural organisations and creators' trajectories, refine strategic reasoning, and better identify long-term effects of decisions.

By offering a rigorous conceptualisation of a CP's strategic situation, this triadic framework also strengthens existing tools—particularly the Business Model Canvas—by adding analytical depth on how interdependencies, capitalisation, and strategic action jointly shape sustainable value creation.

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Mario d’Angelo - Biography

Mario d’Angelo is Emeritus Professor at Burgundy School of Business, where he founded in 1990 the first cultural management master’s programme within a French business school. He also held teaching and research positions at Sorbonne University (1998–2013). As an expert for the Council of Europe (1995–2003) and the OIF-Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (1991–2002), he authored several comparative studies on European cultural policies and on issues affecting francophone cultural industries. As a consultant, he has carried out numerous commissioned assignments, including feasibility studies for cultural facilities, sector analyses and strategic advice. His recent book, *Qui sont les acteurs culturels?*, presents a dynamic typology of cultural players—organisations and individuals—grounded in the concept of cultural player’s strategic situation, illustrated by examples from an empirical study across twenty European countries.

Digital Heritage as an Ecosystem: A Practice-Based Study of Croatia's eKultura Model

Ms. Jelena Rubić, Matea Kolendić, Laura Šejić
Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office
Digitisation, Documentation and Registry Sector
Directorate for Archives, Libraries and Museums
Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia

Abstract

The eKultura project is a national digital initiative designed to strengthen Croatia's cultural heritage sector through the development of a shared infrastructure for the preservation, management and public access to digital cultural content. By integrating museums, archives, libraries, and audiovisual institutions into a unified system, eKultura operates as a coordinated cultural ecosystem that supports interoperability, institutional collaboration, and long-term sustainability. This paper presents eKultura as a practice-based case study of organizing a national digital infrastructure in the cultural and creative sector, highlighting a transition from a purely technical platform to a commons-oriented ecosystem. Beyond its technical function, eKultura serves as a social and collaborative hub, allowing institutions with varying resources and levels of digital maturity to participate within a framework based on shared standards, interoperability and coordinated governance. The paper further explores how digital infrastructure can institutionalize horizontal collaboration, collective accountability, and mutual support across organizational boundaries.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a practice-based case study approach as well as internal and external desktop research with structured practitioner reflection derived from direct involvement in the project's development and implementation. The qualitative component is based on document analysis directly related to the development of the eKultura platform. It examines national and EU policy frameworks, sectoral strategies, project documentation, technical standards, metadata schemas and interoperability guidelines that informed the design of the ecosystem. This approach enables an understanding of how documented institutional needs and sectoral standards were integrated into the system to support participation and engagement within the cultural heritage ecosystem. The analysis is organized around three interrelated dimensions. First, international alignment examines interoperability and integration with other European cultural frameworks and platforms. Second, governance and coordination mechanisms explore how collaboration, shared standards, and decision-making processes are structured across institutions. Third, the analysis examines ecosystem effects, including capacity building, resource sharing, institutional participation and user engagement. Together, these dimensions enable an assessment of how documented policy objectives and sectoral standards are translated into digital infrastructure design and operational practices within the cultural heritage ecosystem.

By conceptualizing digital infrastructure as simultaneously technical, organizational, social, and political, this paper offers an in-depth understanding of how national digital heritage systems can function as collaborative ecosystems. The practice-based perspective ensures relevance for cultural managers and policymakers, while contributing empirically grounded insights to broader debates on sustainable, cooperative, and policy-enabled models of digital cultural infrastructure.

Keywords: *digital cultural heritage, cultural ecosystems, collaborative infrastructure, governance, cultural policy*

1. Introduction

The eKultura system is Croatia's national digital cultural heritage infrastructure, designed to support the preservation, management and online accessibility of cultural heritage resources (Bilić, 2019; Đuretić et al., 2025). It connects museums, archives, libraries and other cultural institutions within a unified ecosystem, enabling the long-term preservation of digital content and wider public access to cultural heritage materials (Rubić & Šejić, 2025). The platform[1] was developed through the project "e-Culture – Digitisation of Cultural Heritage", funded by the European Regional Development Fund under the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion 2014–2020 (Uzelac et al., 2024).[2]

This paper examines eKultura as a practice-based case study of national digital cultural infrastructure development. The research combines analysis of project documentation, policy and strategic frameworks, technical standards, interoperability guidelines, and practitioner reflection informed by direct involvement in the project. Particular attention is given to three interrelated dimensions: interoperability and alignment with European digital heritage frameworks, governance and coordination mechanisms and ecosystem effects reflected in institutional participation, resource sharing and user engagement. The Croatian case provides insights into the role of national cultural policy in supporting cross-institutional cooperation, strengthening sectoral capacities and facilitating integration into the broader European digital heritage ecosystem.

2. International alignment, interoperability and integration with other European cultural frameworks

The planning of eKultura took place within a broader policy framework shaped by European and national strategic initiatives (Uzelac et al., 2024). At the European level, the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010a) and the Digital Agenda for Europe (European Commission, 2010b) emphasised the importance of exploiting information and communication technologies to foster economic growth, innovation and social inclusion. These priorities were reflected in Croatian national strategies, including the e-Croatia 2020 Strategy (Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Digital Transformation, 2017), which emphasised the development of interoperable public information systems and digital services. These strategic documents established a framework for the development of public-sector information systems and electronic services, with particular emphasis on integrated access to information and the reduction of administrative barriers for citizens.

During the programming of the 2014–2020 European funding period, eKultura was identified as a strategic investment priority within Croatia's cultural sector. The need for eKultura was further reinforced by the persistent fragmentation of the digital cultural landscape at both national and European levels. Cultural institutions often maintained isolated digital collections and information systems, limiting interoperability and public access. To address these challenges, eKultura was envisioned as a unified national system capable of aggregating metadata, enabling integrated search and access to digital collections, supporting long-term digital preservation and facilitating connections with wider European digital heritage initiatives,

[1] eKultura is an open-access platform for search and exploration of digitised cultural heritage content available at https://ekultura.hr/.

[2] The total value of the project amounted to EUR 5,573,624.51, of which EUR 4,672,175.17 was co-financed by the European Union. The project was led by the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia in partnership with the Croatian State Archives, Croatian Radiotelevision, the Museum of Arts and Crafts and the National and University Library in Zagreb (Klarin Zadravec, 2021).

including Europeana (European Commission, 2024a). These objectives were reflected in the Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Culture and Media 2015–2017 (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2014), which envisaged the establishment of a national information system for digital cultural heritage. The establishment of eKultura represented a comprehensive effort to modernise Croatia’s digital cultural infrastructure.

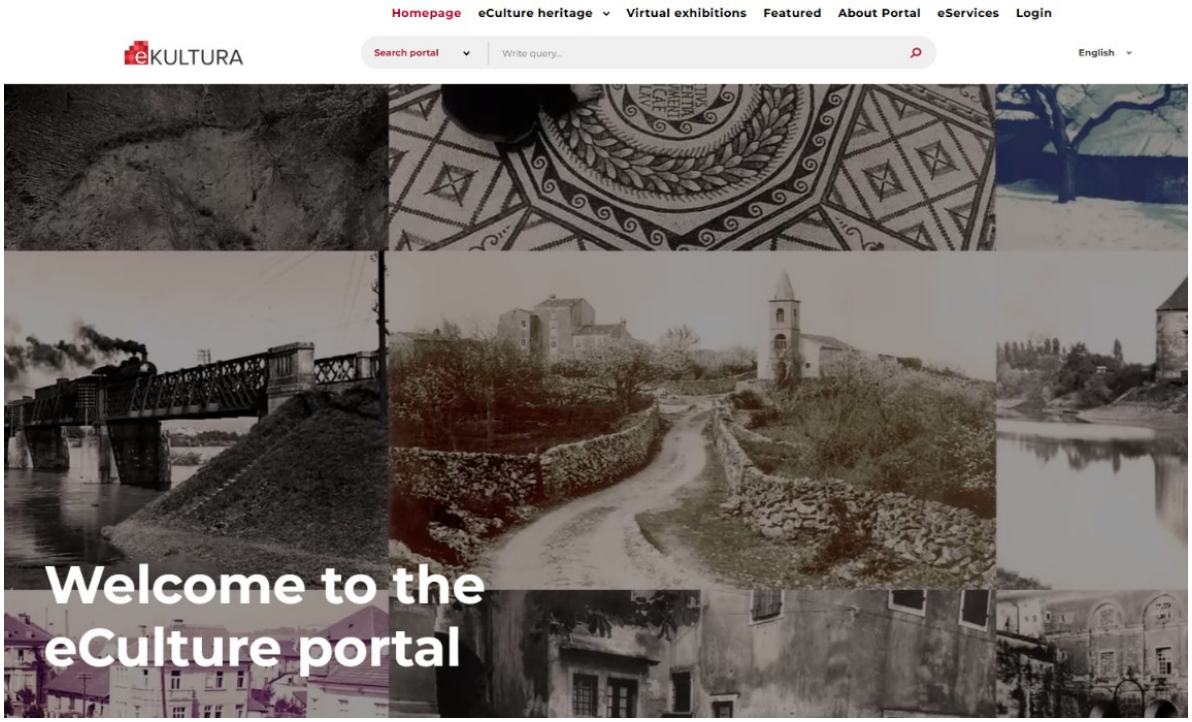


Figure 1: The eCulture (eKultura) homepage. Source: https://ekultura.hr, 2026.

Designing a system capable of serving a diverse range of institutions with varying levels of technical expertise and responsibility for different types of content such as text, images, 3D objects, audio recordings and video materials, represented a significant challenge. Consequently, eKultura had to integrate local applications regardless of internet connectivity constraints or file sizes. To address these requirements, the project adopted specifications, software solutions, training programmes and knowledge-sharing mechanisms intended to support data creators and software developers in managing and reusing digital resources in a sustainable, cost-efficient and interoperable manner. At the core of eKultura system is the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) Reference Model (Consultative Committee for Space Data Systems, 2024) which structures preservation activities around information packages. The Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard (METS) (The Digital Library Federation, 2019) is used as the primary standard for transmitting information packages, while Preservation Metadata: Implementation Strategies (PREMIS) provides the principal framework for documenting preservation activities and ensuring the long-term authenticity of digital objects (PREMIS Editorial Committee, 2015). The application of international standards, particularly OAIS, together with the integration of the Central Permanent Storage System (CPSS), forms the foundation of eKultura’s preservation infrastructure. In addition, the adoption of open-source technologies strengthens the capacity to standardise digitisation workflows, implement quality-control procedures and manage metadata efficiently. This systematic approach not only guarantees the integrity and preservation of cultural assets but also enables institutions with differing levels of technical maturity to contribute to a unified national repository (Igrec & Sušac, 2023).

A key component of eKultura’s success is its process-oriented methodology, centred on RODA (Repository of Authentic Digital Records), a long-term digital repository solution that provides functionalities covering all major units of the OAIS reference model. Through its alignment with Europeana, eKultura functions as

Croatia’s national aggregator while also contributing to the wider European digital cultural ecosystem. Through the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH) and the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), eKultura facilitates the exchange and dissemination of cultural heritage information across institutions and platforms. This interoperability framework reduces unnecessary duplication of data, improves metadata consistency and enables the automated transformation of metadata formats such as MODS, LIDO, EAD, and Dublin Core into the European Data Model (EDM), thereby ensuring compatibility with European cultural heritage infrastructures (Igrec & Sušac, 2023). The project’s commitment to accessibility is demonstrated through its multilingual portal, available in more than twenty-eight languages through the integration of HRVOJKA, a multilingual communication platform developed within the National Language Technology Platform (NLTP, 2026) and supported by the Connecting Europe Facility programme, enabling users worldwide to explore Croatian cultural heritage.

The Ministry actively participates in European cooperation frameworks by implementing European policies and recommendations on cultural heritage digitisation (European Commission, 2011). In addition, the Ministry participates in the European Commission Expert Group on a common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, contributing to the preparation of legislative proposals, policy initiatives, delegated acts and the implementation of European Union programmes and policies related to cultural heritage digitisation. The European Commission’s Recommendation on a Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage establishes ambitious targets for Member States regarding the availability and quality of digital cultural heritage content. In this context, Croatia is expected to substantially increase its contribution to Europeana and related European digital heritage infrastructures by 2030 (European Commission, 2021).

As Croatia’s national aggregator, the Ministry coordinates the integration of digital heritage content into European platforms and infrastructures. The eKultura system plays a central role in this process by providing the technical and organisational framework necessary for metadata aggregation, interoperability and content exchange. Through eKultura, digital collections from Croatian cultural heritage institutions can be made accessible not only at the national level but also within the broader European digital heritage ecosystem, thereby enhancing the international visibility and accessibility of Croatian cultural heritage resources.

3. Governance and Coordination Mechanisms, Common Standards and Decision-Making Processes Structured Across Institutions

The eKultura system is structured around four core functions: digitisation, the provision of digitisation services to cultural heritage institutions, long-term storage and the delivery of services based on preserved digital content. The implementation of these functions is supported by a comprehensive governance framework that encompasses organisational coordination, capacity building, technical infrastructure development and the adoption of common standards for metadata, digitisation, content selection and preservation. A centralised governance model ensures interoperability, data consistency and the uniform application of standards across participating institutions. The organisational structure is based on three levels comprising the system manager, partner institutions and other cultural heritage institutions, thereby enabling coordinated management and sustainable operation of the national digital heritage infrastructure.

The Ministry of Culture and Media serves as the governing authority and system manager of eKultura, providing strategic oversight, management and governance of its development and operation, while coordinating the national digital heritage infrastructure. The platform's technical infrastructure and data storage are hosted within the national Shared Services Centre in accordance with the Croatian State Information Infrastructure framework (Croatian Parliament, 2014). The successful implementation of the central management system for the storage, access, aggregation and search of cultural heritage materials, as well as the enhancement of digitisation processes, required the participation of partner institutions representing different sectors: archives (Croatian State Archives), libraries (National and University Library in Zagreb), museums (Museum of Arts and Crafts) and holders and creators of audiovisual materials (Croatian Radiotelevision) (Klarin Zadravec, 2021). Each partner brought sector-specific expertise and professional knowledge necessary for the development of the central system and e-services across heritage institutions. They contributed to system establishment, e-service development, the standardisation of approaches, cultural heritage digitisation and capacity-building initiatives.

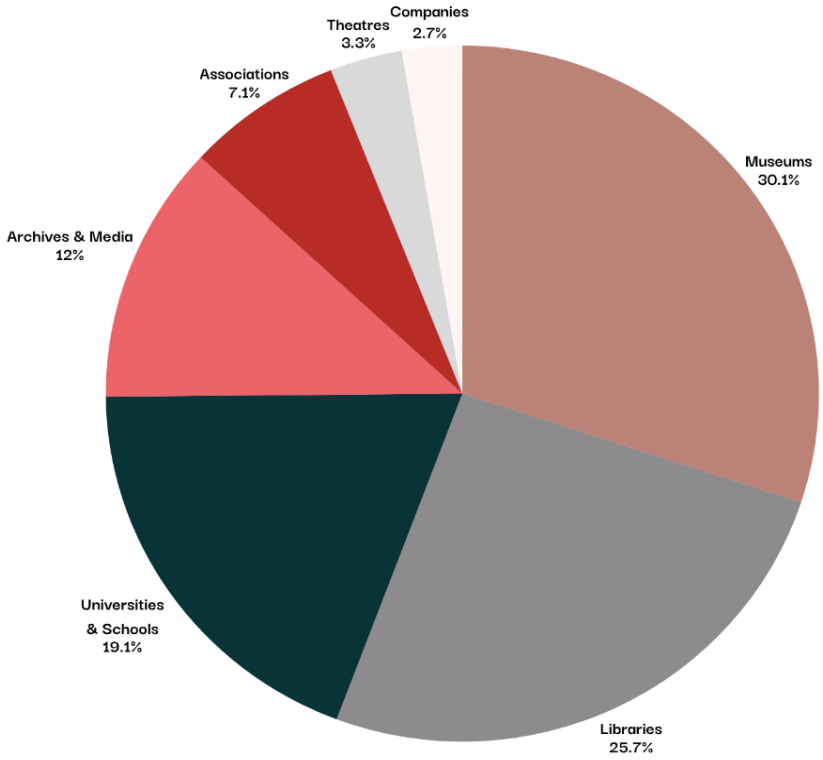


Figure 2: Pie chart of registered cultural heritage institutions by type on eKultura

Other heritage institutions include all organisations that collect, preserve, process and make available diverse digital materials of cultural, artistic, scientific and political significance for a particular community. Participation in eKultura requires institutions to sign a cooperation agreement with the Ministry, which defines their rights and responsibilities within the platform. Standards require heritage institutions and service providers to continuously improve quality, develop technologies and ensure features that meet user requirements. A standardised approach ensures the consistency of digitised materials and interoperability with external systems. The eKultura metadata standard was developed based on an analysis (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2018) showing that heritage institutions use different standards to describe specific types of materials according to their individual characteristics and requirements. Heritage institutions submit content to eKultura through API-based integrations, enabling the transfer, preservation, management, and dissemination of digital heritage materials.

A key outcome of the project was the standardisation of systematic digitisation of cultural heritage through the preparation of strategic digitisation documents, including the Decision on Digitisation Priorities (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2023), the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Plan (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2019) and the Digitisation Guidelines (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2020). These documents established the foundation for a systematic, standardised and sustainable approach to cultural heritage digitisation, defining priorities, selection criteria, recommended formats and project implementation procedures. An important mechanism supporting the growth of the eKultura ecosystem is the annual public funding programme administered by the Ministry of Culture and Media. Through the Public Call for Cultural Programmes of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry regularly finances digitisation projects across the cultural heritage sector. Digital content created through these publicly funded initiatives is subsequently integrated into the eKultura platform, ensuring its long-term preservation and public accessibility. The Ministry's digitisation funding programmes reflect sustained institutional investment in digital heritage, as evidenced by the increase in supported projects from 40 in 2024 to 65 in 2026.[3]

Furthermore, the importance of digitisation is reflected in the national legislative framework, which contains specific acts and policies governing the digitisation of cultural heritage. For example, in accordance with the Museums Act (Croatian Parliament, 2024a), all public museums are required to prepare a digitisation plan for museum collections. The Archives and Archival Institutions Act provides the normative basis for the digitisation of archival materials through the statutory responsibilities assigned to archives (Croatian Parliament, 2024b). The Libraries and Library Activities Act (Croatian Parliament, 2024c) requires libraries to ensure access to library materials and information, submit their digitisation plan and participate in the development of catalogues and databases. The Audiovisual Activities Act (Croatian Parliament, 2024d) promotes the protection, presentation and study of audiovisual heritage. Similarly, the Croatian Radiotelevision Act (Croatian Parliament, 2003) requires the Croatian Radiotelevision to produce, support and develop audiovisual and multimedia creativity, including activities related to the digitisation of audiovisual content. The protection of copyright and related rights, governed by the Copyright and Related Rights Act (Croatian Parliament, 2021), represents a key element in the establishment of a comprehensive cultural heritage digitisation system.

4. Ecosystem Effects: Capacity Building, Resource Sharing, Institutional Participation and User Engagement

The eKultura system provides an integrated digital infrastructure that supports the entire lifecycle of cultural heritage digitisation, including the creation, transfer, storage, preservation and dissemination of digital content. Through the shared infrastructure and coordinated workflows, participating institutions can improve operational efficiency, reduce duplication of effort and increase the visibility and accessibility of their collections (Rubić & Šejić, 2025). A central coordinating function within this ecosystem is performed by the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office serving as the principal institutional interface between the Ministry and participating organisations, facilitating the implementation of digitisation policies, standards and procedures across the sector. It provides expert support, coordinates communication among stakeholders and contributes to the harmonisation of digitisation practices, metadata standards and preservation requirements. The Office acts as a central intermediary within the eKultura ecosystem,

[3] The Ministry of Culture and Media publishes annual public calls for proposals on its official website. These calls constitute the primary funding mechanism for cultural programmes and projects of public interest, including cultural heritage digitisation initiatives. All public calls are available at: https://min-kulture.gov.hr/natjecaji-16274/javni-pozivi-404/arhiva-2632/2632.

connecting the technological infrastructure, content-producing institutions and the wider public to support the effective circulation and accessibility of digital cultural heritage.

User engagement represents an important dimension of the eKultura ecosystem. In addition to its multilingual interface, the portal ensures accessibility through a comprehensive set of advanced functionalities and accessibility tools. These include enhanced search filters, high-resolution content viewing and options for saving and exporting data, all of which contribute to an improved and more flexible user experience. The platform further supports inclusivity through dedicated accessibility features such as font size adjustment, grayscale mode, etc. The content of the portal is promoted through educational programmes, professional dissemination activities, scientific publications, workshops and conferences. To engage broader audiences, eKultura maintains an active presence on social media where selected content from the portal is regularly showcased and promoted. Educational outreach is further supported through the development of learning materials, including workbooks, colouring books and other resources designed to introduce cultural heritage to younger audiences (Rubić et al., 2025). The project also incorporates innovative digital technologies that enhance interaction with cultural heritage resources. These include virtual exhibitions hosted on the portal, an augmented reality eKultura exhibition[4], as well as immersive 3D virtual exhibition experiences that enable users to explore and learn about cultural objects, collections, and heritage sites. In this context, the Twin it! campaign is also noteworthy, as Croatia contributed with 3D models of cultural heritage to the initiative.

To assess the development and impact of the eKultura ecosystem, an analysis of institutional participation, content growth, platform usage and user engagement was conducted. The study uses data collected on 16 April 2026, offering a representative snapshot of the scale and usage patterns of the eKultura ecosystem at the time of observation. Empirical evidence was gathered from the eKultura platform, Google Analytics, the legal deposit system (eOP)[5] and social media analytics. As of April 2026, the eKultura platform comprises 601 digital collections, over 310,000 digital objects and 19 virtual exhibitions. A total of 181 institutions are currently registered on the portal as internal users. The platform records approximately 11,000 active external users, alongside around 600 registered external users, indicating a substantially broader public reach beyond formal registration. Usage statistics further demonstrate strong user engagement, with more than 353,000 page views and an average session duration exceeding ten minutes. While the user base is predominantly concentrated in Croatia, the portal also attracts visitors from neighbouring and other European countries, reflecting its increasing international visibility. The eOP system includes 379 registered publishers and 3,387 submitted legal deposit items, demonstrating sustained participation in digital preservation processes.

Based on the collected data, eKultura has contributed 147,462 digital heritage objects to the Europeana aggregation framework. In this context, eKultura functions as a comprehensive national aggregator for all participating cultural heritage institutions. Social media channels are used to present and promote digital heritage content, particularly through the eKultura Instagram profile, supporting the platform's visibility among younger user groups and complementing access through the main portal. Overall, the results demonstrate that eKultura has developed into a mature and scalable digital heritage ecosystem, successfully integrating institutional workflows, technological infrastructure and public engagement within a sustainable national framework.

[4] The AR eKultura exhibition was presented across multiple cultural institutions and conferences in Croatia during 2025 and 2026.

[5] eOP (e-Legal Deposit) is an e-service of the eKultura system established for Croatian publishers in accordance with the provisions of the Act on Libraries and Library Activities (Croatian Parliament, 2024c) and within the framework of Croatia's legal deposit system.

5. Conclusion

The eKultura infrastructure confirms that digital cultural heritage should be understood as a complex socio-technical ecosystem that integrates technological, organisational and social dimensions. In this regard, eKultura represents a significant shift from fragmented and institutionally isolated digitisation practices toward a coordinated, interoperable, and standards-based national infrastructure. As a central repository for the presentation and discovery of cultural heritage materials, it enables both internal and external users to access, search, and reuse resources, thereby supporting the long-term sustainability, accessibility, and reuse of cultural heritage assets.

Although the ecosystem has achieved significant success in terms of digitised content volume, institutional participation and user engagement, future sustainability will depend on continued investment in digital skills, inter-institutional cooperation, stable funding mechanisms and user-centred innovation. Future research should focus on evaluating its capacity to strengthen relationships between cultural heritage institutions and citizens through improved access, participation and digital engagement, while also exploring innovative approaches to the use and reuse of digital cultural heritage as a public good within the digital society.

Impact & Engagement

This paper addresses a key challenge in the cultural heritage sector: the development of a sustainable, interoperable and collaborative digital infrastructure that enables institutions with varying levels of capacity to preserve, manage and disseminate cultural content effectively. While digital transformation has become a strategic priority across Europe, many cultural institutions continue to face constraints related to limited resources, uneven technical expertise and fragmented information systems. The eKultura project responds to these challenges by establishing a shared national infrastructure that supports cooperation, interoperability and long-term access to digital cultural heritage.

The project has successfully addressed many of the challenges initially identified within the Croatian heritage sector, including fragmented information systems, inconsistent standards, limited institutional capacities and restricted public access to digital content. Through the implementation of a centralized infrastructure, shared metadata models and coordinated governance mechanisms, digital infrastructure has become not merely a technical solution but a mechanism for institutionalizing collaboration across the heritage sector.

The results of this project are relevant to a broad range of stakeholders, including cultural heritage institutions, policymakers, digital heritage professionals, public administrators, technology providers and citizens. The paper provides insights into how national-level infrastructures such as eKultura can foster enhanced cooperation among museums, archives, libraries, and audiovisual institutions, while ensuring alignment with European standards and interoperability frameworks. It provides transferable lessons for countries and institutions seeking to develop shared digital environments that balance technological requirements with governance, participation and long-term sustainability.

Expected impacts include strengthened institutional cooperation, enhanced capacity for digital preservation and access, improved interoperability across cultural information systems and increased public availability of cultural heritage resources to citizens. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that digital infrastructure functions not only as a technological platform, but as an enabling ecosystem that supports coordinated, collective stewardship of cultural heritage.

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Author biographies

Jelena Rubić holds degrees in Art History and Museology and serves as Head of the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office at the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media. She coordinates the development and operation of Croatia’s national digital infrastructure for cultural heritage and oversees activities related to the digitisation of archives, audiovisual heritage, libraries, and museums. Her work focuses on the strategic planning, implementation, and monitoring of national and European projects in the field of cultural heritage digitisation. A key aspect of her work involves fostering synergies between national and European policies, programmes, and platforms, contributing to the sustainable digital transformation of the cultural heritage sector.

Matea Kolendić holds a degree in Art History and Museology from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. She has worked as a program coordinator in museum and gallery institutions, organizing exhibitions of contemporary artists and authoring exhibition forewords. Since 2012., she has been a member of the Ministry of Culture and Media’s Culturenet and Web Department. In 2017 she was appointed Senior Advisor within the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office. Her current work focuses on developing and implementing the national central system for the storage, aggregation, and accessibility of digital cultural heritage at the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office, Directorate for Archives, Libraries, and Museums, Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia.

Laura Šejić is a professional associate in the Cultural Heritage Digitisation Office at the Ministry of Culture and Media. She completed her Master’s degree in Archaeology and Museology and Heritage Management at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. She holds a PhD in Archaeology from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. Her work currently focuses on the promotion of digitised cultural heritage, the administration of the cultural heritage digitisation projects, and the dissemination of results of digitised cultural content. Her main research interests are in heritage digitisation, digital storytelling, archaeological research and promotion of cultural heritage.

Navigating Frictions in Cultural Ecosystems: Cross-Lifecycle Intermediation in Heritage Reuse

Authors:
Chao-Shiang Li (China University of Technology, Taiwan)
Ting-Hsiung Hsiao (X-Basic Planning Co., Ltd.)
Chien-Sen Huang (X-Basic Planning Co., Ltd.)
Yi-Nuo Guo (X-Basic Planning Co., Ltd.)

Authors' bio

Chao-Shiang Li is an Assistant Professor at China University of Technology, Taiwan, with a PhD in Cultural Heritage from the University of Birmingham. His research focuses on heritage management, governance, adaptive reuse, museums and public value, particularly the relationships between conservation, institutional frameworks and contemporary use. He is an Expert Member of ICOMOS International Scientific Committees and currently serves as Co-Principal Investigator of the Taipei City Government Heritage Management Platform Project, bridging academic research with heritage management practice.

Ting-Hsiung Hsiao holds an M.S. from the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning at National Taiwan University and is a co-founder of X-Basic Planning Co., Ltd. His work focuses on urban regeneration, adaptive reuse, cross-sector coordination and sustainable heritage operation, connecting heritage conservation with long-term management and local development. He led the award-winning restoration and adaptive reuse of Chang-Yuan Hospital and has extensive experience in heritage revitalization projects. He also co-authored Beyond Aged (2025) and Aged Taipei (2020).

Chien-Sen Huang holds a B.S. in Interior Design from Shu-Te University and serves as Vice President of X-Basic Team+. His work focuses on heritage restoration, construction coordination and project management, particularly the integration of traditional building techniques with contemporary requirements. His major projects include the restoration of the Former Japanese Navy Fongshan Wireless Telegraph Station and the restoration and revitalization of historic warehouse complexes in Kaohsiung Harbor, reflecting his extensive experience in the on-site implementation and management of complex heritage projects.

Yi-Nuo Guo holds a B.S. in Architecture and Historic Preservation from Shu-Te University and serves as Senior Manager of the Design Department at X-Basic Team+. His work focuses on architectural design, heritage conservation and adaptive reuse, integrating historic preservation with contemporary spatial needs. He leads projects from conservation planning and architectural design through on-site implementation. His major works include the restoration and adaptive reuse of historic warehouse complexes in Kaohsiung Harbor and historic building façades in Qishan, Kaohsiung.

Abstract

This article examines how a heritage intermediary carries knowledge, relationships and decisions across adaptive-reuse stages. It compares X-Basic Planning’s involvement in Chang-Yuan Hospital, which began before historic-building registration and continued into operation, with Changhua Railway Hospital, where a post-restoration day-care proposal was not authorised and the intermediary’s contract ended while the operator remained. Using interviews, records, regulations and a 25-project timeline, the study traces continuity, redirection and interruption across six analytical coordinates. It argues that a Total Solution is best understood as a conditional capacity for cross-lifecycle intermediation, shaped by

relationship continuity, the distribution of authority and the ability to reorganise outputs when project pathways change.

Keywords

Heritage reuse; cultural intermediaries; cross-lifecycle intermediation; cultural ecosystems; institutional frictions

1. Introduction: The Missing Links after Restoration

Process models of adaptive reuse distinguish stages from value assessment and design to construction and renewed use (Arfa et al., 2022, 2024). In practice, authority shifts between actors and regulatory domains. In the two Taiwanese cases examined here, repair, heritage review, service authorisation and operation followed separate paths. Completing repair did not ensure that an intended use would be authorised, resourced or sustained. The question is how far knowledge, relationships, spatial outcomes and value judgements formed at one stage continue to shape the next.

Cultural intermediary research explains how professionals mediate value, expertise and access (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012), but says less about how their work persists across a project lifecycle. This matters when an approved function is interrupted: earlier research, design work and public investment may continue, be redirected or lose influence. Drawing on Holden (2015), cultural ecosystems are understood here as patterns of interdependence through which ideas, expertise and resources move, not as another formal model. In this study, these interdependencies are traced among state-owned enterprises, private owners, companies, incorporated private organisations and public authorities involved in heritage reuse.

The article examines X-Basic Planning through Chang-Yuan Hospital, a former clinic and doctor’s residence, and Changhua Railway Hospital, formerly a banquet hall. The organisation entered the first project before its registration as a historic building and remained involved through repair, public access and operation. It entered the second after monument designation and restoration to support a proposed long-term-care use that was not realised. Comparing the same intermediary under these contrasting conditions isolates how entry point, institutional authority and continuing partnerships affected its scope of action.

The article asks how X-Basic Planning translated knowledge and connected actors across lifecycle stages; which connections continued, changed or ended; and under what conditions this work may constitute a Total Solution. X-Basic Planning uses Total Solution to describe an integrated approach extending from historical research and repair to sustainable operation (X-Basic Planning Co., Ltd., 2025). The article subjects that practitioner claim to comparative analysis and treats it as a provisional proposition: a conditional capacity for cross-lifecycle heritage intermediation, not an accumulation of services or comprehensive control.

2. Analytical Framework: Lifecycle, Intermediation and Institutional Interfaces

Arfa et al. (2022) organise adaptive reuse into four phases and ten steps, presenting the sequence as an idealised model requiring empirical testing. Their later case research refined the model in response to practice (Arfa et al., 2024). Letellier et al. (2007) treat operation as part of a recurring conservation process, while van Laar et al. (2024) identify implementation as under-examined in decision-criteria research.

Together, these studies provide a temporal reference without requiring every project to follow the same sequence. Arfa et al.’s model is the principal point of departure because its detail allows intermediary involvement and discontinuities to be traced.

Three adjustments were required for comparison. Related steps were combined when they formed one decision cluster; separate coordinates were introduced where authority shifted between institutional actors; and recurring, incomplete or extra-sequential activities were retained. The resulting coordinates (Table 1.) are: (1) intermediary entry and problem definition; (2) heritage knowledge, value assessment and institutional positioning; (3) proposed use, feasibility and resource assembly; (4) design, repair and regulatory adjustment; (5) authorisation, interpretation and operationalisation; and (6) maintenance, evaluation and adaptation. They locate institutional interfaces across the cases and do not constitute a revised lifecycle model.

Table 1. The analytical framework across the case studies

Coordinate	**Chang-Yuan Hospital**	**Changhua Railway Hospital**
1.Entry	Before historic-building registration; use initially open	After monument designation and restoration; use proposed
2.Heritage knowledge	Research, repair and value recognition overlapped	Heritage status and values preceded entry
3.Use and resources	Use developed through phased work and funding	Day-care feasibility was reassessed
4.Design and repair	Repair overlapped with interpretation and access	Post-restoration works for the proposed day-care use were completed
5.Authorisation and operation	Repair and interpretation led into operation	Heritage approval did not secure care authorisation
6.Adaptation	Recent operation; long-term evaluation unavailable	Day-care proposal ended; retained the lease and redirected activities

Source: Authors’compilation.

3. Research Design and Evidence

This paired comparison follows the same intermediary from different entry points. X-Basic Planning entered Chang-Yuan Hospital in 2017, before statutory heritage recognition, and remained involved through phased repair, public opening, registration and operation. It entered Changhua Railway Hospital after monument designation and restoration to support a day-care proposal that did not proceed to operation. The comparison examines the formation and limits of cross-lifecycle intermediation rather than ranking the outcomes.

Three semi-structured interviews with the project manager, property owner and property operator were conducted in person during 2024 and 2026. Each lasted at least one hour and was audio-recorded, with detailed notes subsequently prepared. Additional evidence included X-Basic Planning’s project timeline; heritage registers and review records; government documents and regulations; project materials; field observations; and organisational and operator websites. Interview questions were organised around the

same six analytical coordinates for each case. Three co-authors work for X-Basic Planning, while the first author had prior involvement with Chang-Yuan. This insider access enabled longitudinal reconstruction; interpretations were cross-checked against official records and owner and operator accounts.

Following structured, focused comparison (George and Bennett, 2005), evidence was organised chronologically and examined through the six coordinates. The analysis traced the intermediary’s actions and whether earlier knowledge, relationships, resource commitments, physical changes and value judgements continued, changed, weakened or ended. It then assessed whether these linkages formed a cross-lifecycle capacity and where statutory authority, ownership or operational decisions limited it. A summarised 25-project timeline, compiled from X-Basic Planning’s internal records and cross-checked by the authors, recorded entry year, duration, heritage status, actor mix, completion, interruption, repeat engagement and later roles. It identified changes in X-Basic Planning’s project relationships and scope; interviews assessed whether these represented learning or capability development.

4. Cross-Lifecycle Intermediation across Two Cases

4.1 Chang-Yuan Hospital: Building a Path before Heritage Registration

Interviews and X-Basic Planning’s internal timeline place its initial involvement in 2017, when Chang-Yuan Hospital had no statutory heritage status. The owner wished to retain the building but had not settled how repair, future use, resources and responsibilities could be combined. X-Basic Planning entered before either a defined reuse brief or a historic-building registration process. It helped translate the owner’s intention into a course of action by clarifying the building’s condition, available resources and possible public role.

In 2018, the organisation supported an application for small-scale repair funding. By 2019, the front section had been repaired and partially opened through a combination of a county youth entrepreneurship initiative and a Ministry of Culture local cultural venue programme. Historical research, family objects and the photographic archive were progressively incorporated into spatial and interpretive decisions. Exhibitions and limited public access also continued while later repair was being prepared. These activities gave the site a public presence and provided occasions for continued interaction among the owner, public agencies, professionals and visitors.

A later whole-building phase was supported through the Ministry of Culture’s preservation and regeneration programme for privately owned old buildings. Following planning, historical research and review, construction began in 2022 and was completed in 2023. This moved the project from partial repair towards whole-building use, but did not replace the earlier work. Research and public activities undertaken during the first phase informed what was retained, interpreted and displayed. Resources were assembled incrementally, while earlier spatial and interpretive outputs were carried into the next phase rather than restarted under a single comprehensive scheme.



Figure 1. Façade of Chang-Yuan Hospital. Photo: I.-W. Chu. Courtesy of OS Photography Studio.

Chang-Yuan Hospital was registered as a Changhua County historic building on 31 October 2024, after the repair works had been completed. The sequence is important. The early repairs were enabled by old-house and privately owned old-building programmes, not by statutory heritage status. Registration consolidated legal recognition and future protection after the building’s significance had already been investigated, repaired and publicly articulated. Registration was one institutional outcome of the longer process, not its starting condition.

The building fully opened on 7 June 2025 as a privately-operated cultural venue offering displays of historical photographs, consultation on old-house reuse, cultural activities and food service. Interview accounts indicate that the owner and X-Basic Planning established a twenty-five-year rent-free cooperation arrangement. This extended the organisation’s involvement from research, planning and repair into interpretation and day-to-day operation, providing an institutional basis for carrying earlier decisions into use and maintenance. Full opening demonstrates operationalisation, but does not by itself establish financial sustainability or long-term social impact.



Figure 2. Part of permanent exhibition at Chang-Yuan Hospital. Courtesy of X-Basic Planning.

The project was not guided by a complete lifecycle plan. X-Basic Planning’s role expanded from advice to research, collections, interpretation, regulation, planning, design and operation. Cross-lifecycle capacity accumulated through staged resources, continuing relationships and institutional adjustment. Whether this amounts to a Total Solution is assessed through comparison with the interrupted pathway below.

4.2 Changhua Railway Hospital: When Heritage Approval Does Not Secure Day-Care Authorisation

By the time X-Basic Planning became involved, the principal heritage decisions had already been made. Changhua Railway Hospital had been designated a county monument in 2011 and restored in 2018. The initial post-restoration expectation centred on cultural and creative uses. Big Love Care Labor Co-op. Ltd. (hereafter Big Love) subsequently leased the building and proposed combining cultural activities with community-based day care. The operator considered the building’s historic ambience compatible with care for older people. Contact with X-Basic Planning began around 2019–2020 through a referral from another community-regeneration team. By 2020, X-Basic Planning was translating this service ambition into spatial and regulatory proposals for a building whose heritage status and major physical configuration had already been established.



Figure 3. Changhua Railway Hospital. Courtesy of Cultural Affairs Bureau of Changhua County.

The proposed use required the building to accommodate care provision, accessibility, fire safety and public activities without compromising its protected fabric. X-Basic Planning supported spatial adjustment, coordination among the user, owner, professionals and public authorities, and revision of the heritage reuse plan. Official heritage council records show that the proposal was not approved in August 2020 and was returned for further work. Following additional review and revision, it was approved unanimously in November 2020 (Changhua County Cultural Affairs Bureau, 2020a, 2020b). This established the acceptability of the proposed use within the heritage review process.

Heritage approval did not authorise operation as a long-term-care service. Under the regulations applicable in 2020, a community-based institution required separate preparatory and establishment permissions, while its premises had to meet building, accessibility, fire-safety and land-use requirements (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2017, art. 16; 2019, arts 6 and 12). Interview evidence indicates that the proposal was reviewed by the county health authority but did not receive the final authorisation required to operate as a day-care centre. The case therefore reveals an institutional break between heritage approval and care-service authorisation.

The unrealised day-care use did not erase the preceding investment or end the operator’s involvement. According to the operator, the physical improvement works undertaken for the day-care proposal were completed and passed the relevant inspections. In 2023, Big Love ended its contract with X-Basic Planning for advancing the day-care centre, but retained its lease with the railway employee welfare committee. It kept the site active at a lower intensity, initially as an education and training base and through activities held on major holidays. A related operating company later coordinated non-care uses, including exhibitions, performances, courses and other public activities. This redirection also reconfigured local relationships. The operator reported that a local cultural association that had initially opposed the day-care proposal later collaborated with the operator on public activities, including activities associated with the 2025 Taiwan Design Expo in Changhua.

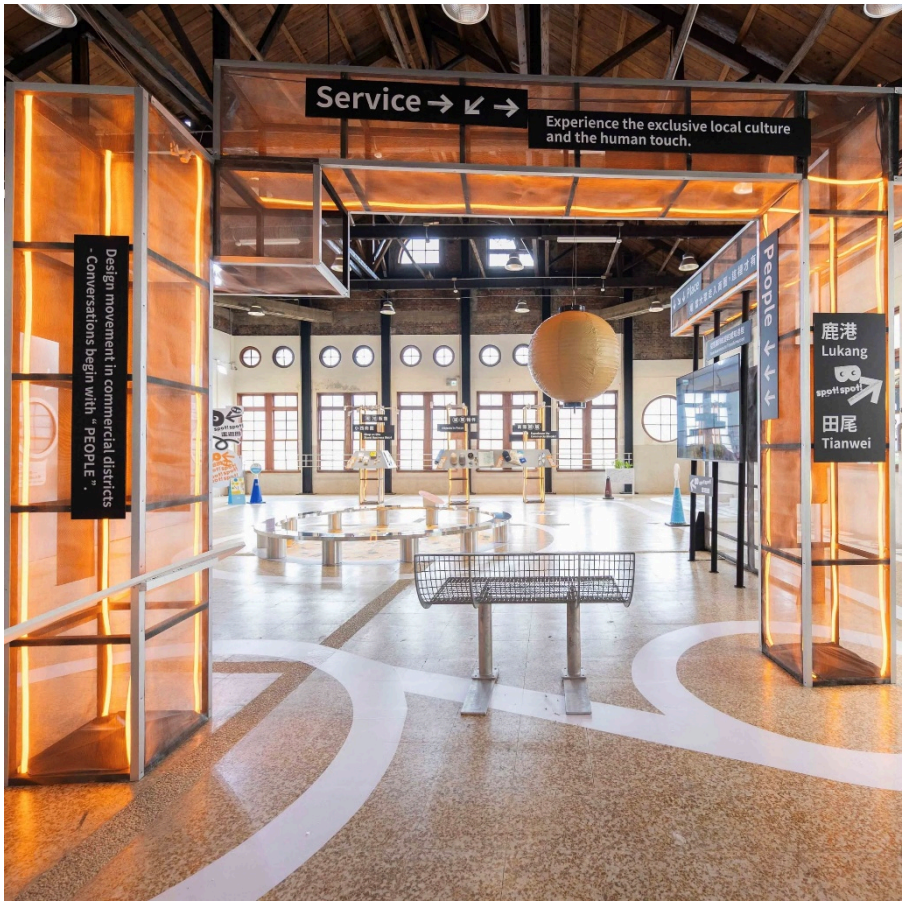


Figure 4. 2025 Taiwan Design Expo in Changhua at Changhua Railway Hospital. Courtesy of Xiaoxi Cultural Association.

X-Basic Planning could revise proposals and mediate between regulatory domains, but it could neither grant the required authorisation nor carry the day-care proposal into operation. Its contractual role ended in 2023, whereas the operator retained the lease and redirected the completed works, organisational experience and local relationships to other uses. The case therefore represents an interruption of the intended service and of one intermediary contract, not the operator’s withdrawal or abandonment of the site.

5. Comparative Discussion: From Cross-Lifecycle Intermediation to a Total Solution?

Reading the cases across the six analytical coordinates brought five comparative issues into focus: continuity of involvement, development of the intended function, retention of physical and activity outcomes, organisational learning and the pattern of connections that remained. These issues did not advance together, making a binary judgement of success and failure inadequate.

Entry before historic-building registration allowed X-Basic Planning to help define Chang-Yuan Hospital’s problem, assemble resources and develop possible uses. Its importance lay in sustained involvement across later transitions, not timing alone. At Changhua Railway Hospital, entry after monument designation and restoration narrowed the decisions open to intermediation. The cases also followed different functional paths: Chang-Yuan’s uses developed incrementally, whereas the more definite culture-and-care proposal gained heritage approval but not operational authorisation.

The connections that endured differed between the two cases. At Chang-Yuan Hospital, research, collections, repair decisions, interpretation and public access continued into subsequent stages. At Changhua Railway Hospital, the intended day-care function and X-Basic Planning’s contractual involvement ended, but the lease, completed physical improvements, periodic public use and experience gained in negotiating care-related requirements continued. The Changhua case therefore distinguishes continuity of intermediary involvement from continuity within the wider ecosystem. Cross-lifecycle intermediation should be assessed not only by whether an intermediary remains involved across stages, but also by whether the connections and outputs it helped assemble can be retained, adapted and used by other actors after its contractual role ends.

The first case does not yet demonstrate long-term sustainability; the second was not emptied of every outcome. The organisational timeline places the two cases within a portfolio of 25 projects. Twelve were marked heritage-related and thirteen non-heritage; two were interrupted, six involved repeat engagement, and five extended into operation or promotion. The latter project-pathway categories were descriptive and non-exclusive.

Across changing actor combinations of public agencies, state-owned enterprises, private owners, companies and incorporated organisations, the cultural ecosystem comprised shifting distributions of authority and dependency. Cross-lifecycle intermediation was enacted through recurring role negotiation across projects, not a fixed professional remit attached to one stage. Interviews indicate that learning was distributed across actors. Project demands prompted X-Basic Planning to develop regulatory, historical-research, interpretive and operational expertise, while the unrealised day-care proposal informed its later feasibility assessments. According to its chief executive, Big Love applied experience from Changhua Railway Hospital to its subsequent operation of Hemei Street Chief’s Dormitory, a registered historic building. Interviews also indicate that X-Basic Planning did not presume heritage designation or a single ideal reuse model, but sought workable arrangements for each building, owner, regulatory setting and operator. The evidence supports capability accumulation through varied projects, not the stronger claim that every project necessarily produced a new skill; nor can organisational learning substitute for an unrealised public service.

Chang-Yuan shows how cross-lifecycle capacity accumulated; Changhua Railway Hospital shows where it was curtailed. A Total Solution can therefore be understood as an adaptive capacity to retain and reorganise earlier outputs as a project moves between investigation, repair, authorisation and use. It remains conditional on relationships and divided authority. Its analytical value lies in showing which connections continue, change or end, not in promising comprehensive delivery.

6. Conclusion

This comparison indicates that the more useful question is not how many services an intermediary provides, but whether earlier decisions and outputs continue to shape later stages. Early entry widened X-Basic Planning’s scope at Chang-Yuan Hospital, yet continuity depended on sustained relationships, staged resources and institutional adjustment. At Changhua Railway Hospital, heritage approval did not secure the final authorisation required for day-care operation. The intended day-care function and X-Basic Planning’s contract ended, but the operator retained the lease, continued public use of the site and carried organisational experience into later heritage operation.

For cultural policy, supporting intermediary work across institutional transitions requires commissioning arrangements that recognise coordination, feasibility reassessment and operational handover as professional work, not incidental additions to repair. Continuity also depends on whether owners, users and authorities retain or renegotiate responsibilities when projects change direction.

A Total Solution remains a provisional account of adaptive cross-lifecycle capacity, not a general model. The two cases trace one intermediary across successive stages, including entry into operation, but not long-term maintenance or evaluation. Further comparative research should test this capacity under other ownership, regulatory and operational arrangements.

Impact and Engagement

By treating heritage-reuse coordinators as cultural intermediaries, this research makes visible a form of cultural work often fragmented across investigation, repair, authorisation and operation. It examines how commissioning arrangements and divided authority shape whether that work, and the connections it creates, can persist within cultural ecosystems.

The findings may benefit heritage authorities, funding bodies, property owners, operators, cultural organisations, conservation and planning practitioners, educators and students. The six analytical coordinates offer these groups a practical means of examining where project relationships, resources, approvals or responsibilities may weaken, while the comparative cases demonstrate why neither physical completion nor heritage approval alone secures an intended use. Potential pathways to impact include project reviews, professional workshops, case-based teaching, organisational reflection using project timelines, and dialogue among owners, users, authorities and intermediaries at key transition points. Through these routes, the research is expected to support earlier identification of regulatory and operational constraints, clearer responsibilities, more realistic project scoping, and greater recognition of coordination, feasibility reassessment and operational handover as professional work. It may also help stakeholders distinguish an interrupted use proposal from total project failure by identifying which material, organisational or public-use outcomes remain available for later adaptation.

As these impacts are anticipated, evidence should be gathered systematically through observable indicators. These may include use of the analytical coordinates in project briefs or reviews; documented changes to commissioning scopes, handover procedures or responsibility agreements; participation and feedback from stakeholder workshops; adoption of the cases in professional training or university teaching; requests for follow-up advice or collaboration; and examples in which identified constraints are addressed before implementation. Such evidence would test whether cross-lifecycle intermediation improves transparency, continuity and adaptability without presuming that one Total Solution can suit every cultural ecosystem.

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Inclusive Intercultural Museology and Sustainability: From the (In)visibility of Competences to International Cross-fertilisation

Prof. Linda Idjéraoui
SIC.Lab, Université Côte d'Azur

Abstract

The postcolonial transition of museums is reshaping collection law, ethical standards and professional work. Yet the competences required for provenance research, restitution, consultation with source communities, sensitive mediation and participatory governance remain unevenly articulated. Drawing on twelve French, supranational, British, Dutch, Brazilian and museum-based documentary units, this article develops a pragmatic matrix combining Sarfati, Goffman, Sperber and Wilson, and Austin. The analysis examines the distribution of roles, recognition of interlocutors, documentary salience of competences and procedural support for institutional commitments. It identifies three configurations: French over-adaptive creativity, structured British and Dutch formalisation, and Brazilian collaborative horizontality. The comparison does not reveal an absence of competences, but rather their fragmented visibility across professional frameworks. It identifies possible connections between norms, tasks, education and training, certification and working conditions.

Keywords: cultural pragmatics; postcolonial museology; professional competences; restitution; cultural policy; French National Register of Professional Certifications (RNCP); sustainability

1. Introduction

The postcolonial transition of museums is no longer merely a critical horizon. It is changing collection law, provenance policies, consultation procedures and everyday working conditions. In France, Act No. 2023-1251 of 26 December 2023 and its implementing decree established a framework procedure for returning human remains held in public collections. Act No. 2026-351 of 9 May 2026 then created a general regime for certain cultural objects obtained through unlawful appropriation, involving a bilateral scientific committee, a public report and a reasoned opinion from a national commission (Code du patrimoine, Arts L. 115-5 to L. 115-16). The legal deficit has therefore narrowed; the issue now concerns the professional translation of these procedures.

These activities already take place. Museum teams document provenance, process restitution requests, cooperate with researchers and community representatives, organise access to collections and support engagement with sensitive memories. Limited formalisation may nevertheless produce invisible labour: tasks divided among several posts, relational time that is scarcely accounted for, informal learning, and legal or emotional responsibilities added to existing duties. This issue directly concerns the ENCATC Congress themes of the visibility of cultural labour, emerging competences, fair working conditions and sustainable careers (ENCATC, 2026).

The research question is therefore: how can national professional frameworks better account for the competences required by the postcolonial transition when these competences circulate discontinuously between law, ethical standards, institutional instruments, work performed and certification? The article compares French, supranational, British, Dutch and Brazilian frameworks, together with documents from MuCEM, the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac and the British Museum. Cultural pragmatics is used to

examine failures of translation between these levels, without treating documentary analysis as direct observation of staff members’ lived working conditions.

2. A Pragmatic Matrix of Competences

The matrix does not assume that the authors mobilised here theorised postcolonial museology. Their concepts are transposed as bounded analytical operators. Sarfati approaches discourse as a production situated within institutions, enunciative positions and norms of use (2019, pp. 19–53). Within the corpus, this perspective identifies what each text constructs as a problem, whom it authorises to speak, investigate or decide, and which addressees it establishes.

The second level is interactional. Goffman defines a ‘line’ as the pattern of conduct through which an actor expresses a view of the situation, of others and of their own place; face is the positive social value attached to that line, while face-work comprises the practices that preserve its coherence (1967, pp. 5–12). Carefully transposed to documentary units, these concepts illuminate how a law, code or protocol distributes relational positions: who decides, who is consulted, which forms of knowledge are recognised, and which procedures protect interlocutors from disqualification. The Goffmanian framework therefore examines the relational order instituted by texts; it does not presume the actual quality of interactions.

The third level is inferential. For Sperber and Wilson, relevance depends on the relationship between cognitive effects and processing effort (1995, pp. 265–266). From this we derive the operational notion of documentary salience: the extent to which a competence is named, connected to observable acts and assigned to a responsibility. The more implicit it remains, the more interpretive work is transferred to recruiters, educators and museum teams.

Finally, Austin shows that an utterance performs an act only when certain ‘felicity conditions’ are met: a recognised procedure, authorised persons, appropriate circumstances and proper conduct (1975, pp. 14–15). The analysis therefore compares the authorities, procedures and resources instituted by the documents, without inferring actual effects from texts alone. These four levels form a chain: construction of the problem, recognition of actors, articulation of competence, organisational instrumentation, followed by assessment and certification.

3. Corpus and Method

The study is based on twelve documentary units selected according to three criteria: institutional authority, direct relevance to postcolonial competences, and comparability across levels of governance. A unit may combine several complementary texts when they belong to the same instrument or policy arrangement.

The first group comprises French frameworks: (1) restitution law adopted between 2023 and 2026; (2) Ministry of Culture resources on museum occupations and provenance, including the *Vade-mecum on Provenance Research* and the report preparing the Provenance Mission; and (3) France Compétences rules together with three active certifications selected because their titles focus directly on museology, museums or the École du Louvre second-cycle diploma: RNCP37129, RNCP41258 and RNCP41854. This explicit scope avoids conflating broader heritage courses with the museum-centred certifications examined.

The second group brings together supranational and professional standards: (4) the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation; (5) the ICOM Code of Ethics adopted in 2026; (6) the Museums Association *Competency Framework* and (7) its *Code of Ethics*. The third concerns foreign public policies and their implementation instruments: (8) Dutch policy on colonial collections, opinions of the independent committee and the Cultural Heritage Agency’s provenance research guide; and (9) Brazil’s *Plano Nacional Setorial de Museus 2025–2035*,

National Policy for Museum Education and *Pontos de Memória* programme. The fourth comprises documents from institutions directly addressing the issues studied: (10) MuCEM’s Scientific and Cultural Project and annual report; (11) Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac resources on provenance, access for communities of origin and restitution; and (12) British Museum policies on deaccessioning and human remains.

Each unit was coded through four questions: what problem and which addressees does the text construct? Which relational positions does it organise? Which competences does it make salient? Which conditions of effectiveness does it provide? A second reading identified action verbs, authorities, procedures, resources, consultation arrangements and possible translations into competences. The resulting configurations are ideal types: they accentuate comparable features without claiming to describe entire national sectors exhaustively (Weber, 1965, pp. 179–181). Interviews and observations would be required to test these categories against lived work.

4. Findings: Three Configurations of Translation

4.1. France: Stronger Norms and Fragmented Visibility across Professional Frameworks

Within the legal unit, restitution no longer appears solely as an exception negotiated case by case. It is organised through a chain of authorities and acts: a state request, a bilateral scientific committee, a report, a national commission and a decision to remove an object from the public domain. Sarfati helps to show how this arrangement establishes durable addressees and roles; Austin directs attention to its procedural equipment. The law therefore specifies who requests, investigates and decides, but not which museum posts continuously carry out research, coordination, consultation and follow-up.

The ministerial unit makes the work more explicit. The *Vade-mecum on Provenance Research* is a reference document for those conducting such research in and for French museums. It sets out a shared methodology covering the legal framework, sources, the conduct of research, reporting and dissemination of findings. The preparatory report for the Provenance Mission, based on two hundred interviews, documentary evidence and an analysis of practices, has a strategic purpose: coordinating actors, identifying the competences required for a specialist team, and defining shared tools, frameworks and resources (Ministère de la Culture, 2026a, 2026b). These texts increase the salience of operations without constituting certification.

The three selected RNCP records clarify the misalignment. The Master’s in Museology and Exhibition Design (RNCP37129) certifies, among other activities, exhibition design, collection management, mediation and project leadership; the Master’s in Heritage and Museums (RNCP41258) covers management, registration, interpretation and mediation. The École du Louvre second-cycle diploma (RNCP41854) is the only one of the three explicitly to mention provenance identification, restitution procedures and the occupation of ‘scientific provenance researcher’. None, however, brings together provenance, consultation with source communities, intercultural mediation and shared governance within one coherent set. Outside the corpus, the ‘Museology and Post-colonial Studies’ course in Université Côte d’Azur’s EMIC pathway illustrates a local educational translation without constituting an autonomous museum-related RNCP block.

Visibility is therefore fragmented rather than absent. Norms establish procedures, guides describe the work and one certification explicitly recognises provenance, yet continuity between these levels remains to be built. We describe this configuration as over-adaptive creativity: professionals assemble protocols, distribute tasks and acquire relational competences in practice. The corpus does not measure their actual workload, but it reveals a risk of additional coordination, informal learning and responsibility when these activities are neither assigned nor assessed.

4.2. MuCEM and Quai Branly: Two Distinct Forms of Formalisation

The two institutions make different competences visible. MuCEM’s Scientific and Cultural Project does not set out a restitution policy; rather, it incorporates participation into exhibition-making and work on collections through openness to other forms of expertise and other voices, collective curatorship, contributory collecting and collaborative documentation. Its *Conseil des publics* extends this orientation by bringing together practitioners from education, social services, health, justice, disability and solidarity organisations (MuCEM, 2022, pp. 50–52; 2026, p. 18).

At Quai Branly, the corpus more directly formalises a chain of provenance, access, consultation and restitution: a three-person full-time team works on provenance with curators; the reception of international professionals and priority access for communities of origin support collection documentation; and the museum assists scientific committees and restitution procedures (Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, 2026). These documents do not describe co-construction of decision-making authority.

In both cases, the Goffmanian framework reveals work of recognition: preparing exchanges, articulating heterogeneous forms of knowledge, clarifying the limits of decision-making and sustaining the relationship. The comparison thus distinguishes competences in participation and the pluralisation of knowledge at MuCEM from competences in provenance, institutionalised consultation and support for restitution at Quai Branly. Their limited connection within French professional frameworks is the analytical finding.

4.3. United Kingdom and the Netherlands: Two Distinct Forms of Formalisation

In the United Kingdom, the distinctive feature of the corpus lies less in the existence of procedures than in their connection to a sector-wide framework for professional development. The Museums Association translates the values *inclusive, participatory, sustainable* and *ethical* into six graded areas of competence used in the AMA (*Associateship of the Museums Association*) and FMA (*Fellowship of the Museums Association*) pathways. Unlike French certifications registered in the RNCP (French National Register of Professional Certifications), this arrangement does not award a degree; it supports professionals’ development throughout their careers. British Museum policies complement this architecture by regulating deaccessioning and requests concerning human remains through specialist advice, consultation with claimants and explicit legal constraints (British Museum, 2024, 2025).

In the Netherlands, the distinctive feature is the continuity of the restitution chain for colonial collections. The holding institution carries out provenance research, the *Colonial Collections Consortium* provides expertise, an independent committee issues an opinion, the ministerial authority decides, and the RCE (*Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed*, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands) coordinates the physical transfer where required. The nine-step guide forms part of this architecture, which was implemented in returns to Nigeria and Indonesia (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, 2025; Government of the Netherlands, 2025, 2026).

The pragmatic reading sharpens the comparative finding: Sarfati illuminates the explicit distribution of roles, while Austin draws attention to institutional conditions of effectiveness. The United Kingdom connects values, competences and career development; the Netherlands links research, independent expertise, decision and transfer. In France, these components exist but remain distributed across law, ministerial guidance, institutional practice and certification. Cross-fertilisation could draw on these principles of connection to link competences more clearly with responsibilities, procedures and professional pathways.

4.4. Brazil: Collaborative Horizontality and the Institutionalisation of Participation

In Brazil, the Instituto Brasileiro de Museus connects national planning, museum education and social museology. The *Plano Nacional Setorial de Museus 2025–2035*, developed through a collaborative process, links historical reparation, decolonial perspectives, networks, training and participation. The National Policy for Museum Education sets objectives for research, the design and assessment of educational activities, dialogue with communities, staff development and the quality of working conditions. The *Pontos de Memória* programme, instituted in 2026, recognises museum processes led by collectives and creates instruments for representation and certification (Ibram, 2025a, 2025b, 2026).

Brulon Soares shows that community museums situated at the ‘periphery’ of international frameworks are not deficient institutions: they test the universality of the dominant museum model and redistribute museum authority (2021, pp. 439–455; 2024, pp. 63–73). We use collaborative horizontality to describe situations in which co-development, recognition of community knowledge and documented sharing of responsibility become competences rather than declared values alone.

5. Discussion: From Graduated Visibility to Coherent Competence Frameworks

The (in)visibility observed is graduated. A competence may be required by law, detailed in guidance, taught in a course or practised by an institution without being assigned to a post, allocated time or made assessable. The pragmatic matrix locates these breaks: Sarfati illuminates the distribution of roles; Goffman, the work of recognition; Sperber and Wilson, the degree to which tasks are explicit; and Austin, the presence of authorities, procedures and resources. The analytical chain can be expressed as follows: normative requirement articulated competence organisational arrangement work performed assessment and certification. Any discontinuity transfers interpretation and coordination to professionals.

Four sets emerge from the corpus: provenance research and the legal processing of restitution; consultation with source communities, including clarification of decision-making authority and traceability; ethical governance, including procedures, responsibilities and follow-up; and sensitive mediation, cultural safety and the management of dissent. Adam (2019) shows that the last of these is not simply a matter of individual empathy: it involves situated, learnable know-how supported by protocols. Naming these operations makes it possible to recognise their workload, teach them and assess them.

Cross-fertilisation therefore does not mean importing a supposedly superior national model. ICOM and UNESCO provide a shared ethical basis; the British framework connects values and professional development; the Dutch architecture sequences research, expertise and decision; Brazilian instruments show that participation can structure problem definition, training and governance. What could circulate is the connection between documenting, consulting, deciding, returning, mediating and evaluating.

For France, the point of application concerns museum-related RNCP certifications. France Compétences defines a block as a coherent and consistent set contributing to an autonomous professional activity that can be assessed and validated (2026, pp. 55–56). The comparison invites consideration of how existing certifications might connect the identified sequences more closely without artificially multiplying occupational titles. Sustainability depends on this coherence. The 2026 ICOM Code links participation, reparative practices and provenance research to staff qualifications, professional development, wellbeing and fair working conditions (pp. 6–10, 15, 18–20). A postcolonial policy becomes sustainable when its commitments are supported by assigned responsibilities, time, resources, training and assessment criteria.

6. Conclusion

Developments between 2023 and 2026 shift the core of the problem: restitution, provenance and participation are now more clearly recognised in law, ICOM and UNESCO standards, and several public policies, yet their translation into assigned, supported and certified work remains uneven. The pragmatic matrix identifies breaks between norms, guidance, organisation, activity and certification.

The three configurations are ideal types, not models to be transferred unchanged. French over-adaptation reveals both staff inventiveness and the risk of overload generated by insufficiently stabilised responsibilities. British and Dutch frameworks make career development or the procedural chain more legible; the Brazilian experience links professionalisation, participation and shared authority. Their cross-fertilisation opens a route for French frameworks to connect scientific expertise, relational competences and sustainable working conditions more coherently.

Impact and Engagement

This research may help to connect professional roles, work actually undertaken in museums, training needs, certification and cultural policy more closely. By making the gaps between these levels explicit, it clarifies why some responsibilities relating to provenance, restitution or consultation remain divided among several posts, with poorly visible coordination time and relational workloads. Potential beneficiaries include museum professionals and directors, certification bodies, education and training providers, cultural policy actors, and representatives of communities involved in these processes.

Sustainability is the central concern. Responsibilities for reparation, care, social justice and inclusion cannot depend indefinitely on the informal commitment of a small number of staff. The pragmatic matrix could be used as an exploratory tool to distinguish a normative requirement, a protocol, an activity performed, an assigned responsibility and an assessable competence. It therefore provides a basis for documenting the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions already mobilised, and for discussing how they might be recognised within organisations, education and training, and certification.

Cross-fertilisation offers a route towards cooperation rather than the transfer of a single model. A working group involving researchers, professionals from pilot museums, community representatives, education and training providers, and certification actors could test the competence sets identified. It could contribute to a scientific advisory group, training activities, a methodological guide and coordinated experiments in participating institutions. The impact remains primarily anticipated. Possible indicators include changes in museum professional frameworks, the presence of assigned responsibilities and dedicated time, traceability of community contributions, and a reduction in duties undertaken as unrecognised additional work. Comparative pilot work could also show whether the matrix improves communication between institutions, trainers and certification bodies. The expected contribution is modest but operational: to provide a shared language for bringing norms, occupations, education and training, and working conditions into closer alignment within the relational museum.

Author Biography

Linda Idjéraoui is Associate Professor of Museology at Université Côte d’Azur and a member of SIC.Lab Méditerranée. Her research examines cultural institutions and their audiences, processes of heritage-making, and interactional, narrative and memorial dynamics, particularly in sensitive and postcolonial contexts. She coordinated the laboratory’s Culture and Heritage research area and redesigned the EMIC Master’s pathway in cultural engineering, museums and heritage. She is the author of *Le témoignage exposé : de l’objet documentaire à l’objet médiatique* and co-editor of *Quand les traces communiquent*. Her recent work addresses inclusive and relational museology, professional competences and institutions in transition.

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Emerging Skills for Digital Cultural Mediation: Rethinking Local Heritage Narratives through the Museum Serious Game *I Codici del Tempo* (Monteprandone, Italy)

Prof. Mara Cerquetti | University of Macerata
Dr. Concetta Ferrara | University of Macerata
Ms. Sara Verducci | University of Macerata

1. Introduction

In the current market, the video game industry is a rapidly expanding sector that requires strategic consideration. Global trends suggest that video games have become one of the most dynamic and influential forms of contemporary cultural production. According to the 2024 report published by Games for Change, there are approximately 3.2 billion players worldwide, contributing to a global market valued at $187 billion. In Italy, the gaming sector reflects these global trends within the broader digital ecosystem. Indeed, the latest IIDEA report estimates the sector’s economic impact at nearly €2.4 billion in 2024 (IIDEA, 2025). The report highlights steady growth, showing an increase from €2,180 million in 2020 to €2,367 million in 2024. Since the widespread adoption of smartphones in the early 2010s, the growing pervasiveness of digital gaming has also had an increasing impact on the cultural heritage sector (Bonacini & Giaccone, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores gamification as a digital narrative tool for cultural heritage and reflects on the emerging competences required to design such experiences. The case of *I Codici del Tempo* , a serious game developed in 2024 for the Museum of the Codes of San Giacomo della Marca in Monteprandone (Italy), is examined. The game invites players to solve a mystery rooted in the museum’s heritage, fostering engagement with local history while introducing them to the manuscripts of San Giacomo della Marca’s Library. Although this figure plays a central role in local identity, he remains relatively unknown, particularly among younger generations.

The study investigates the strengths, challenges, and potential of gamification as a tool for enhancing cultural heritage and fostering narrative innovation, with particular attention to how digital mediation practices can promote local heritage and generate new interpretations rooted in territorial identity. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, involving both the game’s developers and diverse audience groups through semi-structured interviews, gameplay observations, and focus groups. This methodology offers preliminary insights into the impact of gamification on user experience, narrative engagement, and awareness of the value of local heritage.

Beyond contributing to a deeper understanding of the opportunities and limitations of gamification in museums, the study also engages with the debate on emerging professional competences in heritage institutions. In particular, it highlights the growing need for hybrid skill sets that integrate digital literacy, storytelling, cultural mediation, and participatory design.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 situates the study within the relevant theoretical framework, identifies the main research gaps, and provides an overview of gaming in the Italian museum sector. Section 3 presents the case study, the research methodology, and the results. Section 4 discusses the findings and concludes with final remarks.

2. Framing the research

2.1 Theoretical background

In recent years, gamification has transformed cultural mediation practices, emerging as a promising strategy in both educational and tourism-related cultural contexts (Xu et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2020; Marques et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2023). Within this framework, serious games have emerged as effective educational tools that combine learning and entertainment, demonstrating considerable edutainment potential (Bellotti et al., 2010; Mortara et al., 2014; Young et al., 2012; Karagiorgas & Niemann, 2017).

In the heritage sector, these tools are contributing to a broader transformation of cultural mediation by enabling interactive narratives and participatory experiences that reshape the relationship between visitors and cultural heritage. Through interactive storytelling and gameplay mechanics, gamification creates new ways of engaging with places and heritage, playing an increasingly important role in tourism promotion and destination storytelling (Negruşa et al., 2015; Pasca et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2025). It also supports participatory approaches to heritage interpretation, transforming tourism experiences into co-creative processes involving visitors and cultural professionals (Neuhofer et al., 2012; Pasca et al., 2021). These developments call for new interdisciplinary competences that integrate narrative design, digital mediation, audience engagement, and heritage interpretation. In museum settings, gamification can further encourage visitors to become active participants, fostering more immersive and accessible experiences (Bonacini & Giaccone, 2021; Mavrin et al., 2023) while promoting greater awareness of heritage conservation and sustainable behaviours (Dipasquale & Merlo, 2023). Despite growing scholarly interest in gamification (Pozzi, 2020; Bonacini & Giaccone, 2022; Mariotti, 2022; Marques et al., 2023; Solima et al., 2023; Casillo et al., 2024), its limitations remain comparatively underexplored. Game-based experiences may prioritise entertainment over learning, shifting attention away from heritage interpretation towards gameplay itself. This tension is particularly significant in the context of local cultural heritage, which is often less visible, less widely known, and therefore more challenging to communicate effectively.

2.2 Research context

The Italian Videogame Program (IVIPRO) database offers a georeferenced overview of commercial video games related to or inspired by Italian cultural heritage, organised by region and accompanied by project descriptions and visual documentation (IVIPRO, n.d.). Although not exhaustive and subject to ongoing updates, it provides a representative snapshot of the sector. Among specific implementations, *Father and Son*, commissioned by the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN), stands out as one of the most notable examples. The project received significant media and public attention and is widely regarded as a landmark case of gamification, achieving high levels of user engagement.

More generally, current trends in the Italian market reveal a diverse range of game types. To better frame the current directions in heritage-related game design at the national level, four emerging categories could be identified, each illustrated by an example developed by a different studio: visual novel (*Cadentia Farnese*, 2025); strategic-management simulation (*Rise of Ruins*, 2025); visual novel with puzzle elements structured as a treasure hunt (*Toursikon*, 2022); and museum gamification with mini-games (*MRT Play*, 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1. Key points of game design in relation to the case studies analysed. Source: authors' own work.

Format	Game and developer	Role of heritage	Purpose
Visual novel	*Cadentia Farnese* (We Are Muesli)	Heritage as an interpretive system	To narrate the history of Palazzo Farnese
Strategic-management simulation	*Rise of Ruins* (TuoMuseo)	Heritage as a living archive	To educate about processes of preservation, enhancement and museum management
Visual novel with puzzle elements, treasure hunt	*Toursikon* (Effenove, IVIPRO)	Heritage as both backdrop and interpretive system	To promote the village of Tursi and stimulate local tourism
Museum gamification with mini-games	*MRT Play* (Visivalab)	Heritage as an interpretive system	To transform the museum visit into an interactive experience

In the discussion of game categories and formats, the role of immersive technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) warrants particular attention, as they enable new forms of interactive experiences and visitor engagement. In recent years, several projects have integrated AI-based systems in diverse ways. In some cases, users can interact with digitised historical figures through conversational avatars trained on targeted prompts. These AI-driven reconstructions rely on linguistic and narrative models that dynamically respond to user input, adapting content according to context, user knowledge, and individual choices. Notable examples include *AVaDa* (Fondazione il Vittoriale degli Italiani, 2025), *Leonardo da Vinci 3D avatars* (No Real Interactive, n.d.; CNA Firenze Metropolitana, 2025), and *Pietro Perugino Project* (TuoMuseo, 2025).

While these examples demonstrate advanced forms of interaction between technology and cultural heritage, they do not constitute games in a strict sense. A shift towards fully ludic experiences can be observed in projects that explicitly incorporate game mechanics, such as the exhibition *Perceive Isis' Colours* (Archaeo Reporter, 2025). Another approach combines storytelling or guided tours—both on-site and remote—with puzzles and enigmas, as in *Il gioiello del Mediterraneo* by U'Game (U'Game, n.d.). With regard to games designed to support on-site museum visits through integrated ludic experiences, a key example is *I Codici del Tempo* (The Codes of Time) in Monteprandone, which is examined in detail in the following chapter.

3. The case study

3.1 I Codici del Tempo

The case study focuses on *I Codici del Tempo*, a digital serious game developed to enhance the visibility of the Museum of the Codices of Saint Giacomo della Marca in Monteprandone. Commissioned by BIM Tronto and developed by the software house Studio Logico, the project was conceived as a pilot initiative for one of the smallest and most specialised institutions within the Sistema Museale Piceno network (Comune di Monteprandone, 2024). The museum houses a unique collection of 61 codices, including 4 autographs, originally part of the personal library of the Franciscan Saint Giacomo (Loggi, 2010). This corpus represents a significant yet still under-researched cultural heritage, posing a clear communicative challenge: how to engage contemporary audiences with a small local museum of high historical value.

The game was developed by a multidisciplinary team of approximately 13 professionals at Studio Logico, including graphic designers, IT engineers, a systems administrator, and an art historian acting as content manager. The design process began with a concept and storyboard developed by the art historian, subsequently translated into code by the technical team through a modular system that balanced narrative design with technical constraints. The project applies gamification strategies to engage a broad audience, with particular attention to young people and families. *I Codici del Tempo* integrates technology and cultural heritage, transforming the museum into a space where knowledge and play intersect. Its aim is twofold: to improve access to a difficult-to-communicate collection and to strengthen the connection between the museum and local identity. By offering a more dynamic and participatory experience than traditional visits, the project promotes alternative modes of learning and engagement.

Unlike a traditional escape room based on a purely fictional storyline, the game is framed as an educational mission: participants explore the historical phases of the friars' activity, the materials used

for the codices, and Gregorian chant, engaging directly with the display cases and exhibited volumes. Technically, the game is a free web app hosted on the Divergo platform, accessible via on-site tablets or visitors' personal mobile devices. The project adopts a dual-track structure: a ludic pathway for players and an informational pathway based on video guides, which can also be accessed independently by non-playing visitors. An initial version of the project also included a second game set in the village of Monteprandone, designed to guide tourists towards the museum and further contextualise the figure of Saint Giacomo della Marca; however, this component has not yet been implemented. From a narrative perspective, participants are immersed in an interactive adventure guided by two AI-generated monks, Friar Giovanni da Rocca di Sopra and Friar Giusberto, who assist them in solving a mystery linked to the codices. The experience is triggered by three physical markers placed along the exhibition route and alternates gameplay with optional video-based insights featuring AI-generated watercolour-style interfaces. These supplementary materials provide historical and artistic context and are not required to complete the game.

The gameplay is designed to encourage close observation of the manuscripts through activities such as identifying graphic details, solving puzzles and Sudoku, and locating specific words within illuminated pages. Each task is supported by an audio guide addressing topics including the production of codices, the tools used by medieval scribes, the role of Saint Giacomo in the formation of the collection, the origins of musical notation, Gothic script, miniature techniques, and the daily practices of a medieval scriptorium. A hint system is also available to facilitate progression and support a deeper engagement with the local heritage.

3.2 Research methodology

This research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, using focus groups as the primary investigative tool. This methodology involves a researcher-moderated discussion among a small group of participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) centred on a specific topic. Conducted in a neutral setting (Acocella, 2008), focus groups facilitate the exploration of opinions and attitudes that may remain latent when using other methods, such as questionnaires or individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). A distinctive feature of the focus group is its interactive nature: data are generated not merely through individual responses but, more importantly, through the dynamic interaction among participants, which fosters an active and shared exchange of ideas (Kitzinger, 1994). Such discussions can reveal additional insights, enabling researchers to identify convergences and divergences among participants' perspectives and to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of different viewpoints. Furthermore, this method allows researchers to observe not only the content of the discussion but also how ideas are communicated and negotiated within the group, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The field research was conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 and involved a sample of 31 participants of both genders (20 females and 11 males). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 31 years and included lower- and upper-secondary school students, university students, and professionals residing in Monteprandone and the surrounding provinces and regions. A total of five focus groups were organised, each taking part in a distinct gaming session.

Table 2. Research design: phases, objectives, tools, and content. Source: authors' own work.

Phase No.	Objectives	Tools	Content
Phase 0	Investigate the project's design, functioning, and development	Semi-structured interview with key informants	Company structure, creative process, museum needs, and connections with the local area
Phase 1	Define the initial profile of participants and assess prior knowledge	Pre-game questionnaire with open and closed questions	Familiarity with digital tools and serious games; knowledge of the museum
Phase 2	Observe behaviours, interactions, and engagement during the experience	Direct observation during gaming sessions	Interaction dynamics, participation methods, engagement levels
Phase 3	Gain deeper insight into perceptions, opinions, and suggestions regarding the experience	Focus group and post-it notes	Digital attractiveness, satisfaction, learning, accessibility/usability, and the game-museum relationship
Phase 4	Evaluate perceived usability and overall satisfaction	Post-game questionnaire (SUS) with closed questions	Measurement of usability and the degree of satisfaction

During the preparatory phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the serious game's design, functioning, and development from the perspectives of its creators and the museum network manager.

During the initial phase, a pre-game questionnaire was administered to assess participants' familiarity with digital tools and serious games, as well as their prior knowledge of the museum. This step enabled the characterisation of the participants' profiles and provided a contextual foundation for the subsequent observations.

The core phase of the research involved gaming sessions during which direct observation was conducted. This aimed to identify behaviours, interaction dynamics, and the specific ways in which participants engaged with the ludic experience.

Following the gaming sessions, focus groups were organised (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Acocella, 2008), supplemented by the use of post-it notes to allow participants to externalise their thoughts in writing. These focus groups explored perceptions and suggestions, covering familiarity with digital tools, satisfaction, learning outcomes, accessibility, and the game-museum relationship. These discussions were recorded and transcribed[1] for subsequent manual analysis, ensuring participant anonymity throughout the process.

To complete the evaluative framework, a post-game usability questionnaire based on the System Usability Scale (SUS) was administered. This final step aimed to measure perceived usability and overall participant satisfaction (Table 2).

3.3 Research results

The analysis of the collected data yielded the following results. The pre-game questionnaire indicated a relatively high frequency of museum attendance. Specifically, 16.1% of participants reported visiting museums four to six times per year, while 41.9% (13 out of 31 participants) reported visiting museums more than six times per year. This latter proportion is partly attributable to the inclusion of two sessions involving a specialised sample of university students in the field of cultural heritage.

Regarding visitor expectations, the primary motivations identified were seeking new experiences, finding inspiration, admiring aesthetic or interesting objects, and acquiring new knowledge through intellectual stimulation. Participants expressed a preference for a combination of traditional and digital interpretive aids; specifically, within the digital realm, preferences leaned towards digital guides, interactive screens, and touchscreens. Notably, serious games remained underestimated: only one-sixth of the sample reported prior experience with serious games in a museum context. Furthermore, the entire sample declared no prior knowledge of the Museum of Codices or the specific game featured in this study.

The focus groups highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the gaming experience. The strengths identified include:

- Engagement and appeal for younger audiences: the game redefines the traditional museum experience, fostering greater immersion and participation;

[1] Transcriptions were generated using AI tools (ChatGPT and NotebookLM).

- Cognitive activation and learning: the tool stimulates curiosity and active engagement, encouraging direct observation of the codices and facilitating the acquisition of technical and formal knowledge;
- Enhanced appreciation of details: the game directs visitors’ attention to decorative elements that non-expert audiences might otherwise overlook;
- Increased dwell time and social interaction: heightened attention to detail encouraged longer visits and fostered spontaneous collaboration among participants.

Conversely, several critical issues emerged:

- Technical and infrastructural barriers: participants reported frustration caused by bugs, malfunctions, and service interruptions. A non-intuitive and non-adaptive interface disrupted the game flow, with the screen often perceived as a barrier rather than a medium for heritage exploration;
- Orientation and usability barriers: difficulties stemmed from unclear instructions, a fragmented narrative and activity structure, and limited intuitiveness of the gaming experience;
- Cognitive and content-related barriers: some questions were perceived as overly complex or obscure, while insufficient integration with the audio guide risked trivialising the museum objects. In addition, the AI-generated voice-over was considered monotonous and of limited quality;
- Spatial, temporal, and contextual barriers: participants highlighted issues related to partial physical accessibility, the excessive duration of the game in relation to the museum’s size, and a perceived lack of connection with the local territory.

To conclude the study, a post-discussion usability test was administered using the System Usability Scale (SUS). This ten-item Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5) was used to measure perceived usability and user satisfaction. Given that the threshold for acceptable usability is 68 (Brooke, 1995), the game achieved an average score of 60.56, indicating that overall usability falls below the accepted benchmark for a satisfactory user experience.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results clarify how visitors perceived the serious game experience in the museum context. The evaluation phase assessed the effectiveness of the deployed tools, focusing first on the game’s playability, which fell below the minimum usability threshold, and second on participants’ engagement, perceived learning, and overall satisfaction.

The analysis suggests that gamification in museums, particularly for educational purposes, offers a valuable means of creating new forms of public engagement with culture, provided it is underpinned by solid narrative mediation: the game must neither overshadow the cultural content nor allow the educational dimension to compromise enjoyment. Museums are increasingly required to adopt languages and tools beyond their traditional remit, designing strategies that adapt to different ages, interests, and visiting styles, within which serious games and applied games represent valuable resources. Typically, such projects begin with an in-depth study of the heritage asset before identifying the most effective means of communication; in the case of *I Codici del Tempo*, this sequence was reversed, as the game was developed without prior in-depth study of the collection—a preliminary attempt to render a naturally difficult subject more accessible to the public.

Based on these findings, several practical guidelines emerge for improving the tool in the short term, moving beyond a purely traditional museum visit. Beyond resolving technical and infrastructural issues, it is recommended to:

- refresh the interface: making it more visually appealing and narratively coherent;

- offer alternative paths: allowing visitors to tailor the experience to their available time, age, or desired depth of engagement;
- connect with the local area: turning the game into a bridge between the museum, the village, and the surrounding territory, and encouraging collaboration among curators, designers, and residents;
- integrate mini-games: weaving them naturally into the narrative rather than adding them as disconnected pieces;
- go international and social: adding multiple languages, multiplayer modes, functioning leaderboards, and meaningful rewards to enhance inclusivity and engagement.

The project is a promising start, but it requires further development and wider communication to reach its full potential, since awareness beyond the local area remains limited.

Ultimately, serious games hold considerable potential for engagement and learning when they are carefully designed, inclusive, and context-sensitive, enabling them to move beyond entertainment towards genuine cultural mediation. This shift requires museums to move beyond a purely technocratic approach and to develop hybrid teams in which art historians and content experts collaborate with designers, communication professionals, and marketing specialists to bridge the gap between cultural supply and audience demand.

Impact and Engagement

This research addresses the challenge of effectively integrating serious games into museum contexts to enhance cultural mediation, visitor engagement, and informal learning, while highlighting a key gap between technological innovation and actual usability and accessibility of such tools. In particular, the findings from the evaluation of *I Codici del Tempo* reveal a tension between educational intent, narrative coherence, and playability, showing that engagement and perceived learning outcomes are strongly dependent on the presence of a well-structured narrative framework and on the usability of the game interface. The study, therefore, contributes to a better understanding of how gamification strategies can support, but also potentially hinder, the communication of complex cultural heritage when design choices are not fully aligned with audience needs.

The primary beneficiaries of this research include museum professionals (curators, educators, and exhibition designers), cultural heritage institutions, game and interaction designers, as well as local communities and educational stakeholders such as teachers and students. Policymakers in the cultural sector may also draw on these insights to support funding and strategic planning for digital innovation in museums. The expected pathways of impact include the iterative redesign of the game, informed by the proposed guidelines, and broader adoption of user-centred and narrative-driven design approaches in museum-based digital applications. Collaboration between cultural experts, designers, and communication professionals emerges as a key mechanism for translating these findings into practice.

The anticipated changes include improved visitor engagement, increased accessibility for diverse audiences, enhanced learning outcomes, and greater integration between museums and their surrounding territories through hybrid physical-digital experiences. Evidence of impact may be observed through improved usability scores, higher levels of user satisfaction, increased dwell time in exhibitions, more frequent replay or return visits, and expanded multilingual and multiplayer participation. In the longer term, the research supports a shift in museums towards more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive models of engagement, where serious games function not merely as entertainment tools, but as effective instruments of cultural interpretation and public outreach.

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Author biographies

Mara Cerquetti (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4388-1181, e-mail: mara.cerquetti@unimc.it) is a Full Professor of Management at the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism of the University of Macerata. Her research and publications focus on cultural management and policy, cultural marketing, museum management, and sustainable tourism. She serves on the Editorial Board of the scientific journal *Il Capitale Culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage* (https://rivisteopen.unimc.it/index.php/cap-cult).

Concetta Ferrara (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2778-1332; e-mail: c.ferrara3@unimc.it) is an Adjunct Lecturer in Web and Social Media Marketing at the University of Macerata. Her current research focuses on cultural marketing, museum management and sustainability, museum networks, and audience development.

Sara Verducci (e-mail: s.verducci3@studenti.unimc.it) was awarded a Master's degree in Cultural Heritage Management by the University of Macerata in April 2026.

Artist Collectives as Communities of Practice: Professionalisation, Collective Infrastructure and Pathways to International Cooperation

Inês Pinto de Faria
University of Barcelona

Abstract

This paper investigates how artist collectives, defined as self-organised, non-hierarchical networks of professional artists working collaboratively within shared spaces, practices and relational ecosystems, function as pathways to professionalisation by enabling artists to navigate existing support structures, funding mechanisms and institutional frameworks that remain inaccessible to independent practitioners, and how growing as an artist can be easier within these collective structures.

Collectives are rarely designed: they form naturally, created by artists who need community and shared resources. To support them when it comes to public funding, institutional recognition and professional development, it is important to anchor collective practice within existing organisational forms, such as associations, cultural companies and institutional entities, and to understand what can be added to these organically formed groups, in terms of social learning, for them to develop in a more sustained and lasting way. This research asks how formalising collective practice within these legal and organisational structures makes the systems work for artists and how that process shapes career development across different cultural contexts.

The research draws on Pierre Menger's sociology of artistic labour and the economics of uncertainty, and it extends these with Wenger-Trayner's concept of communities of practice as an analytical lens, understanding collectives as informal yet structured environments in which artists develop shared competences, distribute professional roles organically and build the relational networks through which careers are sustained, trying to understand where learning happens within these groups and under what conditions it lasts. Carla Figueira's cultural relations framework guides the analysis of cooperation dynamics across cultural and institutional contexts.

The study is grounded in comparative case studies and built on prior qualitative research of multidisciplinary artist collectives in Porto and Barcelona, and of an international, distributed collective. Data was gathered through exploratory interviews with collective members, analysis of organisational and funding structures, with cross-contextual analysis of the legal forms and support ecosystems available to collectives in each context.

This research shows that collective organisation enables artists to access funding, residencies, institutional partnerships and professional visibility, less as a guarantee than as an opportunity that becomes available. Collectives also function as communities of practice in which artists collectively learn to navigate bureaucratic, curatorial and relational systems, developing the organisational and professional competences that sustain careers over time, and the study suggests that by keeping records of what they learn, collectives can build their own means of faster and more sustained development. The paper argues that supporting artists to organise collectively within existing structures is a pragmatic and immediately actionable pathway to more stable socioeconomic conditions with a clearer understanding of how collective organisation works.

Keywords: artist collectives, professionalisation, communities of practice, international cultural cooperation, collaboration

1. Introduction

The status and working conditions of artists have moved back to the centre of the cultural policy agenda. The Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist made the case more than four decades ago (UNESCO, 1980), and the most recent UNESCO Global Report restates it plainly, listing among artist's socioeconomic rights the right to organise into professional associations and trade unions (UNESCO, 2025, p. 61). The European Parliament has pressed in the same direction (European Parliament, 2021), and a recent series of ENCATC talks confirms how alive the debate is among policymakers, researchers and sector organisations (ENCATC, 2026a, 2026b). This paper joins that conversation from inside a particular environment: the artist collective. Collectives are rarely designed; they grow naturally, created by artists who need help, community and shared resources that a career alone does not offer. The question this research brings is what can be added to these organically formed groups, in organisational terms and in terms of social learning, so that what they already give their members can develop in a more sustained and lasting way.

This paper explores a possibility rather than asserting a fact: that artist collectives can be read as communities of practice, environments where artists develop shared competences, distribute roles organically and build the relational networks through which careers are sustained. Whether they do, and under what conditions, is the empirical question. It sits in a space the sociology of the arts has itself marked as open: the similarities between Becker's art worlds and Wenger's communities of practice "have not yet been systematically explored" (Kirchberg & Zembylas, 2025, p. 39). Working in that space, the paper asks how formalising collective practice within existing legal and organisational structures makes support systems work for artists, and how that process shapes career development across different contexts.

To find out whether that reading holds, the study looks at three collectives with deliberately different characteristics: Oficina Arara, rooted in Porto's artist-run tradition; Col·lectiu Corso, a young thematic collective in Barcelona; and Shortwave Collective, international and distributed. Together they show what these groups already give their members, what remains fragile, and what support structures could gain, and would need to change, to meet this form of organisation.

2. Theoretical framework

Contrary to what it might seem, and although the act of creation can be a solitary one, everything that surrounds it is not. Becker opens Art Worlds observing that all artistic work "involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people" (1982, p. 1); the artist "works in the center of a network of cooperating people", and the art world exists "in the cooperative activity of those people, not as a structure or organization” (Becker, 1982, pp. 25, 35). What makes the collective a distinct answer is the condition of artistic labour. Menger describes careers governed by uncertainty, an oversupply of labour and individualised risk (1999, 2014), and Bourdieu shows access to the field mediated by gatekeepers and by forms of capital most emerging artists do not hold (1993, 1996). Artists have repeatedly responded by organising. Bryan-Wilson documents the moment they did so explicitly as workers (2009), and Kester traces a longer lineage of collectives serving as a “protective enclave” against a “hostile art establishment" (2011, p. 4). In Portugal, Jürgens shows how collectivities opened "more flexible horizons of work and action, outside the regulated framework of institutions” returning cyclically "as critical dispositions towards institutions, the market and the romantic conception of the artist" (2013, p. 86); this is the tradition, running through Porto's artist-run spaces, that Oficina Arara continues. The collective, in short, is not a lifestyle choice but a survival strategy, produced by the structure of artistic labour itself.

The lens this paper brings to that survival strategy is the concept of communities of practice: groups bound by a joint enterprise, sustained by mutual engagement and accumulating a shared repertoire of language, ways of doing and tools that “make practice discussable”(Wenger, 2009, p. 3). Competence here is social, recognisable as such by other members (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014, p. 3), and

learning moves across boundaries and levels of participation. If a group meets these three dimensions, it is a community of practice, whether or not anyone inside it ever uses the term. Figueira frames the horizon: cultural relations understood "less as a transactional relationship and more as a goal in itself”, where all sides may be shaped by the relationship (Chitty et al., 2022, p. 7).

3. Methodology

The study builds on three case studies, chosen to cover three different moments and shapes of collective life. Oficina Arara, in Porto, is a consolidated collective with fifteen years of activity and a legal form of its own: drawn from my earlier study of artistic collectives in the city (Faria, 2022), it shows the full trajectory this paper discusses, from an informal shared workshop to a constituted association living from its own production. Col·lectiu Corso, in Barcelona, stands at the opposite end: a young collective of four members formed around a single thematic project, still inventing its structure. Shortwave Collective sits outside any single trajectory altogether: an international feminist collective distributed across several countries, six years old, with highly developed internal structures and no legal form available to it.

Data comes from public materials, written exchanges and interviews conducted for this research: a telephone interview with one member of Corso and a recorded in-depth interview with one member of Shortwave, complemented in Arara's case by the member interviews of the published Porto study. These accounts are treated as testimony: each speaks from inside the daily life of a collective, and what they offer is the texture of how these groups actually work, from decision-making to money to conflict. They are necessarily situated and partial, and they are read as such, cross-checked against public materials and, for Arara, against a full published case study. Members are quoted anonymously. The cases are read through the three dimensions of communities of practice, alongside a comparison of the legal forms and support ecosystems in each context. Where relevant, findings are checked against a recent series of ENCATC talks used as field-level confirmation.

4. Findings

4.1 Reading the collectives as communities of practice

A community of practice begins with a joint enterprise, and in all three collectives that enterprise is easy to find. For Oficina Arara, founded in Porto in 2010, it is a craft: serigraphy, mastered whole. "Everything was done by us. We drew, we printed there, we pasted in the street, we went to sell, we left work in shops, we went to the festivals. That created a reasonable degree of self-subsistence, because you did not depend on anyone outside" (Faria, 2022, p. 49). For Col·lectiu Corso, which grew out of Liberarte, a self-organised cultural space co-founded in Barcelona in 2022, the enterprise is thematic: health approached through a transfeminist lens, the body treated as a subject of knowledge, currently developed in residency at Fabra i Coats. Shortwave Collective's enterprise is a medium and a way of learning it. The group formed after an online radio physics workshop, when "a small group of women got back to me saying they would like to keep talking, and we initially formed as a kind of group of people who wanted to experiment together with making things", each in their own room during the pandemic, "as a kind of supportive environment" (Interview, 14 June 2026). The contrast that motivated them is telling "the culture there was not really one of accessible shared learning, but one of men telling you how things are... because of gendered education gaps" (Interview, 2026). A community of practice, in other words, was not something Shortwave became. It is what they founded.

Mutual engagement is organised in all three. At Arara the division of tasks "was always organic, because there are people who naturally settle into the tasks they are most apt for" (Faria, 2022, p. 50). Corso's four members bring deliberately complementary profiles, spanning theatre, live arts, visual arts, psychology, mediation and artistic practice. They work consciously at keeping the structure horizontal and safe. Shortwave has built the most explicit machinery: a monthly online admin meeting whose agenda opens with who has contributed what that month, three roles that rotate every two months, a consensus decision-making, and differentiated membership (Interview, 2026). These invented structures are what

Sennett means when he writes that "ritual makes expressive cooperation work" (2012, p. 17).

The shared repertoire is equally visible. Arara's begins with its own name, a layered piece of wordplay (ARARA, arar, rara, a palindrome), and extends to an archive of fifteen years of production that the members can put to work, exchanging prints and editions for what the collective needs (Faria, 2022, p. 53). Corso's repertoire is methodological: what the four members share is a way of working, a common understanding of creation as a political, affective and relational process that defines how a Corso project is made. The Shortwave, using the summit - their annual structural meeting; the rainbow, their status for less active members; the dinner party, their reframing of monthly contributions ("when we meet, we go to a dinner party, and you bring your dish; what did you bring this month?"); and Cloud, Lightning, Stone, Wave and Moon, their system for naming who did the most work, who had strong moments of action, who barely contributed, who waived their fee, and who carried the mental load (Interview, 2026). Within the collectives, this is what Wenger describes: a repertoire of language, concepts and tools that makes practice discussable (2009).

Inside these structures, professional learning demonstrably happens. Arara's members describe learning to do the lighting, make and circulate the invitations, communicate and produce, until "you do not easily subject yourself to dynamics that come from outside". They took interns as "a way of passing on what we keep learning and learning from those who come" and describe collective life as "a layer of protection" (Faria, 2022, pp. 51, 54). At Shortwave the learning converts into individually held professional capital: travelling with the collective puts members "on more people's radar", collective projects turn into connections and invitations (Interview, 2026). Multidisciplinary collective environments make individual progression faster and safer. This is the learning the field keeps calling for, "whether through formal systems or community-based initiatives" (UNESCO, 2025, pp. 123, 130); the multiple skills artists are told to acquire, with one advantage no training programme offers: the community holds the skills together and distributes them, so that, as a European Commission expert Barbara Stacher put it, "not every cultural person or artist has to become a super manager" (ENCATC, 2026a).

4.2 What is missing

What is missing is not capacity. It is, first, a form the support systems can see. Shortwave states the problem exactly: "we're not eligible because we're not an organization" (Interview, 2026). The same wall stands below the funding level: "we don't have a shared bank account, and it's difficult to set up a shared bank account as a collective because we're not an organization", and administering fairer internal payment "would take so much work... that people don't have the headspace or capacity for it” (Interview, 2026). Arara knows the same asymmetry inside a national system: they frequently collaborate with projects supported by Criatório, DGArtes or European funds, yet direct support to Arara itself is rare. What the collectives describe, the statistics measure: 30 to 50% of cultural and creative workers in Europe are self-employed, and "the absence of formal work relationships exposes artists to economic vulnerability and aggravates the precarity of their work" (UNESCO, 2025, p. 61). This is the individualised risk Menger describes (1999), carried here one member at a time because there is no entity to carry it collectively.

Second, recognition from the field. "A large part of the art world has never set foot here", Arara's members observe, years of continuous public programming, and no regular visits from gallerists, organisations, institutional representatives or collectors (Faria, 2022). These are spaces that create opportunity for others, first exhibitions, residencies, audiences, networks, and the field does not reciprocate. In Bourdieu's terms (1993), the gatekeepers simply do not come: the capital these spaces generate circulates inside the independent circuit and is not converted by the field that controls consecration.

Third, recognition from within. The learning happens, but it is rarely named as learning, it is held unevenly, and it is fragile. "Keeping a collective is not easy at all, above all when it is friendship and work at the same time"; "money and friendship and horizontality” (Faria, 2022, p. 51). Corso's members are open about how difficult horizontality is in practice, and their learning lives inside the project rather than in a space of its own. Shortwave offers the fullest account. Labour "is very unequally distributed amongst us"; members operate "from a state of steady crisis" in which unpaid collective work "takes a back foot", and sharing labour equally among unequal circumstances is "the topic of discussion. Sometimes fighting" (Interview, 2026). Accountability without hierarchy is their named struggle: "there's one thing having an agreement, but then there's the other thing of holding everyone up to that agreement... often it falls to one person to be the pointy finger, and then there's resentment on both sides... we just want to have an HR department. But that person doesn't exist. We have to find kind and sensitive ways to hold each other to account" (Interview, 2026). Even their best structure is fragile. The summit exists precisely to discuss "how we are working together as a group", and in its successful years everyone wrote grievances and proposed solutions on a shared agenda in advance; the year no one prepared, "it was kind of chaos" (Interview, 2026).

4.3 How to get there

A pathway exists, and one of the cases has walked it. In 2014 Arara's members constituted themselves as CURVATURVA, a cultural and recreational non-profit association, "for bureaucratic and internal accounting reasons”. The outcome is the strongest in this material: autonomy. The collective subsists from its own production, publications and sales, workshops and continuous training, surviving, as they put it, by "working on several fronts" (Faria, 2022, pp. 51, 52). Formalisation within an existing legal form did not kill the informality of the group. It gave the systems something to see while the internal culture stayed organic. And it answers, point by point, the problems Shortwave names: the bank account, the eligibility, the administrative weight. The UNESCO Global Report lists access to financial support, social protection and the right to organise among artists' socioeconomic rights (2025, p. 61); formalisation within existing forms is how a collective reaches all three without waiting for new policy. For a group that is international, though, no such form exists, and this is where the direction of adaptation has to reverse: instead of collectives fitting themselves into structures, structures could learn to see the paths collectives have already made. Urban planners speak of desire lines, the unpaved trails worn into the grass by people walking their daily routes, which good planners eventually pave rather than fence off. Collectives are the desire lines of artistic careers: they form naturally, out of people joining around an artistic purpose, a community of practice existing before any programme names it, and they already trace a workable route to internationalisation, drawn from the ground rather than from above. If funding bodies and institutions notice these paths, means can be built along routes that are already being walked, including for groups, like Shortwave, that no national legal form can hold.

The reasons against deserve equal seriousness, because independence is a value, not an oversight. Arara built deliberate strategies to avoid subjection to curators, programmers and the conditions attached to public support, "as a matter of freedom and of example": "there is no freedom like depending on no one. We are not against support, I feel it is important to support artists". At the beginning, refusing definition can be exactly right; "we felt no urgency to define ourselves" (Faria, 2022, p. 49). For Shortwave the barrier is partly constraint rather than preference: with members in the UK, rural France, Crete, Ireland and now Australia, no national legal form is an obvious home, post-Brexit UK funding is "absolutely terrible" (Interview, 2026), and formalisation itself costs administrative labour the group does not have. Corso is at the stage where the question has not yet forced itself, partly because a public structure is already meeting them where they are: the residency at Fabra i Coats gives the collective space, continuity and a degree of institutional shelter without demanding a legal form first, a small working example of exactly the adaptation this paper argues for. And there is the drift formalisation invites, the managerial pull the field itself warns against (ENCATC, 2026a).

The reasons in favour follow from everything above, with one caution: formalisation guarantees none of it, it makes it possible. Access to funding, shared finances and contracts, continuity beyond individual members, the layer of protection made durable, the possibility of living from collective production rather than parallel jobs: all of these become options rather than closed doors. Arara's trajectory shows the opportunity taken, not a result that follows automatically. Each of the three collectives studied here extends opportunity well beyond its own members, through internships, workshops, residencies and community projects, so a funding scheme or institution that learns to work with collectives, as Fabra i Coats has done with Corso, reaches more artists with the same instrument, and reaches them inside environments where professional learning is already happening.

5. Conclusion

Read through the three dimensions of the concept, the collectives studied here, in Porto, in Barcelona and across borders, behave as communities of practice: each holds a joint enterprise its members can state, mutual engagement organised without hierarchy, and a shared repertoire of language, tools, systems and archive. Inside these environments artists develop the competences the sector keeps saying they need, and the group distributes them so that no single artist has to carry them all, though what the collective opens is opportunity rather than certainty: funding, residencies, partnerships and visibility become reachable, not guaranteed. What remains fragile is visibility of three kinds: a form the support systems can see, recognition from a field that does not cross into the independent circuit, and recognition from within, naming the learning so that it survives conflict and turnover. And perhaps the simplest discovery available to these groups lies exactly there: a collective that keeps records of what it learns, that names it, writes it down and returns to it, as Shortwave's summit does in its good years, builds its own means of faster and more sustained development.

Two recommendations follow, and they point in both directions. For artists, supporting collective organisation within existing structures is a pragmatic and immediately actionable pathway towards more stable socioeconomic conditions, offered as an option to be chosen, not a model to be imposed. For the structures themselves, the adjustment is worth making on their own terms: collectives multiply what they receive, training interns, hosting residencies and running projects that reach far past their membership, so widening eligibility, creating light routes into formalisation or addressing collectives directly means helping more artists at little additional cost. Reading collectives as communities of practice also begins the systematic exploration the sociology of the arts has said is missing (Kirchberg & Zembylas, 2025), and it points outward: collectives are the unit through which cooperation between artists, including international cooperation, can become mutual learning rather than transfer (Chitty et al., 2022). Artists have been called pioneers of a future of work that is project-based, self-employed and plural (As Dorota Ilczuk stated in (ENCATC, 2026b)); what collectives learn about organising that work matters well beyond the cultural field. "We still feel that there is more that we want to build and do together", one Shortwave member says of the group's seventh year (Interview, 2026).

Impact & Engagement

For artist collectives, the paper offers a direct account of what formalisation buys and what it costs, written to be usable in their own decisions rather than written about them. The three cases show both sides honestly: a collective that formalised and reached autonomy, and collectives for which informality is a constraint to be respected or a position to be defended. Findings will be shared with the three participating collectives.

For educators and trainers in cultural management, the finding that collectives already deliver much of the multi-skilling agenda suggests working with these environments rather than around them: recognising collective experience as professional experience, and designing training that strengthens what collectives already do instead of replacing it.

For funders and policy actors, the findings are immediately actionable, and the interest is mutual. Support systems that only recognise constituted entities exclude working communities of practice, including transnational ones that fit no national legal form. Widening what counts as an eligible form, creating light routes into formalisation, or designing calls that address collectives directly would bring existing professional environments into view at little cost, and it would let each instrument reach more artists: the collectives studied here train interns, host residencies and run workshops and community projects well beyond their own membership. It would also operationalise the UNESCO Global Report's call to invest in community-based learning for cultural professionals (2025, p. 123), and it speaks directly to the current European debate on the status and working conditions of artists in which ENCATC and its partners are engaged.

The paper will be presented at the ENCATC Congress in Nice and connects to my ongoing postgraduate research on social learning in artist collectives at the Universitat de Barcelona, under the supervision of Dr Carla Figueira.

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Biography

Inês Pinto de Faria is a Portuguese curator and cultural manager with a Master's degree in Cultural Management from ESAD.CR, Polytechnic of Leiria. Her practice spans exhibition curation, community cultural projects and performing arts production. She has directed Cápsulabrigo Association, developing collaborative cultural projects connecting museums with communities, and has curated exhibitions in partnership with major Portuguese collections. Her research focuses on artist professionalisation and collaborative practices in the arts, grounded in a published study of artistic collectives in Porto. She is currently completing a Postgraduate Diploma in International Cultural Management and Cooperation at the Universitat de Barcelona, where her work extends into social learning and the conditions that enable independent artistic organisations to sustain and collaborate across borders.

I Say No: A Study of the Domestic and International Artists' Withdrawals in the U.S. in 2025–2026

Ms. Audrey Shon
new york university

Abstract

In 2025, the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. underwent a series of rebrandings and staff changes. Therefore, renowned artists decided to withdraw from their scheduled performances at the centre in order to demonstrate their unwillingness to cooperate with this venue. Not only that, several European musicians also announced the cancellation of their performances in the U.S. along with their opposition to modern political decisions. This research argues that this wave of withdrawals from artists represents a major de-consecration of the U.S. standing as a leading innovator, and wishes to capture a historic shift in the relationship between state power and cultural institutions.

This research argues that the renaming of the Kennedy Center reflects a strategic reconfiguration of capital, in which symbolic capital is relinquished in exchange for political alignment, serving as a diagnostic indicator of field contamination. This institutional shift is further manifested through processes of internal decoupling and governance breakdown, whose resulting silencing of professional agency contributes to the emergence of artist withdrawal and boycott as alternative forms of intervention. Therefore aims to: (1) evaluate how artists interpret shifts in institutional governance as political intrusion; (2) analyse the transition of prestige into restraint leading to strategic boycotts; and (3) develop a diagnostic model for arts managers to mitigate the rupture of institutional legitimacy.

Author's Note:

This paper was primarily drafted in March 2026, capturing the institutional crisis and artistic boycotts at the height of the Kennedy Centre's controversial rebranding. It should be noted that following subsequent legal challenges, a federal court ruled in late May 2026 that the Board of Trustees had exceeded its authority, leading to the restoration of the venue's original statutory name. However, the structural vulnerabilities, internal decoupling, and transnational symbolic impacts analysed herein remain highly relevant for contemporary research.

Introduction

“It was a very easy decision for us to not participate in what that's becoming.” -Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2025, upon being asked about his decision not to perform the widely known Hamilton for the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence at the Kennedy Center. Miranda's decision was just the opening shot of a series of withdrawals from countless artists who then decided to also drop out of their scheduled performances at this renowned historical venue in DC. In late January 2026, prestigious composer Philip Glass announced the withdrawal of his new piece scheduled to be performed in the centre in June 2026. This withdrawal obviously follows a string of cancellations at the Kennedy Center after the board moved to change the arts institution's name to recognise President Donald Trump.

Kennedy Center is not the only one in this country to face consequences of the rapidly changing political environment. German violinist Christian Tetzlaff said that he was cancelling an eight-city tour of the country with his quartet this spring, including a stop at Carnegie Hall, and that he was unlikely to perform again in America unless the government reversed course. His withdrawal was then followed by fellow classic musicians. German pianist Schaghajegh Nosrati cancels her performances scheduled in November, 2025 due to “political reasons,” as stated on her website. Hungarian pianist András Schiff, a towering figure in classical music, also decided to stop performing in the United States because of concerns about President Trump's “unbelievable bullying” on the world stage. He said that he was

cancelling appearances next spring with the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a recital tour this fall with a stop at Carnegie Hall.

This paper wishes to assist art administrators to safeguard their mission against external intrusion, ensuring that artistic institutions remain sanctuaries of creative freedom, not instruments of state ideology.

Literature Review

This study aims to explore how the autonomy of art institutions is compromised when faced with external political pressure, leading to artists withdrawing from exhibitions. To establish an effective diagnostic model, texts from three core dimensions will be used: first, the autonomy of the art field and the theory of symbolic capitalism, laying the sociological foundation for this study; second, analysing the functions of public art organisations and external pressures, exploring how institutions change due to environmental factors; and finally, focusing on withdrawal and protest as forms of expression, analysing how artists reaffirm their subjectivity through refusal to participate.

According to Bourdieu (1992, 1993), the artistic field operates as a semi-autonomous space defined by the distribution of symbolic capital, where struggles between autonomous and heteronomous poles shape institutional legitimacy. The transformation of the Kennedy Center can be viewed as a forced relocation of the institution within the cultural structure. As positions in the field are defined by their access to specific capital, the renaming effectively altered the centre’s relationship with its global artistic collaborators. By shifting from a position of artistic neutrality to one of political alignment, the institution imposed new determinations on its occupants, leading to the administrative purge and the subsequent exodus of high-capital artists who found the new structural logic incompatible with their own positions in the field. (Klamer, 1997). Consequently, autonomy is not a passive state but a site of active sociopolitical struggle that must be performatively enacted by cultural agents (Holmes, 2004). This systemic vulnerability is heightened within public arts organisations due to structural dependencies. Public funding mechanisms and bureaucratic oversight inherently foster coercive isomorphism, forcing organisations to prioritise political compliance over mission integrity to secure institutional survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mulcahy, 1982). In contrast, Mouffe (2007) reframes the public cultural sphere as an agonistic space of contestation, where artistic practices actively challenge dominant hegemonies. Wyszomirski (1982) then explores how the politics of absence functions as a final defence line for artistic integrity. A mechanism through which the art world exerts its agency to re-calibrate the boundaries between state power and cultural autonomy. Far from a passive retreat, boycotts and culture strikes constitute productive withdrawals that establish a secondary economy of collective freedom outside compromised state apparatuses (Raicovich, 2021; Szreder, 2017).

These performative acts allow cultural producers to enact political subjectivities and disrupt dominant narratives by leveraging their celebrity to expose institutional decay (Grossinger, 2023; Serafini, 2018). Strategic absence functions as a critical intervention, unmasking the myth of organisational neutrality and forcing a recalibration of power between state authority and creative autonomy (Sholette, 2022; Wyszomirski, 1982).

All in all, these perspectives reveal a fundamental tension between structural constraints, institutional pressures, and artistic agency. Existing literature has examined the autonomy of the artistic field, the role of public institutions, and the political potential of artistic protest. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to how these dimensions intersect in institutional crises such as this. This study addresses this gap by examining how withdrawal operates as a reaction to compromised autonomy and mechanism through which artists renegotiate institutional legitimacy.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach analysing the underlying rationale behind the 2025-2026 Kennedy Center incident and focuses on the subsequent boycott by musicians from both the U.S. and Europe. The process of data collection will include primary sources collected from the press releases and the announcements published on the musicians' personal social accounts. Though the initial research design included semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the high degree of political sensitivity surrounding the 2025/2026 events led to a pervasive institutional silence among potential participants, which seems like a manifestation of the political chilling effect due to the uncertainty of current administrative policy status in the U.S. This study will be composed from the perspective of an arts management scholar discussing the importance of institutional sustainability. Recognising the personal political convictions of the artists involved, this study also aims to maintain objectivity by focusing on the structural impacts of governance shifts on symbolic capital, rather than endorsing specific political ideologies.

The Succession of Symbolic Power and Field Contamination

On December 18, 2025, the Kennedy Center board, minus the ex officio members whose votes had been nullified in May-voted to rename the centre as The Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts, or the Trump-Kennedy Center. The website for the centre has already been updated to reflect the change, and new signage on the building went up in the following week. As Bourdieu said (1993), the literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchisation: the heteronomous principle, favourable to those who dominate the field economically and politically and the autonomous principle. The renaming of the Kennedy Center showed a systematic de-capitalisation of artistic prestige.

Though totally helpless being in the front line facing the piling cancellations, the problem that art administrators must try to find answers to are: How do artists interpret governance changes within a national cultural institution? How does perceived politicisation translate into withdrawal decisions? How do artist withdrawals affect institutional legitimacy and managerial capacity? Also the last but most important one, What governance mechanisms could mitigate similar crises in the future?

Decoupling and the Collapse of Internal Governance

In March 2025, Kennedy Center dismantled its Social Impact initiative, which focused on providing outreach programs to local underserved communities. Seven of the team's employees were notified on Tuesday that they were laid off, according to the artistic director of Social Impact, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, who was also let go. Three additional employees whose work does not have an equity focus were retained. According to a copy of a letter to a laid off staffer obtained by NPR and signed by LaTa'Sha Bowens, the Kennedy Center's vice president of human resources, "This decision was made after careful consideration and is based on the Kennedy Center's staffing needs." As Mulcahy (1982) argues, the politicisation of the arts is often an inevitable consequence of making cultural support a public responsibility, especially when the agency depends on yearly government appropriations, and such structural dependency creates a vulnerability that can be mobilised by political actors, as evidenced in the case of the Trump administration. Wyszomirski (1982) also brought up that political agendas supersede the rationale for public culture, leading the institution ceases to function as a public trust and instead becomes a tool for partisan signalling. The departure of key artistic leadership signifies that the costs of coercive isomorphism, and the loss of professional integrity became too high to sustain.

The remaining institutional silence mentioned in the report is a structural outcome of a governance shift that prioritises political loyalty over the value rationality (Klamer, 1997) essential to arts management. From the perspective of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this mass dismissals may signify a violent escalation in the institution's quest for coercive isomorphism, these strategic firings targeted veteran staff members who functioned as the professional conscience of the institution, in which internal sources of resistance

are reduced in order to facilitate organisational conformity. By eliminating individuals with high specific symbolic capital, the centre effectively put an end to its own buffer system.

The following institutional silence, including the refusals of being interviewed by researchers, effectively demonstrate Mouffe (2007) theory on how the agonistic potential of public space can be destroyed. As Grossinger (2023) highlights, organisers and artists begin to seek power outside traditional structures when institutions fail to provide a safe harbour for creative integrity. The silencing of the Center's professional staff thus contributed to the conditions under which external actions, including artist withdrawals and boycotts, emerged as alternative forms of agency.

Transnational Symbolic Decoupling: The European Response

The withdrawal of high-capital artists like András Schiff and Christian Tetzlaff transform the act of absence into a potent narrative tool. “I just find it impossible to go along with what is happening.” Mr. Schiff said in a phone interview conducted by the New York Times, cancelling appearances next spring with the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a recital tour this fall with a stop at Carnegie Hall. Tetzlaff, too, said that he “felt like a child watching a horror film,” “There seems to be a quietness or denial about what's going on,” he said in an interview. “I feel utter anger. I cannot go on with this feeling inside. I cannot just go and play a tour of beautiful concerts.” As Serafini (2018) argues, such activist performances allow artists to enact a political subjectivity that the institution's internal structure no longer accommodates. Their refusal to participate is a strategic re-assertion of the field's boundaries.

The crisis reveals a rupture in symbolic capital. For domestic artists, the withdrawal is an ethical defence of professional integrity. On the other hand, for European people, the boycott signifies as Geopolitical Delegitimation. The autonomy of the artistic field used to endorse the symbolic freedom of speech in the United States, but now with it being endangered, it is also a solid proof that the stage is facing political intervention and cannot be taken as a safe space for artists anymore, therefore leading to the decision of withdrawals.

Ethical Reclamation and Public Awareness: The US Response

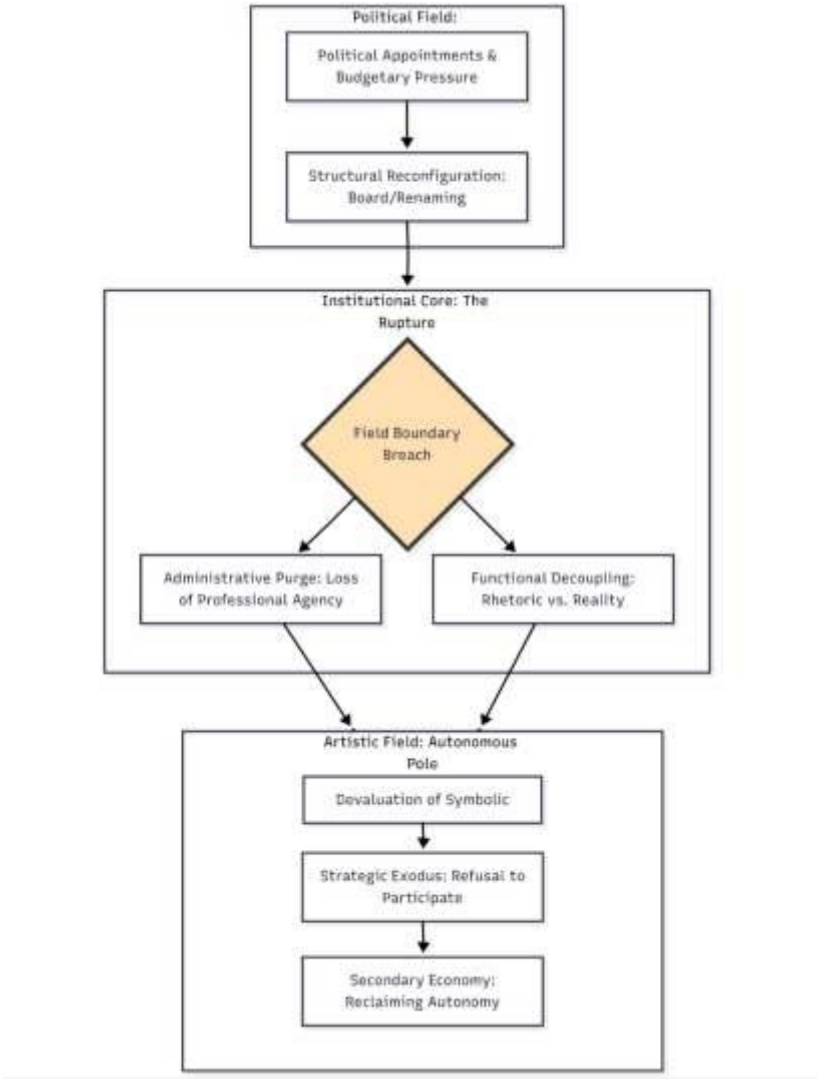
Philip Glass said in his statement posted online publicly, “Symphony No. 15 is a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, and the values of the Kennedy Center today are in direct conflict with the message of the Symphony. Glass's withdrawal of Symphony No. 15, Lincoln, exemplifies a radical dissonance between artistic content and institutional context. By explicitly stating that the values of the centre are in direct conflict with the message of Abraham Lincoln, Glass performatively re-draws the boundaries of the field. As Mouffe (2007) suggests, art becomes an agonistic intervention if it refuses to be co-opted by a consensus that obscures its foundational values. Glass's act is a reclamation of the work's symbolic capital, ensuring that Lincoln's legacy is not instrumentalised to legitimise the centre's current leadership.

Three-time Oscar winner Stephen Schwartz also said in an interview that there was no way he would enter the venue now, as it no longer represents the apolitical place for free artistic expression it was founded to be. Schwartz's refusal to associate his legacy with the newly renamed institute illustrates the total collapse of institutional credibility. This is a solid proof of what Serafini (2018) calls performative instances of political action. Schwartz's withdrawal serves as a signal to the broader secondary economy that the centre has forfeited its role as a neutral sanctuary for the performing arts, which confirms once again Wyszomirski's (1982) warning: an institution loses professional trust when it is viewed as a tool for partisan signaling. As Grossinger (2023) notes, artists reach millions to harness their celebrity to communicate dissent, casting a 'huge wave of attention' on institutional decay. The absence of Glass and Schwartz on the centre's stage is more communicative than their presence could ever be-it renders the institution's functional decoupling visible to the global public.

If reading through Klamer’s (1997) lens, it can be seen that by trying to make the Kennedy Center more efficient or aligned with the current administration (instrumental logic), the board effectively bankrupted the very social capital that gives the centre its prestige. As Klamer might suggest, one cannot order artistic value to exist in a space where the shared values of the community have been discarded in favour of political loyalty. These results constitute what Sholette (2022) describes as an activation of artistic dark matter, which is the creative energy that usually remains invisible to institutions but actually possesses the power to disrupt structural legitimacy upon facing crises. By withdrawing, artists are choosing to perform a "Culture Strike" (Raicovich, 2021) and by doing so, they may be able to take away the most essential asset of the Kennedy Center: its perceived role as a universal public trust.

The exodus of both domestic and international artists signifies more than a temporary programming crisis; it represents the Symbolic Bankruptcy of the institution. As the following model (Figure 1) illustrates, the Kennedy Center transitioned from an autonomous field of artistic excellence into a heteronomous extension of political power. Where the loss of professional buffers (internal staff) made external exodus (artists) inevitable. The renaming strategy was originally intended to consolidate political capital but instead damaged the institution's most valuable asset-its symbolic legitimacy. By withdrawing, artists like Glass, Schwartz, and Tetzlaff have effectively re-territorialised artistic autonomy, demonstrating that the field's integrity is sustained by the refusal to submit to ideological encroachment.

Figure 1: The Cascading Rupture of Institutional Autonomy.



Recommendations For Future Researchers

Another interesting fact that turned up during the progress of conducting this research. Not everyone decided to leave-some chose to stay, including familiar names such as National Symphony Orchestra, a few comedians, and Shen Yun, whose story can simply lead to another whole 30 page research. It can easily be assumed that the criteria for choosing to stay become a calculation of political risk, and the institution undergoes a silent transformation from a Public Forum to a Political Asset. A suggestion to future research is that they should look into how these changes affect the target audience that these institutions are supposed to serve. The National Symphony Orchestra and Shen Yun are institutions that are impacted by these changes, and researchers need to think about what this means for the future of cultural pluralism and the ability of institutions to serve their audiences.

Conclusion

The massive withdrawals happening within a year present a unique sociopolitical laboratory for arts management research. Although previous studies have covered political factors and social analysis, the current scale of artistic withdrawal signals a theoretical threshold where traditional standard operating procedures may not function as well as they did in the past.

The change at the Kennedy Center during a shift is a key example of how fragile cultural institutions can be. Through Bourdieu's field theory, this study finds that the centre moved from being autonomous to being controlled by forces because its leaders made a deliberate mistake. From this case, it can be seen that cultural institutions are only as strong as the protections that prevent their use for political gain. The departure of artists like Philip Glass and Stephen Schwartz is a powerful way for them to take back control of their art. By not performing at the centre, they are resisting the institution's loss of neutrality. This Culture Strike takes away the legitimacy of the government-funded institution.

In conclusion, what happened at the Kennedy Center is a warning for the future of arts management. The findings suggest that if institutions lose their buffer, many artists will refuse to participate because they feel their freedom of speech threatened. The power shift confirms that a huge proportion of artistic freedom relies on artists collectively refusing to let their work be used for political purposes. It is, indeed impossible for a national institution to be totally unpolitical, however, as most national institutions in democratic countries do, a centre should always strive to remain balanced between serving its political and artistic purpose, which is an action that cannot be seen in what is happening at the Kennedy Center.

Impact & Engagement

The massive withdrawals happening within a year present a unique sociopolitical laboratory for arts management research. Although previous studies have covered political factors and social analysis, the current scale of artistic withdrawal signals a theoretical threshold where traditional standard operating procedures may not function as well as they did in the past. This paper aims to dissect and answer these questions and hopefully can function as a lifesaver’s guide for art administrators so they can pull it out from their sleeves if they ever run into similar crises again. This paper also wishes to raise awareness and start conversation in the art administration field by pointing out how people in the industry should prioritise diversified stakeholder engagement because relying heavily on a single source of political or federal support creates vulnerability. As we all know, it is impossible for a national cultural institution to be totally neutral and at all unpolitical, therefore, this paper should remind its readers the significance of preserving professional buffer systems.

Author’s Bio: Audrey Jing-Yun Shon

Actor & Art Administrator

Taiwan & USA

This is Audrey Jing-Yun Shon’s ENCATC debut! She has a MA degree in Performing Arts Administration from NYU and a BA in English Literature from Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. She is an active saxophonist and actor who is not pursuing an academic career so this is probably her first and last time here. Notable credits include *Opera: The White Fox* (Kaufman Music Center), *Apt. 8E* (La MaMa), Mulasaki Ima’s *New Walk* (Music Video), and *Odyssey and the Flowers of the Sun* (Theater for the New City). Huge thanks to mom and dad, Rich, Minji, Prof. Kondrashina, ISPA, NPTC, TNC. ig:@ajs_kuma

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Digital Competences and Inclusive Practices in Museums: Training Cultural Professionals for Autism-Friendly Heritage Experiences

Prof. Antonella Poce | University of Rome Tor Vergata
Prof. Carlo De Medio | Università di Roma Tor Vergata
Dr. Luca Contardi | University of Rome Tor Vergata

1. Introduction

Museums are becoming expected to serve not just as repositories and displays of artifacts, but also as learning spaces that foster social responsibility. With regard to their education function, museums are now being called upon to participate, provide accessibility, promote well-being and enable lifelong learning; and digital transformation has changed the ways in which collections are presented to audiences and in which people interact with cultural heritage.

As a result of these changes, museum professionals are being asked to demonstrate increased amounts of educational, technological and relational skills. While the utilization of digital technology does not inherently lead to inclusive practice, digital competency in museums should thus be defined as the ability to choose, modify and assess digital resources in reference to visitor’s needs, educational goals and the responsibilities of the institution. It is especially significant in reference to visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) because they can experience numerous sensory, cognitive, communicative and social barriers when visiting museums. Autism friendly experiences typically include elements such as predictability, sensory awareness, clearly articulated communication, flexible forms of engagement/participation and appropriately targeted mediation. While many museums recognize accessibility as a high priority area of focus, museum staff often lack formal or specialized training in autism awareness, inclusive design and digital mediation.

This paper fills this gap by detailing the Digital-Spektrum Project, “Digital Skills and Technologies for Promoting Cultural Inclusion in Museum Users with Autism Spectrum Disorders” funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme, "Small-scale Partnership in Adult Education", project number 2023-2-IT02-KA210-ADU-000177194. The goal of the Digital-Spektrum Project was to increase the capacity of museum professionals to develop and implement inclusive and autism friendly educational experiences using digital technologies.

The paper analyzes Digital-Spektrum as a case study based on design orientation, and specifically evaluates three different training pathways: digital Object-Based Learning, Digital Storytelling and the evaluation of a role-based WebApp. The paper states that inclusive digital transformation is dependent far more on integrated professional competences rather than individual tools.

2. Theoretical Framework

The 2022 ICOM definition describes museums as accessible and inclusive spaces that commit to education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge-sharing (ICOM, 2022). Museums are now seen as not just places where people go to see artifacts and exhibits but as educational, participatory and socially responsible environments. Museum learning has been described as a process of learning based on how individuals learn in their environment, both physically and socially. Participatory museum theory describes the museum experience as one where visitors create meaning based upon their own individualized processes (Simon, 2010).

Thus, the idea of museum learning is no longer limited to simply the transmission of knowledge. It includes sensory, emotional and relational forms of engagement. Object-Based Learning is particularly applicable here since it utilizes artifacts to encourage observation, interpretation, dialogue and critical thinking (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2015). Objects within inclusive museum education serve as mediators of attention and communication, thus providing visitors with opportunities to interact with cultural heritage utilizing multiple sensory and cognitive pathways. Therefore, access to culture should be thought of not just as physical access but also as cognitive clarity, sensory comfort, emotional safety and meaningful participation.

However, the digital transformation creates additional complexities to this framework. In the cultural sector, digital competence goes beyond merely being able to technically utilize devices, platforms or software. It involves being capable of selecting, adapting and using digital tools to enhance interpretation, accessibility, communication and learning. As such, several European policy documents emphasize the need for enhancing digital readiness and capability throughout all areas of education, training and the cultural sector (Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2017). Thus, in museums digital replicas, storytelling platforms, web applications and multimedia resources will only be inclusive if museum educators take into account visitors' needs, educational goals and accessible design principles (Poce, 2021) when they develop these digital resources. Moreover, this expanded understanding of digital competence is especially important for visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Individuals with ASD present with a variety of different sensory, communicative, cognitive and social characteristics and museum visits often provide a myriad of barriers for these individuals including noise levels, crowds, unpredictable events, abstract communication or excessive stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Nevertheless, neurodiversity-informed perspectives suggest that rather than viewing ASD-related differences as deficits, institutions should recognize ASD-identified individuals as legitimate participants whose ways of experiencing and communicating may differ from those expected by most institutions (Kapp, 2020; Milton, 2012).

Therefore autism-friendly museum mediation necessitates planned preparations regarding sensory considerations, flexibility regarding visitor participation options and effective communication. Moreover, digital technologies could aid in achieving some of these objectives through previewing activities prior to attendance at the museum, creating social stories specific to each visit to help prepare visitors with ASD for what they can expect during their visit, developing personalized routes through the museum for visiting and interpreting artifacts and other multimedia resources developed for the purposes of supporting museum professionals' decisions. However, the overarching concern is to consider digital innovations not as ends unto themselves but as integral components of a larger ecological system designed to foster inclusivity.

3. Project Context and Methodology

the Digital Spektrum Toolkit for Museum Professionals is accessible via the Digital Spektrum Project Website and represents the culmination of the methodology, examples and recommendations developed during the collaboration between the three partner organizations (Digital Spektrum, 2026)

the author has chosen to employ a design-orientated case study strategy to inform the subsequent analysis of the Digital-Spektrum intervention, drawing on the principles of Educational Design Research. A design-orientated case study approach is well-suited to analyse contextualized educational interventions that develop pedagogic strategies and practical tools that can be put into effect and further developed within authentic environments (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). Therefore, it follows that Digital-Spektrum can serve as an instrumental case for examining wider issues surrounding digital competences, accessibility and professionalism within museums (Stake, 1995; Yin,

2018).

The Digital-Spektrum project also established three complementary training routes for museum professionals focusing on the applications of: digital Object Based Learning; Digital Storytelling and the application of a role based Web App for assessing Autism related Accessibility. These training routes were designed to form part of an integrated training environment that could connect digital skill acquisition, inclusive design thinking and museum education practice.

Data was collected during the training process through workshops attended by participants, feedback forms completed by participants and embedded evaluation instruments. The analysis will focus on common themes arising across all three pathways with a specific focus placed upon perceived competency development regarding autism awareness; confidence in utilizing digital tools; and developing inclusive museum experiences. As such, the project sought to link professional learning opportunities with the development of practical support materials for the museum community.

4. Training Design: Three Complementary Pathways

The Digital-Spektrum training design was structured around three complementary pathways, each connecting digital technologies with specific educational and accessibility challenges. Rather than treating digital tools as neutral solutions, the project embedded them within museum education methodologies aimed at supporting more inclusive forms of mediation, participation and professional reflection.

The first pathway focused on digital Object-Based Learning. Museum objects were used as mediators of sensory, cognitive and emotional engagement, while digital resources expanded the ways in which collections could be explored. The activity introduced participants to the design of structured object-based experiences for ASD audiences, combining experiential learning, tactile engagement, digital reproduction and reflective routines. In this perspective, digital Object-Based Learning was not conceived as a replacement for material experience, but as a way to diversify access to objects and make museum learning more predictable, multimodal and adaptable. The second pathway addressed Digital Storytelling as an inclusive practice for museum education. Storytelling was used to support personal meaning-making, emotional engagement and the validation of multiple interpretations. For ASD and neurodivergent audiences, this required attention to narrative structure, communication preferences, sensory engagement and the social dimension of co-creation. The aim was therefore not only to introduce a digital storytelling format, but to help professionals design narrative environments that are accessible, flexible and emotionally meaningful.

The third pathway explored digital technologies for well-being through the testing of a role-based WebApp. This activity shifted the focus from individual educational practice to organisational decision-making, inviting museum professionals to consider how accessibility is shaped by different roles and moments within the visitor journey. Scenario-based reflection supported the identification of barriers and possible strategies to improve predictability, sensory comfort and institutional responsiveness.

Taken together, the three pathways formed an integrated training ecosystem in which digital competence emerged as a situated professional capacity, linked to pedagogical sensitivity, autism awareness, collaborative practice and organisational responsibility.

5. Findings

The results of the Digital-Spektrum’s training activities for the museum professionals have shown three major points regarding the development of digital and inclusive competencies.

1. The digital competencies became relevant only once linked to real accessibility issues. The training did not introduce participants to digital tools as a technical resource, but rather asked them to think about what role these tools would play to enable an even more inclusive mediation, communication and participatory experience for visitors. Consequently, the digital competency developed through the training was defined by the ability to make pedagogical decisions based on information about whether/when/how technology could be used to provide an accessible museum experience.

2. The Digital Spektrum has increased awareness of the need for autism friendly conditions in museums. Training in the project changed a generic concept of “inclusion” into more targeted questions related to creating an environment that is conducive to autism-friendly design, such as providing predictable environments, being aware of sensory overload, using clear communication, and allowing for flexibility in participating. The focus on these factors provided museum professionals with the means to turn abstract ideas of accessibility into tangible decisions in designing exhibits and/or spaces.

3. A new understanding of inclusive digital practices as organizational or transverse skills and competences also emerged during the training. Participants had to reflect on their professional roles, work collaboratively with others, and recognize how barriers could develop throughout the various stages of the visitor's journey. Therefore, accessibility was presented as an institutional issue that all employees of the museum are responsible for addressing together, i.e., education, visitor services, curatorial departments, communication departments, design teams and management.

Finally, the Digital Spektrum Toolkit for Museum Professionals will serve as a tool to help transfer the methodology and recommendations derived from the project into other museums so that other museums can adapt the methodologies and recommendations into their own context (Digital Spektrum, 2026).

6. Discussion

The Digital-Spektrum case shows that understanding how museums go through digital transformations cannot solely rely on viewing them as technological processes. It takes the embedding of digital tools in pedagogic goals, access strategies and organizational practices before they will have professional and social utility.

Digital transformations in museums thus require contemporary museum workers to develop an array of skills, including (but certainly not limited to) digital literacy, design of educational programs, audience research and development, communications and self-reflection. Therefore inclusive digital practices in museums should not be restricted to specialists (e.g. webmaster), rather this should become a cross-functional aspect of all aspects of cultural work. Workers need spaces in which they can try out digital tools, think about their users' needs and apply principles of accessibility to specific choices.

Additionally the Digital-Spektrum case illustrates the organizational nature of developing autism-friendly practice. As individual awareness is important, creating an experience of an accessible museum requires cooperative actions from many different job functions at each stage of a user's visit. Beyond this Digital-Spektrum provides evidence for redefining cultural work as both care-oriented and socially responsive. The adoption of technology in order to include people with disabilities in museum visits does not represent a simple change of technology, however it represents a change in what we understand to be our competencies, responsibilities and organizational culture.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined Digital-Spektrum as a design-oriented case study of professional development for inclusive and digitally mediated museum practice. The analysis suggests that digital competences for museum professionals should be understood as integrated professional competences, combining technical knowledge with pedagogical design, autism awareness and organisational responsibility.

Through its three training pathways, the project showed how digital tools can support more accessible and autism-friendly heritage experiences when embedded in inclusive educational methodologies. It also highlighted the importance of training in strengthening professional confidence, awareness and design capacity.

Digital-Spektrum offers a transferable model for capacity-building in the cultural sector, showing that digital inclusion requires rethinking professional competences and institutional responsibilities through accessibility and care.

Impact & Engagement

The research addresses a practical gap in the museum and cultural heritage sector: the need to strengthen professionals’ capacity to design accessible, autism-friendly and digitally mediated cultural experiences. Digital-Spektrum responds to this need by offering a transferable model of professional development in which digital skills, inclusive pedagogy and autism awareness are developed together.

The main beneficiaries include museum educators, visitor-service teams, curators, accessibility coordinators, cultural managers, training providers, policymakers and, ultimately, autistic and neurodivergent visitors and their families. The findings may inform staff training, museum education programmes, accessibility planning and professional development initiatives concerned with digital transformation and inclusion.

The main pathway to impact is the Digital Spektrum Toolkit for Museum Professionals, which translates the project’s methodologies into practical guidance adaptable beyond the original partnership. Further pathways include the integration of digital Object-Based Learning, Digital Storytelling and role-based accessibility planning into museum practice, as well as collaboration between museums, universities and neurodiversity experts.

Expected and observed changes include increased awareness of autism-related needs, greater confidence in using digital tools for inclusive mediation, more structured approaches to autism-friendly visits and stronger recognition of accessibility as a shared institutional responsibility. Possible indicators include professionals trained, Toolkit uptake, staff feedback, adoption of inclusive protocols and further training requests.

Note on Contributions

Antonella Poce contributed to the “Introduction”, “Theoretical Framework” and “Discussion” sections. Carlo De Medio contributed to the “Project Context and Methodology” and “Findings” sections. Luca Contardi contributed to the “Training Design” and “Impact & Engagement” sections.

Biographies

Antonella Poce is Full Professor of Experimental Pedagogy at the Department of History, Humanities and Society, University of Roma Tor Vergata. She founded and chairs the joint University INTELLECT International Research Centre for Heritage and Museum Education, Well-being, and Teaching Technology. She also coordinates and chairs two joint postgraduate courses in Empirical Studies in Museum Education and Advanced Studies in Heritage Education, run in collaboration between the University of Roma Tor Vergata and Roma Tre University. Her research focuses on innovative teaching practices in higher education, with particular attention to heritage education, digital technologies, artificial intelligence and well-being. She is actively involved in international academic networks, European research projects, and scientific evaluation bodies.

Carlo De Medio is a researcher at the Department of History, Humanities and Society at the University of Tor Vergata. He is qualified as Associate Professor in Experimental Pedagogy. He has been collaborating with the Museum Education Center (Univ. Roma Tre) from 2019 and with the INTELLECT center (Tor Vergata and Modena and Reggio Emilia Universities) from 2022. He has participated in national and European research projects in the fields of museum education, development of transversal and digital skills, promotion and assessment of Critical Thinking, as well as innovative teaching methodologies supported by VR, AR, and AI. He regularly takes part in conferences at national and international level. He published different articles and two books on the above subjects.

Luca Contardi is a researcher in Experimental Pedagogy at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. Trained in South Asian art history, with a postgraduate specialisation in heritage education, he holds a PhD in Heritage Science from Sapienza University of Rome. His research focuses on the intersection of digital technologies, museum learning, and decolonial practices, with particular attention to inclusive and participatory approaches in cultural heritage contexts. He works on digital valorisation, education, virtual collections, and audience engagement, with a focus on accessibility, wellbeing, and social impact.

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Tensions in the Discourses of Professionalism in the Arts: How Can Higher Arts Education Support Students in Navigating These Complexities?

Dr. Kai Lehikoinen
Research Institute, Uniarts Helsinki

Dr. Sarah Rowles
Fine Art Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki

In the face of the economic realities of the arts field and the challenges that arts graduates face in sustaining careers, this paper investigates three discourses that operate in higher arts education. These are autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and utilitarianism. As practitioners, researchers, and teachers with experience across the UK and Finnish contexts, we argue that these discourses shape the professional futures of students, constraining or enabling the types of professional identities they may come to embody.

Synthesising existing research (Lehikoinen, 2026; Rowles, 2024) and drawing on illustrative case studies of current higher arts education practices, we identify how discourses in higher arts education shape students’ perceptions of viable professional futures in the visual and performing arts in the UK and Finland. We suggest that expanding the range of recognised career pathways within curricula can mitigate some of the inequities often reproduced in higher arts education and better prepare students for the realities of contemporary artistic work.

Context

The arts encompass a wide and evolving range of practices, from literature and visual art to architecture, design, and increasingly hybrid and digital forms. These practices resist stable categorisation: artistic genres are in constant flux, shaped by technological, cultural, and institutional change. This instability highlights the difficulty of fixing what counts as art. Artistic activity encompasses both processes and outcomes, in the form of artefacts and/or events, further complicating any singular definition. In this paper, we focus on visual and performing arts practices within this broader landscape.

Practices in these fields are underpinned by socially constructed understandings of art that are historically and locally situated rather than universal or fixed. Consequently, the arts are marked by diversity and often conflicting narratives about what counts as art and about the role of the artist (Gielen, 2015). Claims about artistic principles and practices—and about artistic careers—are therefore not neutral or natural, but products of specific cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. As Gielen suggests, the contemporary art world is characterised not simply by plurality, but by a condition in which multiple, conflicting meanings coexist and continuously contradict, undermine, and invoke one another. Rather than forming a coherent whole, the field appears fragmented and unresolved—a dynamic space of competing values and expectations.

This condition poses a challenge for higher arts education. While the art world has become increasingly diverse and unstable, educational institutions often continue to operate with relatively narrow and hierarchical assumptions about artistic practice and professional success. Many programmes implicitly privilege the figure of the autonomous, independent artist committed to art for art’s sake, treating this as the most legitimate or desirable career trajectory. However, the expanding range of artistic practices and professional contexts suggests that there is no single pathway that fits all artists.

As a result, dominant educational discourses can limit what can be meaningfully said or done within the arts, as well as whose professional activity is recognised as legitimate. They risk marginalising hybrid

practices, collaborative modes of work, and careers that move between artistic, commercial, and institutional contexts. Following Gielen (2015), this contributes to a situation in which many artists never become clearly recognised figures: they remain 'almost something,' spending their careers as promise or potential, and blending into the collective background murmur of the art world rather than emerging as distinct, audible voices. This raises a critical question for higher arts education: how might it better recognise, legitimise, and support a wider range of artistic careers that reflect the diversity and contradictions of the contemporary art world? How do we help students navigate diversity and complexity rather than subscribe to dominant discourses in the arts?

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative synthesis of existing research on artistic careers and higher arts education, selected for its relevance to Northern European and UK contexts (Lehikoinen, 2026; Rowles, 2024). Data sources include peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and illustrative case examples drawn from prior empirical work, used to examine how discourses are experienced in practice. Our discourse-analytic approach focuses on how ideas of artistic professionalism, success, and sustainability are articulated, normalised, and contested across these sources, and how they shape students' perceptions of viable career pathways. We further consider how these discursive formations expand or constrain graduates' opportunities to achieve meaningful careers.

Positioning ourselves within a social constructionist framework, we draw on Foucault (1972, 1977), Gee (2018), and Wetherell (1998) to understand discourses as historically situated systems of meaning that shape how people speak, act, and identify themselves within a particular social setting. As Gergen (1999) suggests, descriptions of reality are always embedded in particular value traditions, privileging some meanings while silencing others. This perspective informs our analysis of how some artistic career pathways are socially constructed as more valuable than others within higher arts education.

We acknowledge our situated interpretive stance within Northern European and UK academic and artistic contexts. Rather than claiming neutrality, we aim for transparency about these positional constraints and focus on how career pathways are constructed and made meaningful within this context.

Discourses Shaping Careers After Higher Arts Education

We argue that there are three discourses present in the art school when it comes to thinking about making a living in the arts. These are autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and utilitarianism (Lehikoinen, 2018). In summary, 'autonomy' is a dominant discourse in the arts that positions the artist as a naturally gifted agent who operates on the margins of society and produces artwork that is untainted by commercial or utilitarian influences; 'utilitarianism' is a view that art should be socially useful and that artists should connect with other fields like health or education; and 'entrepreneurialism' is based on the idea that artists should generate profit from their activities for the benefit of themselves and others (Rowles, 2024, p. 3).

In our own fields of visual and performing arts, typical ways of working include models of the artist working independently or in groups—often in studio settings—and depending on grants to finance their artistic work. These processes most often lead to outputs that are exhibited or performed in public venues. The integrity of this kind of autonomous work is traditionally valued highly by most participants —and gatekeepers—in the field. Cultural gatekeepers are understood here as professionals in the fields of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993) who play a central role in processes of legitimation and consecration, shaping what forms of artistic practice are recognised and valued.

Tension in the Discourses

Although the art field is increasingly fragmented, perceptions of art diversified, and artistic professional identities in flux, debates about the core values of art remain sharply polarised. At one end lies the

defence of artistic autonomy—the view that art's primary function is to exist and be experienced as art, defined on its own terms and free from external demands. At the other end are utilitarian perspectives that emphasise art's social, economic, or instrumental value.

Within higher arts education, curricula often reflect historically rooted ideas of autonomy that are seen as central to the discipline. At the same time, in some countries such as the UK, the marketisation of higher education and the uncertain and self-managed nature of artistic careers, is leading students to consider how they can make a living from the arts, often through entrepreneurial approaches (Hjelde, 2015).

In parallel, there is growing interest among students in transdisciplinary work, particularly in areas such as arts and health, reflecting broader shifts in higher education towards boundary-crossing approaches to complex societal challenges (Fancourt et al., 2022; van Baalen et al., 2021). This development has been reinforced by policy in countries such as the UK, and Finland, as well as more broadly across Nordic and European contexts, where increasing value is placed on cross-sector collaboration between the arts, health, and social sectors (All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2017; Arts Council England, 2022; Dow et al., 2023; European Commission, 2025; Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö, 2015).

However, these developments can create tensions within the discipline, as some seek to engage with these emerging practices while others hold on to more traditional ideals of disciplinary purity. Disciplinary purity can be understood as a form of boundary maintenance rooted in Western classificatory practices, which distinguish between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. Such distinctions reflect broader modern tendencies toward ordering, normalisation, and the symbolic and material 'sanitation' of social life (Arendt, 1958; Bauman, 1989; Douglas, 1966; Foucault, 1977). In the following case studies, we explore how these discursive tensions play out for students and staff in the visual and performing arts.

Case Study 1

The following case study concerns a mature student with degrees in theatre directing and theology, reflecting on her placement project in a specialist course in socially engaged arts. While definitions vary, socially engaged arts, as conceptualised by Bishop (2007), can be understood as participatory and context-based, focusing on collaborative processes and relationships to generate social learning and change (Lehikoinen, 2026).

As part of her placement, she designed and facilitated an arts-based development process for clergy, aiming to introduce more embodied and performative approaches to church services in Helsinki. In her reflection, concerns about her professional identity as an artist emerge:

> My doubts concerning … the artist as a developer had many reasons. I felt that I will lose myself as an autonomous artist and that I will have to please others … I was afraid that the "artist" … disappears and the mere "developer" is amplified. Creative powers, that cannot be always controlled, belong to art. They demand the participants to throw themselves [into action], deep involvement and training in order to achieve results … If the participants are not oriented in such a way, it may take energy from the artist-developer to persuade them and soften their attitudes. Of course, motivating is part of the theatre director's praxis as working with professionals. Nevertheless, I had my prejudices.
>
> (Sippola, 2016, p. 106, transl. KL)

Lehikoinen et al. (2021) interpret this excerpt as highlighting a tension in how the student positions herself as a 'developer'—that is, as a facilitator using arts-based methods in an organisational context. This shift raises concerns about maintaining her identity as an autonomous artist.

This tension can be understood as arising from two competing discourses: on the one hand, a traditional view of the artist as an autonomous and ‘free’ creator operating within a domain of open-ended creativity; on the other, a more utilitarian discourse that frames the artist as a ‘developer,’ increasingly promoted by policymakers, funders, and researchers. As the quotation above shows, when this instrumental perspective enters the artist’s self-understanding and conflicts with the ideal of artistic freedom, it generates tensions in her professional identity construction.

Case Study 2

In the following example, Lesley, Head of BA Photography at a UK art institution, shares her views about her university’s request that the programme introduces employability and entrepreneurship education into the curriculum. This followed the 2012 introduction of £9000 annual tuition fees for home students and up to £50,000 annual tuition fees for international students. Lesley had herself studied during a time of zero tuition fees and grants.

> I have a massive problem [with the language of employability] because it’s the language of the corporate world just tacked on to the art world. I also have a problem with the term ‘creative industries’ because it’s a way of justifying being an artist in economic terms. It’s absolutely rubbish. For me, employability and entrepreneurship or whatever the word is, it’s all catering to a justification of what we do on economic terms. Actually, artists should be challenging those neoliberal systems and positions. The idea that we would just sit back and fit neatly into that context fills me with horror.
>
> Lesley, Head of BA Photography. (Allen & Rowles, 2017, pp. 368–369)

The extract reflects a familiar attitude amongst staff on UK visual arts programmes. Entrepreneurialism is often perceived to be at odds with the pure and critical nature of the discipline.

Case Studies 3 and 4

In the following examples, final year BA Fine Art students consider their future plans. Their accounts speak to the discourse tensions between employability and entrepreneurialism as they consider their future. These are attitudes likely picked up from the staff during their time on the programme and their need to consider how they will make a living from their work.

> I probably wouldn’t make work just to sell. I’ve had family members ask me to do a drawing and they’ll buy it off of me but they have complete disregard for... they just want me to do a realistic drawing of a dog and I’m like ‘that’s not really what I do now, I haven’t for years’... I wouldn’t really want to cater my skills in order to do something that sells because it seems like a betrayal of my own artistic identity.... I don’t really know what I mean by that.
>
> Emma, final year BA fine art student (Rowles, 2020, p. 56)

> It’s a real conundrum for me ... I’d like to sell work but it’s this issue where if you try and produce something that’s marketable... someone used the phrase ‘don’t devalue your brand’. We’re fine artists, we’ve spent three years working out what that means and if you then start knocking out things that people ask you to do or that you can sell lots of cheaply then you’re devaluing yourself.... Then on the other hand you need to make a living! So, I’m mixed up with this...
>
> Carey, final year BA fine art student (Rowles, 2020, p. 55)

Taken together, the case studies show how a dominant discourse in the arts—the ideal of art for art’s sake—both constrains action and shapes how students understand their professional identity. As seen across the examples, students and educators alike are positioned within a persistent tension between artistic autonomy and instrumental expectations. This tension is not only external but also internalised, leaving students to navigate the pull between the value placed on autonomous practice within the field and the practical necessity of making a living. In this way, commitment to the autonomy discourse does not

simply defend artistic freedom; it also limits the recognition and legitimacy of alternative forms of practice, particularly in hybrid, socially engaged, and economically oriented contexts.

Expansion of the Discourses

In some countries, such as Finland and the UK, for example, the cultural climate has transformed remarkably in the past two decades when it comes to discussing the value of the arts. While the autonomous art for art's sake discourse used to dominate the discussion, new discourses are emerging that highlight art's added value for society and even the economy (Allen & Rowles, 2017). A desire to work across the other discourses of utilitarianism and entrepreneurialism are being driven not only by policy but also by students themselves. In a recent study of student career aspirations amongst BA Fine Art students in England, students expressed clear wishes to work in the fields of education, health, and entrepreneurship (Rowles, 2020) as they sought more economically viable and meaningful avenues for their future practice. The idea of working in a studio all day was seen as dated and impossible to achieve for all but a few. Whilst students have these views, these expanded approaches to professionalism in the arts are not always supported by their programmes of study. Having said that, attitudes are shifting as staff are becoming more empathetic to the economic realities students face. Embracing wider discourses of entrepreneurialism and utilitarianism can open new areas of work for students. These developments have significant implications for how professionalism in the arts is understood and enacted in both higher arts education and the wider arts field. They point to an urgent need to more fully realise artists' professional potential in contemporary society (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021). At the same time, they place new demands on higher arts education, calling on educators to rethink “professional responsibility ... beyond narrow technical expertise” and to move beyond rigid disciplinary boundaries in response to the complexities of late modernity (Westerlund et al., 2021, p. 2). This involves supporting students to recognise the full potential of their existing competences while also developing new ones that enable them to operate in their chosen contexts (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, 2023).

Conclusions

This paper has shown that students' understandings of viable artistic futures are shaped not only by individual aspirations but by competing, often contradictory discourses embedded in higher arts education. Drawing on research, policy analysis, and case studies, we demonstrate how the coexistence of autonomy, entrepreneurial, and utilitarian discourses generates tensions that are both structurally embedded and internally experienced by students. Our contribution is to make these discourses visible as socially constructed and historically situated frameworks that shape what counts as legitimate artistic practice and professional success. In doing so, we move beyond framing these tensions as individual dilemmas, instead locating them within broader discursive formations that enable and constrain students' perceived possibilities. This highlights how commitment to a single dominant discourse—particularly autonomy—both defends artistic values and limits recognition of alternative, hybrid, and socially engaged practices. By analysing how these tensions are reproduced within pedagogical cultures, we show that higher arts education does not simply reflect the art world but actively constructs its boundaries and hierarchies. At the same time, emerging utilitarian and entrepreneurial discourses point to an expanding landscape of artistic professionalism that remains only partially legitimised within higher arts education. We argue that the task of higher arts education is not to resolve these tensions but to make them critically explicit and pedagogically productive. Supporting students in navigating multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discourses requires recognising the plurality of artistic careers and legitimising diverse forms of practice without imposing entrenched hierarchical value judgements. Diversifying models of artistic professionalism is therefore both a pedagogical necessity and an ethical imperative. By engaging critically with the discourses shaping artistic work, higher arts education can better equip students to navigate complexity, expand their professional agency, and pursue sustainable and meaningful artistic lives in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

Impact and Engagement

This research addresses a key challenge in higher arts education: the coexistence of competing discourses of autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and utilitarianism, which shape how artistic professionalism is defined and constrain the range of recognised career pathways. By making these discourses visible, the study responds to a gap in understanding how pedagogical cultures influence students' perceptions of viable futures and may reproduce inequalities within the arts. The findings are relevant to higher arts education institutions, educators, programme leaders, students, and policymakers concerned with the sustainability and inclusiveness of artistic careers. They are particularly applicable to curriculum design and pedagogical development in contexts seeking to respond to the complex realities of contemporary artistic work. The primary pathway to impact is the uptake of the study's conceptual framework in teaching and curriculum development. By framing tensions in artistic professionalism as a pedagogical resource, the research can support critical dialogue, inform the inclusion of diverse professional models, and guide the development of learning environments that recognise collaborative, socially engaged, and cross-sector practices. The expected impact is a shift towards a more plural understanding of artistic professionalism, supporting students in navigating complexity and expanding their professional agency. Indicative evidence of impact may include changes in curriculum content, increased integration of diverse practices in teaching, and evidence of critical engagement with these discourses among educators and students.

Author Bios

Kai Lehikoinen (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8198-5854) is Professor of Dance Pedagogy and Head of the MA Programme in Dance Pedagogy at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. He previously worked as a University Researcher at the Uniarts Helsinki Research Institute and has held roles including Director and Professor at the CERADA Research Centre, Vice-Director of the ArtsEqual project, and University Lecturer. His research focuses on socially engaged arts, the futures of higher arts education, cultural well-being, and dance pedagogy. He serves on the board of ELIA—Europe's leading multidisciplinary network in higher arts education and research—and has contributed to policy development on arts, health, and well-being, including work with interministerial groups and the WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Dr Sarah Rowles (https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4525-1050) is a postdoctoral researcher in higher education fine art pedagogy at Uniarts Helsinki's Academy of Fine Arts where she is looking at how the MFA at the Academy of Fine Arts prepares students to become professional artists. In 2024 she completed her Doctorate at the Institute of Education, University College London where her thesis examined 'The role of undergraduate fine art education in the production of professional artists' in a UK context. Sarah is the Founding Director of Q-Art, an events and publishing organisation that shares approaches to teaching art across higher education institutions. She has worked as a lecturer in art education and fine art contextual studies, and as a pedagogical researcher.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Kai Lehikoinen, Theatre Academy, Uniarts Helsinki, P.O. Box 20, FI-00097 UNIARTS, Finland. Email: kai.lehikoinen@uniarts.fi

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Using City Prototyping to Create Open Innovation Ecosystems in, for and with Cultural and Creative Industries

Dr. Lena Holmberg
Lund university

Ms. Charlotte Lorentz Hjorth
Lund university

Birgitta Persson
Future by Lund

Dr. Marcin Poprawski
HUMAK University of Applied Sciences

Katarina Scott
Future by Lund

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Abstract

Cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are increasingly expected to contribute to innovation-driven societal transformation, while continuing to operate within policy frameworks that remain poorly aligned with their organisational logics and modes of value creation. Fragmentation, hybridity and sectoral diversity challenge the effectiveness of conventional innovation and cultural policies. City Prototyping, developed and iterated within the Horizon Europe initiative ekip, offers a place-based and participatory method for translating policy intentions into locally meaningful innovation pathways. Drawing on City Prototyping processes conducted in eight European city contexts, this contribution examines how open innovation ecosystems can be created in, for and with CCIs. Particular attention is paid to the role of innovation intermediaries as ecosystem conveners and translators, operating in collaboration with universities and public authorities. The analysis shows that City Prototyping supports shared directionality, portfolio-based thinking, intermediary-led coordination and ecosystem learning. It emerges as a boundary-crossing practice that strengthens ecosystem governance, supports policy learning and equips cultural managers to operate within open and evolving cultural ecosystems.

1. Cultural and creative industries and ecosystem-level innovation challenges

Cultural and creative industries are increasingly positioned as contributors to innovation, sustainability and social cohesion in European policy discourse. At the same time, research consistently shows that CCIs remain marginal within dominant innovation systems shaped by technology-centric and firm-oriented assumptions (Poprawski & Kraatari, 2024). Innovation in CCIs rarely follows linear trajectories; instead, it emerges through networks, temporary collaborations, artistic experimentation and cross-sector exchange.

Cultural policy and arts management research conceptualise CCIs as parts of broader cultural ecosystems rather than as autonomous organisations. These ecosystems consist of heterogeneous actors, infrastructures, institutional frameworks and informal practices that shape cultural value creation over time. From this perspective, organisational sustainability depends on the ability to root activities locally and to navigate multiple value regimes, rather than on scale or growth alone (Poprawski, 2019).

This ecosystemic understanding reveals a structural mismatch between CCIs and prevailing innovation policy instruments, which tend to prioritise standardised projects, measurable outputs and short-term accountability. Addressing this mismatch requires place-based, learning-oriented approaches capable of accommodating diversity, uncertainty and contextual specificity.

2. Open innovation and the role of intermediaries in cultural ecosystems

Open innovation perspectives emphasise porous organisational boundaries, distributed knowledge production and collaboration across sectors. In cultural and creative industries, open innovation is not an adopted management strategy but a structural condition of value creation. Creative processes routinely involve interaction among artists, technologists, cultural organisations, public institutions, educators, audiences and communities.

Recent work on open innovation in CCIs highlights that innovation by, for and with cultural actors is characterised by experimentation, relational value creation and non-linear development trajectories (Holmberg, 2026a, 2026b). Rather than scaling through replication, innovation in CCIs frequently scales through diffusion, recombination and ecosystem learning. These characteristics challenge dominant innovation policy frameworks that prioritise firm growth, intellectual property enclosure and short-term performance indicators.

CCIs contribute to innovation ecosystems primarily through their capacity to generate meaning, social value and new forms of collaboration, rather than through technological outputs alone (Holmberg, 2026b). From this perspective, open innovation in CCIs requires governance arrangements that recognise multiple value logics and allow experimentation to unfold across institutional domains. However, existing support systems often fail to accommodate these dynamics, resulting in fragmented policy landscapes and weak alignment between cultural and innovation policy (Poprawski & Kraatari, 2024).

Innovation intermediaries play a critical role in addressing this fragmentation. Cultural development agencies, innovation platforms, hybrid public organisations and sector-specific enablers act as brokers between policy agendas, funding instruments and creative practice. Their proximity to local cultural scenes allows them to mobilise trust-based relationships, informal networks and contextual knowledge essential for open innovation processes to function. Research on cultural ecosystems highlights intermediaries as key actors in sustaining relational infrastructures and enabling organisational rooting over time (Poprawski, 2019).

City Prototyping explicitly builds on this intermediary capacity. By positioning such boundary spanners as conveners and facilitators, and universities as methodological and reflective partners, the approach supports open innovation ecosystems that are sensitive to local cultural conditions while remaining connected to broader policy and research frameworks. This resonates with previous work on Lund’s innovation district, where open innovation culture has been shown to depend on long-term relational capacity, intermediary organisations and cross-sector collaboration rather than on isolated projects alone (Holmberg, 2026a; Pocek et al., 2024).

3. Theoretical framework and methodological approach

The theoretical foundation of City Prototyping draws on three complementary perspectives: innovation ecosystem theory, open innovation in cultural and creative industries, and cultural ecosystem approaches within arts and cultural management research. Together, these perspectives shift attention from individual organisations and projects towards relationships, portfolios and long-term development trajectories.

Innovation ecosystem theory emphasises interdependencies between actors, resources and institutional arrangements, and highlights the importance of directionality, governance and learning in complex

systems. For CCIs, this perspective resonates strongly with the ecosystemic nature of cultural value creation and the centrality of intermediaries in shaping collaborative capacities.

Methodologically, City Prototyping functions as a form of policy experimentation through a structured, participatory method for exploring how innovation and cultural policy priorities can be translated into local ecosystem action. It has been iteratively developed by Future by Lund, HUMAK, City of Rotterdam, CIKE and Cité du Design ésade Saint-Étienne within ekip, a collaborative platform designed to boost the development of innovation capacity in ecosystems to include the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI).

The method brings together local stakeholders – policymakers, CCI actors, universities, enabling organisations and businesses – to explore how policy recommendations might function in specific urban contexts. In 2025, it was applied in eight cities – Lund, Košice, Bratislava, Rotterdam, Saint-Étienne, Matera, Stockholm, and Tallinn. The sessions addressed eight policy areas, including Artificial Intelligence, New European Bauhaus, Ecodesign, Crafts, Platformisation of Music, Performing Arts, Immersive Media, and Gaming.

The process typically follows three phases: preparatory ecosystem analysis, a facilitated multi-stakeholder prototyping lab, and post-lab documentation and reflection (ekip, n.d.-a). Tools such as the Innovation Portfolio Policy Canvas and ecosystem inventories support collective sensemaking and enable participants to move beyond isolated initiatives towards portfolio-based ecosystem development. City Prototyping prioritises directionality over predefined targets, allowing actors with different institutional logics to align around shared future orientations (Haddad et al., 2024; Wise & Arnold, 2022).

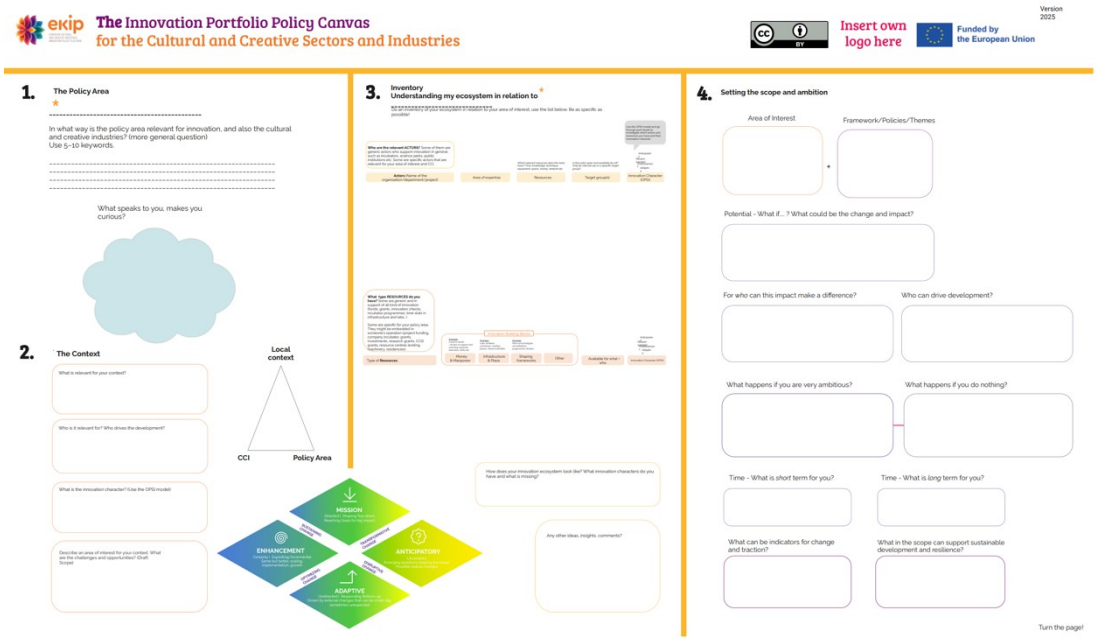


Figure 1. The ekip Innovation Portfolio Policy Canvas, part 1.

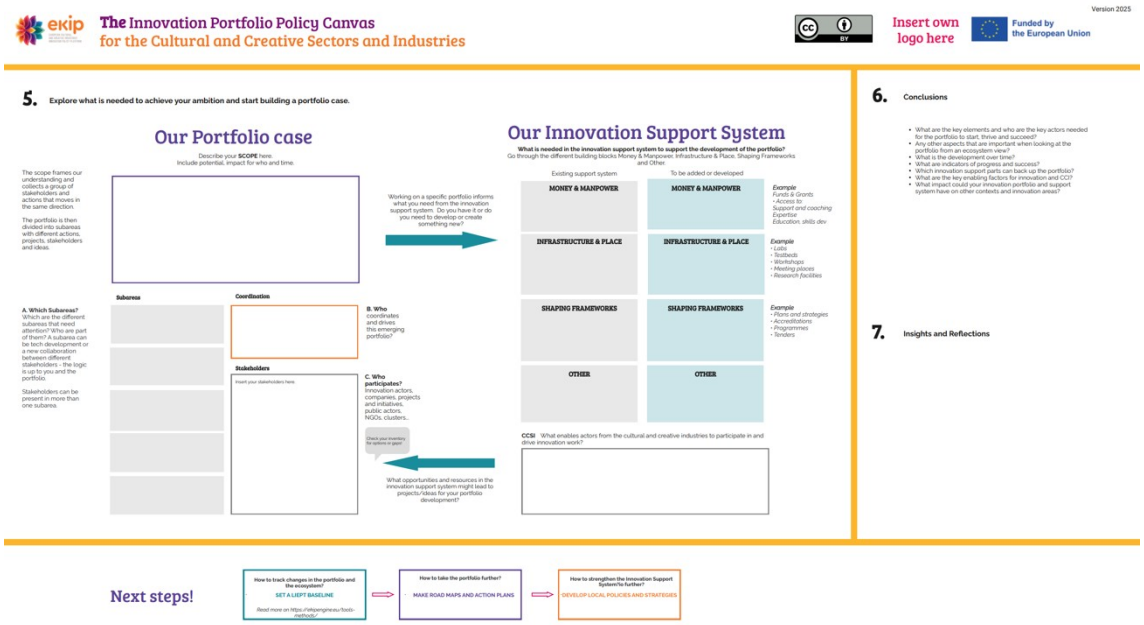


Figure 2. The ekip Innovation Portfolio Policy Canvas, part 2.

4. Results: City Prototyping as a bridge between policy, ecosystems and learning

The empirical material generated through City Prototyping processes within ekip, including the city case descriptions published in the ekip Knowledge Bank (ekip, n.d.-b), confirms the relevance of city-level prototyping as a bridge between policy design, local innovation capacity and ecosystem development. Across cities and thematic areas, City Prototyping enabled actors to translate abstract innovation and cultural policy recommendations into locally grounded directions for action.

A consistent finding across the cases is that City Prototyping created a shared interpretative space in which stakeholders with different institutional logics could jointly explore what policy ambitions would mean in practice. Participants from cultural organisations, creative enterprises, boundary actors, public authorities and academia repeatedly reported that the process provided orientation and inspiration, while also making visible systemic gaps that had previously remained implicit or unaddressed.

These gaps were rarely linked to a lack of resources in absolute terms. Instead, they concerned misalignments between existing funding instruments, organisational mandates, policy responsibilities and the actual innovation dynamics of local cultural and creative ecosystems. City Prototyping made it possible to articulate these misalignments collectively, reinforcing the portfolio-based and learning-oriented governance perspective.

4.1 Translating policy ambition into local meaning

Across the city cases, City Prototyping functioned as a translation mechanism between European-level and national policy ambitions and local ecosystem realities. In Bratislava, where the prototyping focused on the notion of a "Child Friendly City", participants explored how cultural and creative actors could contribute to urban innovation agendas that traditionally sit outside cultural policy, such as safety, mobility and public space design. This process highlighted the capacity of CCIs to act as connectors across policy domains, while simultaneously revealing the absence of integrated support structures for cross-sector innovation.

Similarly, in Košice, the prototyping focused on the role of cultural heritage organisations as innovation catalysts. Participants identified a mismatch between the recognised public value of heritage institutions and the limited scope of policy instruments available to support experimentation, digital development and cross-sector collaboration. Through City Prototyping, heritage organisations were reframed as active

ecosystem actors rather than passive custodians, illustrating how policy experimentation can enable reinterpretation of institutional roles in line with ecosystem theory.

Both these examples demonstrate how City Prototyping supports sensemaking and reframing processes that are essential for ecosystem evolution.

4.2 From isolated initiatives to portfolio-based ecosystem development

A second recurring pattern across the city cases concerns the shift from project-based reasoning towards portfolio-based ecosystem development. In several cities, innovation challenges were initially framed as isolated problems associated with individual organisations or programmes. Through the structured prototyping process, these challenges were increasingly understood as interconnected elements within broader system dynamics.

In Stockholm, where City Prototyping explored cross-innovation with the performing arts, discussions evolved from proposals for single initiatives towards a portfolio perspective that combined shared infrastructure, competence development, cross-sector collaboration and policy adjustment. This enabled participants to articulate how different measures could contribute collectively to ecosystem resilience, even under conditions of financial constraint (Poprawski, 2025).

A similar dynamic was observed across multiple prototyping processes in Rotterdam, where innovation areas such as gaming, immersive media and ecodesign were addressed in relation to broader urban and social challenges. Portfolio-based thinking enabled stakeholders to move beyond isolated pilots and to consider how policy frameworks, intermediaries and infrastructures could be aligned over time.

Across cases, participants emphasised that scaling innovation did not imply replication or growth in size, but rather the strengthening of relational capacity, coordination and shared direction. This understanding of scaling aligns with an ecosystem-level governance perspective.

4.3 Intermediaries as drivers of collaboration and continuity

A third core result across the city cases concerns the role of innovation intermediaries in enabling and sustaining City Prototyping outcomes. They consistently emerged as key actors in convening stakeholders, framing prototyping challenges and maintaining momentum beyond the workshops themselves. Their embeddedness in local ecosystems enabled translation between policy language, cultural practice and administrative routines.

City Prototyping proved most effective when mediating actors operated with an explicit ecosystem mandate rather than a narrowly defined project-delivery role, reflecting an intermediary-centred governance logic developed in the theoretical framework. In such cases, they acted as stewards of collective sensemaking processes and as connectors between emerging ideas and existing support mechanisms.

Universities contributed methodological design, facilitation expertise and documentation, but did not dominate agenda-setting. This division of labour strengthened legitimacy and ownership among local actors, an important factor in relation to long-term ecosystem governance.

4.4 Learning, monitoring and evaluation at ecosystem level

The city cases also point to limitations of prevailing monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) practices when applied to ecosystem-level change processes. Participants frequently described existing evaluation frameworks as focused on short-term, project-level outputs, offering limited insight into cumulative or relational effects.

City Prototyping introduced alternative learning dynamics by embedding reflection directly into the process. When combined with portfolio-based tracking instruments such as LIEPT – the Lund Model for

Innovation Ecosystem Portfolio Tracking (Wise et al., 2023), City Prototyping supports reflexive, learning-oriented evaluation approaches. Rather than summing up results ex post for accountability purposes, evaluation was increasingly used to guide ongoing development and strategic reorientation. This shift in MEL logic is particularly important in relation to mission-oriented and transformative innovation policies.

4.5 Generating new collaborations and ecosystem capacities

Finally, the city cases show that City Prototyping often acted as a catalyst for new collaborations across cultural, academic and business actors. While not all ideas generated through prototyping translated directly into funded initiatives, participants reported increased awareness of complementary capacities, shared challenges and potential partnerships.

In several cities, City Prototyping contributed to the formation or strengthening of cross-sector forums, informal working groups and follow-up processes embedded in existing programmes. These outcomes were not framed as direct impacts of a single intervention but as incremental capacity building within the ecosystem.

The development of shared language, trust and confidence among actors emerged as a recurring result across cases. These relational outcomes, though difficult to capture through conventional indicators, underpin the longer-term governance capacities discussed in the concluding section.

Taken together, the results indicate that City Prototyping functions less as a discrete intervention and more as an enabling infrastructure for ecosystem learning, collaboration and governance. By supporting shared sensemaking, portfolio thinking and intermediary-led coordination, City Prototyping creates conditions under which cultural ecosystems can evolve in response to complex policy challenges.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The findings demonstrate that City Prototyping offers a viable response to structural mismatches between cultural and creative industries and prevailing innovation policy frameworks. By foregrounding intermediary agency, portfolio-based thinking and directionality, City Prototyping supports open innovation ecosystems that align more closely with the organisational logics and value regimes of CCIs. City Prototyping also directly addresses recurring challenges in cultural innovation systems, including fragmented support structures, project-based policy design and limited ecosystem-level learning. The emphasis on shared orientation, collective sensemaking and reflexive monitoring enables ecosystem actors to navigate complexity without reliance on predefined solutions.

From an educational perspective, City Prototyping can be integrated into cultural management training as studio-based, ecosystem-embedded learning. Such integration supports competence development in systems thinking, facilitation and collaborative governance, which are increasingly central to contemporary cultural management practice. By engaging students directly in ecosystem analysis, policy translation and collaborative prototyping, City Prototyping helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional practice in the cultural and creative sectors.

As a research approach, City Prototyping functions as a living laboratory for ecosystem-level inquiry. Combined with portfolio tracking models, it enables co-produced, longitudinal research capable of informing both policy development and academic knowledge. Rather than treating cities as static case studies, City Prototyping positions them as evolving sites of experimentation where learning unfolds over time through interaction between policy, practice and research.

The results also point to several directions for future research. First, comparative cross-city analysis could deepen understanding of how different institutional contexts, governance traditions and intermediary structures shape the outcomes of City Prototyping processes. While the cases presented

here reveal common patterns, systematic comparison could clarify which conditions are most conducive to sustained ecosystem development in CCIs.

Second, further research is needed on the long-term effects of City Prototyping on cultural ecosystems. Longitudinal studies combining qualitative insights with portfolio-based tracking could shed light on how shared directionality, collaboration patterns and governance capacities evolve beyond the initial prototyping phase. Such research would contribute to broader debates on monitoring, evaluation and learning in mission-oriented and transformative innovation policies.

Third, the role of intermediaries warrants deeper theoretical and empirical exploration. While the cases underline their centrality, questions remain regarding intermediary capacities, mandates and sustainability over time. Investigating how these kinds of organisations balance facilitation, governance and accountability roles could provide valuable insights for both cultural policy and ecosystem theory.

Finally, the integration of City Prototyping into cultural management education opens a promising research agenda on pedagogical innovation. Future studies could examine learning outcomes, professional trajectories and institutional implications of embedding ecosystem-based experimentation into higher education curricula. Such research would further strengthen the connection between cultural management training, policy learning and ecosystem development.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a persistent gap between cultural and creative industries and the innovation policy frameworks intended to support them. While CCIs are increasingly recognised as contributors to digital transformation, sustainability, social cohesion and place-based development, they often remain marginal in innovation systems shaped by technology-centred, firm-oriented and project-based assumptions. City Prototyping responds to this gap by offering a practical, participatory method for translating policy recommendations into locally meaningful ecosystem action. Its potential impact lies in strengthening the capacity of cities, cultural organisations, creative enterprises, universities, intermediaries, policymakers and educators to work across institutional boundaries and develop shared directions for change.

The findings may be taken up through several pathways: use of the City Prototyping method in urban and regional policy processes; application of the Innovation Portfolio Policy Canvas and related facilitation tools; integration into cultural management education and university collaboration training; and further dissemination through the ekip Knowledge Bank, city case descriptions, policy camps and practitioner networks.

Expected changes include improved policy learning, stronger recognition of CCIs as innovation actors, more coherent collaboration between cultural and innovation policy, and the development of portfolio-based approaches that move beyond isolated projects. In practice, this may result in new cross-sector forums, follow-up initiatives, strengthened intermediary mandates, and better alignment between local ecosystem needs and policy instruments.

Evidence of impact could be substantiated through the number and diversity of cities and stakeholders adopting the method, documented use of the tools, follow-up collaborations or innovation portfolios emerging from prototyping labs, references to City Prototyping in policy documents or educational curricula, participant feedback, and longitudinal tracking of ecosystem change through models such as LIEPT. In this way, the research contributes not only to academic debates on open innovation and cultural ecosystems, but also to practical capacity building for more inclusive, adaptive and culturally grounded innovation governance.

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Biographies

Dr Lena Holmberg is a Project Manager at Lund University, where she works with collaboration, sustainable innovation ecosystem development and international partnerships. She is an experienced researcher with a PhD in educational research and more than 25 years of cross-sector experience spanning academia, the public sector, industry and civil society. Within the Horizon Europe initiative ekip, she has contributed to the development of open innovation policy for the cultural and creative industries. Her work focuses on multi-stakeholder collaboration, organisational learning and transformative innovation for societal challenges.

Charlotte Lorentz Hjorth has more than 25 years of experience in developing ecosystems and leading innovation organisations at the intersection of academia, industry and society. From 2011 to 2020, she was CEO of Krinova, Sweden’s largest innovation arena for food-related companies. Since 2020, she has worked at Lund University Collaboration, where she is assigned as CEO of Future by Lund, an innovation platform involving Lund University, the City of Lund and more than 40 companies. At Lund University Collaboration, she also coordinates European partnerships with the cultural and creative industries. She leads ekip, the European CCI Innovation Policy Platform, which develops policy recommendations to establish open innovation as a standard in ecosystems.

Birgitta Persson is a project manager at Future by Lund in Sweden, where she develops innovation processes and manages portfolios in the cultural and creative industries. She has held senior leadership roles at Trans Europe Halles as Secretary General and at Olivearte as co-director, building cross-sector networks and organisations across Europe. In the innovation policy project ekip, she co-developed the City Prototyping method.

Dr Marcin Poprawski is a researcher and senior lecturer at Humak University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland, where he works at the intersection of cultural management, cultural policy, sustainability and creative organisation. He previously worked at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and has extensive experience in research, publishing and teaching related to festivals, local cultural ecosystems, organisational cultures of arts and heritage organisations, audience engagement, aesthetics and creative processes. Within the Horizon Europe initiative ekip, he leads the Finnish team and contributes to the development of open innovation policy for the cultural and creative industries. His work focuses on cultural sustainability, value-driven cultural organisations and the role of festivals, cultural institutions and creative ecosystems in wider societal transformation.

Katarina Scott is CFO and Senior Project Developer at Future by Lund. She has extensive experience in private, societal and governmental development and is co-founder of Future by Lund and The Creative Plot, an incubator for the cultural and creative industries. Within the Horizon Europe initiative ekip, she has contributed to the development of open innovation policy for the cultural and creative industries and, together with colleagues from Future by Lund, has helped build the methodology for City Prototyping and ecosystem impact tracking. Her work focuses on multi-stakeholder collaboration, policy as a tool for innovation, cultural policy and innovation policy, innovation by production and ekip Academy.

Reconfiguring music rights: digital transformation and the evolution of copyright management in Italy

Dr. Martina Manzo
IUL Digital University

Martina Manzo is a Tenure Track Researcher in Business Administration (ECON-06/A) at IUL digital University (Florence, Italy). She holds a PhD in Business Governance and Management from Roma Tre University and is qualified as a Chartered Accountant and Statutory Auditor. She has obtained the Italian National Scientific Qualification (ASN) for Associate Professor in Business Administration (ECON-06/A). Her research focuses on intellectual capital and innovative startups, sustainability reporting in cultural and creative industries, female entrepreneurship and gender budgeting. She has been a member of SIDREA since 2022 and of the Ipazia Gender Observatory since 2021. She has held international visiting in China and Portugal and has authored numerous scientific publications, including articles in ANVUR-ranked journals and the monograph Innovation in the Startup Ecosystem (Giappichelli, 2025).

Abstract

In recent years, the music industry has undergone profound transformations driven by digital technologies, streaming platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems and data-driven consumption models. Within this evolving ecosystem, copyright management represents a fundamental governance infrastructure that regulates licensing processes, coordinates stakeholders and organises the distribution of revenues across the music value chain. By transforming creative works into tradable economic assets, copyright management systems shape the industry's organisational structure and influence the economic sustainability of artistic labour. While existing research has extensively examined the impact of digital platforms on music production, distribution and consumption, comparatively less attention has been devoted to how digitalisation is transforming the governance structures through which copyright is administered, and value is distributed.

This study, therefore, addresses the following research question: How has the digitalisation of copyright management contributed to reshaping the governance of the music industry in Italy?

To address this question, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design focused on an independent rights management organisation operating in the Italian music market. The findings show that digitalisation is reshaping copyright governance by integrating rights management processes, shifting monitoring from territorial control to data-driven systems, enabling faster, more analytical royalty distribution, and transforming rights management organisations into digital governance actors.

Keywords: Digital transformation; Music industry; Copyright management; Cultural Ecosystems.

1.

Introduction

The music industry has undergone profound transformations driven by digital technologies, streaming platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems and data-driven consumption models. The transition from physical distribution to digital ecosystems has reshaped how music is produced, distributed, consumed, and monetised, expanding access to cultural content while also transforming the sector's economic organisation (Lin et al., 2025; Watson et al., 2024). At the same time, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain have

1 Martina Manzo

IUL digital University, Street Michelangelo Buonarroti 10, 50122 Florence, Italy Department of Human Sciences

intensified debates on authorship, traceability, transparency and the distribution of value across the music ecosystem (Acar, 2025; Arenal et al., 2025; Ashtagi et al., 2024).

Existing research has extensively examined how digital technologies have transformed music production, distribution and consumption. Studies on platformisation have shown how streaming platforms reconfigure access to music, algorithmic visibility, user behaviour and the distribution of power between platforms, artists and audiences (Arenal et al., 2025; Watson et al., 2024). Legal and policy-oriented studies have highlighted the inadequacy of traditional copyright systems in the streaming era, particularly regarding transaction costs, black-box royalties, licensing inefficiencies, and the declining remuneration of songwriters (Steinmetz, 2025). Research on blockchain and smart contracts has explored the potential of decentralised technologies to improve traceability, transparency and automatic royalty payments (Amith Sriram & Valarmathi, 2025; Ashtagi et al., 2024; Cartwright & Peters, 2026).

Despite these contributions, an important literature gap remains. Less attention has been devoted to the organisational and managerial transformation of copyright management itself: that is, how rights management organisations reinterpret their roles, redesign their processes, and reposition themselves within increasingly digital, platform-based, and international music ecosystems. In particular, the question of how digitalisation reshapes the governance mechanisms through which copyright is administered and value is distributed among ecosystem actors remains underexplored.

This paper is positioned precisely within this gap. It shifts the focus from copyright as a legal framework to copyright management as a strategic and organisational process. Rather than asking only how copyright law protects music, the study examines how copyright is operationalised through digital infrastructures, data-driven monitoring, reporting systems, royalty distribution mechanisms and stakeholder relationships. The study addresses the following research question: How has the digitalisation of copyright management contributed to reshaping the governance of the music industry in Italy?

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009), focused on an independent rights management organisation operating in the Italian music market. The analysis draws on multiple qualitative sources, including press releases, public interviews, podcast materials, the founder’s published book and a semi-structured interview with the founder of the selected organisation. Data were analysed through thematic coding following an abductive logic.

The findings show that digitalisation is reshaping copyright governance by integrating rights management processes, shifting monitoring from territorial control to data-driven systems, enabling analytical, transparent and faster royalty distribution, transforming rights management organisations into digital governance actors, and opening new challenges related to artificial intelligence, platform infrastructures and the protection of human creativity.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on digital transformation, copyright governance, ecosystem governance and value innovation. Section 3 presents the methodological approach. Section 4 discusses empirical findings. Section 5 concludes by answering the research question, outlining contributions, limitations and future research direction

2.

Literature review

The music industry has been one of the cultural and creative sectors most deeply affected by digital transformation. Over the last three decades, technological change has reconfigured the entire music value chain, from creation and production to distribution, consumption, monetisation and rights administration. The transition from physical formats to digital files, and subsequently from ownership-based consumption to platform-mediated access, has reshaped the sector's economic and organisational

structures (Ardizzone & Barbarito, 2010; Wikström, 2020; Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Lin et al., 2025). The first wave of disruption emerged with MP3 technologies and peer-to-peer file-sharing systems, which challenged the traditional recorded music business

model and exposed the limits of copyright enforcement in dematerialised markets (Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2006; Leyshon, 2014; Ramello & Silva, 1999). More recently, streaming platforms have consolidated a new mode of music circulation based on access, datafication and algorithmic mediation (Morris, 2020; Prey, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Platforms such as Spotify, YouTube and Apple Music do not merely distribute music; they organise discovery, recommendation and engagement through playlists, predictive analytics, user profiling and algorithmic curation (Arenal et al., 2025). In this context, music consumption is increasingly mediated by data infrastructures that shape visibility, audience attention and the conditions under which musical works become economically valuable (Beer, 2019; Morris, 2020).

This platformisation of music has produced ambivalent effects. On the one hand, digital platforms have expanded access to music, reduced some transaction costs and provided artists with new channels for reaching audiences (Wikström, 2020; Hesmondhalgh, 2018). On the other hand, they have intensified dependence on algorithmic intermediaries and generated new asymmetries in visibility, bargaining power and value distribution (Prey, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Arenal et al., 2025). Watson et al. (2024) interpret this transformation through the concept of platform reintermediation, showing how early peer-to-peer disruption was followed by the consolidation of major streaming platforms and, more recently, by the emergence of MusicTech actors developing applications across production, rights management, data analytics and distribution. Importantly, platformisation has not eliminated incumbent power. Rather, the music industry remains characterised by strong oligopolistic structures, in which major rights holders and digital platforms are increasingly interdependent (Meier & Manzerolle, 2019; Watson & Leyshon, 2022; Watson et al., 2024). This is relevant to copyright management because digital innovation does not occur in an open and frictionless environment but within an ecosystem through which creative works are transformed into tradable assets, licences are granted, revenues are collected, and value is distributed among authors, publishers, performers, producers, platforms and other intermediaries (Towse, 2001, 2003; Caves, 2000; Handke, 2010). Rogers and Sparviero (2025) reinforce this interpretation by arguing that performing rights mechanisms did not merely protect creators but reshaped the architecture of the music industry by transforming music from an ephemeral live experience into a reproducible and monetisable cultural commodity.

The complexity of copyright management is particularly evident in the music industry, where each work may generate value through multiple forms of use, including streaming, broadcasting, live performance, background music, synchronisation, user-generated content and online platforms (Towse, 2003; Ardizzone & Barbarito, 2010; Steinmetz, 2025). Moreover, each song involves different layers of rights, particularly the copyright relating to the sound recording and the underlying musical composition. These rights activate different licensing systems and categories of right holders, including artists, record labels, publishers, songwriters, and composers (Towse, 2001; Steinmetz, 2025). The streaming economy has exposed the limitations of older licensing infrastructures. Steinmetz (2025) shows that digital music markets have intensified problems related to transaction costs, incomplete metadata and “black box” royalties, where revenues remain unmatched or unpaid because the correct right holders cannot be identified.

Digitalisation has therefore changed the expectations placed on collecting societies, performing rights organisations and independent management entities. In a context characterised by granular digital uses, cross-platform circulation and micro-transactions, right holders increasingly expect timely reporting, transparent data and remuneration linked to actual usage (Rogers & Sparviero, 2025; Steinmetz, 2025). Rights management organisations are thus required to move from bureaucratic administration towards data-driven governance. Emerging technologies such as blockchain and smart contracts are often

discussed in this debate because of their potential to improve traceability, automate payments and reduce information asymmetries (O’Dair, 2018; Senkardes, 2021; Ashtagi et al., 2024; Wijesekara, 2025). Ashtagi et al. (2024),argue that blockchain-based music streaming systems may support transparent royalty distribution, direct interaction between artists and users and reduced dependence on intermediaries (O’Dair, 2018; Ashtagi et al., 2024).

This transformation is particularly significant in Europe, where regulatory changes have introduced stronger principles of transparency, accountability, multi-territorial licensing and right holders’ freedom of choice

(European Parliament and Council, 2014; Meo, 2023; Rogers & Sparviero, 2025). In Italy, the collective rights management system was historically characterised by a highly centralised structure, but gradual liberalisation has enabled the emergence of new rights management actors (Meo, 2023; FIMI, 2024). This shift should not be interpreted merely as a move from monopoly to competition. Rather, it reflects a deeper change in the criteria through which rights management organisations are evaluated: from institutional authority and territorial coverage to data accuracy, technological capability, interoperability, speed, transparency and accountability.

3.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design to examine how digital transformation has contributed to the reconfiguration of copyright management governance in the Italian music industry (Hunter et al., 2029). Given the limited empirical evidence on the organisational transformation of rights management organisations, an exploratory case study approach was considered suitable for investigating an emerging phenomenon and generating analytically relevant insights rather than statistically generalisable results (Yin, 2018; Eisenhardt, 1989).

The empirical focus is an independent rights management organisation operating in the Italian music market. The organisation was selected as an informative case of a digitally oriented entrant in a sector historically characterised by a centralised model of collective rights management. Its activities include royalty collection across online, offline, live and broadcast contexts, supported by an integrated infrastructure for monitoring, licensing, collecting and distributing royalties. This makes the case relevant for analysing how digital technologies can challenge incumbent models, reshape governance arrangements and redefine relationships among authors, publishers, users and intermediaries.

The study is based on both primary and secondary qualitative sources.

The primary source consists of a semi-structured expert interview with the founder the selected organisation. The interview was conducted via Skype and lasted approximately one and a half hours. The interview protocol was informed by the Four Actions Framework developed within Blue Ocean Strategy, a strategic management approach that focuses on how organisations can move beyond direct competition by creating new value spaces (Kim and Mauborgne, 2014). The framework is based on four key questions: which factors should be increased above industry standards; which factors should be reduced below industry standards; which factors should be eliminated because they are no longer valuable; and which new factors should be created because the industry has not previously offered them. These four actions, increase, reduce, eliminate and create, help identify how an organisation departs from established industry assumptions and develops a different strategic configuration. This perspective makes it possible to analyse digitalisation not simply as the adoption of new technologies, but as a broader organisational and strategic transformation that may alter governance arrangements, redefine intermediary roles and reshape the relationship between authors, publishers, users and rights management organisations. The empirical material was analysed through thematic coding, following an abductive logic that moved between data and theory (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2013).

Secondary sources were then used to contextualise and triangulate the interview evidence. These included company website materials, press releases, public interviews, podcasts and the founder’s published book.

4.

Findings

The framework enables the analysis to identify what the organisation increases, reduces, eliminates, and creates compared with the traditional model of collective rights management. This structure makes it possible to interpret the case not only as an example of technological adoption, but as a broader process of value innovation in copyright management.

4.1 Increase

The first dimension concerns the factors that the organisation increases above the standards traditionally associated with collective rights management. The empirical evidence shows that the organisation places particular emphasis on three elements: transparency, analytical royalty distribution and speed of payment.

Transparency is presented as a central component of the organisation’s value proposition. In traditional copyright management systems, right holders often experience a lack of clarity regarding how royalties are calculated, when they are distributed and which uses of their works generate revenues. The analysed organisation seeks to address this limitation by making royalty information more accessible, traceable and understandable for authors, composers and publishers. As the interviewee explained, “the author must be able to understand not only how much he or she receives, but also where that amount comes from and why”.

Analytical distribution is another key element that the organisation increases. Rather than relying mainly on estimates, averages or general allocation criteria, the organisation aims to connect royalty distribution more closely to actual music usage. This principle responds to one of the main weaknesses of traditional copyright management: the perceived distance between the use of a musical work and the remuneration received by the right holder. In the words of the interviewee, “our objective was to move from a logic of approximation to a logic of evidence: if a work is used, that use should be traced and remunerated as precisely as possible”.

Speed is also higher than in conventional collecting models. The organisation frames faster royalty payments as a relevant source of differentiation, especially in a sector where delayed distributions may create uncertainty for authors and publishers. Faster reporting and payment cycles improve the economic predictability of creative work. As the interviewee noted, “for many authors, receiving royalties after a long time means losing the connection between their creative work and its economic value”.

4.2 Reduce

Traditional collective rights management has historically relied on local offices, territorial presence and physical monitoring. However, this model appears less suitable in a music ecosystem shaped by digital platforms, online uses and large-scale data flows. As the interviewee stated, “territorial presence is no longer the only way to guarantee control; today, a large part of music usage can be monitored through data”.

The organisation also reduces bureaucracy by using digital tools to simplify registration, licensing, monitoring, reporting and payment. Digitalisation is therefore not limited to making existing procedures faster but contributes to redesigning the whole process. As the interviewee observed, “digitalisation was not introduced to make old procedures faster, but to rethink the process from the beginning”.

Finally, the organisation reduces information asymmetry by giving right holders greater access to data and reporting tools. This makes the relationship between the intermediary and its members more transparent, data-based and service-oriented.

4.3 Eliminate

The third dimension concerns the factors that the organisation attempts to eliminate from the conventional model of copyright management: opaque royalty allocation mechanisms, unnecessary delays and the assumption that rights management must rely on a centralised or monopoly-based structure.

First, the organisation seeks to eliminate opacity in royalty allocation. Traditional systems often rely on estimate-based or insufficiently transparent distribution mechanisms, which may make it difficult for right holders to understand how their royalties are calculated. The analysed organisation addresses this limitation through more granular data, analytical reporting and a clearer link between music use and remuneration. As the interviewee stated, “what we wanted to remove was the black box effect: the idea that the author receives a payment without really knowing how it was generated”.

Second, the organisation attempts to eliminate unnecessary delays in royalty distribution. Long time gaps between music usage, reporting and payment may weaken the effectiveness of copyright management. Its digital

infrastructure is therefore designed to make royalty distribution more frequent, timely and connected to actual usage.

Finally, the case challenges the idea that rights management should be organised around a single dominant institutional actor. In a market historically characterised by a highly centralised model, independent management entities introduce a logic based on competition, freedom of choice and service differentiation. In the interviewee’s view, “the point was not only to enter a market, but to demonstrate that authors could choose a different model of rights management”.

4.4 Create

The fourth dimension concerns the new factors created by the organisation: an integrated digital infrastructure, a data-driven governance model and a different value proposition for authors, publishers and other actors in the music ecosystem.

First, the organisation creates an end-to-end digital infrastructure that supports the whole copyright management cycle, from registration and licensing to monitoring, royalty calculation, reporting and payment. By integrating these functions, it develops a more connected and data-intensive model of rights management. As the interviewee explained, “the goal was to build an infrastructure able to follow the entire life cycle of a musical work, from registration to payment”.

Second, the organisation creates a new role for rights management organisations. They are no longer only administrative intermediaries that collect and redistribute royalties but increasingly act as digital governance actors. They coordinate data flows, manage licensing relationships and influence how value is distributed across the music ecosystem.

Third, digitalisation creates new value spaces in the copyright management market. The organisation creates value not only by collecting royalties, but also by offering transparency, faster payments, analytical reporting, technological accountability and international reach. As the interviewee suggested, “technology allowed us to offer a different promise: not only collecting rights but giving authors more control over the value generated by their works”.

Finally, the organisation contributes to the creation of new governance capabilities for future challenges related to artificial intelligence, platform-based infrastructures, and algorithmic music circulation. These developments require new tools for monitoring, identifying, reporting and remunerating music usage.

5.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how the digitalisation of copyright management contributes to reshaping governance in the Italian music industry. By adopting an exploratory qualitative case study approach, the paper interpreted copyright management not only as a legal or administrative function, but as a governance infrastructure through which music use is monitored, rights are operationalised and creative value is translated into revenues. This perspective is consistent with studies that conceptualise copyright and performing rights organisations as key intermediaries in the economic organisation of music markets (Towse, 2001, 2003; Rogers and Sparviero, 2025).

The findings show that digital transformation affects copyright management governance through four interconnected dimensions.

First, the case confirms that the digitalisation of rights management processes should not be understood as a merely technical change. Digital technologies do not simply automate existing procedures; they support the redesign of the entire copyright management value chain, including registration, licensing, monitoring, reporting and royalty distribution. In this sense, the analysed organisation reflects broader transformations in the music industry, where digital technologies have changed not only music production and consumption, but also the organisational infrastructures through which music is monetised (Watson et al., 2024; Arenal et al., 2025).

Second, the findings highlight a shift from territorial and physical control to data-driven monitoring. Copyright governance is progressively moving towards systems based on data accuracy, automated monitoring and centralised processing. This confirms the relevance of datafication and platformisation in the music industry, where value creation and value capture increasingly depend on the capacity to collect, process and interpret large volumes of usage data (Arenal et al., 2025; Watson et al., 2024).

Third, the case shows that analytical, transparent and faster royalty distribution has become a key dimension of value creation. This finding is particularly relevant in light of the literature on copyright modernisation, which has emphasised the problems generated by incomplete data, unmatched royalties and opaque allocation systems in digital music markets (Steinmetz, 2025). In this perspective, the effectiveness of copyright management increasingly depends not only on the ability to collect royalties, but also on the capacity to distribute them in a timely, traceable and intelligible way.

Fourth, the study shows that rights management organisations are being reconfigured from administrative intermediaries into digital governance actors. This finding contributes to ecosystem governance literature by showing that rights management organisations act as strategic coordinators within complex music ecosystems, connecting authors, publishers, users, platforms and international partners (Adner, 2017; Jacobides et al., 2018; Rogers and Sparviero, 2025).

6.

Impact & Engagement

This research engages with an emerging issue in the contemporary music ecosystem: the increasing distance between the speed and scale of digital music circulation and the governance mechanisms through which copyright is monitored, administered and remunerated. As music circulates across streaming platforms, online environments, broadcast channels, retail spaces and AI-mediated systems, copyright management may play an increasingly important role in supporting transparency, accountability and fairer value distribution.

The study may offer useful insights for different stakeholders. Authors, composers and publishers may benefit from a clearer understanding of how digital rights management can improve visibility over royalty flows and reduce information asymmetries. Rights management organisations and independent management entities may draw on the research to reflect on their service models, particularly in relation to transparency, speed, analytical reporting and stakeholder trust. Policymakers and regulators may also find the study relevant when considering how market liberalisation, digital innovation and platform governance interact with fair remuneration and the sustainability of creative labour.

The research may generate impact through academic dissemination, conference presentations, practitioner-oriented workshops, teaching materials and dialogue with cultural policy actors and music industry professionals. It may also contribute to broadening how copyright management is discussed and taught, moving beyond a strictly legal perspective towards issues of governance quality, accountability and value distribution.

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Digitalisation and Audience Diversification in Opera: Measuring Access, Participation, and the Limits of Technology

Mr. Filip Babić

Sibelius Academy, University of Arts Helsinki

Author Biography

Filip Babić holds two Master’s degrees in Arts Management, Society and Creative Entrepreneurship from the Sibelius Academy, University of Arts Helsinki, and in Classical Guitar Performance, from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. His research focuses on digital transformation, audience development, and cultural policy in the performing arts. His master’s thesis on digitalisation and audience engagement at the Bavarian State Opera was awarded the TAKU Prize 2026 by the Finnish Union for Art and Culture Professionals. He has contributed to research on intercultural perspectives in higher music education as part of the European alliance In.Tune, and combines his research with professional experience in festival production, cultural project management, and active performance as a classical guitarist.

1. Introduction

Opera houses across Europe have invested significantly in digital platforms, streaming services, and audience-facing applications, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategic rationale is broadly shared across the sector: digital tools will expand access, diversify audiences, and secure long-term institutional relevance. Whether this rationale holds under empirical scrutiny is the question this paper addresses.

Existing research on digital transformation in the cultural sector concentrates predominantly on museums and galleries, where the digitisation of collections offers a relatively direct starting point (Navarrete, 2020). The live performing arts present a different set of conditions. Opera’s core product is time-based, physically situated, and cannot be reproduced without loss (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Verhoef et al. (2021) distinguish digitalisation, understood as the transformation of existing processes, from digital transformation, a holistic and organisation-wide shift in operational logic. This distinction is rarely applied to opera houses with the precision it requires, and the conditions under which digital tools meaningfully contribute to audience diversification, as theorised by McCarthy and Jinnett (2001) and Kawashima (2006), remain empirically underexamined in this specific institutional context.

This paper presents findings from a qualitative case study of the Bavarian State Opera (BSO), one of the most digitally active publicly funded opera houses in the German-speaking world. The BSO established a dedicated digital department in 2021 and has since launched a streaming platform, a subsidised mobile application for under-30 audiences, and a diversified social media presence. It represents a best-case scenario for digital transformation: well-resourced, leadership-committed, and operationally documented. The central research question is whether digitalisation can meaningfully diversify the opera audience, or whether it primarily deepens engagement with audiences already within the institution’s cultural orbit.

2. Theoretical Background

Three theoretical strands inform this study. The first concerns audience engagement and development. McCarthy and Jinnett (2001) distinguish broadening participation, increasing engagement among existing target groups, from deepening participation, increasing the frequency of engagement among current audiences, and diversifying participation, reaching structurally new audience segments. Kawashima (2006) similarly identifies four types of audience development distinguished by target group and purpose, ranging from extended marketing aimed at lapsed attendees to outreach aimed at populations unlikely to attend at all. Brown and Ratzkin (2011) conceptualise audience engagement as a five-stage arc extending from anticipatory build-up through to long-term impact echo, a framework relevant to understanding sustained loyalty over time.

The second strand concerns digitalisation and digital transformation. Verhoef et al. (2021) identify organisational readiness and strategic alignment as preconditions for genuine digital transformation, distinguishing this from digitalisation as incremental process improvement. Martín-Peña et al. (2019) similarly frame digitalisation as a value-creating process change requiring sustained operational capacity rather than one-off project deployment.

The third strand concerns the economic structure of the performing arts. Baumol and Bowen’s (1966) cost disease identifies a structural productivity problem specific to live performance: labour costs rise continuously while the core product cannot be made more efficient through technology. This produces permanent upward pressure on ticket prices, with direct implications for the economic accessibility of publicly funded cultural institutions (Hartwig & Krämer, 2023). The tension between public funding obligations and selective economic accessibility, articulated in the cultural rights frameworks of the Fribourg Declaration (2007), provides the normative lens through which the findings of this study are interpreted.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive single-case study design. Data collection consisted of four semi-structured expert interviews conducted between December 2025 and February 2026: with the BSO’s Digital Projects Manager, its Sales and CRM Manager, an external technology partner responsible for developing the institution’s mobile application, and the original architect of the BSO’s 2021 digital strategy, who was able to provide a historical and comparative perspective. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed using digital transcription tools, with manual review prior to coding.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach combining inductive and deductive elements, structured around three categories that emerged from the data and align with the theoretical framework: institutional context, digital initiatives, and audience engagement. Findings were triangulated with institutional documents, including the BSO’s original 2021 digital strategy document and internal audience survey data from 2023, and with analysis of the institution’s digital platforms.

The single-case design enables detailed, multi-perspective analysis of one institution but limits statistical generalisability. The BSO’s resource level is atypical of the sector, a methodological consideration that is treated as analytically significant rather than purely limiting, as discussed below. The study did not include direct audience research; findings regarding audience composition are based on institutional perspectives and internal data rather than primary engagement with non-attending populations.

4. Structural Conditions

Before examining outcomes, it is necessary to establish the structural conditions that determine what digital transformation can achieve in this institutional context. Three conditions proved consistently significant across all interviews.

The first is governance lag. Publicly funded cultural institutions operate within ministry oversight, multi-year budget cycles, and hierarchical approval structures designed for stability rather than iteration. Digital development requires cycles of weeks to months. At the BSO, this mismatch was estimated by a senior institutional actor at 15 to 20 years of organisational lag. A direct consequence is strategic fragility: the BSO’s 2021 digital strategy, a detailed and operationally grounded document, became inaccessible to current staff following a personnel transition, despite continuing to shape the institution’s digital direction in practice. Strategic knowledge stored in individuals rather than institutional systems does not survive ordinary personnel turnover.

The second condition is capacity. The BSO employs approximately 1,500 staff and delivers over 500 productions annually, yet the team directly responsible for digital transformation comprises three to four people. This is not an institution-specific anomaly but a sector-wide pattern, intensified by post-COVID budget attrition. Two consequences follow: infrastructure is systematically underfunded relative to visible outputs, with budget concentrating on communicable initiatives such as platforms and applications while foundational technical layers receive comparatively little investment; and digital tools are not consistently embedded into institutional workflow, with coordination breaking down under operational pressure.

The third condition is the institution’s economic model. Approximately 85% of the BSO’s annual budget is publicly subsidised, while ticket prices reach up to €140–200 and the subsidised under-30 access scheme is capped at approximately 5% of capacity, a budgetary rather than demand-driven constraint. Baumol’s cost disease provides the structural explanation: a live performance cannot be made more efficient through technology, producing permanent cost inflation that places sustained downward pressure on the institution’s capacity to expand subsidised access regardless of digital investment.

These three conditions jointly determine the operational scope within which all subsequent digital initiatives operate.

5. Findings: Access, Diversity, and Loyalty

5.1 Access

Access operates on three analytically distinct levels: informational access, concerning visibility and legibility; opportunity access, concerning the practical and financial feasibility of attendance; and participation, concerning actual change in who attends. Digital tools at the BSO have demonstrably expanded the first level. The streaming platform Staatsoper.TV reaches registered users internationally, including from Japan, the United States, and across Europe, and has provided continued engagement for elderly and mobility-restricted patrons unable to attend physically. The under-30 mobile application, developed with an external technology partner, has produced a 20 to 30% increase in ticket purchases among under-30 audiences and created a lower barrier to first purchase for a demographic with limited prior engagement.

Opportunity access has expanded more narrowly. While the under-30 scheme demonstrably lowers the economic barrier for a specific age cohort, over 97% of its users are based in Germany, with 64% in Munich, mirroring the geographic concentration of the broader audience. The scheme operates within, rather than

beyond, the institution’s existing reach, and its scale remains capped by the 5% capacity constraint described above.

Participation change, the third level, has not been demonstrated. The institution’s 2023 internal audience survey shows a profile, average age 59, predominantly Munich-based, concentrated in upper-middle income brackets, that is not meaningfully different from the profile that preceded the major digital initiatives launched since 2021.

5.2 Diversity

Audience diversification was an explicit goal of the BSO’s 2021 digital strategy, which identified specific new target segments through sociographic analysis, structurally distinct from the institution’s existing core audience. By 2026, this diversification has not occurred. The current staff member of the BSO stated that the audience is not actually diverse and mostly people with higher education. Two structural barriers, distinguishable but mutually reinforcing, explain this outcome. The first is economic, addressed above. The second is cultural distance: opera does not register as a realistic possibility for populations outside the institution’s existing cultural orbit, a perception built over decades and not addressed by digital content regardless of its quality or accessibility. The original strategy architect, reflecting on the same period, observed that the institution proved structurally more comfortable deepening relationships with its existing audience than transforming its appeal to non-visitors, a finding consistent with Kawashima’s (2006) distinction between taste cultivation and outreach as fundamentally different modes of audience development requiring different institutional capacities.

5.3 Loyalty

The traditional subscription model sustaining opera houses for decades is collapsing generationally, and digital tools have not restored it. The acquisition-cultivation-retention pipeline central to audience development theory (Brown & Ratzkin, 2011) shows a structural break at the retention stage. The under-30 application addresses acquisition and early cultivation effectively but provides no mechanism for retaining users once they age out of the scheme at 30. Interview data further identifies a 20-year life-stage gap, active engagement in early adulthood followed by near-complete disengagement through family and career formation in the subsequent two decades, meaning that even successfully cultivated younger audiences are structurally likely to disengage during the period of highest social and economic influence. No current digital initiative addresses this retention gap, and the institution lacks the longitudinal data infrastructure required to even measure it accurately.

6. Discussion

The findings indicate that digitalisation functions effectively as an instrument of broadening and deepening engagement, in McCarthy and Jinnett’s (2001) terms, but not as an instrument of diversification. This distinction has been insufficiently theorised in existing research on digital transformation in the cultural sector and constitutes the principal analytical contribution of this study. Reporting expanded reach, increased downloads, or higher engagement metrics as evidence of diversification, a pattern observed both in institutional self-reporting and in parts of the broader literature, constitutes a category error with direct policy consequences: it produces false confidence that digital investment addresses structural inequities in cultural participation, thereby reducing pressure for the economic and policy interventions actually required.

The BSO case is analytically significant precisely because it represents a best-case input scenario. Significant resources, sustained leadership commitment, and a documented strategy were insufficient to produce

audience diversification. This suggests that the structural conditions identified in this study, governance lag, capacity constraints, and the economic model, are not institution-specific limitations but sector-wide conditions that likely constrain comparable institutions with fewer resources even more severely.

A further finding concerns the role of leadership in sustaining digital transformation. Visionary institutional leadership was sufficient to initiate the BSO's digital strategy in 2021 but proved insufficient, on its own, to protect that strategy institutionally once personnel changed. This suggests that digital leadership literacy, defined as the capacity to evaluate infrastructure and governance prerequisites rather than simply commission digital initiatives, may be as significant a determinant of sustained transformation as leadership commitment itself, a dimension meriting further empirical attention in cultural management research more broadly. Questions concerning AI adoption emerged consistently across interviews but remain at an early and largely undeveloped stage of institutional engagement at the BSO, falling outside the primary scope of the present analysis.

7. Conclusion

This study finds that digitalisation at the Bavarian State Opera has measurably expanded informational and, to a lesser extent, opportunity access, while producing no demonstrable change in the socioeconomic and cultural composition of the institution's attending audience. The cause is not insufficient digital effort but structural: governance lag, capacity constraints, and an economic model that caps subsidised access regardless of digital investment. Genuine audience diversification, distinct from broadened access, requires intervention at the level of cultural policy, funding models, and institutional governance, conditions that digital strategy alone cannot resolve.

These findings carry direct implications for cultural policy evaluation. Distinguishing access from participation as separate, independently measurable outcomes is a necessary precondition for any honest assessment of what digital investment in publicly funded cultural institutions can and cannot achieve.

Impact & Engagement

Publicly funded cultural institutions across Europe face growing pressure to demonstrate that digital investment serves their public mission, while evidence linking digitalisation to audience diversification remains limited and frequently overstated. This study addresses that gap by distinguishing access from participation as separate, measurable outcomes, and by identifying the structural conditions, governance lag, capacity constraints, and economic model, that determine what digital strategy can realistically achieve in this institutional context.

The findings are directly relevant to opera houses, orchestras, and comparable performing arts institutions seeking to evaluate their own digital strategies, particularly those operating under public funding mandates that require demonstrable progress toward broader societal access. Cultural policymakers and funding bodies are a further key audience: the study's central distinction, between digital reach and genuine audience diversification, has direct implications for how public investment in digital transformation is evaluated and for what counts as evidence of impact in funding and reporting frameworks. Researchers in cultural management and arts policy may find the three-level access framework developed here applicable beyond the opera context, as a tool for analysing digital initiatives across the performing arts more broadly.

The research is likely to be taken up through academic dissemination, including this paper and related conference presentations, and through direct engagement with practitioners in the sector, several of whom

contributed as research participants and expressed interest in the findings. The expected change is a more precise vocabulary for evaluating digital strategy in publicly funded cultural institutions, one that resists conflating reach with diversification and that directs attention toward the governance and funding conditions that digital strategy alone cannot resolve. As digital leadership emerges as an increasingly significant factor in whether institutions can initiate and sustain digital transformation, the finding that leadership literacy matters as much as leadership commitment itself is expected to contribute to ongoing discussions about leadership development and selection in cultural management education and practice. Indicators of broader impact would include uptake of the access-participation distinction in institutional self-reporting, citation in subsequent research on digital transformation in the performing arts, and engagement from cultural policy stakeholders in discussions of funding and evaluation criteria for digital initiatives.

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Formalisation without security: contractual stabilisation, bargaining power and well-being in Romania’s cultural labour field, 2018–2025

Dr. Cristian Pop | Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca / Interdisciplinary Centre for Data Science

Dr. Rarița Zbranca | Cluj Cultural Center

Abstract

This paper examines a paradox in Romanian cultural work. Across three waves of survey research (2018, 2022, 2025), employment in the sector has become measurably more formal: permanent contracts and full-time positions have risen, and legal relationships have grown clearer. Yet the substantive dimensions of a secure professional life have not followed. Bargaining power has deteriorated, creative autonomy remains marginal, incomes lag the national average despite near-universal higher education, well-being sits well below the European norm, and one in two respondents reports some constraint on their freedom of expression. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of a semi-autonomous field and on theories of immaterial and passionate labour, the paper argues that formalisation and security are decoupling: the cultural field is acquiring the legal form of stable employment without its social substance. Well-being, on this reading, functions as a barometer of that gap.

Keywords: *cultural work; precarity; well-being; artistic freedom; Romania; semi-autonomous field*

1. Introduction and theoretical outline

Cultural work has long been theorised as an exemplary case of insecure, self-exploiting labour, sustained less by remuneration than by meaning, vocation and the promise of recognition. Gill and Pratt (2008) described the cultural economy as a “social factory” in which immaterial labour is dispersed across life, blurring the boundary between work and non-work. Ashton (2021) showed how cultural organisations rely on the emotional labour of becoming entrepreneurial, displacing risk onto individuals. These accounts share a premise: in the cultural field, symbolic reward and economic reward are only loosely coupled.

Bourdieu’s (1993, 1996) concept of a semi-autonomous field offers a way to formalise this premise. For Bourdieu, the field of cultural production is structured by its own logic and confers its own forms of value, yet remains subordinate to the economic and political fields that supply its resources. A field is semi-autonomous in this sense when it generates its own currency of value – symbolic capital, reputation, peer recognition – that is partly independent of the economic field, yet remains structurally dependent on external resources. In such a field, actors can accumulate considerable symbolic capital while remaining economically precarious, because the field’s internal logic rewards vocation while its external position keeps it underfunded. The result is a characteristic tension between autonomy and security that this paper takes as its analytical object.

From this outline follows a testable proposition. If cultural work is a semi-autonomous field of the kind described, then legal formalisation – more permanent contracts, clearer employment relationships, even a dedicated professional statute – need not translate into economic or psychological security, because the mechanisms that produce insecurity (weak bargaining position, project dependency, vocational self-exploitation, underfunding) operate independently of contractual form. The argument of this paper is that the Romanian case between 2018 and 2025 confirms precisely this decoupling: the field has formalised without becoming secure.

2. Data and method

The analysis draws on the Reform study of cultural work in Romania, the third wave of a research programme begun in 2018 and continued in 2022. The 2025 wave was administered online between 26 June and 6 August 2025 and yielded 321 valid responses, comprising 142 artists (44%) and 179 other cultural workers (56%). Income and working-time questions referred to the preceding year, 2024.

Sampling was non-probability (convenience), so the data do not support statistical inference to the whole sector. The sample is, however, consistent across waves in occupation, gender, age and education, and it was weighted to the macro-regional distribution of cultural personnel reported by the National Institute of Statistics, allowing comparison across the three waves. The respondents are overwhelmingly highly educated: 96.5% hold a university degree (16.9% a doctorate), against fewer than one in five in the general population (Eurostat, 2024). They are predominantly urban, concentrated in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, and professionally experienced, with a mean of roughly eighteen years in the sector. The instrument replicated earlier waves to preserve comparability and added two internationally validated scales: the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (World Health Organization, 2024) and the two-item Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, CD-RISC 2 (Vaishnavi et al., 2007).

3. Evidence: formalisation is real

The first part of the argument is that formalisation genuinely occurred; it is not an artefact. Across the three waves, the share of permanent contracts rose from 69% to 81%, and full-time work from 82% to 92%. Public-sector employment climbed from 53% to 75% of contract-holders, displacing private and NGO employment. Access to public health insurance among those without an employment contract also improved: voluntary contribution to the public system rose from 34% in 2018 to 54% in 2025, while the share entirely uninsured fell from 34% to 21%. By the conventional indicators of labour-market integration, permanence, full-time status, formal coverage, the sector looks more stable than at any point in the series.

Table 1. Employment-contract characteristics across the three waves (contract-holders, % valid)

	2018 (N=160)	2022 (N=140)	2025 (N=231)
Permanent contract	69%	70%	81%
Fixed-term contract	31%	30%	19%
Full-time	82%	84%	92%
Part-time	18%	16%	8%
Employer in cultural sector	69%	69%	76%
Public sector	53%	56%	75%
Private sector	26%	27%	18%
NGO	21%	17%	7%

Source: Reform 2025 and Future of Work surveys, 2018 and 2022; authors' calculations.

This stabilisation has a clear institutional source. Three quarters of those with contracts, and 45% of all respondents, are employed in the public cultural sector, whose institutions offer the open-ended, full-time positions that drive the aggregate trend. Formalisation, in other words, is largely public-sector formalisation.

4. Evidence: security did not follow

The second and decisive part of the argument is that this formal stabilisation was not accompanied by gains in the substantive dimensions of security. On several measures, the situation deteriorated.

The clearest counter-trend concerns the capacity to set one's own price, the **bargaining power**. The proportion of respondents who could not negotiate their remuneration on any contract rose from 42% in 2018 to 47% in 2022 and to 61% in 2025. Among those with individual employment contracts, 56% of artists and 64% of other cultural workers reported no negotiating room at all; only 13% and 8%

respectively could negotiate on every contract. As formal employment expanded, the room to bargain contracted and this result is consistent with the field's growing dependence on hierarchical public budgets rather than with any normalisation of contractual symmetry.

The data confirm a vocational labour culture in which large parts of the production cycle go unpaid, and it becomes **invisible labour**. Research, documentation, professional development and self-promotion are mostly unremunerated, while only presentation and production tend to be financed. Creative work on one's own projects is the activity most likely (52%) to receive neither payment nor coverage of costs; only 5% of respondents are in a position to be paid and resourced to pursue their own artistic agenda. Seventy per cent have no access to international mobility. **Autonomy**, the field's defining promise, is in practice the least funded part of the work.

Mean monthly **income** in 2024 was 4,524 RON (909 EUR), close to but below the national average of 4,959 RON (997 EUR) - notable given that the sample is almost entirely university-educated, a group that earns well above average in the wider economy. The sector's internal inequality is sharp: public-sector cultural workers earned about 5,258 RON (1057 EUR), those without an individual contract 3,178 RON (639 EUR), and those in the private or NGO segment 3,861 RON (776 EUR). Real incomes did rise across the series (the inflation-adjusted annual mean roughly doubled after 2020), but the subjective picture is flat: only about 40% report rising income, against 56% in 2018, and nearly half consider their income insufficient and themselves financially unstable. Strikingly, those working more than a full week, a mean of 56 hours, equivalent to one-and-a-half posts, earn essentially the same as those working a standard 40 hours, evidence that surplus effort buys experience and visibility rather than money.

Table 2. Monthly income and weekly hours by employment type, 2024 (N=321)

	No individual contract (N=90)	Private/NGO cultural (N=33)	Public cultural (N=143)	Outside cultural sector (N=56)
Mean monthly income	3,178 RON/ 639 EUR	3,861 RON/ 776 EUR	5,258 RON/ 1057 EUR	5,207 RON/ 1047 EUR
Mean weekly hours	42.3	46.9	45.1	48.7

Source: Reform 2025; authors' calculations.

The two validated scales convert this structural insecurity into a measure of its human cost. The mean WHO-5 score was 49.5, well below the European norm of around 64; half the sample scored under 50, the threshold below which mental-health difficulty becomes likely. Mean CD-RISC 2 resilience was 5.85, indicating fragile adaptive resilience, lower than in other occupational groups. Crucially, well-being tracks contractual position: respondents without a formal contract scored lowest on both well-being (47.3) and resilience (5.5), while those in stable public-sector or out-of-sector employment scored highest. Almost a third report deteriorated emotional health and a quarter deteriorated physical health; 66% sometimes consider leaving the sector altogether. **Well-being** is thus not a private trait but a reading of the field's infrastructure.

Table 3. Well-being (WHO-5) and resilience (CD-RISC 2) by employment type (N=321)

	No individual contract	Private/NGO cultural	Public cultural	Outside cultural sector
WHO-5 (max 100)	47.3	49.7	49.9	51.7
CD-RISC 2 (max 8)	5.5	5.7	6.0	6.2

Source: Reform 2025; authors' calculations.

Freedom of artistic expression. Finally, security has an expressive dimension. Half of respondents report some constraint on their freedom of expression: 3.5% experienced explicit censorship, a quarter felt direct or indirect pressure over the past two years, and 21.7% limited their own artistic expression for fear of repercussions. Open responses describe self-censorship driven by fear of losing contracts or public support, institutional and political pressure in public institutions, and economic censorship through funding mechanisms that favour projects aligned with funders' priorities. In a field that depends

structurally on public resources, expressive autonomy is mortgaged to that dependency, a pattern echoed across Europe (Freemuse, 2025; Whyatt, 2023). These pressures are increasingly reinforced by emerging forms of digital censorship, including algorithmic restrictions on visibility, the moderation or suspension of online content - particularly around feminist and political issues - and anticipatory self-censorship prompted by the prospect of social media backlash.

5. Discussion

Read together, these strands support the proposition set out above. The Romanian cultural field has acquired more of the legal form of secure employment while losing ground on the substance. Contracts lengthened, but the power to bargain weakened; public employment expanded, but autonomy narrowed; incomes rose nominally, but perceived stability did not; and the human indicators – well-being, resilience, expressive freedom – registered the strain. This is what decoupling looks like in practice.

The semi-autonomous-field account explains why. Formalisation in Romania was overwhelmingly public-sector formalisation, and the public institution stabilises the contract precisely by absorbing the worker into hierarchical budgetary structures that remove bargaining room and constrain expression. The recently adopted statute for the professional cultural worker has not yet altered this, because it lacks concrete benefits and implementation procedures; independent creators continue to use legal forms ill-suited to cultural work - micro-enterprises or single-employee companies that grant fiscal flexibility but neither social protection nor recognition. The mismatch between legal form and the fragmented, project-based reality of cultural work is the mechanism through which formalisation and security come apart.

The well-being findings give this argument its sharpest formulation. Because well-being and resilience scores rise with contractual stability and fall with its absence, they behave as a barometer of the field’s support infrastructure rather than of individual disposition. Resilience here is less a psychological trait than a function of stable collaboration, support networks and institutional continuity. Where those are absent, the vocational energy that sustains the field becomes a vector of attrition.

6. Conclusion

The Romanian case from 2018 to 2025 shows cultural work becoming more regulated but not more secure, more formalised but not more autonomous. Formalisation and security are decoupling: the legal form of stable employment is spreading faster than its social substance. The policy implication is that contractual stabilisation alone cannot deliver a sustainable cultural workforce. What is required is social protection adapted to fragmented careers, funding that is structural and multi-annual rather than narrowly project-based, stronger collective representation to rebuild bargaining power, investment in the intermediary infrastructure that makes cultural work predictable, and explicit attention to the well-being and expressive freedom of cultural workers. Treated this way, well-being ceases to be a soft outcome and becomes what the evidence suggests it already is: an indicator of occupational justice and of the long-term sustainability of culture as a public good.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a knowledge gap with direct policy relevance: the assumption, common in cultural policy, that legalising and formalising employment relationships is sufficient to make cultural work secure. By tracking three waves of comparable data, the study shows that formal stabilisation and substantive security have come apart, and it offers well-being and resilience scales as practical, comparable indicators of that gap. The findings are intended to benefit several constituencies. Policymakers and ministries responsible for the recently adopted statute for professional cultural workers gain evidence that legal status without concrete benefits and implementation procedures does not improve security. Funding bodies gain an argument for structural, multi-annual support over narrow project finance. Professional associations, federations and emerging sectoral councils gain data to strengthen collective bargaining, the dimension that deteriorated most. Cultural managers and institutions gain a well-being benchmark against which to assess working conditions, and educators preparing students for cultural careers gain a realistic account of the field they will enter. The likely pathways to impact run through cultural-policy consultation processes, sectoral advocacy, and the comparative European networks in which this study participates, including ENCATC. Because the research is the third in an established series, it already feeds into ongoing national debate and has informed prior policy submissions. The expected change is twofold: a shift in how “decent cultural work” is defined, from contractual form towards substantive security, autonomy and well-being; and the adoption of well-being monitoring as a routine instrument of cultural governance. Indicators that could substantiate such impact include the uptake of WHO-5 or comparable well-being measures in sectoral surveys, revisions to the professional-statute implementation framework, the introduction of multi-annual funding lines, and measurable improvements in bargaining-power indicators in future waves. The longitudinal design means these effects can be evidenced directly in the next iteration of the study.

Author biographies

Cristian Pop (PhD) is a sociologist, lecturer at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work of Babeș-Bolyai University, where he teaches statistics and quantitative methodology, and a researcher at the Romanian Academy. His work began with the analysis of social stratification and mobility systems, focusing on the mechanisms through which social inequalities are produced and reproduced, a theme on which he has published a single-author book and several studies. In recent years this agenda has extended to labour relations in the cultural sector and to the relationship between cultural consumption, cultural evaluation and subjective well-being, a direction in which he has coordinated or co-authored three further volumes and published several articles.

Rariț a Zbranca (PhD) has experience in arts management, curating, cultural research, and advocacy. She is Programme Director at the Cluj Cultural Centre in Romania and co-director of the Centre for Culture, Health and Social Well-being Romania. She is a member of the Culture Committee of the Economic and Social Council of Romania, a policy adviser for Culture Next network, and a member of the board of Culture Action Europe network. She has co-founded the AltArt Foundation (1997) and Fabrica de Pensule (2009), an independent collective contemporary art space in Romania. She has led the development of Cluj-Napoca’s Cultural Strategy through several planning cycles and played a key role in the city’s bid for the European Capital of Culture.

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Painting Over the Cracks: Street Art Labour, Structural Precarity, and the Contradictions of Creative City Governance in Berlin

Ms. Alisha Lynch
Queen's university Belfast

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of fragmented urban governance in Berlin on the working conditions of street artists, focusing on responsibility for access, legitimacy, and protection across municipal, borough, and private actors. Although Berlin is celebrated as a “creative city,” this image conceals uneven regulatory practices that both rely on and restrict informal cultural production within urban cultural ecosystems. Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews with street artists and cultural intermediaries, as well as policy mapping and visual documentation, this paper presents an interpretive case study of street art governance. Reflexive thematic analysis is employed to examine how artists navigate access, income, and institutional recognition amid evolving regulatory conditions. The analysis introduces the Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance, a three-tier model of street art labour encompassing sanctioned practice through commissioned work, negotiated access via informal arrangements, and radical practice characterised by refusal or withdrawal. Transitions between these conditions are non-linear and reflect structural precarity resulting from fragmented decision-making and inconsistent enforcement across governance levels. The paper demonstrates that municipal policies extract cultural value from street artists and perpetuate their economic precarity. By centring artists lived experiences, it illustrates that legitimacy is generated through spatial and institutional relations, rather than solely through formal policy, thereby shaping the recognition and regularisation of artistic labour.

1. Introduction

Berlin is widely recognised as a global centre of creative experimentation, yet this reputation often conceals underlying tensions within its cultural economy (Loeb, 2014). The city actively promotes grassroots creativity as part of its “creative city” identity, while simultaneously depending on informal cultural production that remains insufficiently protected. Unlike formally regulated cultural sectors, where labour rights, funding mechanisms, and spatial permissions are clearly defined, informal street art exists in a state of partial visibility: it is culturally celebrated but lacks institutional security. This situation results in uneven access to public space, funding, and legal recognition (Blumenreich, 2022; Tröndle & Rhomberg, 2011).

This study investigates the impact of Berlin’s fragmented urban governance on the working conditions of street artists. Here, fragmentation is understood not as an administrative shortcoming but as a structural mechanism that facilitates the extraction of cultural value from informal artistic labour, while distributing regulatory and protective responsibilities among municipal, borough, and private actors. Street artists significantly contribute to urban identity, atmosphere, and symbolic value, yet their labour is rarely acknowledged within cultural governance frameworks. The analysis considers how institutions, space, and cultural value are co-produced.

The research situates street art at the intersection of cultural policy, labour, and urban governance, drawing upon theories of cultural production, hegemony, and spatial justice. It explores the processes through which legitimacy is constructed within fragmented governance systems and examines how these processes shape the material conditions of artistic work in public spaces. The findings present a three-tier model of street art labour, which is subsequently analysed in relation to Berlin’s fragmented policy infrastructure, leading to specific policy recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework

The "creative city" paradigm frames culture as a catalyst for urban competitiveness (Florida, 2002; Landry, 1995). Although this paradigm symbolically celebrates informal cultural labour, it often leaves such labour materially insecure, resulting in uneven cultural economies. Berlin exemplifies this contradiction: street art is deeply embedded in narratives of urban creativity, yet artists must navigate fragmented governance systems characterised by selective enforcement, unstable spatial access, and ongoing precarity (Hesse & Lange, 2013; McRobbie, 2016; Trubina, 2018).

This study conceptualises this friction as a governance ecology in which space, value, and legitimacy arise from fragmented institutional arrangements. To analyse this ecology, the paper synthesises the theoretical perspectives of Henri Lefebvre, Pierre Bourdieu, and Antonio Gramsci. Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theory demonstrates that urban spaces are actively produced and governed, positioning spatial access as a primary and contested condition of artistic labour. Bourdieu’s (1986) framework clarifies how visibility and cultural capital are transformed into economic value, often appropriated by developers and brands without corresponding material benefits for artists. Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony explains how certain forms of street art are incorporated into official narratives to sustain state or corporate legitimacy, while counter-hegemonic practices are criminalised or excluded (Zaritsky, 1983).

Importantly, these perspectives are not integrated into a single explanatory ‘matrix.’ Instead, they are held in analytical tension. This allows the study to avoid theoretical closure and to preserve the contradictions between spatial production, value extraction, and cultural legitimation as empirically observable rather than theoretically resolved phenomena. The conceptual contribution of the paper therefore lies not in synthesis, but in maintaining analytical plurality while tracing how different governance logics intersect in practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist single-case design, treating Berlin as a critical case for examining how fragmented governance structures shape informal cultural labour (Flyvbjerg, 2006; May & Perry, 2013). Berlin is significant because its multi-level governance structure involves municipal, borough, and private actors who jointly shape uneven enforcement conditions for informal cultural production (Merkel, 2016). Street art in Berlin operates in a legal grey zone: Sections 303 and 304 of the German Criminal Code (1998) criminalise unauthorised marking of property, while the Act on Copyright and Related Rights (1965) protects artistic authorship. This contradiction between criminalisation and cultural valorisation directly conditions the ecosystem.

To capture these dynamics, data collection paired empirical fieldwork with policy tracking. Primary fieldwork was conducted in July 2024 and consisted of semi-structured interviews with eight key stakeholders selected via purposive sampling. Given this modest sample size, the study does not claim statistical generalisation or full ecosystem representation. Instead, the selection captures a diverse cross-section of institutional positionalities, as outlined in Figure 1, to identify shared experiential touchpoints.

Participant	Role	Specific Details
Participant 1	Street Art and Graffiti Journalist	Specific Street Art and Graffiti Magazine based in Berlin
Participant 2	Housing Company Representative	Works for Foundation working on Street Art Projects in Berlin owned by a State Housing Company
Participant 3	Mural Artist	Classical figurative work, inspired by manga and old masters. Works on mainly Commissioned, Studio-based, Festival work.
Participant 4	Sculptural Street Artist	Small figurines and Public installations
Participant 5	Graffiti Artist	Spray painted Humorous, political s and characters. Works Illegal, Self-authorised and Commissioned work.
Participant 6	Tape Artist	Abstract tape murals, large-scale festival work. Works legal grey area and Commissioned with brand and public institutions.
Participant 7	Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion Representative	Works within the Senate department specifically around artistic project spaces and initiatives
Participant 8	Street Art City Tour Guide	Berlin Street-art blogger and offers street art and writing tours

Figure 1: Overview of Participants and Additional Details

To support interpretive trustworthiness, the 2024 experiential data serve as a baseline cross-referenced against late-2025 municipal policy updates (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt, 2025a). This dual-timeline structure contextualises temporal shifts by tracking how institutional and regulatory adjustments reframe prior artistic strategies. Figure 2 operates as an analytical map of the research process, showing how different data streams were brought into relation during reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It should be read as a procedural diagram of interpretation rather than a replication protocol.

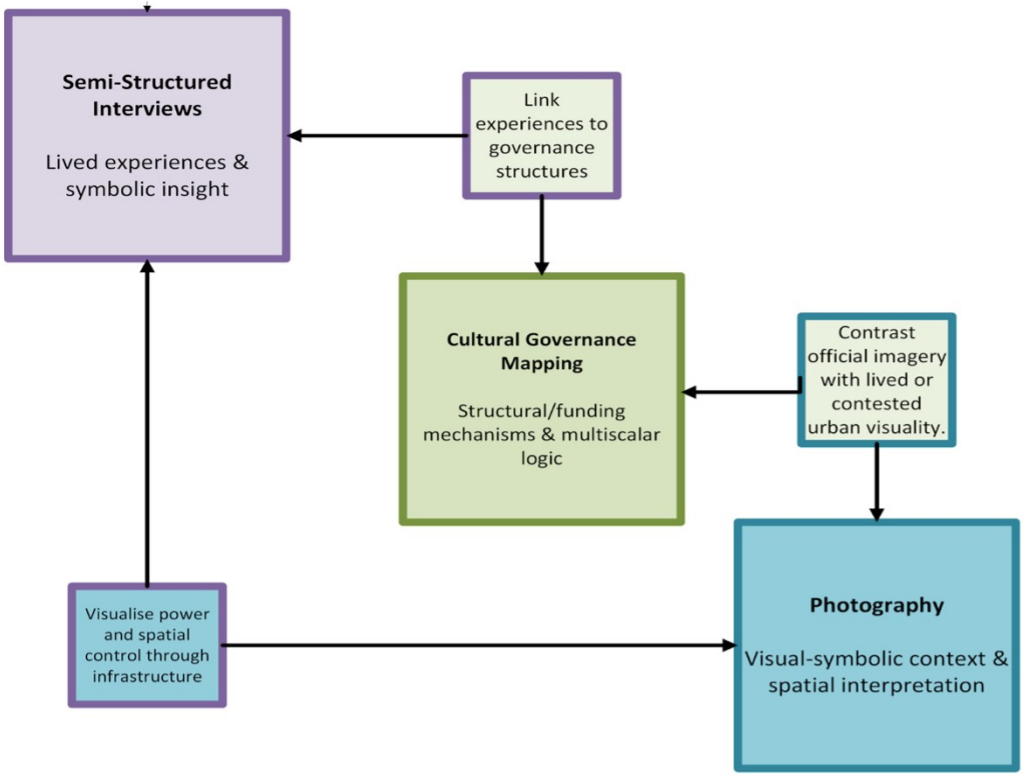


Figure 2: Data Collection and Analysis Framework

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across three primary streams: interview transcripts, policy texts, and field photographs. Triangulation across these distinct sources supported interpretive robustness (Nowell et al., 2017). Human subject protections and visual ethics were strictly maintained (Lahman et al., 2023). All participants were anonymised, and photographs of unauthorised works were framed to exclude identifiable tags or signatures to mitigate legal risk.

4. Findings

Empirical data demonstrate that street artists navigate a fragmented governance system influencing their access to space, income, and recognition. Rather than operating outside policy frameworks, street art is situated within complex regulatory and institutional relationships. Interview analysis identified three recurring modes in which artists described their work: sanctioned, negotiated, and radical practice. These modes illustrate how artists transition between practices in response to economic pressures, spatial opportunities, ethical commitments, and governance conditions.

4.1 Sanctioned Practice: Institutional Commissions

Sanctioned practice encompasses commissioned murals, festivals, and paid institutional or corporate projects. Participants identified this work as a significant source of income, although it frequently entailed compromises in artistic autonomy.

Housing companies and corporate sponsors were frequently identified as primary commissioning actors. Participant 3 observed that “big brands buy public space,” while Participant 4 noted that commissioned projects were often influenced by expectations concerning visibility, branding, and public image. MTO’s mural (Figure 3) demonstrates how subcultural imagery is appropriated through commissioning and branding, thereby stabilising governance by signalling urban openness while underlying power relations remain unchanged (Young, 2013; Kramer, 2016).



Figure 3: Mural by artist MTO, illustrating the circulation of street art within institutional programming

(author’s own).

The Berlin Mural Festival was frequently cited as an example of these dynamics. Participant 3 described its role in increasing recognition for specific areas. In contrast, Participant 8 contended that some projects involved “no creative process,” indicating alignment with external branding objectives rather than artistic priorities. Participant 7 further referenced controversies related to housing-company sponsorship and accusations of “art washing”.

Artists consistently differentiated commissioned work from their personal practice. Participant 3 stated: “I do it out of necessity because I need to earn money.” Similarly, Participant 5 characterised legal mural production as functional labour: “if I paint a legal wall… it’s because I’m being paid to do it and it’s just my job.”

4.2 Negotiated Practice: Informal Access

Negotiated practice operates within conditions of uncertainty where access depends on informal relationships, borough-level discretion, and situational permissions. Participant 6 described this environment as a “legal grey zone,” while Participant 4 referred to reliance on “individuals actively involved” in local decision-making.

Access was frequently characterised as uneven and personalised. Participant 5 explained, “it’s great for artists if they like you… at the same time, they’ve also ripped me off and stolen work from me.” Consequently, opportunities often depended on informal trust and local networks rather than transparent governance structures.

Spatial conditions further influenced this mode of practice. Works such as The Lady in Cement (Figure 4) exemplify forms of temporary visibility that lack formal institutional protection. Participants identified redevelopment processes as a significant factor determining where informal art could be produced, often displacing activity from central to peripheral locations (Holm, 2013).



Figure 4: “The Lady in Cement”, artist unknown, a grassroots tape art installation in Friedrichshain,

highlighting spatial politics of aesthetic governance (author’s own).

4.3 Radical Practice: Refusal and Withdrawal

Radical practice encompasses refusals of commissions, boycotts, and efforts to operate outside formal systems of recognition. Participant 3 stated: “I don’t want to bring that kind of branding into this space,” and several participants referenced boycotts associated with the Berlin Mural Festival.

However, refusal often entailed material consequences, such as reduced income, diminished visibility, and limited access to opportunities. Participant 1 observed that "the first graffiti to go is anything political," highlighting the vulnerability of certain forms of expression to removal.

Participants also discussed intermediary organisations such as Graffiti Lobby Berlin, which aim to translate street-level concerns into policy language (Graffiti Lobby Berlin, 2025). While some artists engaged with these structures, others expressed scepticism toward formalisation itself.

Across all three modes, artists described their movement as fluid rather than linear. Participation in sanctioned, negotiated, or radical practice was seldom a matter of fixed identity. Instead, it reflected ongoing responses to evolving governance conditions, economic necessity, ethical commitments, and opportunities for spatial access.

5. Discussion

5.1 Governance stratification and the production of legitimacy

The findings suggest the three identified modes of practice are relational positions within a broader governance structure rather than discrete categories. To interpret this relationality, this paper proposes the Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance (Figure 5) as a heuristic device to analyse how cultural legitimacy is stratified across fragmented urban governance systems.

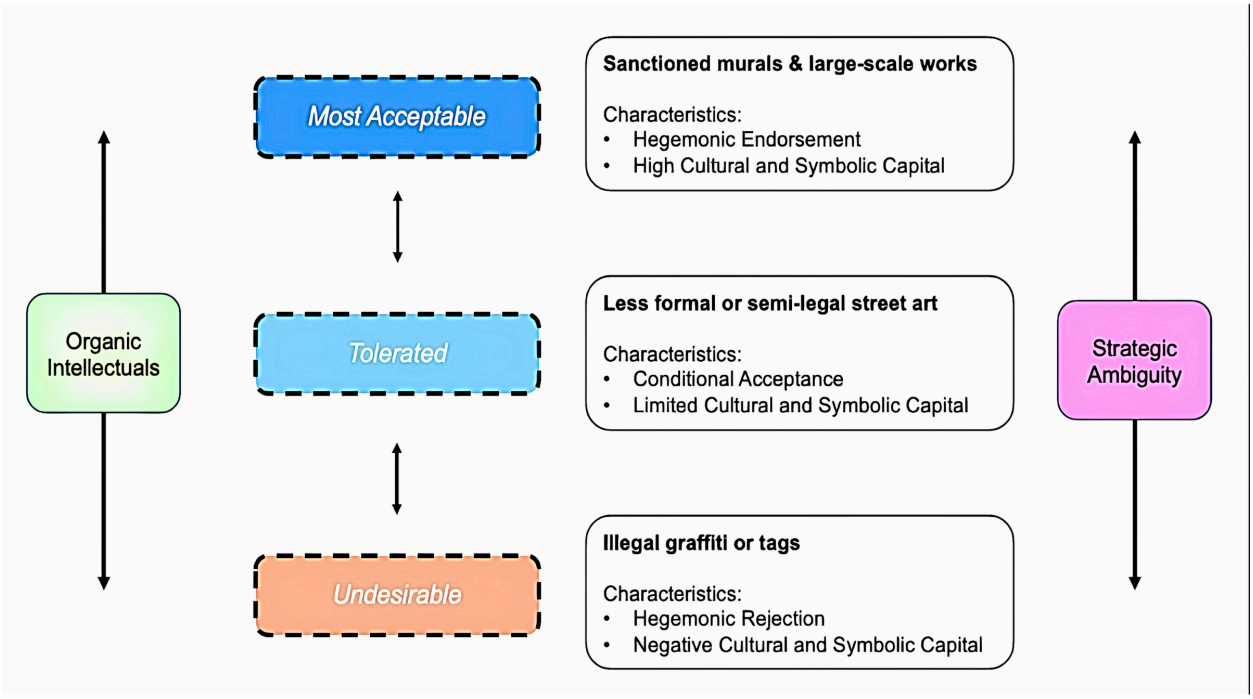


Figure 5: The Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance (author's own).

The framework conceptualises street art labour as organised across three interdependent tiers: sanctioned, semi-legal, and illegal practices. Each tier is defined by degrees of institutional proximity, spatial visibility, and access to resources. Rather than a taxonomy, it serves as an interpretive lens to understand how legitimacy is produced through uneven governance relations.

Sanctioned practices exemplify institutional legitimation processes and the selective production of cultural memory, aligning with Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of legitimate taste. Semi-legal practices reflect negotiated visibility within fragmented governance systems, consistent with Gramsci’s (1971) “war of position.” Illegal practices assert spatial authorship and contest dominant property relations, corresponding to Lukes’ (2005) third dimension of power.

These categories are fluid rather than fixed. Artists move between them due to economic necessity, spatial opportunity, and ethical positioning. This mobility reflects structured constraint, not autonomous cultural agency (Lange et al., 2008), reinforcing the framework’s role as an analytical device rather than a classificatory system.

5.2 Fragmented governance and cultural value production

Figure 6 illustrates Berlin’s cultural policy infrastructure as of 2025, showing a governance system where responsibility for street art is distributed across municipal departments, borough offices, housing associations, and private developers (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt, 2025a; 2025b). This fragmentation shapes how cultural labour is recognised and governed through spatially contingent, institutionally differentiated arrangements (Valverde, 2005).

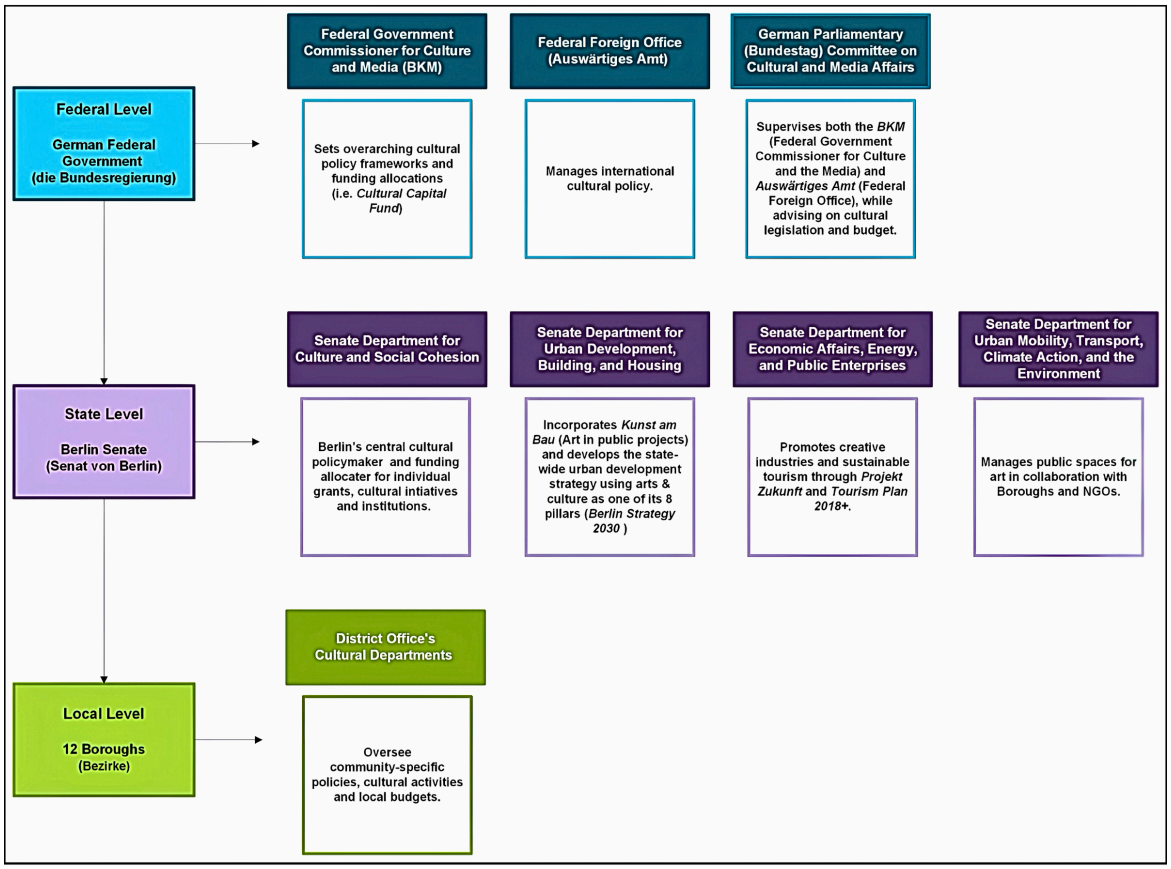


Figure 6: Berlin's Cultural Policy Infrastructure (author’s own based on Blumenreich, 2022, Senatsverwaltung

für Wirtschaft, Energie und Betriebe, 2025; Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt, 2025a; 2025b; 2024a; Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Wohnen Berlin, 2025).

Within this system, legitimacy is not centrally assigned but produced through overlapping, sometimes competing validation regimes. Participants described access as contingent on “delegated power,” where relationships with local gatekeepers outweigh formal procedures. This creates a dispersed field of partial authorities where visibility and economic opportunity are unevenly distributed and continuously negotiated.

The Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance explains how artists navigate this environment. Transitions between sanctioned, semi-legal, and illegal practices are shaped by fluctuating access to space, funding, and recognition. Housing associations, developers, and festival organisers act as de facto gatekeepers of cultural visibility and economic opportunity (Grodach, 2017; Pratt, 2011). This creates structural asymmetry where symbolic and economic value is institutionally captured, while responsibility for labour conditions remains diffuse. Benefits circulate within governance networks, but risk is individualised, reinforcing distributive injustice in cultural policy systems (Fainstein, 2014). This aligns with critiques of institutional stratification and value capture in cultural economies (Caust, 2019; Kaszynska, 2024; Li & Liu, 2023).

5.3 Precarity as a spatial governance effect

Figure 7 shows the uneven distribution of legal graffiti spaces across Berlin, concentrated in few districts and reflecting uneven spatial governance infrastructure (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt, 2024b). Precarity thus emerges not only from labour-market instability but also from spatially uneven cultural provision.

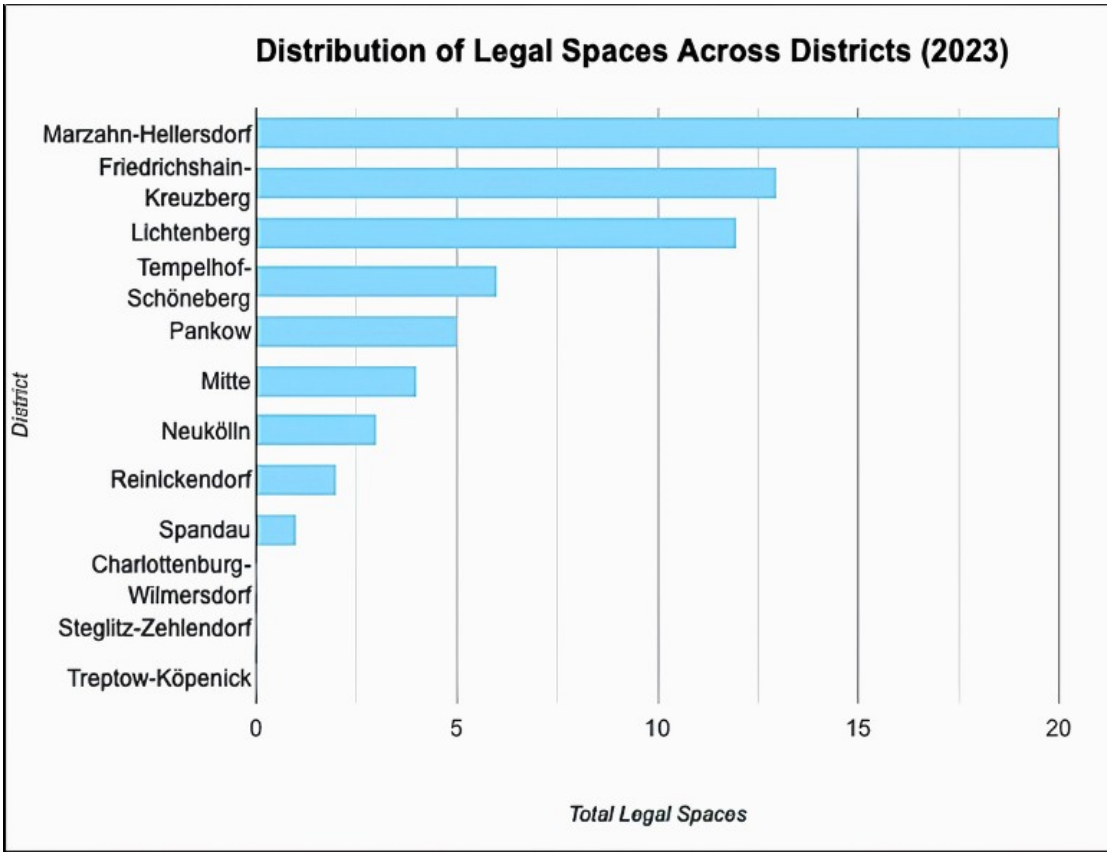


Figure 7: The Distribution of Graffiti Legal Spaces as of 2023 (adapted from Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt, 2024b).

Artists described movement across sanctioned, negotiated, and radical practices as cyclical and necessity-driven rather than developmental. Commissioned work was frequently undertaken “because I’m being paid,” underscoring economic constraint as a structuring condition. This finding resonates with critiques of entrepreneurial urbanism and the creative city paradigm, where cultural labour is instrumentalised within uneven urban development logics (Peck, 2005).

Redevelopment intensifies precarity by displacing informal cultural activity from central to peripheral spaces, disrupting continuity and altering visibility regimes (Holm, 2013; Holden, 2005). These dynamics

illustrate how spatial regulation and urban transformation intersect to produce cultural vulnerability beyond labour-market conditions.

5.4 Visibility, recognition, and the limits of institutional valuation

Interview data indicate that street art shapes neighbourhood identity, atmosphere, and everyday urban experience through continuous informal presence. Participants described it as embedded in routine perception and local meaning-making, positioning it as cultural production operating outside formal institutional provisioning.

This supports Lefebvre’s (1991) account of space as socially produced through lived practice, while highlighting how institutional systems privilege commissioned, legible outputs over relational, ephemeral cultural forms. The result is not an absence of cultural value but a systematic misalignment between cultural production and institutional recognition (Paquette & Mulcahy, 2017).

This tension reflects broader debates in cultural economics regarding the divergence between symbolic, social, and economic value (Throsby, 2009). In Berlin, institutional valuation regimes tend to reward visibility aligned with policy or branding objectives while undervaluing community-embedded or non-commissioned practices.

5.5 Agency, refusal, and constrained participation

The findings indicate that agency exists within fragmented governance systems but remains structurally constrained. Artists navigate commissioned work, informal negotiation, and refusal shaped by financial necessity, ethical commitments, and spatial opportunity rather than autonomous choice.

Refusal constitutes a meaningful yet costly form of agency. While some participants rejected commissioned work on ethical grounds or boycotted festivals (Harbach, 2021), such actions reduce income and visibility and do not eliminate dependence on commissioning structures. Even politically engaged works remain vulnerable to selective removal, with participants noting that political graffiti is often the first to be erased. This supports interpretations of agency as tactical rather than transformative (de Certeau, 1984; Mould, 2015).

Intermediary organisations such as Graffiti Lobby Berlin illustrate mediated institutional translation. By converting street-level concerns into policy language, they enable partial legibility within governance systems (Graffiti Lobby Berlin, 2025; Zaritsky, 1983). However, this process also reveals structural limits: only certain practices can be rendered policy-compatible, producing uneven access to institutional recognition.

6. Conclusion

Fragmented governance produces unequal access to space, recognition, and economic opportunities within the urban cultural ecosystem. This study demonstrates that fragmentation constitutes a fundamental condition shaping the distribution of cultural value rather than acting as a mere administrative hurdle. As illustrated by the Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance, street artists must continuously navigate the shifting boundaries between sanctioned, negotiated, and radical modes of practice. These fluid conditions emerge from complex interactions among municipal authorities, boroughs, housing associations, and private developers, meaning that the regulation and validation of artistic labour differ across various decision-making sites.

While street art actively drives urban vitality, institutional accountability remains highly dispersed. To address this mismatch, policy frameworks must move toward transparent, borough-level coordination that integrates artists into local planning. Mitigating artistic precarity requires standardising legal wall provisions, expanding temporary-use agreements on redevelopment sites, and adapting public funding to support self-organised, un-commissioned initiatives. Rather than viewing policy as a top-down mandate,

these interventions should aim to formalise channels of communication across fragmented institutional layers.

This study is constrained by its single-case focus and a modest sample size, which limits statistical generalisability. Nevertheless, data triangulation across interviews, policy documents, and visual material supports the interpretive trustworthiness of these insights (Yin, 2018). Future research should investigate whether comparable governance dynamics exist across other European creative hubs, using longitudinal approaches to assess how evolving regulatory arrangements influence artistic agency over time. Such comparative work is necessary to test the transferability of the proposed framework and to deepen scholarly understanding of informal cultural labour within contested urban spaces.

Impact and Engagement

This research develops a conceptual and analytical vocabulary to understand how fragmented urban governance structures shape informal cultural labour. Its primary contribution is a framework that helps diverse actors interpret their positions within governance ecologies where cultural production, policy infrastructures, and informal artistic practice intersect.

Rather than treating fragmentation as governance failure, the study sees it as a structural condition enabling the extraction of cultural value while dispersing responsibility for regulation, protection, and support. Fragmentation serves as an analytical lens explaining how structural precarity is produced and sustained within street art ecosystems. The Hegemonic Framework of Street Art Governance traces how artists move between sanctioned, negotiated, and resistant forms of practice across shifting institutional conditions.

Engagement activities are structured as sites of translation between research, policy, and practice. They include dialogue-based exchanges with municipal policy actors, workshops with housing associations, and conversations with artist-led networks. These engagements test how governance conditions are interpreted and how the framework supports shared reflection on access, legitimacy, and spatial regulation.

Co-design sessions with housing associations focus on practical models of shared wall stewardship, including negotiation protocols for temporary use agreements and clearer allocation of maintenance responsibilities. Discussions with cultural intermediaries examine ethical commissioning standards and transparency in sponsorship arrangements. With grassroots collectives, the research framework is translated into toolkits supporting decision-making around visibility, risk, and informal access.

Rather than measuring impact through policy adoption, relevance is assessed through observable changes in how stakeholders articulate governance challenges, adapt terminology, and reference fragmented responsibility structures in local decision-making. Engagement evidence is partial and situated, including shifts in discourse, references to the framework in dialogue settings, and small-scale experimentation with governance practices. The research contributes an interpretive infrastructure for analysing informal cultural labour within fragmented urban systems.

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Biography

Alisha Lynch is an incoming PhD researcher in Arts Management and Cultural Policy at Queen’s University Belfast, supervised by Dr Kim-Marie Spence. Her research focuses on street art governance and how urban policy shapes the working conditions of artists operating in informal cultural spaces. She holds an MA (Distinction) in Arts Management and Cultural Policy and a BA in Law and German International from Dublin City University. Her work examines the relationship between cultural policy, urban governance, and access to public space, with particular attention to cultural equity and spatial justice. She has presented at the ESRC Festival of Social Science (NI) and is a member of ISA RC21.

From Access to Circulation: Bridge Actors as Missing Cultural Infrastructure in Digital Heritage

Ms. Winnie Lam
Plinth BV

1. Introduction: The unresolved promise of reuse

Cultural heritage has long been associated with societal aspirations such as intercultural understanding, identity, belonging, and shared humanity.

Over the past decades, the cultural heritage sector has made significant progress in digitisation. Large-scale digitisation programmes, metadata standards, interoperability frameworks, aggregation platforms, and digital infrastructures have made millions of cultural heritage resources increasingly accessible across institutions and countries. Europe, in particular, has invested heavily in creating the conditions for digital heritage to be preserved, discovered, and reused. As these efforts matured, the ambition gradually expanded beyond preservation and access towards a broader hope: That digital heritage could generate greater societal value.

The concept of reuse became associated with goals such as education, public participation, creative innovation, and societal impact. Underlying much of the sector’s work is an implicit linear model: Digitisation enables access, access enables reuse, and reuse generates societal value.

Yet despite substantial progress in digitisation and digital infrastructure, digital heritage remains relatively absent from the everyday lives of most citizens. While important examples of public-facing reuse exist, they often remain isolated, project-based, or difficult to sustain and scale. The relationship between access, reuse, and societal value therefore appears less straightforward than this model suggests.

This paper explores whether the challenge of digital heritage reuse may be structural rather than technical. It argues that alongside digital assets and supporting infrastructures, greater attention is needed to the activation layer through which digital heritage circulates within society and generates societal value.

2. Digital heritage as an ecosystem: The three pillars

The persistent gap between access and circulation suggests that digital heritage may be better understood as an ecosystem rather than a linear process. The common assumption that digitisation leads to access, access leads to reuse, and reuse leads to societal value implies a sequential relationship. In practice, however, digital heritage operates through the interaction of multiple interconnected components that influence and reinforce one another.

To explore this dynamic, this paper proposes a three-pillar framework consisting of digital heritage assets, infrastructure, and activation.

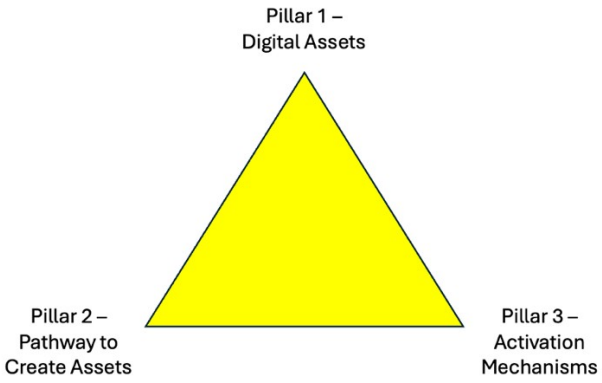


Figure 1: Three Pillars

The first pillar comprises the digital heritage assets themselves. These include digitised collections, archival records, photographs, manuscripts, audiovisual materials, oral histories, 3D models, and other forms of digital cultural heritage, together with their associated metadata and rights information. These assets form the cultural resources that can potentially be accessed, reused, and circulated.

The second pillar is the infrastructure layer surrounding these assets. This includes digitisation workflows, metadata standards, interoperability frameworks, aggregation systems, identifiers, storage, discovery platforms, viewing environments, and large-scale initiatives such as Europeana and the emerging Data Space for Cultural Heritage (Europeana Initiative, 2024). This layer makes digital heritage discoverable, connected, and reusable across institutions, platforms, and national boundaries.

The third pillar is activation. This is the layer through which digital heritage enters society. Activation includes the design and execution of public-facing experiences such as educational resources, games, storytelling formats, exhibitions, and other forms of engagement that allow citizens to encounter and interact with digital heritage in meaningful ways.

These three pillars are mutually dependent. Without digital heritage assets, there is nothing to activate. Without infrastructure, heritage assets remain fragmented, difficult to discover, and challenging to reuse. Without activation, even extensive collections and sophisticated infrastructures may remain largely invisible beyond specialist and institutional audiences. This observation reflects the current situation facing much of the digital heritage sector.

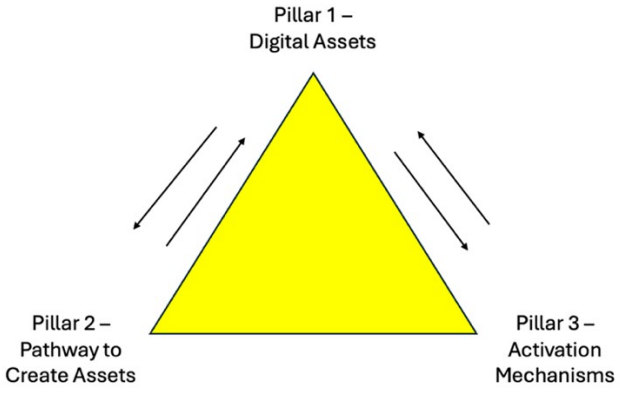


Figure 2: Three Pillars and their relationships

Importantly, the relationship between the pillars is not one-directional. Existing heritage assets may inspire new forms of activation, while new public-facing experiences can generate demand for different

kinds of heritage resources, metadata, access mechanisms, and infrastructure. Reuse therefore emerges through the interaction of all three pillars rather than through any single pillar in isolation.

The current state of the ecosystem also varies across the three pillars. For mature formats such as 2D cultural heritage materials (e.g. photographs and scanned books), digital assets and supporting infrastructure are largely in place. Activation, however, remains underdeveloped, with many public-facing initiatives remaining fragmented, project-based, or difficult to sustain and scale.

In other words, strong digital assets and strong infrastructure do not automatically produce strong activation. Understanding why this gap persists requires closer attention to the activation layer and the actors who operate within it.

3. Zooming in on activation (Pillar 3): What open government data reveals

To better understand the role of activation, it is useful to look at another field that has faced a similar challenge: Open government data.

Beginning in the late 2000s, governments across Europe and North America invested heavily in making public datasets openly available. Transport information, weather data, maps, environmental monitoring, and public records were published through portals, APIs, and other access mechanisms. Alongside these technical efforts came ambitious expectations. Open data was expected to improve transparency, stimulate innovation, strengthen civic participation, and generate broader public value (Ubaldi, 2013).

The underlying logic was familiar: If public information became accessible, value would naturally emerge from its reuse.

In practice, however, access alone proved insufficient. Large volumes of data became available, yet much of it remained largely unused by citizens. The crucial question became how public value would actually be generated from the growing infrastructure of open data.

One of the most visible answers emerged through applications such as Citymapper. Drawing on transport data released by Transport for London, Citymapper transformed complex operational datasets into a journey-planning service that helped millions of people navigate cities more easily (Citymapper, n.d.). Similar patterns appeared elsewhere. Dark Sky used weather data to create highly localised forecasts. Zillow transformed public property information into accessible housing-market insights (Zillow, n.d.). Wheelmap used open mapping data to support accessibility for wheelchair users (Wheelmap.org, n.d.).

What these examples shared was not the data itself, but the presence of actors who translated infrastructure into meaningful public-facing experiences. Public value emerged through applications, services, platforms, and forms of participation that made data useful, understandable, and relevant to citizens.

Over time, researchers and practitioners began recognising these actors as a distinct intermediary layer within the open-data ecosystem. Concepts such as civic tech and open-data intermediaries provided a language for describing the organisations, entrepreneurs, journalists, designers, developers, and civic innovators who transformed open data into services, experiences, and forms of participation (Magalhaes et al., 2013). Once named, this layer became easier to study, support, fund, and connect. Networks formed, conferences emerged, research agendas developed, and ecosystem support structures followed.

The trajectory of open government data offers a useful point of comparison for digital heritage. As shown in Table 1, the two fields have followed remarkably similar paths over the past three decades.

Open Government Data	Digital Heritage
1990s: E-government and digital public information initiatives begin	1990s: Museum, library, and archive digitisation programmes begin
Early 2000s: Public information increasingly published online	Early 2000s: Cultural collections increasingly published online
Late 2000s–2010s: Major investment in open data access and infrastructure	Late 2000s–2010s: Major investment in digitisation, aggregation, and infrastructure
Late 2000s–2010s: Reuse becomes associated with transparency, innovation, civic participation, and public value	2010s: Reuse becomes associated with education, creativity, participation, engagement, and societal value
Late 2000s–early 2010s: Access to data expected to generate public value	2010s: Access to heritage expected to generate societal value
2010s: Realisation that most open datasets remain unused by citizens	2010s–2020s: Realisation that much digital heritage remains absent from everyday public life
Mid–late 2010s: Recognition of intermediaries, civic tech, and activation ecosystems	2020s: Growing awareness that access alone is insufficient
Late 2010s–2020s: Ecosystem support emerges around intermediaries and civic innovators	2020s onward: Tensions between access and circulation persist

Table 1. Parallel trajectories in open government data and digital heritage reuse.

Several parallels stand out. Both fields invested heavily in digitisation, access, and infrastructure. Both associated reuse with broader societal ambitions and expectations of public value. Both initially assumed that access would generate value. Both later recognised that access alone was insufficient to achieve widespread public engagement and societal impact.

An important difference, however, lies in the emergence of a recognised activation layer. Within open government data, concepts such as civic tech and open-data intermediaries helped make visible the actors operating between infrastructure and public life. This contributed to the formation of communities, support structures, research agendas, and funding pathways around activation. Digital heritage is increasingly confronting a similar challenge, but equivalent concepts and ecosystems remain undefined.

Viewed through the three-pillar framework, a key insight emerges. Public value did not emerge from data and infrastructure alone. It emerged through activation. More specifically, it emerged through people and practices capable of transforming resources into experiences, services, and forms of participation that citizens could engage with directly.

This insight provides a useful lens for examining digital heritage. If activation proved necessary even in the relatively structured world of open government data, it becomes even more important in the context of digital heritage, where resources are more heterogeneous, contextual, and complex. Understanding who performs this activation role within digital heritage, and the conditions that enable this work to flourish, therefore becomes a critical task.

4. Bridge actors as the activation layer

The need for activation becomes even clearer in digital heritage because heritage is a particularly complex form of cultural resource. Compared with many forms of open government data, digital heritage is highly heterogeneous. It may include paintings, manuscripts, photographs, archaeological records, oral histories, audiovisual materials, museum objects, 3D models, maps, monuments, websites, digital art, and born-digital archives. These materials differ widely in format, quality, metadata, rights status, language, historical context, and technical readiness for reuse.

This diversity makes digital heritage difficult to activate at scale. A public-facing experience may require assets from multiple collections, institutions, countries, languages, and formats. It may also require rights clarification, contextual interpretation, technical adaptation, and careful attention to cultural sensitivity. In many cases, the challenge is not simply finding digital heritage, but making it usable, meaningful, and responsible within a specific public context.

Heritage value is also deeply contextual, interpretive, and emotional. A transport feed or weather dataset can often be activated through practical utility: Helping someone navigate a city or decide whether to carry an umbrella. Digital heritage operates through different forms of value. It may generate curiosity, memory, recognition, empathy, identity, belonging, or connection across time and place. These values are important, but they are often more difficult to make tangible for citizens and society.

For digital heritage to circulate meaningfully, someone must therefore perform a translation function. This involves moving between cultural assets, technical infrastructures, creative formats, audience needs, and societal ambitions. It requires the ability to recognise the public potential of heritage resources, shape them into meaningful experiences, and connect them with the contexts in which people may encounter, use, and respond to them.

This paper refers to this function as the work of the bridge actor.

Bridge actors are the people, teams, organisations, or hybrid collectives that connect digital heritage resources with public-facing forms of engagement. They operate between collections and audiences, between infrastructure and experience, and between cultural meaning and creative production. Their role is not limited to communication or dissemination. Rather, they help transform digital heritage into experiences, services, tools, stories, and participatory formats through which heritage can become socially meaningful.

In this sense, bridge actors are central to the activation layer of the digital heritage ecosystem. They make circulation possible by translating accessible heritage into forms that citizens can encounter, understand, and engage with in everyday public life.

5. Bridge actors at the centre

Understanding the activation layer requires closer attention to the bridge actors who operate within it. This paper proposes the concept of the bridge actor to recognise a professional function that already exists across the cultural and creative sectors. Bridge actors are not defined by a single discipline, job title, or organisational form, but by the role they perform: Connecting digital heritage resources with public-facing forms of engagement and participation.

In practice, bridge actors may be found across a wide range of domains. They may include game designers, storytellers, creative technologists, experience designers, digital producers, educators, museum innovators, cultural entrepreneurs, immersive creators, community organisers, or interdisciplinary teams that combine several of these forms of expertise. What unites them is their ability to work across boundaries and translate heritage resources into meaningful public experiences.

The value of naming this function should not be underestimated. Open government data benefited from concepts such as civic tech and open-data intermediaries, which helped make visible the actors operating between infrastructure and public life. Naming these actors made it easier to recognise their contribution, study their practices, build networks, attract funding, and develop ecosystem support structures. Digital heritage currently lacks a comparable term. The concept of the bridge actor is therefore proposed as a way of making this activation function visible.

In this sense, the bridge actor performs a role similar to that of a producer or orchestrator. Creating a public-facing heritage experience rarely depends on heritage assets alone. It requires the coordination of collections, infrastructure, creative practices, audiences, partnerships, technologies, and funding realities. Bridge actors move between these different domains, assembling the relationships and expertise needed to bring an idea into public life.

Their contribution extends beyond individual projects. At ecosystem level, bridge actors connect the three pillars introduced earlier. They help transform digital assets into usable resources, draw upon

infrastructures that make those resources accessible, and create experiences through which heritage becomes socially meaningful. In doing so, they connect assets, infrastructure, creativity, and public life. Their work also generates feedback into the wider ecosystem by revealing audience needs and creating demand for new forms of access, data, and infrastructure.

Recognising bridge actors also helps make visible a broader field of activity that has remained relatively fragmented. This paper proposes the term Digital Heritage for Society to describe this mission-oriented field. Digital Heritage for Society is concerned with how digital heritage creates societal value through engagement, participation, creativity, learning, reflection, and connection. It brings together cultural and creative professionals, heritage institutions, researchers, educators, technologists, funders, policymakers, and communities around a shared mission: Enabling digital heritage to circulate meaningfully within society.

The value of naming a field can be observed in other mission-oriented ecosystems. The New European Bauhaus, for example, was created by the European Commission to bring together culture, design, sustainability, and innovation around the goal of creating living environments that are sustainable, inclusive, and beautiful (European Commission, n.d.-a). More recently, Citiverse has emerged as a mission space that brings together cities, digital twins, immersive technologies, researchers, policymakers, and industry around the goal of creating more liveable, sustainable, and citizen-centred urban environments (European Commission, n.d.-b). In both cases, a shared framing helped align previously fragmented actors around a common purpose.

Digital Heritage for Society is proposed in a similar spirit. By providing a common language and direction of travel, it offers a shared frame through which the diverse actors involved in activating digital heritage can recognise their collective contribution and common purpose.

Recognition matters because ecosystems rarely emerge through individual projects alone. Fields develop when actors can identify themselves as part of a wider practice, connect with peers, share knowledge, access support structures, and build collective visibility. Networks, conferences, funding programmes, research agendas, experimentation spaces, and professional communities all contribute to this process. They help transform isolated initiatives into recognised fields of activity.

For digital heritage, this suggests that investment in collections and infrastructure should be accompanied by investment in the people, practices, and ecosystems that enable circulation. Supporting bridge actor practice means creating the conditions under which experimentation, collaboration, and public-facing innovation can flourish. Such support strengthens the activation layer of the ecosystem and expands the pathways through which digital heritage can generate societal value.

Viewed through this lens, bridge actors occupy a central position within digital heritage ecosystems. They are the cultural and creative professionals who translate access into circulation, while Digital Heritage for Society provides the mission-oriented field through which this work can be recognised, supported, and sustained.

6. Conclusion

This paper began with a simple observation: Despite significant advances in digitisation and digital infrastructure, the ambition for digital heritage to generate societal value remains far from fully realised. Digital heritage has become increasingly accessible, yet meaningful public engagement and societal value do not emerge automatically from access alone.

To better understand this challenge, the paper proposed a three-pillar framework consisting of digital heritage assets, infrastructure, and activation. While considerable attention has been devoted to assets and infrastructure, the framework highlights activation as an equally important ecosystem function. It is

through activation that digital heritage enters public life and becomes socially experienced through participation, creativity, learning, reflection, and engagement.

The paper makes two contributions. First, it proposes the concept of the bridge actor as a way of recognising the cultural and creative professionals who perform this activation function. By connecting heritage resources, infrastructure, creative practice, and public audiences, bridge actors enable digital heritage to circulate beyond collections and repositories and into public life. Second, it proposes Digital Heritage for Society as a mission-oriented field that provides a shared frame for the diverse actors and practices concerned with creating societal value through digital heritage.

Together, these concepts offer a more hopeful perspective on the future of digital heritage reuse. The challenge is not a lack of digital heritage assets, nor a lack of infrastructure. Europe has already invested substantially in both. The opportunity now lies in strengthening the activation layer that connects these foundations with society.

This insight has important implications for cultural ecosystem design. Alongside continued investment in collections and infrastructure, greater attention should be given to recognition, support structures, funding pathways, networks, and experimentation spaces that enable bridge actor practice to flourish. Such investments help create the conditions through which digital heritage can generate broader societal value.

In this sense, artists and cultural and creative professionals are not peripheral to digital heritage ecosystems; they are central to them. Through their ability to translate heritage into meaningful public experiences, bridge actors help transform access into circulation and societal value. Supporting this work is therefore not simply a matter of cultural production, but of cultural infrastructure.

Impact & Engagement

This paper addresses a persistent challenge within the digital heritage sector: Despite significant investment in digitisation, access, and digital infrastructure, the ambition for digital heritage to generate widespread societal value remains largely unrealised. The paper argues that this challenge cannot be understood solely through data and infrastructure. Instead, it proposes a three-pillar framework consisting of digital heritage assets, infrastructure, and activation, highlighting activation as a critical but under-recognised ecosystem function.

The paper is particularly relevant to policymakers, programme designers, and ecosystem leaders responsible for shaping the future of digital heritage. It suggests that current policy and investment approaches have focused primarily on the first two pillars, while the activation layer — the people and practices that connect digital heritage with public engagement — has remained less visible within strategic discussions.

A central contribution of the paper is therefore the act of naming. It proposes the concept of the bridge actor to describe the cultural and creative professionals who activate digital heritage through public-facing experiences, and Digital Heritage for Society as a mission-oriented field that brings together the diverse actors and practices concerned with creating societal value through digital heritage. These concepts provide a vocabulary through which the activation layer can be identified, discussed, researched, and supported.

The likely pathway for impact is through policy discussions, ecosystem design, funding strategies, professional networks, and future research. The expected change is not the creation of a new institution, but greater recognition of activation as a legitimate object of policy, investment, and ecosystem support. Potential indicators of impact may include the adoption of these concepts within policy and strategy documents, the emergence of networks and communities around bridge actor practice, dedicated support

mechanisms for public-facing digital heritage activation, and increased attention to activation within digital heritage research, funding programmes, and sector initiatives.

Biography

Winnie Lam is a mission-driven entrepreneur working at the intersection of digital cultural heritage, public engagement, and cultural innovation. Trained as an engineer at Stanford University, she combines systems thinking, cultural storytelling, and digital experience design to explore how digital heritage can generate societal value beyond preservation and access. She is co-founder of Plinth, a Netherlands-based studio specialising in 3D digitisation and interactive cultural experiences. Her recent work focuses on digital heritage reuse, ecosystem design, and the role of ‘bridge actors’ — cultural and creative professionals who connect heritage resources, technology, and public participation.

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Mapping Cultural Mobility: A Reflexive Teaching Method for Sustainable Cultural Futures

Dr. Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio
University of Barcelona

Introduction

How do we teach cultural mobility today? This question has become increasingly relevant as sustainability, geopolitical change and growing awareness of unequal access reshape the ways in which mobility is understood across the cultural sector. International exchange continues to play a fundamental role in artistic creation, professional development and cultural cooperation. At the same time, environmental concerns, changing funding priorities, visa regimes and global inequalities invite a reconsideration of what mobility means, why it matters and how it contributes to cultural life.

These developments have generated an expanding body of research and policy reflection. UNESCO's Re|Shaping Cultural Policies reports (2018, 2022), the European Union's Culture Moves Europe programme (European Commission, 2022), and the work of On the Move have all contributed to reframing cultural mobility within broader discussions on sustainability, ecological awareness, asymmetries and cultural diversity. Recent scholarship similarly argues for understanding mobility not simply as circulation across borders but as a practice shaped by structural conditions, unequal access and changing forms of international cooperation (Duxbury & Vidović, 2022). The debate is therefore no longer centred on increasing international circulation alone, but on understanding how cultural mobility can continue to generate value in a context shaped by sustainability concerns, geopolitical change and persistent inequalities.

While these questions have become central to cultural policy, their implications for cultural management education have received comparatively less attention. Programmes in cultural management routinely familiarise students and professionals with mobility schemes, international cooperation and policy frameworks. This knowledge remains essential. Yet understanding contemporary mobility also requires the ability to relate these frameworks to lived experience, recognising how professional trajectories are shaped by institutional opportunities, personal aspirations and structural constraints. Mobility is therefore not only a policy instrument but also a situated practice that calls for critical engagement.

This paper presents one pedagogical response to this educational challenge. Drawing on workshops developed over several years with cultural practitioners, artists and students in different international contexts, it discusses the Mobility Mapping Exercise, a facilitated teaching method that combines visual mapping, dialogue and collective inquiry. The workshop does not seek to prescribe more sustainable forms of mobility or offer normative answers to current policy debates. Instead, it creates a shared space in which participants examine their own mobility experiences in relation to the wider transformations affecting the cultural sector. Through this process, mobility becomes not only a topic of discussion but also an object of collective inquiry.

Cultural Mobility in Transition

For many years, cultural mobility was primarily understood through the movement of artists, cultural practitioners and artistic works across borders. International exchange was promoted as a means of strengthening cultural diversity, fostering dialogue and supporting career development, becoming a central objective of both cultural policy and international cultural cooperation. Within this perspective, mobility came to symbolise openness, collaboration and the circulation of knowledge.

Over the past decade, however, this understanding has become increasingly nuanced. Climate change, geopolitical instability and persistent inequalities in access to international opportunities have prompted

a broader reconsideration of mobility. Attention has progressively shifted from the quantity of movement towards its conditions, purposes and consequences. Alongside questions of circulation and exchange, discussions now emphasise reciprocity, care, accessibility and long-term collaboration, recognising that the significance of mobility depends not only on movement itself but also on the relationships, opportunities and forms of cooperation it generates (Duxbury & Vidović, 2022).

This conceptual shift is reflected in both scholarship and professional experience. Recent research has encouraged more contextual and relational understandings of cultural mobility, highlighting how mobility is shaped by institutional frameworks, funding structures, unequal access and the diverse realities in which international cooperation takes place (Duxbury & Vidović, 2022). In parallel, organisations such as On the Move have played a significant role in connecting research, policy and practice, fostering international dialogue and providing cultural practitioners with resources that encourage more critical and context-sensitive approaches to mobility.

These developments do not diminish the importance of mobility. On the contrary, they invite a more careful consideration of the role mobility plays within contemporary cultural ecosystems. International travel increasingly coexists with regional collaboration, digital exchange, hybrid formats and longer-term partnerships, expanding the ways in which cultural cooperation can be imagined and practised. The central question is therefore no longer simply how much cultural professionals move, but why, how and under which conditions mobility creates meaningful opportunities for learning, cooperation and cultural exchange.

For educators, this changing landscape raises a parallel challenge. If the understanding of cultural mobility is evolving, educational approaches should also create opportunities to explore these transformations critically. Beyond introducing policy frameworks and mobility programmes, cultural management education can encourage participants to examine mobility as a lived professional experience, relating broader debates to their own trajectories, decisions and aspirations. The teaching method presented in the following section has taken shape through this pedagogical perspective.

Teaching Cultural Mobility: Creating Space for Collective Inquiry

Cultural mobility has recently generated a growing body of policy reflection and academic research. Considerably less attention, however, has been devoted to how mobility is discussed within educational contexts and how future cultural practitioners are encouraged to engage critically with their own mobility practices. As understandings of mobility evolve in response to sustainability, geopolitical change and shifting forms of international cooperation, cultural management education faces the challenge of translating these debates into meaningful learning experiences. The question is no longer simply how to explain mobility programmes or policy frameworks, but how to encourage participants to examine mobility as a practice that is experienced, negotiated and constantly redefined.

Arts and cultural management education has long recognised the importance of connecting conceptual knowledge with practical experience. Preparing cultural practitioners requires more than familiarity with institutional structures; it also involves developing the capacity to navigate uncertainty, reflect critically on professional choices and engage with complex cultural ecosystems. Experiential and practice-based pedagogies have therefore become increasingly relevant within cultural management education, particularly where learning emerges through dialogue, collaboration and the analysis of real professional situations (Johansson et al., 2015; Kuznetsova-Bogdanovits, 2014).

Current discussions on Education for Sustainable Development reinforce this perspective. UNESCO (2020) argues that addressing sustainability requires not only new knowledge but also systems thinking, critical reflection and the ability to connect individual actions with broader social and environmental processes. Within the cultural sector, these competencies resonate strongly with questions of mobility, where professional decisions are rarely independent from institutional frameworks, funding conditions or

unequal opportunities for international exchange.

Yet teaching cultural mobility presents a particular challenge. Most educational programmes successfully introduce participants to international cooperation, funding schemes and policy instruments. These elements remain indispensable. They do not, however, necessarily create opportunities to examine how mobility is experienced in everyday working life or how broader policy debates intersect with individual trajectories. Questions such as Why do we travel?, What expectations shape international careers?, How do sustainability concerns influence professional decisions?, or What kinds of mobility do we value today? cannot be answered through policy analysis alone. They require educational settings in which participants are able to relate conceptual debates to their own experience.

It was through facilitating workshops in different universities, training programmes and international cultural networks that this observation became evident. Many participants arrived with previous experience of international cultural mobility through their own projects and activities. Some were already familiar with current policy debates or had worked with international mobility programmes. The workshops therefore did not begin from a lack of information, but from the opportunity to look collectively at experiences that were usually considered individually. What appeared less common was the opportunity to pause, look together at their own mobility trajectories and consider how these reflected wider transformations within the cultural sector. The challenge was not one of information, but of creating space for observation and dialogue.

The Mobility Mapping Exercise has been refined through workshops delivered in different educational and professional contexts. Its purpose is not to propose an alternative curriculum or a new theoretical model of cultural mobility, but to create the conditions in which participants examine their own mobility practices and relate them to wider debates on cultural policy, sustainability and international cultural cooperation. The following section describes how this pedagogical approach unfolds in practice.

The Mobility Mapping Exercise

The Mobility Mapping Exercise has been developed through workshops on cultural mobility, international cultural cooperation and sustainability delivered in universities, postgraduate programmes, training initiatives and international cultural networks. Although each workshop responds to a different educational context, they all begin from a similar premise: participants bring valuable professional and personal experiences of mobility, but they rarely have the opportunity to examine jointly those experiences. The workshop therefore creates a space in which mobility itself becomes the subject of observation, dialogue and critical inquiry.

Depending on the context, the workshop may be preceded by a broader introduction to contemporary challenges and debates on cultural mobility or begin directly with the mapping activity. Both approaches have proved equally productive. In some settings, a conceptual framing helps situate participants' experiences within wider discussions on sustainability, cultural policy and international cooperation. In others, the experiences themselves generate the questions that later shape the discussion. The sequence is less important than the possibility of moving continuously between individual experience and broader structural debates.

A large world map is placed at the centre of the room. Participants begin by tracing the journeys they have undertaken during a previously defined period, using different colours to distinguish modes of transport. The activity immediately generates curiosity and conversation. While drawing their routes, participants begin exchanging practical questions, comparing experiences and commenting on journeys they had almost forgotten. As the map gradually fills with coloured lines, individual mobility patterns become visible within a shared visual landscape, creating the basis for the discussions that follow. Participants begin recognising patterns, connections and contrasts that had previously remained unnoticed. Individual journeys are no longer viewed in isolation but in relation to broader professional

contexts, institutional conditions and shared challenges.

The map does more than document where participants have travelled. It provides a shared visual reference through which experiences can be externalised, compared and discussed. Participants revisit individual journeys by asking what motivated them, what value each journey generated for their professional and personal development, whether they were indispensable, and how environmental, institutional or personal factors influenced the decisions that were made. Questions concerning funding conditions, accessibility, visa regimes, care responsibilities, professional expectations, asymmetries or unequal opportunities for mobility naturally become part of the discussion. The objective is not to evaluate individual choices, but to recognise the multiple conditions that shape mobility in the cultural and artistic field.

Dialogue develops first in pairs or small groups before returning to the wider group. These conversations frequently become the most significant moment of the workshop. Individual experiences are placed alongside those of others, allowing participants to recognise shared dilemmas while appreciating the diversity of work and practical realities represented in the room. Discussions move naturally between personal narratives and broader questions concerning cultural policy, sustainability and international cooperation. In this way, mobility is no longer approached as a succession of individual journeys but as a collective experience shaped by institutional frameworks, professional cultures and changing global contexts.

In workshops involving students or participants at an early stage of their careers, a final activity invites them to imagine a Desired Mobility Map. Instead of looking backwards, participants reflect on the forms of mobility they hope to develop in the future, the motivations that guide these aspirations and the barriers they anticipate encountering. This prospective component is not essential to the methodology and is introduced only when it responds to the profile and expectations of the group.

Across the different contexts in which this workshop has been facilitated, one observation has remained remarkably consistent. The map quickly becomes much more than a visual representation of travel. As individual trajectories accumulate, it turns into a shared space for conversation, comparison and collective interpretation. Participants frequently return to the image of the completed map because it makes visible the diversity, intensity and complexity of their mobility practices. At the same time, it is the facilitated dialogue around the map that gives those trajectories meaning, connecting individual experiences with broader questions of cultural policy, sustainability and international cooperation.

Reflections from Practice

Facilitating the Mobility Mapping Exercise in different educational and professional contexts has shown that its educational value depends less on the sequence of activities than on the conditions it creates for collective exploration. While the structure of the workshop has remained remarkably consistent over time, the conversations that emerge around the map are never the same. Each group brings different experiences, institutional realities and cultural perspectives, shaping discussions in ways that cannot be anticipated in advance. This openness is not a limitation of the methodology but one of its defining characteristics. The workshop is designed to accommodate diverse interpretations of mobility rather than guide participants towards predetermined conclusions.

One of the most consistent observations across these different implementations is that participants engage most actively when the discussion begins with their own experiences. Depending on the group, participants bring different degrees of familiarity with policy frameworks, sustainability debates and international cooperation. What is often less common, however, is the opportunity to examine how these broader discussions intersect with everyday decisions and personal trajectories. The workshop therefore does not position individual experience as an alternative to policy analysis; it creates a space where both perspectives can inform one another. Questions that initially appear personal often lead to broader

discussions about funding structures, access to international opportunities, environmental responsibility, institutional expectations or unequal conditions for mobility.

Facilitation plays an important role throughout this process. The map provides a shared visual point of reference, but it does not determine the direction of the discussion. The facilitator guides the conversation by introducing new questions, connecting individual observations with broader debates and creating an environment in which different perspectives can coexist. At the same time, participants progressively contribute their own questions, experiences and interpretations, often opening unexpected directions for discussion. Learning develops through this continuous exchange, as personal experiences are related to wider questions concerning cultural policy, sustainability and international cooperation.

Facilitating the workshop across diverse groups has also demonstrated its adaptability. Although the workshop was initially developed with cultural practitioners already engaged in international mobility, it has been adapted to postgraduate programmes, university courses and professional training initiatives. The optional Desired Mobility Map responds to this flexibility, proving particularly valuable for participants at earlier stages of their careers. Looking towards future aspirations encourages reflection on the motivations, expectations and challenges that shape mobility before working routines become established. In other contexts, the exercise has also been expanded to include experiences of mobility that do not involve physical travel, inviting participants to map online collaborations, virtual residencies or other forms of digital participation. These adaptations do not alter the pedagogical purpose of the workshop. They demonstrate how the methodology can respond to different educational contexts while continuing to explore mobility as a diverse and evolving practice.

Looking across these different experiences, the most enduring lesson has been that teaching cultural mobility is not simply about communicating knowledge or discussing policy. It is about creating the conditions in which mobility can be observed, questioned and interpreted collectively. The Mobility Mapping Exercise demonstrates how a facilitated learning experience can create meaningful opportunities to examine mobility across different educational and professional contexts. Its adaptability has been one of its strengths, allowing each implementation to respond to the specific experiences, expectations and challenges of the participants involved.

Conclusion

How cultural mobility is understood continues to evolve, and cultural management education cannot remain unaffected by these transformations. Preparing future cultural practitioners today involves more than introducing mobility schemes, funding opportunities or international policy frameworks. It also requires creating opportunities to examine how mobility is experienced, what values and expectations shape it, and how professional decisions are influenced by wider social, political and environmental conditions.

The Mobility Mapping Exercise has been presented as one possible response to this educational challenge. Drawing on workshops facilitated in different educational and professional contexts, it offers a pedagogical framework through which participants explore their own mobility practices in dialogue with others. The map provides a shared visual reference that supports observation, comparison and discussion, while facilitation creates the conditions for connecting individual experiences with broader questions of cultural policy, sustainability and international cultural cooperation.

Facilitating this workshop across diverse contexts has shown that its educational value does not depend on producing shared conclusions or predefined models of mobility. Instead, it creates opportunities to discuss the challenges that increasingly shape international cultural cooperation, from environmental sustainability and unequal access to mobility, to sector expectations, institutional constraints and changing forms of collaboration. In doing so, participants are encouraged to consider mobility not simply as an expected dimension of professional life, but as a practice that requires ongoing reflection, informed

decision-making and a conscious negotiation of its cultural, social and environmental implications.

Within this perspective, the workshop also contributes to discuss professional development linked to mobility opportunities. By connecting personal experience with wider policy debates, it encourages cultural practitioners to better understand the contexts in which they operate and to make more informed choices about future mobility practices. As discussions on sustainability continue to reshape cultural policy and international cooperation (UNESCO, 2022, 2026; Baltà Portolés & Bashiron Mendolicchio, 2021), educational methodologies should also create spaces where these transformations can be examined together. The Mobility Mapping Exercise represents one contribution to this broader conversation, demonstrating how visual mapping, facilitation and dialogue can support more reflective, context-sensitive and sustainable approaches to professional practice in the cultural sector.

IMPACT & ENGAGEMENT

This teaching method benefits non-academic actors including cultural managers, artists, mobility funders, cultural organisations, and policy practitioners engaged in international cooperation. It is designed to be used as a training tool and reflective workshop format that can be implemented in higher education, professional development programmes, and organisational contexts, as well as adapted into guidelines or toolkits for mobility schemes. Impact is already in progress, as the method has been piloted in diverse international academic and professional settings, where participants have reported increased awareness of sustainability considerations and structural inequalities shaping mobility decisions. The approach offers a practical pathway for integrating sustainability principles into cultural mobility practices and institutional strategies.

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BIO

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio holds a PhD in History, Theory and Criticism of Art from the University of Barcelona. He is a researcher in the Cultural Management Programme at the University of Barcelona and Academic Coordinator of the Postgraduate Course in International Cultural Cooperation. His teaching and research focus on cultural mobility, international cultural cooperation, contemporary artistic practices, sustainability, and the relationship between cultural policy and professional practice.

Herman has taught in diverse international academic contexts, developing reflexive and experiential pedagogical approaches that connect policy debates with real-world challenges in the cultural and creative fields. His work bridges research, pedagogy, and creative practice within international cultural networks.

The Transformation of Aesthetic Editorial Processes in the Age of AI: Influence at the Periphery

Mr. adrien christ
Université Côte d'Azur

Prof. Anthony Hussenot
(Gredeg/ CNRS), Université Côte d'Azur

Adrien Christ is a PhD student at Université Côte d'Azur, affiliated with CNRS-GREDEG. With an educational background in both Philosophy and Management, his research focuses on the impact of AI on the creative industries, with a particular emphasis on the publishing sector. Adrien’s work explores the intricate relationship between AI, human aesthetic judgment, and creative tasks in editorial decision-making, examining how technological advancements intersect with traditional creative processes.

Anthony Hussenot is a Full Professor at Université Côte d’Azur, specialising in the evolution of work and organizations. His research explores new work and management practices, as well as the role of work in contemporary societal transformations. He is a senior member of the CNRS-GREDEG research laboratory and co-leads the Alter-organizing research team.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Creativity, Publishing, AI, Integration

INTRODUCTION

In recent months, the publishing world has been faced with a significant AI–enabled controversy surrounding a book release. The book in question, Mia Ballard’s “Shy girl”, originally self-published before being picked up by Hachette, was, according to experts, filled with writing styles and elements indicating a high likelihood of being AI generated, prompting indignation from readers (Hill, 2026). This controversy illustrates how questions of aesthetics and AI now collide, often uneasily. The selection and development of literary works are inherently subjective processes, shaped by aesthetic judgment. By aesthetic judgment we refer to decisions that consider literary style, thematic relevance, alignment with social mores, the publisher’s editorial vision as well as market constraints and trends in the development of a worthwhile work (Bourdieu, 1992; Caves, 2000). Traditionally, editors were expected to rely on ingrained human competencies, such as emotional sensibility and aesthetic appreciation to evaluate and nurture manuscripts (Talmor, 1969; Squires, 2017; Wohl, 2022). The emergence of AI in editorial practices raises pressing uncertainty: while some scholars suggest that AI integration in organizational processes is a departure from previous technological advancements (Amankwah et al., 2024), others caution against the assumption that AI can replace human-led aesthetic decision-making (Patulny et al., 2020). Through an organizational perspective, we could say that, in the publishing industry, the becoming of organizational processes incorporating aesthetic judgment when developing creative output is always shifting under the influence of technology and its environment (Squires, 2017; Chedaleux, 2025) and that this tension is now reactivated in a distinct context by AI’s rise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF PUBLISHING TASKS

Aesthetic judgment and associated creative competencies are among the foundations of key tasks in publishing. This is why the development of creative works, including literature, is highly case-specific and often proves to be resistant to standardization (Smith & McKinlay, 2009). The term aesthetic was originally coined by the German philosopher Baumgarten through the Greek “aesthetis” which originally meant sensory perception (Guyer, 2020). This sensory perception designed the ways through which one access to knowledge of artistic beauty and to the faculty of judging artistic value (Gregor, 1983). To clarify our research, we hold like (Benton, 2015) that non-fiction includes aesthetic qualities as well. In the

following research we recognize, for the sake of our research, as "aesthetic tasks", all tasks happening during a book's production cycle relying on sensitive perception and aesthetic judgment. They affect a book's inner content, its form and how this form is appreciated by a plurality of agents through its creation, edition, conception and diffusion.

USE OF AI AND INTEGRATION IN AESTHETIC TASKS

While the impact of technological progress on aesthetics has always been a relevant question in the industry, AI, especially LLMs brings new dimensions to this matter because it is now able to provide or at least simulate aesthetic observations. Academic discussion on AI focuses whether the predictive nature of AI is compatible with the conduction of aesthetic tasks (Franceschelli & Musolesi, 2025) and whether AI is able to supersede its status as a tool to pass from object to subject in the aesthetic relationship. In one of the few systematic tests of AI's editorial abilities on literary texts, Otmar et al. (2025) notably observed that AI, when given editorial responsibility, frequently attempted to intervene heavy-handedly in the editorial process. According to the researchers, the type and categories of deficiencies were caused by its lack of human-like aesthetic insights. They thus advocated for an integration of AI tools regulated as a complementary (O'Toole & Horvát, 2024) and augmentative tool (Guerberof & Asimakoulas, 2024) but not as a substitution to human aesthetic judgment.

Currently, the uses and potential uses of AIs in the publishing world are multiple and go from syntax correcting and grammar use to more substantial aesthetic incorporation (Seidlinger, 2023). AI and algorithmic solutions can also be used to predict with more or less accuracy the potential success of a manuscript. AI is now technically able to provide advices and, judgment on the qualities of a given text as well as suggestions regarding its development (Bouhadiera, 2025). While it is impossible to depict in a one-size-fits-all approach the precise range and type of use of AI the general editorial picture is characteristic of a fragmented attitude among publishers (Nawotka, 2025). Many smaller non-mainstream structures extensively use AI for editing and writing (Brown, 2025). Meanwhile, mainstream non-self-publishing publishers' attitudes, with some exceptions, point towards a cautious integration of AI tools limited by the desire to safeguard human ingenuity and sensibility (Rédaction, Syndicat national de l'édition, 2025; Souillot, SNE, 2025).

AI and desires of rationalization in publishing

Despite its novelty, AI revives the long-standing (Benjamin, 1935; Leslie, 1898; Schiffrin, 2001; Smith, 2000) desire to develop techniques that allow publishers and editors to predict a text's qualities and, ultimately, its potential commercial success. This approach seeks to mitigate the unpredictability and risks inherent in creative endeavours and their subsequent impact on organizational publishing strategies (De Glas, 1998). It is grounded on a desire to shift the artistic judgement from a sensible and subjective aesthetic observation to a rationalized and analytical process which could predict the outcome and likely sales of a given manuscript through objective analysis (Squires, 2017).

Existing Studies of AI's organizational integration and the case of publishing industry:

At this stage, current research about AI's potential effects on aesthetic organizational processes can be divided in three main frameworks: substitution, complementarity and transformation (Erickson, 2024). The first framework holds that AI will be able to replace effectively human participation in creative and aesthetic processes (Brown, 2018; Dornis, 2020). The second framework holds that AI and human participation in aesthetic can coexist while adding distinct benefits (O'Toole & Horvát, 2024). The third framework on the other hand, posits that human participation in aesthetic tasks are going to subsist but that their structure and underlying competences are going to be deeply altered by AI integration (Guerberof & Asimakoulas, 2024).

RESEARCH FRAMING AND GAP:

In order to conduct our analysis, we need to anchor our research perspective in a more precise type of research framing. When we consider the specificities of the phenomenon we want to observe, we can deduce that the most appropriate framework to treat our problematic is adopting a so-called "ontological process research" (Simpson et al., 2021) in which we consider the becoming of the publishing process (Chia, 1995) as the head phenomenon we want to observe.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How is AI integration currently transforming aesthetic editorial organizational processes and what are the key narratives that structures this integration?

METHOD

In order to answer our research question, this paper relies on data collected from October 2025 to March 2026. More precisely, the first author conducted non-participant observations of editorial committees in two publishing houses; and 21 anonymized semi-directed interviews conducted with publishing professionals. (data observation table)

TYPE OF DATA	DESCRIPTION
INTERVIEWS	21 interviews with 22 publishing professionals in fiction and non-fiction including authors (4), editors, (10) and managers and other publishing workers (8). / 19 out of 22 were French
NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION	Presence at 5 editorial committees in a non-fiction general public targeted publishing house, one reading committee in a youth fiction publishing magazine. Future observation sessions in those publishing houses.
SECONDARY DATA	Literature review (academic and journalistic literature on the subject).

Table 1. Data collection

DATA ANALYSIS
Interviews with professionals: Thematic coding analysis (Mortelmans, 2024) through Nvivo, to highlight concrete integration of AI in the transformation of creative publishing process and accompanying perspectives and the state of the publishing industry.
Observation of the editorial committees: observation grid of key elements in the becoming of the creative process and stressing the organizational parameters (hierarchy, in-group collaboration…), references to AI use as well as employees' perspectives regarding AI integration and the industry's future.

Table 2. Data analysis

Our multilevel data analysis was built using the methods developed by (Bidart et al., 2013) in which we put together the following dimensions to observe key elements: Ingredients and contexts/Sequences of events/Driving forces /Turning points. Additionally, drawing on (Boje, 2019) we illustrate the key narratives in AI integration. We more specifically highlight how those narratives relate to sensemaking (Brown et al., 2015) inside of publishing organizations.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

AI'S CURRENT PUBLISHING AND AESTHETIC INTEGRATION

Over the course of our investigation, we witnessed, that AI was in the process of being incorporated, for a variety of aesthetics and non-aesthetics tasks encompassing undertakings such as administrative, office automation and business tasks. When we consider the more topic of AI creative integration we witness that professionals acknowledged AI use mainly for integration in secondary creative tasks (proofreading, format adaptation, brainstorming…). However, while interviewees largely subscribed to arguments about the necessity of maintaining human oversight to preserve the supposed integrity of aesthetic decision-making, it appeared (Appendix 2) that AI, for many interviewees (17 out of 22 interviewees) played an increasing role in this periphery of the creative editing process and represents a rupture, also present

during editorial committees. It showed how AI might directly and indirectly influence the creative editorial process, with or without creative actors' acknowledgment, a non-fiction head editor described: "we use all this [AI] to generate creation briefs, to help us a bit with formulating our ideas, or to perform tasks such as creating an index, a summary, a back-cover and then to conduct researches" interview (Nfic head editor 2).

However, this peripheric form of AI administration did not preclude some parts of the publishing chain from being more significantly automatized. We observed that for instance in format adaptation (automatic descriptions of images and content in published works for the sake of print-disabled readers for instance), AI availability was seen as a turning point. In this field of activity, AI was implemented thoroughly and deemed essential, at least in large publishing groups. As expressed by the responsible for format adaptation in a large publishing group: "As for the editors, they did not will to take that [format adaptation] in charge because it required a monstrous amount of work, naturally. Then we managed to train this AI tool." interview (DigInt coord 2). Those secondary uses, while removed from the extreme example of a fully automated writing and editing process displayed, nevertheless, influence the conduction of publishing tasks and more generally its aesthetics-related components.

NARRATIVES REGARDING AI AESTHETIC INTEGRATION

Regarding the reactions of interviewees on this use of AI, we observed that perspectives were significantly mixed when commenting on the effects of AI integration as a temporal rupture in the aesthetic and creative components of editorial process, oscillating between two key narratives: an AI favourable and an AI sceptic or even AI negative narrative. This oscillation provokes, to borrow Patrick Dawson's words a form of "equivocality" when it comes to the publishing industry's future (Dawson, 2014). However, their appreciations were also significantly influenced by other difficulties, such as the unstable publishing context and its economic situation. AI creative integration in itself was seen in a mixed manner with some concerns about its potential menace for Intellectual Property rights through AI information leaks but also its negative aesthetic and creative impacts, in rupture with earlier phenomena. Others, holding to AI positive narratives emphasized its usefulness and the ability of the publishing industry to adapt to those new tools without losing its core, likening it to previous innovation waves. AI integration was perceived in this first narrative, as enhancing the publishing process, facilitating its steps and improving rentability as voiced during interviews by a youth fiction editor "so necessarily there is the temptation of AI, but we have other temptations also, including trying to improve our economic situation with this tool" (Fiction editor 1). On the other hand, initial findings revealed a staunch and notable reluctance among most publishing professionals interviewed to admit delegating significant aesthetic judgments and creative tasks to AI. Many interviewees emphasized the irreplaceable nature of human skills, this held especially true for fiction. A significant part expressed concerns about the potential for AI to undermine the human elements of editorial work, particularly in tasks requiring subjective and symbolic interpretation of formal literary artefacts. Alternatively, it appears that advocacy for peripheric integration of AI in aesthetics-related tasks featured as a compromise between AI favourable and AI negative narratives.

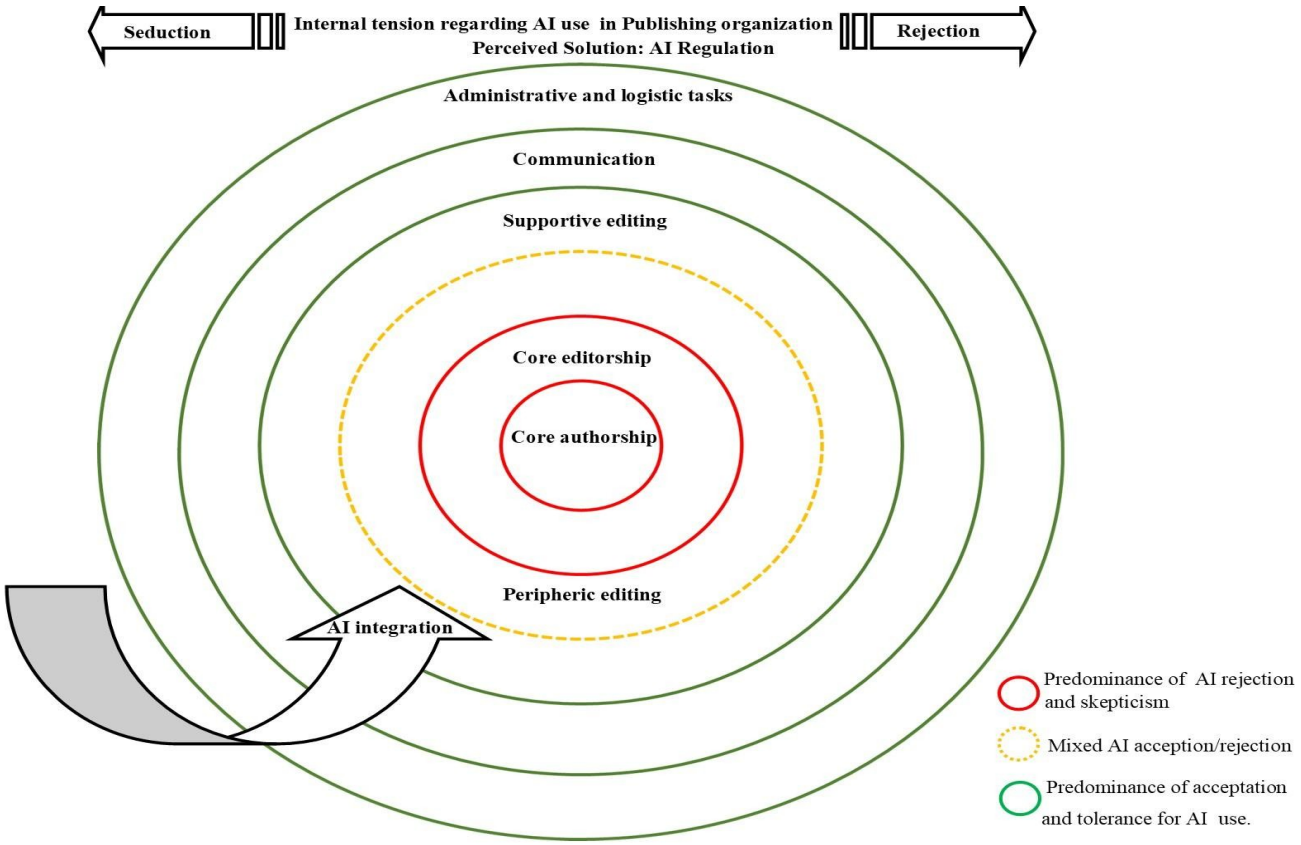
TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC AI REGULATION IN THE PUBLISHING SECTOR?

Consequently, this paper reflects the ways through which the publishing industry is currently adapting and finding ways to integrate AI tools. This was realized jointly with first attempts at regulating AI in the publishing sector. Most of the interviewees, with some notable exceptions, expressed that their company or sector were currently elaborating formal and informal ways to regulate AI. As disclosed by a product manager when asked about AI's regulation practices: "we had presentations indicating the things that we have the right to do, the things that we don't have the right to do and specifically, we have a lot of incitation." interview (Prod manag 1). The interviewees advocated for supervising more thoroughly AI use, expressing a narrative of risk mitigation and benefit from perceived advantages while advocating for

supervision and control to counter shortcomings. Those arguments for regulation thus reflect collective sensemaking (Cristofaro, 2022).

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our research inserts itself in the previous processual study field regarding the interplay between technology and creative industries' processes. The type of secondary influence on aesthetic and creative processes we described is not exclusive to the new AI phenomenon but also reflects the previous significant waves of innovation and most specifically the case of algorithmic integrations. (Kim, 2024) This sort of secondary or peripheric integration can also be interpreted as an attempt at the organizational level to find a meaningful mode of coexistence along with AI. Expressed desire for regulation, along with the types of AI uses we identified, fitted more generally with the so-called complementary AI integration framework. The substitution scenario was notably depicted by many interviewees as undesirable. However, the influence that AI has on parts of the publishing might, if intensified in the future, increase the likelihood of a transformative AI integration framework. It thus warrants returns to the field. In order to sum up the observed dynamics, we advance the following explanatory schema:


Seduction
Internal tension regarding AI use in Publishing organization
Perceived Solution: AI Regulation
Rejection
Administrative and logistic tasks
Communication
Supportive editing
Core editorship
Core authorship
Peripheric editing
AI integration
Predominance of AI rejection and skepticism
Mixed AI acception/rejection
Predominance of acceptation and tolerance for AI use.

Graphic 1: model of AI aesthetic integration in the publishing industry between the distinct types of tasks

As we observe, we identify an important distinction between the segments of editorship and more largely, aesthetic and creative tasks. According to the interviewees' own perspectives we decomposed those tasks' segments in six main circles: the first circle is related to core authorship meaning core tasks related to essential components of authorship (the hard writing process and the laying out of scenarios, structure or characters), the second circle refers to core editorship, namely core activities mobilizing aesthetic judgment deemed as essential for the completion of the editorial process including the editorial reading of a manuscript. The third circle refers to peripheric practices, thus encompassing tasks that are distinct from what is seen as core authorship or editorship but remain important this includes diverse activities such as preliminary aesthetic activities (drafts, rough sketches…) and aesthetic research or obtaining feedback and second opinions. The fourth circle refers to supportive editing, distinct practices that aim at supporting previously mentioned core and peripheric editorial practices, for instance it includes preliminary translation of manuscripts that are going to be acquired but also other supporting activities like market research, graphic creation (covers) or format adaptation (transferring image to texts automatically)or argumentation , the fifth circle refers to communication (creation of commercial and marketing documents,…) and the sixth cycle to distribution and administrative practices in the publishing industry. Based on our observations, the AI integration process, unlike previous waves of innovation influences the editing process through its periphery. The closer we get to what is perceived the editing core mobilizing aesthetic judgments more intensively, the higher is the resistance and the less intensive is AI use (its direct use in manuscripts even being banned in many organizations). This recalls important narratives structuring the integration of AI in the creative industry which we identified by using different colours in our schema: an AI favourable dominant narrative in green and an AI-rejection or at least techno-sceptic narrative in red in the associated sectors. Peripheric editorial tasks are at the confluence of those two narratives and AI integration in this sector is currently unfolding and expanding, hence, this is why we represented this section in yellow. The following table was created to summarize those narratives.

AI NARRATIVES	**AI FAVORABLE**	**AI REJECTION**
PARAMETERS	AI integration approval in the publishing organization	Rejection of AI in the publishing organization
TYPICAL PARTS OF THE EDITING PROCESS	Administrative, distribution and supportive aesthetic and creative tasks, peripheric aesthetic editorial tasks(mixed)	Core authorship and core editing tasks, peripheric aesthetic editorial tasks (mixed)
INTENSITY OF AI INTEGRATION	Medium to high (with exceptions)	Low to null (with exceptions)
AMOUNT OF RESISTANCE TO USE	Low amount of resistance	High amount of resistance
PERSONAL REACTION TOWARDS USE	Acceptation of its use, low controversy	Shame around use, conflicting views, high controversy
ORGANIZATIONAL REGULATION OF USE	Encouraged by the organization	Discouraged by the organization, penalized in some organizations
REASONING BEHIND AI ATTITUDES	Functional use, seen as improving rentability and automatizing tedious tasks or enhancing those activities.	Use perceived as corrupting aesthetic integrity and artistic meaning, deficiencies (hallucinations…)
OUTCOME	Regulation seen as a possible answer to reconcile those narratives and find collective meaning in the editorial process through safeguarding AI advantages and limiting its menaces	

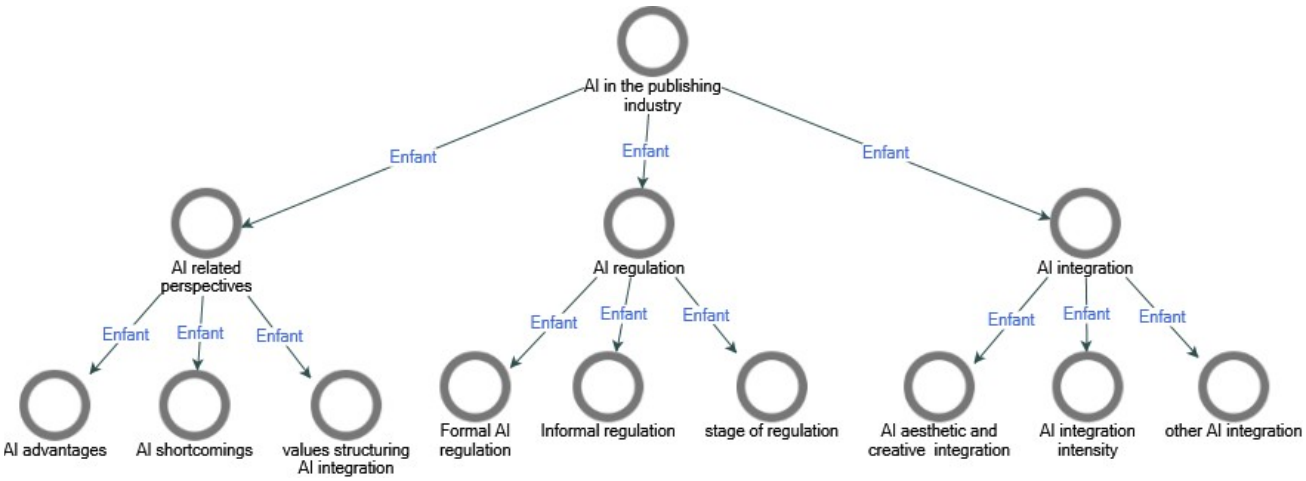
Table 3: description of the two types of AI integration narratives in the publishing industry

In this paper proposal we thus tried, to elaborate an approach of the AI-enabled transformation of aesthetic publishing organizational processes, depicting a form of perceived peripheric integration and its structuring narratives.

IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT:

This paper aims at providing a better understanding of the current process of AI integration in publishing processes mobilizing aesthetic judgment. As we covered during our research, AI represent a significant potential disruption in the field of aesthetics. More specifically, its integration is complexified by the fact that aesthetic processes have, for a long time, been considered as a human prerogative. Recent examples of backlash following suspected AI integration in the content of books showed that AI aesthetic integration remains a taboo. However, due to the novelty of AI integration we lack data depicting this integration and its main narratives as our main research remains speculative. In our research endeavour, we strove, through a processual qualitative approach, to explore how AI is concretely integrated. Our results pointed to a sort of peripheric integration distinct from both extreme scenarios of total AI replacement and the absence of AI integration. They also evidenced important desires emanating from publishing actors for regulation and clarification due to AI's mixed effects. This research, by providing a clearer picture of the industry and cues for the trajectory of AI integration in the publishing sector, could help managers and creative professionals in publishing and more generally creative industries to take proactive approaches. Those approaches could be held by setting implicit and explicit regulation to accompany and guide AI integration. Our research might also incite professionals to move away from categoric, and one-size fits all attitudes accompanying AI integration in creative industries. Instead, it might promote flexibility while addressing the numerous fears and apprehensions that are still linked to AI by better understanding the main narratives structuring its integration's typical path and characteristics through the presented data.

Appendix 1: partial coding tree showcasing the main categories and themes for AI integration



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Reframing Craft Education through Dual Learning Sites: Ceramic Talent Development and Ecosystem Transformation in Yingge, Taiwan

Prof. Yihui Wang
National Taipei University of Technology

Abstract

Craft-based industries increasingly face structural pressures, especially in skills transmission and talent development, and fragile links between education and production systems. While many policy initiatives focus on heritage preservation or short-term creative projects, less attention has been paid to how formal education can structurally support craft-based industrial ecosystems. This paper addresses this gap by examining how institutionalized university–local collaboration can strengthen ceramic talent development and ecosystem resilience in Yingge, Taiwan's historic ceramic town.

The study proposes a Dual Learning-Site Model, which conceptualizes the university and the local ceramic production community as co-equal and interconnected knowledge-production sites. Rather than treating the locality as a temporary field site, workshops, museums, and production spaces are formally embedded into university curricula through a University Social Responsibility (USR) framework. Students engage in a structured "course–field–career" pathway that integrates technical skills, industrial systems awareness, and local cultural governance.

A key contribution of this research lies in analyzing the professionalization of artisans within this collaborative structure. University faculty work with local practitioners to translate tacit production knowledge into structured pedagogical modules and staged learning processes. This transformation enables artisans to move from production-oriented craftsmen to industry mentors with recognized teaching roles, strengthening intergenerational knowledge transmission and enhancing professional recognition within the craft ecosystem.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative case-study approach, combining institutional and policy analysis, field observation, and semi-structured interviews with faculty, students, artisans, and cultural professionals. The findings demonstrate that long-term, place-based educational integration improves knowledge circulation, stabilizes talent pipelines, and reinforces ecosystem continuity.

The paper argues that sustainable craft development requires structural educational integration rather than project-based intervention. The Dual Learning-Site Model offers a theoretically grounded and transferable framework for cultural governance and higher education engagement in craft-based regions.

KEYWORDS

Craft education; Cultural governance; Talent development; Industrial ecosystem; Place-based learning

1. Introduction

Place-based regeneration has become an important strategy for local development. Yet many traditional craft communities are experiencing a slower and more delicate form of crisis: ageing artisans, fewer young people entering the field, fragile routes of knowledge transmission, and weakening industrial networks. These are not only economic problems. They are also cultural and educational problems. When a craft community loses its people, its rhythm of learning, and its confidence in the future, what disappears is not only a technique, but a way of knowing the world.

Yingge, Taiwan’s most iconic ceramics town, has carried a history of ceramic production since around 1800. Its clay, kilns, workshops, and streets have long shaped Taiwan’s ceramic culture. However, since the 1990s, globalized manufacturing, changing consumer markets, and shifts in art education have created a widening gap between formal schooling and local craft knowledge. While universities continue to teach ceramics, students often encounter craft as individual artistic expression rather than as part of a living cultural and industrial ecosystem.

This paper therefore asks: can higher education become a meaningful bridge between local craft knowledge, talent formation, and industrial renewal? More importantly, can the university learn from the locality, rather than only bringing knowledge to it?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Craft as a Knowledge System

Recent craft studies have moved beyond seeing craft simply as technique or artistic expression. Craft may be better understood as a knowledge system that brings together skill, material experience, production structures, cultural value, and social relationships (Adamson, 2007; Sennett, 2008). Much of this knowledge is tacit and embodied: the feel of clay under the hand, the judgment of glaze thickness, the timing of firing, or the confidence of a brushstroke. Such knowledge cannot be fully captured in textbooks. It is learned slowly, through repetition, attention, and shared practice. This corresponds to what Polanyi (1966) described as tacit knowledge— knowledge that is difficult to formalize or communicate through language alone.

When education is separated from local craft fields, this knowledge becomes vulnerable. It may not disappear suddenly; rather, it fades quietly when there are no longer enough people, places, or relationships to carry it forward (Dormer, 1997).

2.2 Cultural Capital and Talent Formation

Following Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, craft talent formation involves more than acquiring technical skills. It is also a process through which students develop cultural literacy, aesthetic judgment, professional identity, and a sense of belonging to a field of practice (Bourdieu, 1984). In craft education, students learn not only how to make, but also how to understand the history, labour, values, and social meaning behind making.

This formation cannot happen within the classroom alone. It requires encounters with workshops, production lines, museums, artisans, and communities. Through these encounters, students begin to see craft not only as an object or technique, but as a living relationship between people, materials, place, and culture.

2.3 Cultural Governance and Place-Based Learning

Cultural governance suggests that cultural development should not be led by one institution alone. Instead, it emerges through collaboration among universities, cultural organisations, local communities, government agencies, and industry actors (Bennett, 1995; Sacco et al., 2018). From this perspective, local knowledge is not a passive heritage object waiting to be preserved. It is a creative and productive resource that can continue to generate learning, innovation, and cultural meaning.

Place-based learning offers an important path for this process. It grounds education in real environments and invites students to learn from the social and cultural fabric of a place (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002). For craft education, workshops, kilns, museums, and community spaces are not merely sites for field trips. They are places where knowledge is made, shared, tested, and renewed.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. It draws on three main sources of data. First, it analyses relevant policy documents, especially Taiwan’s University Social Responsibility initiative, local regeneration policies, and craft-related cultural policies. Second, it uses participant observation based on the researcher’s long-term involvement in Yingge since 2020, including student visits, workshop learning, museum collaborations, and craft-based educational activities. Third, it includes in-depth interviews with university instructors, students, and local artisans in order to understand how different participants experience talent development, knowledge transmission, and industrial sustainability. The aim is not only to describe a programme, but to understand how education, craft knowledge, and local industry may be woven together through sustained institutional collaboration.

4. Structural Challenges in the Yingge Ceramics Community

Fieldwork since 2020 shows that Yingge’s challenges extend beyond market decline. Three issues are especially important. First, generational discontinuity. Ceramics courses are still offered in universities, but there is no stable bridge between classroom learning and local industry. Young people often find it difficult to imagine a future in ceramics. Compared with design, digital media, or other creative sectors, ceramic work may appear less visible, less economically secure, and harder to enter. As a result, students may learn ceramic techniques without developing a deeper connection to the field as a possible life path.

Second, the loosening of the industrial chain. Yingge’s ceramic industry once relied on a rich division of labour, including forming, painting, glazing, firing, design, and sales. This structure

supported local production for many years. However, as workshops close, skilled workers retire, and production moves elsewhere, the old network has become fragile. At the same time, newer needs such as design innovation, branding, and cultural interpretation are not always well connected to traditional production.

Third, the diminished role of the artisan. Artisans were once central knowledge holders in the ceramic industry. Yet under heritage preservation discourse, they are often treated as people to be documented rather than as active knowledge producers. Their practical wisdom rarely enters formal education or curriculum design. This weakens not only their social visibility, but also the possibility of passing their knowledge to a new generation. Together, these challenges show that short-term subsidies, exhibitions, or cultural events are not enough. What is needed is a more durable educational and cultural structure.

5. Dual Learning Sites: NTUT × Yingge

5.1 Conceptual Framework

The Dual Learning Sites model treats National Taipei University of Technology and the Yingge ceramics community as two connected centers of learning. It challenges the idea that the university campus is the only legitimate site of education. Instead, it recognizes that the local craft community also holds deep knowledge, built through labour, memory, skill, and long-term practice.

In this model, the university provides theoretical frameworks, research methods, cultural interpretation (Figures 1), and interdisciplinary resources. Yingge provides real production contexts, embodied craft knowledge, local history, and industrial experience. Through curriculum design, collaborative teaching, and field-based learning, knowledge flows in both directions. The university does not simply “serve” the locality; it learns with it.



Figures 1: Yingge underglaze painting artist Chen Qiu-shan was invited to the school to conduct a

four-week co-teaching workshop focused on technical skills. (April 2025)

This shift is important. It changes Yingge from a place to be observed into a partner in knowledge-making. It also allows students to understand craft as a living system, not merely as a technique taught in isolation.

5.2 Curriculum Design

The curriculum is organized through a four-stage learning cycle: classroom theory, field practice, creative reflection, and career exploration. In the classroom stage, students study ceramic history,

craft culture, local regeneration, and cultural sustainability. In the field practice stage, they enter Yingge workshops, production sites (Figure 2), and painting studios, learning directly from artisans. In the creative reflection stage, students use making, writing, and presentation to process what they have experienced. In the career exploration stage, they connect with museums, cultural institutions, and local industry to imagine possible futures in the craft field.

Through workshop placements, museum visits, craft demonstrations, exhibition projects, and community engagement, students gradually build a fuller understanding of the ceramic ecosystem. They learn not only how ceramics are made, but also how craft lives within a place, an economy, and a community.



Figure 2: As part of the course, students visited a ceramic slip-casting factory in Yingge to observe the commercial production line and the actual workplace environment. (May 2025)

6. Talent Formation and Ecosystem Reconstruction

The Dual Learning Sites model creates value for students, educators, and artisans.

For students, learning moves beyond technique. They begin to understand artisans’ working conditions, the challenges of production, market realities, and the cultural meaning of craft (Figures 3 & 4). This helps them develop professional identity and a clearer sense of possible futures in ceramics.





Figures 3 & 4: Through intensive on-site instruction at ceramic factories in Yingge—featuring co-teaching by school faculty and industry experts—students observe ceramic manufacturing processes and

industrial operations up close, thereby deepening their understanding of and appreciation for the local industry. (September 2025)

For education, the university becomes more than a place of instruction. It becomes a platform that connects workshops, museums, cultural institutions, design resources, and community networks. In this sense, education becomes part of the infrastructure of the craft ecosystem.

For local artisans, the transformation is especially meaningful. Through collaboration with university faculty, artisans are invited to organize their tacit knowledge into teaching steps, learning modules, and assessment criteria. What was once carried mainly through experience and demonstration becomes more visible, shareable, and teachable. This process reflects a broader shift toward professionalization within cultural labor (Banks, 2010). This does not reduce the depth of their knowledge. Rather, it gives that knowledge new pathways to travel. The

workshop becomes not only a place of production, but also a place of teaching. The artisan becomes not only a maker, but also a cultural knowledge bearer (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The course attracts international exchange students through English instruction, fostering cross-cultural collaboration while promoting Taiwanese ceramic painting and integrating diverse artistic perspectives. (September 2025)

This is the deepest value of the Dual Learning Sites model: it creates a two-way movement of knowledge. Academic methods enter the workshop and help structure teaching. Local craft wisdom enters the university and enriches formal education. Between the two, a new form of educational partnership becomes possible.

7. Discussion: Education as Cultural Governance

This case shows that higher education can play a role in craft sustainability beyond teaching skills. It can become a form of cultural governance. Traditional cultural policy often depends on funding, heritage designation, or public exhibitions. These tools are important, but they do not always build the long-term relationships needed for talent development and knowledge transmission.

Universities have a different kind of capacity. They can provide stable courses, repeated student participation, research support, and cross-sector collaboration over time. When local craft fields are formally integrated into education, learning becomes more continuous and less accidental. Students no longer depend only on chance encounters with artisans; they enter a structured pathway of learning, practice, reflection, and possible career development.

The model also supports knowledge translation. Tacit craft knowledge is not simply recorded; it is carefully transformed into teaching structures through dialogue between teachers and artisans. This process respects the depth of craft experience while giving it a form that can be passed on to future learners (Figure 6). In this way, Dual Learning Sites help build cultural resilience. Cultural resilience is not only the preservation of what already exists. It is the ability of a community to continue making, teaching, adapting, and imagining its future (Maclean et al., 2014). Education, when rooted in place, can become one of the quiet but powerful forces that keeps culture alive.



Figure 6: End-of-course exhibition "Études"—students practice arranging and displaying their work from the semester, while also articulating and sharing what they have learned. (June 2025)

8. Conclusion

The sustainability of craft traditions depends not only on preserving techniques, but also on building durable pathways for people, knowledge, and industry. Through the collaboration between NTUT and the Yingge ceramics community, students, educators, and artisans become partners in a shared process of learning and cultural renewal.

This study argues that local knowledge should not be treated as a cultural artefact waiting to be preserved. It should be recognized as a living resource with the power to teach, transform, and generate new futures. The Dual Learning Sites model is therefore not merely a teaching method. It is a governance framework based on reciprocity, respect, and long-term partnership.

To learn from local craft is to learn from the hands, memories, and labor of a community. When universities open themselves to this form of learning, education becomes more than preparation for a profession. It becomes a way of caring for cultural continuity, supporting industrial renewal, and helping a place imagine its next generation.

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Yihui Wang is Professor and Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at National Taipei University of Technology, Taiwan. She is also an artist and independent curator. Her research and practice focus on cultural governance, contemporary ceramics and painted porcelain, craft revitalization, and sustainable cultural ecosystems. In addition to her artistic exhibitions and curatorial projects, she has led University Social Responsibility (USR) initiatives dedicated to cultivating ceramic painting talents and revitalizing local craft heritage in Yingge. Through international curatorial exchange, she connects local craft traditions with global dialogue, promoting ceramics as both artistic expression and cultural knowledge.

PANEL CONTRIBUTIONS

Rethinking Artistic and Cultural Impact: Where We Are and Where We Are Headed

Contributions:

Arts-Based Evaluations in the Arts and Cultural Sector: A Pilot Study of Coventry Biennial
Dr. Francesco Chiaravalloti, University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)

Advancing European Capital of Culture evaluation through impact analysis: The case of SROI Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024
Mr. Stefan Schöggl, Vienna University of Economics and Business (Austria)

From traditional survey research to societal impact analysis: Public libraries and museums as “Save havens” in local communities
Mr. Francis De Bonnaire, Sento Group (Belgium)
Prof. Annick Schramme, University of Antwerp (Belgium)

Narratives, Numbers, and Nuance: Sensemaking in Artistic and Cultural Impact Research
Prof. Martin Piber, University of Innsbruck (Austria)

Abstract

Currently, arts and cultural impact research is at the crossroads of historical, conceptual, and methodological debates. It has evolved into multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary fields like reflective individuals, civic engagement, urban/regional regeneration, social cohesion, economic benefits, place identity, and wellbeing across diverse stakeholders.

A key development is a reframing of the instrumental versus intrinsic value (Holden 2005), revealing a long lineage of claims about the transformative power of arts and culture and arguing for more nuanced taxonomies of impact rather than simplistic binaries (Belfiore, 2007). This approach also challenges the “cult of the measurable” (ibid., 136) in evaluation practice and evidence-based cultural policies and calls for a language that acknowledges complexity and enhances an in-depth-understanding of specific contexts (Chiaravalloti and Piber 2011) beyond seemingly precise performance indicators. On the other hand, parallel advances in the development of cultural performance measurement frameworks (like the recent development of the UNESCO cultural indicators at Mondiacult, October 2025) and sophisticated metrics and indicators emphasize the importance of quantitative frameworks and the need to improve data architectures.

The discussion will draw on lessons from evaluations of European Capitals of Culture (ECoC): Comparative reviews and meta-studies open discussions of cross-city-learnings; place-based and ecosystem perspectives foreground territorial specificities and cultural spillovers; the Social Return on Investment (SROI, Schöggl et al., 2025) clarifies various dimensions of stakeholder value; Theory of Change models highlight assumptions and cross-impacts; and recent innovations like Agent-Based Modelling (ABM) and People’s Juries (Monitor2024, 2026) connect simulation with deliberative judgments.

With transparency and understanding as guiding principles, the panel invites a dialogue on how rich qualitative accounts and carefully designed metrics and indicators can mutually verify and enrich each other. We will unpack the trade-offs, complementarities, and blind spots of various approaches, asking what kinds of knowledge, accountability, and policy action they enable or foreclose in specific institutional and community settings. And we will address the seminal question of comparability: How, and under what conditions (e.g. common taxonomies, standardized indicators, mixed-method approaches) can we compare artistic and cultural impacts, knowing that comparability may be partial and context-bound. Finally, the panel will also chart how the debate is evolving further - synthesizing emerging reflections, shared standards, and unresolved issues, and offer a forward-looking view of where the field is heading in theory, practice, and policy.

Rethinking Artistic and Cultural Impact: Where we are and where we are headed

Prof. Martin Piber
University of Innsbruck

Mr. Stefan Schöggl
Vienna University of Economics and Business

Prof. Annick Schramme
University of Antwerp

Dr. Francesco Chiaravalloti
University of Amsterdam

Abstract

Currently, arts and cultural impact research is at the crossroads of historical, conceptual, and methodological debates. It has evolved into multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary fields like reflective individuals, civic engagement, urban/regional regeneration, social cohesion, economic benefits, place identity, and wellbeing across diverse stakeholders.

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Parts of the Panel

I) Arts-Based Evaluations in the Arts and Cultural Sector: A Pilot Study of Coventry

Biennial (F.Chiaravalloti)

In a context of growing control of expenditures, publicly funded arts organisations are asked to account for the value they create. Arts management research has promptly reacted to this practical need by suggesting models and techniques of performance evaluation that have mainly been imported/inspired from the business sector. Francesco explores how an alternative strategy might

be employed to provide a contextual understanding of arts organisations. ‘Evaluative Performance’ is an innovative artistic research approach amalgamating arts practices and evaluation frameworks. Using the example of Coventry Biennial, the approach creates a much more direct, empathetic connection between the audience and the lived experience of interviewees.

II) Advancing European Capital of Culture evaluation through impact analysis: The case

of SROI Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024 (S.Schöggl)

The contribution proposes a shift in the evaluation of European Capitals of Culture (ECoC) towards a stakeholder-centred impact analysis model. Using the example of the evaluation of an ECoC-project, which employed a Social Return on Investment analysis Stefan demonstrates how social impact can be identified, quantified, and valued monetarily (Schöggl et al., 2025). The more integrated, multi-layered, stepwise approach to impact analysis can enrich the assessment of ECoC projects by systematically mapping and engaging with diverse stakeholder groups. Furthermore, its stakeholder focus strengthens the legitimacy by surfacing heterogeneous impacts (e.g. inclusion, community cohesion and skills development) and potential risks at micro and meso levels.

III) From traditional survey research to societal impact analysis: Public libraries and

museums as “Save havens” in local communities (A.Schramme)

Sentobib/Sentomus is a large-scale international audience research project designed to help libraries and museums to better understand their societal impact. The study uses a standardized survey methodology combining a bottom-up approach with benchmarking to ensure robust results. A meta-analysis is executed in the different countries: what are relevant trends and issues from a country/European perspective? Searching for a common “impact language” while safeguarding a realistic practical implementation, is a challenge that was addressed by using the Danish Impact Compass Model. The combination of micro data analysis, benchmarking, and a meta-analysis is an excellent ground for a reflection from a European perspective.

IV) Narratives, Numbers, and Nuance: Sensemaking in Artistic and Cultural Impact

Research (M.Piber)

The contribution understands various impact-evaluations of ECoC-projects as learning fields in which several challenges between policy demands and artistic/cultural practice and between complexity, comparability and contextuality will be investigated and iteratively refined. However, the omnipresence of evaluation (Furubo/Stame 2018) prompts the question of what various frameworks reveal, which blind spots they surface, and how their inherent trade-offs can be navigated. Lessons from meta-studies and calculative approaches (e.g. SROI/ABM) are contrasted and the role of narratives and experimental designs analysed. And: What might impact research learn from art - about awareness, ambiguity, and care? And how that can sharpen rigor and relevance? Hereby, artistic practice is understood not only as an object of evaluation but as its language, medium, and method.

Keywords

Evaluation, Cultural Impact, Social Impact Research; European Capitals of Culture; Public Libraries

Impact and Engagement

The panel will create learnings and benefits for researchers, cultural managers, policymakers and funders. Among otherers, we will outline and reflect on (co-created) evaluation designs, practical toolkits/guidelines (e.g., taxonomies of impact, SROI/ToC/ABM approaches, artistic evaluation

frameworks) - aligning qualitative accounts with more or less standardized indicator frameworks. Early uptakes include the application of the aforementioned methodologies in ECoC-evlaluations, Sentomus, Sentolib and the Coventry Biennial.

Especially, we address the potential of artistic and arts-based evaluations balancing aesthetic values, expert judgment with selective, context-sensitive evidence. Herewith we open the door for a more qualitative discussion rather than relying primarily on a numeric reach. We discuss cultural impact in its specific local contexts and ecosystems, which are key elements in understanding cultural change in the short and in the long run.

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Biography - Francesco Chiaravalloti

Dr Francesco Chiaravalloti is Tenured Assistant Professor of Cultural Policy and Management, Director of the Bachelor Programme in Cultural Studies and Co-Chair of the research group Artistic Knowing: Research in and on Art and Cultural Practices. The focus of his work as a teacher and as a researcher is on the enhancement of the appreciation of arts, culture, and creativity by individuals, organizations, and communities. Francesco is member of the Social Sciences and

Humanities (SSH) roundtable Cultural Sciences & Linguistics of the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and of the Cultural Policy working group at the Boekmanstichting. He is currently principal investigator in the MSCA-RISE project SPACEX (Spatial Practices in Art and ArChitecture for Empathetic EXchange) and

evaluator of the Creative Europe project OperaVision Next Generation, a project led by Opera Europa and 26 opera companies from 14 countries to bring opera and musical theatre to audiences worldwide digitally.

Biography - Martin Piber

Martin Piber is professor at the University of Innsbruck. He is and has been teaching in several bachelor, master-, PhD-, and further education programs (e.g. Austria, France, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Sweden. His research and his publications focus on the management and the evaluation of cultural organizations, the practices and theory of strategizing & place branding, the understanding of impact and performance measurement, the relevance of culture for society, aesthetics, and business ethics. Since 2016 he is scientific director of the executive MBA program at Bregenz/Austria. He was/is visiting professor at a couple of universities in Europe and Australia. His background includes change projects for several private and public organizations – especially in the fields of culture and the arts. The most current research addresses the evaluation, impact, management, and organization of European Capitals of Culture. Martin is member of the reference group for the ECoC in Bodø 2024.

Biography - Stefan Schöggl

Stefan Schöggl is a researcher at the Center for Nonprofit Organizations and Social Impact at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. He primarily works on impact analyses and SROI analyses in various thematic areas, the cultural sector being one of them, as well as in the fields of social businesses and sustainability. He was the main evaluator of the European Capital of Culture Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024.

Biography - Annick Schramme

Annick Schramme is a professor at the University of Antwerp and academic in charge of the master's program in Cultural Management at the University of Antwerp. Since 2018, she leads the Leadership in Culture program at the Antwerp Management School in collaboration with the University of Utrecht. She is also active in various boards and advisory councils in the broad cultural sector in Flanders and the Netherlands. For example, she has chaired the SARC (the Strategic Advisory Council on Culture, Youth, Sports and Media) of the Flemish government since

2020. In 2020, she set up a working group within the Cultural Management Fund of the University

of Antwerp, which issued the Culture Good Governance Code. This is guiding the cultural sector in Flanders. Since 2024, she has also held the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Entrepreneurship and Policy.

PANEL CONTRIBUTIONS

Cultural Sustainability Impact Evaluation and Reporting

Contributions:

An Ecosystem Approach to Cultural Public Value and Cultural Sustainability Impact Reporting
Prof. Jerry C Y LIU, National Taiwan University of Arts (Taiwan)

Articulating Value through a Cultural Sustainability Impact Assessment Framework: A Case Study of the National Museum of History, Taiwan
Dr. Wen-Ling Lin, Board Member of the Chinese Association of Museums (Taiwan), Board Member of the Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies (Taiwan)

The Impact Assessment as a Tool for Public Governance and Advocacy in Cultural Heritage Institutions: The SoPHIA Model
Dr. Maria Antonietta Cipriano, Roma Tre University (Italy)
Prof. Paola Demartini, Roma Tre University (Italy)
Prof. Michela Marchiori, Roma Tre University (Italy)

Measuring Corporate Contributions to Cultural Sustainability: Towards New Indicators for Sustainability Reporting Frameworks
Prof. Elena Borin, UniPegaso (Italy)
Dr. Martina Manzo, IUL Digital University (Italy)
Dr. Alfredo Valeri, Associazione Civita (Italy)

Abstract

The panel addresses a central challenge currently emerging in cultural policy and cultural management research: how to conceptualize, measure, and report the multidimensional contribution of culture to sustainable development within increasingly complex cultural and creative ecosystems. In line with the ENCATC conference call for papers, the panel aims at addressing the call sub-topic “green policies, ecological transition, and the growing influence of sustainability frameworks on cultural governance and organizational practices”. Thus, the panel explores how cultural institutions, policymakers, and ecosystem actors are developing new approaches to evaluating and communicating culture’s contribution to sustainability.

The panel intentionally follows a progressive analytical structure, moving from conceptual reflections on cultural ecosystems and public value to applied impact assessment frameworks and, finally, to emerging practices in sustainability reporting involving private-sector actors. In doing so, it offers complementary perspectives from both Asian and European cultural governance contexts, highlighting how different institutional environments are experimenting with new models of cultural sustainability evaluation, accountability, and strategic governance.

The panel presents four papers:

- An Ecosystem Approach to Cultural Public Value and Cultural Sustainability Impact Reporting, by J. Liu

- Articulating Value through a Cultural Sustainability Impact Assessment Framework: A Case Study of the National Museum of History, Taiwan, by Wen-Ling Lin
- The Impact Assessment as a Tool for Public Governance and Advocacy in Cultural Heritage Institutions: The SoPHIA Model, by M.A. Cipriano, P. Demartini and M. Marchiori
- Measuring Corporate Contributions to Cultural Sustainability: Towards New Indicators for Sustainability Reporting Frameworks, by E. Borin, M. Manzo, and A. Valeri.

The first paper by Jerry Liu, introduces an ecosystem-based theoretical perspective that reframes cultural governance through the lens of public value creation and sustainability-oriented ecosystem thinking. By conceptualizing cultural ecosystems as networks of interdependent actors co-creating value across governance, economic, social, and environmental domains, the study highlights the need for evaluation and reporting frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of cultural value beyond traditional performance metrics.

Building on this conceptual foundation, the subsequent papers explore the practical implementation of multidimensional impact assessment tools in cultural institutions. Two contributions present empirical applications of impact assessment frameworks in museums and cultural heritage institutions in Taiwan (W.L. Lin) and Italy (Cipriano, Demartini, Marchiori), demonstrating how stakeholder-based evaluation processes can strengthen institutional accountability, clarify strategic positioning, and align cultural organizations with broader sustainability and policy objectives.

The final paper (Borin, Manzo, Valeri) extends the discussion to the broader cultural ecosystem by examining the role of corporate actors in supporting cultural sustainability. It highlights the growing engagement of private companies in cultural production, heritage preservation, and artistic development, while emphasizing the current lack of adequate indicators within mainstream sustainability reporting frameworks.

Taken together, the panel contributes to ongoing debates on how sustainability frameworks are reshaping governance, accountability, and reporting practices in the cultural and creative sector, and how more robust evaluation approaches can help unlock the full potential of culture in sustainable development strategies.

Impact Assessment and Institutional identity in Cultural Heritage Governance: The SoPHIA Method

Dr. Maria Antonietta Cipriano
Roma Tre University

Prof. Paola Demartini
Roma Tre University

Prof. Michela Marchiori
Roma Tre University

Abstract:

Cultural heritage is recognised as a pillar of sustainable development, requiring public cultural institutions to generate multidimensional value. In publicly funded organisations, Impact Assessment (IA) increasingly functions as a mechanism of public governance rather than a simple control management tool, with scholars questioning reliance on purely quantitative indicators. This paper explores IA as a tool for strategic identity construction and public governance, applying the multidimensional SoPHIA framework to the Forma Urbis Museum within the Celio Archaeological Park in Rome, a newly established institution lacking consolidated strategic plans. The methodology employs a participatory approach based on semi-structured interviews with institutional leadership. Findings show that the participatory process enabled public officers to articulate, for the first time, a coherent set of institutional objectives and a shared strategic identity for the museum activity.

Keywords: Cultural Policy; Impact Assessment; Sustainable Development; Strategic Planning; SoPHIA Method

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, cultural heritage has progressively moved to the centre of debates on sustainable development, public value creation, and territorial governance. Heritage is increasingly recognised as an active driver of social innovation and cohesion, local identity and inclusive growth (Sacco et al., 2009; Nurse, 2006), a shift consolidated through international policy frameworks and scholarly contributions (de Vries, 2020) calling for new tools capable to capture the multidimensional value generated by cultural institutions and interventions. Major international organisations, including UNESCO, the United Nations and the Council of Europe, now position cultural heritage as a strategic pillar of sustainable development, contributing to community resilience, inclusion and identity (UNESCO, 2018; United Nations, 2015; Faro Convention, 2005).

Within this landscape, public cultural institutions face growing and often contradictory expectations: demonstrating their contribution to societal goals — social equity, territorial regeneration, environmental sustainability — in ways that extend well beyond traditional dimensions and metrics, such as visitor numbers or financial performance. Standardised quantitative metrics prove inadequate to capture the relational dynamics of cultural value creation (Chiaravalloti, 2014; Labaronne & Piber, 2020). This tension is particularly acute for institutions simultaneously expected to act as cultural agents, governance actors, and policy instruments — as is the case for State museums in Italy (Solima, 2022).

Impact Assessment (IA) has emerged as a promising but underexploited instrument. Despite growing demand driven by EU funding requirements and accountability frameworks for cultural organisations (Borin et al., 2025), IA is frequently perceived as a technical, externally imposed requirement rather than an internal governance mechanism (Chirieleison, 1999; de Vries, 2020). This can be defined an “evaluation paradox” in which organisations are pressured to measure impact for both internal

management and external communication toward policymakers and funders, without the resources to do so meaningfully.

In publicly funded organisations, IA operates as a core mechanism of public accountability, shaping the narratives through which institutions justify their existence, negotiate resources, and articulate their contribution to collective welfare (Moore, 1995; Meynhardt, 2009). Translating multidimensional cultural value into policy-relevant language is, therefore, a governance practise as much as an evaluative one — what Holden (2006) describes as the foundation of institutional legitimacy. Yet, as Holden (2004) observes, the relationship between cultural professionals and policymakers' risks becoming self-referential when evaluation merely satisfies public funding formal requirements. In Italy, despite the managerial autonomy introduced by the 2014 Franceschini reform (Alfano et al., 2023; Bonini Baraldi et al, 2023), public cultural institutions still rarely develop a strategic consciousness (Moore et al., 2026) and even more rarely integrate evaluation practices into strategic processes. Moreover, new museums and smaller institutions often lack an institutional identity that Young (2001), studying nonprofit organisations, identifies as being central, distinctive, enduring, and with high implications for organisations’ strategy and infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, the present paper explores the potential of IA to work as a tool both for public governance accountability and for raising institutional identity in newly cultural heritage institutions. The study applies the SoPHIA (Social Platform for Holistic Heritage Impact Assessment) framework (Baioni et al., 2021) — developed within a Horizon 2020 research project — to a case study, the Forma Urbis Museum within the Celio Archaeological Park in Rome, a recently established public institution lacking formalised strategic planning documents, and therefore an excellent context for examining AI’s dual potential.

The paper is guided by two research questions:

(i) How can a holistic and participatory *impact assessment* framework contribute to the construction of institutional identity in newly established cultural organisations? *(ii)* To what extent can impact assessment support public accountability and governance alignment in cultural heritage institutions?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the literature on cultural governance, public value, and impact assessment, arguing that IA — when grounded in a holistic and participatory framework — can act as a catalyst for institutional legitimacy, strategic coherence, and sustainable public value creation.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The SoPHIA Framework: Conceptual Foundations

The SoPHIA (Social Platform for Holistic Heritage Impact Assessment) framework was developed to address persistent limitations of conventional evaluation approaches in the cultural heritage sector (H2020 SoPHIA, EU; Baioni et al., 2021). SoPHIA sought to create a holistic assessment model for measuring the impact of interventions on cultural heritage, engaging researchers, cultural managers, and policymakers in a collaborative platform aimed at debating and refining conceptual and methodological tools. Conventional evaluation models, grounded in mono-dimensional and ex post logics, tend to privilege easily quantifiable indicators — visitor numbers, revenue from admissions — overlooking complex and interdependent forms of value (Chiaravalloti & Piber, 2011; Zan et al., 2000). Unlike traditional assessment methods, SoPHIA integrates diverse impacts across social, economic, environmental, and cultural domains within a participatory and longitudinal framework (Marchiori et al., 2024).

Rather than proposing a prescriptive model, SoPHIA offers a flexible shared analytical vision adaptable to different contexts, scales, and stages of intervention (Marchiori et al., 2024). The European Commission's Transformation call explicitly encouraged a shift from a logic of expenditure justification to a logic of impact quality — from "why fund culture" to "what effects do cultural interventions generate, for whom, and over time". SoPHIA responds to this mandate by reframing IA as a tool for understanding the transformative capacity of heritage interventions, rather than as a purely technical exercise of measurement.

At its core, SoPHIA is structured around three interdependent axes: People, Time, and Domains (Marchiori et al., 2024; See Figure 1). The People axis places stakeholders at the centre of the evaluation process and are treated as active contributors to the construction of meaning and objectives. The Time axis introduces a longitudinal perspective, distinguishing between ex-ante, ongoing, and ex-post phases. The ex-ante phase plays a strategic role in clarifying objectives and anticipating effects (Marchiori et al., 2024). The Domains axis impact across six thematic areas and twenty-eight sub-themes, encompassing cultural, social, economic, environmental, governance, and well-being dimensions. Domains are conceived to be adapted to each intervention’s context.

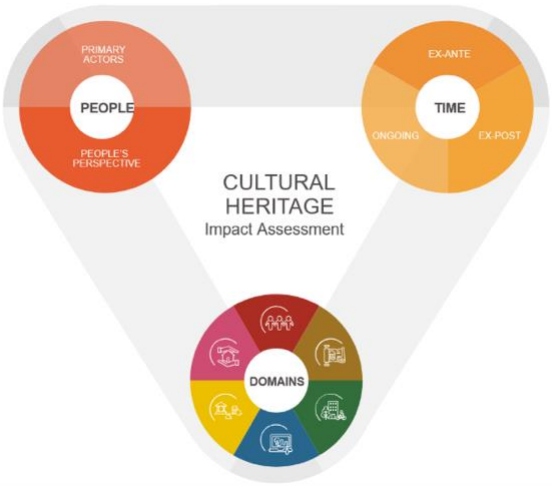


Figure 1: The SoPHIA model. Source: Marchiori et al., 2024 (p. 20)

2.2 Impact Assessment as a Tool for Public Governance

Beyond its evaluative function, IA carries significance for public governance. In publicly funded organisations, how value is measured is inseparable from how it is communicated and legitimised to policymakers and funders. Moore (1995) argued that managerial success in the public sector depends on reshaping institutional activity in ways the public can recognise as valuable. Meynhardt (2009) framed public value as existing only in the relationship between an organisation and those who judge it — meaning institutional worth must be communicated, not merely demonstrated.

Weinberg and Lewis (2009) similarly contend that strategic failure in public sector organisations occurs when institutional goals fail to mirror community expectations, reinforcing the view that public value must be actively constructed and articulated rather than assumed

Holden (2006) describes a long-standing crisis of legitimacy in the cultural sector, where cultural professionals have spent decades satisfying funders' criteria while politicians' and the public's concerns rarely coincide. Dahler-Larsen (2012) argues that evaluation is a constitutive social practice, shaped by — and shaping — the legitimacy demands of the organisational and societal context in which it is embedded.

Within cultural management specifically, Vermeulen and Maas (2020) offer a more constructive reading: impact measurement in cultural organisation serves a dual function, demonstrating achievement to

funders while generating internal lessons — a function close to what SoPHIA is built to do.

Strategic consciousness, in this context, is the capacity to turn impact evidence into a narrative that influences resources allocation and institutional perception (Holden, 2006; Vermeulen & Maas, 2020). This dimension could be particularly salient in Italy, where the 2014 Franceschini reform granted scientific, financial, accounting, and organisational autonomy to 32 state museums, redefining the relationship between central administration and individual institutions (Bonini Baraldi, 2023; Bertacchini et al., 2023). Yet, despite the autonomy introduced by the reform, the integration of impact assessment into strategic planning processes remains an underdeveloped dimension of museum governance, with strategic design in cultural organisations still frequently characterised by emergency-driven and improvisational approaches rather than structured, evidence-based planning (Argano, 2025). In contexts where formal strategic frameworks are absent or embryonic, IA can serve not only as an evaluation tool but as a catalyst for the construction of institutional identity and the negotiation of public legitimacy (Moore, 1995; Holden, 2006; Vermeulen & Maas, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and methodological approach

The research adopts a qualitative (Yin, 2015) and participatory approach (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), consistent with the epistemological assumptions of SoPHIA. Rather than conceiving IA as a separated assessment exercise made by experts, the study is configured as a research-intervention, in which evaluation becomes integral to organisational reflection and institutional legitimation (Marchiori et al., 2024). This approach is particularly suited when objectives and expected impacts are not yet formalised and must be progressively articulated through interaction between researchers and institutional actors. The qualitative design responds to the exploratory nature of the RQs and the need to capture meanings, perceptions, and intentions not reducible to standardised quantitative indicators.

3.2 Case selection

Forma Urbis Museum and Celio Archaeological Park were selected for their contextual, organisational, and governance- related characteristics (Demartini et al., 2024), embedded in a historically dense urban context with a complex stakeholder network (Cipriano & Demartini, 2025a, 2025b). The Museum's recent institutionalisation implies the absence of consolidated strategic documents — rather than a limitation, this constitutes an analytical opportunity: it allows IA to function as a generative tool for awareness and reflection rather than a mechanism for evaluating pre-defined objectives or compliance.

3.3 Application of SoPHIA

The application of the SoPHIA framework followed the methodological guidance provided by the SoPHIA Toolkit (SoPHIA Consortium, 2021), requiring explicit, context-sensitive choices along the three axes. These choices were not treated as purely technical decisions, but as substantive moments of strategic reflection.

For People, three semi-structured interviews with the museum's public officers reconstructed implicit objectives, activities, and intended beneficiaries; external stakeholders were intentionally excluded at this stage, to first consolidate an internally coherent framework.

For Time, the analysis distinguished between activities in progress and actions planned. Emphasis was placed on the ex- ante dimension, using impact assessment to anticipate expected outcomes, identify potential risks and trade-offs, and verify the coherence between strategic intentions and operational choices — a coherence that public sector accountability literature identifies as a precondition for credible performance reporting.

For Domains, the research team worked collaboratively with institutional actors to identify the domains most relevant to the specific objectives and context. This process involved mapping each identified activity onto the selected domains and sub-themes, with attention to cross-cutting effects, synergies, and possible unintended consequences.

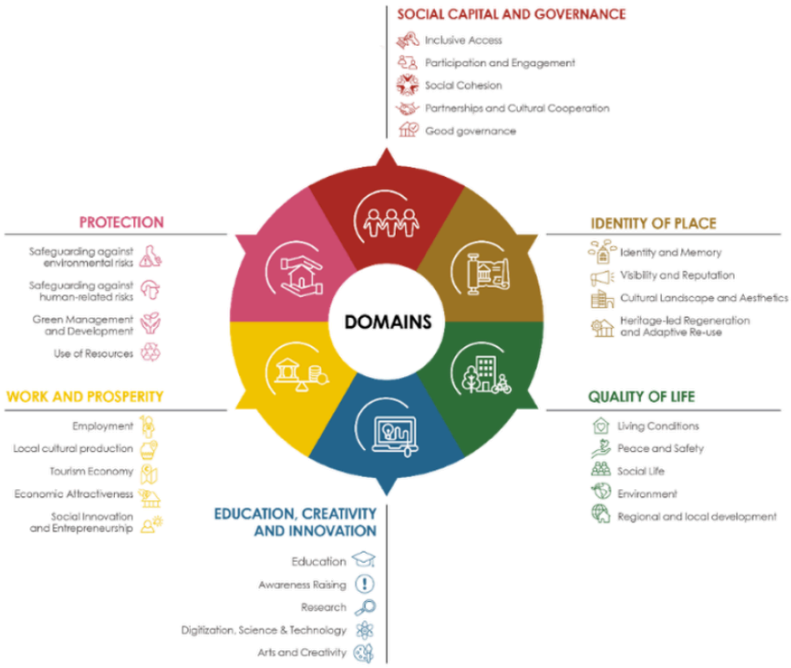


Figure 2. Themes and sub-themes of SoPHIA method. Source: Marchiori et al., 2024 (p. 21)

3.4 Data collection and analytical process

Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews, supported by documentary analysis. The interview guide operationalised the SoPHIA framework, aligning questions to selected domains and sub-themes, prompting reflection not only on what the institution does but why and with what expected impact.

Results were synthesised into an impact map linking objectives, activities, beneficiaries, and domains of impact, subsequently discussed and validated with the public officers. This iterative process reinforced the participatory nature of the evaluation and contributed to the emergence of a shared strategic narrative — consistent with the dual function of impact measurement (Vermeulen & Maas, 2020).

4. Findings: impact assessment as a catalyst for planning

The application of the SoPHIA framework to Forma Urbis Museum generated results extending beyond the identification of expected impacts. Documentation of the museum's objectives was found to be largely absent; three semi-structured interviews with the museum's public officers therefore reconstructed the institution's mission, objectives, and intended beneficiaries.

4.1 Explicit articulation of objectives

The Activities — implemented, ongoing, or planned — were analysed to determine promoters, objectives, and beneficiaries; each general objective was then articulated into specific objectives achievable through instrumental actions. This produced a more coherent strategic narrative, defining Forma Urbis not only as a site for preservation but as a platform for knowledge production and territorial engagement — shifting reasoning from "what we do" to "why we do it and for whom."

Four overarching objectives were identified:

- support and promotion of archaeological research;

- transmission of historical memory;

- conservation and enhancement of heritage;

- strengthening the relationship with the local neighbourhood.

4.2 Alignment between actions and impact domains

The impact map systematically connected institutional activities to selected impact domains and sub-themes of SoPHIA, revealing both strong alignment and previously unexamined gaps. Objectives were found predominantly distributed across four domains: Education and Creativity, Social Capital, Identity of Place, and Quality of Life.

The ex-ante analysis highlighted how some planned initiatives carried implicit expectations of social, educational, or territorial impact that were not yet supported by corresponding operational choices. Making these ambitions explicit allowed public officers to reflect on the adequacy of existing resources, partnerships, and governance arrangements. In this sense, impact assessment functioned as an anticipatory tool, enabling the institution to identify potential misalignments and adjust strategic intentions before implementation.

4.3 Impact assessment as a governance and accountability mechanism

The process produced something beyond a mere evaluation exercise. Through the interviews, public officers were guided to articulate, explicitly, what the institution was achieving through its activities — something they had not previously had reason or occasion to formalise.

This matters because it is precisely the kind of process that the literature on evaluation and legitimacy associates with institutional accountability. Vermeulen and Maas (2020) argue that impact assessment in cultural organisations supports external accountability and it generates lessons that improve internal management. Yet, through dialogue with the research team, the officers came to recognise more clearly the value of what they were already doing, connect individual activities to broader objectives and impact domains before communicating it externally.

At the same time, it is important to be precise about what this case does and does not show. Dahler-Larsen (2012) warns that evaluation can become a ritual that produces the appearance of accountability without being genuinely used for it. This is not the risk illustrated here: the process was deliberately designed as an internal sense-making exercise for the museum's officers, not as an externally oriented reporting exercise.

5. Discussion

To address the RQ1: How can a holistic and participatory *impact assessment* framework contribute to the construction of institutional identity in newly established cultural organisations?

The findings offer a well-supported answer. Through the interviews and the participatory mapping exercise, the museum's public officers were guided to articulate, for the first time in a structured form, the institution's mission, its general and specific objectives, and the beneficiaries of its activities. This is consistent with what the literature describes as a defining challenge for newly established cultural organisations: in the absence of consolidated strategic documents, roles, priorities, and institutional identity remain implicit and fragmented rather than codified in a shared narrative. The SoPHIA process addressed this gap directly, producing four explicit overarching objectives and a map connecting institutional activities to recognised domains of impact. In doing so, the framework functioned less as an evaluation tool in the traditional sense, and more as a structured method for collective sense-making —

consistent with Vermeulen and Maas's (2020) observation that impact assessment processes generate internal learning, independently of any external use of the results. Participatory IA, thus, served as a generative mechanism for institutional identity construction precisely where such identity would otherwise remain unarticulated.

To address the RQ2: To what extent can impact assessment support public accountability and governance alignment in cultural heritage institutions? The evidence indicates that IA supported governance alignment primarily by making explicit what had previously remained implicit: institutional objectives, the beneficiaries of specific activities, and the relationships between actions and expected outcomes. This is consistent with Weinberg and Lewis's (2009) argument that strategic failure in public sector organisations occurs when institutional goals fail to mirror community expectations or when activities generate no lasting public value — clarifying objectives and verifying their alignment with stakeholder expectations is precisely what the SoPHIA process accomplished in this case. Rather than functioning solely as a tool for accountability, the framework operated as an organizational device capable of structuring reflection, clarifying priorities, and supporting organisational objectives.

Taken together, these answers point to a more general implication. The two research questions address different stages of the same underlying process: RQ1 concerns what the SoPHIA application demonstrably achieved — a documented, internally coherent institutional identity, built through participatory dialogue — while RQ2 concerns what this achievement makes possible, namely accountability-ready evidence, without this study being able to confirm that such evidence was actually mobilised in an external governance relationship.

6. Conclusions and limitations

One of the most significant contributions of the SoPHIA framework lies in its capacity to reposition impact assessment within organizational governance and planning processes.

SoPHIA does not merely assess expected impacts; it actively supports institutions in articulating their mission, priorities, and strategic identity. By requiring organizations to make explicit connections between objectives, actions, stakeholders, and domains of impact, the framework fosters internal coherence and reflexivity. This is particularly valuable for newly established cultural institutions or for organizations lacking formal strategic documents, as the evaluation process itself becomes a space for collective sense-making and strategic construction.

At the same time, the findings highlight important limitations. First, the application of a holistic and participatory framework is resource-intensive, requiring time, expertise, and organizational commitment that may not be readily available in all contexts. Without adequate support, there is a risk that impact assessment becomes a formalistic exercise designed merely to satisfy funders. Moreover, the choice of indicators remains a delicate issue: quantitative metrics such as visitor counts are often insufficient to capture deeper forms of cultural and social value, and prioritising "what can be measured" over "what matters". These limitations do not undermine the value of the approach but point to the need for adaptive and context-sensitive applications.

By underlying how IA can support identity construction and strategic awareness, this study contributes to ongoing debates on public value in the cultural sector. The SoPHIA framework consents a multidimensional understanding of value that resonates with sustainability agendas. Impact assessment becomes a means of directing cultural organizations toward socially desirable outcomes, rather than merely measuring their performance.

In conclusion, the paper argues that the integration of impact assessment into planning may represent a path toward more sustainable, transparent, and socially responsive cultural organizations. Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, IA should be treated as a flexible and adaptive process tailored to institutional

capacities and contexts. When implemented thoughtfully, it aligns operational choices with societal goals, reinforces stakeholder trust, and supports the long-term sustainability of cultural institutions as active agents of development and innovation.

7. Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a gap in the management of publicly funded cultural heritage institutions: the absence of structured tools capable of linking organisation identity construction, impact assessment, and public accountability. By demonstrating how a participatory application of the SoPHIA framework can support public officers in articulating a coherent strategic identity, and how this process generates an account of institutional value compatible with public accountability requirements, the study offers a concrete starting point for cultural institutions facing similar conditions.

The findings are likely to be of direct relevance to museum directors and public officers in autonomous and semi- autonomous cultural institutions, particularly those operating without consolidated strategic plans; to policymakers and supervisory bodies responsible for evaluating the performance of publicly funded heritage organisations; and to practitioners and consultants involved in designing participatory evaluation processes in the cultural sector.

The likely pathway for uptake is twofold. Within academia, the study contributes to ongoing debates on governance in cultural heritage management and impact assessment, offering an empirical case that can inform further theoretical and comparative research. Beyond academia, the SoPHIA Toolkit on which this application is designed for direct use by cultural organisations, meaning the methodological approach described here is, in principle, replicable by other institutions with appropriate guidance and resources.

The expected change is a gradual shift in how publicly funded cultural institutions approach strategic planning and impact assessment: from fragmented, implicit understandings of institutional purpose to a participatory process that produces an explicit, shared strategic identity, embedded in language compatible with external accountability requirements.

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Biography - Maria Antonietta Cipriano

Maria Antonietta Cipriano holds a Doctor Europaeus in Markets, Firms and Consumers from Universita degli Studi Roma Tre, where her research focused on participatory governance models as mechanisms of value creation in urban cultural ecosystems. She was a Visiting Researcher at ESCP Business School Paris, Department of Entrepreneurship. Her work integrates qualitative and interdisciplinary approaches to examine how cultural organisations engage stakeholders and contribute to urban regeneration, with applied expertise in multidimensional cultural impact assessment. She has collaborated on the CHANGES research project, funded under Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, and with DTC Lazio as a researcher. She has presented at international conferences including EURAM, IFKAD, and ENCATC, and serves on the Editorial Office of Piccola Impresa/Small Business.

Biography - Paola Demartini

Paola Demartini is Full Professor of Business Administration at the University of Rome TRE. She is Responsible for the Governance and Innovation in Cultural Heritage (GICH) Lab and Principal Investigator of Next-Gen EU projects on CH management. She has published several peer reviewed articles in international academic journals.

Biography - Michela Marchiori

Michela Marchiori is Full Professor of Business Organization and Organizational Change at the Department of Business Administration, Roma Tre University. She is the director of the two-year, second level master’s programme “Economics and Management of Cultural Heritage”. She served as Scientific Coordinator of the European Horizon 2020 project SoPHIA- Social Platform for Holistic Heritage Impact Assessment (2020-2021).

An Ecosystem Approach to Cultural Public Value and Cultural Sustainability Impact Reporting

Jerry C Y Liu
National Taiwan University of Arts

Author Biography

Jerry C Y Liu is the Professor of Graduate School of Arts Management and Cultural Policy, and Dean of College of Humanities at the National Taiwan University of Arts. He is the Editor in Chief of the international journal of *Culture: Policy, Management, and Entrepreneurship.* Liu is the first President of Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies. He is invited as the jury member of the Cultural Policy and Management Research Award 2022-2026. Liu is the author and editor of *Cultural Policy and Governance in Taiwan: Culture, Sustainability, Ecosystem;* and *ReOrient: An East Asian Approach on Cultural Policy and Cultural Governance.* He is also the project organizer of "Cultural Sustainability Impact Reporting of the National History Museum in Taiwan", "Cultural Sustainability Impact for CCIs", and "Project of National Cultural Congress and Cultural White Paper" for the Ministry of Culture in Taiwan.

Introduction: The Rise of Ecosystem Approach in Cultural, Public Value and Governance

Amid the global rise of sustainability discourse, the concept of the cultural ecosystem (CE) has re-emerged as an influential framework for understanding the interrelationships among culture, governance, and sustainability. Originating in 19th century biology, ecology describes the relationships between living organisms and their environments.[1] Although ecological metaphors have increasingly been adopted within cultural governance research and practice, systematic analysis of their underlying value logic and governance implications remains relatively underdeveloped.

With some simplification, the evolution of public policy and public service management in the West may be understood as three successive paradigm shifts. These comprise the era of Public Administration (PA) from the late 19th century through the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of New Public Management (NPM) from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Since the early 2000s, New Public Governance (NPG) has sought to establish a more decentralised, participatory, pluralistic, partnership-based, and networked system of public policymaking, in which network governance provides the institutional form through which diverse actors establish dynamic and collaborative relationships (Rhodes, 1999; Osborne, 2010).

Research on cultural value has largely focused on the dialectical relationship between individual and collective intrinsic, instrumental, and institutional values across political, economic, social, artistic, and everyday-life dimensions (Holden, 2006; 2015; Crossick and Kasznska, 2016). While this perspective successfully highlights the distinctive qualities and critical significance of the arts and humanities, it has paid less attention to value co-creation among actors operating within public institutions and market mechanisms, as well as to the coordination and mediation of values across organisational, regulatory, and institutional levels of governance. Consequently, discussions of cultural value often remain weakly connected to practical governance concerns such as organisational performance, administrative efficiency, public trust, equity, legitimacy, and accountability.

Scholarship on public value within public administration—particularly the transition from NPM to NPG—provides a theoretical foundation for operationalising value creation. Mark H. Moore's theory of Creating Public Value (2000 [1995]), together with subsequent developments in public service ecosystem theory (Osborne, 2022), suggests value creation as a collaborative process involving multiple actors across interconnected governance systems. Applying this ecological perspective to culture, the cultural ecosystem (CE) is understood as an interdependent network of artists, cultural organisations,

[1] In his *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin (2017 [1859]) demonstrated that life evolves through dynamic processes of competition, interdependence, adaptation, reproduction, and transformation.

communities, institutions, and audiences, whose vitality depends upon diversity, interdependence, competition, mutual support, adaptation, and regeneration (Holden, 2005; 2015; Liu, 2016; Pekkarinen, 2025). The CE, in converse, enriches public governance by explaining how cultural, social, economic, and governance values are created, negotiated, transformed, and diffused across institutional domains. This article proposes an integrated analytical framework that brings together the cultural governance ecosystem (CGE), the public service ecosystem (PSE), and the natural–humanistic ecosystem through a shared logic of value creation, mediation, and sustainability. The framework then seeks its application to the cultural sustainability impact (CSI) reporting system.

Public Value and Governance

Moore (2000 [1995]) argues that the primary responsibility of public managers is to create value for society through the effective management of public organisations. If the purpose of private-sector management is the creation of private value, then the central purpose of public-sector management is the creation of public value (PV). In this line, PV is fundamentally management-oriented, emphasising the evaluation of the activities, decisions, and outcomes generated by governmental organisations (Moore, 1994; 2000 [1995]; Nabatchi, 2018). However, PV attracted relatively limited scholarly attention until after 2008 (Sami et al., 2018). Earlier market-oriented approaches to public service tended to confine public value within the analytical framework of economic theory, privileging measurable performance indicators and quantitative evidence as the principal means of demonstrating value. Such an approach significantly constrained broader understandings of public value (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bozeman, 2007).

The inherent complexity of public administration lies precisely in balancing multiple and often competing forms of value. Yet scholarship has not produced a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of explaining public value as an integrated system, let alone reconciling the tensions among multiple public values within administrative practice and governance (Nabatchi, 2018; Brown, Cherney & Warner, 2021). Public value management differs fundamentally from management in the commercial sector. Unlike private markets, where transactions are organised through the exchange of commodities, governance concerns the deliberation, negotiation, and delivery of collectively shared values. As Gerry Stoker (2006) argues, legitimate public decisions require the participation and deliberation of all relevant stakeholders. Governance therefore derives its legitimacy not only from administrative efficiency but also from inclusive processes of collective judgement. PV acknowledges the importance of efficiency while simultaneously incorporating broader normative principles, including impartiality, equity, democracy, justice, and public legitimacy (Naidoo & Holtzhausen, 2020). For these reasons, public value has increasingly been regarded as one of the most significant theoretical alternatives to NPM within contemporary public policy and administration.

The Emergence of Public Service Ecosystem

The ecosystem concept has become increasingly influential in public administration, reflecting growing recognition of the interdependence among organisations, institutions, actors, and their environments. By integrating concepts such as business models, platforms, governance networks, supply chains, and value networks, the ecosystem perspective provides a new understanding of value creation (Adner, 2017). Emerging in the mid-2010s, the PSE approach synthesises service-dominant logic, market-oriented value creation. Accordingly, the PSE may be understood as an adaptive system in which actors, resources, technologies, and institutional arrangements are continuously integrated and reconfigured within specific contextual environments. Rather than viewing public value as a static outcome, the PSE conceptualises value as an emergent property arising from the ongoing interactions among actors whose relationships evolve through processes of adaptation, learning, and institutional change (Vargo et al., 2017; Trischler & Charles, 2019; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020).

Building upon this perspective, Trischler and Trischler (2021) distinguish three interconnected analytical levels within the PSE. At the macro level, institutional arrangements among diverse actors generate constellations of shared public value. At the meso level, public organisations, private enterprises, and service users interact within organisational contexts to co-create value. At the micro level, value is produced through individuals' lived experiences and everyday encounters with public services. Subsequently, Osborne and Powell (2022) further expanded this framework by introducing a sub-micro level, recognising that the personal beliefs, professional ethics, motivations, and value orientations of individual actors fundamentally shape the processes through which public value is created.

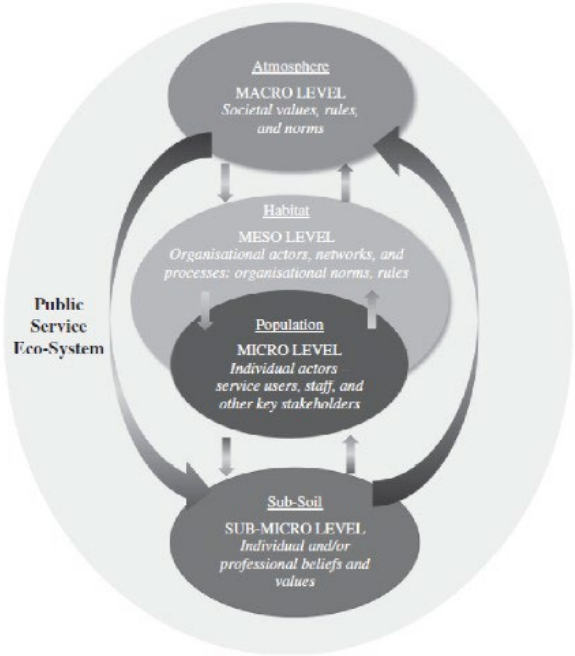


Figure 1: Public Service Ecosystem（Osborne and Powell, 2022, 639; reproduced by the author.）

The PSE framework (Figure 1) integrates four major strands of contemporary public administration theory. First, PV provides an overarching framework for understanding the broader societal impacts of public services. Second, collaborative governance (CG) examines the networks of organisations that collectively design and deliver public services within particular local contexts. Third, public service logic (PSL) focuses on how public services enable citizens to co-create value through their interactions with public organisations. Finally, behavioural public administration (BPA) investigates the psychological processes influencing both public servants and citizens engaged in public service delivery. Taken together, these perspectives establish the PSE as an analytical framework capable of explaining how multiple dimensions of value emerge through interactions among actors operating across different institutional levels. The PSE argues that the value of public services extends well beyond the achievement of predetermined performance indicators. Public managers must understand not only the organisational structures that deliver services but also the diverse values held by stakeholders, the mechanisms through which resources are integrated, and the collaborative processes through which value is continuously co-created and transformed (Osborne & Powell, 2022).

The transition from NPM to NPG has been instrumental in advancing this ecosystem perspective. Whereas NPM primarily emphasised managerial efficiency, organisational performance, and measurable outputs, NPG places greater emphasis on collaborative networks, procedural legitimacy, stakeholder participation, and the collective co-creation of public value (Kann-Rasmussen, 2024). Nevertheless, the PSE remains primarily concerned with governance institutions and service relationships. It has yet to fully incorporate

the symbolic value and ecological relationships among human beings, non-human species, cultural heritage, and natural environments in contemporary sustainability discourse. The limitations suggest the need to extend the ecosystem perspective beyond public administration towards a framework of cultural ecosystem of governance, in which public value, cultural value, and ecological value are understood as mutually constitutive dimensions of sustainable governance.

The Convergence of Cultural Ecosystem and Cultural Sustainability

The concept of cultural ecology has existed within anthropology since the 1950s, where it was originally employed to examine the adaptive relationships between human societies and their biological, environmental, and climatic surroundings. [2] During the 1990s, scholars began to describe industries and organisations as ecosystems composed of multiple stakeholders connected through dynamic relationships of interdependence. Cultural ecosystems (CEs) are characterised by their emphasis on the co-creation of cultural value through collaboration among artists, organisations, communities, and audiences. John Knell (2007) introduced the notions of the arts and CE and the funding ecosystem, highlighting the interconnected relationships among cultural institutions, financial support mechanisms, and artistic production. Similarly, Markusen et al. (2011) conceptualised the CE as an interdependent network linking organisations, individuals, and places.

John Holden (2015) further argues that just as emergence precedes growth in ecological systems, cultural vitality develops through complex and interdependent networks of relationships. CEs simultaneously exhibit resilience and vulnerability; they become increasingly complex while also generating new forms of convergence and adaptation. Within this perspective, cultural resilience—the capacity of cultural communities to adapt, recover, and flourish in the face of uncertainty—constitutes a fundamental condition of cultural sustainability (Järvelä, 2023). Likewise, the long-term sustainability of cultural value depends upon maintaining the diversity and complexity of the ecosystem itself (De Bustos, 2009).

In the wake of the UN’s sustainable development agenda, scholars start to connect the concept of CE with cultural sustainability (CS). Within environmental thought, natural resources and cultural heritage are understood as finite and often irreversible forms of capital. Consequently, concepts such as stewardship, preservation, conservation, care, sustainability, intergenerational equity, and the precautionary principle have become central normative commitments within CS discourse (Throsby, 2001; Holden, 2004; Järvelä, 2023). More recently, Pekkarinen (2025) conceptualises CS through an ecosystem approach. Culture operates as a dynamic, multi-scalar ecosystem linking from artistic practice and cultural organisations at the micro level, through urban initiatives and local cultural policy at the meso level, to international and transnational cultural networks at the macro level. This ecosystem integrates culture, society, the economy, and the environment, recognising the interdependence of human and non-human actors. Cultural vitality and resilience emerge through ongoing adaptation, flexibility, recontextualisation, and the sustaining role of cultural diversity. Pyykkönen (2024) and Pekkarinen (2025) have both questioned the anthropocentric assumptions underlying much of the existing discourse on CEs and CS. Rather than positioning human beings as external managers of ecological systems, they argue that humans should be understood as integral components of interconnected living systems.

The CE and CS extend beyond the PSE by focusing not only on how institutions co-create public value but also on how cultural values emerge, circulate, compete, and transform across cultural, political, economic, social, and ecological domains. It shifts attention from governing organisations to governing meanings, identities, relationships, and values. Cultural values are continually negotiated, contested, diffused, and transformed among diverse actors across institutional contexts. Accordingly, the governance of CE is not merely about policy or resource allocation but also about the governance of

[2] Cultural ecology investigates how traditional knowledge systems and everyday practices enable societies to respond to environmental uncertainty and ecological change, while explaining the reciprocal processes through which culture and environment continuously shape one another (Sutton & Anderson, 2010; Head, 2010).

competing meaning, values, collective identities, negotiating public legitimacy, and alternative futures.

An Integrated Analytical Framework of Cultural Governance and Public Value Ecosystems

Existing PV scholarship has focused primarily on institutional governance, administrative performance, and democratic legitimacy, while paying comparatively less attention to the formation, transformation, and circulation of cultural values themselves. Cultural values are not simply outcomes of governance; they also shape the identities, ethical commitments, aesthetic sensibilities, collective memories, and symbolic meanings through which actors interpret and participate in public life. Accordingly, public value should not be understood merely as an institutional outcome produced through governance processes. Rather, it should be conceptualised as a dynamic process of value co-creation situated within broader cultural, social, economic, environmental, and governance ecosystems. Drawing on McGuigan's (2002; 2010) concept of the cultural public sphere, Liu argues that cultural governance centres on human agency, affect, reflexivity, and humanistic values. More recently, Liu has expanded this perspective to include CGE, CS, and the CSI reporting (Liu, 2022; 2024; Liu et al., 2026a; 2026b).

Liu’s (2018, 2026c) framework identifies six interrelated dimensions of cultural governance value or logic formation, each representing a distinct yet interconnected domain through which actors generate, negotiate, and transform value. They are: A. Primordial identity establishes the ontological foundations of culture through relationships with the body, ancestry, language, place, cultural memory, and the natural environment. B. Power relations shape cultural value through governance institutions, legal frameworks, organisational management, and public legitimacy. C. Competition of interests reflects the dynamic negotiation among economic, cultural, and social values across markets, resources, and stakeholder interactions. D. Public communication emphasises democratic participation, collaborative governance, media engagement, and value co-creation, transforming individual values into shared public values. E. Critical reflection provides the humanistic basis of governance through ethics, creativity, reflexivity, empathy, and respect for human dignity. Finally, F. everyday life serves as the arena in which cultural values are embodied, reproduced, and renewed through daily practices, lived experiences, and continuous transformation. The CGE links the intrinsic values of culture to broader political, economic, social, environmental, and institutional value systems. It positions the arts and humanities as the centre of value formation, establishing a dialectical relationship between cultural and public value while examining tensions among culture, power, interests, and institutions.

The transition from NPM to NPG, particularly through developments in PV and PSE research, provides important methodological resources for addressing these limitations. Within the cultural public service ecosystem, diverse forms of value interact across macro, meso, micro, and inner-micro levels, generating complex processes of value co-creation that extend well beyond conventional performance measurement. Accordingly, by integrating the value logics of **1. Public service ecosystem;** 2. Natural ecosystem, and 3. **Cultural governance ecosystem, we propose** a comprehensive Integrated Analytical Framework of the Cultural Governance and Public Value Ecosystems. Within this framework (Figure 2), culture is no longer treated as an isolated policy sector but as a cross-sectoral interface through which, I. Governance; II. Economic; III. Ecological; and IV. Societal values become interconnected. Consequently, cultural governance requires two complementary forms of integration: (1) Complex connectivity among diverse **domains and levels of culture, and (Z2) intersubjectivity of value and practice. Together these** constitute the cultural logic through which governance develops an internally open, reflexive, and self-correcting capacity capable of reconciling instrumental, humanistic, essential, and communicative rationality within a unified ecosystem of public value creation (McCarthy et al., 2004; Holden, 2015; Walmsley & Oliver 2011; Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Klain et al., 2017; Dunphy et al., 2020; Liu, 2022).

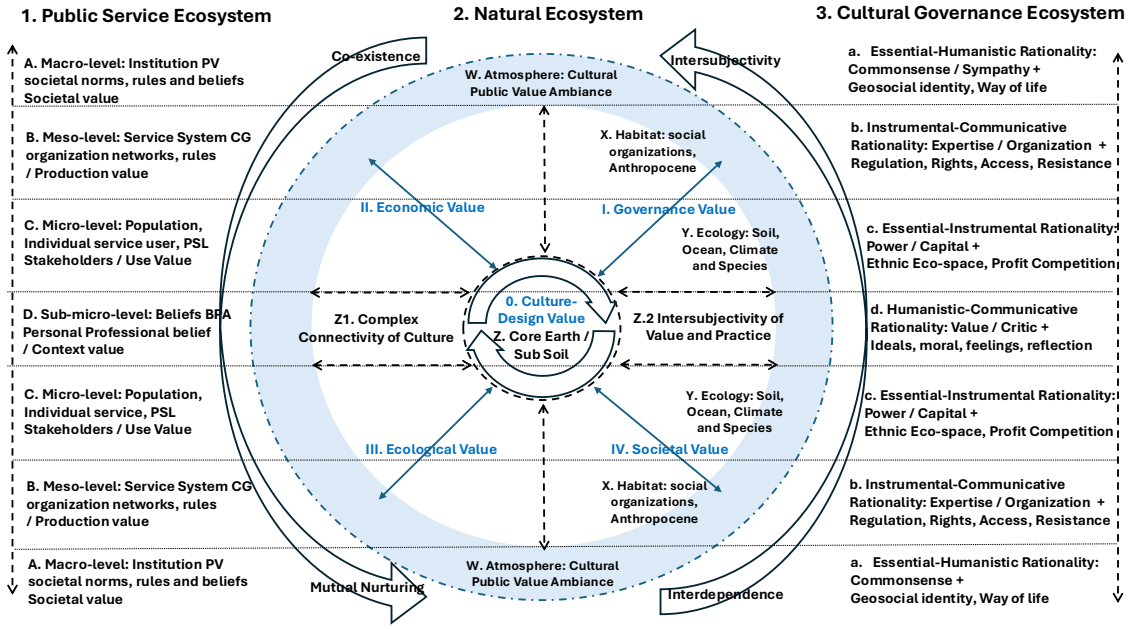


Figure 2: An Integrated Analytical Framework of the Cultural Governance and Public Value Ecosystems.

The framework restructures existing approaches to measuring cultural value and impact. Rather than treating intrinsic and instrumental values as competing alternatives, it views them as mutually reinforcing processes operating across multiple governance dimensions. Individual intrinsic values generated through participation accumulate and diffuse into broader collective values, which subsequently interact with governance (freedom, democracy, dialogue), economic development (growth, regeneration, prosperity), environmental sustainability (ecological balance, resilience, coexistence), and social cohesion (inclusion, mutual understanding, collective memory) value. The framework conceptualises governance, culture, and sustainability as mutually constitutive ecosystems, whose values continuously interact, negotiate, and reshape one another across multiple levels of governance.

CSI Reporting and the Interconversion of Values and Impacts

During the 2020s, CS has gradually shifted from a normative discourse towards an operational framework for cultural governance and institutional evaluation. In Taiwan, this transition has been driven not only by government initiatives but also by advocacy from civil society. Reflecting this development, the Ministry of Culture (2021) takes cultural and creative parks as regional cultural hubs that facilitate collaboration among practitioners, cultural organisations, and local communities, thereby generating synergistic effects through interconnected cultural spaces and networks. Parallel developments have emerged within Taiwan's cultural third sector. Several pioneering initiatives have been undertaken to develop Cultural Sustainability Impact Reports frameworks for cultural institutions, creative parks and the National Museum of History in Taiwan (Liu, 2024; Liu et al., 2026a; 2026b).

The initiatives align with the UN SDGs and UNESCO's growing emphasis on culture as an enabling dimension of sustainability. It also reflects the integration of CS into ESG, positioning culture (C) as the core for organisational resilience, innovation, and public value creation. The Taiwan Association of Cultural Policy Studies (TACPS) formally proposed a new C-ESG paradigm to the Financial Supervisory Commission (FSC) in July 2025 that culture should be taken as a transversal value embedded across the environmental, social, and governance components, which enables cultural considerations to become explicit rather than implicit within Taiwan's corporation sustainability evaluation and reporting framework. Within the Social (S) dimension, the TACPS suggested the following cultural examples,

Indicator	Concrete Examples
(S-1) International Human Rights	Incorporate cultural rights as articulated in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)* and Taiwan's *Cultural Basic Act*, including the right to participate in cultural life, the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples, freedom of artistic and cultural expression and creation, and the right of access to culture.
(S-16) Employee Well-being	Incorporate corporate initiatives promoting cultural well-being, including arts and culture-based social prescribing, as well as cultural counselling and support programmes addressing the needs of ageing populations and declining birth rates.
(S-20) Workplace Diversity	Incorporate corporate policies that foster inclusive workplaces by supporting linguistic diversity, sexual orientation diversity, and other dimensions of workforce inclusion and equal opportunity.
(S-3) Community Development	Incorporate corporate initiatives supporting community building, place-based revitalisation, culture-led community regeneration, participation in local cultural life, enhancement of cultural environments, social reconciliation, and peaceful social inclusion.
(S-4) National Cultural Development	Strengthen corporate investment, sponsorship, and partnership in the arts and culture, taking into account the proportion of financial resources allocated to cultural donations, sponsorship, and collaborative cultural initiatives.

The C-ESG framework also expands Environmental (E) indicators to include cultural heritage, cultural landscapes, human–environment relationships, local knowledge, and community resilience, recognising the inseparability of environmental and cultural sustainability. Governance (G) indicators emphasise transparent, diverse, and resilient organisational cultures that strengthen institutional adaptability and sustain public trust beyond compliance and risk management. The FSC welcomed the proposals and expressed support for incorporating illustrative cultural indicators into future revisions of the Corporate Governance Evaluation System. In 2026, the Taiwan Institute for Sustainable Energy, together with experts from the TACPS, launched the 2027 Taiwan Cultural Sustainability Award to promote CS and reporting.

Conclusion: New Frameworks for Synthesising Cultural Public Values

Although culture has not been formally recognised as a standalone SDG, post-2030 sustainability debates increasingly acknowledge it as an essential dimension of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2025). Throughout the 2020s, scholars and policymakers have sought frameworks that better integrate culture into sustainability governance while improving the assessment of cultural values and impacts. Cultural values do not simply generate cultural impacts; they are continually translated into governance legitimacy, economic vitality, environmental resilience, and social cohesion, while reciprocal influences from these domains simultaneously reshape cultural values themselves. Cultural impact is created in a dynamic ecosystem in which all values are continuously co-created, negotiated, transformed, and regenerated through interactions among diverse actors operating across multiple institutional levels. Existing evaluation tools—including KPIs, ESG, GRI, and SROI—have enhanced organisational accountability but remain inadequate for capturing the multidimensional and transformative nature of cultural value.

The CSI reporting seeks not merely to introduce new indicators but to establish a new evaluative logic capable of explaining how cultural values emerge, circulate, and generate long-term societal transformation (Liu, 2024). To address this challenge, this article proposes an Integrated Analytical Framework of the Cultural Governance and Public Value Ecosystems. Within it, culture is reconceptualised as a cross-sectoral interface linking governance, the economy, environment, and society. Cultural governance extends beyond cultural institutions and policy implementation. Rather, it

constitutes an adaptive process through which multiple forms of value are continuously mediated, translated, and integrated across institutional and societal boundaries. This provides an evidence-informed (European Commission, 2022a; 2022b) framework for evaluating and communicating cultural value through CSI reporting.

The CSI reporting represents an emerging governance methodology capable of connecting cultural values with broader systems of public value creation. Unlike conventional performance measurement frameworks that focus primarily on outputs and accountability, CSI reporting seeks to capture the dynamic processes through which values are created, transformed, transmitted, and accumulated across multiple institutional and societal contexts. Value interconversion becomes the defining characteristic of CSI reporting. Nevertheless, challenges remain. The central issue confronting CSI reporting is how methods and methodologies may adequately account for the complex interactions among different forms of value. Future research needs to develop approaches capable of synthesising the interwoven, multiplicative, and mutually transformative dynamics of value, while simultaneously recognising contradictory, competing, and offsetting effects (Skålén et al., 2024)) across the interconnected dimensions of cultural innovation, governance, the economy, the environment, and society.

Impact & Engagement

The article contributes to establishing a new evaluation framework of cultural values and impact reporting by developing an evidence-informed practice of evaluation through a combined approach of cultural ecosystem, cultural governance and sustainability. It intends to reach non-academic users such as sustainability reporting consulting companies and creating cultural sustainability guidelines for government. The framework has been applied to three cases of CSI Reporting in Taiwan. It may contribute to set policy standards at the local, national and international levels. The cultural governance and public value ecosystem offers not only a new conceptual framework for cultural policy research but also a new understanding of governance itself. Cultural governance becomes an evolving ecosystem in which diverse actors negotiate meanings, construct identities, create public value, and advance cultural sustainability, positioning culture as a central position of post-2030 sustainable development.

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“Rethinking the Legal Status of Artists in Bulgaria: Towards a New Framework for Decent Work in the Cultural and Creative Sectors”

Dr. Diana Andreeva-Popyordanova
UNWE/Observatory of Cultural Economics

Biography - Diana Andreeva -Popyordanova

Dr. Diana Andreeva - Popyordanova is director of the Observatory of Cultural Economics (OCE). She is a lecturer in the University of National and World Economy/UNWE/, Department "Media and Public Communications"- UNESCO Chair on Media and Information Literacy and Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development and National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. She is co-editor of the Bulgarian profile of cultural policy in the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Director of the Centre for Media Research, Audiovisual Policy and Cultural Industries „Bilyana Tomova” in UNWE, Sofia. She was part of the research team of the international Horizon 2020 CICERONE/Creative Industries Cultural Economy Production Network/ project. She is part of the focal point and representative of Sofia – creative city of film of UNESCO. Member of the Advisory board of FILM.EU - European University Alliance since 2026.

Abstract

This paper examines the fragmented legal status and precarious working conditions of artists in Bulgaria’s cultural sectors, arguing for a dedicated “status of the artist” law aligned with contemporary European policy debates on decent work in cultural and creative ecosystems. It situates Bulgaria within broader EU discourses on artists’ rights, social protection, and fair remuneration, and builds on the author’s participation in the CICERONE project on cultural ecosystems. The objectives are: (1) to map the current legal and employment regimes in the Bulgarian cultural and creative sectors; (2) to analyses employment and social security gaps for artists and cultural professionals, particularly freelancers; (3) to provide an economic analysis of employment trends in arts, entertainment, recreation and related creative industries (2008–2023); and (4) to formulate policy options for a new statutory framework for artists. Methodologically, the paper combines: (1) legal and policy analysis of existing European and Bulgarian regulations on employment, social insurance, and cultural institutions and organizations, including the use of permanent, fixed-term and civil-law contracts across cultural and creative sectors; (2) secondary statistical analysis of employment in arts. This is complemented

by insights from ecosystem-mapping work carried out within the CICERONE project, in which the author participated, and subsequent research on Bulgarian cultural industries, focusing on spatial concentration, enterprise structure, and the role of metropolitan hubs such as Sofia.

Introduction

European labour markets are undergoing a period of profound transformation, shaped by technological changes, demographic pressures and persistent labour shortages. In this context, artists and cultural professionals represent a particularly vulnerable group, because creative work is often carried out outside the standard model of continuous (full) employment on which classical labour and social law regimes are built. (European Commission, Open Method of Coordination, & European Expert Network on Culture, 2020; European Parliament, 2023a, 2023b)

In this context, it is even more important to discuss and analyse the status of the artist. It should not be understood solely as symbolic recognition of creative activity, but as a legislative toolbox through which the state defines who is an artist and who is a cultural professional, which forms of work and income in the sector are legitimate, how social protection is ensured in periods of interrupted employment, and

how mechanisms for professional sustainability are created throughout the entire life cycle of a career. In the conditions of digital platforms, algorithmic intermediation and AI-based creation, distribution and monetisation of cultural content, this issue becomes not only a social one, but also strategic for democratic access to cultural production and for the viability of cultural ecosystems.

The analyses shows three interlinked problem areas: (1) a dualized labour market where artists and cultural professionals in public cultural institutions are formally employed but increasingly dependent on fixed-term and project-based contracts, while freelancers rely on civil contracts with fragmented and often interrupted social insurance; (2) significant exposure to income volatility, seasonal work, and discontinuous contribution records, which weakens access to pensions, unemployment benefits, sick leave and maternity protection; and (3) limited coverage of collective agreements and minimum fee schedules, especially in municipal and independent cultural structures, despite the presence of unions and professional associations such as actors', music and dance unions. Building on CICERONE's ecosystem perspective (Tomova et al., 2023), the paper examines that Bulgaria needs an integrated status of the artist and cultural professional law that: recognizes hybrid careers and intermittent work; creates tailored social insurance regimes for artists and cultural workers with discontinuous incomes; labour and social policy in a coherent framework capable of sustaining resilient cultural ecosystems.

1. European and international regulatory framework

The contemporary debate on the status of the artist has deep international and European foundations. In 1980, UNESCO adopted the Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist, which formulates the principle that artistic activity has a specific professional character and requires policies that guarantee freedom of creation, professional recognition, social security and the material conditions for exercising artistic labour. (European Commission et al., 2020) Later, the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions complemented this framework by linking cultural policies with the need for viable conditions for cultural production and participation (UNESCO, 1980; UNESCO, 2022a).

At the level of the European Union, the issue has been developing particularly intensively in recent years. The materials emphasise the importance of this process in the period 2023–2026, as well as the link between the status of the artist, the 2019 DSM Directive and the broader debates on fair remuneration, contractual balance and protection in the digital environment. The DSM Directive stresses Article 18 on fair and proportionate remuneration, Article 19 on transparency, Article 20 on a contract adjustment mechanism, Article 21 on alternative dispute resolution and Article 22 on the right of revocation where a work is not being exploited. (European Parliament, 2023a, 2023b)

The Resolution of the European Parliament of 21 November 2023 explicitly raises the issue of the social and professional situation of artists, cross-border mobility, social security deficits, inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and digital transformations, as well as the need for coordinated European and national measures. (European Parliament, 2023a, 2023b; IETM, n.d.; On the Move, 2006)

It is especially important that the European framework no longer treats the status of the artist as a sectoral or marginal problem. It is seen as part of the broader discussion on the quality of work, fairness in the platform economy, protection against unfair contractual practices and the need for workers in the cultural sector to be covered by adequate systems of social protection regardless of the type of employment. Thus, the European debate provides strong legitimacy for national efforts towards specialised legislation. The problem of a specialised framework that defines and regulates the status of the artist in Bulgaria is becoming increasingly topical in the context of dynamic changes in the cultural sector, its growing economic contribution and the rapid development of the cultural and creative industries, as well as the emerging insecurity in the labour and social security conditions of cultural professionals in Bulgaria.

2. Theoretical framework: artist and cultural professional

When we try to define what constitutes the specificity of employees and self-employed workers in the cultural and creative sectors, we must bear in mind that this concerns a specificity of work which has no substitute on the labour market, where talent and work specificities are built up with difficulty and over long periods of time. In their research and analyses of the specificity of work, David Hesmondhalgh, as well as Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt, show how cultural labour is, on the one hand, based on creativity and, on the other,

characterised by insecurity, precarious working conditions, inequality and strong dependence on networks, intermediaries and platforms, large technology companies and producers. Approaching the artist as a cultural worker legitimises speaking about rights, fair pay, employment contracts, working time, collective bargaining and social protection, including within the framework of the new European cultural policies that insist on “fair remuneration of authors and creators” and better working conditions in the sector. (Standing, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2013)

Atypical employment in culture denotes forms of work outside the classic model of full-time, open-ended employment contracts – short-term and project engagements, seasonal work, part-time employment, self-employment and freelancing, often combined in a “portfolio” of incomes and roles. Within these regimes, the “precariat” emerges – a social group described by Guy Standing as people with unstable employment, insecure and fluctuating incomes, limited labour and social rights and a lack of a clear professional biography and long-term perspective. In the cultural and creative sector this type of employment is not an exception, but becomes a structural norm: project-based funding, oversupply of professionals and fierce competition, festival and seasonal rhythms, as well as dependence on calls, commissions and grants lead to discontinuity of work, frequent transitions between statuses and strong vulnerability in times of crisis. (Standing, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2013)

The practical consequences of this combination of atypical employment and precarisation are visible in the difficulty artists face in meeting standard criteria for social insurance, accumulating pension rights, accessing unemployment and sickness benefits, as well as bank credit, housing loans and rental contracts, all of which presuppose regular income and stable contracts. MONDIACULT 2022 places precisely “the economic and social rights of artists, cultural professionals and practitioners” and the vulnerability of cultural and creative ecosystems at the centre of the global debate, calling for legal and policy frameworks that improve their working conditions and status, including in the digital environment. The EU’s strategic framework for culture and the document “Culture Compass for Europe” further emphasise the insecure working conditions of nearly eight million people employed in the cultural and creative industries and envisage an “EU Artists’ Charter” that will formulate principles and commitments for fair conditions and bind recipients of European funding to them. (UNESCO, 2022a, 2022b, 2024, European Parliament, 2023a, 2023b; IETM, n.d.; On the Move, 2006)

3. Social risks and inequalities

The social risks for artists stem from a combination of poverty, highly unstable incomes, lack of continuous social insurance records, periods without health insurance and the practical absence of effective protection in cases of illness, maternity and unemployment. (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2020; OECD, 2025) Positions of professional organisations and public statements in Bulgaria emphasise that artists and performers often work with delayed fees, low-paid contracts or unclear social security status, which places

them in a persistently insecure material situation. At European level, it is recognised that the cultural and creative sectors are strongly marked by internal inequalities, including gender-based ones, with women creators having more limited access to resources, lower pay and weaker presence in leadership positions,

while intersectional factors increase the vulnerability of artists from ethnic minorities and marginalised groups. (European Commission et al., 2020; OECD, 2025)

A major problem is also the asymmetry in the bargaining position between the individual artist and the stronger players in the sector – producers, institutions, intermediaries and digital platforms, which have greater resources, market power and control over access to audiences and funding. This structural imbalance often leads to unfavourable contractual conditions, uneven pay and limited opportunities for artists to protect their work and rights, especially when they act as self-employed or freelancers. (European Commission et al., 2020; Youth Wiki, 2023)

4. Proposal for an Artists’ Status Act in Bulgaria based on key international documents

The Artists’ Status Act should clearly define its scope and the definitions used – how artists and cultural professionals will be categorised, divided into creators and performers, including those working in the technical sub-markets of industries that are involved in the creative process, BASED ON THE PHASES OF THE Global production network. This should also include those who, over the next five years, will be threatened by the introduction of artificial intelligence and automation of processes. Criteria for professional activity, employment regimes – employees, hired workers, self-employed persons – as well as definitions of atypical employment, fair remuneration and artistic freedom should be set out.

The main principles in the Artists’ Status Act should include: recognition of artists as cultural professionals, equal access to social protection, mechanisms to prevent discrimination and protection of creative independence and freedom. Next, clear criteria for the inclusion of artists and cultural professionals should be established – such as education, a specific and demonstrable number of artistic engagements, professional biography and membership in professional associations and trade unions. With regard to labour rights and working conditions, guarantees should be applied to the work of artists and cultural professionals – minimum remuneration by profession, industry and sub-market in the cultural and creative industries, and categorisation of labour through standardised contractual relations. To avoid exploitation, there should be strict regulation of working time, including for rehearsals, leave, standardised severance arrangements upon contract termination and the need for collective bargaining, including sectoral collective agreements by sub-markets and activities. The state should commit to supporting structures that provide free legal aid and protection for artists and cultural professionals.

The Artists’ Status Act should introduce access to social protection regardless of type of employment, project engagements, permanent or temporary contracts or self-employment and regardless of the number of

engagements, based on every phase of Global production network in CCI . For this reason, progressive social security contributions are needed, as well as participation by the state in cases of low income or when accumulating insurance periods from different projects or employers. Another problem that needs to be addressed is health insurance, which must be continuous between different projects, with minimum health contributions that are covered by the state under certain conditions. For different professions, specialised preventive care, specific health services and psychological support should be introduced. Pension insurance should be linked to the possibility of buying back insurance periods, differentiating retirement ages for different groups of artists and cultural professionals and guaranteeing a minimum pension after a certain length of service.

The Artists’ Status Act should apply specific regimes for unemployment and active employment policies in the cultural and creative industries that take into account the cyclical nature of cultural work: periods of intensive employment and pauses between projects. Conditions for access to benefits should be introduced (minimum number of working days/hours over a given period, level and duration of benefits, possibility of combining them with temporary or part-time employment). Active measures may include

training, qualification and re-qualification, career counselling, networking events and support for entrepreneurship in the cultural sector.

One important element to be introduced is a specialised tax regime and financial incentives for artists, including a tax-free minimum for artistic income, progressive taxation, recognition of professional expenses, deferred tax payment in situations of irregular income and reliefs for investments in training and technical equipment. The introduction of such financial and tax incentives will have a positive effect on bringing the cultural sector out of the shadow economy and reducing undeclared income.

The Artists' Status Act should include guarantees for fair and proportionate remuneration for each use of a work, including online exploitation. This includes rules on reporting obligations of users and platforms, intermediaries and producers towards artists and cultural professionals. One element that frequently arises in the audiovisual sphere and harms creators when contracts are concluded – and which should be regulated in the Act – is the right to review contracts in cases of manifestly unfair conditions and the prohibition of abusive clauses providing for full and gratuitous transfer of rights.

Within this legislative act, it is necessary to provide a special part devoted to vulnerable groups – women, young authors, members of minorities, people with disabilities, artists in less-developed regions and young artists (particularly at risk when entering the profession at a time of AI deployment and job displacement). This can be achieved through specialised funds, quotas in certain programmes and special tax and social security regimes. These instruments have not only a sectoral but also a broader social effect – reducing poverty and social exclusion. To ensure the representation of different professional fields in the cultural and creative industries, a specialised body should be created – a National Council for the Status of the Artist.

5. Economic and sustainability dimension of the Artists' Status Act in Bulgaria

Within the CICERONE project, the global production network approach has been used to conceptualise the ecosystem in the cultural and creative industries as five phases: creation, production, distribution, exchange and archiving, each involving specific groups of employed workers, freelancers, micro-enterprises, platforms and institutions, and understood as a sequence of interconnected value-creating stages with different actors and locations. This model offers a comprehensive way of capturing cultural employment and can be applied in a specialised Bulgarian Artists' Status Act, which should be drafted so as to recognise and regulate these different stages of the cultural value chain, ensuring that rights, social protection and contractual standards for employed and self-employed workers are consistently applied across creation, production, distribution, the broader infrastructures of exchange and the long-term archiving of cultural products. In this way, the law would reflect the real organisation of labour within CCI ecosystems and provide adequate protection both for employed workers and for the many self-employed and project-based professionals whose work sustains each stage of the network. (Tomova et al., 2023)

By adopting this approach, the cultural sector, including the cultural and creative industries, would increase employment in all its forms, despite the technological challenges facing the sector. Positive trends could become visible in increased foreign direct investment, higher labour productivity, growth in innovations and innovative production of cultural goods and services, as well as an increase in value added at factor cost where labour is a central factor.

5.1. Data on employment in Bulgaria and Sofia (2008- 2023)

The data on employment in Bulgaria show a sustained increase in jobs in the cultural and creative industries (CCI), with more than 115,552 people employed in 2023, up from 86,217 permanently employed. To a significant extent, this growth is driven by technical sub-markets within the CCI. At the same time, there is a clear trend towards over-concentration of employment in Sofia – around 70% of

those employed in 2023 – with the share rising from roughly 60% in 2008, i.e. an increase of about 10 percentage points.

Figure 1: Employment in Bulgaria and Sofia(2008-2023)



	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
BULGARIA	86217	90992	89758	88723	89690	93198	92449	94440	102654	103512	108021	110600	105977	112821	113274	115552
SOFIA	51217	54703	53907	54502	55304	57839	56948	58441	63424	64113	67416	68843	66464	71105	78372	81591

Source: National Statistical Institute, Structural business statistics, Observatory of Cultural Economics, Andreeva, Diana, 2008-2023

An important element of the specificity of cultural labour is the recognition that it is distributed across different phases of the global production network (GPN) – from creation through production and distribution to platform-based dissemination and archiving – and that each of these stages involves a different employment profile: employees, self-employed workers and freelancers. We must also take into account deepening territorial imbalances: the over-concentration of employment in Sofia compared to other regions and the need for legal mechanisms that enable decentralisation of CCI jobs, for example through fiscal and tax incentives and schemes that encourage stable, long-term employment for artists outside the capital.

6. Conclusion

From the above arguments we can conclude that the Artists' Status Act should be conceived as an interdisciplinary instrument located at the intersection of labour law, social policy, cultural policy and digital market regulation. This is precisely what makes it a timely policy tool, which seeks not only to prevent the negative impacts of technological change but to offer solutions for how legislative measures can make work more inclusive and sustainable by reflecting the specific nature of cultural activities in a new technological era.

In the Bulgarian context, we can formulate at least four general conclusions. First, artistic labour cannot be effectively regulated through models created for standard and continuous employment, because this leads to systemic deficits in social protection and in the recognition of the specific nature of work in the cultural and creative industries. Second, the recognition of the global production network (GPN) – from creation through production and distribution to platform based dissemination and archiving – and that each of these stages involves a different employment profile: employees, self employed workers and freelancers. Third, a well-protected status of the artist can function not only as a mechanism of protection but also of development: through training, mobility, professional visibility and longer-term sustainability of cultural employment.

Fourth, comparative European analysis shows that effective solutions are those that combine legal recognition with social security, fiscal and educational mechanisms rather than relying on a single measure and general labour legislation.

Impact & Engagement

The effects that the adoption of an Artists' Status Act would have include greater progress towards the global Sustainable Development Goals (decent work, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, peaceful and inclusive societies). Culture should be perceived not only as an “expense” but as an active factor in social cohesion, education and democratic principles in society. Recognising artists as a key factor for sustainable development legitimises the need for sectoral reform regarding specialised conditions and protection through concrete measures addressing cultural labour. At the same time, the adoption of specialised legislation would address insecure employment conditions in the sector that mediate “brain drain” – migration towards larger EU markets and other sectors. The status of the artist in Bulgaria should be treated as a priority of national cultural policy – to address long-standing deficits in the recognition and protection of artistic work in a new technological era. In the conditions of technological change this issue becomes extremely important, because digital and AI-based transformations simultaneously open new opportunities and increase insecurity, fragmentation and inequalities in the cultural sector.

Culture should be explicitly included in bulgarian national strategies for artificial intelligence and digital transformation. It is essential to create reliable mechanisms for fair remuneration when cultural content is used to train AI models and when new content is generated, ensuring compliance with copyright regimes, collective rights management and the role of the state as a regulator and mediator for fair remuneration and a system of tools for protecting employees and workers in cultural activities.

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(Il)legitimacy and Economic Exclusion: Policy Frameworks and the Precarious Status of Freelance Artists in South Africa

Mr. Nolo Mmeti
SA Chamber of Arts

Author Biography

Lehlohonolo Mmeti is a PhD candidate in Cultural Policy and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand, a Mastercard Foundation fellow in MScR in Sustainable African Futures at The University of Edinburgh, holds a Master's in Cultural Policy and Management, a Professional Diploma in Project Management, and a BA Honours in Performance and Visual Arts. He is a Brand Ambassador for South Africa through Brand SA's Global SA Network and Founding Chairperson of the SA Chamber of Arts. As a convener under The Access Group (Pty) Ltd, he hosted the Import Export Access Summit (2025), a T20 side event under G20, leading the cultural diplomacy and creative economy dialogues. He presented at the International BRICS Institute's Spirit of Bandung Conference (2026).

Abstract

While Freelance Artists and Cultural Entrepreneurs may exhibit similarities, their distinctions emphasise the central inquiry into compliance, legitimacy, and economic inclusion. This research explored the pervasive (il)legitimacy labels affixed to freelance artists in South Africa, examining the linkage between government legislation, policies, and the economic inclusion or exclusion of this professional cohort. The scarcity of literature necessitates an examination of the legislative landscape, framed by the premise that policy serves as a foundational framework. When delineating a freelance career, existing literature predominantly emphasises Cultural Entrepreneurs, often using 'freelance artist' interchangeably with this broader concept. Jill Ferguson (2019) distinguishes the terms, defining a freelance artist as 'a person who acts independently without being affiliated with or authorised by an organisation' or 'a person who pursues a profession without a long-term commitment to any one employer' (Ferguson, 2019, p. 3).

The central research problem asks: how do policy and legislative frameworks impact the (il)legitimacy of freelance artists in South Africa? The central argument suggests that existing policies may not adequately address the unique challenges faced by South African freelance artists, thereby leaving a critical void in the understanding of their economic participation. Focused on a qualitative methodology, the research examined documents and policies alongside unstructured interviews with 40 professional freelance artists across South Africa, employing purposive criterion sampling to capture lived experiences. The conceptual framework navigates formality and informality within the CCI through Kanbur's (2017) conceptual

categories of formality and informality, and Varley's (2013) perspective on informality as resistance. The results support the central argument: freelance artists encounter significant hurdles concerning legitimacy, compliance, and economic inclusion. The paper further investigated digital platforms and payment gateway services as alternative approaches and identified several pathways to strengthen legitimisation, integration, and economic inclusion. This South African case study provides empirical evidence from the Global South to inform comparative policy debates on the status of the artist.

Keywords: economic inclusion, compliance, cultural creative economy, legitimacy, cultural policy

1. Introduction

The global creative economy has witnessed a significant transformation in the nature of work, with freelance employment emerging as a dominant mode of labour organisation within the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) (Mallett & Wapshott, 2023; Bellini & Lucciarini, 2019). This shift, however, has not been accompanied by appropriate legislative and policy frameworks that sufficiently recognise and protect freelance artists. In South Africa, freelance artists constitute a substantial portion of the cultural workforce, with youth in the cultural sector more likely to be employed informally than those in non-cultural jobs (Snowball & Hadisi, 2020). Despite this significant presence, these professionals remain caught in a precarious space between formality and informality, often labelled as 'illegitimate,' 'non-compliant,' and 'unprofessional' (Ferguson, 2019). The creative economy contributes approximately R161 billion to GDP, with CCIs accounting for nearly 7% of all jobs (Roux & Coetzee, 2022; Snowball & Hadisi, 2020). Yet systemic inefficiencies, limited access to funding, inadequate technological integration, and a lack of visibility into provincial activity continue to undermine freelance economic participation and legitimacy (Bellini & Lucciarini, 2019).

Informality, project-based structures, and seasonality are foundational to the creative industries, systematically relegating most artists to freelance or gig work without long-term contracts, benefits, or social protections (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). This precariousness reflects a regulatory environment that prioritises institutional stability over the workforce (May et al., 2022; Roux & Coetzee, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified these vulnerabilities; freelance artists faced acute economic exclusion, disqualified from relief initiatives due to compliance requirements unsuited to their employment status (Roux, 2022; Spiro et al., 2021). Without a legislative framework recognising freelance work and providing portable social protections, this cohort remains trapped in systemic economic insecurity (Pyykkönen, 2026; Roux & Coetzee, 2022). This paper argues that current legislative frameworks may fail to address the unique challenges faced by South African freelance artists, creating a critical void in understanding their economic participation. Drawing on a qualitative methodology combining document analysis with unstructured interviews, the paper employs a conceptual framework navigating formality and informality within the CCIs.

2. Literature Review - The Freelance Landscape in South Africa

The scholarly literature on freelance artists within the South African Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) interrogates regulatory frameworks, economic inclusion, and professional legitimacy. Central to this body of work is the question of definition: Ferguson (2019) and Woronkowicz and Noonan (2019) have critically examined the conceptual conflation of 'freelance artist' and 'cultural entrepreneur,' arguing that this terminological slippage obscures the distinctive precarity of freelance practitioners who operate outside traditional employer-employee relationships. Complementing this definitional work, Kanbur (2009; 2017), Varley (2013), and Misztal (2000) grapple with the dynamics of formality and informality, reframing informal economic participation not as a deficit but as a strategic response to regulatory environments perceived as burdensome or exclusionary. Snowball and Mapuma (2020) demonstrate that informality in the creative sector may function as a deliberate, rational choice rather than a merely reactive or survivalist strategy, providing essential local context to the discourse on informality as resistance. The literature further examines policy and legislative architectures: Oyekunle and Sirayi (2018) and De Koker and Jentzsch (2013) explore how regulatory frameworks, from tax legislation to social security provisions, either enable or obstruct the integration of freelance workers into the formal economy. Concurrently, Radcliffe (2016) and the Jobtech Alliance (2025) examine the transformative potential of digital platforms, while algorithmic colonialism literature (Birhane, 2020; Kwet, 2019; Mouton & Burns, 2021) provides a critical lens on how global technology corporations exert structural domination over African creative workers.

Freelance artists are characterised as individuals who operate autonomously without affiliation with or authorisation by a single organisation, and without a long-term commitment to any one employer (Galahova & Fokina-Mezentseva, 2017). Individuals such as doctors, lawyers, or accountants engaged in independent practice may be categorised as independent contractors (Simpson & Innes, 2021), facilitated by regulatory bodies and professional associations that contribute to formalisation. However, freelance artists in South Africa lack an equivalent legitimising infrastructure. Woronkowicz and Noonan (2019) argue that many studies assume 'artist' and 'entrepreneur' are interchangeable, obscuring the distinctive challenges faced by freelance artists. This conflation has material consequences: policy responses designed for entrepreneurs or employees may overlook the specific precarity of freelance artists.

Perry et al. (2007) argue that freelance artists encounter challenges similar to unprotected workers, including excessive regulation, low productivity, unfair competition, underpayment or non-payment of taxes, and working 'underground'. Chong and Gradstein (2007) argued that informality is calculated on cost-benefit evaluation, with 'income inequality, in conjunction with institutional quality, a particularly significant determinant of informality' (Chong and Gradstein, 2007, p. 167). Snowball and Mapuma (2020) demonstrate that informality is a deliberate, rational business model for micro-enterprises in the sector, tailored to project-based work, rather than solely a survivalist strategy. Joffe and Mukanga-Majachani (2023) address how atypical cultural and creative work, freelance, contractor, casual, and once-off, is

overlaid by informality in the African context, marked by insecurity, precarity, and uncertainty. Furthermore, research suggests that creative industries are significant drivers of job creation in South Africa (Durrer et al., 2023). While the Revised White Paper on Sport, Arts and Culture (2017) sought to broaden policy framing to encompass CCIs, the 2022 CCI Masterplan's delivery on funding and support for freelance artists remains uneven (Roux & Coetzee, 2022), attributed to persistent statistical fragmentation that renders policy insensitive to informal employment realities (Council, 2026). To combat these hurdles, the South African Department of Sports, Arts and Culture established 17 CCI Sector Clusters in August 2025. The Jobtech Alliance's sector scan (2025), mapping over 60 digital platforms across Africa, indicates that platforms empowering creators as true businesses are more likely to unlock sustainable income pathways.

Radcliffe (2016) and Stina (2018) explore digitisation's influence on bargaining dynamics between creators and market intermediaries, introducing disintermediated distribution channels. The South African Copyright Amendment Bill, passed on 29 February 2024, seeks to address the platform-mediated drain on creator remuneration through contract adjustments, fair royalty shares, and reversionary rights (Oriakhogba & Erhagbe, 2024). However, Birhane (2020) characterises the broader digital environment as 'algorithmic colonialism', the systematic appropriation of data and algorithmic processes by external actors, creating new forms of dependency. The Performers' Protection Amendment Bill similarly extends protections to interactive streaming (Jansen, 2026); however, it remains contentious: academic critiques highlight that 'fair use' exceptions may diminish economic rights, while unaddressed safe-harbour loopholes suggest the creator value gap may persist (Forere, 2023; Tomaselli, 2022; Tomaselli & Pieterse, 2023). Empirical studies emphasise that African creators actively resist, adapt, or subvert these technologies to fit local realities (Steedman et al., 2022; Nieborg & Simon, 2025). Thus, the potential for digital platforms to foster inclusion is contingent upon context-sensitive policy interventions addressing infrastructure limitations, fair compensation, and visibility mechanisms (Adefemi & Mutanga, 2025; Chimechefulam, 2026). Kwet (2019) argues that Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft (GAFAM) corporations function as new imperialists, exercising structural domination at the infrastructure level. While digital platforms offer opportunities, they impose new forms of algorithmic control and visibility bias that exacerbate precarity (Chimechefulam, 2026; Wood et al., 2018).

3. Theoretical Anchors: Formality, Informality and Resistance

The conceptual framework for this research is constructed around two interconnected theoretical perspectives that collectively interpret the complex relationship between freelance artists, legislative frameworks, and economic inclusion. Kanbur (2009; 2017) provides a systematic framework for analysing the regulatory environment impacting economic actors, distinguishing between four conceptual categories: (A) regulation applicable and compliant; (B) regulation applicable and non-compliant; (C) regulation non-applicable after adjustment of activity; and (D) regulation non-applicable to the activity. Category A represents the ideal of formal economic participation. Category B characterises the experience of many freelance artists who operate within the ambit of regulations but fail to comply, often not through

wilful disregard but due to the complexity, cost, or inappropriateness of compliance requirements. Categories C and D reflect situations where regulations either require adaptation to fit freelance work or are entirely irrelevant to freelance activities. Varley (2013) challenges conventional understandings of informality, reframing the concept not as a deficiency in planning or organisation but as a strategic mode of resistance. This perspective is particularly pertinent to the South African context, where the historical legacy of apartheid and ongoing structural inequalities shape the choices available to freelance artists. For freelance artists, informality can represent a calculated response to regulatory frameworks that are perceived as burdensome, inappropriate, or exclusionary.

4. Research design and Methods

This qualitative paper employed purposive criterion sampling to develop an interpretive understanding of freelance artists' lived experiences in South Africa (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 2008). Unstructured personal interviews, complemented by document analysis of relevant legislation, served as the primary data collection method. Interview questions addressed four research inquiries: awareness of legislation, compliance experiences, access to financial services, and perceptions of legitimacy. The sample comprised 40 South African freelance artists from diverse disciplines and regions within South Africa, including visual art, music, poetry, comedy, graphic design, photography, fashion design, lighting and sound design, and brand influencers. The sample was reduced from an envisaged 100 participants due to the multidisciplinary nature of many freelance artists, a decision guided by the principle that compact samples enable valid, fine-grained inquiry and achieve theoretical saturation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Data analysis followed a two-stage process: open coding of interview transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), followed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Lived Realities: Voices from the Field

The visual summaries below present key findings from interviews with 40 freelance artists, demonstrating key themes of legislative awareness, economic exclusion, access to financial services, digital platform challenges, and the need for targeted support.

5.1 Legislative Awareness and the Burden of Complexity

Participants showed varied familiarity with legislation. Taxation and copyright law were most cited, while knowledge of digital platform terms of service was critically low.

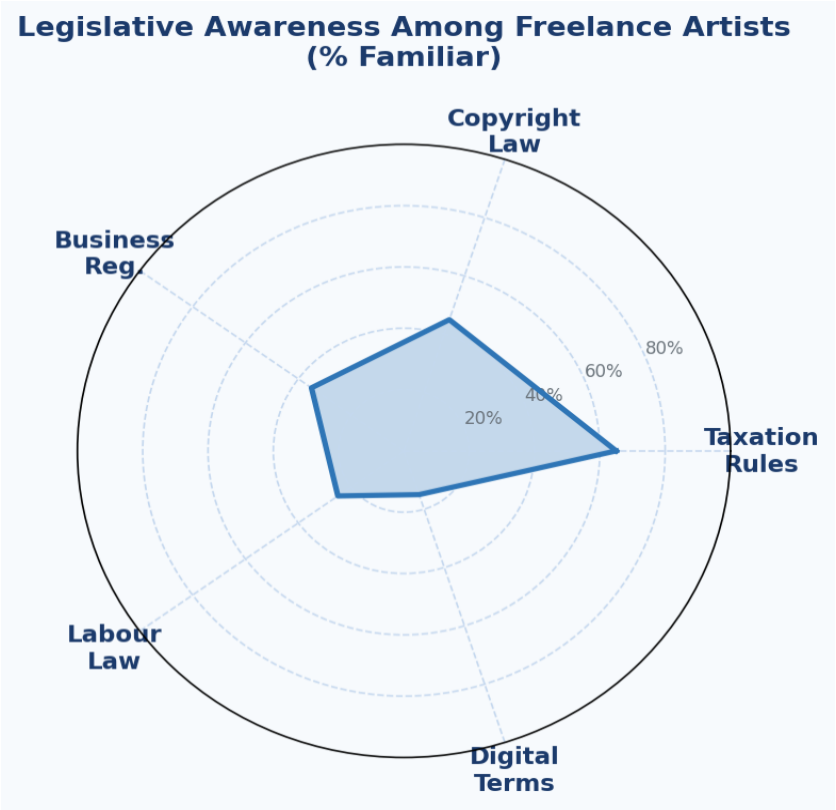


Figure 1 · Estimated legislative familiarity across key legal domains

"My understanding primarily revolves around taxation regulations, copyright laws, and some aspects of business registration." - Visual Artist

5.2 Unintended Economic Exclusion

The pursuit of legitimacy paradoxically creates compliance burdens that exclude artists from formal economic participation. The Income Tax Act 58 of 1962 offers no explicit provisions for freelance artists, widening the gap.

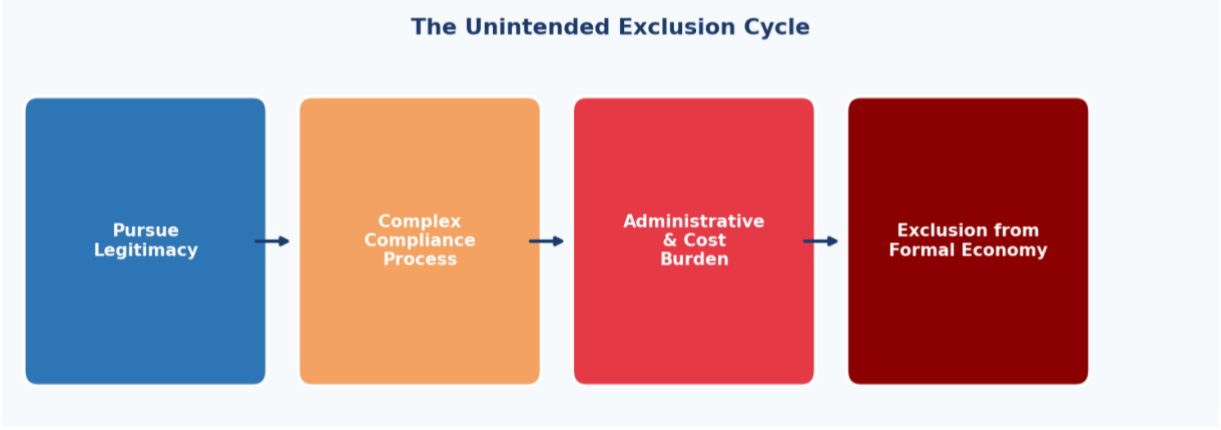


Figure 2 · The Unintended Exclusion Cycle: from seeking legitimacy to economic marginalisation

5.3 Access to Market Opportunities and Financial Services

Irregular income patterns and institutional risk-aversion combine to restrict credit access. Geographic location further compounds the disadvantage, as illustrated by various participants.

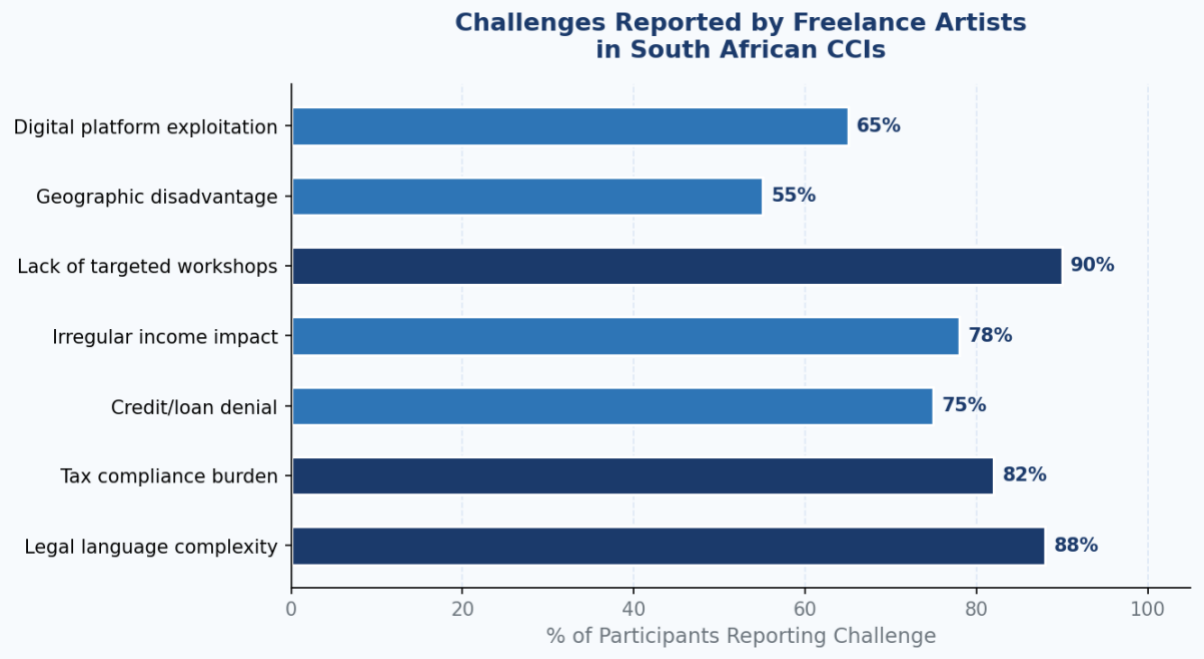


Figure 3 · Frequency of challenges reported by freelance artist participant

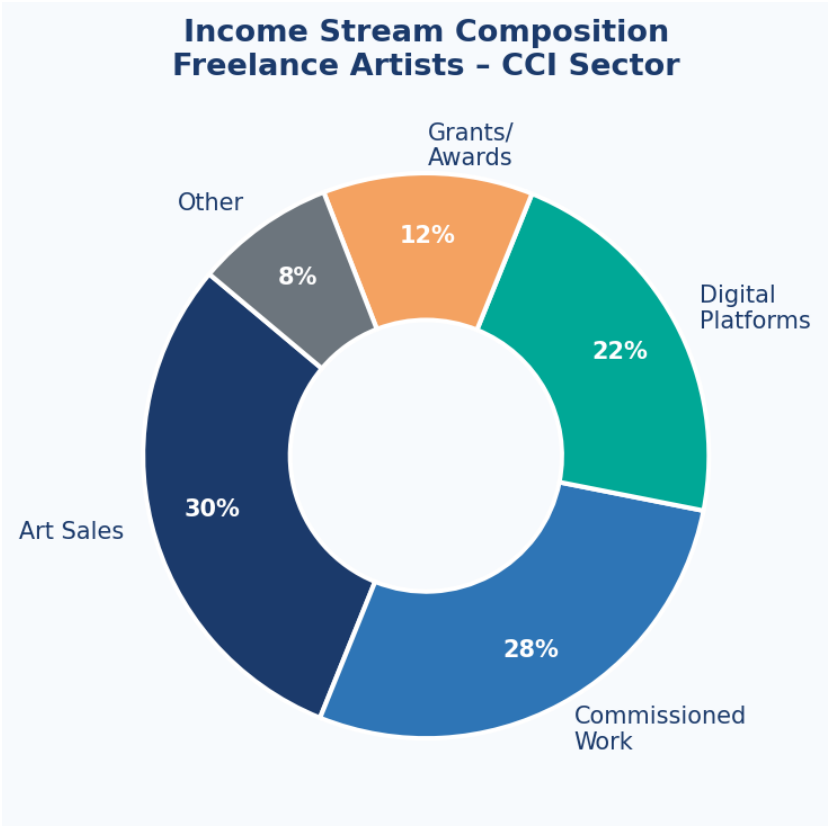


Figure 4 · Typical income stream composition for freelance artists in the CCI sector

5.4 Digital Platforms as Alternative Models

Platforms such as Fiverr, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube offer income pathways, yet structural barriers around currency, algorithmic stripping of cultural context, and exploitative terms of service undermine their potential for African artists.

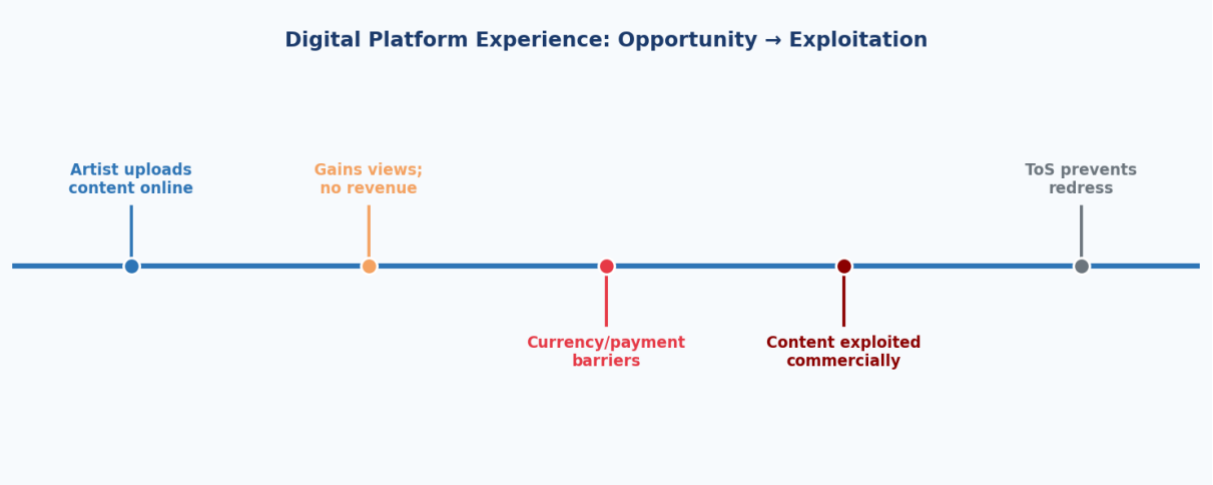


Figure 5 · Digital platform experience journey: from opportunity to exploitation

"My grandmother's songs became someone else's property while I watched." - Musician

6. Unpacking The Policy Void

Applying Kanbur's (2017) four-category framework to the South African legislative landscape reveals how existing laws position freelance artists across a spectrum from compliance to irrelevance. Even regulations classified as 'applicable and compliant' present enforcement challenges due to limited artist awareness and resource constraints.

Category	Status	Legislation	Challenge
Category A	**Applicable & Compliant**	• National Arts Council Act 56/1997 • Performers' Protection Act 11/1967 • Copyright Act 98/1978	Rights exist but many artists unaware or under-resourced to enforce them
Category B	**Applicable & Non-Compliant**	• BBBEE Act 53/2003 • Companies Act 71/2008 • Income Tax Act 58/1962	Designed for formal enterprises; compliance costs prohibitive for individual artists
Category C	**Non-Applicable Until Adjustment**	• Occupational Health & Safety Act 85/1993 • Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75/1997	Could be adapted to freelance context with targeted policy reform

Category	Status	Legislation	Challenge
Category D	**Non-Applicable to Activity**	• Regulations covering formal employment and enterprise structures	Does not encompass informal sales, social media platforms, or market-based activities

Table 1: Kanbur (2017) Framework applied to South African legislation affecting freelance artists

6.1 Informality as Strategic Resistance

Varley's (2013) perspective frames informality not as failure but as rational resistance. For freelance artists in North West Province and beyond, the cost-benefit calculus consistently favours informality over compliance with frameworks designed for formal enterprises.

COSTS OF FORMALISATION	BENEFITS OF FORMALISATION
✗ Registration fees & compliance costs	✓ Legal protection & recourse
✗ Tax administration & filing obligations	✓ Access to formal financial services
✗ Time burden of administrative procedures	✓ Eligibility for grants & government support
✗ Misaligned regulatory frameworks for project-based work	✓ Professional credibility & legitimacy

Table 2: Formalisation cost-benefit analysis for South African freelance artists

Informality for South African freelance artists, particularly those in rural provinces, represents a calculated, rational professional strategy rather than a deficiency of aspiration or awareness. The regulatory environment systematically shifts this calculus away from formalisation.

6.2 Digital Platforms, Algorithmic Colonialism, and Cultural Governance

Digital platforms offer significant potential for market access and income diversification. However, they embed governance logics that may systematically disadvantage South African creative workers. The table below maps platform risks identified across the research.

Platform Risk	Impact on Freelance Artists
Intellectual Property Extraction	89% of creative workers worry about AI copyright infringement
Digital Colonialism	Foreign tech platforms divert value away from local creators & communities
Algorithmic Extraction	Content treated as data source rather than creative output
Visibility Bias	Algorithmic systems disadvantage African/South African cultural content
Payment Gaps	Inadequate infrastructure for creator monetisation in informal markets

Table 3: Digital platform risks for South African freelance artists

Counter-measures require platforms to be designed as genuine business-enablers: solving payment infrastructure gaps, providing multiple income streams, and building creator loyalty through value exchange rather than algorithmic extraction (Jobtech Alliance, 2025).

6.3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings point to six interdependent policy interventions necessary to address systemic barriers facing South African freelance artists. These recommendations span tax reform, legislative recognition, education, digital governance, and associational support

#	Recommendation	Description
1	**Simplified Tax Guidelines**	Develop artist-specific tax guidelines accommodating irregular income; simplify business registration to reduce administrative burden.
2	**Distinct Legislative Category**	Create a category for freelance cultural workers, separate from formal SMEs or unemployed. Advance DSDs draft policy for atypical workers with urgency.
3	**Education & Support Systems**	Workshops, mentorship, and plain-language resources on taxation, legal matters, and business management tailored to artists.
4	**Digital Platforms & Cultural Sovereignty**	Support platforms respecting communal ownership. Apply the SACO Protection-Innovation-Remuneration Continuum framework to policy decisions.
5	**Strengthen Affiliations & Associations**	Strengthen the Cultural Industries Clusters and promote networking tailored to freelance artists for professional development and legitimacy advocacy.
6	**Regulate Algorithmic Bias**	Require platforms to provide algorithmic transparency, disclose data practices, establish complaint mechanisms, and face revenue-linked sanctions.

7. Conclusion

This research explored the pervasive (il)legitimacy labels affixed to freelance artists in South Africa, examining the linkage between government legislation, policies, and economic inclusion or exclusion. The findings support the central argument that existing policies fail to address the unique challenges faced by freelance artists, leaving a critical void in understanding their economic participation. The phenomenon of 'unintended economic exclusion' emerged as a central finding, where the pursuit of legitimacy creates compliance issues that further marginalise freelance practitioners. Current legislation imposes frameworks designed for formal SMEs or unemployed individuals, neither fitting the freelance contract model.

Digital platforms emerged as promising but ambivalent alternatives, offering disintermediated distribution channels while simultaneously subjecting cultural production to extractive algorithmic logics. Addressing this ambivalence requires a fundamental reimagining of the legislative roadmap to place the freelance artist at its centre. Read alongside the Constitutional Court's ruling in Mahlangu and Another v

Minister of Labour (Zulu, 2024; Narotam, 2021), which established that categorical exclusion of vulnerable informal workers from social-security frameworks constitutes an unreasonable legislative measure under section 27 of the Constitution, this exclusion nexus acquires a constitutional dimension that the present legislative architecture has yet to address. This South African case study provides empirical evidence from the Global South to inform comparative policy debates on the status of the artist.

Impact & Engagement

This research directly addresses the critical problem of economic exclusion faced by freelance artists in South Africa's Cultural and Creative Industries, who constitute 34% of all cultural workers yet remain caught in a precarious space between formality and informality (SACO, 2020). The primary beneficiaries are freelance artists themselves, who gain from alternative models that amplify their legitimacy and facilitate access to economic benefits. Public policymakers at the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC), the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) represent key stakeholders who can translate the research's recommendations into actionable policy reforms.

A direct and significant outcome of this research is the creation and registration of the **SA Chamber of Arts (NPC)**. Like traditional chambers of commerce, this chamber functions as a centralised platform formed to develop research aligned with the challenges faced by artists and to create an integrated platform that enables artists to track their alignment and compliance, funding opportunities, and all other information in one centralised space. The Chamber is being developed alongside the **Creative Industry Nervous System (CINS)**, a digital ecosystem designed to provide artists with a secure single sign-on environment, role-specific dashboards, and autonomous AI agents capable of navigating complex legal and financial landscapes.

The main pathway for use is co-creation and direct implementation. The Chamber is being co-designed with local freelance artists, traditional councils, and business stakeholders. The primary pathway for policy influence is a targeted **policy brief**, co-developed with the Chamber's leadership, distilling the research's recommendations for clearer tax guidelines, simplified registration processes, and a distinct legislative category for freelance cultural workers. **Impact is evidenced** by the successful registration of the SA Chamber of Arts (NPC), active co-design of the Creative Industry Nervous System (CINS) platform, and this submission to ENCATC 2026, positioning the findings for international policy comparison and potential adoption within South Africa's forthcoming cultural policy review cycles.

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PANEL CONTRIBUTIONS

Bridging the Art-in-Education Competence Gap: From Systemic Barriers to Site-Specific Experimentations

Contributions:

Arts-Based Evaluations in the Arts and Cultural Sector: A Pilot Study of Coventry Biennial
Dr. Francesco Chiaravalloti, University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)

From Policy Gaps to Art-based Classrooms: A Greek PDP Blueprint
Dr. Maria Kyriakidou, Anatolia American University | American College of Thessaloniki (Greece)

When Culture Is Recognised but Not Taught: Arts Education and Youth in Morocco
Mrs. Marine Masson, Science For Change (Spain)
Ms. Paula Pazos, Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association (Spain)

Beyond Legitimate Art: Recognizing Informal Digital Cultures in French Education
Dr. Guillaume Pellerin, Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation - Centre Pompidou (France)

Abstract

This panel explores the systemic challenges and emerging opportunities in fostering Cultural Awareness and Expression (CAE) within diverse educational ecosystems, drawing on the initial findings of the Horizon Europe-funded PULSE-ART project. Centered on a comparative analysis of seven countries—France, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Morocco, Spain, and the Netherlands—the research aims to bridge the "competence recognition gap." The primary objective is to demonstrate how theoretical EU-level policy frameworks can be translated into localized, participatory blueprints that integrate the "Arts" into education and position culture as a fundamental pillar of a resilient society.

The research is grounded in the Quadruple Helix Model, emphasizing the intersection of academia, civil society, private and public sector in culture and education. It uses a socio-ecological approach to CAE, viewing cultural expression not as an isolated skill but as a transversal competence hindered by systemic fragmentation and professional development gaps. The framework focuses on the transition from a top-down diagnostic to a bottom-up needs assessment and policy adaptation.

The panel employs a comparative qualitative methodology, contrasting 2025 and 2026 data collection results with foundational desk research including literature and policy documents review, as well as grassroots initiative mapping in each country. Central to this approach are the MOSAIC HUBs—local quadruple helix communities in each partner country—which serve as the primary sites for participatory research and case studies development. The methodology follows a three-stage process:

- Diagnostic Phase: Identifying context-specific barriers through stakeholder engagement.
- Experimentation Phase: Utilizing arts-based methods and co-creation sessions to pilot seven case studies exploring the impact of arts in education to foster CAE under an umbrella methodology developed at project level.
- Iteration phase: Analysing and co-validating data collection to further refine the methodology.

The session is structured to present findings through two distinct lenses:

- Part 1: Gaps & Barriers: The panel will identify how systemic barriers—such as financial fragmentation, rigid curricula, and socio-cultural biases—manifest uniquely across different national contexts in France, Greece and Morocco.
- Part 2: Applied Solutions: The panel presents "blueprints" for action. Key expected results include the implementation of the Professional Development Plan (PDP) at EU and Mediterranean level, the construction of Strategic Partnerships in Morocco (EMEA), and the development of the French Case Study.

The session concludes that while barriers are often systemic, solutions can also be local, ensuring a bottom-up approach for a better inclusion of all voices. These insights will inform the seven National Action Plans and EU-level recommendations, providing a scalable model for fostering CAE across diverse European and Mediterranean landscapes.

Bridging the Art-in-Education Competence Gap. From Systemic Barriers to site-specific Experimentation in the PULSE-ART Project

Mrs. Marine Masson
Science for Change

Dr. Maria Kyriakidou
Anatolia American University | American College of Thessaloniki

Dr. Guillaume Pellerin
Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation - Centre Pompidou

Ms. Paula Pazos
Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association

Key words: Cultural Awareness and Expression, Gaps and Barriers, Arts in education, Participatory Action Research, Educational-Cultural Hubs

1. Introduction

1.1. Context

The voices calling for an improved integration of culture and arts in education systems emphasise their role in equipping youth for an increasingly complex and polarised world by enhancing agency, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving and intercultural skills (European Commission, 2025; UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2019). To bring these practices to the core of education, the effective recognition and development of the Cultural Awareness and Expression (CAE) competence is central. Since its recognition at European level in the Key Competence Framework for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2006, 2019), and supported by an Open Method of Coordination (European Commission, 2016), Member States integrated CAE into their curricula and policy frameworks at national and regional level but its actual implementation, adaptation and assessment is facing intrinsic challenges at all governance and practice levels (Kačāne et al, 2026). In the most recent European-level policy frameworks related to this question, such as the Culture Compass for Europe (2025), the Democracy Shield (2025), and the Union of Skills (2025), this competence's absence challenges institutions' and agents' capacity to efficiently bridge the gaps in education towards a more resilient and participative society through arts and culture.

1.2. Methodology

The Horizon Europe PULSE-ART project (2024-2027) aims at generating evidence of the impact of arts in education to foster Cultural Awareness and Expression in youth. This paper presents early findings of the research based on an initial gaps and barriers analysis in the case study countries (France, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Morocco, the Netherlands and Spain), as well as at EU and international level, and the related development of methodologies and tools to bridge the gaps.

This process was anchored in a larger reflection on the competence itself, resulting in a co-constructed dual Competence Framework aiming at objectifying and monitoring CAE progress (Voulgari et al., 2026).

European Commission definition (2019)	PULSE-ART project Co-definition (2025)
Competence in Cultural Awareness and Expression	
Involves having an understanding of and respect for how ideas and meaning are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures and through a range of arts and other cultural forms. It involves being engaged in understanding, developing and expressing one's own ideas and sense of place or role in society in a variety of ways and contexts.	Refers to the capacity to recognise, reflect on, and critically engage with diverse cultural identities while possessing the ability to shape, communicate, and innovate culture through symbolic, artistic, and linguistic forms. This competence encompasses an understanding of how shared beliefs, values, and practices – influenced by history, geography, and social dynamics – shape human interaction, while actively recognizing the power relations that determine cultural visibility. It integrates artistic creation, rituals, and everyday practices as essential tools for individuals and communities to understand, navigate, and transform the world.

Image 1: Cultural Awareness and Expression definitions

The gaps and barriers analysis to CAE development through arts-based learning followed two different dialoguing paths, as detailed in Image 2. The eight co-creation sessions of 2h30 to 3h30 (depending of the format: online, hybrid or in-site), involved 125 stakeholders, and provided important qualitative insights into the priorities to address both in our Case Studies (context-sensible experiential arts-based learning settings), and in our trans- and international research.

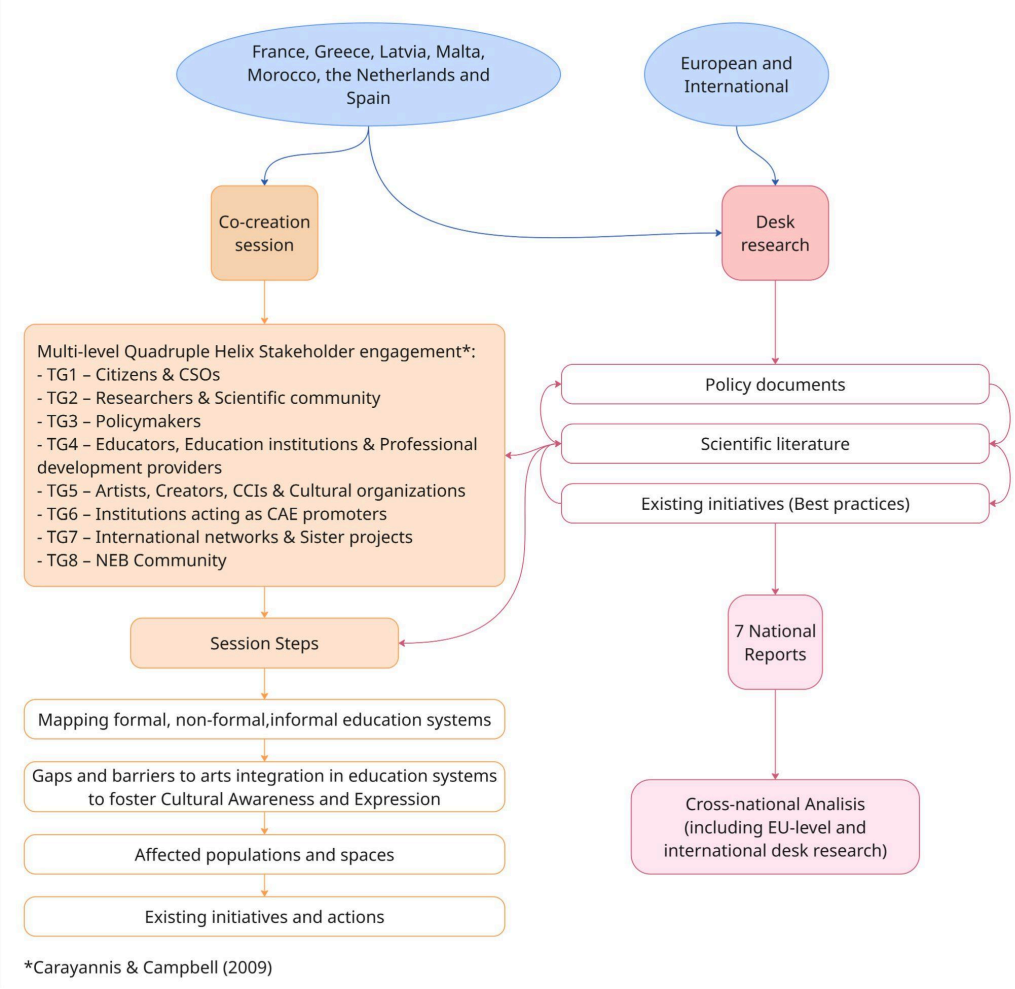


Image 2: Gaps analysis methodology in PULSE-ART

Each section of this paper will focus on gaps identified across partner countries, the consequently developed methodology and how its implementation is responding to site-specific challenges. In this context, we will concentrate on Greece, Morocco and France, as project partners in these countries lead a different tool or methodology in PULSE-ART aiming to span identified gaps; thus offering both project- and local-level perspectives.

2. Bridging Gaps: How a Targeted Professional Development Programme addresses the Greek Educators' Needs

Arts education in Greece stands at a meaningful crossroads. A body of thoughtful, progressively oriented policy exists, all expressing a coherent national ambition to embed the arts at the heart of Greek schooling. Yet the persistent gap between that ambition and its realisation is well documented. Teachers across the country, particularly in rural and underserved regions, enter arts-integrated classrooms without the pedagogical preparation or professional community needed to translate policy into genuine learning experiences. These training and capacity barriers are observed across project countries.

This section presents the Professional Development Programme (PDP) for educators structured around the PULSE-ART Competence Framework (Voulgari et al., 2026). The PDP of fers a competence-based, cyclical learning model that is principled yet f lexible,cultivating a repertoire of approaches and asking educators across Europe and beyond to engage as learners themselves before enabling the creative growth of others.

2.1. The National Policy Landscape: Achievements and Persistent Implementation Gaps

Greece's governance of arts and cultural education is characterised by notable inter-ministerial alignment. The 2022 Action Plans of both the Ministries of Culture and Sports and of Education and Religious Affairs share overlapping objectives such as cultivating critical thinking and empathy, fostering intercultural awareness, and ensuring equitable access to cultural experiences among others while the 2022 primary education visual arts curriculum (Greek Government, 2022) introduces differentiated instruction and digital media tools as pedagogical essentials and the 2023 Gymnasium curriculum explicitly connects artistic study to socio-political contexts of creative production.

Yet implementation gaps are well documented through literature review (Kokkos et al., 2024; Vasilopoulou, 2022). Sotiropoulou-Zormpala's (2012) concept of "aesthetic teaching" suggests that educators need more than curriculum guidelines — they need pedagogical transformation. The elective status of arts in upper secondary education further marginalises them, and the absence of robust process-oriented assessment frameworks means that even well-designed reforms risk losing coherence over time. The rich landscape of arts education initiatives and best practices in Greece provides a compelling evidence base.

The MELINA Project (1994–2003) (Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2024) trained over 4,500 teachers, demonstrating that teacher training can produce enduring changes in practice. Museum partnership programmes (Cycladic Art Museum, 2024) show improved engagement and deeper connection to cultural content. Projects like the Cultural Prescription programme (Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2023) used artistic engagement therapeutically, producing measurable improvements in well-being. Such instances conf irm that arts-based pedagogies can have a genuine transformative potential and provide a foundation for the proposed PDP.

2.2. The PULSE-ART Professional Development Programme: Architecture and Design

PULSE-ART’s PDP follows a cyclical methodology — Explore Experience Ref lect Design Apply — organised across six modules (training chapters) related to the Competence Framework.

Module 1, Introduction to Cultural Awareness and Expression through Arts Integration, uses storytelling, cultural mapping, and ref lective dialogue to help educators examine their own cultural identities and build the foundations for inclusive facilitation.

Module 2, Foundations of Cultural Education, introduces participants to international frameworks and sets these alongside local and grassroots approaches, building capacity to navigate between institutional and community-based logics of cultural practice.

Module 3, Practical Applications of the Arts, is the hands-on core of the programme. Drawing on PULSE-ART case studies from partner countries, educators gain embodied experience across multiple art forms through co-creation workshops and collaborative design stations..

Module 4, Technology for Arts in Education, addresses the digital dimensions of contemporary arts practice, including creation, curation, and ethical use of digital tools and AI. Crucially, the module confronts the digital divide directly, developing hybrid pedagogical approaches that can function in contexts of variable technological infrastructure.

Module 5, Assessment and Evaluation for Arts in Education, equips educators with the tools to document, evaluate, and communicate arts-based learning. Drawing on portfolio methods, self- and peer-assessment frameworks, and culturally responsive rubrics, this module directly addresses the absence of coherent, process-oriented assessment for arts and cultural education.

Module 6, Ref lectionand Future Implementation, brings the programme full circle. Participants develop personal and institutional action plans, identify communities of practice they will build or join, and connect to the PULSE-ART Observatory (https://arts4education.eu/) — a European platform for ongoing knowledge sharing and policy co-creation. This f inalmodule is explicitly oriented towards sustainability: it asks not only what participants have learned, but what they will do dif ferently.

Delivered in a blended online format combining synchronous sessions with asynchronous peer co-creation, the PDP respects the time constraints of in-service educators and enables participation from geographically dispersed communities, including remote and island schools. The PDP directly addresses Greece's (and not only) educators needs — providing the pedagogical vocabulary where teacher preparation is scanty, an evaluative culture where assessment systems are underdeveloped, and a structural principle where curriculum integration is fragmented.

1.3. Conclusion

The challenge of arts education in Greece is not primarily one of policy vision, but implementation: ensuring this vision reaches the teachers, classrooms, and learners who need it most. The PULSE-ART PDP meets this challenge directly, engaging educators in a professional learning journey grounded in best practices and connected to a European network of arts education innovators. Its transnational architecture enriches the PDP with comparative perspectives and directly develops interculturality. The PDP is the instrument through which Greece's policy aspirations can become pedagogical reality, recognising the arts as powerful instruments for inclusion, identity formation, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement.

3. When Culture Is Recognised but Not Taught: Bridging Ecosystem Fragmentation through Stakeholder Engagement in Morocco

3.1. The Interdisciplinary Ecosystem Gap

Across partner countries, a recurrent barrier to the development of CAE is the fragmentation between educational institutions, cultural actors, public authorities, and local communities. As opportunities for meaningful collaboration between these sectors remain limited, education and cultural systems therefore often operate in silos, restricting the potential of arts-based learning to contribute to broader social, civic, and cultural development (European Commission & ECORYS, 2023).

The Moroccan case study provides a particularly revealing illustration of this challenge. Morocco benef itsfrom a rich and constitutionally recognised cultural diversity, as outlined in Morocco’s Strategic Vision for Education Reform 2015-2030 (CSEFR, 2016). However, artistic and arts-based education remains marginal within formal education policies and unevenly implemented across territories (Habib, 2025).

Consultations conducted with Moroccan stakeholders highlighted several interconnected barriers contributing to this fragmentation, ref lected in the fact that young people's access to arts and cultural experiences often depends on isolated local initiatives rather than structured collaboration between actors. A key issue concerns the weak operational links between schools, local artists, and cultural organisations (Wayikpo, 2021; Zarrouq, 2025), which limits opportunities for collaboration and reduces the visibility of local cultural actors within educational environments. Participants also pointed to strong territorial disparities, with cultural resources and activities concentrated in major urban centres (Elqour & Hamimid, 2024).

In addition, consultations revealed limited participatory approaches in the design and implementation of cultural initiatives, as well as insuf ficientcooperation between actors from dif ferent cultural and institutional backgrounds. These factors constrain the development of shared ownership and reduce the potential for long-term collaboration across sectors. Beyond these structural dimensions, culture is persistently perceived as a secondary or optional domain rather than an essential component of education and community life (Elidrissi, 2025; Zarrouq, 2025).

Within PULSE-ART, these challenges were understood as an interdisciplinary ecosystem gap observed throughout partner countries. Addressing this gap required moving beyond isolated interventions towards approaches capable of strengthening relationships, fostering collaboration, and building shared ownership among education, culture, and community stakeholders, in line with policy approaches (European Commission, 2016).

3.2. Stakeholder Engagement and the Mosaic Hub Approach

The MOSAIC Hub methodology was developed to strengthen collaboration between educational, cultural, and community actors, addressing the interdisciplinary ecosystem gap identif iedacross all seven case study countries. Rather than a single, f ixed intervention, the hubs function as locally embedded participatory spaces for co-creation, dialogue, and partnership-building around CAE. Developed at project level and adapted across national contexts, the methodology combines shared tools and approaches with their ref inement through practice on the ground. Thus, the hubs act as spaces of reciprocal learning, where locally identif ied gaps inform the ongoing development of project-level methodologies, while shared tools support structured engagement within each context. The development of MOSAIC Hubs was informed by a mixed methodological approach, as detailed in Image 2.

A key dimension of the approach was the mobilisation of a diverse ecosystem of stakeholders representing complementary sectors through co-creation sessions. Participants included actors from higher education and research institutions, from the cultural and creative industries including independent artists, as well as from innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems such as startups, incubators, and social innovation labs. Public and international stakeholders were also involved, contributing to a cross-sectoral dialogue often absent in traditional education and cultural policy settings.

Moroccan participants expressed strong engagement with the MOSAIC Hub format and a clear willingness to continue their involvement beyond the initial sessions. Many highlighted the value of structured exchange between sectors. This engagement conf irmsthe potential of the hub as a space for initiating and supporting cross-sector collaboration within fragmented ecosystems like Morocco.

3.3. Lessons from the Moroccan Experience

Findings from the Moroccan case highlight a strong rhetorical recognition of culture and diversity, contrasted with the absence of arts education as a coherent policy domain. Despite this recognition, it remains fragmented in implementation, with limited coordination across institutional levels. Fragmentation is not only institutional but also relational, af fectinghow actors perceive their roles within cultural and educational processes. The sessions also revealed divergences between grassroots and institutional perspectives, ref lectingthe heterogeneity of the cultural ecosystem and reinforcing the need for structured spaces of dialogue.

Within this context, intermediary structures such as education–culture hubs emerge as a response to this fragmentation. Rather than replacing existing initiatives, they function as connecting spaces that bring together artists, educators, institutions, and youth within practice-oriented ecosystems. Overall, the Moroccan experience shows that strengthening CAE requires intermediary ecosystem mechanisms capable of connecting actors and translating policy intentions into collaborative practice.

4. Contributory methodology adaptation to the French context

This section critically examines the current state of Cultural and Artistic Education in France by analysing the relationships between public policies, academic research, and innovative educational practices, assessing the extent to which French policies promote equitable access to arts education while identifying the structural challenges that continue to limit their implementation. Although France has established one of the most comprehensive policy frameworks for Cultural and Artistic Education in Europe, significant territorial, social, and cultural inequalities persist. It is argued that arts education should evolve from a model centred on cultural transmission towards a more participatory and contributory approach that promotes creativity, critical thinking, and democratic engagement.

This analysis refers mainly to the PulseArt report WP2-T2.1 (Ratbi & al., 2026) which is called « the report » further in the text.

4.1. Public Policy Framework and Institutional Governance

The French system of Cultural and Artistic Education is jointly coordinated by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture through a network of regional authorities, educational institutions, cultural organisations, and local governments. Key policy instruments, including the Charter for Cultural and Artistic Education (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2016), the 100% EAC programme, the Guide for the Implementation of the Artistic and Cultural Education Pathway, and Pass Culture, seek to guarantee that all students encounter artistic practices, cultural heritage, and creative experiences throughout their

educational pathways. These initiatives promote interdisciplinary projects, partnerships between schools and cultural institutions, and project-based pedagogies designed to strengthen creativity, autonomy, and citizenship.

4.2. Structural Inequalities and Unequal Access to Arts Education

Despite this ambitious institutional framework, implementation remains fragmented. Responsibilities are distributed across multiple administrative levels, resulting in limited coordination between national authorities, regional agencies, local governments, schools, and cultural organisations. Consequently, the implementation of Cultural and Artistic Education varies considerably across territories, generating disparities in access to resources, cultural infrastructures, and educational opportunities. Recent reductions in public funding for culture further threaten the sustainability of existing programmes and disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities.

4.3. Civil Society and the Territorial Ecology of Cultural Education

The report identifies territorial and socioeconomic inequalities as the principal obstacle to the democratisation of arts education. Access to cultural resources remains strongly influenced by geographical location, educational pathways, and local institutional capacities. Metropolitan areas generally benefit from richer cultural ecosystems than rural or peripheral regions, while students enrolled in vocational education participate less frequently in artistic and cultural activities than those in general education. These findings demonstrate that ambitious national policies alone are insufficient to guarantee equal opportunities without sustained investment in local infrastructures and targeted support for underserved populations.

4.4. Cultural Diversity, Inclusion and the Politics of Representation

Although French policies increasingly promote inclusion, institutional recognition continues to privilege traditional forms of culture while marginalising popular, digital, and community-based artistic practices. Drawing upon theories of intersectionality, intercultural education, and critical pedagogy, the report argues that Cultural and Artistic Education should recognise the legitimacy of diverse artistic expressions and encourage learners to engage critically with questions of identity, representation, and social justice. In this perspective, arts education becomes an instrument for democratic participation and cultural pluralism rather than simply the transmission of an established cultural canon.

4.5. Digital Transformation and Pedagogical Innovation

Digital transformation represents another key dimension of contemporary arts education. France's Digital Strategy for Education (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, 2023–2027) promotes digital literacy, media education, and critical thinking while encouraging innovative pedagogical practices. Institutions such as Réseau Canopé provide teachers with training and educational resources addressing artificial intelligence, digital media, and interactive learning environments. The report also emphasises the educational potential of video games and other digital tools to foster creativity, collaboration, and critical reflection, provided that their use is embedded within coherent pedagogical frameworks.

4.6. Theoretical Contributions: Towards a Contributory Model of Arts Education

From a theoretical perspective, the report is strongly influenced by Bernard Stiegler's concept of the amateur (2015), which challenges consumer-oriented approaches to culture by positioning learners as active contributors to knowledge and artistic creation. Combined with perspectives inspired by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (2000) and contemporary theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), this

framework conceptualises arts education as a process of empowerment that enables individuals to participate actively in cultural production and democratic life.

4.7. Innovative Practices and Emerging Methodologies

Finally, the report analyses several alternative approaches based on participation, interdisciplinarity, creativity, and community engagement. One of these initiatives is L'Appartement 101, demonstrating the capacity of speculative design, science fiction, and collective artistic creation to enable young people to imagine alternative urban futures while challenging dominant narratives surrounding marginalised neighbourhoods. These projects demonstrate the potential of collaborative and locally embedded practices to strengthen cultural inclusion and civic participation.

4.8. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that France possesses a robust institutional framework for Cultural and Artistic Education but that its transformative potential remains constrained by fragmented governance, persistent inequalities, and limited recognition of diverse cultural practices. It therefore advocates a transition towards a contributory model of arts education based on participation, collaboration, and cultural diversity. Such an approach would strengthen cooperation among educational institutions, cultural organisations, researchers, and civil society while enabling learners to become active contributors to cultural life and democratic society.

5. General conclusion

This paper highlights how the PULSE-ART project operationalizes CAE by pivoting from project-level barriers to context-specific, localized methodologies. The empirical evidence generated by these diverse pedagogical, ecosystemic, and participatory interventions are bridging the gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, these ongoing iterations aim to deliver evidence-based recommendations capable of transforming educational-cultural policies and empowering youth across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Impact & Engagement

This research bridges the gap between theoretical frameworks and practice by providing an operational model to integrate arts into education and foster Cultural Awareness and Expression, a key competence for lifelong learning that is difficult to objectify, thus to develop and assess.

- Intended Beneficiaries: The primary beneficiaries of the research are young people, in particular those at risk of social exclusion, by connecting educational and cultural ecosystems through collaboration and building capacities in cultural agents and educators across the Euro-Mediterranean region. As PULSE-ART aims at generating evidence-based policy recommendations, policy makers at all governance levels are key users of PULSE-ART results. Finally, PULSE-ART aims at collaborating and contributing to interdisciplinary research, fostering mutual-learning and open science.

- Main Pathways for Use: Impact is delivered through co-creation hubs (MOSAIC Hubs), the implementation of a specialized Professional Development Plan (PDP) for teachers and trainers/youth workers, and the execution of seven site-specific case studies across partner countries, each working with a different artistic discipline (Music, Game Jam, Dance, Visual Tech Art, Video games, Performing arts, Scientific Illustration).

- Impact Status: While broader scalability is anticipated, impact is already in progress via the April–May 2026 PDP first cycle pilot designed to guide educators in infusing arts across curricula, involving 137 educators across Europe and the world. 65 participants responded to the feedback survey, showing high satisfaction with the training dispensed: 80% saw the sessions as useful or very useful, 66% perceived new learning outcomes, and 71% felt confident in integrating arts-based education in their practice.
  Early evidence also includes Morocco, where local partnerships are co-creating shared spaces for case study implementation. Between May 2025 and June 2026, the MOSAIC Hubs involved 149 stakeholders in France, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Morocco, Netherlands and Spain.
  In France, the implementation of the case study methodology will start in September 2026 (as in other project countries), generating evidence on how "contributive research" pilots are transforming youth engagement with urban imagination.

Biographies

Marine Masson is a specialist in the strategic development and coordination of European projects (Erasmus+, CERV, Horizon Europe) with a core focus on arts and culture as a driver for social transformation, gender equality, and inclusion. Currently serving as a Science for Policy Specialist at Science For Change (Barcelona), she coordinates the Horizon Europe project PULSE-ART. Her multidisciplinary background, grounded in political sciences with a Master of European Policies in Science Po Strasbourg, allows her to bridge the gap between policy, culture, and education, facilitating transdisciplinary spaces that advocate for the integration of culture and participatory processes into broader socio-economic frameworks, and lifelong learning.

Maria Kyriakidou, PhD, is Professor and Chair of the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences at the American College of Thessaloniki, Greece. Since 1997, she has specialised in Greek history, politics, and

gender studies. A Fulbright scholar, she holds an MA in Anthropology from George Washington University and a PhD in Modern Greek Studies from King’s College London. Dr. Kyriakidou is a prolific researcher, with numerous articles in international journals such as European History Quarterly. Her published work includes a monograph on local democracy and gender, alongside a co-edited volume on women in art. An experienced speaker, she has organised and participated in extensive international conferences and workshops, focusing on the intersection of political history and gender dynamics in the Greek and Mediterranean context.

Paula Pazos Puig is a Researcher at the Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association, specialising in sustainable development, governance, and climate policy. She holds an International Master’s degree in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies from the University of Glasgow. Her work focuses on climate finance, public policy, and regional cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region and Africa, contributing to research and initiatives that support sustainable and inclusive development.Through her involvement in international projects and think-tank networks, including the Mediterranean Alliance of Think Tanks on Climate Change (MATTCCh), she examines how institutions, knowledge systems, and collaborative action can strengthen resilience and social engagement.

Guillaume Pellerin is the General Coordinator of the Institut de Recherche et d’Innovation (IRI) at the Centre Pompidou. As an Arts et Métiers engineer with a PhD in Physics from Sorbonne University, he formerly led the Web-Audio-Music Innovation unit at IRCAM and served as a research professor at CNAM. As a specialist in digital architecture and signal processing, he is a prominent advocate for open innovation, having developed as an entrepreneur numerous participatory and pedagogical platforms for the CNRS (2018 Crystal Collective Award), universities and various international Art-Science based projects. His current interdisciplinary research focuses on the philosophy of technology, decentralized architectures, and experimental methods of "contributive research." His work is central to bridging technical infrastructure with artistic and social environments.

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Cultivating Territorial Resilience: The Role of Cultural Micro-Enterprises as Catalytic Intermediaries

Federica Pesce
Melting Pro

Maura Romano
Melting Pro

Laura Bove
Melting Pro

Ludovica De Angelis
Melting Pro

Abstract

In the current landscape of rapid social and economic change, micro-enterprises within the cultural sector are emerging as essential agents of territorial activation. This paper examines the role of organisations like Melting Pro, which operate as agile intermediaries between Public Administrations and local communities. Drawing on the conceptual framework of "Urban Acupuncture" in resonance with the approach of Jaime Lerner, our practice interprets cultural interventions not as isolated events, but as strategic "sparks" capable of revitalising a territory's broader systemic fabric. By analysing specific methodologies such as the STAR/E (Territorial Storytelling for Regeneration) format, SPACE, and the IEP project, this paper demonstrates how small-scale cultural entities act as vital connectors, facilitating participatory processes that bridge institutional policies with grassroots realities. A core dimension of this work is the management of economic sustainability and financial redistribution. As intermediaries, we operate in a complex ecosystem where grant-based funding is often rigid. Our practice challenges these limitations through a strategic approach to project management: we actively navigate funding opportunities and construct robust networks, often employing creative administrative stewardship to redirect a significant portion of project resources directly towards local artists and community actors. By transforming grant requirements into opportunities for economic impact, we treat cultural funding as a tool for redistributive justice, validating the role of local creative workers and ensuring that the economic benefits of regeneration remain anchored within the territory. Central to this process is the pivotal role of intermediary organisations like Melting Pro, which act as community organisers and strategic facilitators. Crucially, our practice redefines public-private collaboration, viewing it not as a top-down administrative requirement, but as a shared commitment to building territorial capacity. By embedding our work within stable agreements — such as territorial pacts and public-private partnerships — we create a sustainable "nervous system" that outlives individual funding cycles.

Keywords: *Territorial Regeneration, Urban Acupuncture, Cultural Intermediation, Redistributive Sustainability, Hybrid Governance*

1. Introduction: The Paradox of Public Funding and the Peripheral Capacity Gap

Contemporary debate on local economic development and regeneration of marginal territories is dominated by a persistent contradiction. On one hand, supranational and national financial architectures — European Structural Funds, post-pandemic urban agendas, cohesion policy resources, European Direct Funds, and, in Italy, the PNRR (national recovery plan) and the PN Metro Plus / FSE+ programme — make volumes of capital available for social innovation and territorial development. On the other hand, a chronic inability to "ground" these resources persists precisely in the areas with the sharpest social, economic and demographic fragility.

This generates what may be termed the absorption paradox: territories lacking solid technical competences, dedicated European-project offices and resilient bureaucratic structures cannot easily access public calls, or are excluded by the sheer complexity of submission and reporting procedures. For artists and cultural professionals specifically, this asymmetry translates into a narrower, more precarious labour market: those outside already well-resourced hubs struggle to access structured, fairly remunerated commissions, and are often confined to short-term, event-based engagements disconnected from any longer-term territorial strategy.

In this scenario of informational and bureaucratic asymmetry, the figure of the project intermediary needs to be reconsidered. Cultural and creative micro-enterprises are increasingly positioning themselves not as mere technical service providers or compilers of forms, but as genuine territorial activators. They function as the needle of a compass: a flexible device, sensitive to local currents yet

oriented towards macro-institutional funding flows. This paper draws on the direct professional, practice-based experience of Melting Pro, an Italian cultural cooperative operating across participatory design, European and public project management, and cultural heritage, to make explicit — and thereby transferable — a set of operational principles that often remain tacit in day-to-day project practice. It focuses in particular on STAR/E (Storytelling Territoriale per le Aree in Rigenerazione), a territorial storytelling format used here as an illustrative case and described in full in Section 5, situating it alongside two companion methodologies — SPACE and the IEP (Patti Educativi di Comunità) project — which share the same underlying logic of translating community narrative and need into fundable, redistributive project design.

2. Theoretical Framework: Place-Based Development and Urban Acupuncture

2.1 Beyond spatially-blind policy

Economic development planning has long oscillated between centralist, top-down policies and spatially-blind interventions premised on undifferentiated macroeconomic incentives trickling down to disadvantaged areas. As argued in the Barca Report (2009), commissioned by the EU's Directorate-General for Regional Policy, this paradigm has largely failed, exacerbating the decline of vulnerable areas.

The place-based approach instead holds that long-term development depends on activating knowledge embedded in local contexts, through interaction between exogenous knowledge (call guidelines, European standards) and endogenous knowledge (real needs, craft competences, social capital). Cultural micro-enterprises sit at this junction: they possess the interpretive codes of supranational bureaucracy while inhabiting the relational networks of the territory in which they intervene.

2.2 Urban acupuncture as systemic spark

In resonance with the approach theorised by architect and urbanist Jaime Lerner (2014), proximity cultural design can be assimilated to Urban Acupuncture. Lerner argues that revitalising a declining territory does not always require macro-infrastructural interventions, which demand vast timeframes and capital and risk alienating residents. Instead, small, focused, strategically dense interventions — cultural "sparks" — can release latent energies and trigger systemic healing and resilience.

The cultural micro-enterprise acts as the acupuncturist: it identifies the territory's pressure points — a disused building, a marginalised community, a craft tradition at risk of disappearing — and inserts the needle of the project by creating local alliances and co-designing the proposal. The public call becomes the financial resource that charges the needle with energy; the local coalition is the channel through which that energy propagates through the social body.

3. The Creative Intermediary and Administrative Stewardship

Classical sociological and economic literature often defines intermediaries as neutral transaction facilitators. Culture-led territorial regeneration, however, describes a radically different figure: the catalytic intermediary, or activation agent. Organisations such as Melting Pro operate within structurally asymmetric, multi-level governance contexts where funding rules are rigid, oriented towards bureaucratic compliance rather than social impact, and often structured to favour actors with substantial financial guarantees.

To survive and generate impact within this ecosystem, the cultural micro-enterprise must adopt a strategic posture that can be defined as creative administrative stewardship. This practice does not amount to circumventing rules, but to their interpretive reconfiguration for social utility. Stewardship implies taking on the administrative, managerial and financial risk of the project on behalf of the local coalition. European or national calls frequently impose real-cost reporting, advance cash flows and stringent constraints on eligible expenditure categories — conditions that a neighbourhood cultural association, a young social cooperative or a local artisan typically cannot sustain, lacking both liquidity and accounting expertise.

The cultural micro-enterprise interposes itself as a bureaucratic shield: it takes on the role of lead partner or strategic coordinator, absorbs the burden of administrative management, and engineers the project budget so that resources flow directly, transparently and equitably towards local workers and organisations. In other words, it converts bureaucratic constraints into devices of local economic impact. Table 1 summarises the principal differences between a conventional, corporate approach to public calls and the catalytic model enacted by organisations such as Melting Pro.

Dimension	Traditional model (top-down / corporate)	Catalytic model (cultural micro-enterprise)
Approach to the call	Standardisation and replicability of pre-packaged content	Tailored, listening-based (place-based) design
Budget management	Maximisation of internal margin; downward subcontracting	Creative stewardship: channelling of resources to the base
Relationship with Public Administration	Service supply; transactional market relationship	Hybrid governance, territorial pacts and capacity building
Impact factor	Quantitative outputs (e.g. number of events delivered)	Systemic outcomes (e.g. resilience, stable networks)

Table 1. Traditional versus catalytic models of public-call management.

This distinction is not merely rhetorical, though it should not be read as opposing "formats" to listening as such. Standardisation and replicability of pre-packaged contents, typical of the corporate model, allow for economies of scale but tend to flatten the specificity of place. STAR/E, discussed in Section 5, is itself a format — a repeatable methodological structure — yet what it standardises is the listening process, not its output: the sequence of phases is fixed, but the narrative content that fills them is generated locally each time, through engagement with a different community. It is this replicable scaffold for place-based listening, rather than a replicable product, that allows the format to scale across sites while producing outputs legible and meaningful to the communities that generated them, and therefore more likely to be sustained beyond the funding cycle.

A concrete illustration of stewardship in action can be drawn from STAR/E itself. Within the CHANGES call, Melting Pro acted as lead partner, taking on full responsibility for reporting, cash-flow anticipation and compliance with eligible-cost rules — obligations that neither the resident-led neighbourhood associations in Tor Bella Monaca and Lunetta, nor the local videomakers, photographers and storytelling facilitators involved, would have been able to bear individually. Rather than commissioning the production of digital and printed outputs (video, photography, artistic postcards) to an external, structured supplier — the default choice under a standard subcontracting logic, which would have simplified reporting — Melting Pro structured the budget so that a dedicated grant was awarded directly to a local association in each neighbourhood, which then activated and remunerated resident storytellers and creatives as co-researchers. This required Melting Pro to design a grant-award mechanism compliant with the call's procurement and eligibility rules while still allowing funds to reach informal or newly formed local actors — precisely the "interpretive reconfiguration" that distinguishes administrative stewardship from simple compliance. The administrative complexity was absorbed centrally; the economic and professional benefit was distributed locally.

4. Redistributive Justice in Practice: Anchoring Capital to Local Actors

The concept of redistributive justice, historically rooted in the political theory of Rawls and subsequently developed in economic terms by Amartya Sen through the capability approach, finds an empirical declination in territorial project management. Rawls's (1971) difference principle holds that social and economic inequalities are justifiable only insofar as they work to the benefit of the least advantaged members of society — a criterion that can be applied directly to the allocation logic of a public call: a project budget is redistributively just not simply because it spends money in a disadvantaged area, but because its internal distribution of resources measurably improves the position of the area's least advantaged actors, rather than that of external, already well-resourced suppliers.

Sen's (1999) capability approach sharpens this criterion further by shifting the evaluative focus from resources or outcomes as such to the real freedoms — capabilities — that resources enable people to convert into valued functionings, the things a person is actually able to do or be. This distinction matters precisely because project funding is, by its nature, temporary: a single grant cannot itself "stabilise" an artist's income or a local association's finances, and claiming otherwise would sit uneasily with the ephemerality this paper diagnoses elsewhere (Section 6). What a well-designed project can do is capacitate — that is, build the durable infrastructure of recognition, skill, visibility and relational capital through which a local voice or ability gains a space to exist and to flourish beyond the funding cycle itself. Redistributive justice, in this reading, is realised not when a project pays local actors more, but when it expands the capability set from which they can act autonomously afterwards: removing barriers to qualified employment, converting a place's identity-based competences into functionings the community itself values, and leaving behind capacitated actors rather than merely subsidised ones.

When a cultural micro-enterprise intercepts a call and builds a local coalition, the project budget ceases to be a mere accounting document and becomes an instrument of territorial redistribution. In

extractive practices, typical of some large external agencies, budgets fund centralised consultancy while local labour is confined to marginal, under-remunerated roles. In the cooperative model, this flow is reversed: local artists and cultural operators are contracted as researchers, co-designers and trainers, with an active role since the beginning of the proposal.

Neighbourhood associations, residents' committees and small social cooperatives are the historic holders of community trust, or social capital, yet their action is perpetually threatened by financial instability. Including such actors within the formal coalition of a call allows them to access structured funding and, more durably, to consolidate organisational capacity, hire staff and acquire a managerial posture — the capacitated infrastructure that outlasts the project itself.

5. STAR/E: A Methodological Device for Territorial Storytelling

The theoretical framework outlined above finds empirical validation through STAR/E — Storytelling Territoriale per le Aree in Rigenerazione — a proprietary format developed by Melting Pro with Bold Stories. STAR/E proposes tourist itineraries in neighbourhoods undergoing urban regeneration, often characterised by a dominant narrative built on prejudice and stereotype. Through the web experience storytelling-territoriale.it, itineraries can be explored virtually or visited in person, through a step-by-step narrative combining photography, text, artistic postcards and authorial video with authentic local stories.

STAR/E treats storytelling not as ex-post commercial narration but as a social technology applied to financial and territorial co-design, unfolding through three sequential phases. Narrative mapping and ethnographic research elicit a community's memory, tensions and aspirations, with local associations engaged as co-researchers. Project translation converts citizens' expressed needs into project objectives endowed with democratic legitimacy, rather than leaving the narrative material a passive archive. Activation of local labour entrusts the production of outputs entirely to local creatives, generating immediate employment and qualifying resident competences.

The format was first applied in Lunetta (Mantua), developed with Bold Stories and the University of Brescia, and in Tor Bella Monaca (Rome), developed with Sapienza Università di Roma and Spazio Cantiere (Bove & Pesce, 2025). These two areas share the condition of being perceived as "peripheral" relative to cities otherwise renowned for tourism, a dynamic the project challenged by fostering a more authentic narrative. In each neighbourhood, a grant activated participatory storytelling workshops, resulting in physical and digital "artistic postcards" co-created by residents and local artists — specifically Claudia Bernabucci, representing Cubo Libro in Rome, and the Lan.De. SI artistic collective in Mantua.

The format's modular, scalable architecture has since supported replication beyond its original sites: STAR/E has been extended to Campo Parignano, in the municipality of Ascoli Piceno, confirming its transferability to a further peripheral context marked by comparable dynamics of stigmatisation. The replication followed the same three-phase structure, adapted to a smaller, non-metropolitan setting where the density of resident associations is lower — making the micro-enterprise's intermediary role even more decisive in aggregating the local coalition. Each replication follows the redistributive logic of Section 4: through this model, thanks to the funding intercepted and secured by the cultural enterprise, local grants channel resources directly to resident associations and creative practitioners rather than external teams, ensuring that the economic benefit remains anchored within the territory. STAR/E thus functions as infrastructure for redistributive storytelling — concretely, the "needle" of the Urban Acupuncture framework — with each new site added to a growing network visible through the same platform.

The same logic underpins two companion formats: SPACE, addressing the co-design of shared and public spaces through arts and tactical urbanism; and the IEP — Patti Educativi di Comunità, under PN Metro Plus / FSE+ — extending coalition-building to educational communities through alliances between schools, families, associations and local authorities. Together they share a single methodological grammar: mapping, translation into fundable design, and activation of local actors as paid protagonists rather than passive beneficiaries.

6. Towards Hybrid Governance: Building the Territorial "Nervous System"

The most recurrent criticism of culture-based regeneration concerns its ephemeral nature: interventions produce "sparks" that extinguish once the funding cycle ends — the so-called project-ism syndrome. To overcome this, cultural micro-enterprises must evolve from single-project management towards co-creating hybrid governance models: territorial collaboration pacts between Public Administration, third sector and citizens for shared administration of commons and cultural activities; and special public-private partnerships — co-programming and co-design — that supersede competitive procurement in favour of long-term cooperation.

Through these devices, the initial coalition becomes a permanent territorial nervous system, wiring relations between a rigid Public Administration and the fragmented fabric of local associationism. The

Public Administration gains a rooted interlocutor for cohesion policy, while the territory gains a permanent structure for intercepting new resources. The cultural micro-enterprise thus ceases to be a one-off service provider, configuring itself as an element of local development infrastructure.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that cultural and creative micro-enterprises operating as intermediaries represent an irreplaceable resource for local communities' development trajectories. At a moment characterised by an influx of substantial centralised financial resources alongside a shortage of bureaucratic and design competences at the periphery of the system, organisations such as Melting Pro act as interpreters, enablers and multipliers of territorial potential.

Adopting Jaime Lerner's Urban Acupuncture, enriched by operational methodologies such as STAR/E, elevates cultural project-making beyond mere entertainment, positioning it as a practice of socio-economic engineering. Through creative administrative stewardship, the micro-enterprise assumes the burden of technical complexity to democratise access to resources, translating regulatory constraints into opportunities for redistributive justice. The result is a resilient territorial ecosystem, equipped with a capillary nervous system and a hybrid governance capacity able to sustain itself over time.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a persistent knowledge gap between EU and national cohesion policy frameworks and the operational competences required to translate them into locally anchored, equitable outcomes. It contributes practice-based evidence on how small cultural organisations can act as catalytic intermediaries — absorbing bureaucratic complexity on behalf of communities otherwise excluded from structured funding, and redirecting resources towards local artists, artisans and third-sector actors.

The findings are relevant to several stakeholder groups: local associations, artists and cultural workers in peripheral neighbourhoods, who may benefit from fairer remuneration through coalition-based project design; Public Administrations and policymakers seeking rooted interlocutors for regeneration policy; and educators and students of cultural management, for whom STAR/E offers a transferable model connecting participatory storytelling, project engineering and redistributive budgeting.

Likely pathways for uptake include direct replication of the STAR/E format in further regeneration contexts, as already demonstrated by its extension from Tor Bella Monaca and Lunetta to Campo Parignano; integration of the stewardship model into training for cultural managers and public officials; and dissemination through networks such as ENCATC, connecting practitioners engaged in similar territorial challenges.

The expected change is twofold: greater retention of economic value and professional recognition for local creative labour; and a more explicit institutional acknowledgement of cultural micro-enterprises as infrastructural actors within hybrid governance, rather than as short-term service suppliers. Possible indicators include the scale of territorial pacts formalised after a project's conclusion, the proportion of budgets channelled to local actors, the continuity of engagement beyond funding cycles, and the geographical replication of the STAR/E format.

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Author Biographies

Federica Pesce is co-founder and head of the Participatory Storytelling area at Melting Pro. She is an expert in European cooperation and cultural management, specialising in community-driven formats such as STAR/E and the development of professional skills within the cultural sector.

Maura Romano is co-founder and head of the Territorial Regeneration area at Melting Pro. A strategic planner with expertise in urban social innovation, she focuses on creating sustainable governance models and developing formats such as SPACE to leverage cultural heritage for local development.

Laura Bove is an expert in cultural design and community engagement at Melting Pro, where she is head of the Communication Area and co-founder. Her work sits at the intersection of education, culture and territorial identity, where she plays a key role in the operational implementation of storytelling workshops and strategies for territorial activation.

Ludovica De Angelis is co-founder and President of Melting Pro. As a researcher and project manager, she focuses on how technology and innovative narratives enhance cultural experiences, as well as on developing new economic models and integrating transversal skills for creative workers.

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Artistic interventions in social contexts. The role of arts and culture for community building in polarized societies

Prof. Dr. Birgit Mandel
University of Hildesheim

Key words: artistic interventions, community arts, cultural community building, socially engaged arts practices, teaching artists

abstract

Many artists have expanded their working methods into social and socio-political fields, - on the one hand to improve their otherwise precarious income conditions, and on the other hand to increase their societal relevance.

In increasingly polarized societies, the question of what the arts can contribute to social cohesion and democratic capacity building is becoming more urgent.

The research is based on a survey among 33 socially engaged artists in Germany on their motivation, obstacles and strategies; on qualitative expert interviews with artists and facilitators in cultural community building and analyses of examples and a desk top analyses of studies on the social impact of the arts.

The aim of the research project is to find out by which means and under which conditions artists can become productive in social contexts without losing their artistic autonomy.

Introduction

In Germany, the freedom of the arts from political instrumentalization is protected by German fundamental law. The arts are highly publicly funded (15 billion euro per year) to protect them also from economic influences. A rather critical view on “utilizing” the arts for economic or social reasons is deeply anchored in the professional cultural sector (Mandel&Nesemann, 2024). Arts academies mostly still don´t include additional lessons in arts education or management, and the ultimate aim for artists is still to become an autonomous genius in the art world. Artists engaged in cultural education are supposed to be second class artists (Stutz, 2019). This image has changed in other countries since many years due to the so called „educational and social turn“ in the arts (Bishop, 2006). Mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries arts activism and community arts have a long history since the1960th: “These (community) artists challenged beliefs about the universal, transcendent value of art, and the genius of the individual artist, that had shaped elite culture and its institutions in Europe since the enlightenment“ (Matarasso, 2019, p. 22). Today, art mediation, participatory work, and interventionist activities in public space are understood by many artists as an inherent part of artistic practice (Lacy, 2016). The boundaries between arts, art education, outreach, social and political work and arts management are blurring, when artists collaborate with schools, social organisations or residents to develop ideas for neighbourhood community activities and urban development, which corresponds to the role model of the “post-heroic artist” (van den Berg, 2007).

In the discourse on cultural education, the work of artists is regarded as central to empowering people to express themselves and to experience themselves as effective social agents. Empirical studies show that artists can be highly effective in cultural education contexts precisely because of their “authentic,” non-pedagogical mediating role (Keuchel/Aescht 2007). The importance of aesthetic and artistic dimensions has also grown in other areas of society beyond the cultural and educational sectors, including in the

realm of economic innovation where artists are often engaged to create new solutions and way of thinkings.

Currently, the question of how the arts can contribute to community building, helping people to connect beyond social and political differences is becoming increasingly urgent.

In Anglo-Saxon countries, the concept of “cultural community building” refers to community building as part of urban development and cultural placemaking (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010), as well as to civic neighbourhood initiatives (Stern & Seifert, 2002; Lewis 2013), and social activities organized by arts organizations (Borwick, 2012). In the U.S., programs focusing on community building and social cohesion through the arts, have existed since the early 2000s, primarily initiated by organizations like Americans for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. In the German discourse, the term has been established only in recent times, primarily in the context of efforts by public arts organizations to secure their legitimacy and relevance by demonstrating their activities in the areas of cultural participation and social engagement (Mandel&Nesemann, 2024).

Cultural community building is defined for this study as bringing together people from different social groups through shared artistic and cultural activities, in order to foster new, temporary communities, understanding of other social and political perspectives, tolerance, and solidarity.

This paper asks, why and how artists intervene in community building processes, and which kind of conditions they need to effectively enlarge their artistic potential into societal contexts.

1. Why do artists work in social contexts? Motivation and challenges

The survey amongst 33 teaching artists in Germany, who took part in a model project on training their capacities and developing new strategies for arts in social contexts (Mandel, 2022) shows the following motivations and obstacles:

- New source of income
  As German Artists’ Social Insurance Fund shows, even in a country with very high levels of public funding for the arts such, the average annual income of artists is approximately 15,000 euros; only 20 per cent make a living solely from their art. For the artists surveyed, too, participatory work – particularly in schools – is a necessary additional source of income.

- Increasing one’s own visibility
  Artists gain visibility when they work with other people in public contexts, far beyond the art community. Those surveyed cited new contacts and networks, as well as the use of PR by partner organisations, as valuable for their own public relations.

- Collaboration with non-professionals as inspiration for one’s own artistic work
  Artistic work in educational and social contexts offers the opportunity to gain insights into other ways of life and, even more so, to broaden one’s own view through collaboration with people of different generations and from different social or cultural backgrounds, thereby developing new thematic and aesthetic impulses for one’s artistic work.

- Increasing one’s own social relevance
  Empowering others through art and helping to shape social spaces in a meaningful way increased the sense of purpose and relevance of their artistic work for all respondents. The power of collaborative artistic work in bringing people together became clear to them.

Challenges for artists to work in social contexts

From the artists’ perspective, these advantages are offset by a number of challenges:

- Significant organizational effort involved in applying for fees and project funding
  The administrative burden associated with what are often modest fees for participatory work proves to be very high when collaborating with, for example, schools and social institutions. There is often a lack of reliable contact persons. Furthermore, these projects are often accompanied by time-consuming evaluations and reporting requirements.
- The challenge of reconciling one’s own artistic aspirations and interests with participatory work in groups
  Participatory art projects often take up so much time that individual artistic and autonomous work – which is equally important to most artists – becomes virtually impossible.
- A decline in one’s reputation as an artist
  Many feel that their activities in educational and social fields are associated with a loss of standing within the art world. The traditional image of the autonomous artistic genius still influences the hierarchy of recognition within the art world.

2. How do arts work? Characteristics of the arts and their relevance for social dialogue

“The only revolutionary force is the power of human creativity and art. But only under the conditions of a radical expansion of the concept of art does art gain the opportunity to prove that it is the only evolutionary force, capable of dismantling the repressive effects of an aging social system (…) in order to create: a social organism as a work of art, the social sculpture that unfolds through every single human being”, German artist Joseph Beuys explained the power of arts. For him, artistic creation was a ‘social sculpture’, an artistic way of reflecting on society that could potentially be embraced by everyone.

What is it that art alone can do? What inherent characteristics do the arts possess, that are valuable in social contexts?

Surveys of teaching artists in Germany (Mandel, 2022; Eger 2015) show that artistic practices can be summarised as follows:

- Offering differentiated aesthetic perception: perceiving social contexts as images
- Working with tangible materials and performative action: ‘embodied knowledge’ – the body can think
- Asking questions rather than implementing clear objectives: acting with an uncertain outcome
- Experiencing emergence: unexpected possibilities arise
- Ambiguity and a surplus of meaning: there is no single correct interpretation of art; contradictions can coexist
- Freedom from purpose and playful experimentation: anything is possible
- Thinking utopian beyond the boundaries of the existing: everything could also be completely different

Further specific strategies for participatory art-making, from the perspective of the artists interviewed, include:

- the creation of stimulating spaces that are also safe spaces, where everyone feels secure enough to share even personal issues
- an open-ended project concept in which all participants can contribute their own concerns, rather than having to follow a specific artistic concept

How can the arts foster a sense of community in divided societies?

Rabkins finds in his secondary analyses of empirical studies in the US, that „Correlations between arts participation and the motivations and practices of civic engagement are substantial and consistent" (Rabkin, 2017, p.16).

„Arts participation contributes to social cohesion by reducing isolation, encouraging cooperation, and building community networks. Involvement in the arts helps build individual identity, as well as group solidarity. Arts participation helps to resolve conflicts and increase tolerance and cross-cultural understanding by bringing together people from different backgrounds and providing opportunities to recognize the contribution of many segments of the community. Arts participation crosses barriers of social class and ethnicity and leads to residents learning about each other and other neighbourhoods. People involved in the arts meet more people, and participatory arts projects make marginalized groups more visible and promote positive community connections. (Americans for the Arts, o. J.).

A study by the European Commission came to the same result: people who are involved in artistic and cultural projects are often also involved in voluntary work and have good relationships with many people in their neighbourhood (European Commission, 2023).

In summary, the potential of the arts for community-building processes lies in the fact that they facilitate shared aesthetic and emotional experiences, often transcending language barriers, social and political differences and open up for different perspectives.

Artistic instruments for community building:

Artistic Interventions

One concept for autonomous art to have an impact in social and political contexts is that of the 'artistic intervention'. Artistic interventions are unexpected, questioning routines in everyday contexts through shifts, disruptions and new aesthetic experiences (Borries et al., 2012). They can open up spaces for the unpredictable, creating distance to everyday life, and facilitating unexpected insights into e.g. organisations, teams or neighbourhoods. They can create – at least temporarily – independence from existing systemic logics, for example in educational institutions such as schools. "An artistic intervention within the social and physical context of an organisation encourages people to break with routines and change their attitudes. It creates a space in which new ways of seeing, thinking and acting can be explored' (Berthoin Antal, 2019, p. 2). Artistic interventions as a method are therefore characterised by the following strategies: They are temporary and often surprising. They take effect through an 'aesthetic experience of difference' that is distinctly different from everyday routine perception. They are based on artistic research and an exploration of the respective situation, often with an uncertain outcome. The aim is to find the 'unsearched-for', which is also what the English term 'serendipity' stands for.

Example: Joseph Beuys's '7,000 Oaks'

Joseph Beuys put his conviction that art can intervene in social and political contexts in a unique way into practice through numerous art interventions. For documenta 1982, he developed his ecological action 'Urban Afforestation instead of Urban Administration'. He laid 7,000 stones on the forecourt of documenta hall, symbolising the need to replant 7,000 oak trees within the city of Kassel in the coming years – for which he had organised the funding.

Example: Kubick Collective "We Vote"

Kubick is a collective of artists, designers and academics who "aim to disrupt everyday visual and behavioural habits through interventions in public space and to intervene performatively in the here and now". In September 2024, they mixed their own poster creations with the election posters of different political parties for the state election in Thuringia/Germany, displaying them on streets and lampposts. On their posters they asked surprising questions that encouraged reflection like: 'Where can we find

common ground?", "Do you try to understand others?" "Instead of polarisation, we wanted our posters to encourage people to question things, to foster empathy and mutual understanding" (Kubick Kollektiv).

Participative arts and community arts

The concept of participatory art refers to the collaboration between professional artists and non-professionals, which is central to cultural community building as it goes beyond reception of arts and actively involves people.

Matarasso distinguishes between 'participatory art' as the general umbrella term for 'the creation of art by professional artists and non-professional artists' and 'community arts', which is characterised even more strongly by the criterion of equal cooperation between all participants and explicitly defines artistic creation as a 'human right': 'Community art is the creation of art as a human right, by professional and non-professional artists, cooperating as equals, for purposes and to standards they set together, and whose processes, products and outcomes cannot be known in advance' (Matarasso, 2019, p. 63).

A distinction can therefore be made between professional artists, on the one hand, who work in a participatory manner with amateurs as part of their own artistic practice, whilst retaining artistic authority over the work and associating it with their name. And Community artists, on the other hand, whilst initiating the artistic activities of non-professional participants, regard them as equals in an artistic process with an uncertain outcome.

This distinction corresponds to different objectives that may be associated with 'participatory art-making': increasing access to art (often connected to audience development and arts education); creating social change (as a way of empowerment by arts for personal and social change) and advancing cultural democracy (emphasizing that everyone has the right to make arts and be heard) (Matarasso 2019, p. 97). For Matarasso, the aim of community arts is closely linked to the idea of 'cultural democracy': "Cultural democracy is the right and capability to participate fully, freely and equally in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to create, publish and distribute artistic work" (Matarasso 2019, p. 97).

Community arts are a genuine tool for cultural community building. Community music, in particular, has a long history, especially in the USA and England, as a method of bringing people together. The following criteria can be identified as fundamental principles for community music and community arts in general: low-threshold accessibility and inclusion, participation, and the equality of all forms of music and art. Professional artists have the role of 'facilitation' – that is, providing the framework for bringing people together through and with the arts, and for linking social processes with artistic and cultural ones (de Banffi-Hall/Hill, 2017, n.p.).

In doing so, community arts subverts the rules of the art market, developing its own working conditions and its own quality standards, when professional artists and amateurs work together and contribute their ideas on equal footing and with an open-ended approach; when the focus is not on 'art for art's sake' but on the authentic stories and personal concerns of those involved; when previously unheard voices are given a platform, when the process is just as important as the product (Matarasso 2019, p. 108ff).

Community arts can make a unique contribution to fostering community and social cohesion across differences, and thereby also to a more democratic society: „The artistic act is a means of agency in the world, a way to speak and to be heard. When it is made by professional and non-professional artists together, it becomes an expression of shared humanity, different voices in harmony, listening to one another. It becomes a commitment to the idea that we have more in common than separates us, not least in our common human dignity" (Matarasso, 2019, p. 239).

Example: Dortmund Concert Hall – Community Music for the Neighbourhood

The concert hall for classical music in Dortmund has set up its own community music department, where cultural educators work alongside freelance musicians to promote community spirit in the neighbourhood. In the Brückviertel community, they regularly organise community festivals in collaboration with other local organisations and have set up their own neighbourhood choir, which anyone can drop in on and sing along with at any time.

Example: ‘Die Neuen Auftraggeber’: ‘Growing old together in the village’

‘Die Neuen Auftraggeber’, an artistic and social initiative, connects residents of small rural communities with artists, who work alongside them to develop solutions to social problems in the village. For instance, residents of the village of Steinhöfel commissioned the artist groups Rimini Protokoll and Construct Lab to explore the theme: ‘Ageing well together’. The artists interviewed the villagers about the ‘recipes for life’ they use to cope with daily life: from Grandma’s best cheesecake and household tips to singing and meditative weeding. On this basis, a collaborative film was made, and many new ideas for shaping village life were developed.

3. Summary, Impact and Engagement:

The arts have great potential to bring people together by enabling shared aesthetic and cultural experiences, create trust and mutual understanding. There is no right or wrong in them, they can show different perspectives on society, they show diversity as something exciting and enriching, which is a prerequisite for encouraging democracy. This has been shown by several surveys.

Artistic interventions, participative community arts, thrustful collaborations with diverse organisations and communities beyond the art worlds are approaches to engage arts in communities.

However, in order to realize this potential for community building, certain conditions seem to be necessary: According to the artists interviewed in the study, the challenge lies in productively combining participatory work in social contexts with their own artistic approaches.

To achieve this, the art world also needs a new definition of quality in participatory artistic work: which involves combining educational, managerial and artistic expertise to create a new standard of quality that includes bringing people together, building trust and offering encouragement. Thus, the arts are not instrumentalized but – at least temporarily – contribute to mutual understanding as part of the artistic purpose and have effects beyond the rather elitists art world.

Appropriate payment, based on minimum fee thresholds, is necessary to enable artists to carry out the highly demanding work, combining artistic, educational, social and managerial tasks. From the perspective of the artists surveyed, longer-term and ongoing commissions – for example, as ‘artists in residence’ at arts organisations, schools or within local authorities – are helpful in this regard.

Artists’ particular expertise in building communities is urgently needed in times of social division and polarisation. However, more artists will only become involved in these fields if the right conditions are in place – such as fair pay, a significant reduction in bureaucratic and administrative hurdles when applying for project funding, longer-term commissions for artists, and the freedom to engage in experimental work.

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Biography

Prof. Dr. habil Birgit Mandel is professor for Arts and Cultural Management, Cultural Policy and Arts Mediation/Education and head of MA program Arts Mediation, Cultural Policy and Transformation at Hildesheim University.

She is founding member and former president of the Association of Cultural Management Research (Fachverband für Kulturmanagement in Forschung und Lehre) in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

She is head of the Cultural Policy Committe Country of Lower Saxonay, board member of the German National Comittee for Cultural Heritage, the Commerzbank Foundation Frankfurt a. M., the Berlin Neuköllner Opera and the Friedrichstadtpalast Berlin.

She did several research projects in the field of cultural participation, audience development, arts visitor and non-visitor studies; international comparison studies of cultural policy and governance; cultural leadership and transformation of arts organisations and cultural entrepreneurship.

Between Patronage and Power: Rethinking Governance and Decision-Making in Collaborations Between Public Museums and Private Art Collectors

Ms Laura d'Hoore
University of Antwerp

Prof. Annick Schramme
University of Antwerp

Laura D'hoore is enrolled as a PhD researcher at the University of Antwerp since 2026 on *The Changing Relationship between Museums and Private Art Collectors*, a fundamental research project (G067726N) funded by the Flemish Research Foundation (FWO). She holds a Master's degree in Art History from KU Leuven and a Master's in Cultural Management from the University of Antwerp. Since 2021, she has been researcher at the University of Antwerp, contributing to projects on PPPs in the museum sector, museum governance, and the revaluation of crafts. Her work has been presented at ICCPR (2022), ACEI (2025), and MACCH (2026). She is co-editor of the New Perspectives in Cultural Management series (Routledge) and a member of the Flemish Arts Advisory Committee.

Annick Schramme is Professor of Cultural Management at the University of Antwerp and Program Director of the Master's in Cultural Management. She launched the international Master's in Fashion Management (AMS) and the executive program Leadership in Culture (LinC LL) in collaboration with Utrecht University. Her research focuses on cultural policy, cultural entrepreneurship, governance, and sustainable business models. She serves as a policy advisor and evaluator at the European level, is a member of the Flemish UNESCO Commission, and chairs the Strategic Advisory Council for Culture, Youth, Sport, and Media. In 2024, she was appointed UNESCO Chair in Cultural Entrepreneurship and Policy and currently leads several European and FWO-funded research projects.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, collaborations between public museums and private art collectors have become increasingly visible and influential within the contemporary museum landscape. This development reflects broader transformations in cultural governance, changing funding environments, the globalisation of the art market, and the growing prominence of private actors in the production and circulation of cultural value (Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020; Kolbe et al., 2022; Velthuis et al., 2023). The rapid growth of collector founded museums since the early 2000s has created influential institutional actors involved not only in exhibition-making but also in collecting, commissioning, research, education, and the construction of artistic canons (Kolbe et al., 2022; Velthuis et al., 2023). At the same time, public museums have become increasingly dependent on external support due to financial pressures, rising acquisition costs, intensified competition within the global art market, and broader processes of marketisation (Brown, 2019; Brenton, 2020; Aroles & Morrell, 2024). Within this context, collaborations with private collectors have become an important means of accessing artworks, financial resources, expertise, networks, and symbolic capital (Berg, 2025). These collaborations take diverse forms, including long-term loans, donations, exhibition partnerships, sponsorships, collection-sharing agreements, advisory roles, and co-curation (Walker, 2024; Berg, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly attention to public–private relationships in the museum sector, the governance implications of these collaborations remain insufficiently understood. Existing research documents their expansion and highlights concerns regarding private influence, institutional autonomy, public accountability, and cultural value production (Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020; Berg, 2025). However, much of this literature focuses on controversies surrounding specific collaborations (Chung et al., 2022;

Wessman et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2022; Berg, 2025), broader shifts in cultural power (Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020; Kolbe, 2024), or governance principles designed to safeguard public values (Toporoff, 2021; Žuvela et al., 2023; Gustafsson & Amer, 2023; Mendoza & Talavera, 2025). Less attention has been devoted to understanding how authority, legitimacy, and public value are negotiated within collaborative arrangements. Yet the long-term sustainability and societal legitimacy of such collaborations depend not only on outcomes but also on decision-making processes, the prioritisation of interests, and the ways claims to public value are justified and accepted by stakeholders (Reynaers, 2013; Haack et al., 2021; Schoon, 2022).

To address this issue, this paper conceptualises museum collector collaborations as governance arrangements in which authority, legitimacy, and public value are continuously negotiated among interdependent actors. Drawing on cultural governance scholarship (Osborne et al., 2021; King & Schramme, 2023) and public–private partnership research (Skelcher & Smith, 2015; Xiong et al., 2019), the paper views governance as a relational process through which roles, responsibilities, interests, and forms of authority are coordinated and contested. From this perspective, publicness, legitimacy, and cultural authority are not fixed institutional attributes but outcomes of interaction, deliberation, and negotiation among actors with different resources, values, and objectives (Reynaers, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2017; Haack et al., 2021). Against this background, the paper asks: *How can governance processes in collaborations between public museums and private art collectors be conceptualised, and how do these processes shape the negotiation of authority, legitimacy, and public value?* In response, this paper aims at developing a theoretical framework for museum collector collaborations, integrating insights from cultural governance theory, public–private partnership research, museology, stakeholder theory, and legitimacy studies. Existing approaches tend to examine museum collector collaborations through the lenses of organisational form, resource exchange, governance principles, or legitimacy outcomes. This paper argues that these collaborations are better understood as governance processes in which authority, legitimacy, and public value are continuously negotiated across multiple levels. By integrating institutional logics, resources and power, governance arrangements, decision-making processes, and governance outcomes within a single analytical framework, the model attempts to capture interdependent governance dynamics and outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Museum collector collaborations are embedded within broader macro transformations in cultural governance, cultural policy, and the contemporary art world. Across many Western countries, cultural policy has shifted from models of direct public provision towards governance arrangements that encourage collaboration among public institutions, private actors, and civil society stakeholders (Reynaers, 2013; Žuvela et al., 2023; Mendoza & Talavera, 2025). At the same time, public museums face rising acquisition costs, intensified competition, pressures for audience growth, and increasing expectations of financial sustainability (Brenton, 2020; Aroles & Morrell, 2024). These developments have coincided with the rapid expansion of private museums, collector-founded institutions, and philanthropic foundations, creating a more interconnected cultural ecosystem in which public and private actors jointly participate in the production, circulation, and legitimisation of cultural value (Kolbe et al., 2022; Velthuis et al., 2023). As authority over artistic recognition and cultural valuation becomes increasingly dispersed, museum collector collaborations bring together actors with different resources, interests, and forms of influence (Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020; Kolbe, 2024). Resource dependence theory suggests that organisations collaborate to access resources they cannot easily secure independently, creating mutual dependencies that shape decision-making and influence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Public museums may seek access to artworks, funding, expertise, networks, and philanthropic capital, while collectors benefit from the symbolic legitimacy, visibility, and scholarly authority associated with museums (Hagan, 2011; Berg, 2025). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1996) conception of cultural fields, influence derives not only from economic resources but also from cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Collectors may exercise influence

through ownership of sought-after artworks, market expertise, reputational standing, and elite networks, while museums possess authority derived from their public mission and curatorial expertise (Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020). Understanding these distributions of resources and power is therefore essential for analysing why actors collaborate and how influence is exercised, negotiated, and contested within governance processes.

At the institutional meso level, museum collector collaborations can be understood as governance arrangements that structure how authority, responsibilities, resources, and decision-making rights are distributed among participating actors. Public–private partnership (PPP) scholarship provides a useful lens because it conceptualises collaboration not merely as a contractual exchange but as a governance process through which public and private actors coordinate actions, manage interdependencies, and pursue shared objectives (Hodge & Greve, 2007; Reynaers, 2014; Osborne et al., 2021). PPPs encompass a variety of arrangements characterised by different distributions of risks, responsibilities, resources, and authority (Hodge, 2010; Reynaers, 2014), a diversity that is equally visible in museum collector collaborations (Hagan, 2011; Berg, 2024). Governance arrangements should therefore be understood not as neutral organisational structures but as mechanisms through which collaboration is organised and influence is exercised. Research on collaborative governance emphasises that successful partnerships depend on both formal structures, such as contracts and accountability mechanisms, and informal dimensions including trust, reciprocity, communication, and shared objectives (Xiong et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2021). In the museum sector, governance arrangements encompass the practices through which museums and collectors coordinate expectations, manage conflicts, and establish acceptable boundaries of influence. Recent work similarly highlights the importance of hybrid governance models capable of integrating diverse stakeholders while safeguarding institutional missions and public responsibilities (Mendoza & Talavera, 2025).

While governance arrangements provide the structures within which collaboration occurs, authority becomes visible through decision-making processes. At the micro level, museum collector collaborations involve ongoing negotiation over acquisitions, loans, exhibitions, conservation, interpretation, public communication, and broader strategic priorities. Decision-making within hybrid arrangements rarely follows a simple hierarchical logic but instead emerges through interaction among actors possessing different resources, interests, expertise, and forms of authority (Skelcher & Smith, 2015; Osborne et al., 2021). Consequently, decision-making is not merely a technical activity but a process through which competing understandings of cultural value, institutional priorities, and public responsibilities are reconciled, contested, or reinforced. Research on inter-organisational collaboration emphasises the importance of aligning interests, managing tensions, and creating shared ambitions among participants (Kaats & Opheij, 2014). Because museums and collectors often operate from different institutional logics and possess unequal resources, decision-making frequently involves negotiation over participation, representation, expertise, and authority as well as substantive outcomes. Museum studies similarly highlight that exhibition-making, collection management, and conservation require balancing multiple stakeholder interests through compromise, deliberation, and mutual adjustment (Waller & Henderson, 2024). Governance is therefore enacted through everyday interactions that determine whose priorities, interpretations, and values become institutionalised.

Underlying all stages of museum collector collaborations is the continuous construction and evaluation of legitimacy. Contemporary legitimacy scholarship conceptualises legitimacy not as a fixed organisational attribute but as a socially constructed process through which actors, decisions, and institutional arrangements are judged to be appropriate and acceptable within prevailing norms and expectations (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). Legitimacy is neither guaranteed by public status nor automatically undermined by private involvement. Rather, it emerges through the evaluations of multiple audiences, including museum professionals, collectors, policymakers, artists, art market actors, academics, and wider publics (Bitektine, 2011; Haack et al., 2021; Schoon, 2022). Within museum collector

collaborations, legitimacy concerns are particularly salient because partnerships bring together actors with different positions, value systems, and sources of authority. Decisions concerning exhibitions, acquisitions, sponsorships, governance roles, and collection loans may raise questions about curatorial independence, public accountability, transparency, and the boundaries of private influence (Hagan, 2011; Brown, 2019; Quemin, 2020; Berg, 2025). Legitimacy therefore depends not only on formal governance design but also on whether stakeholders perceive decision-making processes and outcomes as fair, appropriate, and aligned with public purposes. Multi-level theories further suggest that legitimacy depends on both individual evaluations of appropriateness and their broader social validation (Tost, 2011; Haack et al., 2021). Examining these processes is essential for understanding why some collaborations gain acceptance while others generate controversy, resistance, or challenges to institutional trust.

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual and theory-building approach situated within the exploratory phase of an ongoing research project (2026-2029), funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) (G067726N), examining collaborations between public museums and private art collectors. The objective is to develop a theoretical framework for analysing how authority, legitimacy, and public value are negotiated within museum collector collaborations. The framework was developed through an integrative review of literature from cultural governance studies, public private partnership research, museum studies, cultural sociology and legitimacy theory. In addition, a document analysis of published case studies, policy documents, governance guidelines, and scholarly accounts of museum collector collaborations was undertaken to illustrate and refine the framework’s analytical dimensions. By synthesising insights from these complementary bodies of scholarship, the study identifies key dimensions shaping governance processes in hybrid cultural arrangements and integrates them into a multi-level analytical model. Drawing on concepts of institutional logics, resource dependencies, power relations, governance arrangements, decision-making processes, legitimacy construction, and public value creation, the analysis focuses on their interconnections and relevance for understanding museum collector collaborations as governance arenas. The paper therefore follows an abductive, theory-building logic aimed at generating concepts that can guide future empirical investigation.

A Framework for Museum Collector Collaborations

This paper proposes a governance framework for analysing collaborations between public museums and private art collectors. Rather than viewing such collaborations as resource exchanges or contractual arrangements, the framework conceptualises them as governance arenas in which actors continuously negotiate authority, legitimacy, and public value. To capture these dynamics, it integrates five interconnected dimensions: (1) institutional logics, (2) resources, interests, and power, (3) governance arrangements, (4) negotiated decision-making processes, and (5) governance outcomes. The framework is further informed by Kaats and Opheij’s (2014) work on inter-organisational collaboration and the Cologne Decision-Making Model (2019). While Kaats and Opheij emphasise shared ambitions, mutual interests, trust, organisational alignment, and process management, the Cologne model highlights the iterative nature of decision-making through stakeholder engagement, deliberation, evaluation, and justification. Together, these perspectives reinforce the framework’s process-oriented understanding of governance by highlighting the relational and decision-making mechanisms through which collaborative arrangements are enacted.

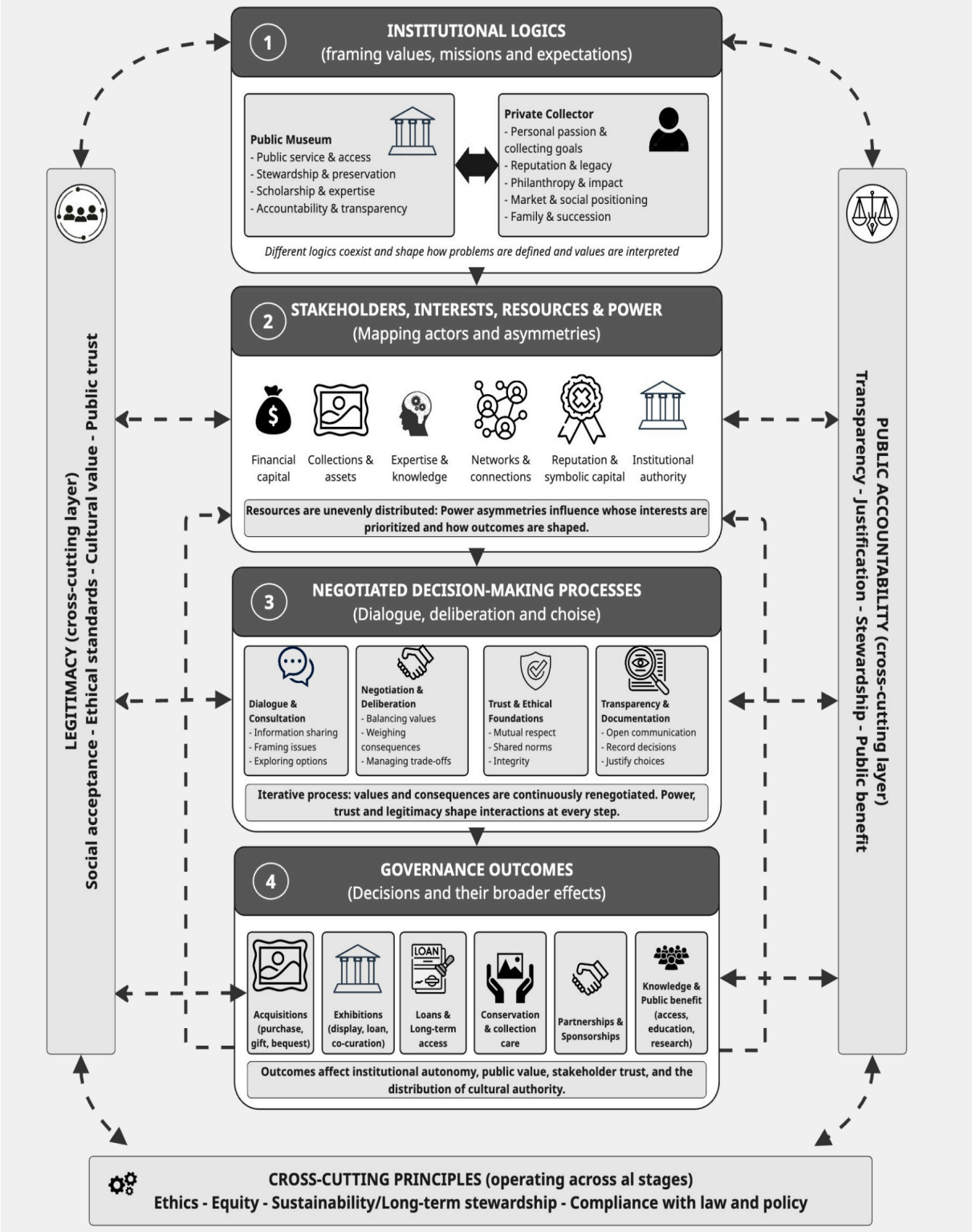


Fig. 1. Museum Collector Collaboration Framework

The framework should be interpreted as an integrated governance process rather than as a linear sequence of stages. The first dimension, (1) **Institutional Logics**, captures the values, missions, and expectations that public museums and private collectors bring to the collaboration and which shape how opportunities, risks, and objectives are interpreted. Building upon these underlying logics, (2) **Stakeholders, Resources and Power** maps the actors involved and the resources they contribute, highlighting how differences in expertise, collections, financial capital, networks, symbolic capital, and institutional authority create power asymmetries that influence collaboration. These dynamics are

subsequently translated into concrete organisational structures through **Governance Arrangements**, which encompass the formal and informal mechanisms through which responsibilities, decision rights, participation, and accountability are organised. Within these arrangements, (3) **Negotiated Decision-Making Processes** represent the arena in which actors engage in dialogue, deliberation, negotiation, and justification to address competing interests and reach decisions regarding acquisitions, exhibitions, loans, conservation, and other collaborative activities. The interaction of these dimensions ultimately produces (4) **Governance Outcomes**, including both tangible outcomes such as exhibitions, acquisitions, and partnerships, and broader (intangible) outcomes related to public value, institutional autonomy, stakeholder trust, and the distribution of cultural authority. Throughout all dimensions, legitimacy and public accountability operate as cross-cutting considerations that shape how decisions are justified, evaluated, accepted, or contested by stakeholders and wider publics.

The framework is intended as an analytical tool for examining how governance processes unfold within collaborations between public museums and private art collectors. Rather than assuming that governance outcomes are determined solely by formal institutional arrangements or the public or private status of participating actors, the framework directs attention to the interactions through which authority, legitimacy, and public value are negotiated. The five dimensions should therefore not be interpreted as separate or sequential stages, but as interconnected elements that continuously influence one another. Institutional logics shape actors’ expectations and objectives; resources and power affect whose interests carry greater weight; governance arrangements structure opportunities for participation and influence; and decision-making processes translate these dynamics into concrete outcomes. Throughout these interactions, legitimacy and public accountability function as cross-cutting dimensions that influence how decisions are justified, accepted, contested, or revised. The framework can be applied both retrospectively and prospectively. Retrospectively, it can be used to analyse existing collaborations by identifying the actors involved, the resources and interests they bring, the governance structures through which decisions are organised, and the ways legitimacy and public value are constructed throughout the process. Prospectively, it can serve as a heuristic tool for designing and evaluating collaborative arrangements by helping stakeholders identify potential tensions, power asymmetries, accountability challenges, and areas requiring greater dialogue or transparency. Empirically, the framework provides a structured lens for analysing interviews, observations, governance documents, contracts, policy texts, and decision-making processes across different cases.

Discussion

This section illustrates the analytical value of the framework by applying it to several documented collaborations between museums and private collectors. The examples demonstrate how different dimensions of the framework help explain governance dynamics in public private museum partnerships. The first dimension, **Institutional Logics**, highlights how actors define the purpose and role of museums. The Beyeler Museum (Switzerland) illustrates that the distinction between public and private institutions cannot be reduced to ownership structures alone. Although privately managed and only partly supported by public funding, its collection practices closely resemble those of public museums. As Frey and Meier (2003) observe, the museum does not deaccession works, prioritises long-term stewardship over financial value, and frequently relies on reciprocal exchanges rather than monetary compensation for loans. This case demonstrates how public-service logics can be adopted within privately governed institutions, although questions about long-term stewardship are raised. The second dimension, **Resources, Interests and Power**, draws attention to the ways in which financial and symbolic resources can be converted into influence. Brown (2019) shows how collectors and philanthropic families, such as the Moulin family through Lafayette Anticipations (France), increasingly shape cultural production rather than merely supporting it. Similar debates surrounding their sponsorship and donor involvement at the 2017 Venice Biennale (Italy) reveal that resources extend beyond financial contributions to include networks, visibility, expertise, and symbolic capital. The key governance question is therefore not whether private

actors possess resources, but how their influence is balanced against public accountability and institutional autonomy. The third and fourth dimensions, **Governance Arrangements** and **Negotiated Decision-Making Processes**, focus on how authority is structured and exercised in practice. The collaboration between the National Museum of Norway (Norway) and the Fredriksen Family Art Company Ltd. illustrates the importance of clearly defined governance arrangements. Berg and Larsen (2025) show that controversy emerged partly because the agreement did not explicitly establish the museum’s final authority in cases of professional disagreement. By contrast, initiatives at FOAM Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam (The Netherlands) demonstrate how decision-making increasingly occurs through dialogue and collaboration. According to Van Mensch (2017), collectors, curators, dealers, photographers, and conservators are actively brought together in programmes that facilitate the exchange of expertise and perspectives. Such initiatives illustrate that governance is not only embedded in formal structures but also in ongoing processes of negotiation and relationship-building. Rather than viewing public private collaborations as inherently beneficial or problematic, these cases show that their outcomes depend on how institutional logics, resources, governance structures, and decision-making processes interact in practice.

Conclusion

Collaborations between public museums and private art collectors have become an increasingly significant feature of contemporary museum ecosystems, reflecting broader transformations in cultural governance, funding structures, and the distribution of cultural authority. While existing scholarship has documented the growth of these collaborations and highlighted concerns regarding private influence, institutional autonomy, and public value, less attention has been devoted to understanding the governance processes through which these issues are negotiated. In response, this paper asked how governance processes in museum collector collaborations can be conceptualised and how they shape the negotiation of authority, legitimacy, and public value. Drawing on cultural governance theory, public private partnership research, museum studies, collaboration studies, and legitimacy scholarship, the paper developed a *Museum Collector Collaboration Framework*. The framework conceptualises collaborations not merely as resource exchanges or contractual arrangements, but as governance arenas in which actors continuously negotiate values, interests, responsibilities, and authority. By integrating institutional logics, resources and power, governance arrangements, negotiated decision-making processes, and governance outcomes, while treating legitimacy and public accountability as cross-cutting concerns, the framework provides a structured lens for analysing contemporary museum collector relationships. Conceptually, this paper advances a process-oriented understanding of museum governance centred on negotiation and interaction. Practically, it provides a diagnostic framework for assessing governance tensions, public value, and institutional legitimacy.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a significant knowledge gap in understanding how governance processes operate within collaborations between public museums and private art collectors. While existing scholarship has documented the growing prevalence of such collaborations and highlighted concerns regarding private influence, institutional autonomy, and public accountability, less attention has been given to how authority, legitimacy, and public value are negotiated in practice. By developing a *Museum Collector Collaboration Framework*, this study provides a structured approach for analysing how stakeholders navigate competing interests, resources, and expectations within increasingly hybrid cultural environments.

The findings are relevant to museum directors, curators, collection managers, private collectors, cultural foundations, policymakers, and researchers. The framework may also be valuable for educators and students in museum studies, cultural policy, and arts management, offering a practical tool for understanding contemporary governance challenges in the cultural sector. As collaborations between

public and private actors continue to expand internationally, stakeholders require analytical instruments that support transparent, accountable, and publicly legitimate forms of cooperation.

Potential pathways to impact include the use of the framework in governance reviews, partnership design, policy development, professional training, and strategic decision-making within museums and cultural organisations. The framework can help stakeholders identify governance risks, power asymmetries, accountability gaps, and legitimacy challenges before they develop into conflicts. It may also encourage dialogue about roles, responsibilities, decision-making rights, and public value objectives among collaborating partners. The expected impact of this research is improved governance capacity within museum collector collaborations, contributing to more transparent, balanced, and socially legitimate partnerships. Over time, this may strengthen public trust in cultural institutions while supporting sustainable collaboration between public and private actors. Evidence of future impact may include the adoption of the framework in publications, professional training and policy discussions, and its application within the ongoing FWO-funded research project.

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Special Public-Private Partnerships (SPPP) in Italy: Redefining Participation and Sustainability in Cultural Heritage

Dr. Giorgia Dato
University of Bari Aldo Moro

Dr. Giovanna Muraglia
University La Sapienza, of Rome

Prof. Mariavittoria Cicellin
University of Napoli, Federico II

Dr. Adriana Scuotto
University of Napoli, Federico II

Prof. Stefano Consiglio
University of Napoli, Federico II

Although this contribution is the result of the joint work of all authors, for the purposes of academic evaluation, it is specified that G. Dato authored sections 2. Background, 4.1 Ex Monastero del Carmine Bergamo, 4.3 The Lilibeo Marsala Archaeological Park (PALM), and 5. Conclusion; G. Muraglia authored sections 1. Introduction, 3. Methodology, and 4.2. Palazzo Tiberio di Sepino. Finally, the section Impact & Engagement is to be attributed to all authors.

1. Introduction

In the italian context, the gradual reduction in public resources and the downsizing of cultural institutions have weakened the protection and promotion of widespread cultural heritage, rendering traditional management models - centered on vertical and conservative approaches - inadequate (Consiglio & Riitano, 2015; Žuvela et al., 2023). In this context, innovation and cultural entrepreneurship emerge as essential conditions for ensuring resilience and sustainability, facilitating the transition toward participatory and collaborative governance models (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Michelini, 2012). At the heart of this transition lie hybrid governance models (Cicellin & Scuotto, 2022), capable of integrating public institutions, private actors, and civil society, thereby overcoming the traditional public/private dichotomy. These frameworks redefine value creation by combining economic sustainability with social impact, and require new managerial skills geared toward managing multi-stakeholder and participatory processes (Quélin et al., 2017; Volpe, 2024).
An analysis of bottom-up revitalisation initiatives highlights the pioneering role of communities in activating heritage, but also reveals structural challenges related to fragmentation, financial instability, and difficulties in replicability. Special Public-Private Partnerships (SPPPs) fit into this context; they are instruments that institutionalise such participatory practices, offering greater continuity and integration with territorial planning.
Through three Italian case studies and a stakeholder analysis framework, this research investigates whether SPPPs succeed in ensuring meaningful participation and generating social value.

2. Background

The italian national regulatory framework designed to safeguard and promote cultural heritage has historically been affected by a polarization between public prerogatives and the dynamism of private initiatives. Within this framework, the contribution of private actors has remained confined to purely contractual or sub-concession arrangements, reducing the operator to a mere provider of ancillary services and depriving it of the role of a strategic actor in the enhancement process.
The emergence of the SPPP marks a genuine paradigm shift from ordinary procurement procedures, avoiding contractual rigidity to recalibrate asset management in accordance with the principles of horizontal subsidiarity and, as noted in the most recent doctrinal legal research, shared administration (Antoniazzi, 2024; D’Isanto, 2024b). In this trajectory, the SPPP transcends the hierarchical synallagma to institutionalise a model of equal cooperation, centered on co-design and the alignment of objectives among institutions and stakeholders.
Introduced by Article 151(3) of Legislative Decree 50/2016, the SPPP serves as an "open," hybrid framework designed to overcome the structural limitations of traditional cultural service

concessions (D'Isanto, 2024a). As clarified by early ministerial guidelines (MiC note, June 9, 2016), the instrument operates as a flexible, atypical model. Bypassing the taxonomic rigidity of standard public procurement contracts, the SPPP effectively fosters the restoration and enhancement of underappreciated cultural heritage sites (Consiglio et al., 2019).
To mitigate these issues, the Ministry of Culture issued Circular No. 10/2025, which introduces Guidelines on the SPPP to clarify the conditions for legitimacy, selection procedures, and co-design methods, with the aim of standardising administrative practices.

3. Methodology

The analysis is part of wider research carrying out in partnership with different Italian Institutional Organisations, which helped us to choose initiatives and informants to interview.
This research focuses on three bottom-up case studies, selected to ensure typological diversity of the heritage sites (monumental complex, historic building, archaeological site) and geographical distribution across the peninsula.
Given the complexity of the phenomenon—characterised by multiple stakeholders and information asymmetries—the research is exploratory in nature, based on empirical evidence and documentary analysis. This allows us to move beyond a purely dogmatic interpretation of SPPP, focusing instead on cooperative practices, operational challenges, and emerging participatory configurations in various territorial contexts (Ansell & Gash, 2018).
From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, the study adopts stakeholder analysis (Moreno-Mendoza et al., 2019; Snis et al., 2021), which is used to identify, classify, and evaluate the actors involved in valorization processes. This approach proved essential for mapping the relational networks of partnerships, highlighting the different levels of power, interest, and decision-making capacity among public, private, and civic actors.
A preliminary phase involved data collection based on literature review, institutional documents (such as project documents) and desk analysis. Despite the fragmented nature of the national information landscape, engagement with active organisations made it possible to map 51 Italian SPPPs' initiatives in the management and enhancement of cultural heritage (fig.1).



Fig.1 Mapping of SPPPs for Cultural Heritage (authors' own elaboration)

The empirical research is supported by semi-structured interviews with public officials and private partners, conducted remotely between October 2025 and March 2026, lasting an average of 60 minutes and recorded with prior consent. The sample, collected between October 2025 and June 2026, includes both top-down institutional trajectories and bottom-up initiatives driven by the Third Sector and citizens (Consiglio & Riitano, 2015).
In line with sociological and organisational paradigms, the qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews is a specific choice for understanding the negotiation processes and rationales for action among institutions, market, and communities, rather than focusing solely on quantitative dimensions (Yin, 2009).
Stakeholder mapping consists of four phases: identification of the parties involved; analysis of roles, profiles, and expectations; prioritisation of needs according to power/interest matrices (Mendelow, 1991; Olander, 2007); and direct involvement of the actors in the project's implementation.
Starting with an initial categorisation of stakeholders - which allows for the identification of internal and external actors - it is then possible to proceed with further identification based on the two parameters of power (or influence) and interest. Internal stakeholders include public entities, identified in this study as the municipality. External stakeholders, on the other hand, include regions, provinces, private entities, nonprofit organisations, residents of the area where cultural and landscape assets are located, universities, academies, volunteer organisations, students, researchers, visitors, and tourists.
Influence (or power) is determined by factors such assize, representativeness, current and potential resources, knowledge, specific expertise, and strategic location. The level of interest is determined by the relevance of the policy in question to the stakeholder's sphere of action and objectives, and by the lobbying efforts that stakeholders may undertake to promote or assert their interests or to facilitate their participation in the decision-making process.
By cross-referencing these two attributes in a matrix, three additional categories of stakeholders emerge: essential, attractive, and weak.

Tab. 1: Stakeholder analysis

	INFLUENCE		
INTER		LOW	HIGH
LOW		**Weak Stakeholder** Minimal monitoring and general reporting	**Latent Stakeholder** Categories to involve
HIGH		**Stakeholder to be involved** Categories to inform	**Key Stakeholder** Category that is necessary to involve

Source: Ministero della Cultura (2016, p. 3)

The influence/interest matrix adopted in this research is not a static tool, but a dynamic framework (Mendelow, 1981; Ministero della Cultura, 2016; Olander, 2007) that can evolve over time. The placement of actors in the matrix is also the result of the authors' interpretation based on semi-structured interviews, documentation, and empirical evidence. This assessment contains a subjective component, though mitigated by the triangulation of sources, and the matrix thus serves a heuristic and interpretive function in describing relational dynamics and degrees of involvement in SPPs.
Ultimately, participatory approaches should not be understood as a simple transfer of responsibility from institutions to private actors. Cultural heritage management is not limited to striking a balance between management and promotion but involves building new forms of relationship with the local area and its stakeholders, engaging not only the cultural sector but also the scientific-technological, economic, and socio-institutional sectors.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Ex Monastero del Carmine Bergamo

The subject of this analysis is the Former Monastery of the Carmine, a monumental complex of

approximately 4,000 square metres in the historic centre of Bergamo, dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries and subject to preservation restrictions. Since 1996, it has housed the Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo (TTB), a social cooperative active in theater research and education since 1973. Before the partnership was formalised, the TTB occupied 358 square metres under a temporary lease, while still ensuring the maintenance and public use of the spaces.

The cooperation process began after a public tender failed in 2015 and materialised in 2018 with the signing of a 20-year, renewable SPPP agreement. The model excludes direct municipal funding for the restoration, assigning the entire business risk to the private partner and relying on a hybrid fundraising strategy (Art Bonus, crowdfunding, foundations, and donations), while the municipality's annual contribution of 18,000 euros is allocated exclusively to cultural and social programming. The regeneration plan is divided into three phases: the first, already completed, restored the theater hall, the foyer, and the Chapter Hall; the second involves the construction of a guesthouse for artists; the third concerns the redevelopment of the cloister, the upper floors, and the vertical access systems. The initiative is grounded in an anti-gentrification vision, conceiving the Carmine as a civic hub open to residents and "temporary citizens," with a design focused on accessibility and the preservation of the property's public function.

Management of the partnership is entrusted to a Technical Committee that meets every six months; moving beyond a purely asset-based approach, it has successfully integrated the Department of Culture and the Superintendency through a "flexible" relational approach capable of fostering processes of collaborative governance. The economic resilience of the model is ensured by a participatory funding system (as evidenced by the "Wall of Donors"), synergies with the academic world, and innovative heritage storytelling practices, such as a voice archive and interactive digital tours. The TTB case illustrates the evolution of a SPPP from a technical-real estate tool to a cultural-community model. The interest/influence matrix (Table 2) is fundamental for analysing how a partnership manages the transfer of power between technical and cultural offices, how it involves donors and residents without formal decision-making structures, and how it balances the private sector's managerial autonomy with institutional oversight.

Tab. 2: Stakeholders' analysis of SPPP for Ex Monastero del Carmine

	INFLUENCE		
INTEREST		**Low**	**High**
	Low	**Tourists,** Service providers, Local media Community in transit (Erasmus students, workers) Weak stakeholder	**MiC,** Department of Culture, Foundations and grant-makers Cooperative representative bodies Latent stakeholders
	High	**Local Communityadn residents**, Schools, University, Trainees, Local Associations, Donors, Artists-in-residence Stakeholder to be involved	**TTB -Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo,** Municipality of Bergamo, The Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape Key stakeholder

Source: Authors' own elaboration

This is a prime opportunity to test engagement strategies in contexts characterised by high urban visibility and intense tourist pressure. Furthermore, the success of the partnership does not lie in contractual rigidity, but in the ability to absorb initial asymmetries, transform formally weak stakeholders into qualitative drivers of planning, and balance private autonomy with public oversight without conflicts over responsibilities. The main strategic recommendation is to institutionalise proven relational practices: formalise the Department of Culture's presence on the technical committee, codify community feedback mechanisms, and document the process in an open-source operational manual to ensure replicability and resilience in the face of administrative changes. From this perspective, the matrix is not a static classification tool, but a dynamic compass for adaptive governance—essential for transforming a pioneering experiment into a structural model of participatory cultural regeneration.

4.2. Palazzo Tiberio di Sepino

The focus of the revitalisation effort is Palazzo Tiberio, an 18th-century historic building owned by the municipality (approximately 560 square meters over three floors plus an attic), formerly a school and now decommissioned but renovated and accessible. The property is protected under Legislative Decree 42/2004 and, due to its proximity to the Saepinum-Altilia Archaeological Park, represents a potential catalyst for the regeneration of the historic center and the development of the local tourism sector.
Following regional funding of approximately 300,000 euros (2020) for a virtual museum hub, the cultural cooperative JustMO' submitted a bottom-up proposal in 2022. The SPPP was formalised in 2024 pursuant to Article 151 of Legislative Decree 50/2016, with a renewable term of 25 years. The project involves an upfront investment of approximately 294,000 euros by the cooperative, with support from LegaCoop Molise and technical assistance from the Fitzcarraldo Foundation.
The MAT project (Museum, Archaeology, Archive, Environment, Hospitality, and Territory) project involves repurposing the spaces into a community and coworking hub (Spazio MAT), a virtual museum on Samnite civilisations in collaboration with the Federico II University of Naples (MAT Virtual Museum), a digital archive of 20th-century Molise history (Archivio XX|20), and complementary services such as Caffè MATto, an information desk, and a bookstore.
The governance structure is centered on a joint Technical Committee composed of representatives from the municipal administration and the private partner. The economic sustainability model integrates various sources of revenue, ranging from museum admission fees—with discounts for residents—to space rentals, as well as the attraction of resources through research grants (the CHANGES project). Central to the project is the dimension of public archaeology, fostered by constant collaboration with the Superintendency and the Park, as well as by the active involvement of the local population and educational institutions in the processes of reclaiming the heritage.

Tab. 3: Stakeholders' analysis of SPPP for Palazzo Tiberio

	INFLUENCE		
INTEREST		**Low**	**High**
	Low	**Casual tourists,** Service providers, Local media Returnee communities. Weak stakeholder	**Regione Molise,** LegaCoop Molise, Istituto di credito, Archaeological Park of Saepinum Fondazione Fitzcarraldo. Latent stakeholders
	High	**Community of Sepino,** Schhols, Local Associations, Universities. Stakeholder to be involved	**JustMO' soc. coop.** Municipality of Sepino The Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape. Key stakeholder

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The Sepino case serves as a pioneering model for inland areas, where the private sector provides resources and expertise upfront, the public sector guarantees the asset and initial funding, and the community is involved from the very beginning. The Interest/Influence matrix is essential for mapping how a bottom-up partnership distributes power and expectations among financial institutions (the Region, banks), regulatory bodies (the Superintendency), scientific institutions (the University, Fitzcarraldo), social entities (schools, residents), and management entities (the cooperative), ensuring strategic alignment in a context of limited resources.

4.3 The Lilibeo Marsala Archaeological Park (PALM)

Established in 2019, the PALM is centered primarily on the Capo Boeo Archaeological Area, a 28-hectare site that preserves a significant portion of ancient Lilybaeum. Its close integration with the contemporary urban fabric and the presence of satellite sites scattered throughout the city have historically increased the complexity of its management, a challenge exacerbated by the fragmentation of administrative responsibilities during the transition from the Superintendency to the Park Authority. To combat deterioration and a lack of public resources, the ArcheOfficina cooperative—active since 2013 in the research and promotion of Sicilian heritage—has promoted a hybrid governance model through a bottom-up proposal,

formalised in 2024 as a SPPP and selected as the winner of the Viviamo Cultura 2024 call for proposals.

The economic and institutional plan, with a renewable 25-year term, was supported by the Fitzcarraldo Foundation and Confcooperative, with the aim of ensuring long-term managerial sustainability. The economic and financial plan calls for an initial investment of over 100,000 euros, fully funded by the cooperative, based on a matching fund model: 50% through bank debt and 50% through self-financing from the cooperative's internal Research and Development fund.

Governance is based on structured co-management through a permanent joint Technical Committee, responsible for scientific planning, monitoring economic and cultural objectives, and validating strategies for conservation and integrated enhancement. The stakeholder mapping (Table 4) applied to the Lilibeo case reveals a framework in which governance is not merely a transfer of authority, but rather a balanced operational ecosystem, born of a bottom-up initiative and supported by a clear separation of professional, institutional, and civic roles. The intersection of decision-making power and the degree of involvement highlights how the partnership has transcended the traditional public-private dichotomy, transforming an underutilised asset into an active cultural hub.

Tab 4: Stakeholders' analysis of SPPP for PALM

	INFLUENCE		
INTEREST		**Low**	**High**
	Low	**Casual tourists,** Service providers, Local media, Scientific community Weak Stakeholders	**Fondazione Fitzcarraldo,** Confcooperative, Soprintendenza ABAP Sicilia, University of Palermo Latent stakeholders
	High	**Local community** Local associations Educational institutions, Independent tourists Stakeholder to be involved	**ArcheOfficina,** Park Directorate Key stakeholder

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The matrix confirms that the success of the Lilibeo PSPP lies in the clarity of roles and the financial autonomy of the private partner. Rather than passively delegating the asset, the model transforms it into a permanent site for scientific and social enhancement. The primary strategic recommendation is the formalisation of a community engagement protocol to convert qualitative feedback into a semi-annual planning tool, alongside the planning of a gradual outsourcing of operational services to prevent cooperative overload during the scaling phase. In this way, the matrix is not a static tool, but a dynamic compass ensuring that the PSPP evolves from a pioneering experiment into a structural management model for scattered archaeological heritage.

5. Conclusion

The cross-sectional evaluation of these three operational trajectories underscores the SPPP framework as a fundamental enabling infrastructure for revitalising fragmented cultural assets, especially where institutional resources are constrained and properties remain dormant. Despite distinct territorial and typological nuances, the case studies exhibit a profound structural alignment in their relational architectures: across all initiatives, Third Sector entities inhabit the high-interest/high-power quadrant alongside institutional bodies, thereby establishing themselves as strategic co-protagonists in decision-making rather than peripheral service providers.

This persistent configuration signals a transformative shift in the stewardship of cultural heritage; infact the Third Sector functions as a pivotal mediator, orchestrating financial flows, professional competencies, and civic participation to redefine the social and symbolic resonance of heritage sites (Romanelli, 2018). Distinctive operational focuses characterise each local experiences: Bergamo prioritises deep-rooted community cultural output, Sepino integrates research with the paradigms of public archaeology, and Marsala exhibits a high degree of managerial independence and specialised scientific rigor. The empirical evidence suggests that the success of these atypical partnerships is predicated not merely on regulatory compliance but on the cultivation of resilient governance ecosystems where diverse stakeholders balance power imbalances and synchronise objectives. Within this framework, stakeholder analysis serves as an essential heuristic for interpreting these complex interactions. From a policy standpoint, establishing a national repository for tracking SPPP trajectories could facilitate the evaluation of long-term impacts and the dissemination of effective management protocols, fostering institutional learning in alignment with the Circular 10/2025 guidelines.

Impact & Engagement

From a governance perspective, the SPPP framework institutionalises bottom-up participatory dynamics, embedding the Third Sector and cultural cooperatives within management architectures endowed with greater long-term stability and sustainability. In this light, the partnership operates as a strategic catalyst, translating private activism into systemic initiatives. Nonetheless, structural criticalities emerge regarding the heavy reliance on the partners' entrepreneurial and relational know-how; indeed, the model's efficacy appears contingent upon the presence of actors possessing far-reaching vision and fundraising capabilities, raising questions about the replicability of the instrument in contexts where social capital is fragmented or scarce.

A further problematic core concerns economic and financial viability during consolidation phases (Archetti, 2026). Although the cases investigated demonstrate a marked aptitude for mobilising start-up resources, uncertainty persists regarding the stabilisation of financial flows indispensable for ensuring operational continuity, routine maintenance, and the accessibility of sites. Consequently, there is an inescapable need to strengthen managerial skills and strategies aimed at diversifying income streams.

A specific vulnerability lies in the absence of systematic protocols for monitoring and measuring the generated impacts. Despite the evidence of social and territorial impacts, these often remain confined within a narrative and qualitative dimension, particularly in bottom-up initiatives, thereby undermining the comparability and objectification of the public value generated. Therefore, the development of multidimensional evaluation frameworks appears urgent, conceived as a cornerstone of collaborative governance and institutional learning processes.

In conclusion, the SPPP proves to be a hybrid governance infrastructure suitable for generating shared value among institutions, the market, and the community. The prospective challenge lies in consolidating substantive participation and providing rigorous evaluation tools, in order to ensure its scalability and systemic resilience.

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Biographies

Giorgia Dato is a specialised archaeologist and currently a PhD student at the University of Bari “Aldo Moro” (PhD of national interest in Mediterranean Archaeological, Historical, Architectural and Landscape Heritage). Her research focuses on the relationship between public and private in the field of cultural heritage with a particular interest in hybrid governance models like collaboration pacts, SPP’s and stewardship agreements. Currently she is working on a PhD thesis titeled “Participation and Local Heritage Communities: Collaboration Pacts and Ecomuseums". Her academic interests are shared administrations, cultural heritage as common good and community participation in the care, management, and enhancement of cultural heritage.

Giovanna Muraglia is a PhD Candidate in Heritage Science and a fellow of the Italian National PhD Programme in Cultural Heritage Analysis. Her research focuses on cultural heritage analysis and management, with particular attention to participatory governance models and innovative frameworks for the sustainable enhancement of cultural assets. Her doctoral project explores the application of Special Public-Private Partnership (SPPP) as emerging tools for shared governance in the cultural sector. Through institutional analysis and case study research, she examines how collaborative management models can strengthen cultural participation, community engagement, and long-term sustainability. She was a Visiting PhD student at Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. Her academic interests include cultural commons, public-private and public-community partnerships.

Mariavittoria Cicellin is Associate Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Naples Federico II, Department of Social Sciences. She holds a PhD in Healthcare Management from the University of Naples Federico II, and was a Visiting Doctoral Student and Visiting Researcher at IESE Business School in Barcelona, Spain. Her main research interests focus on organisational behaviour and on organisational and business models in the cultural sector, with particular attention to how cultural organisations combine social and economic objectives in their day-to-day management and long-term strategic development.

Adriana Scuotto is Assistant Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Naples Federico II, Department of Humanities. She holds a Doctorate from the University of Naples Federico II. Her main research interests focus on the organisational and business models of social enterprise, social innovation, social business models, and organisational models in cultural heritage management, with particular attention to how hybrid organisations balance economic sustainability with social and cultural value creation in the management of heritage sites and cultural institutions.

Stefano Consiglio is Full Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Naples Federico II, Department of Social Sciences, where he is President of the Human and Social Science School. Since 2023 he has been Director of Fondazione con il Sud. His main research interests focus on organisational change, cultural heritage management, and social innovation applied to the creation of social and cultural enterprises, with particular attention to the organisational and managerial conditions that enable sustainable, community-based cultural regeneration in Southern Italy.

Funding Ecologies and Power Dynamics in Projectified Cultural Fields: A Nordic Comparative Study

Dr. Tomas Järvinen | ProCult Productions Ab

Abstract

Projectification seems to have become a defining feature of contemporary cultural organisations, particularly within the Nordic arts sector, where project grants, temporary funding schemes, and short-term initiatives increasingly shape organisational practices. While project-based structures can promote innovation and flexibility, they also generate dependencies that influence power relations, decision-making processes, and artistic autonomy. This study examines how different funding ecologies affect organisational power dynamics and artistic agency in Nordic cultural organisations.

Drawing on institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) and Bourdieu’s (1993) field theory, the research investigates how external funding structures interact with internal organisational processes. The study employs a qualitative multi-case design based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from twelve cultural organisations across Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (n = 24 interviews). Documentary materials complement the interview data.

Findings indicate that project-based funding regimes reshape organisational temporality, increase administrative labour, and redistribute internal power towards managerial functions. While projectification can enable flexibility and innovation, it also constrains long-term planning and weakens institutional memory. Organisations with more diversified funding portfolios demonstrate greater resilience and autonomy. The article contributes to cultural policy and arts management literature by conceptualising funding ecologies as key mechanisms of cultural governance.

Keywords: projectification; cultural policy; funding ecologies; organisational power; arts management; Nordic cultural sector

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, project-based organising has become increasingly dominant across cultural and creative sectors. Museums, performing arts organisations, and cultural networks increasingly operate through temporary, externally funded projects rather than stable institutional structures (Bakker et al., 2016). Although artistic production has always involved project logics, recent developments indicate a broader transformation in which projectification shapes entire organisational systems and professional identities (Castañer & Oliveira, 2022).

In the Nordic context, cultural policy has historically been associated with strong public support and institutional stability. However, organisations now operate in hybrid funding ecologies characterised by competitive grant schemes, performance accountability, and short-term programme funding. These shifts have intensified projectification as a structural condition of cultural work.

Projectification is not merely administrative. It reshapes organisational priorities, redistributes authority, and influences artistic decision-making. Funding systems increasingly determine what kinds of cultural work are possible, how success is defined, and whose knowledge is legitimised.

This article asks:

How do funding ecologies shape power relations, organisational autonomy, and artistic agency within projectified cultural organisations in the Nordic countries?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Institutional Theory and Organisational Conformity

Institutional theory explains how organisations respond to external pressures by adopting similar structures and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In cultural sectors, funding bodies function as key institutional actors by defining legitimacy through criteria such as participation, diversity, and impact measurement.

Scott (2014) conceptualises institutions as operating through regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms. Cultural funding systems combine all three: eligibility rules (regulative), expectations of societal value (normative), and assumptions about artistic legitimacy (cognitive). Over time, organisations adapt their internal practices to align with these frameworks.

2.2 Bourdieu’s Field Theory and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu’s (1993) theory of cultural fields highlights how artistic production is structured through struggles over capital and legitimacy. Within cultural fields, actors possess varying forms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

Funding systems influence how these capitals are distributed and converted. Organisations with stronger reputations or networks may gain easier access to resources, while economic dependence can constrain artistic autonomy. Power is therefore relational and multi-dimensional, extending beyond formal hierarchy into symbolic and institutional recognition.

Together, institutional theory and field theory provide a dual lens: external structural pressures and internal power relations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design.

3.1 Data Collection

Data consist of semi-structured interviews with representatives from twelve cultural organisations across Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (n = 24). Each organisation contributed two interviews.

The participating organisations represent a broad spectrum of cultural activities:

1. Finland: Zodiak – Centre for New Dance, Aura of Puppets and UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra

2. Sweden: Cirkus Cirkör, Konstfrämjandet and Masthuggsteatern

3. Norway: Black Box Theatre, Panta Rei Dance Theatre and De Unges Orkesterforbund

4. Denmark: Poesiens Hus, Levende Musik i Skolen and DATS (Dansk Amatør Teater og Scenekunst)

The organisations vary considerably regarding size, artistic discipline, organisational structure, and funding composition. This variation allows for comparative analysis across different funding ecologies.

Additional data include annual reports, funding documents, and policy materials.

3.2 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied. Coding focused on: funding dependence, administrative workload, organisational autonomy, temporal structures, knowledge transfer, artistic agency, strategic planning. The cross-case comparison enabled identification of recurring patterns across funding ecologies.

4. Findings

4.1 Funding Ecologies and Organisational Dependence

Across all cases, funding does not function merely as a neutral background condition but rather as an active structuring force that shapes how cultural organisations are able to exist, plan, and act. Even organisations that appear relatively stable in terms of core public funding are, in practice, dependent on project-based supplements in order to maintain or expand their activities, respond to emerging opportunities, or cover specific staffing needs. This creates a layered funding ecology in which “stability” and “project logic” coexist rather than replace one another.

For instance, in the Danish case of DATS, the organisation operates with a comparatively stable institutional base supported by state funding and membership contributions. This enables a continuous core activity, including courses, festivals, consultancy visits to member organisations, and political advocacy work. However, even within this stability, project funding becomes essential when additional capacity is required. As one respondent explains, temporary staff cannot be retained without external project resources: “We do not have the finances to keep him otherwise” (DATS interview 1). This illustrates how project funding operates as a corrective mechanism within otherwise stable organisations, allowing them to expand selectively but not permanently.

In contrast, Black Box Theatre in Norway illustrates a more structurally embedded dependency on project logic. As a programming venue rather than a producing institution, its operations are closely tied to externally produced artistic work and the availability of subsidies within the independent performing arts field. The organisation therefore becomes dependent on fluctuating external production ecologies, as reflected in the statement: “We depend on what kinds of subsidies the independent field can secure” (Black Box Theatre interview 1). In this case, projectification is not an add-on but constitutive of the organisation’s operational identity.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that project dependence is not uniform but distributed across hybrid funding arrangements, where even stable institutions rely on project logic to maintain flexibility and responsiveness.

4.2 Temporal Compression and Planning Uncertainty

A second dominant pattern across the interviews concerns the compression of organisational time horizons. Funding structures based on annual or short-term cycles generate a form of temporal uncertainty that directly affects strategic planning and organisational development. Rather than working with long-term trajectories, organisations are repeatedly drawn into cycles of application writing, budgeting, implementation, and reporting.

In one Finnish case, this uncertainty is explicitly described as a constraint on strategic foresight: “It is difficult to plan one or two years ahead when funding is uncertain” (UMO interview 2). This uncertainty does not only affect large strategic decisions but also everyday operational planning, such as staffing, programming, and partnership development.

Similarly, Panta Rai Dance Theatre emphasises how the need to continuously secure funding shifts attention away from longer-term artistic and institutional development: “It takes focus away from long-term planning and vision work” (Panta Rei interview 1). The organisation becomes oriented towards immediate funding opportunities rather than sustained artistic trajectories.

Across cases, this results in what can be described as fragmented temporal regimes, where organisations operate simultaneously in multiple overlapping timeframes: short-term project cycles, medium-term staffing arrangements, and long-term institutional expectations. This temporal fragmentation produces organisational strain, particularly when decisions must be made without certainty about future

resources.

4.3 Administrative Expansion and Power Redistribution

Most cases report a significant increase in administrative labour associated with project-based funding systems. This includes the preparation of funding applications, detailed budgeting processes, reporting requirements, and continuous documentation of activities and outcomes.

A Swedish respondent describes application processes that can take several weeks per grant, often requiring extensive justification of artistic and societal relevance. Danish respondents similarly highlight the cumulative burden of repeated applications across multiple funding sources. In Norway, this administrative expansion is explicitly linked to organisational structure: “There is a larger bureaucracy… reporting work has increased” (De Unges Orkesterforbund interview 1).

Importantly, this expansion of administrative work is not neutral in its effects. It contributes to a redistribution of power within organisations, where administrative and managerial functions gain increased influence over artistic decision-making processes. Decisions about what can be proposed, funded, or reported become increasingly shaped by those with expertise in navigating funding systems.

In Bourdieusian terms, this reflects a growing importance of bureaucratic and institutional capital, which becomes essential for securing economic capital. As a result, artistic priorities may become indirectly shaped by administrative feasibility rather than purely creative considerations.

4.4 Artistic Autonomy: Constraint and Opportunity

The interviews reveal a consistently ambivalent relationship between projectification and artistic autonomy. On the one hand, funding requirements can constrain artistic choices by privileging certain themes, formats, or measurable outcomes. On the other hand, project-based structures also create opportunities for experimentation, collaboration, and artistic renewal.

One respondents note that project structures can paradoxically expand artistic freedom: “It can also give greater artistic freedom” (Masthuggsteatern interview 2). This freedom emerges particularly in relation to collaborations with external companies and guest artists, where temporary constellations enable experimentation outside institutional routines.

In Finland, respondents similarly describe how project work introduces new energy into organisations, bringing in external knowledge, new practices, and different perspectives. Rather than being purely restrictive, projectification can therefore function as a mechanism of organisational renewal.

In one Danish case, where institutional stability is stronger, autonomy is also maintained through continuity of staff and organisational memory: “New people coming in does not harm us” (DATS interview). This suggests that autonomy is not solely determined by funding structures but emerges from the interaction between stability and change.

Overall, artistic agency appears relational rather than fixed, shaped by the interplay between funding conditions, organisational structure, and professional networks.

4.5 Organisational Learning and Knowledge Loss

Projectification has a profound impact on organisational learning processes. Across all cases, a clear tension emerges between increased individual learning and weakened collective memory. Temporary staffing and short-term project cycles lead to frequent turnover, which interrupts the accumulation of institutional knowledge.

Finnish respondents highlight the loss of expertise when project-based employees leave, noting that valuable insights often disappear with them despite documentation efforts. In Norway, leadership is

described as playing a crucial role in compensating for this loss by actively facilitating knowledge transfer. In Denmark, organisations rely heavily on informal communication structures to preserve continuity.

As a result, learning becomes increasingly individualised. Employees gain significant experience by working across diverse projects, disciplines, and organisational contexts. However, this individual learning does not always translate into collective organisational learning. Instead, organisations must repeatedly reconstruct knowledge that has previously been developed.

This creates a dual dynamic: intensification of learning at the individual level alongside erosion of institutional memory at the organisational level.

4.6 Organisational Resilience and Funding Diversification

Finally, the analysis indicates that funding diversification plays a crucial role in shaping organisational resilience. Organisations with a stable public funding base, demonstrate a greater capacity to absorb fluctuations in project funding and maintain continuity in core activities. These organisations are better able to sustain long-term relationships with members, staff, and audiences.

By contrast, organisations more heavily dependent on project funding experience greater vulnerability to external changes, including shifts in policy priorities or funding availability. However, diversification is not without cost. It also increases administrative complexity, as organisations must manage multiple funding streams, reporting requirements, and strategic alignments simultaneously.

Resilience, therefore, cannot be understood solely as financial stability. It is also an organisational capacity to manage complexity, uncertainty, and competing temporal demands within highly projectified environments.

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that funding ecologies function as governance mechanisms shaping cultural organisations’ internal structures, temporal regimes, and power relations.

Institutional theory explains how funding systems produce organisational conformity through regulatory and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Bourdieu’s (1993) field theory complements this by showing how these pressures translate into uneven distributions of capital and influence within organisations.

Projectification should therefore be understood not as a neutral organisational form but as a power-laden governance regime. It restructures:

1. Time (short-term cycles)

2. Labour (administrative expansion)

3. Power (managerialisation)

4. Knowledge (fragmentation of memory)

5. Autonomy (conditional artistic freedom)

The Nordic context highlights a paradox: despite strong welfare-state traditions, increasing reliance on project funding introduces market-like logics into cultural governance.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how funding ecologies shape power dynamics, organisational autonomy, and artistic agency within projectified cultural organisations in the Nordic countries.

The findings demonstrate that projectification is not simply an administrative tool but a structural condition that reorganises cultural production. While enabling flexibility and innovation, it simultaneously produces uncertainty, administrative burden, and weakened institutional memory.

Understanding funding ecologies as central to cultural governance is essential for policymakers and cultural leaders seeking to balance accountability, innovation, and long-term sustainability.

Impact & Engagement

This study addresses a growing policy and organisational challenge in the Nordic cultural sector: the increasing reliance on project-based funding and its implications for organisational sustainability, labour conditions, and artistic autonomy. While existing research has extensively documented the rise of projectification in cultural work, there remains a limited understanding of how funding ecologies translate into concrete shifts in organisational power relations, administrative burden, and knowledge continuity across different institutional contexts. By linking institutional theory with Bourdieu’s field perspective, this research offers an analytically grounded account of how funding systems actively shape cultural governance rather than merely enabling it.

The findings are relevant to a broad range of stakeholders, including cultural policymakers, arts council representatives, funding bodies, cultural managers, and practitioners working in performing arts organisations, festivals, and membership-based cultural institutions. In particular, organisations operating at the intersection of stable public funding and competitive project grants may benefit from the study’s comparative insights into how funding diversification, administrative demands, and planning uncertainty affect organisational resilience and artistic decision-making. Educators and students in arts management and cultural policy may also use the findings to better understand the structural conditions underpinning contemporary cultural production in the Nordic context.

The research may be taken up through several pathways, including policy development, funding scheme design, and organisational strategy. Cultural agencies may draw on the findings to reconsider the balance between short-term project grants and multi-annual funding allocations, while cultural organisations may use the insights to refine internal knowledge management practices and strengthen cross-project learning. Professional training programmes in arts administration may incorporate the study’s findings into curricula addressing governance, leadership, and sustainability in project-based environments.

Expected changes include improved awareness of the unintended organisational consequences of projectification, particularly regarding administrative overload, reduced institutional memory, and constrained long-term planning. Indicators of impact may include shifts in funding policy towards longer-term support mechanisms, adoption of more robust knowledge-transfer practices within organisations, and increased sectoral discussion of administrative burden in cultural work. Over time, such changes may contribute to more sustainable cultural ecosystems that better balance flexibility, accountability, and artistic development.

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Biography - Tomas Järvinen

Tomas Järvinen is a Finnish cultural researcher, arts manager, and author with over two decades of leadership experience in education and the cultural sector. His work bridges organization theory, arts management, and creative practice, focusing on sustainable leadership, learning, and working conditions in contemporary cultural organizations.

The Project-Based Structuring of Ecological Engagement in French Museums: A Cartographic Representation

Mrs. Camilla Schianchi
Lirsa, CNAM and Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon Université

Mrs. Lucie Marinier
Lirsa, CNAM

Mrs. Isabelle Brianso
Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon Université

Introduction

From the 2000s, the museum sector has made its commitment to addressing the ecological emergency increasingly explicit, as reflected in the declarations of the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2019). In France, the 2020 health crisis marked a turning point, accelerating both professional reflection (ICOM France, 2023, 2024) and action across the sector. Observation of the field reveals that many recent ecological engagement initiatives in museums are presented as "projects". Diverse in form, they share a common intention to respond to the ecological emergency through the concrete realisation of something new, within one or more museums. Lately, French public authorities have launched a growing number of calls for projects supporting this kind of initiatives[1]. This research therefore asks: in what ways does the project structure ecological engagement in French museums? It is part of an ongoing CIFRE doctoral research (Lirsa, CNAM and Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon University) in collaboration with the French committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM France).

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, international research has examined the museum sector’s engagement with sustainable development (Porcedda, 2006; Chaumier et al., 2011; Müller & Grieshaber, 2024; Pop & Borza, 2016; McGhie, 2019; Garthe, 2023), the socio-ecological crisis (Janes, 2024; Marinier et al., 2026; Porcedda & Gagnebien, 2026), and climate change (Cameron & Neilson, 2015; Merriman, 2023). This work has addressed various museum functions: acquisition and de-accessioning (Latouche, 2021; Morgan & Macdonald, 2020; Wood et al., 2018), conservation (Bickersteth, 2014; Bourgès, 2026; Rubio, 2020), dissemination and mediation (Dressen, 2026; Viel, 2019) and exhibition (Nunberg et al., 2016; Rubessi, 2026). The questioning of existing organisational models, however, remains underexplored (Porcedda & Gagnebien, 2026, p. 10) – it is precisely in this area that this research positions itself.

Ecological engagement in museums is studied here through the lens of the project, understood not merely in the project management sense, but anthropologically, as a pluridisciplinary (Boutinet & Bréchet, 2018, p. 440) and polysemous concept (Bréchet & Desreumaux, 2005, p. 133), defined as a “partially determined, action-oriented anticipatory figure” (Boutinet, 1990, p. 69). Oriented towards bringing a desired future into being, it articulates an intentional and an operative dimension, held in constant tension and never fully coinciding (Boutinet, 1990, p. 69).

Since the 1990s, the project has come to permeate society as a whole, providing a new form of justification for action (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, p. 171), leading to discursive inflation (Boutinet, 1990, p. 202) and empirical proliferation across a growing number of fields (Bréchet & Desreumaux, 2005, p. 123), often without any critical reflection on how it actually operates (Piponnier, 2021, p. 13). “Projectification” (Midler, 1995) – the increasing reliance on project-based work organisation – has also extended to the museum sector (Pauget et al., 2023).

1 From 2021, the French State launched two editions of the call for projects “Alternatives Vertes”, operated by the Banque des Territoires (Caisse des Dépôts Group), under the France 2030 Recovery Plan. https://www.culture.gouv.fr/thematiques/design/actualites-design/appel-a-projets-france-2030-alternatives-vertes-2

The theoretical framework of this study draws on work that has contributed to the denaturalisation of this concept. Bréchet understands the project as an apparatus regulating collective action (Bréchet & Desreumaux, 2005): it generates rules – not as codified norms but organising principles emerging from practice – and makes "doing together" possible. Rules and projects are never fixed: they are continually enacted through processes of regulation (Bréchet, 2019, p. 100), constituting the always temporary and contingent solution actors find to cooperate (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981, p. 107).

Two further theoretical threads extend this foundation. First, the project is examined as a structuring communicational apparatus. In Piponnier's perspective, it constitutes a “mediated space” (Piponnier, 2021, p. 68). Communication, especially written, is not merely a functional complement to the project: it is a structuring force (Piponnier, 2021, p. 11), constructing the activity and inscribing it in public space (Piponnier, 2021, p. 7).

Second, the project is analysed as an instrument of public action with its own power (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2005, p. 29). It embodies a vision of “light” public action, operating through incentive rather than regulatory imposition (Pinson, 2009, p. 15), while remaining the expression of political steering logics (Pinson, 2005, p. 330).

Materials and Methods

A corpus of past and ongoing projects was built from a survey[2] distributed through ICOM France’s communication channels. The survey yielded 35 valid responses, supplemented by 15 additional projects identified through literature and field observation, bringing the corpus to 50 projects. They span a wide range : from eco-conceived exhibitions, cultural programmes and building renovations to strategic orientations, collective initiatives and research projects.

The projects were analysed drawing on documentary sources and information provided through the survey. In parallel, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals: museum directors, heads of department, CSR coordinators, project managers, as well as external collaborators. The PhD researcher, acting as Sustainability Project Coordinator at ICOM France, also conducts participant observation of two projects, documented through a field journal kept over two years. Interviews and journal excerpts, originally in French, have been translated to English by the authors.

To analyse and present the findings, a typological approach was set aside for its rigidity, in favour of a cartography, better suited to capturing the fluid and porous nature of the object under study. Ecological engagement in museums is a recent and unfolding dynamic, and its regulation processes are continuously renegotiated. The museum itself is not conceived as a stable entity (Porcedda & Gagnebien, 2026, p. 6), but as a fluid assemblage of heterogeneous agencies in continuous adaptation (Cameron, 2015b, p. 354), what Cameron terms the “liquid museum” (Cameron, 2015b, p. 356). Grounded in the epistemology of complexity (Morin, 2005), this research adopts cartography as mode of representation and innovative form of research writing, best able to reflect complex realities. By bringing together and making visible data that remains largely dispersed, it also contributes to the formation of a data culture (Casemajor, 2023) around museum ecological engagement.

Results

The analysis of the corpus reveals 29 fields of application, grouped into four clusters. The first two graphs position each project against these fields, with projects often spanning more than one. The third adds the

2 Link to the survey: https://framaforms.org/questionnaire-sur-les-projets-dengagement-ecologique-dans-les-musees-francais-1770730094

dimension of ecological action logics – understood as the types of change the project seeks to bring about – revealing where the sector mostly stands, and where it is moving.

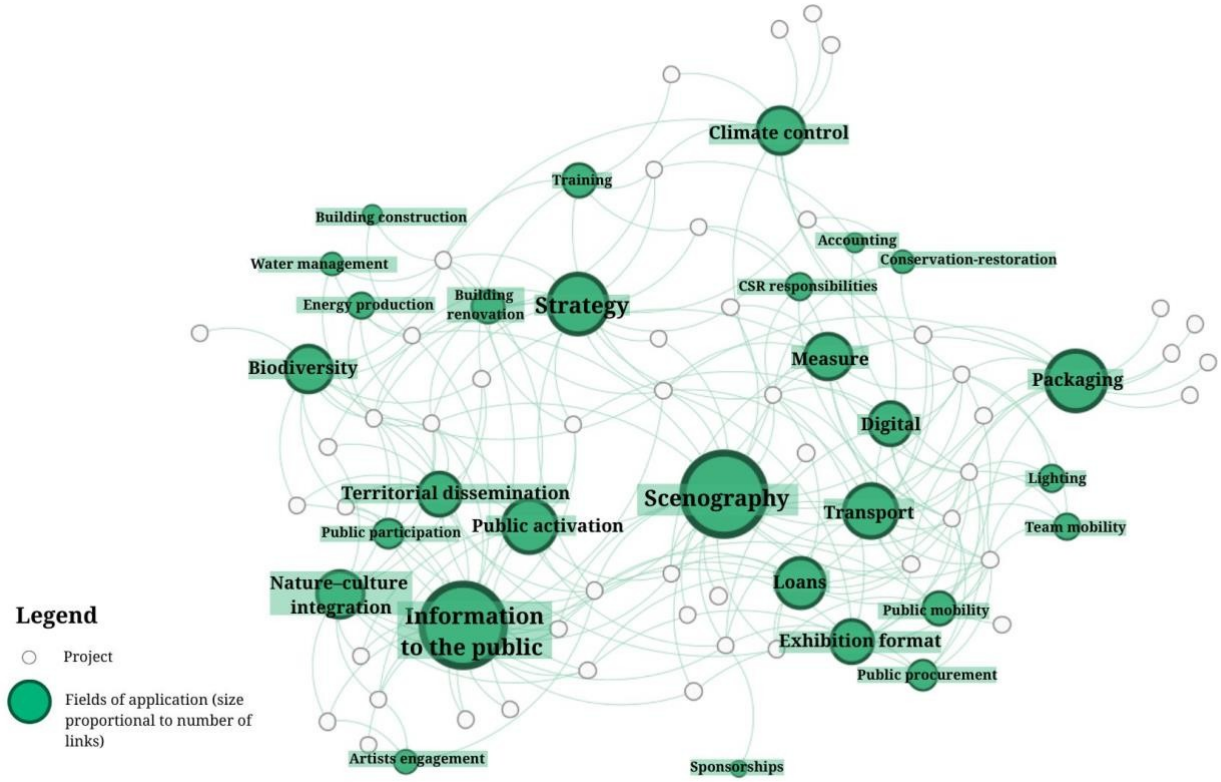


Figure 1 - Cartography of projects by fields of application, own visualization.

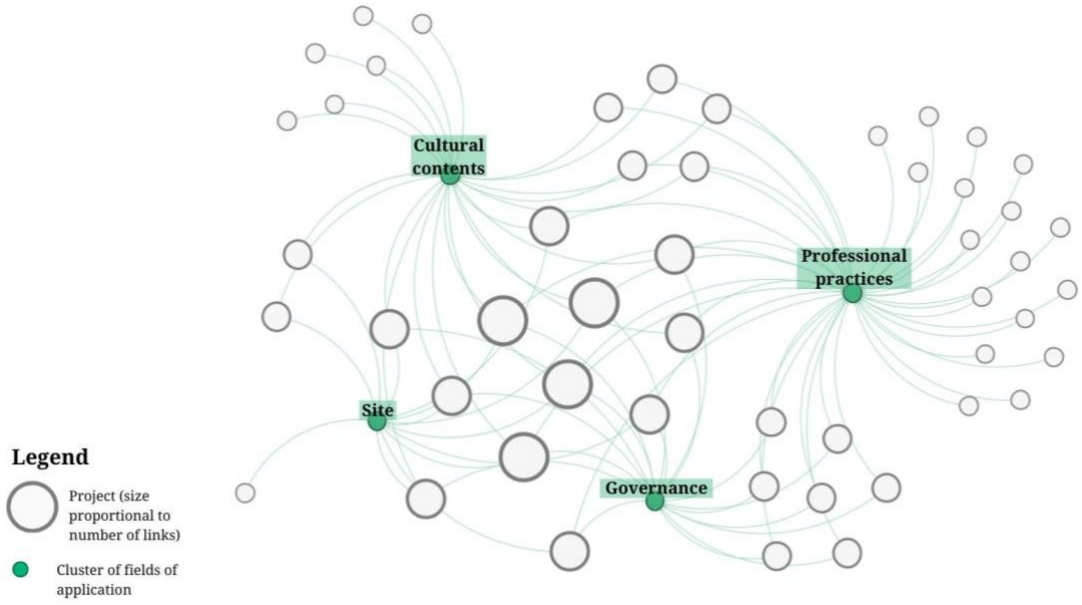


Figure 2 - Cartography of projects by clusters of fields of application, own visualization.

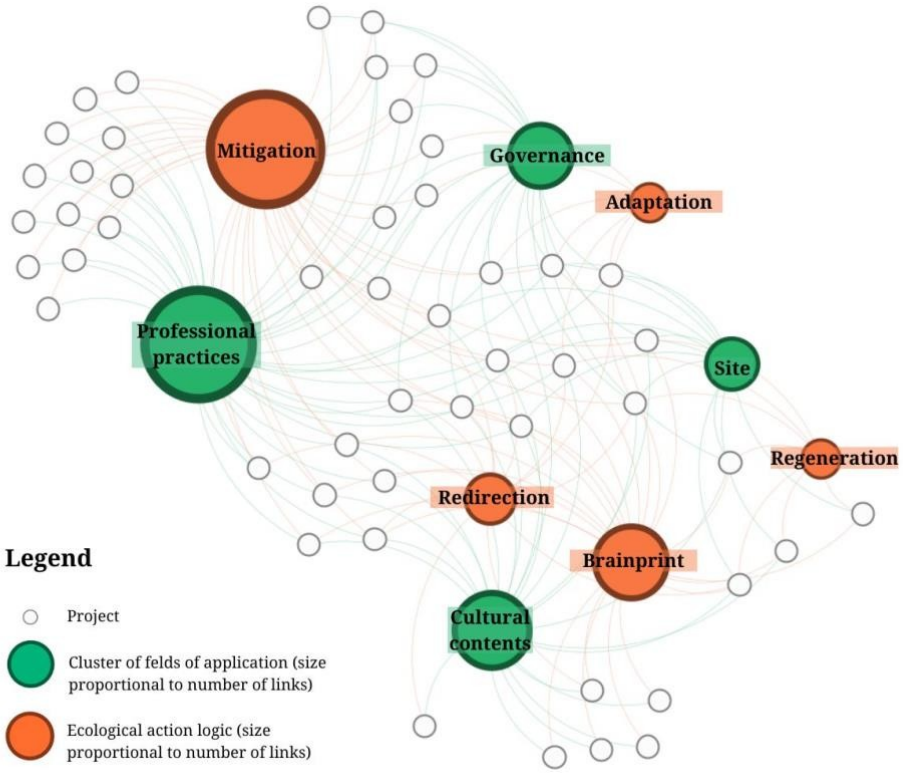


Figure 3 - Cartography of projects by clusters of fields of application and ecological action logics, own visualization.

Distribution confirms that engagement remains primarily focused on professional practices, driven by a logic of negative impact mitigation. Nevertheless, more hybrid initiatives are emerging – combining cultural contents and professional practices, extending towards governance and site-level interventions, and integrating other ecological action logics.

Professional practices – 74 % of the corpus

Projects in this cluster transform professional practices, primarily through mitigation strategies, particularly in exhibition production. Easily identified as forms of ecological engagement, they often treat ecological initiatives as a separate technical matter, which frequently hinders their integration within organisations.

> “When you ask me about how things were received, overall it was well received, but I don't think that in the mindset of the exhibition project manager or the curator, this environmental assessment is really part of the project for them... the exhibition project, I mean. So you see, I find that the ecological dimension gets neatly set aside, on one side, and the exhibition project itself on the other.” [Project manager]

It is notably among projects confined solely to professional practices that the highest rate of stalled projects is found (10% of the corpus), confirming that even rigorously conducted projects would encounter major difficulties when they remain embedded in this siloed approach.

Cultural contents – 46 % of the corpus

Several projects engage cultural contents through a “brainprint” logic (Chatterton et al., 2015, p. 74) seeking to shift consciousness and thereby contribute indirectly to reducing negative environmental impact beyond the museum. In this context, collections can be reinterpreted through the lens of the ecological emergency, moving beyond static and singular interpretations (Wood et al., 2018, p. 62), so to make them fully present to contemporary concerns (Janes, 2024, p. 85).

While research identifies this cultural dimension as the museum sector's main potential to address the ecological emergency (Cameron & Neilson, 2015, p. 16; Chaumier et al., 2011, p. 9; Janes, 2024, p. 59; Latour, 2021, p. 24), the lower presence of such projects in the corpus reflects a difficulty in recognising them as forms of engagement when they are not accompanied by measurable impact reductions. Thus, several projects (22% of the corpus) bridge these clusters, working towards coherence between discourses and practices (Marinier et al., 2026, p. 27).



Figure 4 - Data sculptures on food (Céline Diez), part of the permanent eco-conceived exhibition "Urgence climatique", Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie (Paris), in partnership with CNRS. © Adagp, 2023. Photo: A. Robin / EPPDCSI.

Governance – 34% of the corpus

A further set of emergent projects aims to structure past initiatives and govern ecological engagement at the institutional or sectoral level. Primarily associated with professional practices and inscribed in mitigation logics, they are gradually and partially opening towards adaptation and redirection. The former refers to adjusting to ecologically-induced transformations driven by human pressures “to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities” (IPCC, 2023, p. 120). The latter designates the transformation of purposes of activities and organisations to operate within planetary boundaries (Monnin et al., 2021, p. 3), while accounting for existing attachments (Bonnet et al., 2021, p. 105).

Site – 24% of the corpus

A final cluster of projects intervenes on buildings or outdoor spaces, following mitigation, adaptation and/or redirection logics. When they engage with green spaces (Gobbato, 2026), they often extend to cultural contents as well, and take on a regenerative logic – contributing to the restoration and strengthening of the ecological systems within which they are embedded (Haggard et al., 2024).



Figure 5 - Rendering of the cloister garden, Beauvoisine project (Rouen). The renovation targets Passivhaus and Enerphit certifications and merges archaeological and natural history collections. © PERSEVOIR-DUPLAT-CBA-RRC-Ateliers A.Rispal.

Emergence conditions

Survey results show that the primary condition for project implementation is team engagement (80% of respondents), ahead of support from the director (57%) or institutional authorities (23%). The professionals who initiate these projects often correspond to what Crozier and Friedberg term the

“marginal-secant actor” (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981, p. 86), operating across multiple action systems simultaneously. Frequently registrars or exhibition producers, they draw on their margins of autonomy to invest “zones of uncertainty”, spaces that remain largely ungoverned and that therefore constitute potential sources of power (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981, p. 24).

> "Fairly quickly, the question of ecological impact seemed to me like something that needed to be taken into account. And I thought: I have the opportunity here to be thinking about a new project from scratch. So I'm going to introduce this issue from the outset and see how I can seize this opportunity to try to find new ways of doing things. [...] So I told myself: this is an opportunity, and I can try to invent things a little differently." [Head of department]

Often relying on a few individuals, these projects can be fragile and difficult to transmit, particularly as they are rarely formalised in writing.

Some directors now embed ecological engagement as a structural axis that can contribute to consolidating these initiatives. It is worth noting that such institutional commitments typically build on a pre-existing, diffused ecological sensibility within teams. Less common are top-down projects imposed by authorities without prior staff engagement: in such cases, the project operates as a "soft constraint" (Courpasson, 2000, p. 200), presented as a valuing opportunity with little room to opt out. The risk is to produce a mechanical form of compliance rather than real appropriation and learning.

Finally, while funding plays an important role in sustaining projects, it rarely initiates them – sometimes it is secured after the project is already underway. Calls for projects represent a distinct case : as competitive funding mechanisms through which a body – often public – defines eligibility criteria and invites applications, they can directly prompt the conception of projects in response to their launch (Breton, 2014, p. 215). In major national calls, criteria of replicability and scalability mainly drove projects at the sectoral level. Calls require substantial written production, which professionals with little prior experience progressively master in terms of procedures and of semiotic codes (Piponnier, 2021, p. 47).

Organisational effects

Operating partly outside organisational routines, projects create conditions in which institutional and professional assumptions can be questioned. Particularly when conducted in collaboration with other stakeholders, they compel teams to dedicate time to substantive questions usually pushed aside, and to venture into unfamiliar territory with the competencies at hand, following pragmatic approaches.

The survey reveals significant effects of projects on relationships between actors: within a single department (29% of respondents), across departments (63%), and with external partners (46%), including in fields with little prior connection to museums. When differences are acknowledged and listening is established, transdisciplinary collaborations foster capacity building and constitute a change driver.

> "There was a real leap in impact when the project enabled forms of communication that had not previously existed. The differences between museums that achieved this and those where the project remained self-contained are striking: in the first case, there is genuine motivation, skills development, and a desire to continue beyond the project's end; in the second, the focus tends to be on delivering outputs, with participants struggling to identify what the initiative actually brought them." [PhD researcher, field journal]

Skills development (63% of respondents) enables the emergence of new legitimacies for actors, particularly within professional communities. At the institutional level too, museums can acquire new standings on ecological issues and take on pioneering roles in new configurations – themselves evolving towards a position of “marginal-secant” institutions.

Discussion

This research demonstrates that the project generates rules which, by structuring spaces of negotiation, make ecological collective action within museums possible (Bréchet, 2019). The analysis highlights two main processes through which the project can act as a lever for the structural ecological transformation of museums.

- Opening up action. The project offers a way of engaging with the uncertainty inherent in ecological challenges through concrete and exploratory action. In a sector traditionally marked by risk aversion, it contributes – not without hesitation – to fostering a culture of experimentation, allowing to do things differently. This dynamic is partly explained by the fact that the project is defined, including in the project management literature, in opposition to routine operations (Garel, 2011, p. 12; Rocca, 2013, p. 51), making it the preferred mode of management for introducing innovation (Boutinet, 1990, p. 238).
- Building connections. As an inherently interactive process (Pinson, 2005, p. 227), the project encourages the development and strengthening of relationships among professionals within museums. In institutions often characterised by rigid (Garthe, 2023, p. 74; Janes, 2024, p. 4), hierarchical and siloed structures (Cameron, 2015a, p. 25; Janes, 2024, p. 77; Worts & Dal Santo, 2022, p. 75), the project opens up new forms of transversal relationship (Boutinet, 1990, p. 240). The collective discovery and adoption of new relational models constitutes a form of “collective learning” (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981, p. 392), deepening collective capacities and shaping organisations’ ability to change (Crozier & Friedberg, 1981, p. 399).

By opening up action and building new connections, the project aligns with the practice of the liquid museum (Cameron, 2015b, p. 355). Not every project, however, will automatically produce these effects. Many of them remain confined to a small team, limiting themselves to localised operational changes or fading out after departures. Structural ecological transformation requires bridging cultural and technical dimensions and bringing together heterogeneous knowledge – across departments, disciplines and professional worlds. The project, as occasion and pretext for connection in a network-based world (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999, p. 170), can be a vehicle for the transversality needed to respond to the complexity of contemporary challenges (Nsonsissa & Morin, 2010).

Finally, this research does not allow us to claim that ecological engagement projects in museums are, in general, heavily textualised, or constitute instruments of public action. One exception deserves to be noted: those supported through calls for projects. Relatively recent, they primarily drive ongoing sectorial initiatives, making it difficult at this stage to assess their impacts – a subject requiring further research. Public authorities shape projects through the definition of criteria that are subsequently interpreted (Breton, 2014, p. 216) by museum professionals in the applications writing process. Calls for projects are not merely funding mechanisms: they structure practices – especially through the writing they demand, which shapes how projects are conceived and develop.

Conclusion

This research shows that the project constitutes an apparatus for regulating ecological engagement in French museums, instituting spaces in which experimentation and transversality become possible. One significant risk emerges: that of “token projects” (Boutinet & Bréchet, 2018, p. 444), empty forms generated by a logic of accumulated actions without real collective learning. Ecological engagement then risks being reduced to fragile "symbolic or technical adjustments" rather than being a "lasting structural transformation" (Porcedda & Gagnebien, 2026, p. 3). Relational richness and cross-field hybridisation emerge as the conditions for making ecological commitment a structural axis of museums – yet always in motion (Cameron, 2015b, p. 354). The project can thus serve as a lever for moving beyond the current glass ceiling of engagement (Marinier et al., 2026, p. 25), but – this research demonstrates – on the condition that its transversal dimension is fully mobilised. The macro perspective provided by this

research calls for complementary case studies examining how rules and transversality are negotiated within situated contexts, a direction the authors are already pursuing through the doctoral research.

Impact and Engagement

Disseminated through webinars and expert interventions facilitated by the author's position within ICOM France, this work is particularly well placed to provide evidence-based advisory input to museum professionals. Its core contribution lies in demonstrating that transversal approaches are necessary conditions for making ecological commitment structural rather than punctual in museums. Concretely, this means equipping professionals with a critical framework for structuring projects – one that ensures ecological engagement is not siloed within a single department or team and that integrates multiple dimensions, from cultural to technical ones.

This research is equally well suited to inform policymakers. Funding bodies and cultural authorities seeking to drive structural ecological change across the sector could draw directly on the principles of transversality and transdisciplinarity (Nsonsissa & Morin, 2010) to redesign their public policy instruments. Most importantly, embedding these dimensions as explicit criteria within calls for projects would have a strong and direct impact on how projects are conceived and develop.

On a practical level, this research initiates a publicly accessible database of ecological engagement projects, compiled from survey submissions and hosted on the ICOM France website, thus offering an accessible interface for data culture (Casemajor, 2023) on the ecological commitment of museums. Early engagement within the ICOM France network has already confirmed both appetite and need: professionals report a certain lack of communication across institutions, and a desire to identify inspiring experiences. If actively disseminated and regularly updated, this database can support experience-sharing, peer networking, and collective benchmarking. Moreover, by connecting dispersed and diverse efforts across institutions, it embodies the very transversal logic this research advocates for.

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Authors’ biographies

Camilla Schianchi is a PhD candidate affiliated with the LIRSA laboratory (CNAM) and the Centre Norbert Elias (Avignon Université). She is conducting her doctoral research at the crossroads of management studies and information and communication sciences under the supervision of Lucie Marinier (CNAM, LIRSA), and Isabelle Brianso (Centre Norbert Elias, Avignon Université). Her PhD is carried out through a CIFRE (Industrial Agreements for Training through Research) collaboration with ICOM France (French committee of the International Council of Museums), where she works as Sustainability Project Manager, coordinating projects with a variety of French museums. Grounded in fieldwork, her research focuses on the ecological engagement of museums, examined through the lens of project-based approaches.

Lucie Marinier is a Professor at the Conservatoire national des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), where she holds the Chair in Cultural and Creative Engineering. She has served as Director of Cultural Affairs for the City

of Créteil and, for the City of Paris, led the reform of arts education and amateur practices, before heading the Performing Arts Office. She has also served as Cultural Adviser in the Office of the Mayor of Paris, Secretary General of the Musée d'Art Moderne, and Co-Director General of the Carreau du Temple. Her research focuses primarily on art in public space, the organisation and missions of museums, and the socio-ecological transitions of the cultural sector. She has also headed the School of Transitions at CNAM.

Isabelle Brianso is an Associate Professor at Avignon Université, Centre Norbert Elias (UMR 8562), where she teaches museology and communication sciences applied to cultural heritage. Her research centres on the discourses and analysis of heritage-making processes in international contexts (UNESCO, Council of Europe), as well as visitor studies, museum mediation, and ecological transition in museums (ANR “Climate, Society, Siberia”). Former Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellow at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) and researcher at National Museum of Natural History of Paris, she is an expert evaluator for the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Isabelle Brianso leads with Lucie Marinier the research project “Museums in ecological transition” (2025-2028), financed by HERMES programme (AMI SHS).

Encouraging Individual Knowledge Management Practices as a Way of Professional Empowerment for Creatives: Perspectives from the Internationalisation Experiences of Estonian Musicians

Dr. Kristina Kuznetsova-Bogdanovish
University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy

Dr. Virgo Sillamaa
University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy

1. Setting the Scene

Creative fields across the world have undergone profound technological and wider content-related transformations during the past two decades. Digitalisation, platform-based distribution, cross-border dialogue, international cooperation and the expansion of project-oriented employment have significantly altered the ways in which creative professionals develop and sustain their creative practice and careers. While artistic practice remains the foundation of profession, musicians today are increasingly expected to assume (or if possible delegate, e.g. DeVereaux, 2020; Huhtanen, 2004) multiple roles extending far beyond artistic performance. Naturally, the extent to which artists choose to assume power over their career choices varies a lot and the decision might not be in their hands at all.

It is evident though that artists today operate in much more hectic professional environments than two decades ago. They tend to simultaneously function as entrepreneurs, project managers, marketers, educators, network builders, digital content creators, grant writers, and administrators (e.g., Grau Pérez, 2025). Additionally, artistic freedom, independence and uniqueness are under growing attack from both artificial intelligence as well as globalizing markets (e.g., Gagić Kičinbači, 2025). Consequently, awareness of personal identity, including tacit and explicit knowledge base built on lived experiences (e.g., Dewey, 1973) becomes key alongside artistic talent for a musician´s ability to claim ownership of their unique professional career, nowadays involving multiple income streams, temporary collaborations, freelance contracts, and international projects. Bennett (2016) observes that contemporary musicians must continuously negotiate changing professional identities while adapting to evolving technological, economic, and cultural environments. Bridgstock (2013) argues that employability within the creative industries increasingly depends upon lifelong learning and the capacity to navigate complex professional ecosystems.

Internationalisation has become a significant social phenomenon in the career of music actors, including creative individuals, collectives, and organisations. (e.g., Brandão & Ferreira de Oliveira, 2019; European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture et al., 2023; Huhtanen, 2004) For most crossing borders and reaching new audiences is a necessity rather than an extra. Internationalisation and cultural export are among wider cultural policy goals supported by programs and promoted by cultural representatives. Yet, its meaning is often ambiguous and the nature fleeting. (e.g., Knight, 2011; Kultuuriministeerium, 2020; Searle, 1995; Yanow, 1996) These inconsistencies often result in fragmented operating environment for the creatives. Additionally, musicians entering foreign markets are faced with informational landscape which is extensive and constantly evolving while freelance musicians typically lack dedicated administrative suppor to approach unfamiliar legal systems, complex funding mechanisms, institutional cultures, audience expectations, taxation rules, copyright regulations, mobility requirements, and professional networks. (e.g., Spanu & Sillamaa, 2025) Individual Knowledge Management (IKM) addresses the challenges above through self-awareness and the practices of managing and sharing personal knowledge so that it is accessible and meaningful to the individual while consciously maintaining and leveraging social networks (e.g., McGrath & MacMillan, 2000; Skyrme,

1999). We focus on exploring the IKM practices applied to the lived, international professional experiences of musicians, analysing how they facilitate professional empowerment, even when the approach is not fully strategic. We see professional empowerment as increased autonomy, agency, competence, and the capacity to influence one's professional environment (Spreitzer, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995). Thus in this article we ask: „How do musicians engage in individual knowledge management practices in the context of professional internationalisation experiences?“ Additionally, the research investigates the respondents` motivations for internationalisation as professional phenomena. We believe that finding empowerment in IKM supports artists in their careers allowing them to make (economic) decisions in ways aligning with their core (artistic) values (e.g., Nonaka & Toyama, 2015; Ranczakowska & Kuznetsova-Bogdanovitsh, 2024).

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Knowledge Management from Organizational to Individual

Knowledge management (KM) emerged in the 1990s as a response to the growing recognition that knowledge, rather than physical or financial capital, constitutes a primary source of organisational competitiveness in advanced economies. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) conceptualised knowledge creation as a dynamic interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge in their SECI model. This model emphasised that organisational innovation depends on continuous conversion between embodied experiential knowledge and codified informational structures. Davenport and Prusak (1998) saw knowledge as a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight, highlighting its embedded and socially constructed nature. From this perspective, knowledge management is not simply about information storage, but about enabling meaningful interpretation and application of information within specific contexts of action. Alavi and Leidner (2001) among others further systematised KM as an organisational capability supported by information systems, positioning technology as a key enabler of knowledge creation, storage, transfer, and application.

Despite differences in emphasis, early KM theories shared a common assumption: KM is primarily an organisational phenomenon embedded within stable institutional structures, often overlooking the increasing importance of individual autonomy in knowledge-intensive work. Yet the “reification of knowledge” has been widely questioned in epistemological discussions (e.g., Polanyi, 1966) summarised as “we know more than we can tell.” From this perspective, experience-based knowledge is inherently personal, embodied, and context-dependent. It cannot be fully codified or detached from the knower. Furthermore, the rise of post-industrial economies has fundamentally altered the nature of work itself-individuals operate as autonomous knowledge workers rather than as employees embedded in hierarchical organisations. This shift is particularly visible in creative industries, where freelance, project-based, and portfolio careers dominate (e.g., Hesmondhalgh, 2019; McRobbie, 2016).

2.2 Individual Knowledge Management1 and International Creative Careers

1 The authors are aware that individual versus personal knowledge management can be defined using diferent nuance, yet in this article we apply these concepts interchaengably

Creative work is characterised by uncertainty, subjectivity, non-linear career trajectories, and high levels of autonomy. According to Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), creative labour is often experienced as both highly rewarding and structurally precarious, combining expressive freedom with economic instability. Within such environments, knowledge is not merely technical or procedural but deeply embedded in identity, reputation, and relational networks. Bennett (2016) highlights that musicians in particular operate within “portfolio careers,” combining multiple roles such as performer, educator, producer, and entrepreneur requiring continuous learning and adaptation, often without formal organisational support structures.

Similarly, Bridgstock (2013) argues that creative employability depends on “career self-management,” which includes reflective practice, opportunity recognition, and strategic networking. These

competencies are inherently knowledge-intensive, requiring individuals to actively construct and maintain their own professional knowledge ecosystems. In creative industries, knowledge is deeply embedded in social relations, which might be geographically dispersed, culturally diverse, and often maintained through digital communication. Professional opportunities often emerge through networks of trust, reputation, and prior collaboration. Hence, the ability to track and activate these networks is therefore a critical component of career development. In this sense, networks themselves function as distributed knowledge systems (e.g., Phelps et al., 2012). They contain information about opportunities, standards, reputations, and practices that are not formally documented.

Individual knowledge management (IKM) or personal knowledge management (PKM) emphasises the practices through which individuals actively manage their own knowledge resources (e.g., Skyrme, 1999; Shepherd et al., 2010). Wright (2005) defines PKM as a set of processes enabling individuals to collect, classify, store, search, retrieve, and share knowledge in the course of their work and learning. These processes are not merely technical but also cognitive and behavioural, involving reflection, sense-making, and decision-making. Unlike traditional KM systems, PKM is distributed across personal tools, digital platforms, informal networks, and cognitive routines. (e.g., Avery, 2009) This makes it particularly relevant for entrepreneurs, freelancers and creative professionals who must operate across multiple organisational contexts.

There is increasing alignment between knowledge management and career theory, wherein careers are understood as self-directed, dynamic, and shaped by individual agency rather than organisational structures. (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004), In this view, knowledge becomes a form of “career capital” that individuals accumulate, refine, and deploy across different professional contexts. Inkson and Arthur (2001) suggest that career success depends on the ability to interpret experiences and convert them into transferrable knowledge and skills. For us, professional empowerment refers to the extent to which individuals experience a sense of control, agency, and influence over such dimensions as meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact in their profession (e.g., Spreitzer, 1995).

2.4 Knowledge Management as Reflected Lived Experiences

We understand IKM as a dynamic process through which individuals structure their professional environments, interpret experiences, and construct actionable understanding from fragmented and often ambiguous information. For musicians, each rehearsal, performance, collaboration, funding application, or international interaction generates informational inputs that could be interpreted and integrated into broader career narratives. Without continuous critical reflection, such experiences remain isolated and lose their potential cumulative value (e.g., Kuznetsova, 2022). IKM thus operates as a mediating layer between experience and professional development, enabling individuals to transform episodic events into coherent knowledge structures that guide future decision-making.

To operationalise IKM analytically, this study draws on Nonaka and Takeuchi’s SECI model of knowledge management (1995), which distinguishes between four interrelated modes of knowledge conversion: socialisation (tacit-to-tacit), externalisation (tacit-to-explicit), combination (explicit-to-explicit), and internalisation (explicit-to-tacit). The SECI framework provides a useful lens for capturing how experiential and embodied knowledge gained through artistic practice is gradually articulated, systematised, and re-embedded into individual competence.

In parallel, Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984) is used to further specify the temporal and cognitive structure of learning processes. Kolb conceptualises learning as a cyclical process consisting of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This model complements the SECI framework by emphasising the iterative transformation of experience through reflection, conceptual understanding, and subsequent action. When combined, Kolb’s cycle and the SECI model provide a comprehensive analytical foundation for

understanding how experiential knowledge is both internally processed and socially externalised over time wherein individual learning is continuously reconstructed through cycles of experience, reflection, articulation, integration, and application.

3. Study Design

Epistemologically, this is a practice-led research (e.g., Lewin, 1946; Trunk & Shapiro, 2007, p. 158) while the outcomes build on the thematic interpretative analysis (e.g., Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) of qualitative data from 6 focus group interviews, 14 policy maker interviews and 25 individual interviews with a variety of Estonian musicians, music managers and other music actors across diverse scenes. The participants were selected based on the confirmed professional internationalisation experiences, however there were no limiting criteria to the quantity or type of internationalisation. The data was collected during 2025 within the project funded by the Estonian Ministry of Culture and is reposited in the University of Tartu servers.2

The participants list was compiled based on the knowledge of the field of researchers as well as professional recommendations provided by unions (e.g., performers union, composers union) and the Estonian Authors’ Society. Within the analysis of this material, particular attention was given to representational balance: music genre (including classical, pop, rock, electronic, folk genres) and gender balance were observed as descriptive analytical dimensions. Nonetheless, this paper utilizes the rich qualitative data as a one empirical pool (e.g., Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The table 1 below presents the analysis process giving an insight into the practices and activities as described by the respondents in relation to Nonaka's SECI model of knowledge management and Kolb's experiential learning cycle with subsequently derived sub-themes and main themes.

2 Kuznetsova-Bogdanovitsh, K. 2025. Conceptualising internationalisation in Estonian music sector and policy making. https://www.etis.ee/Portal/Projects/Display/edb793e6-ce06-4d77-914e-55262c389459 Researches obtained informed consent and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

Thematic analysis table 1

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	SECI Model Phase (Nonaka)	Kolb Learning Stage	Core Processes / Practices	Examples of Activities
Experiential knowledge formation in internationalisation	Immediate experience of performance context	Socialisation (tacit - tacit)	Concrete Experience	Immersion in live performance, informal learning through interaction	Performing on stage, informal backstage conversations, observing audience reactions, participating in rehearsals abroad
Perception and interpretation of experience	Meaning-making of feedback and context	Externalisation (tacit - explicit)	Reflective Observation	Internal reflection on feedback and contextual interpretation	Post-performance self-reflection, discussing feedback with peers, mentally evaluating concert success
Documentation and structuring of knowledge	Capturing and organising professional information	Externalisation - Combination	Reflective Observation- Abstract Conceptualisation	Recording, organising, and structuring experiential data	Writing post-tour notes, saving emails, recording contacts in CRM or spreadsheets, organising setlists and contracts
Knowledge systematisation and integration	Linking dispersed knowledge across experiences	Combination (explicit- explicit)	Abstract Conceptualisation	Comparing, categorising, and integrating knowledge across contexts	Reviewing past tours, comparing festival outcomes, analysing funding applications, mapping networks
Strategic adjustment of artistic and professional practice	Decision-making based on accumulated knowledge	Combination - Internalisation	Abstract Conceptualisation -Active Experimentation	Strategic planning, evaluation of opportunities, career decision-making	Choosing future festivals, selecting collaborators, redesigning repertoire, refining branding strategy

4. Analysis

4.1. Motivations for Internationalisation

The analysis of responses shows diverse motivations for internationalisation combining artistic, collaborative, social, economic, and structural ones. Internationalisation is understood as both an artistic opportunity and a professional necessity. Still clearly a central motivation is of artistic nature, stating the desire to “be part of the broader global scene, get influenced” and to “share inspiration and knowledge.” It is notable, that this is true regardless of the music scene challenging the sometimes persistent reductive tropes that some types of music(s) are artistically oriented whereas others are purely commercially motivated. International contexts are perceived as spaces of artistic exposure and learning, where musicians can encounter new approaches, aesthetics, and practices highlighting its role in pushing artistic and professional growth beyond familiar environments. (e.g., Zimmermann, 1995)

Creative collaboration is another key driver, with respondents emphasising opportunities to “learn and gain new knowledge” through working with international partners. These collaborative settings can function as informal learning environments where artistic and professional competencies are developed through practice. Internationalisation is also strongly connected to audience development and career sustainability. Musicians highlight the aim to “extend your audience” and access “new markets, more revenue.” This is particularly significant for artists working in niche genres where internationalisation becomes essential for achieving sufficient scale and visibility.

Social and professional recognition also play an important role. Musicians value opportunities to “get feedback from peers, feel less lonely,” indicating that internationalisation contributes to validation, belonging, and reduced professional isolation. Finally, internationalisation carries a cultural and identity-related dimension (e.g., Bennett, 2016). Respondents describe how artists may “find your unique voice” while also serving as “ambassadors to your country and culture (even if not waving a flag all the time).” This reflects a nuanced understanding of representation. Overall, internationalisation emerges as a combined process of artistic stimulation, collaborative learning, audience expansion, deeply embedded in both individual career development and the broader conditions of the creative industries.

4.2 Reflective Practice as the Core Mechanism of Knowledge Transformation

Reflection is widely recognised as a central mechanism in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and professional development literature (e.g., Lehmann et al., 2007). Within IKM, reflection functions as the process through which experience is converted into structured knowledge. For creative professionals, reflection often occurs informally and intermittently rather than through formal systems. We found that musicians engage in reflective practices—such as post-performance (informal) self-evaluation, peer discussion, or systematic review of project outcomes.3 These practices may in turn influence audience engagement, artistic development, networking effectiveness, or international positioning in more or less direct ways. While bigger career choices – like moving abroad – depend on complex socioeconomic factors, concrete behavioural changes - like using local language during performance are more straightforward. Reflection therefore enables musicians to move from reactive stance to more proactive one (e.g., McGrath & MacMillan, 2000) However, while musicians frequently exercise autonomy in artistic decisions, strategic and managerial ones are often delegated to external actors such as managers for a variety of reasons (e.g., time-consuming, complex). As a consequence, managerial activities—like networking strategies, communication and branding, funding navigation, project concept development—remain underdeveloped at the individual level. This reinforces dependency and/or delegation and can contradict the principles of empowerment embedded in IKM. Importantly, this gap is not always caused by a lack of capability but also by an inability to see decision-making as a knowledge practice. Many of our respondents make numerous strategic decisions in practice; however, these decisions are rarely reflected, or integrated into a systematic learning process. Over time, this could lead to the development of meta-knowledge—which increases both autonomy and strategic flexibility in international contexts.

(e.g., Zenk et al., 2024) From an IKM perspective, this represents a missed opportunity where valuable professional insights for knowledge externalisation and codification from international experiences are lost (e.g., Nonaka & Toyama, 2015)

4.3 Individual Knowledge Management as a Facilitator of Professionally Empowering Decision Making

A key outcome of the analysis is the identification of decision-making as both a cognitive and structural empowerment mechanism within IKM. Cognitively, decision-making enables musicians to interpret experiences, evaluate opportunities, and prioritise engagements in line with long-term professional goals and values. Structurally, it allows them to organise their professional environments by selecting networks, projects, and collaborations that align with desired career trajectories. On a most fundamental level being able to turn down unwanted opportunities based on previous experiences, which do not align with core identity and values, is one practical way our respondents exercise their decision making power.

3 These reflective practices apply not only to international but also local performances and experiences, however in international contexts there are usually more layers of experience to consider – e.g. cultural differences, language barrier, different legal and structural elements etc

The findings of this study position IKM not as an isolated cognitive or managerial skill, but embedded, continuous practice of working with lived international experiences which shapes how musicians acquire, interpret, structure, and ultimately convert these into forms of professional knowledge (see also Table 1).". It has to be underlined though that the contextual constraints wherein decisions are made (e.g., Zenk et al., 2024) lack of funding, environmental effects on travel and safety, state representation or lack thereof) set limitations on options. However, the reflective process leading to decision-making can be valuable in itself allowing the knowledge fragmented across projects, collaborations, and encounters, to become consolidated into professional capital.

Internationalisation related decisions are often made under conditions of incomplete information, which reinforces the need for systematic IKM practices that can support sense-making and manage uncertainty. Following Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, international engagements provide rich input. The findings also suggest that musicians do engage in (self)reflection, yet it is strongly concentrated on artistic refinement, interpretative development, and performance quality, while the managerial dimensions of experience remain under-reflected and under-systematised. As a result, decision-making processes often remain implicit rather than explicit, intuitive rather than structured which on a very practical level becomes a constraint in certain professional activities like writing funding applications and arguming one's decision to others.

5. Conclusion

Research reveals that motivations for internationalisation are multifaceted, encompassing artistic, collaborative, social, economic, and structural dimensions. Internationalisation is perceived simultaneously as an artistic opportunity and a professional necessity, with artistic motivations as the predominant driving force.

The findings further demonstrate that critical reflection constitutes a foundational component of individual knowledge management, facilitating professional empowerment through informed career-related decision-making. Although musicians already engage in extensive informal decision-making throughout their international careers, the absence of systematic reflection and explicit knowledge conceptualisation constrains the transformative potential of these experiences. By positioning reflection as a central practice of individual knowledge management, rather than an incidental outcome of artistic work, musicians can more effectively transform international experiences into coherent professional knowledge, strengthened agency, and enhanced professional empowerment which are of particular significance in international professional contexts.

Impact and Engagement

The research contributes comprehensively to achieving professional engagement and striving for multi-level impact. First, the project significantly expands the knowledge base regarding the socio-economic functioning of the Estonian music sector, enabling an understanding of internationalisation not merely through individual success stories, but within the context of structural conditions, institutional practices, and policy choices. This lays the groundwork for analytically grounded interventions in (lifelong) learning support for musicians and the planning of sector-specific development measures, some of which might be transferable to other European markets at minimum.

Second, the research has a significant institutional impact, as it draws upon the academic and professional expertise, international research experience, and extensive collaborative networks of faculty members who have recently joined the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy. Implementing the research significantly strengthens the Academy’s research and development capacity and supports the establishment of a sustainable research focus in the fields of music as well as in the future - cultural policy.

Third, the research generates a direct practical impact by involving key representative and development organizations from the music sector, many of which are part of professional international networks. This innovative collaborative model enables the creation of a practical and transferable analytical framework for assessing internationalisation and empowerment through individual knowledge management—one that can be utilized in future research, the drafting of strategic documents, and the impact assessment of policy measures.

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Biographies of Authors

Kristina Kuznetsova-Bogdanovitsh, is an arts management researcher and educator as well as programme director at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy. She has been working in diverse arts universities for almost 20 years and conducted her doctoral studies at the University of the Arts Helsinki Sibelius Academy. Her research focuses on knowledge management, experiential learning and entrepreneurial mindset. In her teaching she relies mainly on active learning methodologies as well as experimenting with merging academic and creative learning and practice through estonian folk dance movement.

Virgo Sillamaa is music policy researcher currently pursuing doctoral degree at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Virgo has been involved in numerous music policy and export research and working groups and projects and is the head of research at EMEE. Virgo initially trained to be a musician and works as lecturer at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy.

Higher Education as Ecosystem Anchor: Co-Designing Cultural Production Education in a Peripheral Finnish Region

Dr. Laura Päiviö-Häkämies
HUMAK University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

This paper examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) can support the development of creative ecosystems in peripheral regions where cultural and creative industries (CCI) education is absent. Drawing on a preliminary needs assessment conducted in Kainuu, northeastern Finland, and the subsequent design of the KUKA project (2026–2028), it argues that in such regions the absence of CCI education constitutes not merely an educational gap but an ecosystem gap. The paper presents findings from interviews and workshops with over 70 regional stakeholders and discusses the methodological and governance innovations of a nature-based, regionally co-designed bachelor's degree programme in cultural production. It proposes that higher education, when genuinely embedded in regional specificity and co-created with local actors, can function as an ecosystem anchor capable of connecting creative practitioners, businesses, municipalities, and research activities.

Keywords: creative ecosystems, peripheral regions, cultural production education, regional vitality, higher education as ecosystem builder

Introduction

Regional creative ecosystems are unevenly distributed. This paper draws on the case of Kainuu, a region in northeastern Finland with approximately 70,000 inhabitants. Kainuu has a rich cultural heritage, a significant gaming industry cluster, and extensive nature-based tourism resources, but no higher education provision in cultural production or arts.

Case Kainuu presents findings from a systematic preliminary study conducted in 2024 (Päiviö-Häkämies, 2024b) and the design logic of the KUKA project, a collaborative initiative between Humak University of Applied Sciences and Kajaani University of Applied Sciences (KAMK), funded through the European Social Fund for 2026–2028.

The central argument is that higher education institutions in peripheral regions can serve as ecosystem anchors — not by replicating urban programme templates, but by designing education together with regional and local actors and actively building collaborative infrastructure as a pedagogical and institutional strategy.

Creative Ecosystems and Peripheral Regions

The concept of creative ecosystems has become a productive framework for understanding how creative economies develop beyond individual firms or cultural organisations. Drawing on ecological metaphors, it emphasises the interdependencies between creative practitioners, intermediaries, infrastructure, audiences, and enabling institutions (Cunningham & Flew 2019; Ministry of Education and Culture & Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2025). In healthy creative ecosystems, these elements interact fluidly, enabling knowledge circulation, cross-sectoral collaboration, and adaptive resilience.

However, ecosystem thinking has predominantly been developed in urban and metropolitan contexts, where density of actors enables organic network formation. In peripheral regions, this density is

structurally absent. The relevant question therefore shifts: rather than asking how to optimise an existing ecosystem, the challenge is how to catalyse one from conditions of structural thinness.

Drawing on the Triple Helix framework (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), which remains influential despite its origins in an earlier phase of knowledge economy thinking, and on civic university scholarship (Goddard et al., 2016), this paper argues that higher education institutions can serve as regional anchors. Such institutions are not merely training workers but actively shaping the innovation and cultural ecosystems of their territories. The KUKA case extends this proposition specifically to the cultural and creative sector, and to a context of peripherality.

Kainuu's Creative Sector and Its Structural Constraints

Kainuu presents a paradox that is instructive for broader debates on peripheral creative economies. On one hand, the region possesses distinctive cultural assets: a deep-rooted cultural identity shaped by its eastern Finnish heritage, the Kalevalaic tradition, and an internationally recognised landscape (Kainuun liitto, 2022). Kainuu's own University of Applied Sciences KAMK has focused on building a nationally significant gaming industry centred in Kajaani, home to several prominent studios; and a rapidly growing nature-based tourism sector. On the other hand, Kainuu faces acute demographic pressure and its creative sector is characterised by fragmentation, precarity, and limited cross-sectoral integration (Kainuun liitto, 2024a). At the same time, the region's industrial sectors — including data centres and manufacturing — have shown relative economic strength, pointing to culture's indirect significance: incoming workers and their families seek vibrant cultural services and recreational opportunities (Kainuun liitto, 2024b). The preliminary study also identified the gender dimension of this dynamic, as several of the region's strongest industries are male-dominated, making the development of cultural and creative sectors relevant to broader questions of attraction, retention, and community wellbeing (Päiviö-Häkämies, 2024b).

The preliminary study conducted by the author in 2024 mapped these conditions through interviews and workshops with over 70 regional actors: cultural operators, municipal cultural administrators, tourism enterprises, gaming industry representatives, and civic organisations. The study revealed several interconnected structural barriers to creative sector development.

First, the absence of cultural production education meant there was no pipeline of trained intermediaries capable of bridging creative practice and other industries. Cultural producers — professionals who plan, manage, and develop cultural projects and organisations — are essential connective figures in functioning creative ecosystems (Tilev, 2022). Without locally trained producers, Kainuu's creative organisations either remained small and isolated or depended on professionals relocating from elsewhere, which proved difficult given the region's demographic challenges.

Second, existing cultural practitioners operated in conditions of significant precarity. Many worked across multiple part-time roles, lacked access to professional development, and had limited knowledge of funding mechanisms or collaboration models available to them. This fragility constrained the capacity of the creative sector to take on larger or cross-sectoral projects.

Third, the region's distinctive assets — particularly its gaming industry and nature-based tourism — remained largely siloed from cultural heritage and creative practice. There was appetite among businesses and municipalities for cross-sectoral collaboration, but no institutional mechanism to facilitate it. Cultural expertise was broadly undervalued as a strategic resource for regional vitality (Parkkola 2024; Päiviö-Häkämies, 2024a).

These findings pointed towards a conclusion that shaped the subsequent project design: the region's creative ecosystem was not merely underdeveloped but structurally incomplete. The missing element was not primarily funding or goodwill, but trained human capital and an educational anchor capable of

convening actors across sectors.

The KUKA Model: Design Principles and Governance

The KUKA project (an acronym and formally: *Kulttuurituotanto Kainuun elinvoiman vahvistajana*, Cultural Production Strengthening Kainuu's Economic Vitality) was designed in direct response to these findings. It comprises two interrelated components: a regionally tailored bachelor's degree programme in cultural production, and a continuing professional development strand for working practitioners.

The degree programme, developed in partnership between Humak and KAMK, departs from several conventions of national curriculum design. Rather than beginning from a generic competence framework and adapting it to regional context, the curriculum was built outward from Kainuu's specific strengths and needs. This methodological inversion — designing from regional specificity rather than national template — has substantive consequences for both content and pedagogy.

Thematically, the programme foregrounds three dimensions that correspond to Kainuu's distinctive assets: nature-based cultural production, drawing on the region's landscape and outdoor heritage; gaming and digital creative industries, connecting students to the existing industry cluster; and cultural heritage and community identity, engaging with Kalevalaic and local cultural traditions. These are not treated as separate tracks but as intersecting contexts within which general cultural production competences are developed.

Pedagogically, the programme employs a place-based learning approach in which nature and landscape are explicitly configured as learning environments, not merely settings. Students undertake projects embedded in the regional ecosystem, working with real partners from the outset. This serves a dual function: it provides authentic professional learning experiences and simultaneously builds the network infrastructure of the ecosystem itself. The programme is, in this sense, simultaneously educational and ecosystem-building in its intent.

The governance structure of KUKA reflects the inter-institutional partnership at its core. Humak contributes its national expertise in cultural production education and its research programme on regional vitality, while KAMK contributes its deep regional embeddedness, its existing relationships with Kainuu's business and municipal sectors, and its infrastructure in Kajaani. This division of complementary roles — between a nationally profiled specialist institution and a regionally anchored generalist university — represents a model for inter-institutional collaboration that may have wider applicability.

The project also involves a steering network of regional stakeholders including the City of Kajaani, Kainuu Regional Council, cultural organisations, tourism businesses, and gaming industry representatives. This network is not merely advisory; it is constitutively involved in curriculum development, project partnerships, and the ongoing identification of sector needs. The project thus embodies the principle of co-creation not as a consultative gesture but as a structural feature of its design.

Preliminary Findings and Emerging Observations

The needs assessment findings, combined with early project implementation, point to several observations of relevance for the broader field.

The appetite for creative sector development in Kainuu was found to be substantial and broadly shared across sectors. Municipal administrators, tourism businesses, gaming companies, and civic organisations all expressed interest in greater collaboration with cultural expertise, but lacked mechanisms for initiating or sustaining it. This finding suggests that in peripheral regions, demand for creative sector capacity may be latent rather than absent — it requires activation through institutional intervention rather than market mechanisms.

The nature-based framing of the programme has proved generative beyond its original intent. Several regional actors have engaged with the curriculum design process, identifying specific professional development needs that a cultural production programme could address. This cross-sectoral interest suggests that nature-based cultural production may constitute an emergent occupational field with relevance beyond the cultural sector narrowly defined.

The inter-institutional governance model, while requiring careful negotiation of roles and expectations, has also produced unexpected benefits. The combination of Humak's sectoral expertise and KAMK's regional embeddedness has facilitated access to regional networks that neither institution could have mobilised independently. This suggests that inter-institutional partnership may be a more effective vehicle for peripheral ecosystem development than single-institution initiatives.

Challenges encountered include the structural difficulty of sustaining ecosystem development beyond project funding cycles. The ESF funding framework, while enabling the initiative, creates temporal constraints that risk producing fragile infrastructure. The governance model explicitly addresses this by seeking to embed the programme within the normal institutional operations of both universities, with the continuing education strand providing a revenue-generating mechanism beyond the project period. Nevertheless, the longer-term sustainability of such initiatives remains a significant policy challenge.

Discussion: Implications for Creative Economy Policy and Practice

The KUKA case contributes to debates on regional creative ecosystems, the role of HEIs as ecosystem builders, and the design of place-sensitive education in several ways.

First, it operationalises the concept of HEI as ecosystem anchor in a CCI-specific context, demonstrating that the functions of convening, bridging, and capacity-building that anchor institutions perform can be achieved through educational programme design, not only through research or consultancy roles. The curriculum is simultaneously a pedagogical instrument and an ecosystem-building strategy.

Second, it challenges the assumption that peripheral regions must replicate urban models of creative economy development. The Kainuu programme does not aspire to produce a scaled-down version of Helsinki's creative sector. Instead, it proposes that distinctive assets — nature, gaming knowledge, cultural identity — can serve as the basis for a creative economy model with its own competitive advantages and development logic.

Third, the governance innovations of the project co-design with regional stakeholders and inter-institutional partnership is based on complementary profiles as well as integration of research and development within educational practice. This offers a set of transferable principles for similar initiatives in other peripheral European regions.

For cultural policy, the findings point to the importance of educational infrastructure as a condition of creative ecosystem development, not merely its product. In regions where creative sectors are underdeveloped, the policy question is not only how to support existing cultural organisations but how to create the human capital conditions under which a self-sustaining ecosystem can develop. Investment in relevant higher education provision is, in this perspective, a foundational cultural policy instrument.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in peripheral regions, the absence of CCI education constitutes an ecosystem gap with negative consequences for cross-sectoral collaboration, cultural infrastructure utilisation, and the strategic use of culture as a resource for regional vitality. The KUKA project in Kainuu represents a response to this gap that is methodologically innovative in its approach to curriculum design and institutionally innovative in its governance model.

Early evidence suggests that higher education, when co-designed with regional actors and embedded in local landscape and culture, can serve as an ecosystem anchor — connecting practitioners, businesses, municipalities, and research activities in ways that neither the market nor individual organisations can achieve alone. The project's ongoing implementation will provide richer evidence for these propositions, and its transferability to other peripheral European regions warrants further comparative investigation.

Impact & Engagement

The research underpinning this paper addresses a structural gap in creative economy development policy: Whilst significant scholarly and policy attention has been directed towards metropolitan creative economies, the specific challenges facing sparsely populated and demographically declining regions — where creative sector development cannot rely on organic density but requires institutional catalysis — remain comparatively undertheorised and underaddressed in practice.

The communities most directly served by this research are those already engaged in the KUKA project: cultural operators, municipalities, tourism and gaming businesses, and higher education institutions in the Kainuu region. More broadly, the findings are relevant to regional development practitioners and policymakers across Europe who are grappling with similar challenges of creative sector development under conditions of demographic and economic pressure.

The primary pathway for impact is through the KUKA project itself, which embeds research findings directly in the design and implementation of an educational programme and regional ecosystem strategy. The curriculum model developed through the project is intended as a transferable framework adaptable by other regions facing analogous circumstances. Documentation of the curriculum design process, the needs assessment methodology, and the inter-institutional governance model will be made openly available.

Evidenced uptake is already visible: the project has received positive ESF funding decisions, regional endorsement from the City of Kajaani and Kainuu Regional Council, and substantive engagement from KAMK and the gaming, tourism, and cultural sector organisations in the curriculum co-design process. The continuing education strand is designed to generate ongoing professional development impact for working cultural practitioners in the region from the outset of the project period.

The longer-term indicators of impact include the sustainability of the degree programme beyond the project funding cycle, the measurable strengthening of cross-sectoral collaboration in the regional creative economy, and the adoption of similar models by other peripheral regions — an outcome actively pursued through international conference dissemination, of which this paper is a part.

Author Biography

Laura Päiviö-Häkämies is a Principal Researcher at Humak University of Applied Sciences (Finland), leading research within the programme Vitality through Experience. She holds a PhD in European History from the University of Helsinki (2018) and previously served as Senior Lecturer in Cultural Production and Creative Industries Entrepreneurship. Her research focuses on cultural production, regional vitality, and creative ecosystems. She has extensive leadership experience as Cultural Director of the City of Kotka, Director of Education and Culture in Mynämäki, and CEO of Turku Music Festival, Kotka Maritime Festival, and The Tall Ships Races. She is the lead author of the Kainuu preliminary study underpinning the KUKA project.

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From Precarity to Dignity: A Decalogue for Labour and Professional Dignity in Cultural Management. The Catalan Case

Pepe Zapata
APGCC (Association of Cultural Management Professionals of Catalonia) / Universitat de Barcelona

Keywords: cultural rights, cultural management, invisible infrastructure, professional dignity, collective organising

1. Introduction

Why are cultural managers largely absent from cultural-rights frameworks, despite being essential to their implementation?

Recent European and national policy affirms the right of citizens to access, participate in and contribute to cultural life. In almost every such framework, the subject of rights is the citizen; the protagonist of policy is the artist or the cultural organisation. The cultural manager — the professional who programmes venues, designs audience strategies, administers budgets and mediates between artists, institutions and citizens — appears, when at all, as an invisible intermediary. Cultural rights are legislated as if they were exercised without anyone making their exercise possible.

This paper starts not from a theory but from something that happened. A territorial professional association, the Association of Cultural Management Professionals of Catalonia (APGCC), which represents over 800 members, took the dispersed and individually endured precarity of its profession and turned it into a collectively validated policy instrument: the *Decalogue for Labour and Professional Dignity in Cultural Management in Catalonia*. The paper examines that process and asks what it reveals. Its central claim is that the experience of the APGCC brings into view something that cultural-rights policy systematically overlooks — that cultural managers constitute an *invisible infrastructure of cultural rights*, the institutional, relational and organisational substrate without which the rights that governments proclaim cannot in fact be delivered.

On this reading, the precarity of cultural management is not the essence of the problem but its symptom. The well-documented insecurities of the sector — unstable contracts, unpaid labour, eroded boundaries between personal and professional time, limited social protection — are what happens to a professional function that policy has failed to recognise adequately. The research question is how a professional association transforms a sectoral diagnosis into a tool for policy advocacy; the wider contribution is to show that, in doing so, an under-recognised profession can constitute itself as a legitimate subject of cultural-rights policy. This paper is not, in the end, about labour precarity in cultural management. It is about how an invisible professional function made itself visible.

2. Context: the gap at the heart of cultural-rights policy

Cultural rights have moved to the centre of policy at every level. Internationally, the UNESCO MONDIACULT 2025 World Conference reaffirmed the right to participate in cultural life as a human right and culture as a global public good. At state level, the Spanish Ministry of Culture has advanced its *Plan for Cultural Rights* (2025), framing access to and participation in culture as enforceable rights. At regional level, the Catalan Government has brought forward a draft Law on Cultural Rights of Catalonia (2025), embedding those rights in a legislative architecture.

These frameworks mark real progress; they also share a decisive blind spot. They define cultural rights from the standpoint of the citizen who receives culture, while leaving unaddressed the conditions of the

professionals who make that reception possible. As Romainville (2015) argues, the right to participate in cultural life is not exhausted by its legal proclamation: its effectivity depends on the concrete obligations and enabling conditions that make participation real, and cultural policies are at once the justification and the instrument of that right. A right of access presupposes someone who programmes and mediates that access; a right to participate presupposes professionals who design and hold the spaces of participation. Where those professionals work under precarious conditions, the infrastructure on which cultural rights depend is itself unstable — and, like all infrastructure, it tends to become visible only when it fails (Star, 1999).

This is the gap the APGCC's experience exposes. The very call to move cultural rights “from declaration to implementation” stops short of naming a precondition for implementation: that the professionals who deliver cultural rights must themselves work under conditions that make delivery sustainable. The omission is not only a gap between policy intention and sectoral reality, but a conceptual one within cultural-rights policy itself — the failure to recognise that guaranteeing rights requires sustaining the function that delivers them. There can be no effective cultural rights without a recognised, dignified professional foundation to make their exercise possible. It is precisely here that the Decalogue intervenes — not to replace public policy but to complete it, supplying the missing term that links the rhetoric of cultural rights to the labour that realises them, and offering institutions, funders and policymakers concrete principles that can be built into the implementation of frameworks from the global to the local.

3. Theoretical framework

Three bodies of literature help interpret what the APGCC did, and a bridge between them names what the case reveals.

Cultural labour studies have reframed creative work as a site of inequality rather than unbounded opportunity: Banks (2017) situates it within questions of justice; McRobbie (2016) shows how the rhetoric of “being creative” naturalises self-exploitation; Gill and Pratt (2008) analyse how immaterial labour normalises precariousness; Standing (2011) supplies the category of the precariat; and Comunian and England (2020) show how COVID-19 exposed, rather than created, the sector's fragility. This literature diagnoses precarity powerfully, but its subject is rarely the cultural manager, and its horizon rarely the question of political subjectivity — which is exactly what the Catalan case foregrounds.

Cultural-rights theory supplies the second strand. Romainville (2015) demonstrates that the right to participate in cultural life entails a regime of positive obligations whose effectivity depends on enabling conditions, not declaration alone. Yet this literature, like the policy it analyses, attends to the citizen as right-holder and rarely to the professional conditions on which delivery depends. Read through the *ecology of culture* (Holden, 2015) — where a cultural system's health rests on the quality of relationships among its actors rather than on discrete outputs — cultural managers, usually cast merely as intermediaries, reappear as sustainers of the system itself.

The sociology of professions supplies the third. Abbott (1988) shows that professions secure recognition by establishing jurisdiction over a domain of expertise and legitimacy before relevant audiences; a professional association, on this view, does not merely represent interests but produces the knowledge, standards and legitimacy through which a jurisdiction is claimed. This is precisely what the APGCC does through the Decalogue.

Drawing from infrastructure studies the insight that infrastructure recedes from view until it breaks down (Star, 1999), the paper proposes that cultural managers be understood as the *invisible infrastructure of cultural rights*. The claim is not that cultural managers are themselves beneficiaries of cultural rights — those

remain the citizen's — but that they are a condition of possibility of those rights, and must therefore enter the policy frame as a function of public interest. Recognition theory completes the picture: following Fraser and Honneth (2003), dignity requires both redistribution (fair pay, social protection, decent contracts) and recognition (the valuation of cultural management as a profession). The concept does not precede the case; it is the name the case demands.

A necessary qualification. Cultural managers are not the only professionals who sustain cultural rights; technicians, mediators, producers, educators and administrators all contribute. But cultural managers occupy a distinctive coordinating position, connecting institutions, artists, publics and resources, which makes them a particularly revealing case through which to examine the relationship between professional dignity and the implementation of cultural rights — and a natural point from which a wider professional foundation can begin to be recognised.

4. Methodological approach

The Decalogue was produced through an action-research process combining participatory methods with sectoral expertise. The choice was deliberate: a document intended to claim professional legitimacy could not be drafted by experts in isolation but had to be co-produced with the professional community whose conditions it sought to name. The aim was methodological as much as substantive — to ensure the framework reflected authentic professional experience while functioning as both an advocacy instrument and an act of collective self-representation.

The process opened with a public conference in April 2024, organised jointly with the Cercle de Cultura, which gathered practitioners, educators, institutional representatives and policy experts. This forum served as the diagnostic stage, surfacing the recurrent difficulties of the profession — late or inadequate payment, the exclusion of freelancers and small operators from public tenders, the award of contracts to organisations disconnected from territorial and cultural reality, and the normalisation of unpaid and boundaryless work — difficulties repeatedly identified by participants across different professional contexts, and establishing them as structural patterns shared across the sector rather than isolated grievances.

The diagnosis was then translated into principles through a structured, iterative drafting process led within the APGCC and opened to its membership. This stage, rather than the diagnosis, was where the decisive work occurred, and it was shaped by two explicit choices that reveal the political logic of the document. The first was a sustained effort towards precision. Drafts that relied on generic aspirations — “fair conditions”, “proper recognition” — were repeatedly rejected in favour of formulations specific enough to constitute an actionable framework: principles that an institution could translate into a clause in a tender, a line in a budget, or a criterion in a funding call. The recurring question was not “do we agree with this value?” but “what would acting on this value actually require?” The second was a choice of form. The same content could have been set out as a longer charter, but it was deliberately concentrated into ten principles to make it packageable and memorable — to give the sector and its institutional interlocutors a framework that could be cited, circulated and recalled. The decalogue format is therefore not a rhetorical accident but an instrument of advocacy in itself: condensation as a strategy for uptake.

Through successive rounds of consultation and revision, each candidate principle was tested against two criteria — fidelity to documented professional experience, and usability by the institutions the Decalogue seeks to influence — until ten were consolidated and collectively validated before public launch. The methodology is thus part of the contribution: it shows how a territorial professional community moved from being an object of diagnosis to becoming the author of its own policy framework, and how the very form of that framework was designed to act in the world.

5. Results: from occupation to public-interest function

The Decalogue articulates ten principles, each grounded in practitioners' experience and validated through broad consultation. Though presented as a list, they cohere around four interlocking dimensions.

A first cluster concerns material conditions: fair remuneration reflecting the real value and complexity of the work; contract transparency ending informal and ambiguous arrangements; and access to social protection, so that freelancers and small operators are not excluded from basic securities. These respond to the redistributive dimension of dignity.

A second cluster addresses time and sustainability: a genuine work–life balance that resists the normalisation of unpaid overtime, and sustainable working conditions that protect practitioners' health — including the mental-health consequences of chronic precarity — and align cultural work with wider environmental and social sustainability.

A third cluster concerns recognition and development: the professional recognition of cultural management as a qualified field with its own expertise; continuous training as a right rather than a private burden; and gender equity, addressing the specific inequalities that structure the sector.

A fourth cluster is structural and collective: collective organising, affirming the legitimacy of associative action; and institutional accountability, calling on public administrations, funders and private organisations to embed these principles in their procurement, funding and employment practices.

Taken together, the ten principles redefine cultural management not merely as an occupation but as a public-interest function within cultural ecosystems. This is the decisive move. The Decalogue does not say only “we want better conditions”; it says that this function carries a public value that requires certain conditions in order to exist at all. In Abbott's (1988) terms, it is a jurisdictional claim: an assertion that cultural management is a domain of expertise meriting recognition and the conditions that recognition entails. Once cultural management is framed as a public-interest function rather than a private career choice, its working conditions cease to be a matter of sectoral self-interest and become a matter of cultural policy — and, ultimately, of the effectivity of cultural rights.

6. Discussion

The Catalan experience suggests three lessons. First, that collective organising can be constitutive rather than merely defensive: a territorial association need not confine itself to denouncing precarity but can produce the instrument through which an under-recognised function names itself as a legitimate subject of policy. The APGCC did not wait to be counted; it counted itself.

Second, that the strength of such a tool lies in its dual character. Grounded in lived experience and validated by the sector, it carries legitimacy; formulated as concrete, adoptable principles — the product of the deliberate search for precision described above — it is usable by the institutions it addresses. It occupies the productive space between a manifesto and a code of practice, and reframes a labour question as a cultural-rights question, giving it purchase in the arena where cultural rights are now being legislated.

Third, that what is transferable is not what it might first appear. The transferable element is not the content of the Decalogue itself, which responds to a specific territorial context, but the process through which a professional community transformed dispersed experiences into a collectively validated policy framework — and, in doing so, turned itself from an unacknowledged intermediary into a recognised subject. That process, not the document, is the export.

The approach has limits worth stating. A voluntary decalogue depends on uptake; without integration into binding procurement and funding criteria, its principles risk remaining aspirational. Its effectiveness will be measured not by its adoption as a statement but by its translation into enforceable standards — which returns the question to the policy arena, where the recognition of cultural management as a condition of cultural rights remains to be secured.

7. Conclusion

This paper began with a question: why are cultural managers largely absent from cultural-rights frameworks despite being essential to their implementation? The Catalan case offers both an answer and a demonstration. It shows how a professional association transformed the lived experience of cultural managers into a collectively validated policy framework, and in doing so revealed cultural management as an essential yet largely *invisible infrastructure of cultural rights*. The *Decalogue for Labour and Professional Dignity in Cultural Management in Catalonia* did more than improve conditions: through a deliberate pursuit of precision and a deliberate choice of memorable form, it made an under-recognised function legible to the institutions that depend on it. The contribution of the Catalan case is to show that a profession can organise to make its own conditions visible, operational and transferable — not as a document, but as a process. The question, in the end, is no longer whether cultural rights can be guaranteed. It is whether they can be guaranteed while continuing to overlook the professionals who make them possible.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a persistent knowledge and policy gap: cultural management professionals are essential to the delivery of cultural rights yet remain absent, as a recognised function, from the policy and statistical frameworks that govern them. While artists' working conditions gain growing recognition, the professionals who sustain cultural ecosystems remain largely unaccounted for — noticed, like any underlying support, mainly when they fail.

The findings are designed to benefit cultural management professionals, professional associations, cultural institutions, funders and policymakers across Europe. The primary pathway to impact is policy contribution. The Decalogue has been conceived not as an academic output but as a practical toolkit that institutions and funders can adopt to raise labour standards, and as a conceptual frame through which public administrations can recognise dignified professional conditions as a condition of cultural-rights implementation. It speaks directly to the call issued at UNESCO MONDIACULT 2025, held in Barcelona as the Decalogue was launched, for cultural rights to move from declaration to concrete measures.

Impact is already in progress. The Decalogue was officially launched in October 2025 by the APGCC in partnership with the Cercle de Cultura, and is being presented to the Catalan Government as input for the implementation of the new Law on Cultural Rights. Early uptake includes the integration of its principles into advocacy meetings with regional policymakers and into professional training programmes at the Universitat de Barcelona. Beyond Catalonia, the framework is beginning to inform discussions within broader professional networks, including the Spanish Federation of Cultural Management Associations (FEAGC), suggesting potential pathways for adaptation and transfer in other territorial contexts.

The expected change is twofold: in the short term, fairer standards in public procurement, funding criteria and institutional practice; in the longer term, a shift in how cultural management is recognised — as a public-interest function and as a condition of cultural rights. Possible indicators include references to the Decalogue in tenders and funding guidelines, its citation in policy documents, its adoption by other associations, and measurable improvements in contractual and payment practices.

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Biography

Pepe Zapata is President of the APGCC (Association of Cultural Management Professionals of Catalonia) and President of the Spanish Federation of Cultural Management Associations (FEAGC). With over 30 years of experience across public, private and non-profit organisations, he specialises in audience development, communication strategy and cultural participation. Through his leadership of the APGCC he has been actively involved in advocacy on professional recognition, fair working conditions and cultural rights, and has contributed to Spain's *Plan for Cultural Rights* and the White Paper on Cultural Audiences. A former Director of Corporate Relations at Grup Focus, he now works as an independent cultural manager and consultant, and lectures at the Universitat de Barcelona. He is also active as actor and playwright.

The Generative Role of Arts Management in Artist Residencies: A Comparative Study of Cité Internationale des Arts and 59 Rue de Rivoli (Paris)

Ms. Yu-Chih Chang
Department of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU)

Abstract

Arts management in artist residency institutions tends to operate implicitly. It works through decisions about space, time, obligation, and encounter that are rarely identified as management decisions, and rarely examined as such. This implicit character is not incidental: it is one of the marks of management that is doing what it is capable of doing. The conditions it produces are experienced not as managed conditions but as the quality of the place.

Drawing on field observation and interviews with two artists conducted in Paris between January and June 2025, this paper examines the generative role of arts management in two residency institutions: Cité Internationale des Arts and 59 Rue de Rivoli. The institutions share a city and a commitment to sustaining artists' presence within it, but have arrived at that commitment through entirely different histories, spatial logics, and organisational forms. At the Cité, arts management operates through a logic of protection: a deliberate institutional design that organises around the artist's own rhythm, sustains conditions in which nothing is required, and places the organising power of public encounter entirely in the artist's hands. At 59 Rue de Rivoli, it operates through a logic of distribution: a self-governing community that continuously constitutes its own conditions through collective daily choices, producing an environment in which making and encounter happen simultaneously and without institutional prescription.

In both cases, what arts management produces is present not as management but as the quality of the environment the artists inhabit. When that design is well-calibrated to what artistic practice actually requires, the effect is not merely protective but amplifying: it does not only preserve creative possibility, it expands the ground on which that possibility can grow.

Keywords: arts management, artist residency, generative practice, creative conditions, accountability, thing theory, New Public Management, public visibility

1. Introduction

Arts management work in artist residencies tends to operate at a distance from what is most visible. Coordinating space, communicating with artists, organising public encounters, sustaining the conditions of creative practice: none of this surfaces readily in accounts of what residencies produce. Something is available for closer examination here: the organisational and relational practices through which residency institutions generate the conditions for artistic work to unfold.

Bill Brown's (2001) thing theory offers a way of understanding this implicit character. When an object functions well, it is transparent: we look through it to see what it frames or enables, and its presence becomes apparent only when it fails or when we choose to stop and look at it directly. Arts management in residency institutions operates in this register: when it functions, it recedes into the quality of the environment. Stopping to look at it directly is what this paper attempts, not because something has gone wrong, but because what is working deserves to be understood.

The standard positioning of arts management as a support function, secondary to artistic work, has consequences. It leaves unexamined the ways management actively shapes what becomes possible: what quality of time is available, what forms of encounter an institution makes room for. Belfiore and Bennett

(2008) show that frameworks oriented toward measurable outcomes undercount effects that accumulate slowly; Becker (1982) demonstrates that artistic creation is always embedded in networks of cooperative activity that remain implicit to those who encounter only the finished work. The conditions of creative work are produced, not given, and producing them is a management task. In what follows, arts management is understood in the sense developed by Chong (2000), as a form of mediation connecting artistic practice to its institutional, social, and public contexts. To mediate is not to service from a distance but to be actively present in the relationship, constituting the terms on which it unfolds.

The researcher comes from Taiwan, where artist residencies have developed along a path shaped by the adaptive reuse of idle public spaces () and accountability frameworks prioritising demonstrable outputs. That background positioned her as an observer attentive to arrangements a more familiar eye might not examine. Two bodies of analytical work inform this inquiry: While's (2003) account of how cultural spaces are constituted through the accumulation of everyday arrangements, and Zhou et al.'s (2022) observation that public visibility is always the product of organisational decisions, not a natural consequence of quality.

2. Background and Research Design

2.1 Defining the Terms

Arts management, as understood here, is a relational and constitutive practice. Drawing on Chong's (2000) account of arts management as mediation, what arts management does in residency contexts is not only to keep an institution running: it shapes the texture of time and space available to artists, the kinds of encounter an institution makes possible, and the forms through which creative work becomes publicly present. These effects are experienced by artists not as management but as the quality of the environment around them.

Artist residency refers here to institutional arrangements providing artists with dedicated time, space, and support for creative work within a defined period. Elfving and Kokko (2019) trace a structural shift in which the residency and the physical site have increasingly decoupled: the residency is defined not by a fixed location but by the set of conditions the institution provides. Both institutions examined here are understood as artist residencies on these terms.

2.2 The Researcher's Position

The researcher arrives from Taiwan, where the residency sector has been shaped by a policy genealogy linking artist residencies to the adaptive reuse of idle public buildings, a pattern Zukin (2014) identifies as characteristic of urban cultural space development more broadly. Two trajectories are telling: one residency, catalysed by an unauthorised occupation in the late 1990s, saw artists displaced after management was transferred to a commercial operator; another, established in the early 2000s, lost its central urban site to redevelopment in 2023. In both cases, artists activated a space, the space became desirable, and the conditions that made their presence possible were dissolved. This background made the researcher attentive to what arts management can protect, and what it cannot.

2.3 Method

Field visits to both institutions took place between January and June 2025, with particular attention to the Wednesday open studio format at the Cité and multiple visits and open studio events at 59 Rue de Rivoli. The primary materials are in-depth interviews with two artists. Wang Anqi is a Taiwanese performance artist who came to the Cité through Taiwan's Ministry of Culture partnership, staying for at least seven months across two periods; direct encounters and observation at the Cité during the fieldwork period were deepened through a subsequent interview in Taipei in July 2025. Antoine de Tyssandier is a painter who was resident at 59 Rue de Rivoli during the fieldwork; the primary encounter took place in Paris, supplemented by written exchange. Neither account makes any claim to statistical representativeness.

What each carries is a first-person account of how the institutional environment feels from inside artistic practice, and what that felt sense illuminates about the management conditions that produce it.

3. Case One: Cité Internationale des Arts

3.1 The Space and Its Rhythm

The Cité Internationale des Arts was inaugurated in May 1965, with decisive support from André Malraux, then France's Minister of Cultural Affairs. It operates today as a nonprofit private foundation with close to three hundred studio apartments across two Parisian sites, hosting approximately one thousand artists annually from around one hundred countries (Cité Internationale des Arts, n.d.).

Moving through the corridors during Wednesday open studios, the researcher encountered a building organised around a particular quality of quiet. Studio doors were closed along most stretches of the hallway; here and there, a room with light spilling out. What this communicated, without announcing itself, was that concentration was the expected condition here, and that whatever interrupted it did so by invitation only.

This quality is produced through deliberate institutional arrangements: the self-contained studio apartments remove the need to negotiate shared spaces; the management rules are clear and stable from arrival; the optional programming extends an open invitation without prescribing participation. Taken together, these constitute what While (2003) would recognise as the continuous institutional constitution of a spatial character, not a fixed atmosphere but a quality of environment produced and reproduced through the accumulation of everyday management choices.

3.2 Freedom as a Condition: Wang Anqi's Account

When asked to describe her first encounter with the Cité, Wang Anqi reached for a single word the researcher had not anticipated: shock. What she had encountered was a degree of freedom she had not known to expect, and did not immediately know how to inhabit. Under the terms of her residency, nothing was asked of her. There were no obligations to fulfil, no schedule to answer to, no requirement to make the creative process legible to anyone outside it. "My pressure is just my own creative work. That's it."

The significance of that shock becomes legible when placed against publicly funded residency programmes in Taiwan, which typically operate within structured accountability frameworks: periodic reports, documentation of creative process, a specified number of public-facing activities. What the researcher recognised was the specific weight such frameworks place on the artist's attention: the ongoing pressure to make visible what is happening before it has fully happened. Under the conditions of Wang Anqi's residency at the Cité, none of that applied.

What Wang Anqi found was an environment in which the creative impulse could simply follow itself. "If there are absolutely no restrictions, everything becomes a source of stimulation." And then: "I thought, so this is how simple art really is." Months later, she called this "the Cité curse, because that place is a creative paradise." Having inhabited those conditions, she now knew what she had been missing, and that knowledge was irreversible. What she was pointing toward is not a statement about art's ease, but about what art looks like when institutional conditions are organised around the creative process rather than around the need to demonstrate it.

3.3 The Generative Logic of Not Requiring

"Giving complete freedom," Wang Anqi said, "is the greatest form of support." That sentence describes freedom not as a natural state but as something actively sustained. The Cité's decision to organise around the artist's own rhythm is not a default. It is an achievement, remade every day through choices that never announce themselves as choices.

At the level of public visibility, the Cité operates through a deliberate distribution of organising power: it makes Wednesday open studios available and keeps participation voluntary. Wang Anqi held three open studio events across her residency periods, each organised according to her own sense of readiness. "You could register and then decide not to do it, and they would absolutely never come to tell you, why didn't you do it? Not at all. This had a very strong impact on me." When no one monitors whether an artist opens their studio, the decision to open carries a different weight, and the encounter that results carries the quality of something that grew from inside the creative process. As Zhou et al. (2022) make clear, public visibility is always the product of organisational decisions. The Cité's decision is to place that organising power entirely in the artist's hands.

4. Case Two: 59 Rue de Rivoli

4.1 The Space and Its Energy

59 Rue de Rivoli began as an unauthorised occupation of a vacant bank building in 1999 (Eburne, 2014; Yeung, 2019). After years of collective presence and negotiation with city authorities, the building was purchased by the City of Paris in 2006 and granted legal status in 2009, with its self-governing character preserved. Today it houses approximately thirty artists across six floors: fifteen form the long-term core community who manage the space alongside an administrative team, while fifteen others are residents staying between three and six months.

The exterior stands apart from the energy of the Rue de Rivoli not by being quiet but by being something else entirely. Large paper sculptures climb the façade; a giant octopus hangs above the street. The building's first statement to the city is that something different is happening here. The interior answers by refusing to resolve that statement: each floor is a continuous open space, with artists defining their working areas through furniture, materials, and objects. Walking through it, the researcher moved through a space that was simultaneously studio, exhibition, and social environment, without any of these functions being formally designated or separated.

4.2 The Alchemy of Simultaneous Making and Showing: Antoine's Account

Antoine de Tyssandier applied through an open call on the institution's website, came in for a meeting with permanent artists and the administration, and was accepted. What he was looking for was specific: "I wanted to experiment this collective approach, with more human interaction, because the life of an artist can be quite solitary on a daily basis."

What he encountered reorganised something fundamental about the relationship between making and being seen. In a conventional studio-to-exhibition model, these two things are separated into distinct phases. At 59 Rue de Rivoli, that separation does not exist. Antoine described this precisely: "Usually your time is divided between the 'making' and the 'showing.' In this place the very alchemy is happening in the same time." That simultaneity is not incidental: it is what the space's organisational logic produces, continuously, through the openness of the floors and the culture of availability the community has built across years of collective presence.

This condition generates what Antoine called "a support and a pressure in the same time." The presence of visitors introduces a continuous field of attention the artist cannot entirely step away from. Antoine was candid about adjusting to this: "At the beginning it seems frightening, but in the end I would say it's more of a booster because this constant flux of people is a real motivation." He kept a portion of his practice at home, reserving that space for more experimental work, developing a working structure that the space itself called into being in response to what the environment requires rather than what an institution prescribes.

4.3 Self-Governance as Arts Management

The history of 59 Rue de Rivoli is present in the institution's daily life. Antoine captured something of this when he described the building's character: "It was a squat at the beginning so there is this punk approach in every corner of the building." That punk approach describes how the space continues to govern itself: from the inside out, by the people who are there, on terms they set collectively.

Read through While's (2003) framework, this is cultural space-making as a continuous process. The character of the space is produced not by any founding decision but through the ongoing accumulation of everyday arrangements: collective decisions about who enters, informal norms governing how artists relate to one another and to visitors, and the accumulated physical marks of presence layering the stairwells across years. The spatial character that results, its openness, its energy, its quality of encounter, is not something the institution has. It is something the institution continuously does.

Public visibility here follows a logic different from Zhou et al.'s (2022) account of concentrated institutional decision-making. The building is simply open, and what happens inside is visible to whoever arrives. The organising power is distributed across thirty artists, each making their own decisions about how to work and engage. Antoine described the encounters that happen in this open environment as sometimes "pretty intense," carrying a quality that managed exhibition conditions tend to foreclose: "That's really a wonderful way of doing, maybe superior in some ways, to a classic exhibition space." He described the building as remaining "like a mountain in the middle of the sea", sustained not by external guarantee but by the continuous collective choice to keep it "an utopia and a collective dreamhouse."

5. Comparative Discussion

The two cases present different logics through which arts management generates the conditions for artistic work, and the differences are worth sitting with.

At the Cité, the generative logic operates through protection: a set of conditions, self-contained studio apartments, stable management rules, and optional programming, through which the artist's time and creative autonomy are actively held in place. What is distinctive is not what the institution does to the artist but what it refrains from doing: it does not require, does not schedule, does not monitor. That restraint is a sustained institutional choice, continuously reproduced through everyday management decisions.

At 59 Rue de Rivoli, the generative logic operates through distribution: the institution sustains the environment within which the community itself continuously constitutes creative conditions through daily collective choices. Management and managed are not separate categories here: the artists who work in the space also produce and reproduce its character.

While's (2003) framework clarifies what both logics share beneath their differences. In each case, the spatial character of the institution is continuously constituted through the accumulation of everyday arrangements, and this constitution is not automatic. It requires deliberate management choices to sustain. The choices look different in each institution, but in both, the quality of the creative environment is something arts management actively produces through decisions that rarely announce themselves as such.

Wang Anqi's shock at encountering the Cité was, among other things, the shock of recognising by contrast what had been missing. Antoine's account of 59 Rue de Rivoli points in the same direction: the capacity the space produces, for artists to work in continuous public encounter without that encounter consuming the work, demonstrates what becomes possible when organisational conditions are designed around the creative process. When arts management design is well-calibrated to what artistic practice requires, the effect is not only protective but amplifying: the conditions it produces do not merely preserve creative possibility, they expand the ground on which that possibility can grow. A reorientation follows from this:

when arts management design is oriented toward sustaining the conditions for creative work rather than toward demonstrating that those conditions exist, the ecosystem it sustains is more likely to produce what arts ecologies actually need.

6. Conclusion

The argument advanced here is a simple one, though its implications extend in several directions. Arts management is not only the organisational infrastructure through which artistic work is serviced and enabled. It is a constitutive practice, one that, through the accumulation of everyday decisions about space, time, obligation, and encounter, actively shapes the conditions within which creative work becomes possible or difficult.

The Cité has shown that when management design is oriented toward protecting the artist's time and autonomy, sustaining conditions without layering requirements onto them, the creative environment it produces is both generative and reproducible. 59 Rue de Rivoli has shown that when management is distributed across a self-governing community, the creative environment is continuously made from within. In both cases, what arts management produces is present not as management but as the quality of the place, implicit in the environment and apparent only when one stops and looks directly at it.

For practitioners, the two logics identified here, protection and distribution, are not models to replicate but descriptions of what has worked, in these two places, over these decades. The question they carry for residency design is not procedural but fundamental: when you design a residency programme, what are you actually designing? The answer these two institutions suggest is a quality of environment: the texture of time available to the artist, the conditions under which encounter happens, the degree to which the creative process is asked to make itself legible before it is ready. Generative arts management is what happens when those choices are made with the creative process, rather than around it. The implications of that reorientation extend beyond any single institution.

Impact & Engagement

The argument above has implications that extend beyond the two institutions examined here. Artist residency programmes occupy a significant position in contemporary cultural infrastructure, yet the organisational practices through which they sustain creative conditions remain poorly understood, both within arts management scholarship and among practitioners designing and evaluating residency programmes. The gap is practical as well as scholarly. Residency programmes across many national contexts are increasingly embedded in accountability frameworks that prioritise demonstrable outputs, including exhibition records, public participation numbers, and documented creative outputs, over the quality of the conditions in which artistic practice unfolds. By making explicit what generative arts management looks like in practice, through two institutions that have sustained creative conditions across decades, this study offers a vocabulary for recognising the constitutive dimensions of organisational work in creative contexts.

The communities most likely to engage with these findings include residency programme directors and administrators seeking frameworks for understanding what their management decisions actually produce; cultural policymakers designing evaluation criteria for residency support; arts management educators developing curriculum that moves beyond the service-function model; and researchers working to extend the analytical frameworks available for studying creative institutions. The likely pathways for uptake include the ENCATC Congress 2026 presentation and publication in the Book of Proceedings, citation within arts management and cultural policy scholarship, and adoption by residency networks as a reference for reflective practice.

The researcher, drawing on direct experience of residency administration in Taiwan alongside doctoral research, is positioned to carry these findings into applied contexts beyond the academy. The expected change is modest but specific: a shift in the language available for thinking about residency management,

from management as support function to management as constitutive practice, and from accountability as demonstration to accountability as stewardship of creative conditions. Where that language takes hold, it tends to change what practitioners notice, what funders ask for, and what residency design attends to.

Author Biography

Yu-Chih Chang is a doctoral researcher in Fine Arts at National Taiwan Normal University, working at the intersection of arts management scholarship and practice. With nearly fifteen years of experience in international artist reception, including senior roles at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and multiple international music festivals, she brings a practitioner's sensibility to residencies understood not merely as organisational structures but as environments shaping the continuity of creative life. Her master's research examined the implicit mechanisms through which arts administration sustains practice; her doctoral project extends this through the concept of generative arts management, drawing on Bill Brown's thing theory to reframe management's presence from invisible to transparent. Her research draws on fieldwork across multiple international residency contexts.

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The Infrastructural Labour of Accommodating Arts and Cultural Work in Difficult Heritage Sites

Dr. Marthe Nehl
Lund university

Author biography

Marthe Nehl (PhD) is an interdisciplinary early career researcher and educator in the field of urban cultural studies, working with cultural policy and on the ground struggles of cultural production in urban contexts. Her publication-based dissertation “Infrastructuring independent cultural production” (2025), emphasised the often hidden and overlooked long term forms of relational work that cultural actors do and depend on, enabling and supporting project based cultural production. Such infrastructuring, the thesis argues, is important to recognise to improve cultural policy and support structures to tackle prevailing precarity. Nehl teaches in the international master’s Program Service Management Culture and Creativity at Lund University, on cultural organisations, creative work, creative spaces, cultural entrepreneurship and cultural policy. Her broader research and practice concern the entanglements of cultural production, the built environment, community and cultural policy. Alongside her academic work, Nehl actively engages in a local grassroots initiative in Malmö, where she is based.

Abstract

This project investigates how arts and cultural practitioners navigate, adapt, and inhabit difficult heritage sites. Buildings suffering long term vacancies, offer spatial opportunities for cultural production, yet they also carry emotional, ethical, and political tensions that shape everyday cultural work. Through a comparative study of two sites in Austria and Germany, the project examines the infrastructural labour through which cultural actors make these contested spaces usable, ranging from practical maintenance and negotiation to emotional and embodied forms of coping. Drawing on the notion infrastructural labour, the study highlights how cultural actors sustain and transform repurposed spaces over time, thereby mediating between difficult pasts and possible futures through, and alongside, everyday creative practices. By foregrounding cultural actor’s strategies knowledge and affective engagements, the project contributes new insights into adaptive heritage reuse, the emotional dimension of infrastructural labour, and explores the role of cultural workers as stakeholders in heritage management and urban development.

Background and Introduction

In my dissertation, I explored the hidden and taken for granted labour of arts and cultural workers who continuously create and maintain the conditions for, in my case, independent cultural production. A large amount of this time and labour goes into the negotiations of access to and rent of spaces (often vacant spaces such as industrial brownfields), as one major infrastructural component of cultural production. With this project, I aim to take the discussion further in two ways: on the one hand though developing the concept infrastructural labour and secondly to focus on a recent phenomenon of arts and cultural production coinciding with the adaptive reuse of cultural heritage sites, particularly those considered difficult heritage. While the adaptive re-use of industrial heritage is laboursome and practically and economically challenging, difficult heritage sites come with moral and ethical burdens, that risk ending up being silently dealt with by cultural workers accommodating the conditions for production in difficult heritage sites, due to a pressure on and scarcity of available and affordable spaces in cities.

The following paragraphs present parts of a draft for the project in the making, and all comments and thoughts are very appreciated

“Adaptive reuse enables buildings to be given a second life, enabling them to live on when they may have been previously underutilized.” (Dyson et al., 2016, p. 44) All built infrastructure will eventually become obsolete (Van Laak, 2023) posing various challenges of reuse. The material-built structures we refer to as difficult heritage describe sites and buildings marked by contested or painful histories, whose significance is disputed because they embody shame, violence, or political controversy. The term presents a “comprehensive referent for any painful historical event or process that affected a community” (Cappelletto, 2025, p. 1). Yet, witnessing the increasing cultural activity at difficult heritage sites, suggests that the involved actors actively work with these difficulties and questions. I suggest to explore the challenges entangled within the opportunities of artistic, or cultural working broadly, at difficult heritage sites. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, p. 21) see dissonance as a quality “intrinsic to the nature of heritage” and is thus not problematic per se, but the term has come to account for sub-categories such as ‘difficult heritage’, ‘contested heritage’ and ‘undesired heritage’ (Kulojärvi, 2021). Due to their contested history, contested heritage sites’ future use is often difficult to determine, and slowed down adaptive reuse means buildings remain vacant over long periods of time (Flynn, 2011; Liu et al., 2021; McAtackney, 2014; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015).

Unresolved future uses mean underused spaces today. Unlike post-industrial buildings commonly used as cultural infrastructure, difficult heritage sites pose not only technical, structural and, in most cases, economic challenges, but also ethical, emotional, and psychological ones. While vacant properties, often centrally located, offer spaces of opportunity for creative professionals, the question arises of how everyday life and cultural production can be reconciled with the awareness of violent crimes and the imperative to remember (Szuta & Szczepański, 2019). If dissonances be understood as intrinsic quality of all heritage (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) why would some repurposed structures require more work from cultural actors than others? Macdonald (2009) means that the dissonance roots in historically significant periods that societies struggle to reconcile with the present.

Adaptive reuse of difficult heritage touches practical, economic, ethical and political questions. Amidst the persisting crisis of lacking affordable cultural production spaces in many cities (Bain & Podmore, 2023), difficult heritage sites keep appearing as potential spaces for adaptive reuse. Architects have been interested in the technical and emotional possibilities, suggesting that independent of how difficult a site is perceived, its decay is to be avoided (Szuta & Szczepański, 2019) and tourism holds promises of economic return. Studies on critical success factors of adaptive reuse of heritage (Dyson et al., 2016) do not include the social dimension of everyday activity, but how we feel in and around dissonant heritage buildings is of interest to scholars in tourism studies (Chabra, 2012; Soulard & Russel, 2025). Toursists come and go, experience, commemorate and ponder momentarily until they leave a site, but what does coping with an unwanted past look like in everyday practice (Liu et al., 2021) for cultural workers?

Towards an everyday approach of adaptive reuse

While an explicit cultural workers’ everyday perspective is absent, Cappelletto (2025) suggests contemporary art can bridge between heritage and the everyday, past and present, and that critical exploration shows not only that historiographical and cultural work is necessary but carries emancipatory and empowering potentials for affected communities. “In contrast to conservation-led approaches”, Mosler (2019) argues, “these everyday heritage elements/landscapes have been changed or replaced through people-led factors: societal needs leading to appropriation of the built environment, and accumulation of meaning and identities as a form of place-making process” (Mosler, 2019, p. 785). Thus, to facilitate everyday cultural work is not the end product of adaptive reuse; it is the mechanism through which reused heritage becomes operational, as cultural infrastructure. In other words, the everyday cultural work of predominantly precarious societal subjects, includes producing value by practicing adaptive reuse over time, making-places, thereby reconciling difficult pasts with the present and future and in the case of contested heritage.

Everyday cultural work is where adaptive re-use happens on the ground, and where strategies to cope with difficult heritage can be studied. Asking what does and what does not take place, Wollentz (2020) identified trivializing narratives (p. 220), or temporally position heritage, either in a harmless and distant past, or integrate it as part of living heritage, maintaining its relevance (p. 278). He further suggests that we should be paying attention to what is perceived as appropriate and what is not, and that investigating especially the engagements considered inappropriate or actively prohibited, might be telling of the meaning of a site (p. 206). Considering that forgetting and remembering are not mutually exclusive (Wollentz, 2020), this project suggests that artists' everyday work surfaces the affective governance of difficult sites, and what implicit rules are there about what is appropriate to do/feel, when, and for whom (Hochschild, 1979, 2012) and shows how these norms are negotiated in practice.

Conceptually, the study draws on the interdisciplinary infrastructural turn, which cuts across urban, cultural, and media studies. Foregrounding actors and activities, the turn shifts attention from infrastructure as static systems to the ongoing processes of repair, adaptation, and care that enable their operation (Schabacher, 2022; Smedberg, 2022). I suggest studying the practices of cultural actors in difficult heritage sites through the conceptual lens of infrastructural labour. Building on ideas of infrastructure as 'peopled' (Simone, 2014) I build on Stoke and De Coss-Corzo's (2023) working definition of infrastructural labour as "intentional human work, whether waged or unwaged, which is fundamental in sustaining collective life by enabling, mediating, maintaining, and modifying infrastructural assemblages" (p. 437). Graham and Thrift (2007) have long pointed out the value of studying maintenance (an aspect of infrastructural labour) because the numerous "small increments in practical knowledge produce change" (p. 5). Hence, the project seeks understanding of cultural actors' knowledge, skills, capacities constituting such practices, thereby nuancing infrastructural labour, and adaptive reuse practices.

Filling the void of urban cultural infrastructure (Bain & Podmore, 2023) the project highlights cultural infrastructural labour, including the physical, organisational, and emotional efforts involved in inhabiting and transforming difficult heritage spaces into environments for day-today creative work. This underlines the idea that cultural production infrastructures are dependent on people (Bain & Podmore, 2023), especially because without people's activities, buildings risk losing their community functions (Puletti et al., 2024). The project is guided by the following research questions:

- What individual and collective practices and strategies do arts- and cultural actors employ to enable everyday cultural work in difficult heritage sites?
- How can cultural actors' practices inform people-led adaptive reuse strategies?
- Which functions or roles can cultural actors play in commemorating difficult pasts?
- What does it take to make difficult heritage sites permanent spaces for arts and cultural production and multifunctional public space?

In short, this project suggests examining the infrastructural labour of adapting and inhabit sites of difficult heritage for cultural production. The project presents adaptive reuse not as a top-down process but an ongoing, user-driven spatial adaptation and transformation. Theoretically, the research nuances debates on infrastructural labour through an emotional dimension, identifying 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979, 2012) of difficult heritage sites and their negotiations. It further contributes to heritage studies by shifting to the focus from the heritage site to heritage actors (Liu et al., 2021, p. 456) positioning arts and cultural actors, commonly only intermediary spatial users, as stakeholders in the centre of the heritage management process. Knowledge of cultural actors' everyday practices is not only informative for adaptive reuse processes, but also crucial to prevent exploiting cultural workers emotional infrastructural labour for revaluation processes.

Expected impact and engagement

This research addresses a critical gap in understanding how cultural practitioners navigate the infrastructural and emotional demands of working within difficult heritage sites, spaces marked by contested histories such as former psychiatric hospitals, concentration camp satellite facilities, and prisons that remain vacant due to moral and political dissonances. Despite growing urban pressures for affordable cultural workspace, and the use of difficult heritage sites through cultural actors, little is known about the everyday strategies these actors employ to reconcile creative production with difficult legacies. The findings will benefit arts and cultural practitioners seeking accessible workspaces, heritage management organisations, urban policymakers grappling with adaptive reuse challenges, and community groups engaged in memory work. By foregrounding the perspectives of cultural actors as central stakeholders rather than passive beneficiaries, the study positions their practices within heritage governance and urban development decisions. Further, the project adds to the understanding of the diverse and versatile practices of arts and cultural workers often remaining invisible (Gerber, 2006; Nehl, 2025) adding to the vocabulary of artistic work.

The research anticipates generating three key outcomes. First, it seeks to render visible the often-invisible emotional and physical infrastructural labour required to inhabit difficult heritage, transforming practitioners from passive occupants into recognized experts in heritage governance. This recognition holds significant emancipatory potential: by articulating and validating these strategies, the study empowers cultural actors to negotiate their terms of engagement more effectively, challenging precarious power dynamics and reducing the risk of displacement. Second, the project aims to provide policymakers and heritage managers with a nuanced framework for adaptive reuse that balances commemoration with sustainable, everyday cultural production. Finally, by documenting how creative communities appropriate and repurpose contested spaces, the findings will offer evidence of bottom-up resilience that can inform future urban planning legislation. Success will be measured not only by academic dissemination but through strengthening of practitioner networks, the adoption of action-research insights by site organisations, and the establishment of cultural workers as legitimate stakeholders in the management of difficult pasts.

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Segmented Audiences, Shared Institutions? Generational Tensions, Audience Work, and Market Logics in Contemporary Museums

Dr. Anders Parment
Stockholm University

Prof. Martin Piber
Universität Innsbruck

Keywords: Audience development; cultural professionals; museums; generational theory; cultural governance

Abstract

This paper examines how museums manage generationally segmented audiences and how this reshapes professional roles and institutional priorities. Museums are increasingly expected to expand access, diversify audiences, and engage younger generations while maintaining cultural authority, financial stability, and long-standing visitor relationships — pressures that intensify demands on curators, mediators, educators, and digital teams working at the intersection of artistic, managerial, and policy logics.

The aim of the research is to examine how museums manage generationally segmented audiences and how this shapes the priorities of museums. We analyse audience development as a form of cultural labour embedded in a broader context of societal benefits. The objective is to contribute to current debates on cultural work by highlighting how audience strategies influence professional roles and institutional identities.

Aim, context, and objectives of the research

Across Europe and beyond, museums are increasingly expected to expand access, diversify audiences, and engage younger generations while simultaneously maintaining cultural authority, financial stability, and long-standing visitor relationships. These expectations place growing pressure on cultural professionals such as curators, educators, mediators, and digital teams, whose work sits at the intersection of artistic, managerial, and policy-driven logics. Within contemporary cultural ecosystems, audience development has become a central site where institutional sustainability, professional roles, and cultural value are actively negotiated, sometimes at the cost of professional quality, coworker well-being, visitor experience, or societal welfare.

The aim of our paper is to examine how museums manage generationally segmented audiences and how this shapes the work, priorities, and professional practices of museums. Our research analyses audience development as a form of cultural labour embedded in broader market and governance frameworks. The objective is to contribute to current debates on cultural work by highlighting how audience strategies restructure professional roles and institutional identities within museums.

Theoretical framework

The paper draws on three complementary theoretical fields. First, generational theory is used to conceptualize differing value orientations, expectations, and modes of cultural participation among younger and older audience cohorts. Second, audience development and cultural consumption research provides insight into segmentation, participation, and access strategies. Third, institutional and legitimacy theory (notably Suchman’s framework) is applied to analyze how museums balance pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy through audience-facing practices. Together, these

perspectives frame audience development as a key arena where artistic, economic, and policy logics intersect.

Drawing on generational theory and research on audience development, this paper examines how museums navigate tensions between younger and older cohorts, between mass-market outreach and traditionally elitist conceptions of cultural participation. While Millennials and Generation Z are frequently addressed as future audiences through digitalization, immersive technologies, and social media strategies, such initiatives risk reinforcing new forms of segmentation rather than fostering intergenerational integration. Younger audiences tend to value authenticity, participation, and social relevance, whereas established audiences often emphasize contemplation, expertise, and continuity, hence creating frictions in curatorial priorities, mediation formats, and communication strategies.

Empirically, the paper adopts a qualitative comparative case-study approach, which uses lots of quantitative and other data. It analyzes audience positioning, mediation formats, and digital strategies at major international museums, including institutions in North America and Europe. Data sources include institutional documents, annual reports, public programming materials, digital communication strategies, and secondary sector analysis. The comparative design allows for identifying recurring patterns across different governance and funding contexts while remaining sensitive to local institutional conditions.

Methodological approach

Our study employs a qualitative comparative case-study methodology to explore how audience development practices are organized and experienced within different institutional and governance contexts. The analysis focuses on a purposive sample of major international museums in Europe and North America, selected for their prominence, scale, and articulated commitment to audience diversification. Data sources include institutional documents (annual reports, audience strategies, policy statements), publicly available programming and mediation materials, digital communication outputs, and relevant secondary literature. These materials are analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis, with particular attention to how generational distinctions are framed, operationalized, and translated into professional practices. The comparative design enables the identification of recurring patterns and tensions across cases, while also accounting for contextual differences in funding models, policy frameworks, and institutional missions. This approach allows the study to foreground audience development as a form of cultural work embedded in broader cultural and creative ecosystems.

Summary of main or expected results and conclusions

Our paper argues that audience development should be understood less as a linear expansion toward younger, larger, or more diverse publics, and more as a process of negotiating boundaries between generations, value systems, and market segments. Rather than framing younger audiences as a replacement for ageing visitors, museums may benefit from integrative strategies that acknowledge generational differences without collapsing into either mass-market populism or exclusionary elitism. In doing so, the paper contributes to current debates on cultural governance, legitimacy, and sustainability by positioning audience development as a central site where cultural, economic, and social logics intersect.

The analysis shows that museums increasingly operate with parallel audience logics: one oriented towards visibility, reach, engagement metrics, and younger audiences; another oriented towards expertise, continuity, and established visitor groups. These parallel strategies translate into

differentiated forms of audience work, placing cultural professionals in roles that require constant mediation between artistic integrity, market expectations, and policy objectives.

Rather than resolving generational tensions, segmented audience strategies often institutionalize them, reinforcing internal divisions of labour and competing value systems. The paper argues that audience development should be understood less as linear growth towards younger publics and more as an ongoing negotiation within cultural ecosystems that directly shapes professional identities and working conditions. By repositioning audience development as a form of cultural work, the paper contributes to debates on cultural governance, sustainability, and the future organization of artistic and cultural labour.

Impact and Engagement

Our research addresses an important knowledge gap: how generationally segmented audience strategies reshape museum priorities, professional roles, and institutional legitimacy.

Cultural professionals (curators, educators, mediators, digital teams), museum leadership, funders, cultural policymakers, museum associations, and students in museum studies will gain actionable insights through our research. Local and national cultural agencies and NGOs focused on access and inclusion can use the findings to design more balanced audience strategies.

We anticipate uptake through four possible routes: (1) practitioner-facing toolkits and guidelines for integrative audience strategies; (2) targeted workshops and training co-delivered with museum associations to translate findings into job-role design and wellbeing practices; (3) policy briefs for funders and cultural policymakers recommending metrics that balance reach with curatorial quality; (4) incorporation into museum studies curricula and continuing professional development modules.

Museums adopting the paper’s recommendations gain insights that help transfer from siloed, generation-targeted programming toward integrative approaches that potentially reduce internal role conflict, improve staff wellbeing, and sustain diverse visitation without sacrificing curatorial standards. For policymakers and funders, the research supports more nuanced evaluation criteria that reward intergenerational integration rather than raw engagement metrics.

Evidence of change could include: adoption of integrative audience policies in institutional strategy documents; new job descriptions or cross-team roles; workshop attendance and follow-up evaluations; shifts in visitor metrics disaggregated by cohort showing stable or improved satisfaction across generations; citations in policy briefs; and uptake in museum studies syllabi. Together these indicators would substantiate real-world influence beyond academic debate.

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Anders Parment is a senior lecturer and researcher at Stockholm Business School, specializing in marketing, generational analysis, and consumer behaviour. His work spans academic research, lecturing, and advisory roles, with a strong focus on how generational shifts shape markets, organizations, and societal trends. Parment holds a PhD in Business and has published extensively on Generation Y, cultural consumption, and marketing strategy, including influential books and articles on generational differences in labour and consumer markets.

Martin Piber is a Professor of Business Administration at the University of Innsbruck, where he also serves as Scientific Director of the executive MBA program. His research focuses on performance measurement, intellectual capital, and the management of cultural and creative organizations. Piber has contributed widely to scholarship on cultural governance, participatory cultural initiatives, and accounting in public-sector and cultural institutions, with publications in leading journals and edited volumes on cultural management and organizational learning.

Outreach initiatives and new service models: the relationship between digital product strategies and the reconfiguration of conservation and mediation professions

Mr. Vincent Mathiot
Université de Bordeaux

Dr. Juliette Passebois-Ducros
Université de Bordeaux

Dr. Pierre Poinsignon
Université Bourgogne Europe, Burgundy School of Business

Strategic configuration and digital maturity of museums:

an analysis of organizational dynamics prior to immersive

mediation

the

relationship between digital product strategies and

Authors

Vincent Mathiot, PhD Student, University of Bordeaux

Pierre Poinsignon

-Associate Professor, Bourgogne Europe University, Burgundy School of Business,

CEREN EA 7477, F

-

21000 Dijon, France

Juliette Passebois

-Ducros -PhD Supervisor -Professor -University of Bordeaux -

IAE

-IRGP Bordeaux

Bibliographies

Vincent Mathiot:

Vincent Mathiot is a PhD candidate pursuing a Cifre thesis within the cultural agency Correspondances Digitales. His doctoral research, initiated in March 2026, investigates the impact of digital devices on the development strategies of museum structures.

His dissertation is co -supervised by Professor Juliette Passebois

-Ducros from IAE Bordeaux and Dr. Pierre Poinsignon from Burgundy School of Business. A graduate of the Specialized Master MECIC at Burgundy School of Business

and a double research master at the Université de Bourgogne for his historical resarches , he applies his cultural management expertise to support the digital modernization of museum institutions.

Pierre Poinsignon

: Dr. Pierre Poinsignon is an Associate Professor in the Humanities and Arts Management department at Burgundy School of Business (BSB), where he also serves as the Director of the MS MECIC program. He holds a PhD in Management Sciences from École polytechni

que, an MS in Management from HEC Paris, and a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Université Paris

-Dauphine. His research within the RIIMES laboratory focuses on innovation, cultural industries, and creative management. A frequent con

tributor to academic journals like the International Journal of Arts Management

, his work examines collaborations between artists and corporations.

Juliette Passebois

-

Ducros

: Dr. Juliette Passebois -Ducros is a Professor of Marketing at IAE Bordeaux University School of Management, where she has taught since 2007. She holds a PhD in Management Sciences and an HDR from the Université de Bordeaux. Her research specialized in exper

iential, artistic, and cultural marketing, alongside relational loyalty. She has published extensively in prominent journals, including the

Journal of Service Theory and Practice . Her academic work earned her the prestigious AFM rketing. award for best thesis in ma

Introduction

Historically, museums have defined themselves through their collections: the possession and display of rare objects constituted both their legitimacy and their value proposition. Digital transformation and shifting public expectations have since placed the

visitor experience at the centre of institutional missions. According to Bakhshi and Throsby (2012), the museum is no longer a repository of static works but a provider of complex experiences whose value depends on the visitor relationship. This evolution

is often described, empirically, through the shift identified by Vargo and Lusch (2015) from a goods

-dominant logic, in which value is produced upstream and transmitted to visitors, to a service

-dominant logic, in which value emerges from use.

Read through a strategic

-management lens, however, this shift amounts to a reconfiguration of the museum’s value architecture (Stabell and Fjeldstad, 1998; Porter and Heppelmann, 2014): digital technology redistributes where and how value is created, requi

ring new organizational capabilities. Digital transformation refers here to the integration of digital technology into all of the institution’s functions

— conservation, education, outreach, governance — reconfiguring its value models, structures, and professi

onal roles (Navarrete, 2019). This research stream remains largely silent on how these transformations reshape curators’, mediators’, and project managers’ working methods

— a blind spot for researchers and a pressing concern for professionals, whose routine

s, training, and recruitment are directly affected.

Through a qualitative study conducted with eighteen professionals from French museum institutions engaged in digital outreach, this paper identifies four organizational configurations through which museums integrate digital technologies into their structur

es. It shows that this integration is reshaping the roles of curators and outreach professionals, who increasingly adopt approaches derived from digital product management, and it highlights three tensions common to all institutions: maintenance as an indi cator of institutional maturity, narrative authority as a distinguishing variable, and organizational compensation as the primary adaptation mechanism.

Literature Review

1. Reconfiguration of the value chain and organizational openness

The shift toward a service

-oriented approach requires overhauling the architecture of value creation. The institution can no longer operate according to Porter’s (1985) linear value chain, in which departments act sequentially and in isolation. Stabell and

Fjeldstad (1998) propose the configurations of “value shops” and “value networks,”

in which value results from resolving complex problems or mediating among multiple actors. Production thus becomes an iterative, interconnected process rather than a baton

passed between siloed specialties. Porter and Heppelmann (2014) show that connected digital systems require integrating information systems, audience relations, and research functions, replacing silos with constant front

-office/back

-office synchronization (Bharadwaj et al., 2013).

In the museum context, this translates into a shift from linear, siloed operations

— acquisition, conservation, exhibition

— toward an integrated network architecture, in which each digital outreach project requires constant interaction between curators, outre

ach specialists, and technicians. The extended value chain theorized by Marty (2007) structures this relationship into three phases

— pre -visit, visit, and post

-visit — requiring uninterrupted editorial maintenance that traditional, linearly organized structur

es struggle to accommodate. Institutions face budgetary uncertainty, accelerated technological obsolescence, and a lack of staff trained in managing sustainable systems (Nikolaou, 2024), creating a structural mismatch between digital ambitions and organiza

tional capabilities.

This delinearization logically forces organizational models open. Chesbrough (2011) shows that when value is distributed across complex networks, the organization can no longer be self

-sufficient. Barrett et al. (2015) extend this view: digital infrastruct

ures are socio -technical systems fostering new forms of collective innovation, which the

“middlegrounds” described by Muller, Szostak, and Burger -Helmchen (2020) make operational by translating between scientific rigour and external creative agility. This openness requires teams to develop new internal coordination skills.

2. Digital Heritage, Immersive Mediation, and the Transformation of Museum Professions

The shift toward a service

-oriented approach also transforms the heritage object itself. Navarrete (2019) shows that digital heritage constitutes an autonomous strategic asset rather than a documentary substitute: the

“stock” approach to physical works gives way to a “flow” approach, in which collections become exploitable data, reused across platforms. The lifecycle of digital heritage follows the rules of product management

— evolutionary maintenance, interoperability, iterative response to user needs — requi

ring curators to develop data management and information -architecture skills absent from their initial training.

Digital mediation tools have also altered how mediators practice their profession. Pallud (2017) shows that these tools foster deeper cognitive absorption but require mediators to design non

-linear experiences in which visitors construct their own paths, t

urning the mediator into a designer of user scenarios who must manage cognitive overload while guarding against digital overstimulation, which can saturate attention and hinder learning.

This evolution also transforms institutional narrative authority. Russo et al. (2008) show that social media and interactive devices shift communication from top

-down to participatory, as visitors contribute to the production of meaning

— a shared sovereignt y that breaks with curators’ historical professional identity. The risk of

“Disneyfication” identified by Balloffet et al. (2014), where spectacular staging takes precedence over scientific substance, forces professionals to balance playful appeal with aca

demic rigour. Mairesse (2002) had already identified this tension between the museum as

“temple” and as “spectacle,” noting that its resolution rests on staff’s ability to maintain a demanding editorial line under growing pressure for interactivity

— a capacity the literature documents least.

The literature outlines what institutions are expected to do

— manage digital portfolios, coordinate partner networks, maintain continuous services

— but does not examine how organizational structures actually implement these transformations. Our research thus

explores to what extent managing digital projects compels museums to reconfigure their structures, what changes in professional roles result, and at what level digital and museum logics integrate.

Method

" Our research was conducted as part of the OPUS study

-Musées et offres de médiation numérique – quelle(s) durabilité(s)

?" -led by the Observatoire des Patrimoines de l’Université de la Sorbonne with the agency Correspondances Digitales. Documenting digital practices across diverse French museums, this contribution focuses specifically on the reconfiguration of professional skills and roles. We adopt a comprehensive, interpretive approach (Dumez,

2016), capturing transformations through the frames of re ference of institutional actors. Reasoning is abductive (Dumez, 2012; Peirce, 1931 -1958), allowing categories of analysis to emerge from the field before being tested against existing frameworks

-value chain reconfiguration, dynamic capabilities, and orga

nizational openness.

The empirical corpus comprises 24 one

-hour semi -structured interviews with digital project managers from 18 institutions, yielding 18 case studies.

The sample spans national museums (MNHN, Musée d'Orsay, Versailles), regional museums (ARCHÉA, Musée Fabre, Musée Dauphinois), science centres (Universciences, Territoire de sciences), and memorial sites (Mémorial de Rivesaltes).

Fully transcribed interviews covered four main themes

-decision -making, budget, competencies, and maintenance -and were supplemented

by internal documents.

Data Analysis

We conducted a two

-stage thematic content analysis. First, open coding identified key themes without predefined constraints. Second, these categories were mapped against the literature review's frameworks -value architecture reconfiguration, organizationa

l openness, and evolving professional roles. This theoretical integration structured the data into four interpretive axes: decision

-making dynamics, sustainability and maintenance, ethics and inclusion, and reconfiguration of professions. Finally, these ax es were cross -referenced with institutional profiles to evaluate differences across organizational contexts.

Results and

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nalysis

Analysis of the eighteen interviews reveals that French museums do not share a single approach to integrating digital strategies into their operations. The study brings to light distinct internal configurations

— organizational models for developing, managin g, and maintaining technology -integrated outreach programmes. These configurations differ not primarily in resources or digital maturity, but in the level at which digital and museum logics are integrated and in the consequences for internal activities and professional boundaries. This diversity is structured by fixed criteria — legal status, governance model, economic model

— and situational variables such as digital positioning. Case analysis reveals four institutional configurations, each defining a framewor

k for decision -making, budgetary trade -offs, partnership management, and maintenance strategy. Running through all four is a common tension: reconciling inherited logics

— scientific expertise, curatorial authority — with logics imported from product managemen

t.

4.1 The Institutionalization of Cross

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Functionality: When Digital Technology Reconfigures

Professional Hierarchies

The first configuration applies to a specific group of studied institutions, including the Palace of Versailles, the Public Establishment of the Musée d’Orsay and the Musée de l’Orangerie (EPMO), the Louvre

-Lens, the Musée des Confluences, and the Cité int

ernationale de la langue française.

In these structures, the organizational dynamic relies on cross

-functional governance where digital technology is integrated into the core structure rather than isolated in a standalone department. Digital initiatives become a cross

-departmental responsibi lity, involving curators and education specialists from the design phase onward. Projects are carried out “with the expertise of and in collaboration with the curators,” balancing technological choices with historical coherence. One radical approach reject

s a specific digital department entirely, choosing instead to handle projects “jointly managed by the departments of public engagement, exhibitions, and outreach.” Across these cases, digital competence is treated as a cross

-functional skill embedded withi n existing roles, ensuring that “digital technology is a tool in service of our missions, not an end in itself” while fully preserving narrative coherence upstream.

4.2 The strategic dichotomy: when project management redefines the profession

The second configuration applies to a specific group of studied institutions, including Universcience, the National Museum of Natural History (MNHN), the National Maritime Museum, the Cité du Vin, and the Dobrée Museum.

In these structures, the organizational dynamic formally distinguishes between core projects managed internally and immersive or experimental initiatives entrusted to external partners. This model shifts the roles of educators and curators toward project m

anagement, meaning they no longer directly produce exhibits but define specifications, validate deliverables, and manage service providers. This reliance on external contractors creates significant operational challenges; for instance, one outreach departm

ent focuses its expertise on “design and project management,” noting that regular calls to contractors “complicate the maintenance process” and limit the time available to “respond to calls for proposals or secure sponsorship.” Another approach seeks to al

ign digital production “within a framework of controlled project lifecycles: deployed, shared, and made profitable over the long term” to move from “experimentation to industrialization.” However, due to “persistent budgetary constraints,” these projects r

emain led by “ad hoc project teams, mobilized according to the specific needs of the audiences.” Ultimately, public procurement rules and resource limits create a structural tension across these cases, making agile iteration difficult.

4.3 Individualized hybridization: the professional as the agent of integration

The third configuration applies to a specific group of studied institutions, including ARCHÉA and Territoire de sciences (Cosmocité/La Casemate).

In these structures, the organizational dynamic focuses the integration of digital technology at the individual level rather than the departmental level. This strategy addresses the mismatch between digital ambition and limited resources by relying on prof

essional profiles that combine expertise in mediation or curation with technical mastery of digital production tools. For instance, this hybridization can be

embodied in a “scenography technician trained, among other things, in 3D tools and virtual reality,” whose in -house mastery “guarantees autonomy and responsiveness,” allowing the museum “to design digital content integrated into the scenography from the ea

rliest stages of planning, rather than as an afterthought.” Alternatively, this model can be scaled across teams through a recruitment strategy targeting “versatile profiles capable of managing digital content in collaboration with technical, scientific, a nd artistic partners,” combined with continuing education to train mediators “to facilitate immersive experiences.” Consequently, this individual hybridization internalizes digital production and maintenance directly within existing professional identities

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4.4 Scientific sovereignty: meaning as a criterion for the legitimacy of digital technology

The fourth configuration applies to a specific group of studied institutions, including the Rivesaltes Memorial, the Musée de l’Œuvre Notre

-Dame, the Musée d’Archéologie Nationale, the Muséum de Toulouse, the Musée Fabre, and the Musée Dauphinois.

In these structures, the organizational dynamic conditions the acceptance of digital technology on a logic of strict authorization, ensuring scientific and narrative coherence remains under the absolute control of curatorial and outreach professionals. Thi

s approach does not reject technology, but subjects every deployment to a guiding question: “how does it serve our narrative?” For example, one institution deliberately limits digital usage, focusing on “simplicity and technical robustness” as an ethical o

bligation to protect the sensitivity of its subject matter, which requires professionals to argue for a “targeted, ethical, and sensitive use of digital technology.” Another structure addresses scientific sovereignty through a “trial

-and -error approach” in conservation, noting that “producing data also means accepting the responsibility to ensure a form of its longevity; the museum takes charge of archiving these formats.” This logic of deliberate restraint

— whether driven by editorial focus, user -friendline ss, openness, or energy impact — converges on the requirement that every technical choice must justify itself against the core institutional narrative

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4.5 Cross

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cutting analysis: three underlying tensions

Beyond the four configurations, a cross

-cutting analysis reveals three tensions running through all of them, serving as analytical levers for understanding the reconfiguration of professions.

First tension: maintenance as an indicator of institutional maturity.

Maintenance is the most reliable indicator of institutional maturity. Institutions that treat it as a problem to manage after delivery

— the National Maritime Museum, Universcience

— face team overload and contractual dependence that undermines their strategi

c capacity. Those that integrate it from the design phase onward — ARCHÉA, the National Museum of Archaeology

— achieve autonomy over the full lifecycle of their systems. This divide does not

map onto institutional size; it depends on whether digital systems are viewed as assets to be maintained (Vidal, 2018) rather than projects to be delivered.

Second tension: narrative authority as a distinguishing factor.

All institutions maintain a requirement for coherence between digital initiatives and scientific meaning, but its institutionalization varies: distributed and collective in the first configuration, externalized into contractual specifications in the secon

d, centralized within curatorial professions in the fourth, and incorporated into hybrid roles in the third. This variation determines who can halt an initiative deemed illegitimate. Curators’

and mediators’ professional identity constitutes a critical resource that organizations mobilize differently depending on structure

— an “ethical safeguard” role (Balloffet et al., 2014) that here functions less as resistance to change than as a dynamic capability (Teece et al., 1997): the capacity to absorb digital product logics without dissolving the institutional project within them.

Third tension: the logic of organizational compensation.

Unable to house all digital skills internally, institutions develop compensation strategies that redefine professional boundaries

— through cross -functionality, expanded project ownership, individual hybridization, or constrained frugality. New skills

— partn

er coordination, data management, iterative project management, environmental assessment — are absorbed into roles that did not originally include them, often through pragmatic, ad hoc adjustments. This remains one of the most formative

— and least visible — dynamics in the reconfiguration of professions.

Impact

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ngagement

This research addresses a key knowledge gap by examining how digital transformations reshape the day

-to -day routines, training, and recruitment of curators, mediators, and project managers. While existing literature documents technological opportunities, i

t remains mostly silent on how internal structures adapt to these changes. By establishing four organizational configurations, this paper provides an analytical framework to balance scientific authority with digital management.

The findings primarily benefit museum professionals, cultural administrators, institutional leaders, and educators responsible for cultural management programs. By offering a clear mapping of French cultural institutions, the study helps these stakeholders

diagnose their own structural models and manage trade -offs regarding technical maintenance and cross

-functional governance. The primary pathways for this research include its integration into professional training curricula and its use as a decision

-making guide for museum directors. Using these configurations, institutions can better anticipate structural mismatches between digit al ambitions and operational capabilities, leading to sustainable management strategies. The expected change is a shift in how museums plan digital outreach, moving from isolated experimental projects to integrated, long

-term organizational structures. This evolution helps safeguard the narrative sovereignty of institutions while optimizing in

ternal resources. Progress and impact can be substantiated through indicators such as the adoption of these configurations in institutional restructuring plans, the update of job descriptions to reflect hybridized skills, and the integration of these organizational framewor

ks into professional museum workshop programs.

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Immersive technology adoption in cultural consumption. Integrating technological and psychological perspectives [1]

Dr. Chuan Li
Universitat de València
Dr. Mónica Edwards-Schachter
Valencian International University (VIU)
Dr. Ximo Diaz Boils
Universitat de València

1. INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies are fundamentally transforming cultural heritage landscapes by accelerating the digital transition of art and cultural organizations throughout the world (Massi et al., 2020). While the rapid diffusion of immersive technologies, such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR), has fostered the development of novel cultural products and experience-centric business models in the cultural and creative sectors (Bacete et al., 2024), scholarly inquiry on this transformation remains fragmented and imbalanced (Colamatteo et al., 2024), with great concentration on technology-enabled creativity and production processes from the supply side dynamics meanwhile insufficient attention being paid to technology adoption of cultural consumers and their experiential engagement from the demand side.

This study is focused on immersive exhibitions, which are one of the most plausible cultural product innovations by cultural organizations in their digital transition processes. Different from traditional arts exhibitions prioritizing authenticity, aesthetic contemplation and object-centred appreciation, novel immersive exhibitions emphasize the visitor's experience, interactive engagement, multisensory stimulation, and emotional involvement (C. Li et al., 2023; Tcha-Tokey et al., 2017). This fundamental shift calls for a renewed understanding of the determinants influencing the acceptance of digital exhibition formats and technologically mediated cultural experiences, which different significantly from those associated with traditional exhibition models.

To address this gap, the present study aims to examine the key factors and underlying mechanism that influence users' acceptance of immersive technologies in the context of immersive exhibition experiences. Based on the premise that a sense of immersion is the primary driver of user engagement, satisfaction and repeat visits (Jangra et al., 2025; Lee, 2020; Mihelj et al., 2019), and drawing on the current literature on immersion production, we first identified technological systems and creative content as the two main technological and psychological sources of immersion, and then examined their influences on visitor acceptance of immersion by incorporating them as antecedents into mainstream technology adoption models.

The empirical analysis was conducted using Covariance-based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM), based on survey data collected from 200 visitors to two immersion exhibitions in Valencia, Spain. The results demonstrate that the quality of technological systems and creative content collectively determine the adoption of immersive technology in cultural experiences. While the impact of technological capabilities on visitor acceptance of immersive technologies is largely indirect, creative content plays an important mediating role between technological capabilities and users' perceptive and affective evaluation of these technologies.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Immersive technologies are an umbrella conception compassing VR, AR and MR, as well as other tools and technologies that mediate interaction between users and virtual or digital environments (Milgram & Kishino, 1994). These technologies can direct users' attention towards the displayed content, foster a heightened sense of involvement, and minimize external distractions by isolating users from irrelevant stimuli (Agrawal et al., 2020a; Rubio-Tamayo et al., 2017). As a specialized exhibition format, immersive exhibition leverages immersive technologies to create full immersive environments and experiences by reshaping visitors' perception of time, space and context and detaching them from real-world surrounding (Gilbert, 2002). In this way, immersive exhibitions purposefully transform visitors from passive spectators into active participants and co-creators of immersive environments (Popoli & Derda, 2021). Unlike traditional object-oriented, emerging immersive exhibitions adopt an experience-centred approach (Stobiecka, 2020), prioritizing experiential novelty (Luo et al., 2025), meaningful engagement (Zhu et al., 2024), and postmodern authenticity arising from aesthetic pleasure, immersion, and spectacle (Thouki, 2024). These characteristics are primarily achieved by providing specific immersive experiences within the exhibition spaces.

According to existing literature of immersion production, immersive experiences stem primarily from two sources: technological and psychological factors. From a technical perspective, immersion refers to an objective and measurable property of technological systems, which can be configured and modified through technical design (Rubio-Tamayo et al., 2017). A sense of immersion is generated through artificial stimuli and physical disconnection preventing individuals from perceiving external physical world via multisensory media and technological affordances (Sanchez-Vives & Slater, 2005; Slater, 2009; Slater & Wilbur, 1997). Therefore, advanced and complicated systems – for instance, a dynamic multisensory system integrating audio, music, and scent elements – often create a stronger sense of immersion compared to simple visual and textual cues (Garbutt et al., 2020; He et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2025; Pelowski et al., 2018).

From a psychological perspective, immersion is a subjective experience related to an individual's mental state, stemming from the engagement of intellect and imagination driven by intrinsic motivation (Ryan, 2001). This experience arises when people shift their attention from daily life to a specific narrative setting, creating a sense of being enveloped, embraced, and fully immersed in that environment (Agrawal et al., 2020; Witmer & Singer, 1998). This is frequently observed, for example, when engaging with engaging video games (Brown & Cairns, 2004) or reading a compelling novel (Murray, 2017), suggesting that psychological immersion is closely associated with the consumption of creative contents.

Taken together, the technological perspective conceptualizes the technological system as a medium that facilitates physical immersion through multisensory stimulation, while the psychological perspective regards creative content as a driver of psychological immersion by engaging cognitive and imaginative processes and fostering a state of focused attention. In this way, the quality of technological system and creative content represent distinct yet complementary determinants of visitors' immersive experiences in the context of cultural experience consumption.

3. An integrated analytical framework of technology adoption

To explore the roles and mechanisms through which technological capabilities and creative content play the technology adoption decision-making process, this study develops an analytical framework by incorporating system quality and content quality as two antecedents into the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2), one of the most widely used models for understanding technology adoption from the audience perspective. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework views technology adoption as a sequential process that progresses from the technological foundation, through experiential value creation and users' evaluative perception, to ultimately shape behavioural intentions.

From technological foundation to experiential value.

Technological system quality (SQ) refers to attributes such as functionality, interactivity, usability and system reliability (Jeyaraj, 2020; Petter et al., 2008), whereas creative content quality (CQ) encompasses aesthetic design, narrative richness, and emotional engagement (N. Li et al., 2024; Yang, 2023). SQ represents the technological infrastructure where immersive content is created, displayed, and disseminated and, thereby, shaping the way visitors engage with content and environments (Pei et al., 2023; Pietroni, 2019; Wang et al., 2025). In another words, high-quality system delivers a seamless interaction and immersion, ultimately enhancing visitors' perception of CQ. Therefore, the hypothesis H1 is proposed, indicating that *SQ has a positive impact on CQ*.

From experiential value to evaluation perception.

In the present framework, CQ serves a key mechanism that permits experiential value to be translated into visitors' evaluations of immersive technologies. By providing coherent narratives, engaging storytelling, meaningful interactions, and emotionally resonant experiences, high-quality content enhances visitors' understanding, enjoyment, and engagement with the exhibition environment. Prior research suggests that rich and well-structured content can improve perceptions of usefulness (Wu et al., 2022) and ease of use (Al-Ansi et al., 2023; Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2025), strengthen hedonic responses (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Thouki, 2024), facilitate navigation and interaction (Vega et al., 2026), and increase the social appeal of immersive experiences (Pizzi et al., 2025; Slater, 2009b). Therefore, CQ is supposed to shape the five core evaluative perceptions identified in UTAUT2 and the following hypotheses are consequently developed.

H2a: CQ has a positive effect on performance expectancy (PE)

H2b: CQ has a positive effect on effort expectancy (EE)

H2c: CQ has a positive effect on hedonic motivation (HM)

H2d: CQ has a positive effect on social influence (SI)

H2e: CQ has a positive effect on facilitating conditions (FC)

From evaluative perception to behavioural intention.

The relationship between users' cognitive and affective evaluations and their behavioural intention to adopt a technology constitutes a central component of the traditional technology adoption paradigm (Lai, 2017; Taherdoost, 2018). Particularly, UTAUT2 includes PE, EE, HM, SI, and FC as key

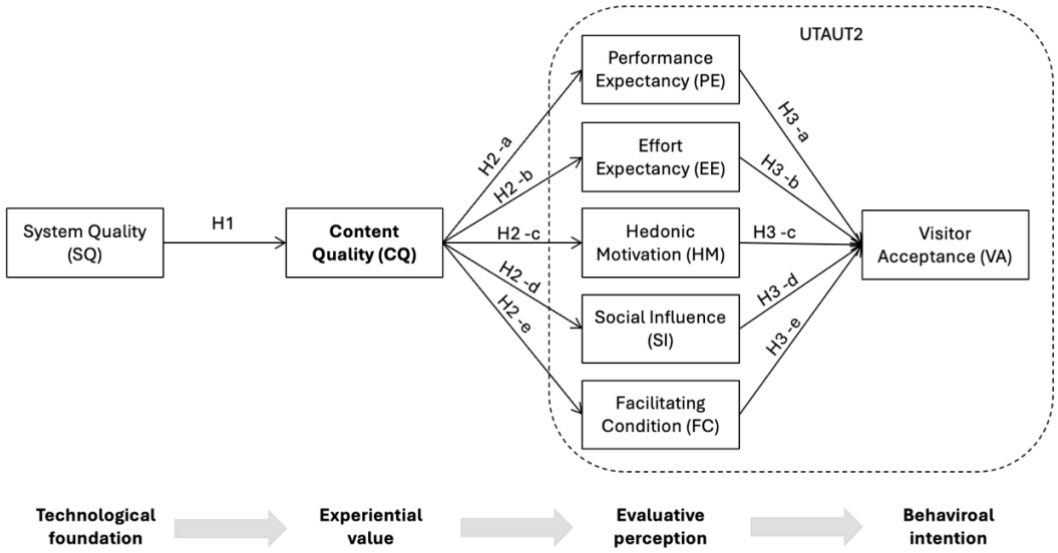


Figure 1 An analytical framework of technology adoption incorporating system quality and content quality antecedents.

determinants of technology adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2012), and the model has been extensively validated in the context of immersive experiences across cultural heritage, museums, and tourism settings in the recent years (e.g., Abou-Shouk et al., 2024; Capasa et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Thus, following hypotheses are correspondingly proposed as follows:

H3a: PE has a positive effect on visitor´s acceptance of immersive technology (VA).

H3b: EE has a positive effect on VA

H3c: HM has a positive effect on VA

H3d: SI has a positive effect on VA

H3e: FC has a positive effect on facilitating conditions VA

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) to examine the proposed hypotheses and assess the relationships among the latent constructs. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administrated to visitors of two immersive exhibition in Valencia, Spain, during November 2025 and March 2026,

The two exhibitions represented mature implementations of immersive technologies combining VR, AR, and multisensory design elements while offering distinct experiential contexts. The first exhibition, titled *The Route: Modernity, Culture and Chaos,* exhibited La Ruta de Bakalao, the iconic nightlife movement and club culture in Valencia and Spain during the 1980s and 1990s; the second, titled *The Lascaux Caves: A Virtual Journey into the Past,* presented the Paleolithic cave art complexes in human prehistory. The selection of these exhibitions enabled the examination of user acceptance of immersive technologies through applications deployed in real-world cultural institutions, while enhancing the external validity of the findings by purposefully incorporating variation in visitors’ cognitive and affective engagement conditions and controlling for the broader museum context and geographic setting.

A total of 200 valid responses were collected across two exhibition venues (The Ruta = 126, The Lascaux = 74). Respondents were relatively mature (M=46.52 years, SD=15.00) and highly educated with approximately two-thirds holding a university or postgraduate education (67%). Additionally, most respondents reported little or intermediate prior experience with immersive technologies (78%).

In addition to collecting basic demographic information, the questionnaire measured eight latent constructs, each operationalized through four affirmative statements. Respondents evaluated all items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model (see Table 1), after which the proposed structural relationships were tested using CB-SEM. The results of the structural model are presented in Figure 2.

Table 1 CFA results

Variables	Measurement Items	Loading (λ)	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
SQ1	The system delivers high-quality, realistic sensory information.	0.812	0.888	0.892	0.676
SQ2	The system responds accurately and smoothly to my movements and actions in real-time.	0.763			
SQ3	It effectively isolates me from the physical environment.	0.805			
SQ4	The system creates an illusion of living, coherent reality that surrounds me completely.	0.901			

CQ1	The content captures my attention and keeps me mentally engaged throughout the experience.	0.846	0.903	0.903	0.700
CQ2	The story or experience is coherent and meaningful, which reinforces my feeling of being “inside” the environment.	0.798			
CQ3	Virtual content stimulates my imagination and my emotional involvement.	0.870			
CQ4	Content encourages interaction and exploration in a natural and rewarding way.	0.834			
PE1	Immersive technology (IT) enhances artistic and cultural expression.	0.846	0.882	0.884	0.656
PE2	IT helps me better understand the content of the exhibitions.	0.843			
PE3	IT increases the interactivity of cultural goods and services.	0.797			
PE4	IT makes cultural goods and services more attractive and eye-catching.	0.752			
EE1	I find it easy to use IT.	0.806	0.898	0.899	0.690
EE2	My interactions with IT are clear and easy to understand.	0.834			
EE3	It doesn't take much effort to learn how to use the IT and/or equipment.	0.837			
EE4	Learning how to use IT or related devices is easy for me.	0.846			
SI1	In my environment, it is believed that IT improves the experience of artistic and cultural exhibitions.	0.830	0.880	0.879	0.645
SI2	People who influence me would claim that IT improves the quality of cultural experiences.	0.899			
SI3	The people who influence me think that the cultural and creative sector should adopt IT.	0.840			
SI4	People around me often attend or talk about immersive exhibitions.	0.696			
FC1	I have the knowledge to use IT.	0.659	0.796	0.800	0.510
FC2	IT fits well with my cultural preferences and consumption habits.	0.817			
FC3	The exhibition venue offers enough support and infrastructure to use IT.	0.655			
FC4	I can get help from other people when I'm struggling to use IT.	0.668			
HM1	Using IT is fun.	0.915	0.918	0.921	0.745
HM2	Using IT is enjoyable.	0.862			
HM3	Using IT is entertaining.	0.900			
HM4	Using IT piques my curiosity.	0.795			
VA1	I intend to continue using IT for cultural experiences.	0.895	0.911	0.910	0.717
VA2	I will try to use IT as my preferred way to enjoy cultural content.	0.777			
VA3	I plan to continue to engage in cultural goods and services based on IT.	0.859			

VA4	He or she is likely to recommend immersive cultural experiences to others.	0.884

5. RESULTS

As shown in Figure 2, all hypothesised relationships were confirmed except for H3b. Specifically, H1 is supported, indicating that system quality had a statistically significant effect on content quality (β = 0.872, p < .001). All hypotheses linking content quality to the UTAUT2 constructs (Ha2-H2e) were supported. Content quality significant influenced facilitating condition (β = 0.836, p < .001), performance expectancy (β = 0.830, p < .001), hedonic motivation (β = 0.766, p < .001), social influence (β = 0.739, p < .001), and effort expectancy (β = 0.552, p < .001). Among the UTAUT2-related hypotheses, all (H3) were supported except H3b. Facilitating conditions exert the strongest effect on visitor acceptance (β = 0.333, p = .002), followed by hedonic motivation (β = 0.296, p < .001), performance expectancy (β = 0.231, p = .003), and social influence (β = 0.167, p = .017). In contrast, effort expectancy had no significant effect (β = 0.015, p = .798). A possible explanation is that, with the proliferation of immersive technologies, ease of use has become a basic expectation rather than a distinguishing factor, particularly in mature technological contexts (Ayaz & Yanartaş, 2020; Blut et al., 2022).

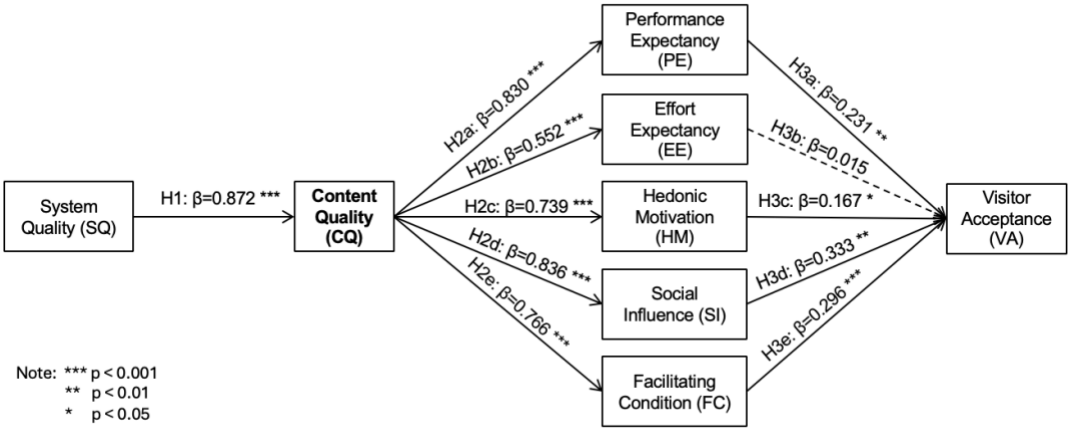


Figure 2 Results of hypothesis testing in the structural model

6. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above findings, three main conclusions can be drawn. First of all, system quality alone is not sufficient to explain visitors' acceptance of immersive technologies. The value of immersive technologies does not stem solely from their technological features but also from their capability to support the creation and delivery of high-quality creative content. While technologies provide the foundation for physical immersion, content quality shapes the potential for translating technological affordance into valuable visitor experiences.

Second, content quality serves as a critical yet underexplored mechanism within technology adoption processes. While existing technology adoption models focus primarily on users' evaluations of technological attributes, our findings show that such evaluation is strongly shaped by the quality of the content delivered through technology. Content quality significantly influences the cognitive, affective, social, and contextual factors and mediates the relationship between system quality and visitor acceptance.

Last but not the least, in the field of cultural experience, visitors' acceptance of immersive technologies is driven largely by perceived value rather than technological usability. Particularly, as immersive

technologies and digital interfaces become more widespread, ease of use is increasingly regarded as a basic requirement rather than a source of added value. As a result, visitors' adoption decisions depend more on whether immersive technologies provide meaningful, enjoyable and socially valued experiences than on the effort required to interact with immersive environments.

7. THE IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT

Immersive technologies have increasingly been viewed as a driver and catalyst for sustainable transition in cultural and creative industries (Edwards-Schachter & Li, 2026). In recent years, in particular, VR- and AR-enabled immersive exhibitions have surged in popularity, becoming an important vehicle for museums, cultural heritage sites, tourist destinations, and other cultural instructions to pursue technological innovation and digital transformation.

However, with the proliferation of immersive technologies and digital interfaces, fierce competition in immersive exhibitions has emerged within the sector and beyond, for example from theme parks and shopping malls. Purely technological spectacle based on the adoption of VR and AR technologies is no longer a golden rule for attracting visitors, as visitors increasingly seek value beyond visual stimulation and technological usability once they become familiar with these technologies and experiences. As a result, cultural managers and exhibition specialists should adopt differentiated strategies to enhance visitors' acceptance and adoption of immersive exhibitions.

Against this context, the findings of this study generate key managerial implications for practitioners in this field. First, creative content is an important determinant of visitors' acceptance of immersive exhibitions. Therefore, resources should be allocated appropriately between technological infrastructure construction and creative content development.

Second, immersive experiences have moved beyond technological novelty and visual spectacle and have relied increasingly on meaning, enjoyment, and emotional engagement of visitors. Therefore, the quality of creative content embedded in immersive exhibition has constituted a critical component of experiential value and become a key element for differentiated strategies to distinguish themselves from the others.

Last but not the least, the significant impact of facilitating conditions in visitors' adoption of immersive technologies suggests the importance of accessibility and easy to navigate within cultural experience consumption. Consequently, exhibition designers should provide clear narrative structures, intuitive navigation systems, interactive prompts, and appropriate visitor support mechanisms. These features help visitors engage effectively with the immersive environment and maximize the value of the experience.

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BIOGRAPHY

Chuan Li holds a PhD in Territorial Development and has been an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Economics of the University of Valencia (Spain) since 2023. He is also a research fellow at the Research Unit for Cultural Economics and Tourism (Econcult) at the same university. His research focuses primarily on innovation theories, practices, and policies within the cultural and creative sectors. He is the author of the book *Collaboration for Museum Innovation* (Routledge). He has coordinated and participated in various regional, European, and international projects, including Horizon Europe, Interreg, Erasmus Plus, ASEF creative networks. Prior to his academic career, he worked as a curator and editor at Shanghai Art Museum (China).

Mónica Edwards-Schachter has been a Senior Researcher at the International University of Valencia since 2024. She holds a PhD in Science Education and degrees in Electronic Engineering and Science Education. Her current research lines include social innovation, civic technologies, emerging technologies in the context of the sustainability transition, and AI governance. She is engaged in the Horizon project Inclusive Democratic Engagement and Language Technologies in Europe (2025–2028). Her work has around 3,900 citations (h-index 22), with publications in leading journals such as Research Policy, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, and IEEE Proceedings. She is also an active evaluator for European Commission programmes and contributes to research transfer, mentoring, and science communication initiatives

Joaquín Díaz Boils, PhD in Algebra, is assistant professor at the Department of Applied Economics of the University of Valencia since 2022. He has carried out research in various fields: Category Theory, Theory of Computability, Applied Mathematics, Didactics of Mathematics, Topology and Statistics. His works have been published, among others, in the following journals: Electronic Notes in Theoretical Computer Science, Journal of Logic and Computation, Journal of The Electrochemical Society, Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, Communications in Algebra, and Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences. He has carried out research studies at the University of Calgary, at the University of Genova, at the Ohio University and at the Pompeu Fabra University. Currently, his researching field is Algebraic Topology applied to Economics

Configuring Financial Health: Dependency and Strategic Trade-offs in Dutch Museums

Ms. Fabiana Basili
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Dr. Carolina Dalla Chiesa
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

KEYWORDS

Museum, public funding, financial strategy, resource dependency, cultural policy

Introduction

Finance in museums remains a persistent challenge, reflecting structural tensions in the cultural sector that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty surrounding public funding. Between 2005 and 2023, the cultural sector in the Netherlands experienced a steady decline in government spending, while growth in total revenues lagged behind inflation by 6.5 percentage points (Council for Culture, 2025).[1] Museums therefore operate under a persistent tension between mission fulfilment and financial viability.

Existing literature in nonprofit finance largely explains financial health through financial indicators, paying less attention to how revenue structures shape strategic priorities and organisational choices. Consequently, it remains unclear to what extent museums' financial health results from managerial strategy or from internal and external constraints embedded in their funding environment. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the space for manoeuvre of cultural managers and for informing more effective cultural policy design, particularly in contexts of budget cuts.

Focusing on the Netherlands, this study examines how museums pursue financial health and structure their financial strategies within broader organisational goals.[2] It adopts a mixed-methods design to develop a comprehensive understanding of financial dynamics and decision-making processes. The analysis focuses on four medium-sized Dutch museums: the Rotterdam Wereldmuseum, the Groninger Museum, the Catharijneconvent Museum (Utrecht), and the Zeeuws Museum (Middelburg), between 2021 and 2025.

First, the literature review examines the interplay between financial and strategic decisions in nonprofits

[1] Due to restrictions related to the pandemic, museums in the Netherlands were forced to close during the first six months of 2021 and again from mid-December of that year until the end of January 2022.

[2] This research is based on the author's Master's thesis in Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship at Erasmus University, completed during the academic year 2024-2025.

and museums. The methodology combines quantitative analysis of financial data with qualitative interviews with cultural managers to explain both financial patterns and the strategic reasoning underlying financial decision-making. Building on these insights, the research develops a framework showing that museums' financial health emerges from the interaction between managerial strategy and structural resource dependency. The findings suggest that museums can retain enough resources to respond to opportunities and unexpected threats, but that these resources remain precarious due to limited net surpluses, fragile net assets, and external funding conditions. Public dependency emerges not only as a constraint but also as a condition supporting public value creation. This framework identifies implications for cultural policy under both scenarios of maintaining or reducing reliance on external support.

Financial dependency and strategic agency

Museums' financial condition must be evaluated through their status of dependency, considering them as interconnected organisations embedded in a complex external environment that must be navigated to obtain critical resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Museums typically have a hybrid revenue composition, combining public subsidies, earned income, and charitable contributions (Froelich, 1999). As the nature of income streams shapes strategic decision-making, it becomes crucial to balance financial constraints with mission objectives. Indeed, stakeholder expectations, legitimacy pressures, and cultural policy frameworks associated with specific resource types influence decision-making and may encourage behaviour aimed at maintaining legitimacy rather than maximising efficiency (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019).

While income streams and financial structure influence strategic choices, the reverse is also true. Actually, nonprofits, rather than pursuing wealth maximisation, prioritise artistic and social missions. Strategic priorities shape resource allocation and the goods and services produced, which must be continually recalibrated against financial sustainability (Wacht, 1984; Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007). Benefit Theory supports this view by proposing that revenue composition is primarily determined by the nature of the goods and services provided (Young, 2007). Consequently, organisations serving private, individual beneficiaries rely more on earned income, while those delivering broader public or equity-oriented benefits depend more on government funding and donations.

In addition, literature on the optimal revenue mix, consistent with Portfolio Theory, assumes that nonprofits can actively shape their income structure by adjusting revenue sources to achieve financial objectives. Revenue diversification is commonly framed as a risk-reduction strategy, as empirical studies link it to lower financial vulnerability (Chang & Tuckman, 1991), reduced volatility (Carroll & Stater, 2009), and improved organisational survival (Hager, 2001). However, more recent evidence suggests these benefits are context-dependent and often limited (Hung & Hager, 2019). Diversification may also increase administrative complexity and reduce fundraising and operational efficiency (Frumkin & Keating, 2011; de los Mozos, Duarte, & Ruiz, 2016). In contrast, revenue concentration can strengthen financial capacity and enable asset accumulation (Foster & Fine, 2007), but it also increases exposure to shocks and dependency risks (Chang & Tuckman, 1991).

This literature review highlights how financial components and strategic choices are mutually constitutive in nonprofits and museums, yet they are often treated in isolation. Financial structures shape the conditions under which museums operate, while strategic and mission-driven choices determine how revenue sources are developed. However, these two strands of research are rarely integrated into a single analytical framework. This separation is addressed here as it limits the understanding of how financial dependence and museums' strategic agency interact in practice.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to investigate how museums in the Netherlands pursue financial health and structure their financial strategies within broader organisational goals. The quantitative analysis identifies financial structures and patterns, while the qualitative analysis builds on it to explain how financial configurations influence managerial choices, shedding light on the tensions and governance dynamics underlying decision-making. The case studies are selected for their comparable financial structures as medium museums in the Netherlands (Museumvereniging, 2024) and because they operate under the same legal framework as nonprofit Public Benefit Organisations (ANBIs).

First, the structure of revenues and expenses, as well as the financial health of the case studies, are examined through descriptive analysis of five-year budgetary data (2021-2025) derived from income statements and balance sheets, resulting in 778 observations. Common-size analysis, growth rates, and inflation-adjusted growth rates are used for a longitudinal (within each institution over time) and cross-sectional (between institutions) comparison, with logarithmic normalisation applied to ensure comparability across different scales and time periods. Financial health is operationalised by integrating Bowman's (2011) framework of financial capacity and sustainability with Park, Shon, and Lu's (2021) accounting constructs (Fig. 1). Liquidity (current ratio and working capital) captures short-term capacity, referring to the availability of cash or easily convertible assets in case of financial distress. Solvency (equity and debt ratios) reflects long-term capacity, defined as the extent to which total assets exceed total liabilities, reflecting its ability to meet its obligations. Short-term sustainability is assessed through the organisation's ability to generate sufficient margin (net surplus and efficiency ratios) to cover expenses and contribute to long-term objectives. Long-term sustainability concerns profitability (return on assets), understood as the capacity to generate and retain resources to sustain and possibly expand the organisation.

Second, the qualitative analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with museum managers and focuses on identifying the key principles, constraints, and strategic considerations guiding financial choices. Thematic coding is applied (Saldaña, 2009) to identify strategic and financial decision-making and stakeholder influence (government, donors, audiences) within the cultural policy context.

Figure 1

Financial health framework, including financial dimensions and accounting constructs

	Financial capacity	Financial sustainability
Short-term	Liquidity	Margin
Long-term	Solvency	Profitability

Note. Source: Author's elaboration from Bowman (2011) and Park, Shon, and Lu (2021).

Results

Revenue structure

Grants, earned and charitable income are the three main revenue sources in the case studies. The case studies present a high level of revenue concentration and strong dependence on public subsidies, which account for approximately 60% to 88% of total income. First, structural grants form the most stable component, and their increase generally keeps pace with inflation. Second, project-based grants fund specific initiatives beyond core operations and are typically restricted in use, leaving little room for profit generation or reserve accumulation. Museum managers seek to prioritise projects aligned with their mission and also adapt programming to available funding opportunities. Incidental grants are more volatile and result from temporary policy responses (e.g., COVID-19 support or cost compensation). Interviews confirm that the Dutch policy system ensures substantial autonomy in programming and activities, while financial decisions are influenced by public authorities through requirements related to reserve accumulation, equity levels, and debt approval procedures. Public bodies are generally responsive to institutional needs, ensuring alignment between public value objectives and museum activities. Despite a steady decline in the share of Dutch public spending on culture over the past two decades (Council for Culture, 2025) and ongoing public debates on budget cuts, the case studies do not anticipate sudden funding cuts, and, across the period, public cultural spending in the country has, in fact, shown an increase (Ministerie van Financiën, n.d).

Earned income is the second most important revenue source (11%-23%), except in one case, which relies more on charitable income. This income stream is primarily driven by entrance fees, followed by educational and public activities, and it has gradually recovered after the pandemic due to higher visitor numbers and ticket price increases in two museums. Managers can leverage the well-known price elasticity in the arts sector (Luksetich & Partridge, 1997), but, according to managers, museums have limited room to adjust prices without undermining accessibility or destabilising visitor numbers. Diversification within this stream remains limited, as shops, restaurants, and venue rentals contribute only a small share of revenues and are often constrained by infrastructure. Only two museums generate income from external events, while others plan expansion through renovation projects, reflecting an effort to increase earned income. These activities carry higher financial risk: one case accounts for them separately in its financial statements to limit exposure, while another incurred losses after its café failed. Sponsorships remain limited, and donations from private companies are preferred, partly due to legitimacy and autonomy concerns. One museum increased income through off-site programming and partnerships, a strategy expected to expand during renovation closure.

Charitable income plays a secondary role and is uneven, ranging from almost 0% to 20% across museums. The Charity Lottery is a key funding source, operating under specific legislation to support cultural and social organisations through lottery revenues. Controversially, contributions from friends’ associations, foundations, and private donors are more volatile and difficult to incorporate into budgeting due to high fundraising costs, uncertain returns, and strong competition for funds under strict eligibility requirements. Nevertheless, some see room for manoeuvre through “Friends of the museum” schemes, which help stabilise annual income and support donor engagement strategies. Contrary to the literature, no significant external influence or legitimacy concerns related to charitable contributions emerged from the interviews, although they appear to exert a more indirect and limited influence (Mitchell & Calabrese, 2019).

Although all museums experienced nominal revenue growth, real growth remained modest once adjusted for inflation and the low post-pandemic baseline. Real gains are limited, indicating that growth compensates for price increases rather than reflecting expansion. Only earned revenues showed real growth, while grants

and donations are more heterogeneous. Despite efforts to increase resources, museums face challenges that raise doubts about whether their revenue composition is truly a matter of choice.

Expenses structure

Expenditure analysis shows that personnel costs are the largest expense category (40%-55% of total costs), reflecting museums' labour-intensive nature and representing a managerial concern due to their constant growth. While personnel costs can partly be adjusted through flexible employment and outsourcing, recent labour regulations reduce flexibility and increase organisational vulnerability. Alongside personnel costs, operating costs, including purchases, administration, and communication, are the least flexible expenses. According to managers, their increase represents an investment with uncertain returns, as higher marketing or fundraising spending does not necessarily translate into additional revenue. Direct costs, including exhibitions, acquisitions, and educational activities, increased more than any other expense category throughout the period, reflecting rising production costs and post-pandemic inflation. Managers noted that this category is more flexible and the easiest to cut, making it directly affected by financial distress or reductions in public funding. However, sustained cuts may weaken programme quality, visitor engagement, revenues, and legitimacy.

Managers described budget allocation as mission-driven, with projects evaluated for their social, educational, and cultural value, while financial planning does not primarily aim at profit maximisation but at ensuring project sustainability. Resource allocation reflects strategic ambidexterity, balancing financial and non-financial goals. Differences in the scale of revenues and expenses across museums do not translate into substantial differences in net surplus, which remains relatively stable across institutions regardless of size, suggesting that museums adopt a similar financial logic.

Over time, expenses grow faster than inflation in most cases, driven mainly by personnel and direct costs; production and management costs appear to increase more rapidly than energy expenses. Only one museum substantially reduced costs in real terms as a drastic response to financial instability. Overall, expenditure growth outpaces revenue growth, indicating increasing financial pressure consistent with broader sector trends. Revenue and expense growth follow similar trajectories across museums, suggesting that institutions adjust spending to available resources and maintain limited margins. This may indicate not only difficulties in generating surpluses but also a financial logic in which museums intentionally or structurally operate close to budget balance.

Financial health

The case studies suggest that museums maintain relatively strong financial capacity, allowing them to sustain current operations and continue pursuing future activities despite periods of instability. In the short term, liquidity levels are good or sufficient across cases, reflecting a conservative financial approach. In the long term, solvency indicates that museums generally possess the resources needed to maintain current production levels. High equity ratios reflect greater financial self-sufficiency and reliance on internal funds, while weaker positions across museums are associated with past financial instability or expected declines due to the planned use of reserves for renovation projects. The use of debt is limited and linked to maintenance projects approved by governmental institutions and external authorities. The findings suggest that financial capacity is strongly sustained by government support, highlighting the cases' dependency condition. Conversely, translating favourable financial capacity into sustainability appears more challenging. Limited margins and consequent low profit appropriation allow museums to continue operating but leave limited room to set aside resources for future investments; this restricts reserve accumulation, investment potential, and the ability to respond to unexpected events. Profitability either shows volatility or remains steadily low, reflecting the necessity for a conservative approach to asset management and limited surplus generation.

Considering reserves, museums in more stable financial conditions show higher shares of net assets, while those undertaking major investments or facing financial shocks display weaker positions, reducing their capacity to absorb shocks and pursue future opportunities. Reserve composition matters as much as volume: most reserves are restricted or designated, limiting financial flexibility and responsiveness to external changes. Museums appear financially stable but constrained, with limited capacity for self-financed expansion, as future growth remains dependent on external funding.

Discussion

Bringing together organisational, financial, and revenue characteristics helps explain museums’ financial health and identify a dependency framework (Fig. 2). The findings portray museums as financially stable in maintaining current activities thanks to public support, but constrained in building autonomous long-term growth, providing a starting point for reflecting on funding policies.

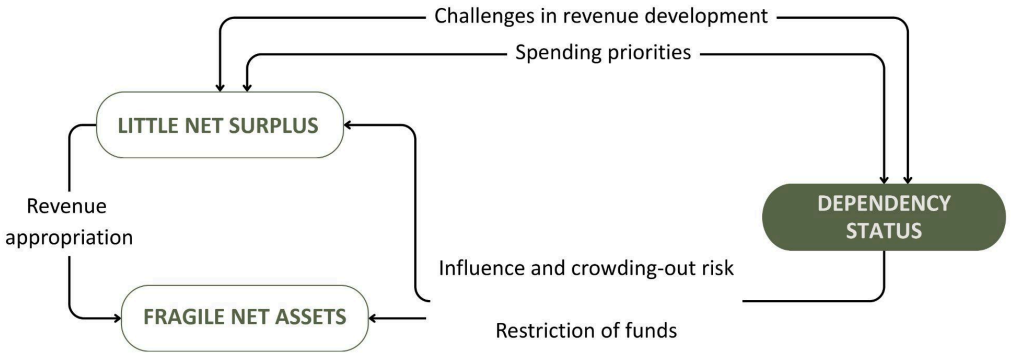
A fragile net asset structure limits growth and the capacity to respond to financial challenges, resulting from three main factors. First, internal and external restrictions on the use of certain funds limit reserve accumulation. Second, reserves often need to be justified, as high reserve levels may signal excessive funding and trigger crowding-out effects from governmental and private stakeholders. Third, and most importantly, limited revenue appropriation is directly related to low net surplus.

In turn, limited net surplus results from both internal strategic choices and external constraints. First, many funds are restricted to specific uses and must be returned if unspent, limiting opportunities to generate surplus and creating crowding-out effects, as high reserves or surpluses may reduce future external support. Second, the case studies suggest that government funding enables museums to prioritise social and educational objectives over profit generation, supporting the production of cultural goods and public value, whereas a stronger market orientation could shift activities towards leisure and entertainment. These dynamics help explain why differences in revenue and expenditure volumes do not necessarily translate into differences in net surplus across the case studies. Finally, the findings challenge the assumption that museums enjoy full flexibility in shaping their revenue portfolios: Although managers consider risk, volatility, and future revenues, strategic orientation and external constraints limit their choices in developing funding structures.

Fragile net assets and limited net surplus are both a cause and a consequence of dependency. Regulations and relationships with external bodies create dependency, as museums are not fully free to manage assets and accumulate surpluses. At the same time, museums can afford and intentionally maintain low surpluses to prioritise the production of public goods and fulfil their mission. Dependency, therefore, enables this strategic orientation while simultaneously reinforcing weak financial sustainability, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which external support sustains mission fulfilment but also reproduces financial dependence. In the absence of strong financial sustainability, museums pursue future objectives through gradual reserve accumulation, close dialogue with public institutions, and selective expansion of their revenue base through limited funding opportunities.

Figure 2

Limited net surplus and reserves in the case studies in relation to the resource dependency status



Note. Source: Author’s elaboration.

Conclusion

Although not representative, the analysis provides an overview of the dynamics experienced by medium-sized museums in the Netherlands that reflects broader sector concerns. Considering the dependency framework emerging from the interaction between financial and strategic factors, policy reforms aimed at strengthening museums’ financial position may move in two directions.

First, policymakers may recognise dependency as a structural feature of the museum sector. Stable public support remains central to preserving financial capacity and enabling public value production, while financial sustainability is supported through continuous dialogue with institutions. Rather than reducing dependency itself, policy may improve its quality by increasing communication and simplifying administration, while protecting museums’ programming autonomy. Multi-year budgeting can support stability and planning, while more flexible public grants may strengthen museums’ ability to absorb shocks, invest strategically, and pursue future objectives. At the same time, greater dependency may justify stronger

public oversight over revenue accumulation and reserve building to ensure alignment with societal objectives. Accountability should combine financial requirements aligned with the dependency framework and performance measures beyond efficiency, including public value, educational impact, and collection stewardship.

Alternatively, if public support declines and financial capacity becomes less government-dependent, financial sustainability shifts more directly toward managerial responsibility. Policy should then create genuine opportunities for alternative revenue development through fiscal incentives for donations, matching-fund schemes that leverage fundraising efforts, and greater flexibility in resource accumulation. Evaluation systems should reduce the perception that reserves and surpluses indicate spending inefficiency and recognise that entrepreneurial approaches may strengthen financial resilience but also risk reducing public goods production.

In both scenarios, the analysis suggests that policies aimed at strengthening museum finances involve unavoidable trade-offs between dependency and autonomy, financial health and public value production.

IMPACT

This research addresses a knowledge gap in understanding museums’ financial health beyond traditional financial indicators by integrating financial structures, strategic decision-making, and resource dependency into a single analytical framework. The study responds to increasing pressure on cultural institutions to remain financially sustainable while continuing to fulfil their mission.

The findings may benefit policymakers, as the distinction between financial capacity and financial sustainability offers a more nuanced basis for evaluating museums’ performance. The study challenges the assumption that reserve accumulation or limited surplus necessarily indicates spending inefficiency and argues that their interpretation should depend on the policy approach adopted towards public dependency. For museum managers, the framework acts as a diagnostic tool to identify signals of financial vulnerability and critically support decision-making.

This research does not prescribe a single funding model for museums but highlights the importance of reflecting on the role of dependency in the cultural sector. It invites policymakers to reconsider assumptions about financial independence and to recognise it as a condition that may either be improved or reduced depending on policy objectives. The findings can inform funding allocation mechanisms, accountability frameworks, and cultural policy reforms under both scenarios.

Expected impacts include greater alignment between funding rules and museums’ operating conditions, more flexible approaches to reserves and public grants, and evaluation systems that combine financial resilience with public value creation.

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BIOGRAPHY

Fabiana Basili is a researcher specialising in the financial management of cultural institutions and cultural policy. She completed her Master’s in Cultural Economics and Entrepreneurship at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where her research focused on the financial structure of museums in the Netherlands. Her initial work investigates financial management and cultural strategies, such as differential pricing and alternative revenue models, as well as the dynamics of public funding and cultural policy.

Precarity, Meaning and the Spiritual Vertical: Freelance Actors in Latvia Between Cultural Policy and Existential Commitment

Mrs. Lauma Inovska
Latvian Academy of Culture

Author Biography

Lauma Inovska is a professional doctoral candidate in the Professional Doctoral Study Programme in Arts, jointly implemented by the Latvian Academy of Culture, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, and the Art Academy of Latvia. Her doctoral dissertation examines precarity, professional identity and long-term professional sustainability among freelance actors in twenty-first-century Latvia. Inovska is a professional actress, theatre and film director, and guest lecturer at the Latvian Academy of Culture. Her research focuses on artistic labour, cultural policy, professional identity, and the existential dimensions of artistic persistence.

Introduction

Research on precarity in the cultural and creative sectors has provided important insight into the structural instability of contemporary artistic labour. Project-based employment, irregular income, limited social protection, and fragmented professional trajectories have been widely analysed as defining conditions of cultural work (Standing, 2011; Lorey, 2015; Kunst, 2015). Within this literature, artistic labour is often understood through the language of insecurity, flexibility, vulnerability, and self-organisation.

These perspectives help explain how responsibility for professional continuity is increasingly transferred from institutions to individual cultural workers. However, they do not fully explain a central paradox of artistic labour: if the conditions are so unstable, why do many artists continue to practice their profession over long periods of time?

This article examines that paradox through the case of freelance actors in Latvia. The Latvian performing arts field has historically been shaped by the repertory theatre system, where the actor’s professional identity has been strongly associated with belonging to a permanent theatre ensemble. Alongside this model, however, a substantial group of professionally trained actors work outside permanent institutional employment. They participate in theatre productions, audiovisual projects, independent initiatives, festivals, educational work, and self-organised artistic practice. Their work is often cyclical, project-based, and dependent on continuous self-organisation.

The article asks how professional continuity is sustained when stable employment, regular income and institutional belonging are absent or intermittent. Existing explanations based on professional identity and motivation offer important insights but do not fully account for the persistence observed in the empirical material. The article therefore explores whether an additional analytical perspective is required.

The article proceeds from the assumption that professional continuity cannot be reduced to individual resilience or personal motivation. This study therefore does not interpret professional persistence as a personal attribute. Rather, it examines how continuity emerges through the interaction of institutional conditions, economic structures, professional recognition, and individual orientations towards meaning.

Latvian context and methodology

The Latvian performing arts sector offers a particularly relevant context for examining professional sustainability under conditions of precarity. In Latvia, the professional identity of the actor has historically been closely linked to repertory theatres and permanent ensembles. This model has also shaped symbolic recognition of the profession.

At the same time, the contemporary field includes a significant freelance sector. Based on the author's mapping conducted in 2025 of Latvian repertory theatre ensembles and publicly available professional biographies, approximately 230 actors are employed in repertory theatres, while around 100 professionally trained actors work primarily as freelancers.

In this article, the term freelance actor refers to a professionally trained actor whose employment is not based on a permanent contract with a single institution. The term describes an employment regime, not a level of professional quality.

Freelance actors work across theatre, film, television and independent cultural projects. Their activity depends largely on short-term contracts, project funding and personal initiative, often without the stability associated with long-term employment.

The empirical material for this article consists of eight publicly recorded group interviews conducted in 2023 with professional freelance actors in Latvia. In total, twenty-one actors participated in the interview cycle, which was organised in collaboration with the professional theatre journal Teātra Vēstnesis. The interviews were structured as group interviews with stimulus materials. This format allowed participants to respond to shared themes while retaining the specificity of individual experience. All interviews were publicly recorded and published through the Teātra Vēstnesis digital platform, allowing the material to function simultaneously as research data and publicly accessible professional discourse.

The interviews addressed professional practice, project-based employment, artistic development, institutional belonging, relations with audiences and the long-term continuation of acting work outside permanent theatre employment. The material was analysed using qualitative thematic interpretation. The analysis focused on recurring explanations of professional persistence, descriptions of professional identity, experiences of recognition, and the ways in which actors articulated meaning, responsibility and purpose in relation to their work.

Rather than applying an existing theoretical concept, the study reconstructs the spiritual vertical inductively from recurring empirical patterns. It emerged from repeated patterns in which actors described professional continuity through structures of meaning that exceeded economic reasoning, career planning and institutional affiliation, and was subsequently conceptualised in dialogue with theories of precarity, artistic labour, recognition and meaning. The analysis moved iteratively between empirical patterns and theoretical interpretation.

Importantly, the interview material suggests that freelance status is not always experienced as a constraint. Some actors explicitly value the autonomy, flexibility and artistic mobility associated with project-based work. The issue is therefore not freelance practice itself, but the distribution of responsibility, risk and social protection within increasingly project-based forms of cultural labour.

Theoretical orientation

The article draws on selected theoretical perspectives from research on precarity and artistic labour. Guy Standing’s analysis of the precariat is useful for understanding insecure labour as more than low income: it

involves unstable work, limited social rights and a weakened relation to one’s professional future (Standing, 2011). Isabell Lorey’s concept of precarisation extends this perspective by showing how insecurity may become a normalised mode of governance, where flexibility and self- responsibility are expected rather than exceptional (Lorey, 2015).

Judith Butler’s work highlights the relationship between precarity and recognition (Butler, 2004, 2009). This perspective is relevant for freelance actors whose artistic work may be culturally valued while their professional conditions remain institutionally fragile. Kunst (2015) demonstrates how artistic passion, flexibility and autonomy may become entangled with exploitation, concealing the displacement of risk onto the individual.

These perspectives explain the conditions of precarious artistic labour but not the persistence of professional activity within them. To address this question, the article draws on Frankl’s understanding of meaning (2006) and Rosa’s concept of vertical resonance (2019), understood as an orientation towards something experienced as larger than the individual self.

Findings: beyond identity and motivation

The interview material confirms that freelance actors experience precarity not only as economic insecurity but also as a fragmentation of professional time, visibility and recognition. Although professional identity emerged as an important theme, the analysis suggests that identity alone cannot account for the long-term continuation of professional activity under precarious conditions. Work may be intense during one project and absent in the next. Professional life is therefore not organised as a stable career line, but as a sequence of projects, interruptions, returns and self- organised attempts to remain active. The question is how continuity is maintained under such conditions.

Professional identity is one important mechanism through which continuity is maintained. Actors describe the need to retain a sense of being an actor even during periods without employment. One participant formulates this condition directly: “If you do not work for a while, you have to maintain the feeling yourself that you are still an actor” (Brīvmākslinieku sarunas, 2023). This statement illustrates a central aspect of freelance professional life: institutional recognition may be intermittent, but the actor must sustain professional identity internally. In this sense, professional identity becomes detached from institutional membership and is maintained through continued professional orientation rather than organisational affiliation.

Participants also repeatedly described the need to demonstrate their professionalism despite being outside permanent institutional structures. Professional competence was often taken for granted within institutions but required continuous reassertion in freelance practice. Recognition was therefore experienced not as a stable status but as something that had to be repeatedly earned, demonstrated and defended. Consequently, professional belonging appeared less as an institutional position than as an ongoing process of recognition. This finding suggests that professional precarity is not limited to employment insecurity but also involves unstable forms of symbolic recognition and professional legitimacy. For freelance actors, professional competence cannot be assumed through institutional affiliation and must instead be continuously articulated and demonstrated in practice.

Yet professional identity alone does not fully explain long-term continuation. Across the interviews, participants rarely spoke about professional survival in purely economic terms. The interviews show that actors do not describe their persistence only as a matter of self-definition. They also speak about responsibility towards the profession, the quality of work and the audience. Acting appears not merely as

employment but as a relational practice. The actor’s work is repeatedly connected to encounter: with partners, directors, texts, audiences and the wider cultural space.

This suggests that the continuation of professional activity is sustained by more than the desire to remain in the labour market. The audience forms part of the process through which artistic work acquires meaning, linking professional continuity to ethical responsibility. The empirical material therefore points beyond two insufficient explanations. The first is the economic explanation: actors continue because they need to work. This is true but incomplete, since the profession often does not provide stable economic security. The second is the motivational explanation: actors continue because they are committed or passionate. This is also incomplete, because it risks turning structural instability into a question of individual attitude.

The interview material points to four recurring dimensions of freelance professional experience: the need to continually prove professional competence, the fragility of institutional belonging, the maintenance of professional identity through internal rather than institutional validation, and the significance of the actor–audience relationship as a source of meaning. Taken together, these recurring patterns provide an empirical basis for the concept of the spiritual vertical. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that professional continuity is produced relationally rather than individually: it emerges through the interaction of institutional conditions, recognition, professional identity and existential meaning.

The spiritual vertical as a structure of professional continuity

The spiritual vertical refers to an existential orientation towards meaning that helps sustain professional continuity under precarious conditions. Unlike motivation, which may fluctuate according to projects, recognition, or income, the concept describes a recurring orientation identified in the interview material through which professional activity remains meaningful despite uncertainty.

Actors describe professional continuity not only as remaining employed but as maintaining the quality and integrity of artistic practice. Among these dimensions, the actor–audience relationship is particularly important because it locates professional activity within a broader framework of responsibility and meaning. In this respect, the spiritual vertical resonates with Rosa’s idea of vertical resonance: an orientation towards something experienced as larger than the individual self (Rosa, 2019).

The spiritual vertical helps explain why professional activity continues despite economic uncertainty.

A resource and a risk

A central finding of the study is the ambivalence of the spiritual vertical. On the one hand, it functions as a resource. It sustains professional identity, ethical responsibility, and the sense that artistic work matters. Without such meaning structures, long-term activity in a precarious field would be more difficult to maintain.

On the other hand, the same structure may be a risk. If artistic work is experienced as deeply meaningful, actors may accept conditions that would be unacceptable in other professions: unpaid or underpaid work, insufficient rehearsal time, irregular income, emotional overinvestment and the continuous need to prove professional value. Meaning may therefore become one of the mechanisms through which precarity is endured. As Kunst (2015) argues, artistic commitment may become entangled with forms of self-exploitation when structural insecurity is masked by the rhetoric of freedom and vocation. This observation is particularly relevant in cultural sectors where commitment, flexibility, and autonomy are frequently presented as professional virtues. Under such conditions, structural insecurity may be reinterpreted as freedom, while responsibility for risk is transferred from institutions to individuals. In this sense, the

spiritual vertical functions not only as a resource for professional sustainability but also as a mechanism through which precarious conditions may become normalised. The concept should therefore be understood not only as an explanatory category but also as a critical one, drawing attention to the ways in which meaning may compensate for insufficient institutional support.

This critical perspective prevents the spiritual vertical from becoming another romantic concept of artistic vocation. Rather, it shows that meaning is both sustaining and vulnerable. It can support professional life, but it can also make unstable conditions more bearable and therefore more easily normalised.

For this reason, the spiritual vertical should be understood as an analytical category rather than a normative ideal.

Discussion: implications for cultural policy

The findings have direct implications for cultural policy and cultural management. Discussions about the sustainability of artistic labour often focus on funding, employment status, project support, and social protection. Material support remains essential. However, the analysis suggests that professional sustainability also depends on symbolic recognition and structures of meaning.

For freelance actors, professional continuity depends not only on the availability of projects but also on recognition, professional identity and meaningful relations to audiences and cultural communities. A cultural policy that addresses only financial mechanisms may overlook the ways in which artistic labour is sustained through professional belonging, recognition and ethical responsibility. At the same time, the findings do not suggest that freelance practice is inherently problematic. Rather, they indicate that cultural policy should recognise the continuity of freelance professional practice between projects instead of focusing exclusively on the projects themselves. This shifts attention from artistic production alone towards the long-term sustainability of professional artistic practice. Conversely, a cultural policy that celebrates artistic passion without addressing material conditions risks turning meaning into a substitute for institutional support.

In small cultural systems, the loss of professionally trained freelance actors affects not only individual careers but also the diversity and continuity of the wider performing arts ecosystem. Freelance actors should be recognised as part of the cultural field’s professional infrastructure. Recognising this continuity also requires institutional frameworks that acknowledge freelance professional practice as a permanent component of the performing arts ecosystem rather than as an exceptional employment model.

The concept of the spiritual vertical helps cultural policy avoid two reductions. Cultural policy should avoid reducing artistic labour either to income, contracts and productivity or to vocation, passion and sacrifice. Artists need both material conditions and meaningful structures of professional life.

Cultural policy should therefore support not only projects but also the conditions that make long-term professional continuity possible. This may include more flexible social protection mechanisms, recognition of freelance professional status, support for rehearsal and development time, access to spaces, and institutional models that allow artists to remain professionally active between projects. Such measures would not replace the meaning structures that sustain artistic work, but they would prevent those structures from being used as compensation for inadequate support.

Conclusion

This article has examined how professional continuity is sustained among freelance actors in Latvia under conditions of precarity. It has argued that long-term artistic engagement cannot be explained only through

economic necessity, institutional employment, or individual resilience. The empirical material suggests that professional continuity emerges through the interaction of material conditions, professional recognition, and structures of meaning rather than from individual resilience alone.

At the same time, the article has emphasised the ambivalence of this structure. Meaning can sustain professional life, but it can also make precarious conditions more tolerable and therefore more easily normalised. For cultural labour research, the spiritual vertical offers a way to analyse the existential dimension of artistic work without romanticizing it. For cultural policy, it suggests that artistic sustainability requires attention not only to funding and employment categories, but also to the conditions under which professional identity, artistic quality and ethical responsibility can be maintained over time.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a significant knowledge gap in cultural policy and cultural labour studies: the long-term sustainability of freelance artistic practice in small cultural systems. While precarity is often analysed in terms of insecure employment, irregular income and limited social protection, less attention has been paid to the meaning structures that enable artists to continue professional work within such conditions.

The findings are relevant to cultural policymakers, theatre and film institutions, independent performing arts organisations, artist unions, higher arts education institutions and freelance practitioners. By introducing the concept of the spiritual vertical, the study provides an analytical framework that may help cultural policy and cultural management understand long-term professional sustainability beyond economic indicators alone. In cultural management, the findings can support more responsible collaboration with freelance actors, particularly regarding rehearsal time, remuneration, professional recognition and continuity between projects. In arts education, they may help prepare emerging actors for the realities of freelance professional life without reinforcing the romanticisation of self-sacrifice. The study contributes a more nuanced understanding of artistic sustainability. Rather than treating freelance artists as peripheral, flexible or endlessly self-motivated workers, the research frames them as part of the professional infrastructure of the cultural field. Possible indicators of impact may include uptake of the concept in policy discussions, educational contexts, professional debates, artist advocacy and further comparative research on freelance artistic labour in Europe.

The findings may also be relevant to current discussions concerning the expansion of project-based employment and fixed-term contracts within publicly funded cultural institutions. The study therefore contributes not only a new analytical concept but also a different way of explaining long- term artistic sustainability under conditions of precarity.

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The Role of Actors in Artistic Co-Determination and De-Hierarchical Decision-Making

Prof. Julia Glesner
University of Applied Sciences Potsdam

Author Biography

Julia Glesner is a research professor for Cultural Management at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam in Germany. Her research interests include corporate governance, shared leadership and organizational change in the performing arts. She is principal investigator of “Strengthening Cultural Offerings in Rural Areas with the Independent Performing Arts – Models for the Professionalisation of Cultural Infrastructures”, a research project funded by the German research Foundation. Current publications: DOI: 10.1515/9783111602080-012, 10.3389/ejcmp.2025.14629, 10.33423/jaf.v25i3, 10.1007/978-3-658-40513-7. Her biography on Sir Peter Jonas, »Opera for all«, was published in 2022.

ORCiD-ID: 0000-0002-4263-8307

Abstract

Against the backdrop of debates on the transformation of German-speaking municipal theatres, this qualitative case study analyses forms of artistic co-determination within formal hierarchies, using the example of the drama department at Theater Basel. Through participant observation and interviews, it demonstrates how de-hierarchised practices foster co-determination and aesthetic collaboration.

Key Words

Theatre, participation, co-determination, transformation, aesthetic collaboration

Introduction

Theatre organisations in German-speaking countries face a wide range of challenges relating to transformation and organisational change. In particular, the handling of power structures and leadership models has come under increasing critical scrutiny since the revelation of numerous cases of abuse in 2017/18 (Schmidt, 2019). In numerous state-funded theatre organisations, artistic teams are currently working on solutions to these problems. They aim to break down existing structures and develop alternative organisational models that promote transparency, co-determination and a balanced distribution of power. The fact that participation and co-determination are themes of transformation in German-speaking theatre companies is by no means a given, as Anna Volkland’s characterisation of the situation of actors illustrates: Actors and actresses – who today are generally employed on fixed-term contracts as ensemble members or guest performers at a public repertory theatre – find themselves in the contradictory position of, on the one hand, defining themselves as artists and being recognised as such in public discourse, whilst in reality being employees subject to the authority of a theatre management and always operating within a group (Volkland, 2022, p. 105).

Theater Basel, Switzerland’s largest multi-disciplinary theatre company, offers opera and ballet in addition to drama. Since the 2020/21 season – that is, since Benedikt von Peter took up his post as artistic director at Theater Basel – the theatre’s drama department has been led by a team of four. Anja Dirks is the executive dramaturg and deputy artistic director of Theater Basel; Antú Romero Nunes is the principal director; Jörg Pohl works as an actor within the four-person leadership team; and Inga Schonlau serves as dramaturg. An important part of their work involves establishing non-hierarchical practices of artistic co-determination. These are aimed at creating an actor-centred theatre that provides the best possible conditions for their artistic work. The work of the Basler Compagnie is a prime example of an attempt to transform the structures of the German-speaking theatre scene by taking concrete steps to bring about organisational change.

Research question

This study examines artistic co-determination in the context of de-hierarchised decision-making structures in theatre operations, using the Basler Compagnie as a case study. The focus is on how artistic co-determination is organised in practice within a three-genre theatre that remains formally hierarchical, yet with a shared leadership at the top. On this basis, an initial discussion takes place of the challenges and opportunities that arise in theatre operations when implementing forms of artistic co-determination in practice.

Methodological and theoretical approach

Theory of Participation

Amongst the approaches in democratic theory that seek to conceptualise participation, the ladder model published in 1969 by the US government adviser Sherry Arnstein is regarded as one of the most important points of reference (Arnstein, 1969). Her approach conceives of participation as a power-related category and understands citizen participation not as mere involvement, but as a question of real opportunities to influence decisions. In her ladder model (A Ladder of Citizen Participation), Arnstein distinguishes eight levels of participation, ranging from non-participation (manipulation and therapy) through forms of symbolic participation (information, consultation, appeasement) to co-determination in the fullest sense of the word (partnership, delegated power, citizen control) (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). Central to this is the distinction between symbolic participation (‘token’), which primarily generates legitimacy, and power-effective participation, which shifts decision-making authority. Arnstein's approach highlights that participation must always be analysed in the context of power and dominance relations and can be normatively evaluated based on the degree to which decision-making authority is genuinely transferred from established elites to citizens. Arnstein’s metaphor of ‘steps’ has inspired countless approaches to distinguishing between forms of participation according to their intensity or depth. Rohr et al. (2017) propose a three-stage framework which distinguishes between informative, deliberative and collaborative participation according to their intensity of involvement and methodological approaches. Whilst ‘information’ as a level of participation refers to the essentially one-way exchange of information from the sender to the receiver – with interaction limited to comments or queries and no provision for active co-creation – ‘deliberation’ denotes a more complex form of participation. It is described as a process in which the advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action for achieving a goal are weighed up against one another, either at an individual or a collective level (Velasco, 2010, p. 360). Information, deliberation and collaboration as types of participation are not mutually exclusive: Deliberative processes always include informative elements, whilst collaborative processes likewise contain both informative and deliberative elements. According to Rohr et al., the degree of participation – and thus also the participants’ engagement with the subject matter in question – increases from stage to stage (Rohr et al., 2017, pp. 29f.).

Organisation theory

The approach of sociologist Stefan Kühl describes organisations as “structured networks of relationships that define certain possibilities and exclude others” (Kühl, 1995, p. 83). He thereby draws on Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (Kühl, 2020, p. 176). According to this approach, organisations decide autonomously on their three characteristics: purpose, members and hierarchy. Purposes are not merely pre-determined objectives, but serve as premises through which organisations legitimise and structure their decisions. Membership functions as a central means of control in this context: those who are members submit to specific expectations; the possibility of exclusion ensures conformity. Organisations are thus not merely means to an end, but highly complex, self-observing and self-reproducing decision-making systems (Kühl, 2020, pp. 23-27). Hierarchy, as the third characteristic, in turn represents a fundamental structural feature of modern organisations, as Kühl emphasises, drawing on Luhmann’s ideas. Kühl draws on the literal meaning of hierarchy as “sacred order” (Kühl, 2019, p. 10), but detaches

the concept from a purely domination- or power-theoretical understanding, which has often interpreted hierarchy as an instrument of domination, a top-down command system or an expression of personal superiority. Hierarchy, as the temporally, socially and substantively stable definition of leadership and subordination relationships within organisations, institutionalises leadership on a permanent basis, clearly allocates responsibilities and ensures the fundamental possibility of escalating decisions to higher levels. Hierarchy is thus not merely an instrument of domination, but a functional mechanism for the coordination, decision-making capacity and stabilisation of organisations. Organisations therefore require hierarchies to manage complexity (Kühl, 2019, pp. 11ff.).

State of research

Research on co-determination in theatre practice primarily originates from theatre studies from theatre studies, or more precisely: the historiography of theatre. In the 1960s and 1970s, West German theatre companies trialled collective management structures (Doyon, 2014), experiences which continue to shape discourse on new management forms today. The term ‘co-determination theatre’ was coined to describe these experiments, prominent in theatres such as the Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer in Berlin, Schauspiel Frankfurt, and Theater am Turm in Frankfurt (Boldt, 2021). These models aimed to enable theatre staff to participate in ‘all projects, tasks and decisions concerning the theatre’ (Kabelitz, 1969, p. 28), with a focus on grassroots democratic participation and shared values, driving demands to abolish hierarchies and authority structures in production processes. Critics viewed the traditional municipal theatre as the epitome of centralised power structures, rejecting its organisational model. The Schaubühne adopted a works constitution that institutionalised collective management by delegating decisions – including casting – to the ensemble and formalising procedures such as general assembly meetings (Sandmeyer, 1974). From a cultural-historical perspective, the definition of ‘a collective’ depends heavily on academic context. Historically, collectives were often linked to communally managed property and living but also associated with expropriation and injustice. Organisational theory describes collectives as communities of action structured around shared values, often characterised by flat hierarchies and grassroots democratic consensus principles. In the early 1970s, this concept was tied to Marxism, regarded as the “collective’s shared ideological foundation, which guaranteed its cohesion” (Nitsche, 2021, p. 118). As Nitsche observed, theatre practitioners viewed co-determination as a dress rehearsal for societal transformation, aiming to test participatory principles at a smaller scale before applying them politically at the state level. The theatre collectives of the 1960s and 1970s saw themselves not only as cutting-edge institutions but as the spearhead of broader social development (Nitsche, 2021, p. 117). However, these experiments were only partially realised, as minutes and reports show painful plenary sessions and exclusion of certain groups, such as technical staff (Sandmeyer, 1974, p. 167).

Qualitative social research

Methodologically, the study follows the approaches of qualitative social research. Using a triangulative approach, qualitative, guided interviews were combined with participant observation. This combination enables a comprehensive examination of the subject under investigation and helps to capture different perspectives and perceptions. In total, three interviews were conducted with ensemble members, as well as two sessions of participant observation of ensemble meetings, with a total duration of ten hours. Data analysis followed Mayring’s qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022) and comprised both a deductive application of categories and an inductive formation of categories. The categories of participation defined by Rohr et al. (2017) served as the basis for the deductive application of categories. Inductive categorisation was employed in identifying the motives, understood as long-term motivations for actions, and the self-perception of the roles that actors assume during the decision-making and rehearsal process.

Results

Communication standards and routines for participatory decision-making

The Compagnie has titled two of its most important texts "Ways and Tools" on its in-house blog (Basler Compagnie, 2022). According to Kühl's systems-theory-informed organisational theory, this would refer to standards and routines that generate stability and redundancy within the organisation, i.e. that are intended to avoid uncertainty, ambiguity and disorder – which, in turn, could lead to a renewed consolidation of power relations (Kühl, 1995, p. 82). The various tools – to stay with the Compagnie's terminology – implement the different levels of participation: information, deliberation and collaboration. The starting point here are three premises that function as principles, that is, as normative rules for the Compagnie. The principle of collegial working stipulates that all individuals who will be affected by an upcoming decision, as well as all those with relevant specialist expertise, must be involved in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the principle of self-organisation stipulates that all members of the Compagnie may raise issues on their own initiative, but that there is no compulsion to participate or to have a say. In the decision-making process, the principle of consent then comes into play. Unlike the consensus procedure, which requires the active agreement of all participants, in the consent procedure a decision is deemed to have been taken when no one has a reasoned and serious objection to the decision, according to Gerard Endenburg, the founder of sociocracy, from which the principle of self-organisation also originates. The sociocratic principle of consent is of central importance, as it embodies equality in decision-making. Within the Basler Compagnie, this is put into practice through company meetings, ensemble representatives and working groups with rotating responsibilities, post-performance discussions and annual one-to-one meetings between the four-member management team and each ensemble member. These formats implement the levels of participation – information and deliberation – in various forms. As described by Rohr et al. (2017, pp. 29ff.), all formats contain elements of information, albeit in different directions: from the management to the ensemble, within the working groups, or from the working groups to the management. Deliberative moments occur from the moment decisions are made according to the principle of consent, for example when the ensemble appoints a representative, when procedures are established at a company meeting, or when arguments are negotiated within working groups. The "ambitious idea of free and public reasoning amongst equals" (Velasco, 2010, p. 360), as Juan Carlos Velasco characterises the process of deliberation, must be significantly toned down for the real-world application within a hierarchically structured organisation: In the 10-eyes discussions, for example, which each member of the Compagnie holds once a year with the four-member leadership, a free exchange of views may still be possible; however, it is neither public, nor, at best, quasi-public, and certainly does not take place amongst equals. Organisational theory demonstrates how the assumption in organisations that reducing hierarchies inevitably also dismantles power structures often leads to a renewed concentration of power being treated as a taboo (Kühl, 1995, p. 101). The leadership team seeks to address this ambivalence in their leadership roles, as well as persistent informal hierarchies – such as individual assertiveness, hierarchies based on experience or competition – by addressing them directly. Collaboration in the full sense of the term – that is, the joint, equal development of aesthetic ideas as well – occurs particularly during the development of the programme. In stark contrast to many other theatre companies, the Compagnie has developed a transparent process that calls for the active participation of the ensemble at various stages and aims to implement artistic self-determination as a value right from the development of the ideas that will eventually form the programme. Once initial names and subject matter have been proposed and deliberatively reviewed in company meetings, the dramaturgy group, the four-member management team and other formats, the management creates an online document that marks the progression of the season along the vertical axis, whilst the titles of the productions and the initial names of those involved are placed on the left and right respectively. The planning status is openly accessible to all ensemble members; it changes continuously during the planning phase as a result of the decisions made in the various participatory forums. The actors have the right of veto here: the four-person management team does not force any ensemble member to take part in a production. Conversely,

the actors do not have the right to dictate casting, though they may express their preferences (Bettini, 2025).

Aesthetic collaboration

The practices of artistic co-determination at the Basler Compagnie are driven by the motivation to create an actor-centred theatre that ensures the best possible conditions for the actors' artistic work. The de-hierarchisation of decision-making is deliberately aimed at giving the actors' artistic personalities the space to flourish fully. Whilst in the classical conception of hierarchical organisation "the hierarchical position coincides with the necessary expertise" (Kühl, 2020, p. 77), the Compagnie's working method values ensemble-based expertise by transforming traditional power asymmetries. Ultimately, the Compagnie is working towards the democratisation of artistic processes. In contrast to the development of the programme, where aesthetic ideas were collaboratively developed offstage, the Compagnie has also developed a working method for the rehearsal process in which the production teams achieve the highest level of collaborative participation within the aesthetic process. The 2025 production "What We Lost in the Fire", directed by Manuela Infante, exemplifies this working method. The process begins with the preparation of improvisations, which are enriched by engagement with the short story of the same name by Mariana Enriquez, academic texts and interviews. The performers improvise scenes, develop characters and create dialogue. Armed with this material, the director – who is also the playwright – retreats to a writing retreat. She works directly with the results of the improvisations and weaves them together into a first draft. This is later fed back into the second phase of the rehearsal process, although the allocation of lines to the performers remains open at this stage. The performers engage collectively with the texts that have emerged during the rehearsal period. They assign them to one another collaboratively, and something new emerges once again, regardless of who developed the original scenes or ideas. The process deliberately avoids any claims of ownership over roles, creative moments or developments. Instead, the focus is on how to achieve the greatest possible sense of collaboration when telling a story. Ideas are not claimed for an individual role but are made available to the ensemble and the narrative through a collective process. This collective approach remained ever-present – not only in terms of individual contributions to a role, but also through continuous involvement in the entire creative process right up to the premiere. The work ranged from text design and musicality to the overall structure of the production. This way of working, based on mutual trust and freedom, reflects a performance culture rooted in a willingness to put one's own ideas forward whilst accepting the dynamics of how these are received and further developed by others. The process demands a high degree of openness and respect for the creative contributions of others. As ensemble members explain, this way of working has not only proved its worth in individual productions but also shapes the entire ensemble, the structure of the theatre and day-to-day work (Winter, 2026).

Conclusion

The working methods of the Basler Compagnie are a prime example of the attempt to permanently establish non-hierarchical practices of artistic co-determination and collaboration within a theatre company that remains formally structured along hierarchical lines. Collective leadership functions here as an organisational structure designed to balance out the informal hierarchies – with their ambivalences and contradictions – that inevitably arise from this constellation. Although these practices go hand in hand with a democratisation of working processes within the theatre sector, their primary motivation is to establish a practice of aesthetic collaboration on stage. The practices of co-determination serve an artistic practice on stage that offers every individual member of the ensemble the opportunity to develop their own expressiveness and creativity. Nevertheless, the de-hierarchisation of processes and structures always entails the need to constantly reassess and negotiate decisions. Kühl refers to this as a "politicisation dilemma" (Kühl, 1995, pp. 11, 18) that inevitably accompanies de-hierarchisation. Like other organisations, a theatre ensemble can withstand the politicisation of its working methods; doing so requires willpower, expertise, time – and energy. The process of changing its own working structures has

already shaped the company. Every guest and every new ensemble member brings fresh impetus for change. Whilst such impetus is desirable for the artistic work, it also represents critical moments that repeatedly put the resilience and flexibility of existing working structures to the test.

Impact & Engagement

By examining artistic co-determination in theatre companies, this research offers insights into how forms of participation and shared leadership can be tested and adapted, even within hierarchically structured organisations. The findings highlight that non-hierarchical decision-making can take place in specific areas or during temporary periods, enabling organisations to explore participatory approaches in a flexible manner. Importantly, the study identifies opportunities during moments of organisational change, such as the beginning of a new artistic director's tenure, which insiders regard as favourable for implementing artistic co-determination. However, external support for these transformations is often recommended, with a professional field currently emerging to address these needs. The research contributes to theatre practitioners, policymakers, educators, and cultural organisations by providing actionable pathways for introducing co-determination practices. The pathways for utilising this research include the development of training programmes, workshops, and consultancy services aimed at supporting theatres in their transition to participatory models of co-determination. It offers practitioners and policymakers a foundation for balancing hierarchical structures with participatory practices, fostering artistic collaboration while addressing challenges such as resilience and adaptation in changing production environments.

Note

Quotations that were not originally written in English have been translated by the author.

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Framing the Artist: How Policy Frameworks Shape the Recognition of Artists in the Nordic Countries

Dr. Maria Hirvi-Ijäs
Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore

Dr. Vappu Renko
Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore

Dr. Sakarias Sokka
Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore

Abstract

Professional artists occupy a distinctive position within the cultural policy systems of the Nordic welfare states. Although the Nordic countries share long traditions of public support for artistic work, significant differences exist in how artists are defined, identified and statistically represented. This paper examines how administrative, statistical and policy frameworks shape the recognition of professional artists in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Drawing on recent national studies, official statistics and comparative policy analysis, it argues that definitions of artists are not merely technical instruments for data collection but institutional mechanisms that influence access to support systems, social protection and public recognition. Differences in occupational classifications, organisational membership criteria, grant systems, and statistical methodologies produce divergent representations of artistic labour. These differences complicate cross-national comparisons and affect the evidence base available for artist policy. The article further demonstrates how the growing emphasis on artists' working conditions and social security within European cultural policy has increased the importance of reliable and comparable data. The findings suggest that improving methodological transparency and strengthening cooperation among researchers, statistical authorities and cultural policymakers are essential for developing more coherent evidence bases capable of supporting sustainable artistic careers.

Keywords: artists, artist policy, Nordic countries, statistics, professional artists

Introduction

The Nordic welfare states have long regarded support for professional artists as a central responsibility of cultural policy. Public authorities have established grant systems, educational institutions, cultural organisations and dedicated administrative structures designed to support artistic production and safeguard artistic freedom. Compared with many other European countries, the Nordic region has developed highly institutionalised systems of artist policy in which professional artists constitute a distinct policy category.

This institutionalisation reflects an understanding that artistic work contributes not only to economic development but also to democracy, cultural diversity, freedom of expression and social cohesion. The legitimacy of public support for artists has therefore traditionally rested upon both intrinsic and instrumental conceptions of artistic value.

Despite these common foundations, the question of who qualifies as an artist remains difficult to answer. Definitions are necessary for cultural policy implementation, grant allocation, research, statistical monitoring, taxation and social security systems. Artistic work is characterised by diverse educational backgrounds, multiple employment relationships and increasingly fragmented careers.

Definitions matters as they determine who becomes visible within statistical systems, who qualifies for support and whose working conditions become subjects of policy concern. Consequently, artist definitions influence both the governance of artistic labour and the social position of artists.

This paper examines how professional artists are defined and identified in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. It argues that policy and statistical frameworks do not merely describe artistic populations but actively participate in constructing them. By comparing national approaches, it explores how definitions influence knowledge production, policy development and the understanding of artists' working conditions.

Theoretical Perspectives: Artists, Professions and Classification

Professional artists occupy an ambiguous position within modern labour markets. Unlike professions such as medicine or law, artistic occupations generally lack formal licensing systems or universally recognised entry requirements. As Becker (1982) argues, artistic work emerges within networks of cooperation and institutional recognition rather than through clearly bounded professions. Similarly, Menger (1999, 2006) emphasises the uncertainty, project-based employment and unequal income distributions that characterises artistic labour markets.

Professional recognition depends upon institutions, organisations, educational systems and state regulation. Definitions of artists therefore reflect institutional arrangements as much as occupational realities. Macdonald (1995) describes the process of professionalization as a project emerging within occupational groups, developing in several steps over time.

Bowker and Star (1999) argue that classification systems are never neutral. Categories make certain groups visible while rendering others invisible. Statistical classifications possess political and institutional effects. Definitions of artists influence not only knowledge production but also the allocation of resources, rights and public recognition.

As artistic work lacks universally recognised professional licences or formal entry requirements, individuals may become artists through higher education, self-training, professional practice or recognition within artistic communities. Artistic careers frequently involve multiple forms of employment, self-employment, temporary contracts and non-artistic work (e.g., Heian, 2018; Lindström, 2016), making artists particularly difficult to identify through conventional labour-market statistics. This openness constitutes an important characteristic of artistic practice but also creates challenges for cultural policy and research. Professional boundaries are often fluid, and distinctions between artistic work, cultural work and creative work remain contested.

Administrative and statistical systems actively shape the populations that artist policy seeks to support. Definitions possess both practical and symbolic significance. They determine which forms of artistic labour become visible and recognised. Statistical categories do not simply measure social reality; they help create it. Artist statistics may therefore be understood as a form of governance. Classification systems establish boundaries between inclusion and exclusion and influence the distribution of resources, rights and opportunities.

Recent European discussions concerning artists' status and working conditions have further highlighted the importance of reliable data. The European Commission has emphasised that improving social protection, labour rights and working conditions within cultural and creative sectors requires more robust evidence concerning artistic labour markets. Reliable evidence, however, depends upon reliable definitions.

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative qualitative approach based on secondary analysis of official statistics, policy documents, administrative reports and recent research concerning artists in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Iceland is here excluded from the analysis, due to lack of comparable data.

The comparison focuses on four dimensions: 1. institutional responsibility for artist policy; 2. organisations responsible for statistical production; 3. criteria used to define professional artists; and 4. implications for policy knowledge and working conditions.

The selected countries share similar welfare-state traditions, extensive public support for culture and long-standing artist policy systems, making them suitable for comparative analysis. At the same time, they exhibit important variations in administrative organisation and statistical practices that illuminate broader questions concerning the governance of artistic work.

The analysis draws upon recent national studies, including the Finnish As an Artist in Finland project, Norwegian artist surveys, Swedish studies of artistic occupations and Danish artist statistics. These sources are interpreted not simply as empirical descriptions but as institutional representations of artistic labour.

Nordic Artist Policy, Definitions and Institutional Arrangements

The Nordic countries are frequently described as a coherent cultural policy region characterised by strong public sectors, universal welfare systems, and substantial public investment in culture. Within these systems, support for artists occupies a prominent position. Nevertheless, important differences exist regarding the administration of artist policy, statistical production and research.

Danish artist policy is governed by the Ministry of Culture and administered through the Danish Arts Foundation. Denmark differs from the other Nordic countries in that statistics on artists are produced directly by Statistics Denmark.

In Finland, responsibility for artist policy rests with the Ministry of Education and Culture and is implemented through the Finnish Arts and Culture Agency. Notably, no fully established or shared definitions of professional artists exist between these institutions. Over the past decade, the Centre for Cultural Policy Research Cupore has developed research programmes based on both survey data and administrative registers. The register-based studies rely on data administered by Statistics Finland.

In Norway, responsibility for artist policy lies with the Arts and Culture Norway and its subordinate agencies. Research has relied extensively on commissioned studies conducted by independent research institutions, particularly the Telemark Research Institute.

In Sweden, responsibility for artist policy lies with the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, whose grant schemes have also provided an important basis for defining the artist population. It is noteworthy that the mandate of the Swedish Arts Grants Committee has recently been expanded to encompass the creative industries. Responsibility for official cultural statistics is divided between Statistics Sweden and the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis.

These institutional arrangements influence both how data is collected and how artists are defined. The organisations responsible for grant distribution, research, and statistical production occupy different positions within national policy systems, thereby shaping both the categories and the knowledge that emerge. As Mangset (2013) has argued, the institutional organisation of artist policy reflects broader questions concerning autonomy, governance, and the relationship between cultural policy and the state.

The production of knowledge about artists cannot therefore be separated from the administrative structures within which that knowledge is generated. Statistical categories, research practices, and policy instruments influence which artists become visible, which forms of artistic labour are recognised, and which policy issues receive attention.

Table 1. Overview of the institutional structure on definitions of artists in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Country/ population (2024)	**Main Artist Policy Institution**	**Main Definition**	**Statistical Producer**	**Main Criteria in Studies**	**Number of Artists (year)**	**Part of Countries Population**
Denmark/ 5 961249	Danish Arts Foundation	Artists	Statistics Denmark	Membership, grants, education and copyright income	27 731 (2022)	0,5 %
Finland/ 5 603 851	The Finnish Arts and Culture Agency	Professional artists	Statistics Finland, Cupore	Membership, grants, education and copyright income	17 295 (2019)	0,3 %
Norway/ 5 550 203	Arts and Culture Norway	Artists	Telemark Research Institute	Membership and self-employment	27 017 (2019)	0,5 %
Sweden/ 10 551 707	The Swedish Arts Grants Committee	Artists, Arts professionals	Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, Official Statistics of Sweden	Occupations and grant applications	55 642 (2021)	0,5 %

Although the Nordic countries share broadly similar cultural policy traditions, their methods for identifying professional artists differ considerably.

In Denmark, artists are identified through organisational membership, educational registers, copyright remuneration, and the receipt of grants. Approximately 28,000 artists were identified in 2022. Membership data are collected by the Danish Artists' Council and transferred to Statistics Denmark. Copyright remuneration data are partly obtained from copyright organisations and partly from existing statistical sources, as is also the case for educational data derived from national education registers. Information on grants awarded by the Danish Arts Foundation is extracted from administrative data used in the Ministry of Culture's statistics on cultural funding.

In Finland, a register-based approach has been developed by Cupore in a manner similar to that used in Denmark. This work is organised in collaboration with Statistics Finland and the main artists' organisations. Professional artists are identified through combinations of organisational membership, grant receipt, artistic education, and copyright income. Statistics Finland compiles the data using education registers, grant registers, copyright registers, and membership data collected from artists' organisations. Applying these criteria, approximately 17,000 professional artists were identified in 2019. Alongside register-based research, Cupore also conducts survey research in collaboration with the Finnish Arts and Culture Agency.

In Norway, the most recent survey, conducted by the Telemark Research Institute, combined register-based data with a questionnaire directed at individual artists. Artists were identified through membership in artists' organisations and registration as self-employed individuals within artistic sectors. The 2019 study identified approximately 27,000 artists, corresponding to around 0.5 per cent of the national population. The inclusion of self-employed individuals reflects the growing importance of entrepreneurship within artistic labour markets.

In Sweden, the most recent research has been conducted as a collaboration between the Swedish Arts Grants Committee and the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis. One study employed occupational and industrial classifications produced by the national statistical authority and identified approximately 56,000 individuals working in artistic occupations. Another study compared occupational registers with applicants for artists' grants, producing a smaller population of approximately 18,000 artists. Swedish definitions therefore distinguish between broader occupational categories of arts professionals and narrower artist-policy populations.

At first glance, these figures suggest considerable similarity. Artists constitute between 0.3 and 0.5 per cent of the population in all four countries. However, these similarities conceal important methodological differences. The observed variations partly reflect genuine differences in artistic labour markets, but they also result from differing definitions, administrative arrangements, and data sources. The question is therefore not simply how many artists exist, but rather which artists become visible within statistical systems.

The differences in statistical responsibilities are equally evident. Denmark is the only Nordic country that maintains continuous official statistics on professional artists. In Finland, Statistics Finland has, because of budget reductions, discontinued much of its work on cultural statistics. The production of cultural statistics is now maintained as a separate project through supplementary funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture. In Sweden, responsibility for statistics in certain cultural sectors has been transferred to the Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, which also has a mandate to promote the harmonisation of Nordic cultural statistics. To date, however, artist statistics have not formed part of this mandate.

Statistics as Instruments of Governance

Statistics are often regarded and employed as neutral representations of social reality. The case of artists demonstrates, however, that statistical systems are closely connected to policy choices and institutional priorities. Each approach has advantages and limitations, and no single definition fully captures the diversity of artistic labour. European efforts to harmonise occupational and industrial classifications further illustrate this complexity.

Definitions based on occupations may favour individuals whose artistic work constitutes their principal employment and fails to identify artists who combine artistic work with multiple forms of employment. Organisational membership criteria may privilege artists connected to established professional associations and exclude emerging practitioners or individuals working outside professional organisations. In the Nordic countries, traditionally stable artists’ organisations have become increasingly differentiation, reflecting the broader reinterpretation of artistic categories within creative industries and cultural economies.

Grant-based definitions may reflect existing funding structures rather than the diversity of artistic practice and overlook artists operating independently of public funding systems. Swedish studies also point to changing interpretations of the role and function of grant systems, emphasising the social and economic foundations of grant applications in relation to entrepreneurship and employability.

Rather than seeking a single universally valid definition, policymakers and researchers must recognise how different approaches shape the knowledge that becomes available. Statistical frameworks influence which groups become visible, which inequalities can be measured, and which policy issues receive attention.

This issue has become increasingly important as artistic labour markets evolve. Digital platforms, international mobility, portfolio careers, and project-based employment have transformed artistic work, while the boundaries between artistic occupations and the wider creative industries have become increasingly blurred. Consequently, statistical systems must continuously adapt to changing forms of cultural labour.

Artists Between Cultural Policy and Social Policy

Definitions influence not only statistics but also artists’ everyday lives. Across Europe, debates concerning artists increasingly focus on social protection, labour rights and economic sustainability. (European Commission, 2023) Artists frequently experience unstable incomes, fragmented employment histories and combinations of self-employment, freelance work and temporary contracts.

Traditional welfare systems often assume stable employment relationships that differ substantially from artistic careers. Recognition as a professional artist may influence access to grants, taxation arrangements, professional services and social benefits. Definitions therefore create important links between cultural policy and social policy.

Historically, Nordic artist policy primarily emphasised artistic freedom, cultural development and public support for artistic production. More recently, attention has increasingly shifted toward broader questions concerning working conditions, income security and social protection. European debates concerning the status of artists and cultural professionals reflects this development. Policymakers increasingly recognise that cultural policy cannot be separated from labour-market institutions and welfare systems.

If artists remain invisible within statistical systems, problems related to income insecurity, multiple job holding or unequal access to social protection may remain insufficiently understood. Conversely, better data can support evidence-based policies capable of responding to the realities of contemporary artistic work. Definitions therefore have material consequences.

Discussion

Despite strong traditions of cultural policy research, substantial challenges remain concerning comparability between Nordic countries. Differences in definitions, data sources and administrative practices complicate comparative research and limit opportunities for policy evaluation. Moreover, data protection regulations, administrative barriers and varying institutional responsibilities may restrict access to relevant information.

Greater comparability does not necessarily require a single definition of an artist. Given the diversity of artistic practices, such standardisation may neither be realistic nor desirable. Instead, progress may depend upon several complementary strategies. First, greater transparency regarding definitions and methodologies would improve the interpretation of national statistics. Second, stronger cooperation among researchers, statistical authorities and cultural agencies could facilitate methodological learning. Third, shared indicators concerning working conditions, income and social protection could support comparative analysis while respecting national differences.

The Nordic experience demonstrates that artist definitions are not simply administrative tools. They reflect broader understandings concerning artistic value, professional recognition and cultural citizenship. Consequently, debates concerning definitions are simultaneously debates about the future of cultural policy itself.

Recent European cultural policy debates increasingly extend beyond artists alone towards broader discussions concerning cultural and creative professionals. The European Commission has emphasised the need to improve working conditions, social protection and labour rights throughout the cultural and creative sectors.

This development challenges traditional Nordic artist policy. Historically, artist policy has focused on professional artists as a relatively distinct category deserving specialised support. Contemporary cultural labour markets, however, increasingly blur the boundaries between artists, creative professionals and cultural workers. Digitalisation, platform work, international mobility and project-based employment have created new forms of cultural labour that do not always fit established categories. Some practitioners move between artistic and creative occupations, while others combine artistic work with entrepreneurial activities or employment outside the cultural sector.

These developments raise important questions for future cultural policy. Should support systems continue to focus primarily on professional artists, or should they increasingly address broader

categories of cultural labour? How can statistical systems capture hybrid careers and multiple forms of employment?

Conclusion

The question of who counts as an artist extends far beyond technical issues of classification. It lies at the centre of contemporary artist policy.

Across the Nordic countries, artists are supported through extensive public institutions and funding systems. Yet the populations these systems seek to support are defined in different ways. These differences influence how artists are counted, how their working conditions are understood and how policy interventions are designed.

The data presented here suggests that definitions, statistical methods and institutional arrangements significantly shape the knowledge produced about artistic labour. Statistical frameworks do not merely describe artistic reality; they participate in constructing it.

As European debates increasingly emphasise artists’ rights, working conditions and social protection, the need for reliable and comparable data becomes more urgent. Policymakers require robust knowledge to understand changing artistic careers and to design effective support measures.

The Nordic countries possess strong foundations for addressing these challenges. Their long traditions of artist support, public institutions and cultural policy research provide favourable conditions for further development. Recent collaboration among Nordic institutions suggests promising developments. As artistic labour markets become increasingly international, the need for comparable knowledge will continue to grow. Strengthening cooperation between researchers, statistical authorities and policymakers can contribute to more coherent knowledge systems while respecting national differences. Such efforts would enhance the capacity of cultural policy to respond to contemporary challenges and support sustainable artistic careers.

Ultimately, the ways in which societies define artists reveal broader assumptions concerning the value of artistic work itself. Recognising artists is not simply a matter of counting them. It is a matter of determining whose work becomes visible, whose contribution is acknowledged and whose place within society is secured.

Impact & Engagement

This article contributes to cultural policy research by demonstrating that artist definitions are not merely statistical categories, but institutional mechanisms that shape the recognition, governance and working conditions of artistic labour. The Nordic comparison illustrates how differences in administrative and statistical frameworks influence the evidence base upon which artist policy is built.

This comparative research will benefit all artist policy actors in all Nordic countries. It will impact on the discourse of professional artists. It concerns funders, grant reviewers, and artist organizations giving them opportunities to develop argumentation. The research is developed within an existent network of administrators, officials, statisticians and researchers from Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

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Biographies

Dr. Maria Hirvi-Ijäs

Dr Maria Hirvi-Ijäs is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore in Finland. She has a PhD in Art Research from the University of Helsinki and is Associate Professor (Docent) in Contemporary Art at the institute of Art History at Åbo Academy University.

She has extensive experience in research and evaluation, with particular expertise in artist policy, cultural funding, and the conditions of artistic work. Hirvi-Ijäs has has worked extensively with questions concerning cultural policy in the Nordic countries. Her current research interests include the recognition and working conditions of artists, cultural policy frameworks, and the development of cultural policy and cultural production in Finland.

Dr. Vappu Renko

Dr. Vappu Renko is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore in Finland. She holds a doctoral degree in Social and Public Policy from the University of Jyväskylä with a dissertation examining regional cultural policy in Finland in contrast to Sweden. Her research focuses on local and regional cultural policy, arts policy, and cultural politics, with a particular emphasis on the Nordic context. Currently, she is especially interested in contributing to societal debate through cultural policy research and in making research more accessible to wider audiences.

Dr. Sakarias Sokka

Dr. Sakarias Sokka is Deputy Director and Senior Researcher at the Center for Cultural Policy Research Cupore in Helsinki, Finland, and Associate Professor (Docent) in Cultural Policy at the University of Jyväskylä. His research focuses on cultural policy, arts and artist policy, public funding for culture, cultural participation, and the impact and evaluation of cultural policy. He has extensive experience in research, teaching, and cultural policy development. Sokka has also served as editor-in-chief of the Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy and has contributed to numerous national and international research projects and publications on cultural policy and the arts.

Designing the Research Program for Polish Capitals of Culture: Frameworks, Stakeholders, and Policy Impact

Mr. Antoni Głowacki
National Centre for Culture Poland

Introduction

In 2024, the title of European Capital of Culture 2029 was awarded to Lublin (Poland) and Kiruna (Sweden). The application process required all candidate cities to commit substantial effort and resources. To capitalise on this effort, Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage initiated the “Polish Capital of Culture” (PCC) programme. The cities that reached the final stage of the 2029 ECoC competition will become the first Polish Capitals of Culture.

National Center for Culture Poland (NCC) was assigned the task to coordinate the programme, including preparing a research plan and conducting an impact evaluation. The following paper presents the process of constructing the research programme, which was developed by NCC jointly with Joanna Wróblewska-Jachna of the University of Bielsko-Biała and CityLaBB.

I begin by presenting an overview of the PCC programme, before outlining our assumptions and the approach ultimately adopted. Finally, I will reflect on the main challenges encountered throughout this process. In effect, this paper could serve as a case study of how broad research frameworks are translated into concrete actions keeping in mind the necessity of reconciling the interests and priorities of many diverse actors operating at different levels.

Polish Capital of Culture programme

The primary motivation for initiating the PCC programme was to capitalise on the momentum generated by the competition for the title of the European Capital of Culture. Many institutional processes had already been initiated in the cities before the final announcement of the competition results. The PCC programme aims to support urban development through culture, to preserve the institutional capacity developed during the bidding process, and to enable at least partial implementation of the cultural activities that had been planned. The official objectives of the programme are: (1) strengthening local identity, (2) city promotion, and (3) the development of cultural offer[1]. The scope of the programme is obviously smaller than that of the ECoC. It lacks funding for large-scale projects, in particular infrastructure projects. The PCC programme is primarily symbolic and image-oriented.

The programme has been further strengthened through the acquisition of an EEA grant for the implementation of a wide range of activities, including an extensive research component. The first edition of the programme will involve three cities. Each of them will hold the title for one year, leading up to the European Capital of Culture 2029 in Lublin. In 2026, the title will go to Bielsko-Biała; in 2027, to Katowice and the Upper Silesian–Zagłębie Metropolis; and in 2028, to Kołobrzeg. These are highly diverse cities. Bielsko-Biała is a medium-sized city (approximately 165,000 inhabitants) located in a foothill area. Historically, it was an important industrial and commercial hub; at present, it is seeking to redefine its identity as a creative and touristic city. Katowice and the Upper Silesian–Zagłębie Metropolis constitute the only area in Poland formally recognised as a metropolis, acting as a node of a regional functional system (Bierwiaczonek et al. 2020), inhabited by over two million people in total. It also faces the challenge of post-industrial redefinition. Kołobrzeg, by contrast, is a small town (fewer than 50,000 inhabitants) located on the Baltic coast, with a tourism-oriented economy. Both Bielsko-Biała and Kołobrzeg face demographic challenges (declining population), which are

1 https://nck.pl/projekty-kulturalne/projekty/psk/polska-stolica-kultury, accessed 24 June 2026.

characteristic of many cities in post-socialist Europe (Kajdanek 2026).

Approach to culture in the PCC programme

All these cities have chosen to invest in development through culture. However, the practical implications of this can vary widely (Montalto et al., 2019, p. 167). The term often encompasses highly heterogeneous types of activities that should not be conflated (Buscema et al., 2023, p. 2).

In the case of the PCC programme, “culture” is understood primarily as:

- outcome of local networks and institutions;
- significant component of local identity;
- means of supporting the well-being of residents;
- local cultural sector;
- support for the economic and tourism potential of the city.

This understanding of culture privileges small-scale measures and image-building, aimed at supporting the construction of a positive image of the city externally (among tourists, investors, or potential migrants) and internally (among residents). At the same time, a strong emphasis is placed on democratisation and grassroots cultural activity. The programme also aims to support workers in the cultural sector, primarily by preventing its marginalisation and by placing culture at the centre of urban activities.

This way of understanding the role of culture differs significantly from the one adopted, for example, during the competition for the ECoC 2016. At that time, culture was still primarily conceptualised in terms of large-scale events. In the competition for the 2029 title, however, city applications were characterised by a very strong emphasis on local community and residents’ well-being.

In recent years, the understanding of the role of culture is shifting from an unlinear (largely economic) model to an active, identity-forming and network-building factor placed within a complex urban system (Grossi et al. 2023). While there is no clear evidence of long-term economic effects of holding the ECoC title (Nermond and Lee 2021), there is evidence of image-related effects and influence on cultural policies (Nermond and Lee 2021; Kubicki et al. 2018). In the Polish context, it has been argued that the ECoC programme contributed to the creation of new urban narratives (Kubicki et al. 2018). These findings suggest a shift in emphasis away from economic outcomes towards image and identity-related aspects. The impact of culture on the tourist attractiveness of cities is also well documented (OECD 2008; Noonan 2023). Moreover, the emphasis on community aligns well with the role of culture as a component of sustainable development (Duxbury, Hosagrahar and Pascual 2016; Hawkes 2001; Soini and Birkeland 2014). This approach was clearly reflected in the strategies of all four cities.

Assumptions of the PCC research programme

Given the experimental nature of the PCC programme, the research component was a crucial element from the outset. The study of the first Polish Capitals of Culture is intended to establish directions for future action once the initial phase associated with the ECoC competition comes to an end. The role of the research component was further strengthened as part of the cooperation with Arts and Culture Norway, due to its comparative potential.

The relationship between culture and urban development is a field that has already been extensively studied. There exists a wide array of conceptual frameworks and indicators used to measure these phenomena, such as those associated with the CCCM database (Montalto et al. 2019), Culture Next (2024), ECoC evaluations, and many others (Montalto et al. 2019, pp. 168–169). We did not wish to add

yet another framework, but rather to make maximum use of those already proven effective and enabling broad comparability.

In our context, particularly important points of reference were indicators of cultural activity used in research conducted in Poland (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej 2026; Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2025; Narodowe Centrum Kultury 2025), as well as indicators recommended by UNESCO (2019). We also drew heavily on the Culture Next system of indicators, particularly indicators relating to the “image” dimension, in line with the programme’s objectives.

As part of the competition for the ECoC title, each city conducted their own research activities. It was essential to leverage this existing potential. For this reason, we decided to work particularly closely with Bielsko-Biała, which was to become the first Polish Capital of Culture. The main author of the research programme was Joanna Wróblewska-Jachna, an expert from the local university who had been involved in earlier research conducted in the city. This ensured continuity with previous studies. In designing the research tools, we also referred to instruments previously used in Katowice, where a very extensive research programme had been implemented as part of the preparations for the ECoC competition.

The final key point of reference consisted of urban monitoring practices already in place in the three cities. Wherever possible, we sought to make use of existing data. To this end, detailed consultations regarding the list of programme indicators were carried out.

At the same time, the specific nature of the programme determined the final shape of the research design. It had to be aligned with the understanding of culture described above. Indicators should realistically measure those aspects where the PCC programme is expected to contribute a change. Frameworks such as CCCM or those developed by the Culture Next network focus on assessing cities across a broad range of cultural indicators, often closely linked to infrastructure. We cannot expect a programme such as PCC to have any direct impact on infrastructure availability, the number of students, or levels of tourist accessibility. Hence the primary focus on image-related issues, the visibility of activities, and the inclusion of local communities.

Final shape of the research programme

Taking all the assumptions into account, we developed an extensive research programme employing a broad spectrum of social science methods.

The final research plan includes:

- passive data analysis (urban data, social media data, and media data),
- survey research (conducted on both city-level and nationwide samples),
- qualitative research (interviews with representatives of local cultural institutions, public administration, and the creative sectors).

In the case of survey research, we planned both ex ante and ex post measurements in each city, to capture changes in attitudes during the year in which the title is held.

The entire programme was based on the progressive specification of indicators — from the most abstract level to concrete measures:

- Level 1: potential areas of impact. Four areas were distinguished: cultural, social, image-related, and economic.
- Level 2: main objectives (8).
- Level 3: operational objectives (11).

Table 1. Main and operational objectives of the PCC research programme.

Main objective	**Operational objectives**
1. Building an authentic urban culture based on local histories, traditions, and communities	1.1 Organisation of events engaging diverse social groups and generations in an inclusive manner 1.2 Promotion of inclusiveness and culture as lived heritage
2. Building and developing urban cultural ecosystems	2.1 Involving communities in the co-creation of culture (cultural animators, artists, informal groups, youth, craftspeople)
3. Integration of residents, strengthening identity and civic pride	3.1 Strengthening local identity, as well as the sense of agency and community through reference to cultural heritage and local values
4. Creating lasting, long-term social change through urban culture	4.1 Increasing accessibility of cultural offer; removing economic, social, and physical barriers
5. Distinguishing the city through a unique PCC brand by combining cultural authenticity and modernity	5.1 Building a recognisable and strong brand for cities holding the PCC title 5.2 Promoting the city as an open, creative, and culturally active place
6. Supporting cooperation and exchange of experience between cities	6.1 Increasing the scale and quality of inter-city cooperation in the cultural field through durable mechanisms for knowledge exchange
7. Long-term promotion of culture as a driver of economic development	7.1 Stimulating culture-related economic development 7.2 Encouraging investment, the development of cultural tourism, and strengthening the attractiveness of the city as a place to live, work, and invest
8. Strengthening the urban cultural sector and creative industries	8.1 Supporting local creators and artists in promotion, development, and cooperation with residents

Source: J. Wróblewska-Jachna, Research Programme of the Polish Capitals of Culture, 2026.

Each of the operational objectives is also linked to specific Sustainable Development Goals.

The operational objectives are translated into specific indicators (Level 4). There are 24 in total, covering all operational objectives. Twelve are based on urban monitoring data; seven on surveys of residents; three on nationwide survey data; and two on media monitoring. This set of main indicators is designed to measure the achievement of the programme’s objectives and to constitute the core axis of the research programme.

This core set will be supplemented by additional elements intended to deepen the understanding of the context and the functioning of the programme in a more qualitative manner. We expect that these tools will enable us to capture the programme’s social impact and its influence on local cultural sectors. By employing a more diverse range of methods, we aim to obtain a comprehensive picture that captures both the specificity of individual cases and broader patterns.

It may seem surprising that relatively strong emphasis has been placed on survey data rather than on economic or administrative indicators. In our view, such traditional methods of data collection can still play a very important role. Although they are costly to implement, they offer significant advantages. In the case of surveys conducted on samples of city residents, they allow the assessment of impact at the level of the population, rather than only among an interested minority or individuals connected to the sector. They make it possible to assess, for example, levels of awareness of activities or levels of support for the concept of development through culture. As analyses indicate, in programmes such as the ECoC, the voice of residents is generally relatively weakly represented in the evaluation process (Nelaeva and Iermolenko, 2024). The use of such techniques may have a democratising effect—although there is also a risk of populist misuse if survey results are treated as the primary basis for evaluating urban policies. In addition, survey research provides access to well-established methodological tools that enable comparisons across different levels (for example between city and nationwide samples).

Main challenges

Four challenges played a key role in developing the research plan: diversity of cities, comparability, reconciling interests of different actors, and reconciling multiple potential data sources.

1. Diversity of cities

The cities that obtained the title of Polish Capital of Culture are highly diverse in terms of scale, location, and modes of functioning. The final research tools had to be applicable across all of them. This necessitated the use of relatively simple, easily scalable indicators. At the same time, the specificity of each case justifies supplementing the core indicators with an extensive additional component, which facilitated the recognition of the particularities of each location.

2. The need to maintain comparability

Since one of the aims of the research programme is to provide insight into the overall functioning of the programme—rather than merely its success or failure in individual cities—it was essential to ensure the comparability of data. It was also important to design the research programme in such a way that it could be used in subsequent years to study future Polish Capitals of Culture, should the initiative be continued. The experiences of similar programme in other countries demonstrate that the absence of a unified research strategy established at the outset makes systematic evaluation impossible. Due to the acquisition of the EEA grant, comparisons must be possible not only at the national level but also internationally. Poland and Norway differ significantly in terms of survey research practices. In the Polish context, the most effective techniques remain telephone surveys (at the national level) and face-to- face surveys (at the urban level). In the Norwegian context, by contrast, online surveys were effectively the only available method. It was therefore necessary to design the final research instruments in such a way that they could be implemented in different national contexts and by using different methodological techniques.

3. Reconciling the interests of central institutions and local stakeholders

Unlike research conducted in the context of the ECoC, which focuses on a single city, the PCC programme is intended as a coherent national framework. In addition to the interests and priorities of municipal authorities, the research programme must also consider the perspective of the operator (NCC) and initiator (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage) of the PCC title. These perspectives are not necessarily aligned. At the most basic level of image analysis, this means, for example, that it is necessary to monitor both the perception of a specific city as a capital of culture and the perception of “capital of culture” as an abstract title that may be conferred on any city in Poland. At the level of relations between central and local governance, a significant challenge also lies in clearly separating research from controlling. In addition, it is important for municipal authorities that the research results do not become part of local political competition. This required, in few cases, the abandonment of indicators that posed an exceptionally high political risk of misuse.

4. Reconciling multiple potential sources of indicators

The final major challenge worth emphasising is the need to reconcile multiple possible sources of indicators. The ideal solution would have been to adopt one of the existing research frameworks. In practice, however, this proved to be impossible due to the necessity of accounting for the specific features of the programme, its local contexts, local data collection practices, and the existing research traditions in the cities involved.

Conclusion

The process of creating the research programme for the Polish Capitals of Culture illustrates that, in practice, universal research frameworks often need to be adapted to the specific circumstances. Paradoxically, achieving a higher degree of comparability required taking local conditions into account: adapting tools to the data-collection practices operating within individual cities, considering differences in the functioning of the research market in Poland and Norway, or relying more on survey data than on administrative data. It also shows that research considerations must be integrated with other aspects, including the perspectives of stakeholders operating at different levels and the priorities of municipal authorities.

At the same time, two broader conclusions concerning the approaches adopted by the cities became particularly evident. First, there is a clear shift in the orientation of candidate cities, expressed in a strong emphasis on the grassroots dimension of cultural life, alongside a departure from the logic of mega- events or separate cultural production zones. Second, there is an openness of municipal authorities to non-economic indicators, which can also justify the validity and effectiveness of public policies.

Impact & engagement

The research program was designed from the start with a clear policy-related focus. It will be used by program beneficiaries to evaluate the implementation of cultural policies, and by the program organizers to estimate if the policy goals have been attained. PCC presents an opportunity to carry out an extensive research program enabling a multidimensional assessment of how cultural policies affect urban development across several domains: economic growth, social cohesion, tourism, development of local cultural institutions, strengthening of local identity, and residents' well-being. The research program is an effect of collaboration between academic researchers, government agencies, municipal authorities. Key metrics were adopted from established academic frameworks, providing a link between expert evaluation and local specificity. The research program aims to integrate a democratic perspective by positioning social resonance as a key sphere of impact. By presenting the architecture of the research program, we aim to contribute to the broader discussion on how large-scale cultural policy evaluations can be designed with clear policy impact in mind.

Author biography

Antoni Głowacki studied sociology and social anthropology at University of Warsaw (Poland) and École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris, France). He is an author of academic and popular articles on sociology of culture and sociology of religion, as well as numerous research reports and expert opinions as a member of Research and Analytics Department at National Centre for Culture Poland and, previously, Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS).

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Between Education and Cultural Practice: The Role of the Faculty of Visual Arts

Dr. Natasa Kraljevic
Institute for Science, Culture and Art, University Mediterranean

Prof. Milena Dragutinović
Faculty of Foreign Languages, University Mediterranean

Abstract: This paper explores the role of art education in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility, focusing on the case of the Faculty of Visual Arts in Montenegro. Employing a mixed-methods research design that integrates curriculum analysis with interviews involving students, academic staff, and a wider circle of institutional partners and collaborators, this study investigates how interdisciplinary curricula and project-based learning contribute to the development of competencies beyond technical proficiency, while fostering critical engagement with contemporary social and cultural issues. The findings highlight the importance of socially engaged artistic practices, interdisciplinary collaboration, and inclusive learning environments in shaping critically aware and socially responsible individuals. The paper argues that art education can serve as a catalyst for critical thinking and civic engagement, contributing to the formation of active and informed citizens.

Keywords: art education, critical thinking, civic engagement, social responsibility, cultural participation, Faculty of Visual Arts.

Introduction

The integration of the arts into education has emerged as a particularly valuable strategy, providing students with opportunities to develop innovative outputs and engage in deeper creative thinking processes (Mishra et al., 2011), both of which are central to transdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. Beyond supporting cognitive development, arts integration also encourages social interaction, as collaborative projects and partnerships with artists help dismantle social barriers and foster a sense of community (Cross, 2001; Catterall, 2012). By incorporating various artistic disciplines, including visual arts, music, and drama, into social science curricula, educators can create dynamic and engaging learning environments in which students explore social concepts from multiple perspectives. As the educational value of the arts has become increasingly recognized, formal systems of arts education have also expanded, reflecting a broader institutional commitment to artistic learning and creative development.

Although the educational importance of the arts is widely acknowledged today, formal arts education is, from a historical perspective, a relatively recent phenomenon. For much of human history, artists developed their skills through apprenticeships and independent practice rather than within institutionalized educational settings, while the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree has existed for little more than half a century. Over time, however, the establishment of dedicated arts institutions has accelerated significantly. According to data from 2019, more than one hundred higher education institutions across Europe offer formal arts education, including specialized art academies and university-based arts departments. In practice, this number is even higher when smaller and highly specialized institutions are taken into account (List of Art Schools in Europe, 2019).

This broader European trend is also reflected in Montenegro, which currently hosts six higher education institutions dedicated to the arts, contributing to expanded opportunities for artistic training and interdisciplinary collaboration. At the same time, however, the role of art schools has evolved considerably in economic, social, creative, and broader functional terms. The nature of these transformations remains only partially understood. As Zeichner notes, the history of art education

throughout the twentieth century has, with a few exceptions, been inadequately documented. While extensive scholarship has been devoted to artistic movements and leading figures of modern art, relatively little attention has been paid to significant changes within art education itself. Consequently, information on European art academies in the postmodern era remains limited (Zeichner, 2024).

Therefore, this paper examines the case of one higher education institution in Montenegro, the Faculty of Visual Arts (FVA), in order to explore the potential of contemporary art education and its significance within the community in which it operates. More specifically, the study investigates the multifaceted role of an art faculty in the contemporary context: as an educational institution, a cultural institution, a contributor to civic awareness and a site for interdisciplinary engagement extending beyond aesthetics into social and professional domains. Drawing inspiration from the ideas of the American philosopher Maxine Greene, who argued that conversations themselves constitute forms of action because they inspire and initiate new possibilities, and echoing her statement, “I do not want to save the world. I only want to start a conversation” (Sousanis & Suzuki, 2015), this paper seeks to initiate a broader discussion about the value and purpose of art education. Through a combination of literature review, qualitative and quantitative research methods, and a case study approach focused on a single art faculty, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the strengths, limitations, and challenges of contemporary arts education.

The Institutional Role of Art Schools in Contemporary Society

Whether creativity functions as the basis of a professional career, personal practice, or cultural communication, the question of what an art school is and should be remains widely debated. Steven Henry Madoff (2009) raises this issue in *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century*, emphasizing that the relevance of art schools depends on their capacity for continuous transformation in response to changing ethical, economic, and cultural conditions. Boris Groys (2009), in *Education by Infection*, further conceptualizes art education as a process of transformation, arguing that the artist’s sensibility is reshaped through technological and social developments and that art schools cultivate “openness toward the outside.” Within this framework, the role of art education is understood as the creation of conditions for artistic and personal development rather than direct instruction, as also argued by James Elkins (2010), who maintains that art cannot be taught but can be facilitated.

Contemporary critiques of art education also highlight tensions introduced by neoliberal higher education models. Claire Bishop (2007) argues that administrative frameworks and market-oriented approaches have shifted education from exploration and experimentation toward measurable outcomes and financial logic.

Building on the foregoing discussion, this paper is further informed by constructivist learning theories, which emphasize active, experiential, and socially mediated learning (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978), as well as Project-Based Learning approaches that engage students in real-world artistic inquiry (Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1929; Thomas, 2000). In addition, sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides a framework for understanding learning as embedded in social and cultural contexts, shaping both the pedagogical model and the institution’s engagement with the broader community.

Between Fragility and Resistance: Curatorial and Exhibition Strategies of the Faculty of Visual Arts

The research presented in this paper, using the Faculty of Visual Arts (FVA) as its primary case study, is grounded in the institution’s significance for the development of arts education in independent Montenegro. Recognized as an institution of public interest in 2013 and 2018, the Faculty’s activities cover a wide range of creative industries, including graphic design, illustration, photography, stage and interior design, digital art and animation, video and new media, fine arts, and sound design.

The institution’s public engagement is mainly realized through thematic exhibitions and interaction with the community. Alongside annual exhibitions presenting student work, the Faculty regularly organizes

thematic exhibitions dedicated to specific ideas, artistic practices, or cultural events. Over time, these exhibitions have moved beyond student assignments and graduation projects, becoming public expressions of the institution’s ideas, values, and positions. Through carefully chosen themes and titles, the Faculty communicates not only with professional audiences but also with the wider public, cultural stakeholders, prospective students, media, and policymakers. Through two decades of practice, it has sought to foster critical thinking, reflection, and social responsibility, while actively contributing to the cultural life of the community, thus moving beyond the role of an educational institution toward that of a cultural institution (Kraljević, 2025). In this way, it helps shape public discourse and encourages dialogue.

Through a consistent exhibition policy, the Faculty has built a public identity based on freedom of expression, openness, courage, and critical engagement with contemporary issues. Exhibition titles such as: *Years of Lead* (2022), *A Youth of a Certain Time* (2023), *A Million Million of Foul Little Lovekins* (2024), *Mysterious Connections* (2025), and *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Places* (2025), along with projects like *Fragile* (2023) and *Medea* (2024), show a clear conceptual and thematic direction. Rather than simple presentations of student work, these exhibitions function as curated projects addressing trauma, identity, social responsibility, human vulnerability, and contemporary social issues.

Among them, *Mysterious Connections* stands out as the most complex conceptual project. Its title, taken from Danilo Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and marking the 90th anniversary of the author’s birth, carries multiple layers of meaning. Beyond being a literary reference, it represents a collective institutional statement that invites reflection on the complex relationships between art, history, politics, identity, and memory. In this context, “mysterious connections” refers to the invisible links between individuals, ideological systems, and historical narratives (Despotović, 2025). The exhibition positions art as part of a broader cultural and ethical framework, while extending the Faculty’s mission beyond technical training toward critical awareness. In this way, it builds an institutional identity based on critical thinking, intertextuality, and dialogue with the world.

This commitment to critical practice and intertextuality is also visible in smaller exhibitions such as *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Places* and *Medea*, which involve smaller student groups from the Illustration programme. *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Places*, based on visual interpretations of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poetry, uses the legacy of a revolutionary poet as a reference for artistic engagement and experimentation, while also offering an ironic critique of contemporary intellectual superficiality.

Similarly, *Medea* uses the mythological figure of the tragic heroine to explore feminist perspectives, archetypes, and psychological complexity. The exhibition opens questions of female agency, suffering, resistance, and ethical ambiguity. Developed through students’ responses to Fabio Tolledi’s theatre production Medea, Desire, it engages with one of the central archetypal narratives of Western culture. Students were tasked with interpreting emotional and ethical conflicts through visual language, addressing themes of love, violence, and social norms.

The project is particularly significant for the Faculty as it connects visual art and theatre, reinforcing its interdisciplinary approach, critical inquiry, and engagement with cultural heritage, which is treated not as a fixed canon but as material for reinterpretation and reflection.

Methodological Framework

This paper examines the contribution of the Faculty of Visual Arts (FVA) to the construction of social reality within the cultural and educational context of Montenegro, where higher education developed relatively late, only in the second half of the 20th century. Given the complexity of the research context and the multifaceted role of arts education, a multidimensional analytical framework was adopted.

Contemporary arts education emphasizes the development of creative and innovative capacities (Lin, 2011) and is widely integrated into Western European curricula. In Montenegro, however, as in much of

the region, reforms have only partially reflected contemporary pedagogical approaches, with higher education still largely organized through a subject-based, highly structured teaching model (Skender, 2017). Within this context, the Faculty of Visual Arts, one of six units of the University “Mediterranean” Podgorica, the first private university in Montenegro, represents an example of innovative practice in arts education. The study employed a qualitatively oriented mixed-methods design combining interpretative analysis, desk research, and empirical data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). It was guided by grounded theory principles, including concept development and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), enabling triangulation of data and strengthening the validity of findings (Harris & Brown, 2010).

Data collection was conducted in two phases. The first involved analysis of Montenegro’s educational and cultural policy framework, including the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation and the Ministry of Culture and Media, alongside a comparative review of regional art education practices.

The second phase included empirical research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were collected through ten semi-structured interviews and a case study of the FVA. Interview participants included art educators, students, museum curators, cultural journalists, and directors of cultural institutions collaborating with the Faculty. The case study incorporated interviews with faculty members, analysis of institutional policies, and review of relevant documentation and archives.

Quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire completed by 100 respondents from the wider academic community, including students from other art academies in Montenegro and students and staff from other faculties within the University “Mediterranean” Podgorica. The questionnaire primarily served to complement and validate qualitative findings.

To ensure coherence across methods, interview and survey instruments were thematically aligned and conducted within a short time frame (Harris & Brown, 2010). Qualitative data were analysed using grounded theory procedures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), while quantitative data supported interpretation and reinforced emerging themes. By integrating multiple data sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the FVA’s role, influence, and societal significance, as well as its contribution to cultural development in Montenegro. Although all sources informed the analysis, interviews provided the most nuanced and contextually rich insights into the institution’s position within the broader cultural landscape.

Analysis and Interpretation of Interview and Survey Findings

The interviews indicate a strong consensus that the Faculty of Visual Arts (FVA) functions not only as an educational institution but also as a socially engaged cultural actor. Its role is perceived as extending beyond technical training toward the formation of critically aware and socially responsible individuals. Participants emphasized that art education should foster critical thinking, freedom of expression, empathy, and engagement with broader social, political, and historical contexts, thereby contributing to public awareness and societal development.

Art schools were consistently described as spaces of social responsibility, inclusiveness, and cultural democratization. This includes providing students with opportunities for experimentation, supporting authentic artistic expression, and preparing them for ethical and professional challenges. Particular emphasis was placed on art as a socially relevant practice, especially in fields such as design, media, and digital communication, which actively shape public space.

Exhibitions were identified as the Faculty’s primary communication channel with the public. Respondents highlighted their role in addressing themes such as identity, memory, social injustice, gender, ecology, marginalization, and trauma. While socially engaged exhibitions may emerge from both

societal conditions and personal artistic experience, their impact is generally indirect, symbolic, and long-term rather than immediately measurable. They function primarily through emotional and experiential engagement rather than informational transmission.

Audience reception is varied, ranging from dialogue and reflection to discomfort or resistance, particularly in relation to provocative themes. Visibility and attendance depend heavily on institutional support, media coverage, and partnerships, while independent initiatives often remain limited to narrower audiences. A broader issue identified is the relative insularity of the art scene and limited engagement of the general public.

In the context of digital transformation, exhibitions are no longer the sole or dominant medium of artistic communication. Digital platforms, social media, and alternative forms of visual expression (performance, public art, design, murals) significantly expand reach and impact. While exhibitions remain essential within the traditional art system, their strength lies in immediacy and embodied experience, whereas digital media offer accessibility and broader dissemination. The Faculty is also characterized by a strong but organically developed interdisciplinarity. Collaboration spans design, animation, sound, film, literature, social sciences, activism, and other fields, embedded in projects, exhibitions, and teaching practice. Although not always formally systematized, interdisciplinarity is consistently present through institutional culture and collaborative practice.

Overall, respondents perceive the Faculty’s social impact as gradual, subtle, and difficult to measure, shaped by broader cultural and media conditions. While no fully articulated strategy of social engagement is evident, an implicit framework exists through institutional openness and individual initiatives. The Faculty is thus seen as a space of creative freedom, dialogue, and long-term social influence.

Quantitative findings reinforce these insights. A majority of respondents associate art education with critical awareness (75.6%), social responsibility (89.5%), improved quality of life (79.1%), and civic consciousness (91.9%). However, despite this positive perception, familiarity with the contemporary art scene is limited (40.7%), and most respondents (82.6%) believe exhibitions are insufficiently socially engaged. Additionally, 62.8% consider the current number of art schools in Montenegro inadequate. The findings confirm a strong public recognition of the social importance of art education, alongside clear challenges related to visibility, accessibility, and the effective communication of contemporary artistic practice to wider audiences.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the Faculty of Visual Arts (FVA) effectively implements key principles of contemporary art education by functioning not only as a site for technical training but also as a space for developing critically aware and socially responsible artists. This aligns with participants’ views that art education should foster critical thinking, dialogue, and civic responsibility. Exhibitions are identified as the Faculty’s main form of public communication. Through thematically and socially engaged projects, the institution promotes reflection on issues such as identity, memory, trauma, gender, and social justice. Although their impact is often indirect and difficult to measure, exhibitions serve as important platforms for critical and emotional engagement. In the digital context, artistic communication is further expanded through online platforms and alternative visual practices, increasing accessibility and public reach. The study confirms a strong interdisciplinary orientation within the Faculty, reflected in its integration of art, science, and technology, as well as in its curriculum, projects, and exhibitions. While this interdisciplinarity is not always formally structured, it is consistently present and represents one of the institution’s core values.

Quantitative results show strong public agreement that art education contributes to civic awareness and social responsibility. However, limited familiarity with the contemporary art scene and perceptions of

insufficient social engagement indicate the need for improved visibility and communication strategies, particularly through digital media and institutional collaboration. The Faculty's practices closely correspond with constructivist, project-based, and sociocultural learning theories, as students actively construct knowledge through experience, collaboration, and engagement with real social issues. Teachers function primarily as mentors and facilitators, while exhibitions operate as real-world learning environments.

Overall, the FVA is positioned as an institution that fosters critical thinking, interdisciplinarity, and social responsibility, building an identity grounded in humanistic values and artistic engagement with public discourse. It thus demonstrates how contemporary art education can contribute to both artistic development and broader social and cultural transformation.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a gap in understanding the broader societal role of art education in higher education by examining how interdisciplinary curricula, project-based learning, and socially engaged artistic practices foster critical thinking and social responsibility. The findings offer valuable insights for diverse stakeholders. Higher education institutions and educators can use the results to strengthen curricula, teaching practices, and learning environments that promote critical reflection, collaboration, and engagement with contemporary social issues. Students may benefit from approaches that encourage active participation in cultural and social life while developing transferable skills applicable across professional fields. Cultural institutions, non-governmental organisations, community groups, and artists may benefit from its emphasis on collaboration and socially engaged practices that strengthen links between educational institutions and communities.

At a broader level, the study contributes to discussions on the societal value of arts education by highlighting its capacity to promote active citizenship, cultural participation, and social cohesion. In Montenegro and similar contexts, the findings provide a basis for policy development and institutional initiatives that recognise art education as a driver of both individual and societal development.

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Biography:

Nataša Kraljević, PhD, is Director of the Institute for Science, Culture and Arts and a lecturer at the Faculty of Visual Arts, University “Mediterranean” Podgorica. She holds a PhD in Marketing in Culture, an MA in Arts, Festival and Cultural Management from QMU Edinburgh as a Chevening Scholar, and an LL.M in Intercultural Human Rights from St. Thomas University School of Law, Miami. She graduated from the Faculty of Law, University of Montenegro. Since 2022, she has served as a national expert in the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends network.

Milena Dragutinović is a professor of Italian language and senior lecturer at the University “Mediterranean” Podgorica. She teaches at undergraduate, master’s, and specialist study levels and is actively involved in academic and seminar activities. She regularly participates in national and international conferences, seminars, and professional development events, with a particular focus on second language acquisition. She has contributed to several international projects and is a co-author of textbooks used in language teaching. In addition, she works as a translator of books and academic articles from Italian into her native language, contributing to both educational and scholarly exchange.

Beauty Influencers as Cultural Professionals? Rethinking the Boundaries of Cultural and Creative Industries in Platform Capitalism

Julien Fauqueux Albanese
SIC.Lab, Université Côte d'Azur

Introduction

Cultural and creative industries (CCIs) occupy a central place in European public policy, yet their boundaries remain contested as new forms of cultural production emerge on digital platforms. YouTube, Instagram and TikTok have given rise to actors whose activities combine content creation, symbolic mediation, commercial recommendation and digital entrepreneurship. These practices challenge established distinctions between artistic work, promotional communication and cultural production.

Beauty influencers are a particularly revealing case in that respect. Through tutorials, product reviews? , “full face” videos, routines and technical demonstrations, they produce content devoted to makeup, skincare and contemporary aesthetic norms. Their activity does not merely consist of recommending products. It also involves staging the face, transmitting practical know-how, interpreting trends, animating communities and building relations of trust with audiences.

Yet these creators remain difficult to identify within institutional classifications of CCIs. They are most often associated with influencer marketing, advertising or digital commerce, without fully considering the cultural and symbolic dimensions of their work. This raises a central question: can beauty influencers be understood as emerging cultural professionals, or should their activity remain outside the scope of cultural and creative industries?

Drawing on an ongoing doctoral research project in information and communication sciences, this article examines the boundaries of CCIs in the age of platform capitalism. It brings together a reflection on cultural classifications, a pilot content analysis of a YouTube video by a French makeup influencer, and preliminary elements from an audience survey. The argument developed here is that beauty influencers occupy a structurally hybrid position: their activity involves symbolic production, aesthetic mediation, commercial prescription and adaptation to the algorithmic logics of platforms.

The aim of this contribution is therefore to examine what the case of beauty influencers reveals about the current limits of cultural taxonomies. More broadly, it highlights the institutional and policy implications of recognising, or failing to recognise, digital content creators as cultural workers.

Beauty influencers and the boundaries of cultural and creative industries

The question of the boundaries of CCIs is not merely terminological. It involves issues of recognition, legitimacy and institutional visibility. Defining what does or does not belong to the field of CCIs means determining which activities are recognised as producing symbolic value, which occupations can be considered cultural, and which forms of labour are taken into account in public policy, sectoral statistics and support schemes. Classifications are therefore not neutral descriptive tools: they produce effects of inclusion, exclusion and hierarchy.

Beauty influencers reveal these tensions particularly clearly. Their activity is usually located within influencer marketing, commercial communication or digital entrepreneurship. This categorisation is not inaccurate, but it remains partial. It privileges the promotional dimension of their work while

overlooking other central dimensions: aesthetic production, mediation of norms, transmission of know-how, community management and the construction of symbolic authority among audiences.

In the field of makeup, the influencer does not simply recommend a product. They produce content, construct a narrative, organise a demonstration and display a transformation of the face. Tutorials, product reviews?, “full face” videos and routines are stabilised formats combining technical skill, self-presentation, visual pedagogy and community interaction. Makeup thus becomes a medium of cultural mediation: it opens up discussions about taste, gender, self-presentation, bodily diversity and beauty norms.

This position can be related to research on microcelebrity, self-branding and visibility labour. Senft (2008) and Khamis et al. (2017, pp. 191–208) show that online visibility relies on practices of self-presentation, self-branding and relational management of public image. Abidin (2016, pp. 86–100) defines “visibility labour” as aesthetic, relational and communicative work aimed at maintaining the attention of audiences and brands. In the case of beauty influencers, this work of visibility is combined with technical and creative skills: framing, editing, writing, product presentation, trend monitoring, partnership management and community engagement.

The ambivalence of this activity lies in its embeddedness within a highly commercialised environment. Makeup content is shaped by brand collaborations, affiliate links, promotional codes and product placements. However, this commercial dimension does not disqualify these practices from belonging to the cultural field. Cultural industries have always intertwined creation, symbolic production and economic logic. What is specific to beauty influencers is that this articulation takes place within platform environments where visibility, engagement and monetisation depend on technical and algorithmic infrastructures.

The case of beauty influencers therefore reveals a central tension. Their activity has many features of cultural work, symbolic production, aesthetic mediation, narration and audience relations, yet it is often classified outside CCIs because it is associated with advertising, the attention economy or cosmetics commerce. The point is not to argue that all influencers should automatically be integrated into cultural and creative industries, but to show that their liminal position exposes the limits of existing classifications. They function as a boundary object through which the borders of CCIs can be rethought in the age of platform capitalism.

Theoretical framework: cultural industries, platform capitalism and digital creative labour

This research draws on three theoretical fields: cultural and creative industries, critical approaches to platform capitalism, and studies of digital creative labour. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to understand beauty influencers not merely as commercial prescribers, but as actors engaged in platform-mediated symbolic production.

The first theoretical anchor concerns cultural industries. Critical approaches emphasise the relationship between symbolic production, economic organisation and power relations. A cultural activity cannot therefore be defined solely by its belonging to an already established sector; it must also be examined through its capacity to produce meanings, organise imaginaries and contribute to the formation of taste. Hesmondhalgh (2019) underlines that cultural industries are characterised by the production and circulation of symbolic goods, but also by markets structured by uncertainty, concentration and commodification. This approach makes it possible to analyse beauty content as the production of signs, narratives and aesthetic values, even when it is embedded in commercial devices.

The second anchor concerns platform capitalism. Srnicek (2017) describes platforms as digital infrastructures that organise intermediation, collect data and structure new models of monetisation. Poell et al. (2019, pp. 1–13) show that platformisation transforms the conditions under which cultural content is produced, circulated and monetised. For beauty influencers, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok are therefore not simply distribution channels. They shape formats, temporalities, modes of address, engagement metrics and possibilities of visibility. Creativity unfolds under technical, economic and algorithmic constraints.

The third anchor concerns digital creative labour and its forms of invisibilisation. Duffy and Wissinger (2017, pp. 4652–4671) show that social-media-based creative work is often framed through mythologies of pleasure, freedom and authentic self-expression, which obscure the labour and constraints involved. Duffy (2017) also shows that creative activities linked to social media, often feminised, are frequently presented as personal passions rather than work. Beauty influencers strongly embody this tension: their activity is made desirable through the performance of pleasure, passion and proximity, while relying on professional organisation, technical expertise and the ability to transform attention into economic value.

Finally, research on authenticity and credibility helps explain how these creators stabilise their authority among audiences. Abidin (2016, pp. 86–100) shows that visibility labour relies on cultivated proximity with audiences and on the production of relational authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2020) analyse how influencers must preserve perceived authenticity while integrating commercial requirements. This tension is central to makeup content: creators must be able to recommend products, collaborate with brands and monetise their activity while maintaining a discourse perceived as sincere, critical and credible.

This framework leads us to consider beauty influencers as hybrid cultural professionals. Their activity combines symbolic production, algorithmic governance and commercial authenticity. It shows that cultural production no longer belongs only to institutionally stabilised sectors, but may also emerge within digital ecosystems where creation, communication, consumption and algorithmic mediation are closely intertwined.

Methodology

This research is based on a multi-level methodology combining documentary analysis, content analysis and preliminary exploratory quantitative data. This combination follows a logic of methodological triangulation, understood as the cross-referencing of several types of data in order to better grasp a complex phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, cited in Creswell, 2017, p. 587; Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2021, pp. 291–307). The aim is not to measure the beauty influencer sector exhaustively, but to analyse its position at the intersection of cultural production, aesthetic mediation and the platform economy.

The first level consists of a documentary analysis of institutional definitions of CCIs. It focuses on European texts, statistical frameworks and documents related to cultural and creative sectors, in order to identify how emerging digital activities are classified, named or marginalised within existing taxonomies. This stage makes it possible to examine the effects of visibility and invisibility produced by institutional classifications.

The second level is based on a pilot content analysis of a YouTube video by a French makeup influencer. Published on 15 February 2026, this “full face” video centred on a makeup brand lasts 27 minutes and 10 seconds and had 85,851 views and 4.7K likes at the time of collection. This choice does not aim at statistical representativeness, but at the analytical depth associated with exploratory case study research

(Yin, 2018). The video is relevant because it combines technical demonstration, product testing, self-presentation, commercial discourse, community relations and critical evaluation.

The analysis brings together three materials: visual annotations, a discourse transcript and comments posted under the video. The annotations make it possible to observe framing, gestures, facial transformations and product presentation. The transcript allows the study of technical vocabulary, aesthetic justifications, critical distance and references to platforms. Comments are analysed as indicators of reception, trust, recognition and community engagement. The video is therefore approached as a multimodal device in which meaning is produced through the articulation of visual, verbal, technical and interactional elements. The analysis draws on qualitative content analysis (Bardin, 2013), thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77–101) and visual analysis inspired by the semiotics of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The third level draws on preliminary results from an exploratory quantitative survey on the experience of makeup on social media. The questionnaire documents platform uses, exposure to makeup content, perceptions of aesthetic norms, social comparison, self-esteem, credibility granted to influencers, purchasing behaviours and perceptions of algorithmic logics. These data are used cautiously, as exploratory indicators rather than generalisable results.

Finally, a phase of semi-structured interviews is planned with audiences exposed to makeup content and actors connected to beauty influence. These interviews will deepen the analysis of usage trajectories, forms of identification, perceptions of authenticity, understanding of commercial partnerships and the ways in which actors themselves qualify their activity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Miles et al., 2014).

This methodology therefore builds a set of converging indicators on the position of beauty influencers within CCIs, by cross-referencing institutional classifications, produced content and audience reception.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings suggest that beauty influencers occupy a hybrid professional position that cannot be reduced to influencer marketing, advertising or digital entrepreneurship. Although the data remain exploratory, they point to three converging dimensions: aesthetic mediation, authority grounded in perceived authenticity, and adaptation to platform visibility logics.

The pilot study of a YouTube “full face” video first shows that the influencer does not merely display cosmetic products. He organises a progressive demonstration, comments on product effects, compares textures, coverage and final results, and turns the face into the central medium of a technical and visual performance. The visual annotations highlight the constant centrality of the face, the progressive transformation of the complexion and the sequenced presentation of products. The video therefore operates both as a device of aesthetic mediation and as an informal learning space through which audiences may acquire practical makeup skills.

This mediation also contributes to the stabilisation of aesthetic criteria, such as controlled complexion, coverage, pigmentation and homogeneous finish. These norms are not stated as explicit directives, but are made visible through repeated gestures, framings and evaluative criteria. The comments confirm that these norms are taken up and discussed by audiences, who refer to complexion quality, product longevity or their own bodily and aesthetic concerns. However, reception cannot be reduced to normative pressure: viewers also use these contents as practical resources to choose suitable products or avoid unnecessary purchases.

The second finding concerns perceived authenticity. Comments frequently describe the influencer as “sincere”, “honest”, “objective”, “human” or “real”. This authenticity is built through first-person speech, humour, negative evaluations of certain products, transparency about commercial collaborations and proximity with the audience. It is not opposed to commerce; rather, it becomes one of its conditions of acceptability. The commercial dimension of the video does not appear to undermine audience trust when the influencer maintains a critical stance. This dynamic grants him technical and relational authority: viewers ask for his opinion, request comparisons, routines or further product reviews?.

The third finding concerns visibility logics. The video adopts several features of stabilised YouTube formats: an engaging title, a sequenced structure, calls for comments and a final presentation of the result. The influencer’s discourse also refers to TikTok, viral products and TikTok Shop. These elements show that beauty content production is shaped by an awareness of platforms and their circulation mechanisms. The influencer adapts his formats and editorial choices to environments in which visibility depends on engagement, trends and algorithmic recognition.

These findings lead to a first interpretation: beauty influencers produce a form of sociotechnical mediation, combining content creation, aesthetic expertise, community relations, commercial prescription and adaptation to digital infrastructures. This articulation makes a strictly advertising-based or commercial classification insufficient.

Discussion

The preliminary findings invite us to reconsider how beauty influencers are understood. In professional and institutional discourses, they are often approached primarily through their commercial function: they recommend products, collaborate with brands and contribute to the circulation of promotional content. This perspective remains relevant, but it is insufficient. The pilot study shows that their activity also involves aesthetic, pedagogical, relational and symbolic dimensions that belong more broadly to cultural production.

This observation brings us back to the central issue of classification. CCIs are based on historically constructed boundaries that stabilise certain sectors while leaving other practices in zones of uncertainty. Beauty influencers are located precisely within one of these zones. Their work does not fully correspond to the classical categories of audiovisual production, design, fashion, advertising or informal education, yet it combines dimensions that cut across them: image production, narrative construction, aesthetic mediation, transmission of knowledge, audience relations, community management and entrepreneurship.

The issue, therefore, is not simply whether beauty influencers should be added as a new category within existing nomenclatures. Rather, their position reveals the limits of contemporary cultural taxonomies. Platform creators work in shifting, individualised environments that depend on private infrastructures; their institutional recognition is therefore difficult, even though their cultural influence is increasingly visible.

The notion of hybrid professionalism helps to describe this position. Beauty influencers are neither only artists, nor only communicators, nor only entrepreneurs. Their activity combines content creation, self-branding, community relations and commercial prescription. The presence of brands does not necessarily erase the cultural dimension of the content: cosmetic products become the basis for narratives, evaluations, norms, advice and forms of digital sociability.

This articulation between commerce and culture is not new in cultural industries. What distinguishes beauty influencers is the central role of platforms in the production of value. Platforms organise access to

audiences, rank visibility and measure engagement. Influencers' creativity is therefore inseparable from their ability to negotiate technical and algorithmic mechanisms, in line with analyses of platformisation (Poell et al., 2019, pp. 1–13). Perceived authenticity also plays a central role: it makes the commercial dimension acceptable when the influencer maintains a critical, transparent and relational stance (Abidin, 2016, pp. 86–100).

This discussion has implications for cultural policy. If beauty influencers remain classified exclusively under advertising or digital entrepreneurship, several dimensions of their activity become invisible: aesthetic production, mediation of norms, transmission of know-how, community organisation and contribution to the formation of taste. This invisibility may affect sectoral measurement, professional recognition and debates on the protection of creative labour.

However, recognising the cultural dimensions of beauty influence does not mean that every form of influence automatically belongs to CCIs. Such recognition requires analytical criteria: original content production, mediation of knowledge or norms, durable relations with audiences, aesthetic and technical skills, and cultural circulation that extends beyond commercial transaction alone. Beauty influencers therefore reveal a broader tension between institutional classification and the reality of platform-based cultural practices.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the place of beauty influencers within the contemporary boundaries of cultural and creative industries. Drawing on ongoing doctoral research, it has shown that these creators cannot be fully understood through the categories of influencer marketing, advertising or digital entrepreneurship alone. Their activity mobilises aesthetic, technical, narrative and relational skills that bring them closer to emerging forms of platform-based cultural work.

The preliminary findings indicate that beauty influencers participate in the production and circulation of aesthetic norms, transmit know-how and organise community relations around makeup. Their authority relies on technical expertise, perceived authenticity and audience trust, while remaining inseparable from a commercialised and algorithmically structured environment.

The analysis therefore invites us to understand beauty influencers as hybrid cultural professionals. This characterisation does not erase the commercial dimension of their activity, but recognises that contemporary symbolic production may emerge in spaces where creation, communication, consumption and platformisation are intertwined. This research remains exploratory and should be extended through a broader corpus, cross-platform comparison and semi-structured interviews. Nevertheless, it already suggests the need to rethink the boundaries of CCIs in order to better account for forms of symbolic production that emerge within digital environments.

Impact & Engagement

This research addresses a problem of institutional visibility: digital platform content creators, particularly beauty influencers, participate in the production of aesthetic norms, cultural practices and contemporary forms of mediation, while often remaining absent from classifications of cultural and creative industries. This gap between observable digital practices and institutional categories limits the ways in which platform-based creative labour is named, measured and recognised.

The findings may benefit public decision-makers, cultural policy bodies, cultural observatories, educational institutions, cultural management researchers and professional organisations. They provide

elements for better identifying the skills mobilised by content creators: audiovisual production, aesthetic mediation, community management, technical expertise, commercial negotiation and adaptation to algorithmic environments.

The main routes to uptake concern contributions to public policy and classification standards. The research may inform policy briefs, recommendations for cultural observatories, exchanges with institutional actors or educational content for programmes in cultural industries, digital communication and creative entrepreneurship.

The expected impact is a better consideration of hybrid forms of digital creative labour in debates on cultural and creative industries. Possible indicators of impact include citation of the research in institutional documents, use in training programmes, uptake in professional meetings or integration into discussions on nomenclatures, skills and the conditions for recognising platform-based creative workers.

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Author biography

Julien Fauqueux Albanese is a PhD candidate in Information and Communication Sciences at Université Côte d’Azur, affiliated with SIC.Lab Méditerranée. His doctoral research examines beauty influencers, social media platforms and the mediation of aesthetic norms, with particular attention to authenticity, algorithmic visibility, consumer practices and the cultural dimensions of makeup content. His work lies at the intersection of digital communication, cultural and creative industries, platform studies and visual culture. He is also President of the Association des Jeunes Chercheurs des Alpes-Maritimes and represents PhD candidates within SIC.Lab Méditerranée.

Authors Index

Andreeva -Popyordanova, D. 279

Babic, F. 193
Bajde, A. 1
Bashiron Mendolicchio, H. 226
Basili, F. 430
Borin, E. 256
Bove, L. 319
Brianso, I. 359

Cerquetti, M. 135
Chang, Y. 391
Chen, T. 22
Chiaravalloti, F. 250
Christ, A. 233
Cicellin, M. 343
Cipriano, M. 256
Consiglio, S. 343
Contardi, L. 159
Copil, L. 199

D’Angelo, M. 94
Dalla Chiesa, C. 430
Dato, G. 343
De Angelis, L. 319
De Bonnaire, F. 250
De Medio, C. 159
Demartini, P. 256
Dhoore, L. 333
Diaz Boils, X. 418
Dragana, K. 9
Dragutinović, M. 469

Edwards-Schachter, M. 418
Elkan, K. 199

Fauqueux Albanese, J. 476
Ferrara, C. 135

Glesner, J. 446
Głowacki, A. 462
Guo, Y. 115

Hirvi-Ijäs, M. 453
Holmberg, L. 175
Hooge, S. 69
Hsiao, T. 115
Huang, C. 115
Hussenot, A. 233

Inovska, L. 440

Järvinen, T. 352

Kahle, S. 54
Kolendic, M. 104
Kolsteeg, J. 40
Kraljevic, N. 469
Kuznetsova-Bogdanovish, K. 370
Kyriakidou, M. 302

Lam, W. 218
Lehikoinen, K. 167
Li, C. (China University of Technology) 115
Li, C. (Universitat de València) 418
Lin, W. 256
Linda, I. 126
LIU, J. 256
Lorentz Hjorth, C. 175
Lynch, A. 205

Mandel, B. 325
Manzo, M. 184, 256
Marchiori, M. 256
Marinier, L. 359
Masson, M. 302
Mathiot, V. 407
Mmeti, N. 287
Muraglia, G. 343

Nehl, M. 398

Päiviö-Häkämies, L. 379
Parment, A. 403
Passebois-Ducros, J. 407
Pazos, P. 302
Pellerin, G. 302
Persson, B. 175

Pesce, F. 319
Piber, M. 250, 403
Pinto de Faria, I. 144
Poce, A. 159
Poinsignon, P. 407
Pop, C. 199
Poprawski, M. 175

Renko, V. 453
Ricci, N. 69
Romano, M. 319
Römhild, J. 54
Rowles, S. 86, 167
Rubić, J. 104
Runnel, P. 46

Schianchi, C. 359
Schmidt, K. 9
Schöggl, S. 250
Schramme, A. 250, 333
Scott, K. 175
Scuotto, A. 343
Šejić, L. 104
Sharma, A. 77
Shon, A. 152
Silisty, L. 9
Sillamaa, V. 370
Simjanovska, V. 30
Sokka, S. 453

Valeri, A. 256
Vengerfeldt, P. 46
Verducci, S. 135

Wang, Y. 244
Wu, H. 63

Zapata, P. 385
Zbranca, R. 199

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Avenue Maurice 1
1050 Brussels
Belgium

T +32 (0)2 201 19 12
info@encatc.org
www.encatc.org

ENCATC
The European network on cultural management and policy

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