



Establishing a creative identity: Rebranding a creative space



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ABSTRACT

Strategies on audience development have become central to cultural debates in Malta. Such interest stems partly from Malta's current low rate of participation in cultural events. While there has been a rising interest in analysing cultural consumption and audiences quantitatively, the modes of agency of cultural participants, who reflexively make sense of events differently, have received inadequate attention. This article tackles this gap by presenting empirical results of a recent qualitative study on audiences' reflexivity for the National Centre for Creativity in Valletta, Malta. The contribution of this article lies in the fact that it provides an epistemological understanding of the meanings and feelings of audiences for engagement, or lack of it, in cultural participation at the National Centre for Creativity in Malta. Results presented in this article were used as guiding frame in the process of rebranding this national Centre as a creative space in the capital city of Malta.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the meaning and ontological experiences for engagement, or lack of it, in cultural participation at the National Centre for Creativity in Malta. Malta's cultural infrastructure is growing in importance by way of strategic investments on various artistic projects especially within the context of Malta's preparation to host the European Capital of Culture in 2018. Such strategies aim to increase Malta's cultural participation rate, which registers second lowest in Europe, at a meagre 18%. (Eurobarometer, 2013). The attendance to public performances is also low, with 49% saying that they did not attend concerts and 54% do not go to the theatre due to lack of interest (Eurobarometer, 2013). Despite the fact that there has been growing interest in obtaining statistical data on cultural audiences in Malta, there is missing work on understanding sociologically the meanings of different publics towards cultural participation.

This article tackles this gap. By drawing on from a qualitative research, this article provides an understanding for participation at the National Centre for Creativity in Malta. The empirical results presented here are part of research commissioned in the process of rebranding. This article emphasises the interconnection of structure-agency and seeks to contribute to the debate about audiences, grounded on the principle that cultural audiences are the outcome of continuous interactions between dispositions and reflexivity. Here, cultural audiences are treated not simply as epiphenomena of political and economic

structures. Instead, similar to Jeffrey Alexander's (2003) argument when speaking on cultural forms, weight is placed on the autonomy of such audiences and how they have the capacity to alter existing structures. The explanations of individual perception were mediated by an understanding of meaning and feelings of audiences and the person's internal and external symbolic structures.

Developing a brand identity as a creative centre for an organisation such as Malta's National Centre for Creativity – i.e. one that has operated for more than a decade without systematic analysis of its audiences – necessitates a long-term qualitative study of its audiences. This is what led *Fondazzjoni Ċentru għall-Kreattività* – the legal entity that runs the Centre for Creativity – to appoint a Data Scientist in Residence in 2015. Working hand in hand with the organisation's Artistic Director and Marketing Manager, the Data Scientist in Residence was able to provide scientific insight into matters that may seem obvious to those inside a cultural organisation but have no concrete means to show that things are the way they know them to be. Such empirical evidence was used as a guiding frame for rebranding this centre as a creative space rather than as a showcase for artistic works. This is thoroughly explained in the next section.

2. Malta's National Centre for creativity

St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity was established in 2000 when the old fortification of St James Cavalier in Valletta was

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designated by the Government of Malta, as millennium project to redesign the building as a Centre for Creativity. Architect Richard England was faced with the task of re-engineering this building, originally meant to keep people out, as one open to all and inviting anyone to come inside. The Centre for Creativity has functioned primarily as an arts centre, particularly because there is no such entity in Malta. However, the organisation has frequently encouraged engagement from other aspects of the creative industries outside the art world, primarily from creative endeavours that are not immediately associated with the arts, such as creative thinking and the sciences.

The original branding of the Centre was directly tied in with the historic building that is St James Cavalier, a part of the city of Valletta's 17th century fortifications. So much so that the centre was named St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity. The original logo featured a prominent outline of the building and the name emphasised St James Cavalier over the Centre for Creativity descriptor. The effects of this connection resulted in having the general public and frequent visitors referring to this Centre in terms of the structure of St James Cavalier. This was also emphasised by research participants during qualitative interviews and their meanings are aptly presented in the empirical evidence section of this article. This led the Foundation to emphasize the Centre for Creativity aspect over St James Cavalier as a building by renaming the centre from St James Cavalier Centre for Creativity to *Spazju Kreattiv* (Creative Space).

The precise wording on the Foundation's mission statement with regards to audience development and engagement is as follows: "to act as a catalyst for all forms of expression, by providing space and extending experience to reach all people and involve them in interactive participation" (www.kreattivita.org). The appropriate enactment of this primary aim, leads back to the concept of audience development and particularly audience engagement by ensuring alternatives to top down models of communication. This led to the need for a sociological research exercise in which for the first time, knowledge on the perceptions of persons who visit the Centre as well as those who do not, was acquired.

Primarily, it is significant to give an overview of the creative and cultural events taking place at the Centre for Creativity, some of which are often perceived as 'highbrow' by the general public. An example of this is the cinema programme. The programme of live cinema screenings comes from the National Theatre in London, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow. The cinema rarely shows Hollywood or other mainstream films which appeal to a broader audience. The Centre is a member of the Europa Cinemas network, and therefore shows several European and other world cinema productions, which are frequently deemed as not having mass appeal, particularly because they are screened with subtitles. However, this is not necessarily the case with live theatre and music presented at the Centre, as in this case a broad range of activities are presented, appealing to a wider public. It seems that people who are not familiar with the details of the events programme at the Centre may get the impression that the rest of the programme is the same as that offered in the cinema, which has for some time received the most coverage in newspaper advertising, along with productions of play performed in English – the language itself can act as a barrier for large segments of the Maltese-speaking public. This language barrier is not only an issue of distinction here but other theatre organizations in Malta that choose produce performances only in English, or at least predominantly so.

Thus, it is worth noting that the national Centre for Creativity does not hold a monopoly over the cultural industries in Malta. There are other institutions working within the arts that work in parallel and in collaboration with the Centre. The Arts Council Malta (ACM) (ACM, 2016) works on a number of artistic projects to increase the accessibility of the Maltese public to the arts, partly by funding public cultural events. The ACM is the cultural advisor to the Government and works on the Cultural Policy and strategies for the arts. Through administering the Malta Arts Funds, ACM contributes towards investing in local artists

and strengthening artistic practice and cultural development. Moreover, *MUŻA*, the new national museum of Art in Malta, administered by Heritage Malta, is working on the process of community empowerment, both through educational programmes as well as in a non-formal manner and recognising the needs of each individual to access arts and culture (Debono, 2014).

3. Theoretical framework

According to the critical stream of sociology of art that exposes the power relations in the art world, audiences are treated as passive consumers of art and their capacities to decode art are dependent on their cultural capital. It is argued that there is a strong homology between taste, class and power and the appropriation of the arts as status markers, in which dispositions, cultural knowledge and skills, mode of thoughts and linguistic competences are acquired through the process of socialisation (Bourdieu (1973, 1984 [1979]) – an undemocratic effect of 'high' art in which "art and cultural consumption are predisposed ... to fulfil a social function of legitimating social difference" (1984[1979],p.7). Focus is placed here on issues of prestige as a distinguishing feature in the high arts that serve to reinforce social boundaries. Audiences are studied as requiring an innate skill, which is inherited or acquired through the education system, to decode and make sense of artworks. This becomes "an illusion collectively shared and approved" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 334). Following this argument, social actors cannot be considered away from their contextual conditions and their own biographical standpoints (Lahire, 2008). This includes an analysis of individual's educational level and social class.

The Great British Class Survey (GBCS) by Savage et al. (2013) uses a Weberian approach to social class and draws from Bourdieu's concern of capital, as a form of power resource. The seven class model by Savage et al. rests on different access to economic, cultural or social resources in its ranking. The 'established middle class', for example, refers to individuals who obtained tertiary education, who are in well-paid jobs, who like 'highbrow' culture but are also have "emerging cultural capital" that include enjoying rock music and maintaining a Facebook page. Such class could also be similar in lifestyle to what Richard Peterson (1992) refers to as "cultural omnivores".

The omnivore theory rejects Bourdieu's high cultural tastes of the highly educated individuals in society. Instead it argues that individuals with tertiary education are more like "cultural omnivores", embracing different cultural tastes associated with the high, middle and low brow tastes. People from higher status groups are considered to appreciate a wider array of musical genres, compared to lower status groups (Peterson & Simkus, 1992). Thus, the turn of the twenty-first century has brought with it a post-Bourdieu meta-critical approach, focusing more on the notion of reflexivity.

Taking a cue from Tony Bennett's (2007) ontological understanding of culture, the Centre for creativity is not a static or passive inert entity but one that has its own autonomy. Since 2000, the Centre has been constantly made and remade and altered by individuals who were involved in its strategic planning and those who participated in its events. This, in return, influenced the modes of reception of both the insiders (persons who are directly involved) and the outsiders (the general public). Such understanding is required to devise strategies for audience development and engagement.

In an attempt to explicitly examine audiences and make sense of ways people exhibit openness or limitations to cultural consumption, the use of quantitative methods are not sufficient in this case. Following this premise, our research was purposely built around a qualitative study. In line with Lahire (2008), an understanding of cultural practices of individuals requires a contextualised approach that takes into consideration the individual cultural profiles and their 'intra-individual portraits'. This is the only way, according to Lahire that "leads to describing how cultural practices and preferences vary in relation to the domains, sub-domains, contexts or circumstances of cultural activity or

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