Research Digest:
Lifelong Cultural Engagement

CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE

About the Centre for Cultural Value

The Centre for Cultural Value is building a shared understanding of the differences that arts, culture, heritage and screen make to people's lives and to society. We want cultural policy and practice to be shaped by rigorous research and evaluation of what works and what needs to change in order to build a more diverse, equitable and regenerative cultural sector.

To achieve this, we are working in collaboration with partners across the UK to:

- make existing research more relevant and accessible so its insights can be understood and applied more widely;
- support the cultural sector and funders to be rigorous in their approaches to evaluation and foster a culture of reflection and learning;
- and foster an evidence-based approach to cultural policy development.

Our approach is primarily pragmatic: we want empirical research to drive decisions about cultural funding, policy, management, engagement and evaluation.

Based at the University of Leeds, the Centre's core partners are The Audience Agency, the universities of Liverpool and Sheffield, and Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. The Centre is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation), Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Arts Council England.

About the Centre's research digests

Our research digests are based on a rapid assessment of published literature to present a "snapshot" of cultural value research across a number of core themes.

These research reviews are shaped in consultation with practitioners, researchers and policymakers to make sure they are as useful and relevant as possible. We invite people to take part through surveys, interactive workshops and policy roundtables. This helps us develop research questions that we can find answers to in the literature.

The reviews present an overview of key findings, what we know for certain, where there is emerging evidence and where further research is needed. We use the insight gained through the review process to make conclusions about the current state of the evidence and what implications this has for the future.

About this digest

How may the value and impact of engaging with culture evolve across someone's lifetime? Are our cultural tastes set in childhood? Or is there scope for our behaviours to change? If so, what can affect these shifts?

These questions are worth exploring for many reasons. For instance, cultural organisations might want to investigate who's engaging with particular art forms and how. Practitioners might want to explore how working in different co-creative ways might impact their engagement. Funders and policymakers, on the other hand, might be interested in how levels of engagement compare and contrast across different demographics and policy areas.

Of course, cultural engagement arguably takes place everywhere: reading a book, listening to music or taking part in a community celebration. The questions of (who defines) what culture is (and isn't) and what constitutes cultural engagement are important. If you're interested in exploring this further, you might want to take a look at our recent Everyday Creativity research digest.

While the studies included here cover engagement with a broad range of cultural activities, this digest particularly focuses on audience, visitor and participant engagement with theatres, museums, art galleries, arts centres, heritage and visual arts organisations, as well as those who deliver festivals, and community/participatory arts events and activities.

We can play many different roles when engaging with culture. When we attend the theatre, we're described as audiences; when we visit museums or galleries, we become visitors; when we take part in a workshop or activity, the term 'participant' fits best. Throughout this digest, we'll use the term 'audience' to refer to all three groups more generally, when using one specific term doesn't apply.

The idea of *lifelong* cultural engagement also raises other questions around definitions:

- Does engagement with cultural organisations have to begin when we're very young to be considered lifelong, or can we think about what happens if we start engaging in our later lives?
- Are we defining lifelong engagement as sustained or regular engagement, and with particular forms of culture?

While no strict answers to these questions are offered here, this digest brings together studies that explore this broadly defined 'topic' from different research disciplines and practices. It synthesises findings and identifies recurrent themes from research related to lifelong engagement, or that in some way provides us with an understanding of how sustained or regular engagement can have valuable impacts on people's lives.

Above all, this digest is based on the understanding that while audiences, visitors and participants may bring in invaluable income as 'consumers' to cultural organisations, they also should be valued as active partners in artistic and cultural exchange.

Further information

Other formats of this document are available on request. If you require an alternative format, please contact: ccv@leeds.ac.uk

Any enquiries about this publication should be sent to us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk

Research review conducted by Dr Emma McDowell and supervised by Professor Ben Walmsley for the Centre for Cultural Value

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Contents

Highlights

- Studies show that regular and sustained engagement with culture can add value, meaning and joy to people's lives. These impacts can feel particularly significant at transformative or key life moments.

- Influential lifelong learning research suggests our engagement as adults with arts and culture is significantly influenced by our initial engagement as children, in school, family and community environments. Ensuring all children have access to high-quality art and cultural education and activities can play a part in reducing inequalities in social and cultural capital.

- Research also highlights that our individual cultural tastes, habits and behaviours aren't set in stone from childhood. This finding strikes a hopeful note about the transformative power of cultural activities and interventions in later life. Policy directives and sector practice need to do more to take this into account.

- There's a gap in research on the lasting impacts of cultural engagement across longer timeframes. This has led to a number of unsubstantiated claims and generalisations, particularly in impact and evaluation research. There's a need for more empirical (experience-based) and interdisciplinary research into cultural engagement, incorporating more diverse activities, modes of engagement, people and experiences – including the potential for less positive experiences – to help us understand how value and impacts can change and evolve through time.

- Developing a more sophisticated understanding of the value of lifelong engagement is important for social, education, and health and wellbeing research, policy and practice. For example, the impact of cultural engagement on quality of life becomes more significant a question as people across the world are living longer.

- Gaining a nuanced understanding of lifelong cultural engagement is hindered by a context of short-term project-funding cycles and shifting policy agendas in the cultural sector. There's a need to find better ways to share research and learning, including making improvements to the quality and access of participation and engagement data.

- Overall, the existing longitudinal research that looks at lifelong engagement with culture often relies on quantitative research methods, such as statistical models and controls, which factor out context and complexity. There are particular challenges associated with the long-term sustainability of these research interventions, including difficulties in inferring causal relationships years after events and activities have taken place.

- Place-based studies – which explore local ecologies – and methods that mix quantitative and qualitative data can be particularly helpful in fully unpicking processes of cultural engagement (see the Centre's Making Data Work report for further recommendations). Local data-sharing partnerships have great potential for informing deep learning applicable to specific types of organisation and practices, e.g. for socially-engaged arts practice and volunteer-run arts organisations.

- Population studies are a largely underused source of data on cultural engagement. However, developing a greater understanding of lifelong cultural engagement doesn't have to rely on commissioning new longitudinal cohort studies. Adding questions on cultural engagement to existing studies could also lead to a better understanding of the longer-term impact of specific cultural interventions.

- Taking a longer-term approach to understanding the value of cultural engagement is vital for fostering robust insights that can underpin policy and practice. Co-research and creative approaches have been shown to be effective in this area. However, it's crucial that cultural practitioners' knowledge, practices and expertise in working with audiences over time directly inform both research and policymaking activity.

Introduction

"There is little in the way of longitudinal evidence to support correlation between culture and its effects because cultural practice, the context in which it takes place, and policy goals are constantly shifting."

(Holden, 2006, p.16)

At the Centre for Cultural Value, we've published a range of different research digests which have explored engagement in many applied contexts. For example, we've looked at how engagement impacts young people's mental health, older people's physical health and wellbeing and social connection. We've also explored the evidence base around culture on referral or social prescribing through the arts.

In our initial scoping events for the creation of the Centre, the topic of lifelong cultural engagement beyond these areas of practice was one people said they were interested in hearing more about. While this digest primarily focuses on scholarly research and that conducted by consultants in these areas, much of this work is directly informed, and in some cases conducted, by and with cultural organisations and practitioners.

In our scoping events for this digest, many cultural management and creative arts practitioners further emphasised that their work doesn't happen in a vacuum. The organisational priorities and contexts in which they work are profoundly impacted and shaped by diverse policy priorities, sometimes directly funded by particular impact agendas.

The instrumentalisation, or co-option, of the work of arts, cultural and heritage organisations and practitioners to fulfil certain educational, health, social and economic policies is well documented in cultural policy literature (Holden, 2006; Belfiore, 2002; Hadley and Gray, 2017).

This digest includes relevant research exploring the widely reported benefits of arts to health, education and the economy as they create the conditions in which many practitioners work and many people engage as visitors and audience members. As such, these studies represent a key contribution to research looking into lifelong cultural engagement.

For example, lifelong learning represents an explicit policy priority for the arts, cultural and heritage sector, in both educational and cultural policy contexts across the globe (e.g. Mowlah et al., 2014, p.10). Similarly, recent arts and health research has formed a broad evidence base demonstrating how regular and sustained engagement in the arts correlates with positive impacts on specific health and wellbeing outcomes and the prevention and management of disease (see Fancourt and Finn (2010) for a comprehensive overview of this work).

The problem with considering the universal benefits and impacts that culture can have is that it doesn't take into account the specific and varied contexts of engagement. Class, race, age, other structural determinants of settings, geographies and power relations all influence how people engage with cultural events and activities (Gilmore, 2014b, pp.315-316). Therefore these studies can't, and often don't, fully capture the complex, varied and multiple ways in which value emerges through engagement.

Studies included in this digest not only dig deeper into different modes of cultural engagement but also approach engagement through a broader lens to compare and contrast results and patterns across longer timeframes. What's more, research shows that audiences, visitors and participants themselves don't delineate between types or categories of impact within their own explanations of their cultural experiences (Walmsley, 2019a).

This digest aims to consider the value and impact cultural engagement has for those who are doing the engaging, and how that may change or evolve across their lifetimes. Studies that are included don't all ask the same questions, but they all can contribute in some way to a richer understanding of the value of lifelong cultural engagement.

Method

Our scoping process included a questionnaire and two interactive online workshops with practitioners, researchers and policymakers, and was followed by a comprehensive evidence review.

What questions did we ask?

The scoping process demonstrated a wide range of interests in, and motivations for, understanding longer-term impacts of engagement with culture. We asked the following questions to help guide our analysis:

- What research already exists around the value of lifelong cultural engagement?
- What particular impacts do these studies explore, and how are they researched, evaluated and articulated?
- Do they explore cumulative impacts or cultural engagement across different life stages?
- What methodologies are used to capture lifelong engagement, and where are the gaps in research?
- What are the applications of this research in sector practice and policy?

What we included

We conducted a rapid review of peer-reviewed research studies, using a systematic approach to identify relevant literature. This was then enhanced by:

- a search of the 'grey' (non-peer-reviewed) or unpublished literature (including theses and dissertations) identified through consultation with expert stakeholders;
- searches of key websites;
- and a limited Google search.

In total, 133 sources and studies are included in the digest, including literature from audience studies, cultural policy, arts management, arts marketing, audience and visitor engagement studies, music psychology, museum management, and related and relevant literature in applied contexts such as education and health.

This digest includes literature on non-publicly funded and commercial art forms, as well as community and amateur participation. It doesn't comprehensively review all art forms. As it's primarily a review of academic research and grey literature, there's a bias towards publicly funded arts and cultural activity.

This process didn't include literature looking at longitudinal employment studies or pathways to employment in the creative industries. Studies looking at the role of the artist in society can be read in our recent research digest.

Our search protocols didn't limit the geographic area and opened our searches to as broad a base as possible, including literature from 15 countries. However, as it only covers work published in English, there's a clear bias toward research from the Global North and Australasia. The literature we reviewed was published between September 1999 and July 2023 to provide a snapshot of the most recent research and evidence.

Full details of the keywords used for this search and the journals' titles, as well as a full list of sources, are included in the literature database, available to read here.

Findings

This digest considers three key types of research studies:

- Longitudinal research studies tracking specific metrics of cultural engagement and participation over time, including in areas such as health and education.
- Research into the extended impact of a particular specific cultural event on individuals or communities across different stages, or later stages, of life.
- Studies considering the value and impact of sustained engagement with cultural activities throughout a lifetime, including how we develop or discover our tastes and preferences for particular cultural activities.

This digest summarises studies from all these areas, considers their contribution to our understanding of the value of lifelong cultural engagement, and shares what implications this research might have for future research and for the arts, cultural and heritage sector.

Longitudinal studies tracking engagement

A significant proportion of existing longitudinal research captures patterns of cultural engagement across populations at a regional or national level. These population-level studies can capture and monitor levels of engagement across a broad range of cultural activities and have large sample sizes.

The yearly Taking Part Survey in England, started in 2005/6, surveys around 10,000 people a year and includes a longitudinal web panel (Hanquinet et al., 2019, p.204). Similar studies occur in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (for a more detailed overview of these projects, see Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023, p.20). By describing attendance at or participation in cultural activity, this data provides useful information on rates of cultural participation with some degree of granularity. Specific patterns can be identified across variables such as geography and artform, as well as behavioural (e.g. frequency of engagement, details of booking) and demographic categories (e.g. age, gender, ethnic background).

Additional population-level surveys were launched in response to the onset of the global Covid-19 pandemic, including the Cultural Participation Monitor in the UK (The Audience Agency) and the Audience Outlook Monitor in the USA (WolfBrown). These surveys provide a useful snapshot in time of a population's cultural participation and behaviour. These two particular studies are managed by consultants working in the arts, culture and heritage sector and will likely continue to generate cultural participation data over a longer timeframe.

However, there are other relatively under-used potential sources of existing cultural engagement data in other population-level studies such as: Next Steps: Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, Millennium Cohort Survey, Active Lives survey, and the Understanding Society survey (see Making Data Work and Mowlah et al., 2014 for more detailed discussion). Furthermore, developing a greater understanding of lifelong cultural engagement doesn't have to rely on commissioning new longitudinal cohort studies. Adding questions on cultural engagement to existing studies could also lead to a better understanding of the longer-term impact of specific cultural interventions and activity (see for example the Born in Bradford Age of Wonder study).

Data collected with organisations over many years has its part to play in our understanding of long-term cultural engagement. Given the valid concerns surrounding inequities within cultural production and participation, better use of this data would enable an improved critical evaluation of the failures within cultural organisations (Maggs, 2021). It would also equip us with a deeper understanding of the lasting impacts of arts and culture.

The Wellcome Galleries © Science Museum

Becoming the Brontes © University of Leeds

The large amount of existing data on arts infrastructure and investment, particularly that managed by funders and policy networks, could provide us with some interesting insights into supply, demand, investment and arts engagement (Brook, 2013).

On the other hand, it's important to take a critical approach to data generated purely on the point of consumption, providing a market assessment of cultural value and focusing on return on investment.

Firstly, these studies are more restricted to engagement with institutionalised and publicly funded culture (e.g. Naylor et al., 2016; Carnwath and Brown, 2014; Ellis et al., 2015). Secondly, consumer markets aren't designed to satisfy long-term needs but rather to create new ones (Bauman, 2011, p.109). Measurement based solely on econometrics and market dynamics results in a poor understanding of the diversity and complexity that is cultural value.

There are landmark research studies that have also taken a more in-depth study of engagement, while still keeping a broad definition of cultural activity, such as those included in the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) cultural value project. Reeves' (2014) study analysed data from the British Household Panel Survey from 1996- 2008 "to uncover the latent patterns of cultural consumption across nine activities: cinema, watching live sport, attending the theatre, eating at a restaurant, doing DIY, attending an evening class, meeting with local groups, volunteering and going to a club/pub" (p.273).

The Understanding Everyday Participation project (Miles and Gibson, 2016) investigated how participation "is articulated by location and by the relations and boundaries within and between places and communities" by taking an "ecosystem" or "ecological approach" (p.153). This body of research related to everyday participation is explored in more depth in our digest about everyday creativity.

Research studies that take this kind of ecological approach have found that people navigate cultural spaces often with little loyalty or allegiance, reminding us that venues and organisations are rarely "the be-all-and-end-all, or one-stop destination, for their engagement with the arts, but rather part of the complex and interconnected ecology" (Murray et al., 2014, p.28).

There's a need to broaden the scope of studies beyond organisational impact. Organisations involved solely in researching their own specific activity may not be able to take the bigger picture into account (Ruiz, 2004). There are examples in the place-based project literature of organisations working within local partnerships and networks that have recognised this. They've taken steps to address the lack of data that enables them to take a broader view of cultural engagement beyond the boundaries of their direct impact (Jeannotte, 2015; Wali et al., 2001). Examples of key areas of focus for these research projects include:

- developing holistic strategies for building creative and cultural cities (Stern and Seifert, 2002);
- strengthening local creative ecosystems and communities (Murray et al., 2014), building long-term partnerships within the "place ecosystem" including social and cultural practices, institutions, industries, the built environment and infrastructure (Madgin and Robson, 2023);
- developing the creative economy of place through job creation and business sustainability (Parkinson et al., 2019);
- and exploring the interconnected ecology of professional and voluntary/amateur models of cultural practice (Nicholson et al., 2023; Miles and Gibson, 2016).

In their literature review on the value of arts and culture for Arts Council England, Mowlah et al. (2014) suggest that longitudinal research can help uncover:

- the impact of the frequency, intensity and duration of different types of arts and cultural engagement on personal and social outcomes;
- models of change and continuity across the life course, plus the impact of earlier life activity on later life outcomes;
- and how key points or events in people's lives relate to change or impact (p.41).

Often research exploring the contribution of culture to the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals and communities monitors changes in outcomes across a long time period (e.g. Silverstein et al., 2002; Tepper, 2014). Measuring and tracking wellbeing metrics or quality of life indicators has a firm standing within economic studies of cultural policy.

For example, Bakhshi et al. (2015) found a correlation between cultural engagement and momentary wellbeing indicators, such as how happy people feel or their sense of purpose (p.6). There's been an increased proliferation of studies conducted exploring the effects of cultural engagement on a number of health and wellbeing metrics (see Fancourt and Finn (2019) for a comprehensive overview).

While much of this work focuses on proving that there is in fact a correlation between cultural engagement and positive outcomes for health and wellbeing, some studies begin to provide some understanding of how these impacts occur. These include:

- A report by Bacon et al. (2010) found that wellbeing benefits are more pronounced in participating in, rather than simply observing, arts and sports events (pp.70-71).
- A study by Jenkins (2011) analysed data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). It found that compared to sports classes, evening classes in music and arts were associated with significant improvements in subjective wellbeing after controlling for other factors (p.403).
- Some research studies look to isolate specific wellbeing effects against a range of cultural interventions (Musella and Bignall-Donnelly, 2022, p.7; Rugg et al., 2021), while others allow for comparisons with other activities, such as sport, and can include recommendations for arts policy itself (Tymoszuk et al., 2020).

Lifelong learning is a prominent research area for many studies that explore the lifelong value of cultural engagement with arts, cultural and heritage organisations:

- Recent research found that 70% of English adults agree that culture and the arts within society had a role and contribution to be useful for the lifelong learning of adults (Kim et al., 2022, p.47).

- Bacon et al. (2010) concluded that "arts, sport and culture not only encourage informal, lifelong and intergenerational learning but also improve formal learning experiences" (p.70).

- A key recommendation of the Warwick Commission Cultural Value report (Neelands et al., 2015) was that: "DfE and Ofsted must ensure that all children up to the age of 16 receive a cultural education in order to ensure their lifelong engagement and enjoyment as audiences and creators" (p.49).

- Some studies focus on the impact of 'informal' learning programmes and activities, defined as those not part of a formal education programme in schools and educational institutions (Jackson and McManus, 2019; Gibbs et al., 2007).

The potential for lifelong learning is often seen as a de facto positive benefit of engaging with cultural organisations. They therefore often quantify related impacts as levels of access to programmes rather than the processes of engagement itself.

There's a danger of superficially claiming positive wellbeing and learning impacts without considering the potential for negative impacts. In fact, the idea that cultural engagement only yields positive results is critiqued by scholars who question the advocacy agenda of evaluation (Johanson and Glow, 2015) and the "bullshit" positive rhetoric in policy (Belfiore, 2009).

Research needs to account for both positive and negative impacts, as studies show that what's positive for one group, may not be for others. For example, Steiner and Hotz's (2015) study on the detrimental impact of the European Capital of Culture on residents' wellbeing during the event. This has important policy implications for the cultural sector, given that recent research by Musgrave (2022) found the well-documented wellbeing effects of participating in music are, in fact, countered for those for whom music is their profession. Additional granularity is needed to dig into the nature and processes of engagement and impact across longer time periods.

Scholars also call for better theoretical insights explaining correlations found in the data and less over-emphasis and oversimplification of causal relationships to fulfil specific (intended) outcomes (Kaszynska, 2018, p.19; Jackson and Herranz Jr., 2002, p.37).

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Researching extended impacts of cultural events and activities

In their literature review, Carnwath and Brown (2014) develop a helpful way of framing how researchers and practitioners might consider the impacts of cultural experiences over time. Impact is categorised in three ways:

- "concurrent impacts" (those that occur during the experience);
- "experienced impacts" (observed post-event hours or days later);
- and "extended and cumulative impacts" (observed over a longer time period and/or built up over a person's lifetime) (p.15).

Concurrent impacts (those that occur during the experience)

Developing an understanding of the concurrent impacts of a cultural interaction could include using visitor-tracking technology to get a sense of visitor flow, duration of visit and route-taking within a museum or art gallery. In live performance studies, wearable technology can produce physiological data. Examples of this approach include the use of eye-tracking technology, facial display and optic flow, EEG (electroencephalography) readings and other brain imaging to measure brain activity and skin conductance, and heart/breathing rate (Stevens et al., 2007; Healey et al., 2022; Music and Mind project, 2021; Jola, 2022).

These cognitive neuroscientific approaches and visitor tracking technology are just some examples of new methods used to understand cultural engagement 'as it happens' or what's termed 'real-time' engagement (Merritt Millman et al., 2022, p.293).

However, similar to the generation of transactional data and that on levels of cultural consumption created in larger quantitative studies, these methods often involve analysis of predetermined quantitative metrics that describe observed behaviour. On their own, they can't provide us with an understanding of the meaning and value of cultural experiences, or how these impacts are experienced.

Experiened impacts (observed post-event hours or days later)

Empirical research conducted in audience and visitor studies often focuses on experienced impacts of events and activities. This includes research studying:

- longitudinal relationships with events (Sedgman, 2019);
- our interactions with a work of art (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007);
- and the beneficial result of remembering a work of art days, months or years later (Brown and Ratzkin, 2011).

This area of research extends the study of the impact of multiple events, such as festivals or mega-events, which take place over a longer time frame, for example, Cities of Culture.

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Challenges of longitudinal impact studies

Impact evaluations of large-scale mega-events such as Cities of Culture often use a longitudinal design (e.g. Liverpool 08, Garcia et al., 2010; London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, Gilmore, 2014a). Their scale and the fact they're situated across a specific geographical area allow for the measurement of different types of impact (Langen and Garcia, 2009), the generation of new data and the use (and re-use) of existing evidence (Melville et al., 2010; Garcia et al., 2010; Crone and Ganga, 2023).

Even though mega-events such as Cities of Culture enable a more longitudinal approach to researching impact within a specific place over, say, 5 or 10 years, there are questions of whether and how regularly research needs to be carried out, and for how long.

The Liverpool 2018: Legacies of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 10 Years On project was the "first continued assessment of a European Capital of Culture over two decades" as it built on baselines established 10 years prior to Liverpool's City of Culture in 2018 (Institute of Cultural Capital (ICC) n.d., p.4). The Impacts 18 project was considered an extension of Impacts 08, which initially aimed to gain insights on the perceived lasting effects of mega-events "on perceptions of the city and local residents' cultural practices". The study framed a series of neighbourhood case studies "placing the voices of residents, and their neighbourhood narratives at the centre of the research" (Institute of Cultural Capital Liverpool, 2008).

Impacts 18 aimed to utilise pre-existing data and sought to replicate the research methodologies from the original evaluation.

However, the full Impacts 18 report hasn't yet been published, as a result of what those involved in the process described as "falling far short of its own (unrealistically high) explanatory ambitions, whilst simultaneously producing conclusions that, for some, proved too controversial to publish" (Crone and Ganga, 2023, p.5).

While there's been some other work to capture the long-term impacts of Cities of Culture programmes (e.g. Gomes and Librero-Cano's 2016 study on economic impact in hosting regions), there's a noted absence of evidence of long-term effects of mega-events (Palmer, 2004; European Capitals of Culture Policy Group, 2010). Researchers working in this area have noted the challenges associated with the long-term sustainability of research interventions of these large-scale, time-limited events (Garcia et al., 2010, p.40).

One of the key difficulties in long-term legacy capture is the difficulty in "disentangl[ing] from myriad competing factors" which affect event impacts on, for example, "local economies or perceptions of place" (Crone and Ganga, 2023), or infrastructure and economic legacy (Liu, 2016). Inferring causal relationships between these metrics years after the event itself only makes this harder.

There's also a call for more comparative research to take place, including more formal knowledge transfers so future Cities of Culture hosts can benefit from past learnings and promote continuity in programmes such as European Capital of Culture knowledge accumulation and legacy learning (Cox and Garcia, 2013; Ruiz, 2004; Musella and Bignall-Donnelly, 2022; Crone and Ganga, 2023).

Extended and cumulative impacts (observed over a longer time period and/or built up over a lifetime)

Described as "delayed impacts of individual events" and "impacts that accrue through repeated engagement in cultural activities over time", extended and cumulative impacts are typically measured through retrospective interviewing and longitudinal tracking studies (Carnwath and Brown, 2014, p.15).

The model of cumulative impact over time [Figure 1] illustrates impact resulting from specific cultural experiences over a participant's lifetime. The suggested "impact echo" is particularly relevant to questions of lifelong engagement and value. It's a helpful model for mapping some example approaches that scholars have taken to exploring the impact and value of cultural experiences.

Figure 1: Cumulative impact or multiple experiences over time

We can see from the illustration above that experienced impacts and cumulative impacts overlap with one another.

When we consider the memories and meanings generated over a longer time frame, we have to move away from notions of objectivity concerning experienced impacts. There are questions of how 'reliable' data generated a while after an event is, as people might not be able to precisely remember how they felt or responded in the moment (Walmsley, 2019a, p.121). Yet some scholars question the significance of this problem arguing that an individual uses memories for different purposes in the making of meaning (Faull, 2022; McDowell, 2022a). Therefore, memory can't be false and researchers should incorporate this potential for misremembering and confabulation in their descriptions of value and meaning. As audience scholar Kirsty Sedgman (2022) describes it, it's a process of being "haunted" by our past cultural experiences, "with the ghosts of past experiences layered up one on top of the other" (p.198).

While short-term impacts of cultural engagement are well documented, impacts of regular and/or sustained engagement are less common. There are calls for additional longitudinal data and experimental methods to explore short-term and long-term wellbeing impacts of sustained and regular cultural engagement (Mowlah et al., 2014; Leadbetter and O'Connor, 2013; Bakhshi et al., 2015).

Studies exploring the effects of longer-term arts engagement in older people is a particularly notable area of research, for example, in relation to music therapy and training (Gooding et al., 2014; Takahashi et al., 2006).

Studies have provided insight into frequency of engagement – i.e. how regular or sustained arts and cultural engagement compares with less regular or ad-hoc arts engagement – or how engagement of different types impacts health outcomes (Wheatley and Bickerton, 2017; Fancourt and Steptoe, 2019). A handful of Scandinavian longitudinal studies found that frequent attendance at cultural venues and engagement with cultural activity resulted in a lower incidence of disease in population studies spanning decades (Bygren et al., 2009; Konlaan et al., 2000).

Stanley and Audrey Burtion Gallery © University of Leeds

With the exception of this work, research in this area tends to assume, rather than evidence, that any such positive impacts on health and wellbeing will continue over the longer term.

As many of these studies are exploratory in nature, they're often unable to generalise their findings beyond the specific local contexts in which they occur nor provide a causal link (Galloway, 2009; Fancourt and Finn, 2019).

There's some initial research into why certain modes of engagement with particular artforms and activities have certain impacts compared with others. In their arts and health evidence review, Fancourt and Finn (2019) note more arts and health studies focus on music, dance and visual arts engagement rather than festivals, carnivals or digital arts (p.53).

Konlaan et al.'s (2000) study found the correlation between the frequency of cultural engagement and lower incidence of disease not as strong for attendance at all types of cultural events such as theatre or church or sports events.

Tymoszuk et al.'s (2020) study found that frequent engagement with museums, galleries and exhibitions over more active forms of engagement may be more of a protective factor against loneliness in older adults. This research reinforces the need for more culturally diverse art forms to be available and accessible to minoritised groups (Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p.55).

Leeds Light Night © University of Leeds

In this sense, cumulative impact consists of not just benefits, but a range of sensations, memories and evaluations: from the brilliant to the mundane to the offensive. In research into transformational museum experiences, researchers found that heightened reactions were correlated with a sense of "physical unease" as much as they were to moving and emotional experiences (Soren, 2009, p.238).

To improve our understanding of lifelong cultural engagement, we need to not just count up the sum total of impact but also to understand how impacts of our cultural experiences "interact, decay and evolve" (Brown, 2017, p.61) to further explore how memory, meaning and memory interrelate.

Researching cultural engagement across 'the life course'

As the previous sections explored, studies producing a snapshot in time of a fixed set of metrics enable comparisons across populations and, crucially, public policy areas. They help us understand what – and how much – value and impact our cultural experiences have on people at different life stages. But they tell us little about how the meanings and value we give to our cultural experiences shift and change throughout our lives.

This section provides an overview of studies that consider the value and impact of sustained engagement with cultural activities throughout a lifetime, including how we develop or discover our tastes and preferences for particular cultural activities.

On the whole, questions around taste development, progression, milestones and significant cultural events, preference discovery and the social transmission of taste have had limited attention in the field of cultural policy, management, marketing and audience studies (Brown, 2017). There are many questions that remain largely unanswered from Carnwath and Brown's (2014) literature review. For example, there are gaps in the evidence base around the duration and intensity of cultural experiences; how impact is affected by levels of existing familiarity, knowledge and experience; how we might prolong impact; and the significance of frequency and depth of impact (p.18).

The potential of early engagement as a reliable way of launching young people into a lifelong relationship with art and self-expression through cultural activity is clearly influential in both practice and research. Getting families and young people through the doors of cultural organisations is prevalent in audience development and communications strategies across the sector, as they're often regarded as a primary target market – or "future lifeblood" (Walmsley, 2019a, p.51) – for culture.

Influential research in this area explores the idea that our engagement as adults with arts and culture is significantly influenced by our initial engagement. This could have been through formal or informal learning structures in schools alongside supportive familial and community environments in which to play, learn and engage (Briggs, 2007; Husu and Kumplainen, 2021). This reinforces the intertwined nature of cultural and class values and how cultural participation creates social and cultural capital (Pitts and Price, 2021; Husu and Kumplainen, 2021).

There have been some landmark studies in music participation and consumption in particular that begin to light the way by exploring notions of social agency, identity development, cultural capital and past experiences (DeNora, 1999, 2009; McPherson et al., 2012; Gross and Pitts, 2016). Daenekindt and Roose's (2014) project reflects on how participants' musical tastes, which cross boundaries and genres, highlight the "malleability" of our cultural profiles, and how cultural practices "are not simply the result of dispositions that are firmly established in childhood" (p.84). In this sense, scholars in the field argue for a life course perspective that "offers greater specificity and explanatory power than a perspective that heavily weights childhood experiences" (Ho et al., 2021, p.1).

Qualitative studies have the potential to offer insight into the impacts of several important dimensions of our cultural experiences. These can include impacts on self-awareness, worldview, fulfilment, respite, catharsis, restoration, escapism and self-expression (Carnwath and Brown, 2014, p.14); or how audiences, participants and visitors have strategies of their own to elongate their experiences of arts and culture, such as collecting mementos and souvenirs (Walmsley, 2013). Qualitative data analysis often relies on the active choice of theoretical assumptions and positionings, which enable researchers to consider their own epistemological positioning – or how they know what they know (Hollstein, 2021, pp.8-9).

Over the last 15 years, longitudinal qualitative research has become an established research methodology within life course research in social policy, as it offers less standardisation and more flexibility than quantitative research, (Hollstein, 2021, p.9). Used over the long term, qualitative research methods can account for "changes in practices and perceptions, but also for changes in how people look into their past and how plans, expectations and anticipation of the future change over time and over the course of certain events" (Hollstein, 2021, p.9). One such study, launched in 2019, is the Talent 25 Longitudinal Study. Based in Leicester, this is an action research programme using a variety of methods which aims to explore the interventions needed to increase cultural opportunities and engagement at the earliest possible point in their cohort of 400 children, recruited aged 3-12 months old.

Audience studies and cultural value scholars call for more interdisciplinary approaches to be adopted in research to capture the complexity and multidimensional aspects of the experiences of audiences, visitors and participants (McCarthy et al., 2004; Walmsley, 2019a). Mixing methods in research can involve different types of data produced by different methods so the data builds to form a fuller picture (e.g. Tulloch, 2005) or "complementary" strategy (Bazeley and Kemp, 2012; McDowell, 2022b). Example studies include:

- Mackney and Young's (2022) exploration of longitudinal creative research methodology to evaluate an arts centre's participatory arts programme. They aimed to capture "stories of risk, resistance and transformation" by combining quantitative surveys, ethnographic techniques (observations, note-taking, interviews) and artistic research methods (pp.405-413).

- Lembo's (2017) study of country music attenders across 15 months via observation, informal and in-depth interviews pulled together data from a range of different honky-tonk music nights.

- The Watching Dance project (Reason et al., 2013) brought together neuroscientists and audience researchers to study experiences of dance performances, taking an interdisciplinary design, bringing together researchers from different fields with different methodological approaches to research the same thing.

- The Beauty Project was a year-long research collaboration between Quarantine and researchers in physics (Rox Middleton) and philosophy (Lucy Tomlinson). It explored the multiplicity and complexity of "experiences of beauty" as defined by research participants, using a variety of mapping, visual techniques and collated feedback via handwritten "lab books" to pull together their findings (Quarantine, 2023).

Adopting a multi-method approach allows for the flexibility to study different instances or modes of engagement as they shift and change across a longer timeframe:

- Marty (2007) was interested in how online museums can be vital in enabling lifelong relationships in person and online.

- Everett and Barratt's (2011) research looks at how the relationship between an individual and a single museum is maintained through different life stages.

- Kristinsdottir's (2017) research focused on the multiple ways people can experience museums, in both formal and informal lifelong learning programmes, reflecting similar studies in music, e.g. the informal jazz spaces in Burland and Pitts' (2012) research.

- Studies exploring how participating as a volunteer either within formal volunteering schemes (Brodie et al., 2009; Selbee and Reed, 2001; Rochester, 2006) or as amateur practitioners (Nicholson et al., 2023) are also opening our understanding of this more long-term engagement over a lifecycle with a specific arts, culture or heritage organisation.

Scholars identify the potential of building on existing data and research into cultural engagement. Example studies that do this include:

- Miles and Sullivan's (2012) project analysed historical data within a longitudinal mixed-method research design. This involved the combination of material from qualitative interviews conducted by the researchers with existing data from a birth cohort study conducted in 1958.

- Kopiez et al.'s (2009) exploration of Clara Schumann's archived collection of concert programme leaflets across her performing career (aged 9 to 71) provided an understanding of how she curated and programmed her concerts across 160 cities and over a particular period in time.

- In their work Theatre and Audience, Freshwater (2009) recalls the work of Davis and Emljanow's 2001 project, Reflecting the Audience, which was a mapping study of 40 years of theatre-going in London (1840-1880) based on statistical analysis and use of archive materials (p.22).

Calling on existing research and (re-)analysing secondary data opens up great potential for both intragenerational studies of cultural engagement, i.e. how engagement and life stage interrelate, and intergenerational narratives, i.e. across generations (Stewart, 2013, p.60; see also Scherger, 2009). This also addresses a question raised in our consultation process on whether we can – and how we might – map cultural engagement against the evolving priorities of particular generations (e.g. millennials, Gen Z, etc). This is a significant area for potential growth given the increased focus on sustainable, equitable practices and regenerative strategies for cultural production (see the Centre's Culture in Crisis report).

Research taking a 'life course approach' can help us to understand how engagement develops, adopting a type of lifecycle 'through-line' or narrative, instead of relying on monitoring changes in a set of pre-determined metrics through time. Sedgman (2022) proposes this type of approach to studying fandom, as it enables the examination of the "ebb-and-flow" of cultural engagements and how people "have mapped their shifting emotional investments and participatory activities over a lifetime" (p.199). In particular, mixing methods and co-research studies within a longitudinal timeframe feature significantly.

Examples of such studies include:

- Ho et al.'s (2021) research on how the timing and duration of music socialisation affects taste for classical music and opera. This study analysed data from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts in Canada and found that "fundamental change can occur at any time, depending on the social context, past biography, and the timing of change in conjunction with other life course events" (p.3).

- Cucu-Oancea's (2023) study aimed to explore the meaning of Christmas as a socio-cultural phenomenon and drew on solicited diaries of 14 young Romanian adults across four panels waves from 2004-2020. The study found that meanings were sensitive to significant turning points in participants' life trajectories (p.105).

- A study conducted by Newman et al. (2013) across 28 months looked at how older people's responses to contemporary visual art were influenced by their life course experiences.

- Pitts and Price's (2021) foundational project Understanding Audiences in the Contemporary Arts included the interview question: "Can you briefly tell us the story of how you became interested in the art you are most likely to attend?" in an attempt to capture life narratives (p.105).

There was a call in our research scoping workshops for the redistribution of power and funds to those who work "on the ground" directly with audiences and to "those who understand engagement the best". This would rely on researchers and practitioners alike co-creating research questions together, and enabling more action and participatory research to take place alongside, and within, cultural practices (Mackney and Young, 2022; Reinelt, 2014) and community partnership working (Muir and Cunningham, 2022).

There was a call in our scoping workshops for this digest for the redistribution of power and funds to those who work "on the ground" directly with audiences and to "those who understand engagement the best".

This builds on prominent themes explored by scholars in cultural engagement research, such as Lynne Conner, who champions audience enrichment and talks of audiences as "learning communities" (2013, p.106). Walmsley's audience enrichment model looks to shift the discussion in arts marketing from one focused more on communicating and articulating impact and advocacy, to one of engagement as a process rather than an end goal (2019b, p.231). This approach echoes Bilton's argument that meaning and value inherent in cultural products is realised only through "exchange, interactivity and engagement" (2017, p.101). This is reflected in recent work on evaluation in the sector, e.g. the "many-voiced" Evaluation Principle, part of a set of 12 principles that were co-created by the Centre with the sector.

Some examples of studies using co-research designs within a longitudinal framing include:

- The Connecting Through Culture As We Age (2021) project brings together a team of co-researchers, including disabled older adults and those who identify as socioeconomically and racially minoritised, to explore how and why people take part in arts and culture as they get older, particularly through digital access. Adopting a life-course approach, the project used a range of participatory and co-research methods (Dowlen and Gray, 2022) across three years.

- The Listening Experience Database (2023) project aims to crowdsource and publish data from the general public on their music listening habits.

Involving and collaborating with performing arts audiences creatively have also been researched by scholars across the globe: for instance, studies of practices by Steppenwolf Theatre Company in the USA (Harlow, 2014), Melbourne Theatre Company in Australia (Walmsley, 2013) and Theatre Royal Stratford East in the UK (Glow, 2013).

Furthermore, there's an increased focus within performing arts programmes and organisations to provide platforms for the audience voice within engagement activities such as audience talkbacks, listening labs and theatre clubs (e.g. Costa, 2022, p.429), and like those facilitated by initiatives such as Pudding. Collaborations between researchers and practitioners use methods such as long-listening, facilitating spectators' evolving relationships with performances and performers and their memories (Jacobsen et al., 2019), and reviewing how cultural experiences become meaningful to participants (Breel, 2023).

Developing longer-term relationships with audiences, visitors and participants has economic advantages, such as increasing customer retention. It's therefore long been a focus for strategies in arts and cultural marketing (Lee, 2005). The way arts organisations are typically set up doesn't provide them with the "tools for remembering" (Brown and Ratzkin, 2011, p.21), and there's also a call to develop more longitudinal, individual and contextual relationships within marketing and communications processes (Walmsley, 2019a; Rentschler et al., 2006).

Research adopting a life-course approach to understanding audience engagement patterns across a lifetime can inform the practice of generating more targeted and relevant communications tailored to specific life stages; such as those who've made a move to a new town or city, or those who've retired (Pitts and Price, 2021, p.122). Studies demonstrate that even a modest shift away from short-term to more long-term – if not necessarily entirely lifelong – relationships with audiences and communities can have radical impacts on the health and vibrancy of arts, cultural and heritage organisations (Harlow, 2014; Reinelt, 2014).

This empirical work exploring the complexity of how we experience value and art in particular contexts has its challenges. The idea of asking people to critique or report on negative experiences and responses could threaten the formation and maintenance of long-term partnerships between organisations and researchers, and organisations and funders (Sedgman, 2019, p.105). Similarly, in longitudinal studies, the commitment required increases, as those taking part in the research may well be regularly contacted about their participation over many years. However, there's growing evidence that taking part in research into their own cultural experiences can have deep and foundational impacts on people (e.g. Guhathakurta, 2022).

Leeds Light Night Opening © University of Leeds

Even a modest shift away from short-term to more long-term – if not necessarily entirely lifelong – relationships with audiences and communities can have radical impacts on the health and vibrancy of arts, cultural and heritage organisations.

Conclusions and implications

"I'm starting to think, what if instead of understanding what we do as producing and selling a product, we actually say our job is to guide people through their lifelong journey with art and theatre? What would your organisation look like if you started with that as an outcome? It would change everything! An entirely new model would be possible."

(Alan Brown, interview in Brown and McDowell, 2022, p.137)

While lifelong cultural engagement is far from a discrete topic, the studies included in this digest indicate that regular and sustained engagement with culture can have myriad impacts and add value to the lives of audiences, visitors and participants. However, we need a better understanding of how, and under what conditions, these benefits are felt over the long term. This would allow the cultural sector, funders and policymakers to adapt, learn and best serve the public.

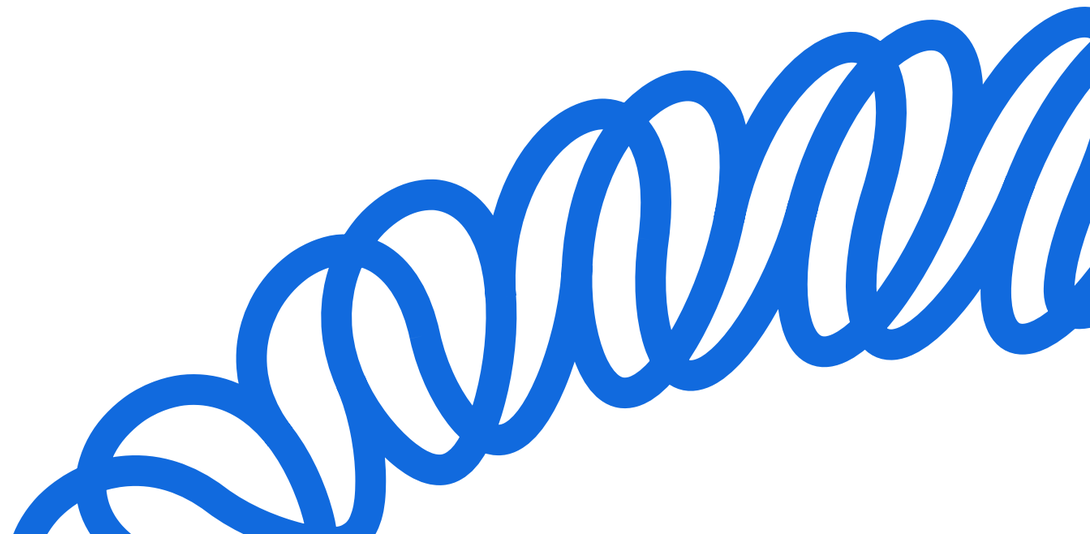
Research taking a 'life course approach' can help us understand how engagement develops. Adopting a type of lifecycle 'through-line' or narrative, instead of relying on monitoring changes in a set of pre-determined metrics through time, would help us develop this more holistic understanding.

The Highlights section outlines some key areas indicated in these studies for further research and exploration to inform both cultural practice and policymaking.

Next steps

Our research and evidence base for cultural value needs to respond to what we know works now and what needs to change in the future. This will allow us to support practitioners and policymakers in developing models and practices that are more robust, equitable and sustainable.

If you're aware of new publications or feel we've missed a vital piece of research or evaluation that should be included in this digest, please get in touch at: ccv@leeds.ac.uk



Glossary

Cultural capital
Originally developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this term is used to describe how societal power is transferred and maintained. For example, families might pass on cultural capital to their children by fostering familiarity with particular types of culture such as music, art or theatre.

Cultural engagement
While not providing a fixed definition, this digest uses this term to describe visiting, attending, experiencing or taking part in some form of activity or event organised by a cultural or artistic institution, organisation or practitioner. However this is an operational definition for this digest, and not a comprehensive one. Cultural engagement can be used broadly to describe any type of interaction with an activity deemed 'cultural' or 'artistic' in nature.

Empirical research
A term to describe studies that explore observed or measured phenomena, deriving knowledge from the actual experience of the researcher, as opposed to drawing on theories or hypotheses. Empirical research tends to draw on data generated from surveys, observations and experimental studies conducted by the researcher.

Epistemology
A philosophical term used to describe our study and understanding of knowledge itself. It's particularly useful when discussing how we know what we know in research: what are our findings based on? What assumptions are we making about the world? How are our findings shaped by the methods we've chosen? The term is often used alongside 'ontology' (see below).

Grey literature
A term used to describe the wide range of different information produced outside traditional publishing and distribution channels. Examples of grey literature could include evaluation reports, blog posts and articles.

Impact (concurrent, experienced, cumulative)
Impact used as a noun is a generally neutral term – a marked effect or influence of one thing on another. In the case of understanding cultural experience, Carnwath and Brown (2014) split impact into three distinct categories: "concurrent impacts" (those that occur during the experience), "experienced impacts" (observed post-event hours or days later), and "extended and cumulative impacts" (those that take place after the event or experience). The latter might be particularly relevant to our understanding of life-long impact, i.e. the memories, emotions or feelings engendered from a cultural experience that last through a person's lifetime.

Instrumentalisation
A term used in cultural policy to describe the co-option of the work of arts, cultural and heritage organisations and practitioners to fulfil certain educational, health, social and economic policies. See Belfiore, 2002; Holden, 2006; and Hadley and Gray, 2017 for a more detailed discussion of this in a cultural policy context.

Intergenerational research
Intergenerational research may study how the behaviour, or cultural engagement, of those belonging to a particular generation compares or is different to those belonging to another generation, i.e. 'in-between' generations.

Intragenerational research
Intragenerational research may study the behaviour or engagement of those within a particular generation. For intragenerational studies of cultural engagement, this might involve how engagement and life stage impact and interrelate throughout an individual or a generational cohort's lifetime.

Life-course research
This is a field of research originating from social and behavioural sciences that looks to examine an individual's life history, and/or long-term patterns of stability and change. It enables a consideration of how factors such as age, relationships, life transitions and events, and changes in society might impact a particular person's lived experience. There's potential for this approach to be applied to more studies of the value of lifelong cultural engagement. The Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies (SLLS) provides information on a number of longitudinal and life course studies currently in progress.

Longitudinal research
Longitudinal research typically takes place over an extended time period, rather than studying one instance or event. In the context of cultural engagement, this research explores the "extended" or "cumulative" impact as defined by Carnwath and Brown (2014). However, no strict or consistent criteria is used to define longitudinal research. Researchers can describe their research approach as 'longitudinal' if their fieldwork takes place across a series of months, to differentiate these studies from research projects with shorter fieldwork timelines.

Methodology
A term used to describe an approach to researching phenomena. It includes our research design and what methods we're using, but also how these relate to the object of study, and how we might analyse data generated by our research activities.

Methods
Research methods are tools to capture or generate data, such as surveys, observation, interviews or focus groups.

Metrics
Metrics are a set of numbers used for comparing, monitoring and tracking a particular process or activity. In the cultural sector, metrics can be anything from number of ticket sales for a performance, to visitor dwell time at an exhibit, to perceived levels of satisfaction with a cultural experience.

Mixed methods research
This type of research uses more than one method within a research study's design which can be quantitative or qualitative in nature. They're often combined to provide a more complete understanding, or to generate a different understanding, of a phenomenon.

Ontology
This type of research uses more than one method within a research study's design which can be quantitative or qualitative in nature. They're often combined to provide a more complete understanding, or to generate a different understanding, of a phenomenon.

Qualitative research
A type of research that aims to provide a deeper understanding into the 'how' and 'why' of a particular phenomenon, within its original setting or context. This can often mean generating and analysing non-numerical data that's rich in detail, typically using in-depth interviews, focus groups or observations.

Quantitative research
A type of research that aims to find correlations or test hypotheses about a particular phenomenon by describing, predicting or controlling for particular variables of interest, then giving it a numerical value. By doing so, the researcher can test the causal relationships between variables, make predictions and generalise results to wider populations through statistical analysis.

Key studies

A full list of literature reviewed for this digest as well as additional details of the methodology, including the search terms, can be found here. Below is a selection of key studies referenced a number of times throughout this digest:

Carnwath, J.D. and Brown, A.S. 2014. Understanding the value and impacts of cultural experiences: a literature review. Arts Council England.

Fancourt, D. and Finn, S. 2019. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. World Health Organization.

Gibbs, K., Sani, M. and Thompson, J. 2007. Lifelong Learning in Museums: A European Handbook. Lifelong Museum Learning.

Mowlah, A., Niblett, V., Blackburn, J. and Harris, M. 2014. The value of arts and culture to people and society: an evidence review. Arts Council England.

Pitts, S. and Price, S. 2021. Understanding Audience Engagement in the Contemporary Arts. Abingdon: Routledge.

Reason, M., Conner, L., Johanson, K. and Walmsley, B. 2022. Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts. Abingdon: Routledge.

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