



Centre for Research on Settlements and Urbanism

Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning

Journal homepage: <http://jssp.reviste.ubbcluj.ro/eng/index.html>



The COVID-19 Pandemic as Catalyst for Virtual Events

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DOI: 10.24193/JSSP.2023.1.02

<https://doi.org/10.24193/JSSP.2023.1.02>

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, independent creative spaces, cultural events, digital technologies, cultural and creative industries (CCI), creative cities

ABSTRACT

Globally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the cultural sector the most by restricting, suspending, and cancelling events in physical spaces. In Romania, the occurrence of the first COVID-19 infected case and the gradual restriction of the public to events until their complete stop during emergency and alert periods led to the reorientation of cultural spaces to online audiences through social media. The present study focuses on the evolution of online events organized by the independent cultural and creative industry during the emergency state of the pandemic crisis (February 27 – May 14, 2020). The types of spaces and the perception of cultural professionals were considered in the analysis, at the city level. The independent creative communities of two of the most effervescent cultural cities in Romania (Timișoara and Cluj-Napoca) readjusted their cultural activity, by organizing online events. A mixed method of analysis was used, in which two methods of data collection were employed: some 205 events recorded on different social media pages (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) were collected and in-depth interviews with relevant representatives of the independent cultural and creative industry were conducted. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the qualitative data. Results showed an openness of artists to the virtual environment and a relocation of events from the physical to the online environment, a readjustment of events for the virtual audience through creativity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of cultural and creative industries in urban development. Like any other industries, cultural and creative industries (CCI) include agglomerations of spaces, generally located in the centre of metropolitan areas, although their spatial distribution and concentration depends on the particular features of every cultural activity. Their spatial distribution is of high interest for urban planners, decision-makers and scientists. The literature review suggests an increased interest in the creative economy associated with the

creative class of workers, a concept developed by Florida (2003), and further advanced with the theory of the 3Ts (Technology, Talent and Tolerance), as essential factors for determining a *creative milieu* (Arauzo-Carod and Coll-Martinez, 2020).

The efforts of active urban stakeholders were directed towards project applications under EU funding programmes such as the European Capital of Culture or the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, through which they tried to connect the cultural offer with the urban regeneration strategies (Rotolo, 2021). One of the criticisms of Florida's theory derives precisely from the

fact that innovation does not only depend on the local conditions but also on the connections of the local environment to global opportunities (Bontje and Musterd, 2009).

The impact of the real estate market on the attraction of cultural workers and the creative activities is one of the main aspects that influences the evolution of cultural regeneration projects, in some cases representing the context of gentrification. In other situations, although with a rhetoric of encouraging social capital, either against the background of political frictions or the marginalization of certain groups of individuals, some artists were pushed to the peripheries of the urban centres, in much lower price locations, thus amplifying social inequalities (Atkinson and Easthope, 2009; Peck, 2005; Grodach, 2013). In countries such as Great Britain, but also in other Western and Northern European countries, the neoliberal creative-city strategies that emphasize the revitalization of old buildings under the umbrella of the so-called cultural quarters or districts have become the main triggering factor for the appearance of some creative cities (Bontje and Musterd, 2009; Mould and Comunian, 2015; Lidgaard et al., 2017; Bain and Landau, 2019).

The absence or quasi-absence of coherent public policies that stimulate creative cities defines, above all, cities with a post-industrial economy (Atkinson and Easthope, 2009). Economically marginalized spaces, such as temporary locations within industrial platforms, have become important places of communication for local networks of creativity (Bader and Scharenberg, 2010; Gainza, 2018; Marian-Potra et al., 2020). If the impact of public policies on large cities is quite highly debated in the scientific literature, the same context in the post-socialist cities from emergent countries of the European Union, such as Poland or Romania, are rarely investigated. In these cases, the formation of multiple formal or informal clusters more often has caused the decrease in the number of networking activities and their intensity (Borén and Young, 2020).

According to different local experts from several European creative cities, education is the most important element in urban and economic development strategies (Bontje and Musterd, 2009). The involvement of professionals in the development of cultural policies becomes essential (Borén and Young, 2020). Moreover, a creative environment with a cosmopolitan attitude defined by tolerance, openness and trust is more suitable for enhancing cultural activities, while stimulating collective well-being (Cerisola and Panzera, 2022).

Against the background of various European models for the economic valorisation of culture and the development of an algorithmic society, culture becomes a tool for individuals and communities in the cybernetic

environment. Not everything can be digitized or limited to a digital replica; it is necessary to rethink policies for the preservation and cultural enhancement using technology and the strategic role of the territory that should be accepted by the internet users (Lazzeretti, 2020).

Five potential perspectives of urban evolution through cultural economy are identified in the specialized literature: the conventional model (without any cultural economy policy), the creative city model (the model developed by Florida), the cultural industries model (by encouraging clustering), the cultural occupations model (with an emphasis on artists' occupations and their needs), and the cultural planning model (through neighbourhood empowerment) (Grodach, 2013). Regardless of the selected model, cultural actors are the ones who can stimulate new relationships between spaces and society, but their impact is limited, especially at the local level. It is the role of policies to reconsider the territory scale through collaborative projects between different organisations and empowering local community (Kahya and Ataov, 2019).

For Romania, in the two cities selected for analysis (Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara), although there are no public policies directly aimed at the replication or development of a cultural planning model, the following were found: a). the presence of a complex number of public and independent cultural entities, with a cohesive cultural offer and international collaborations, b). the professional affiliation of each city to an international network (Timișoara - European Capital of Culture and Cluj-Napoca - City of Film within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network), c). public strategic connections between culture and urban regeneration (Cluj County Council, 2012; Cluj-Napoca Local Council, 2015; Timișoara City Hall, 2014).

The role of digital technologies in cultural events. Digital technologies strengthen the public's access to physical exhibits of some collections and also increase their interest in participating at creative-cultural activities carried out at some locations or on the occasion of various cultural events. They offer the possibility of replicating all the previously mentioned elements virtually, as well (Bertacchini and Morando, 2013). Contemporary technologies, including social networks, are often considered an opportunity to increase the audience of cultural events (Heuguet, 2016; Pulh and Mencarelli, 2015). Some cultural institutions have included content dissemination via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, forums, etc.) in their marketing strategy, thus encouraging interaction with the public (Juanals and Minel, 2017; Quillot et al., 2017; Rahdari et al., 2017). Much more, the effects of cultural events can be observed through social media, namely during the live experience and afterwards, when participants share impressions and memories related to

them (Richards, 2020). However, there is a tension generated by the adopted management model resulting from maintaining control and free access to cultural assets and events (Bertacchini and Morando, 2013).

The event industry has evolved over time. Although initially designed for recreation and entertainment, its purpose has been diversified, events being currently perceived as ways of learning, promoting or accumulating experiences (Berridge, 2014). They can also be seen as temporary, generating unique experiences, lived by the audience at the time of their production, and difficult to reconstruct (Ton and Le, 2021).

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been perceived as a new context that the entire human community must face. One of the most affected fields of activity was the cultural sector, especially the uninstitutionalized, independent one. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the establishment of emergency and alert periods, the implementation of social distancing measures, and restrictions on mass gatherings. For event organizers, virtual events have become a potential solution during the outbreak. In this case, the disadvantages generated by the lack of physical interaction and the technical problems that may arise during virtual events are counterbalanced by a series of advantages, such as the complementarity of these events, the elimination of unnecessary travel, the reduction of the carbon footprint etc. (Ton and Le, 2021).

The fragility of workers in the cultural sector is not recent; the economic recession of 2018 highlighted, on the one hand, the closure of art galleries along with the high degree of artists' unemployment, and, on the other hand, the characteristics of the individuals' adaptation, such as their openness to cooperation and joint projects (Pérez-Ibáñez and López-Aparicio, 2018). From the perspective of the use of immersive technologies (communication platforms, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, livestreaming, event apps, podcastings, etc.), the pandemic accelerated their use, a trend that has maintained in the post-pandemic period (Wreford et al., 2019; Estanyol, 2022). If location is an important factor for organizing an event on site, in the case of online events the virtual environment is the vital one. The social presence, that feeling of belonging to the virtual environment, is the challenge intensified by this pandemic context (Yung et al., 2022). Moreover, Capelli et al. (2016) demonstrated that, in the case of musical concerts, audience participation in the artistic act has a much greater impact on consumers. Additionally, Khlystova et al. (2022) points out the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the emergence of new business and organizational models, which focus on various forms of resilience.

Against the background of a rather accelerated competition, artists are constantly forced to find their

own means of expression and select channels of communication (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm, 2015). For this reason, storytelling is one way to communicate, the event organizers being able to determine a certain level of engagement (Ton and Le, 2021) or even physical gratifications as for the products that use virtual technology (Williams and Ferdinand, 2019).

To combat the spread of the virus during the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities at any spatial level set up various directives to discourage meetings in public and closed spaces, while communities found some social connections in the virtual environment (Hannigan et al., 2020; Stanciu et al., 2020; Khlystova et al., 2022). The state of emergency was set up in many countries affected by the pandemic (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.) as a first step in limiting the spread of the virus, the extension of restriction period depending on the evolution of the number of infected cases. In the case of Romania, the establishment of the state of emergency started on March 16 (Decree no. 195/2020), firstly for one month, and then extended by another month, until May 14, 2020 (Decree no. 240/2020). Starting with May 18, 2020, the state of alert was established for 30 days, and applied at the national level (Decision no. 394 from 2020). The effects of these measures on the cultural sector translated into the suspension of cultural activities and the closure of cultural spaces, be them public or independent, the lack of funds both for the remuneration of cultural workers and as a support for events, as well as the public reluctance to participate at events onsite.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the cultural content of two Romanian cities by analysing the cultural activities of independent cultural-creative spaces, which were transferred online in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, the following research questions were established: What was the role of cultural events before and during the pandemic? What were the challenges during the online transfer of cultural events and how the creative workers responded to them?

2. METHODOLOGY

According to the Digital Economy and Society Index 2022 and the Cultural Employment Index 2017, out of all member states of the European Union, Romania records the lowest performances in terms of society digitization and employability rate of the population in the field of culture (Suciu et al., 2018; European Commission, 2019). However, in the Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor (2019), six cities in Romania (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Baia Mare, Timișoara, and Iași) are found with relevant cultural activity (European Commission, 2019). Special attention was given to Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, both university cities, strong cultural centres and with a

relevant number of independent cultural spaces ($n = 126$ independent cultural spaces, from which 85 are found in Cluj-Napoca and 41 in Timișoara). Starting from the typology of creative spaces proposed by the Mulas et al. (2017), eight categories of spaces were identified in these two municipalities: maker space, community space, co-working space, business accelerator, incubator, event space, festival space and innovation hub. A total number of 205 events were recorded in the creative spaces in the two cultural centres. The reference unit for collecting the online events was the number of posts on the Facebook page of each cultural space. At first, in order to collect the data on digital events, we searched on their own web pages and social media channels (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook). After filtering the official data, quite a few cultural spaces were found to have their own webpage, whilst the promotion of some events or day-to-day activities was found in an insignificant share. YouTube pages had content about an even smaller share of independent cultural spaces and included only post-event recordings, while Instagram pages duplicated Facebook events, although more selectively detailing the content found on Facebook platform. Considering the complexity of the availability of information associated with digital events and the relevance of the associated information, the Facebook platform was selected for this study.

Digital cultural activities were analysed for the reference period overlapping the emergency period of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which regular cultural activities onsite were suspended and transferred online. The perception of event organizers and cultural content creators was investigated through qualitative analysis based on interviews, conducted before the pandemic and after the emergency period.

Descriptive statistics were used to interpret the data associated with the events; mean, minimum, median, maximum, standard deviation, Q1, Q3 and IQR were calculated and graphically displayed (Fisher and Marshall, 2009; Kaur et al., 2018; Brownstein et al., 2019; Banning, 2020; Cooksey, 2020). To describe the overview of quantitative data (statistics for events data) we used a series of statistics based on percentiles, the five - number summary -, without graphically representing them through boxplot diagram or other types of graphs.

In addition, the mean of the centre was used to describe the centre (the middle of the data); IQR (interquartile range), derived from the five - number summary, and the standard deviation to characterize the variation of the data. Qualitative data were displayed in tables, namely through a two-way table (crosstab – the distribution of the categorical variable online activity, including the events component, for the creative spaces in the analysed cities). A stacked bar graph was used to show the conditional distribution of

online activities, including the event component for the space and city typology categories, using joint distribution values as data labels.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The suspension of the face-to-face activities implicitly determined the disappearance of the public, a source of income for both the event organizers and for other local producers. The cultural employment recorded the lowest values in Romania among all the EU Member States (Montalto et al., 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, all events were disseminated online to a hybrid community (Simons, 2018; Schulte-Romer and Gesing, 2022), offering the possibility to participate at the event on-site. However, according to the interviews conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 with representatives of all 126 cultural and creative spaces that remained open during the emergency and alert period in the two cities, we found that event organizers felt that they were forced to reinvent themselves, in some cases, exclusively for the online community. However, their experience in using digital technologies can be, in most cases, associated only with the social media promotion of offline events:

„According to Facebook, we have organized 89 events; this many because we are an open space” (Planetarium).

„Here, at Centrul de Interes, Facebook works best, that’s clear; it is practically the most visible for us, and probably even if the promotion was exclusively on Facebook, I am sure that the number of participants would not decrease” (Centrul de Interes).

The development of the cultural-creative community in the two cities was based on relevant events and activities carried out on site. These pointed out the lived experiences and the transfer of know-how skills through interaction and socialization:

„The project is linked to the location [...] as far as I know, for almost 22 years; our space is the longest-lasting alternative cultural space [in Cluj-Napoca]; a lot of ideas and projects appeared here; it’s a space for dialogue” (Casa Tranzit).

„However, in our short history, we have already had dozens of events in the cultural field: exhibitions, vernissages, book launches, painting, sculpture, movie screenings, cultural evenings, debates, all of which aiming to polarize a small part of Timișoara’s culture as we perceive it today. That’s why the house is sparsely furnished, to make room. The house is not listed as historical monument, so we can expand it” (Casa cu Iederă).

Only 41 of the total 126 existing independent cultural and creative spaces (25 in Cluj-Napoca, and 16 in Timișoara) held events in the analysed period (Fig. 1). If, before the onset of the pandemic, the cultural-

artistic events took place exclusively on site and were more numerous, once with the establishment of the state of emergency a decrease in their number was observed, as well as the closure of many cultural spaces.

During the reference period, some 205 events were recorded (155 in Cluj-Napoca, and 50 in Timișoara), and they were promoted through Facebook posts (Fig. 1, Table 1), with several specific characteristics.

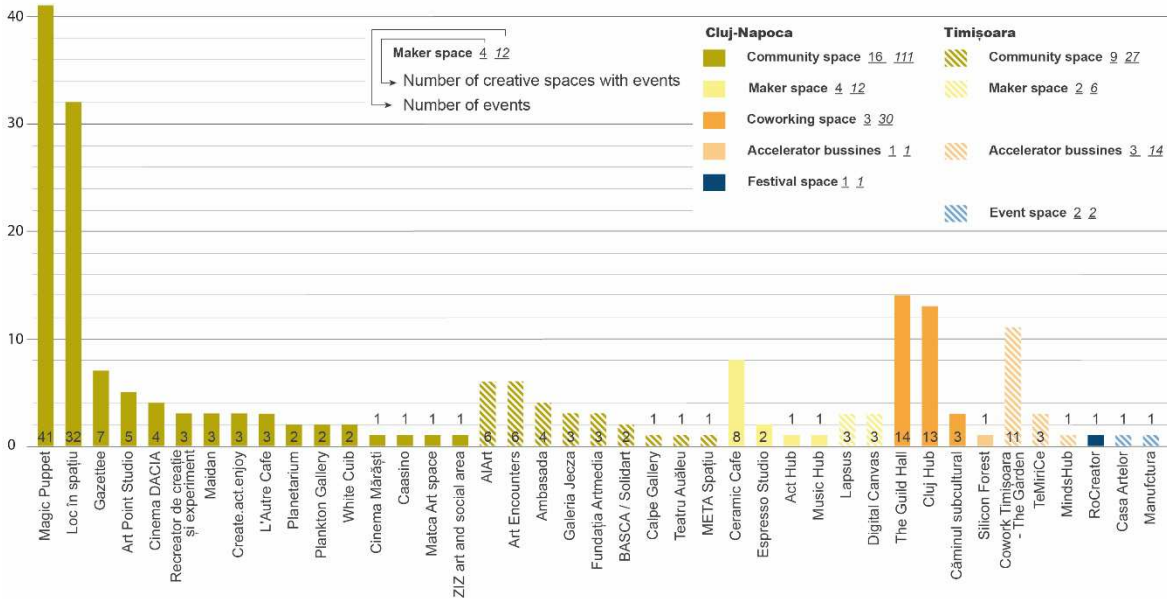


Fig. 1. Distribution of events between 27 February and 14 May 2020, for every type of creative space, at the city level.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics time for events.

City	Variable	Total posts	No. of creative spaces	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Q1	Median	Q3	Max	IQR
Cluj-Napoca	Number of events	155	25	6.20	9.86	1	1	3	5	41	4
Timișoara		50	16	3.13	2.68	1	1	3	3.5	11	2.5
Total		205	41	5	7.96	7.96	1	1	3	4	41

According to the measures of shape, we can assume that the data that make up the entire string (Total) and those associated with the municipality of Cluj-Napoca are slightly skewed to the right, which means that values lower than the median are closer to each other than those that are higher. At the same time, the values registered for the spaces in Timișoara are slightly skewed to the left, the values higher than the median are closer to each other than those with lower values. The inclination to the right is also confirmed by the medians lower than the averages, for the total: = 3, respectively = 5, for Cluj-Napoca and = 3, respectively = 6.2 and for Timișoara: = 3, respectively = 3.13. The centre defined by the median is more expressive in the context of the existence of aberrant values: 5 for Total - 2 Community space, 2 Co-working space and 1 Accelerator business -, 3 for Cluj-Napoca - 2 Community space and 1 Co-working space and 1 for Timișoara - 1 Accelerator business. The variation from the mean, expressed by the standard deviation, has clearly higher values in the case of the Total string (= 5),

s = 7.96 in the case of the spaces in Cluj-Napoca (= 6.2), s = 9.86) than in the case of those in Timișoara (= 3.13), s = 2.68. As outliers influence the variation indicator mentioned above, we can consider the interquartile range IQR, for measuring data variation between Q3 (75th percentile) and Q1 (25th percentile). With an identical median value (3) for all three datasets, we find higher IQR values for Cluj-Napoca (4), lower for the Total (3), and minimum value in the case of Timișoara (2.5).

The distribution of creative spaces that had at least one event promoted on social media (Facebook) highlights six categories of creative and cultural spaces (Fig. 2). The community spaces, the maker spaces and the accelerator business have recorded events in both cities. All three cases are characterized by higher weights, out of the total category they represent, in Timișoara compared to Cluj-Napoca. Event spaces have significant values only in Timișoara, no event spaces with digital activity being recorded Cluj-Napoca. Large organizers of events such as TIFF, Untold, Electric

Castle, Jazz in the Park, all located in Cluj-Napoca, suspended their activity and created the platform *Un Singur Cluj*, meant to support the medical sector, by purchasing medical equipment. Co-working spaces and festival spaces recorded events only in Cluj-Napoca,

even if without any online activity. Innovation hubs did not have events promoted online, although they are present in both municipalities. Likewise, the incubator spaces, with activity only in Timișoara, did not have any events promoted online.

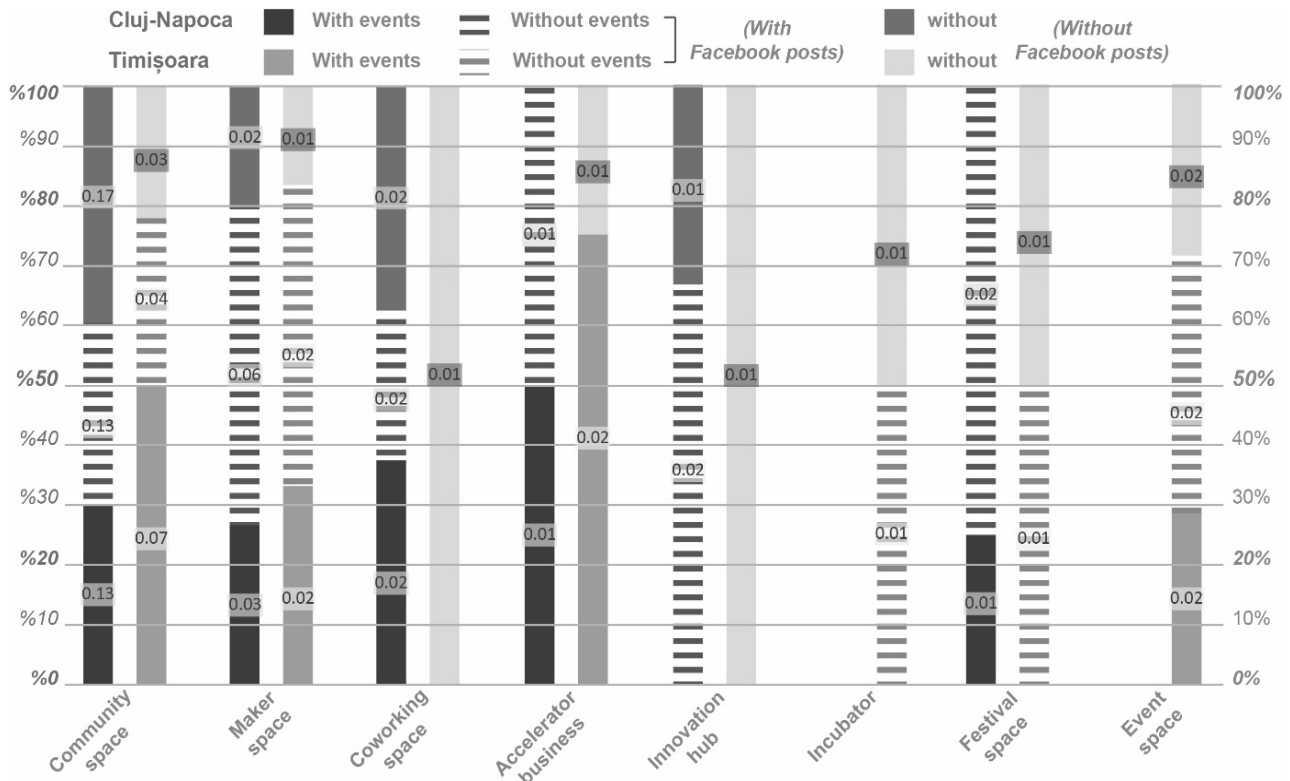


Fig. 2. Stacked bar graph showing the conditional distribution of online activities by using joint distribution values as data labels.

The online content of the events promoted by the independent cultural spaces reflects some forms of their adaptation. The COVID-19 phenomenon was reflected by some cultural operators through art. In this sense, we mention “Art in play”, a program launched by Create.act.enjoy, where young artists brought their contribution; the exhibition “Journal of the virus”, initiated by Alina Andrei and Dan Perjovschi with the support of the contemporary art gallery White Cuib, which reflected the current pandemic situation, through drawings authored by several artists. In other cases, the cultural activity was improved by designing and organizing new activities, such as mutual benefit events for vulnerable groups (foundation ARTMEDIA created Marathon Solidarity - online event; Loc în spațiu organised “Everything is OK with Horia Traian” – online event). New events were adapted to the social context: “Stories on the couch”, “Science miniom” – events initiated for children by Magic Puppet, “Gossiping with writers”, hosted by AIAart, “(Re) meetings in isolation” – a series of interviews with people working in the cultural sector, an event promoted by Create.act.enjoy, “Parenting” – Act Hub). Finally, new formats for classes or performances were

conducted face to face: improvisation courses music – jam sessions – Music Hub; online painting courses (Plankton Gallery, Pastel Workshop, Art Point Studio); theatre performances: “Theatre of resistance” – Auăleu Theatre, “Exeunt” – Reactor de creație și experiment.

The representatives of cultural-creative spaces perceived the online transfer of activities as an immediate solution of adaptation (Pop et al., 2023). Designing some online activities was an opportunity to maintain cohesion within the creative community and ensure their continuous functioning. At the same time, this was a way of civic affirmation through the online promotion of charitable events in the context of COVID-19. Also, according to our results, a change in the content of the events occurred, these being oriented towards addressing the pandemic problem through art and solidarity, thus our findings contributing to the support of some ideas tested in the literature (Ankenbauer and Jiahong Mon, 2020).

„Now, flexibility and resilience are somehow the keywords of survival. We have achieved the impossible, because during the pandemic we managed to implement the eighth edition of our Art Therapy project, a project that we carried out in hospitals,

contrary to the voices in the community who told us that they did not believe that we would be able to enter hospitals this year" (Create.act.enjoy).

Even if in the narrative discourse of the respondents, the transfer of some events to the online environment is considered an opportunity, the process of effectively designing online activities generated a series of difficulties. Against the background of limited knowledge to develop an online community that is built on pre-existing offline relationships, we argue, as also shown in Kadam's (2021) study, that the major challenge has been to develop ways to offer the same sensation and experience as the offline cultural-creative events, through elements of augmented and virtual reality. The arguments lie in the statements of the creative actors, in whose perception:

„The fact that we could no longer organize activities with the public put us on standby for everything related to creative workshops, performances or other activities that required direct interaction" (Create.act.enjoy).

The fact that some cultural jobs are incompatible with teleworking, not as the actual deployment of activity but rather in terms of emotions transmitted to the audience, poses some challenges to performing arts (dance, music, drama etc.) To perform in a physical space, which becomes a living laboratory through the interaction with the community, was the main idea behind the development of cultural and creative activities, since *“without the practical part it is not possible, it would not be what we wanted to do”* (Muzeul interactiv DIVE Timișoara). Creative activities have an educational and interactive component, *“it's about one hundred percent educational and interactive shows”* (Magic Puppet). Online transfer is perceived as restrictive for educational practice, as it is difficult to provide skills or know-how through virtual means (Baum and McPherson, 2019). The importance of interaction is an aspect suggested even in the case of creative spaces whose activity is based on the digital environment:

“Even if we are talking about art, we need the physical encounter. Art touching was strongly affected: we reopened the space after the state of emergency, but we have no longer organized public meetings with more than three people.” (Digital Canvas).

On the other hand, transferring activities to the online environment highlights the psychological dimension among the administrators of creative spaces, as the artistic performance is nourished by the emotional experiences lived by the public: *“human contact is lost (...) It is also very frustrating for artists to stay only in the online environment, it's quite frustrating”* (Basca Timișoara).

Maintaining public interest in the cultural act must be accompanied by new digital skills on behalf of

event organizers (Marian-Potra et al., 2022). Moreover, the online transition implies additional costs, difficult to manage in the context of the already known economic vulnerability of the independent cultural-creative sector.

„For the online transfer, we believe that preparing a virtual tour would take longer and be more expensive than if we kept the museum closed during the state of emergency” (Muzeon).

The online design of cultural-creative events appeals to the degree of adaptability of its content to such an environment. Not all types of creative spaces can adapt their activity in the online environment, festival spaces and event spaces involve the development of mass events, where the participating public can become a potential source of income for the local community. The situation is similar for the co-working spaces, where renting offices is seen as an opportunity to optimize the costs of the entire creative structure (Popa et al., 2022).

„We haven't really thought about it, but I don't really see how we could go online, given that we rent out workspaces. We have seen other hubs, the online meetings with all kinds of speakers have started to be practiced, but we have not been able to focus on events so far” (Milestone).

Much more, not all creative spaces can support outdoor events, although open-air events represented a particular form of resilience and adaptation during the state of alert. This claims for the identification of new online and offline locations to carry out their activities (Coles et al., 2022). At the same time, in the narrative discourse of the respondents, concerns are noted regarding the economic profitability of the activities carried out online during the pandemic. Difficulties in securing a stable source of income as a result of the cancellation of important offline events are highlighted. This situation amplifies the already known problems regarding the funding of the cultural-independent sector.

Virtual events can expand the emotions experienced by online users, but they cannot replace the real experiences (Williams and Ferdinand, 2019). In the same direction, the respondents' opinions regarding prospects also converge. Most of them are aware that the pandemic period has generated opportunities for rethinking some cultural-creative activities and designing them for online streaming:

„We have all gone through the classic press crisis, when we thought, it was going to disappear. It went online and now I think it has an even larger audience. Similarly, but not identically, it can happen for the cultural-creative field. Only the visual cultural-artistic part can go online. But I am convinced that classical cultural modes of expression will endure; people will want to consume culture in physical presence, at home. We are social beings. Moreover, I

believe that after this online push that tends to the extreme, there will also be a setback, which will physically bring us back together. People will be keen on direct interaction” (Casa cu Iederă).

Beyond the need for interaction, ensured by the presence of audience onsite, the role of current digitization becomes more appreciated in a pandemic context: *“the digitization of activity must now become plan A, the only viable solution in the short term”* (Lapsus). Even if the full online transfer of cultural-creative activities is excluded in the respondents’ perception, some of them believe that *“it will be a mix, a blending. Art will be inclusive in this blend between sense, emotion, digital, face to face, and online”* (Multiplexity). Whether and to what extent a constant trend of online events in the cultural sector will be maintained remains as a further potential research perspective, through longitudinal research.

A change in the cultural policies existing in urban and marginal areas is expected for the cultural sector and all their collaborators. Most of the EU governments have tried to react promptly to support cultural operators, by implementing measures such as: maintaining funding for cultural grants, even if the events were rescheduled; providing indirect financial measures (VAT exemption) and direct financial measures to compensate for the lack of income; and other forms of support, such as business advisory services (Montalto et al., 2020). However, new policies are needed to foreshadow the role of cultural operators and artists, new formats for carrying out cultural activities, new paradigms of artistic discourse and public education. All these policies must be integrated within the territorial development vision of the cities in question. Otherwise, the territorial impact of some cultural synergies, formal or informal, will not generate spatial effects.

For urban and cultural centres such as Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara, the cultural activity has gained new development directions although with limited support from the local authorities. The universities brought their contribution through social capital or by providing locations for different cultural performances. However, the cultural life in the small or medium Romanian was highly restricted or extremely limited specifically to some more resilient cultural events.

The resilience of cultural spaces in other urban centres is another trajectory that can be addressed, especially by analysing the factors that can condition the readjustment of cultural policies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The current socio-economic context has gone through abrupt changes generated by the need to limit social interaction and to comply with a set of measures of social distancing. All these measures were even more

restrictive for the cultural operators, the events with the public being fully suspended during the state of emergency and more permissive during the state of alert, yet with strict compliance with a set of rules to prevent the community spread of infection. In Romania, the lack of a status of independent artist put cultural workers in a difficult situation, without the stability of a consistent remuneration and social contributions. This is why many of the independent cultural spaces in the two cities analysed (n = 85) did not record any online events. For some, however (n = 41), the restrictions imposed by the pandemic were transformed into opportunities, by relocating events online, mostly on social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram).

Respondents associate the online transfer of events as an opportunity in the context of the rules imposed during the COVID-19 period. However, the design of cultural-creative activities in the online environment has generated a couple of challenges among the creative actors, reflected as difficulties in their perception. In the narrative discourse of the respondents, the difficulties are generated by the degree of transferability of some activities in the online environment, the ability to provide virtual experiences like the real ones, technical knowledge or the profitability of some online activities.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has globally spread around the world, the response to pandemic effects has been particular to each state, as it was already stated by Coles et al. (2022). Furthermore, the focus of event organizers on identifying short-term adaptation measures did not allow them to focus their attention on the design and implementation of strategies to increase the public’s attraction or even the loyalty of online users. This issue has led to different reactions among users. The experiments tested by Wiggins et al. (2017) reconfirm, as a result of social media posts, that participants demonstrate a more positive attitude providing unedited access to critique.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was conducted and funded by Babeș-Bolyai University, under the SRG-UBB 32909/22.06.2023 and AGC 31017/28.02.2023 grants.

6. AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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