

HOW THE PANDEMIC RESET THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: A REDISCOVERY OR A DECLINE?

Ruxandra-Irina POPESCU^{a}, Ovidiu-Iulian BUNEA^b, Ionela-Giorgiana NEGULESCU^c*

^a Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

^b Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

^c Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT

This study examines changes in cultural consumption behaviour in Romania in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, using a mixed methodology that includes document analysis and a questionnaire-based survey. The results indicate a general decline in interest in traditional cultural events, with a pronounced shift towards alternative and digital activities. Although certain types of institutions, such as museums, show signs of recovery, they are still below prepandemic levels. The conclusions suggest not only a change in the behaviour of the cultural consumer, but also an urgent need for strategic adaptation on the part of cultural institutions to keep up with these changes. This article argues that diversifying offers and adopting digital approaches may be the key to rehabilitating and revitalising the cultural sector in Romania.

KEYWORDS: *cultural consumption, COVID-19, digital adaptation, pandemic, institutional strategies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on society, affecting not just public health, but also traditional patterns of consumption and social interaction. In a context where social separation has become the norm, one area severely affected has been that of cultural and tourist services. This study aims to explore how cultural consumption trends in Romania have changed during the pandemic period and to analyse the adaptability of consumers to an ever-changing environment.

Contrary to the perception that cultural experiences are largely physical and tied to a specific space, we observe a radical change. Between January and June 2020, 11% of the respondents opted for virtual visits to museums and galleries, according to a previous study by Croitoru et al. (2021). In addition, 21% visited cultural websites to improve their knowledge, although this percentage decreased to 19% in the subsequent period. These data suggest a digital migration of cultural consumption, which warrants detailed analysis to understand the long-term implications.

Therefore, this research aims to assess the extent to which the pandemic has changed the behaviour of cultural consumers in Romania. The objectives are manifold: from evaluating the impact of the pandemic on the number of participants in outdoor cultural events to identifying nonartistic alternatives that have taken on the role of cultural consumption.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature offers a wide range of definitions for the concept of "culture." Edward Tylor, in his 1871 work, defines it as a conglomerate of knowledge, beliefs, customs, and practises that characterise a certain human community (Tylor, 1871). Hagoort (2003) expands on this definition,

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: irina.popescu@man.ase.ro

focussing on artistic-traditional aspects, stating that culture comprises all directed artistic expressions and services.

In Romanian literature, Dimitrie Gusti offers a tripartite classification of culture, identifying it as an objective structure (art, literature), institutional (schools, museums, churches), and personal (how individuals interact with cultural objects and institutions) (Moldoveanu & Ioan-Frânc, 1997).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a direct negative impact on access and participation in cultural events, with a drastic drop in visitors recorded (Ioniță et al., 2021). However, the pandemic has also served as a catalyst for transformations within cultural organisations, including a shift to digital solutions such as online viewing of plays and access to digitised book collections (Rössel et al., 2015).

From a sociological perspective, cultural consumption is not limited to attending events or cultural institutions (Radermecker, 2020). It also involves a series of practises and attitudes that contribute to the construction and delineation of social identities (Katz-Gerro, 2013). In this direction, the specialised literature notes how cultural preferences serve as means of social differentiation and as vehicles for transmitting cultural values and norms from one generation to another.

Another aspect discussed in the specialised literature refers to the role of the brand in evaluating cultural institutions (Baumgarth et al., 2016). In an era where information is abundant, an institution's brand becomes a sign of quality and credibility (Pusa & Uusitalo, 2014).

We consider it essential that the cultural sector identify and implement adaptive strategies after the impact of the pandemic. This involves embracing new technologies, as well as addressing emerging issues such as inequalities in access to culture and the need to reconsider traditional methods of assessing cultural quality.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main objective of our research is to assess the complex changes in cultural consumption behaviour due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are particularly interested in understanding how the pandemic has affected participation in outdoor cultural activities, identifying nonartistic activities that have replaced cultural consumption, and examining what types of cultural activities have seen a significant increase in popularity following the lifting of restrictions.

To achieve these objectives, we adopted a mixed-methodological framework that includes both document analysis and a questionnaire-based survey. Regarding document analysis, we conducted a systematic review of a significant number of secondary sources, including government reports, specialised studies, and online news articles. These were subjected to qualitative and quantitative analytical methods to isolate trends and key factors in cultural consumption behaviour during the pandemic period.

Parallel to this process, we developed and distributed an online questionnaire through the *isondaje.ro* platform. Our sample aimed at individuals aged between 18 and 64 years and collected a total of 231 responses, thus ensuring an acceptable margin of error and a robust level of statistical confidence. The questionnaire was designed to assess not only the frequency of participation in different forms of cultural activities, but also to identify the types of activities where participation has decreased during the pandemic or became more popular subsequently.

By integrating data collected from secondary and primary sources, our research offers a complex perspective and nuanced understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted cultural consumption.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 shows that in 2020, the number of libraries decreased by 393 units compared to 2019, reaching 8,829. The total volume of books also decreased by 2.5 million, reaching 158 million. Rural libraries outnumbered urban ones but had fewer books available. The number of active users dropped by 598,000, with the largest declines in public libraries.

Table 1. Library network and activity during the period 2019-2020

Type of library	Libraries - units		Existing volumes - thousands of volumes		Active users, thousands of people		Released volumes - thousands of volumes	
	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020	2019	2020
Total	9222	8829	160854	158359	3102	2504	33264	20574
<i>National</i>	3	3	21362	21459	28	11	568	123
<i>University</i>	91	89	26115	26167	266	181	4155	1573
<i>Specialised</i>	415	376	7525	7043	129	113	1040	765
<i>Public, of which:</i>								
County	41	41	17647	17647	368	232	7668	4248
<i>Municipality and town</i>	250	246	9901	9811	266	197	3304	2085
<i>Communal</i>	1877	1747	17130	16064	474	332	4160	2244
School	6545	6327	61174	60168	1571	1438	12369	9536

Source: Data processed from INS reports; Ioniță et al. (2021)

From Table 2, we observe that not only libraries but also museums and public collections have suffered. Their number decreased to 438, and the number of visitors was reduced by half compared to the previous year. The "Night of the Museums" had to be postponed and restructured. Most museums were state-owned, but the impact was felt across all forms of ownership, with a total decline in the number of visitors by over 10,000 thousand.

Compared to 2019, the year 2020 saw a decline in the number of visitors to museums and public collections by about 10,259 thousand people. Therefore, 4,723 thousand people preferred to visit museums and monuments, while 3,216 thousand people chose to visit zoological gardens or natural reserves. Access to museums for the 7,939 thousand visitors was made with 58.4% paying the full ticket price and only 22.9% receiving discounts.

Table 2. Number of visitors to museums and public collections, by mode of access in 2020

Type of unit	Thousands of people					
	Total visitors	From which in organised groups	Full price	Reduced price	Free	Free at the Night of the Museums
Total	7.939,3	453,8	4.640,4	1.818,3	1.470,2	10,4
<i>Art museums</i>	1.074,7	81,4	468,9	223,7	381,7	0,4
<i>Archaeological and History Museums</i>	1.479,8	77,0	832,6	344,5	302,1	0,6
<i>Science and Natural History Museums</i>	315,7	11,9	148,9	98,0	63,4	5,4
<i>Science and Technical Museums</i>	75,6	18,2	38,3	21,6	15,5	0,2
<i>Ethnography and Anthropology Museums</i>	818,3	42,7	380,6	181,5	255,6	0,6
<i>Specialised Museums</i>	225,7	40,4	98,8	73,8	51,7	1,8
<i>General Museums</i>	158,8	3,6	83,6	39,9	34,1	1,2
<i>Other Museums (mixed)</i>	339,1	18,8	166,5	83,1	89,4	0,1
<i>Monuments</i>	235,0	23,4	194,8	38,9	1,2	0,1
<i>Botanical Gardens, Zoos, and Aquariums</i>	2.312,3	45,6	1.578,2	525,6	208,5	-
<i>Natural Reserves</i>	904,3	90,8	649,6	187,7	67,0	-

Source: Authors' Processing Based on Ioniță et al. (2021)

The year 2020 represented a real challenge for the institutions and companies responsible for organising shows and concerts. For this reason, the number of these events has been on a continuous

decline compared to 2019, and the reduction was primarily determined by the disbandment of several artistic ensembles or dance troupes (Ioniță et al., 2021).

Although cultural institutions have tried to adapt to the new rules imposed, the number of spectators has dropped dramatically compared to 2019, so that in 2020 there were only 1,506 thousand spectators, thus constituting only 18.7% of the total of participants registered in the previous year (Figure 1).

Both in the case of theatre shows and in the case of dance and entertainment troupes, as well as artistic ensemble performances, the number of spectators decreased well over half of the number of spectators from 2019, recording declines of 77.1%, and 89.2%, respectively.

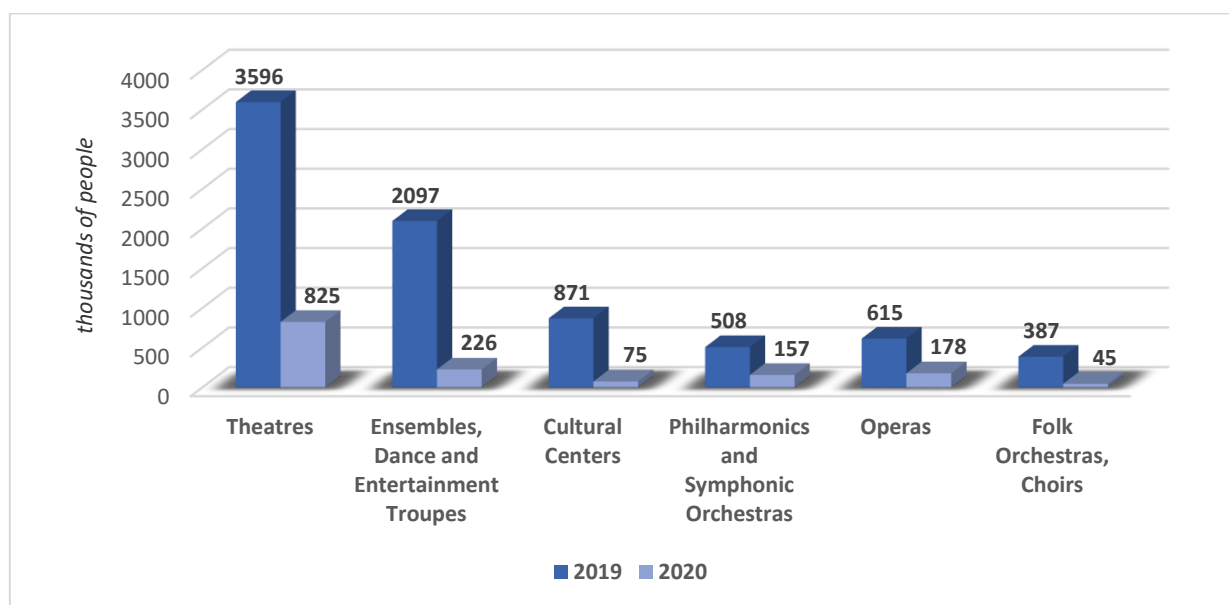


Figure 1. Distribution of spectators, by types of institutions and performance and concert companies, in the period 2019-2020

Source: Ioniță et al., 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic has visibly affected the Romanian cinema network, which is why, compared to 2019, the number of films made in 2020 has remarkably decreased (Ioniță et al., 2021). The unfriendly situation in 2020 also negatively influenced film production; the number of spectators dropped by 9,827,811. Furthermore, total revenues for the year decreased by 197,398.57 RON.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of the cinema network for the period 2019-2020

General data	2019	2020
Functional Cinemas	98	96
Seats	76.333	78.079
Spectators	13.129,961	3.302,150
Total revenue (RON)	265.383,592	67.985,022
Frequency per inhabitant	0,68	0,17
Average ticket price (RON)	20	20,59

Source: Author's Processing Based on the National Centre of Cinematography (2022)

Of the total of 231 respondents, the majority belong to the 18-24 age group (76.9%), followed by the 25-34 age group (16.1%). The 50-64 age group comes last with a percentage of 7%. The demographics of the gender show that 75.5% of the respondents are women and 24.5% are men, with a bias towards the urban environment, having 135 respondents from cities and 96 from rural areas. In terms of educational level, the majority of respondents (69.2%) have completed high school, followed by those with university degrees (22.3%) and master's degrees (8.5%). On demographic background, the questionnaire included a key question: "Did you participate in any cultural activity

between October 2021 and March 2022?" Approximately two-thirds of the respondents (67.9%) indicated that they did not participate, while 32.1% confirmed their participation in such activities. Reasons for not attending cultural activities varied, including lack of interest, preference for the online environment, and health concerns. In contrast, those who participated in cultural activities listed a wide range of events, from theatre performances to art exhibitions.

Table 4 offers a detailed perspective on how people used their time and internet access during the pandemic. Regarding non-artistic activities, watching movies on streaming platforms like Netflix or HBO Max dominated, with a percentage of 31.5%. This was followed by listening to music and reading, with fairly close percentages of 24.3% and 22.3% respectively. Interestingly, playing games on phones or computers was also a popular option, with a percentage of 21.9%.

In the field of using the Internet for educational or cultural purposes, videos of this type were the most popular, capturing a percentage of 23.1%. Social networks were a close second, with 22.4%, followed by watching movies online, with 20.6%. Online reading and watching concerts or live performances online recorded lower percentages, 8.9% and 6.6% respectively.

Although the pandemic has limited access to cultural activities in public spaces, the number of visits to museums, exhibitions, and galleries was surprisingly high, with a percentage of 39.9%. Music performances also had a high percentage, at 38%. On the contrary, open-air cinemas attracted only 13.1% of the respondents.

Regarding access to books, the printed version remains the favourite, with 59.2%, while the digital format attracted 37.1% of the respondents. Audiobooks are less popular, with a percentage of only 3.8%.

For the future, a significant number of respondents intend to go to the movies or visit historical monuments and archaeological sites. At the same time, a large part of respondents, 60% to be exact, expressed the desire to visit museums more often, indicating a potential revitalisation of interest in post-pandemic cultural activities.

Table 4. Consolidated analysis of cultural behaviours and leisure activities during the pandemic period

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Non-Artistic Activities	Watching movies (Netflix, HBO Max, etc.)	31.5
	Listening to music	24.3
	Reading	22.3
	Playing games on the phone or computer	21.9
Uses of the Internet	Watch educational or cultural videos	23.1
	Social networks	22.4
	Watching movies online	20.6
	Reading	8.9
Cultural Activities Practised	Visiting Historical Monuments	23.9
	Visit museums, exhibitions, galleries	39.9
	Music performances	38.0
Forms of Accessing Books	Printed books	59.2
	Digital-format books	37.1
	Audiobook	3.8
Future Cultural Activities	Going to the cinema	24.8
	Visiting Historical Monuments/Archaeological Sites	23.3
	Visiting a museum	19.7
	Going to the library	8.4
Degree of Museum Visitation	Wants to visit more often	60.0
	Not interested	17.0
	Familiar with museums in Romania	12.0
	Visiting museums abroad	7.0

Source: Data processed from questionnaire results

The data on global museum attendance (Table 5), provided by The Art Newspaper (2023) for the year 2022, show some improvement compared to previous years, but with a still slow recovery compared to the pre-pandemic period. While museums and galleries have managed to attract a larger number of visitors in 2022, these numbers remain below the levels of 2019, suggesting that the road to full recovery is still long and fraught with uncertainties.

Table 5. The 10 Most Visited Museums in the World in 2022

Rank	Museum	City	Number of visitors 2022	% Changes Compared to 2021	Percentage decrease compared to 2019 (%)
1	Louvre	Paris	7.726.321	173%	-20%
2	Vatican Museum	Rome	5.080.866	215%	-26%
3	British Museum	London	4.097.253	209%	-34%
4	Tate Modern	London	3.883.160	236%	-36%
5	National Museum of Korea	Seoul	3.411.381	170%	2%
6	Musée d'Orsay	Paris	3.270.182	213%	-10%
7	National Gallery of Art	Washington D.C.	3.256.433	91%	-20%
8	Metropolitan Museum of Art	New York	3.208.832	64%	-34%
9	Centre Pompidou	Paris	3.009.570	100%	-8%
10	Hermitage Museum	St. Petersburg	2.812.913	71%	-43%

Source: The Art Newspaper, 2023

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study highlights a series of relevant observations on how the pandemic has influenced cultural behaviour and leisure time spending. Although cultural events have been significantly impacted by pandemic restrictions, our analysis underlines a less visible but very real phenomenon: the general public's discouragement towards traditional cultural consumption. Despite encouragements and revitalisation programmes for this sector, interest in cultural activities remains unsatisfactory, while other forms of entertainment, such as watching movies and video games, have gained ground.

An unexpected finding was the stagnation of cultural consumption between October 2021 and March 2022, a period that brought no significant progress compared to March 2020 - September 2021. In this context, a significant proportion of respondents chose to ignore cultural activities, instead opting to dedicate their time to other types of activity, such as watching movies on online platforms or playing on their smartphones.

Although restrictions were lifted in March 2022, a change in respondent preferences has not yet been observed. Instead, a range of alternative cultural activities, such as visits to historic monuments or cinemas, seem to attract public attention. However, museums are not considered a priority by most of the respondents, even though the number of global visitors has shown improvement.

Our study provides an interesting perspective on how the pandemic has changed cultural consumption. Our findings align with other research showing a change in leisure behaviour due to pandemic restrictions.

In a study published by Coman (2020), it was shown that the pandemic led to a dramatic drop in attendance at traditional cultural events such as theatre shows or concerts, in favour of activities that can be carried out safely at home or online.

Another study published by Kinczel & Müller (2022) found that consumer preferences for indoor activities, such as watching movies and video games, increased significantly as people sought safer alternatives to spend their leisure time.

However, our finding regarding the stagnation of cultural consumption between October 2021 and March 2022 is novel. This suggests that, although there have been initiatives to revitalise the cultural industry, the effects are not yet visible at the consumer behaviour level. This could signal a lasting change in how the public interacts with culture.

As for the interest in alternative cultural activities, such as visiting historical monuments or cinemas, we may be dealing with a phenomenon of "cultural reorientation," where people are willing to explore different forms of cultural activities that have not traditionally been at the centre of their attention. A study published by Monaco (2021) identified this behaviour among tourists who started visiting less-known attractions in the context of the pandemic.

Therefore, the research conclusions suggest not only a change in consumer behaviour with respect to culture but also the need for revised strategies to attract and retain public interest in the cultural field. The increased attention paid to non-artistic and digital activities during the pandemic cannot be ignored and requires a proactive approach from cultural institutions to adapt to new trends. The results suggest that although there is a slow recovery in participation in cultural activities, it has not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. Thus, in a context where cultural institutions are striving to adapt to new realities, digital approaches and diversifying the offering can play an essential role in attracting a new audience.

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