

Beata Reformat

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4178-9541>

University of Economics in Katowice

beata.reformat@uc.katowice.pl

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Cultural Participation in a Pandemic Reality – Challenges for Cultural Institutions

ABSTRACT

The subject of the considerations was cultural participation in a pandemic reality and the resulting consequences and challenges for cultural institutions in Poland. Their identification was the main objective of the exploratory and problem-oriented article. The conclusions were based on rich literature, the results of research conducted by various specialized institutions in the form of reports and exemplification of selected practices used by cultural institutions in the field of access to cultural goods. The results obtained revealed changes in the ways and forms of cultural participation observed under the conditions of pandemic reality. The basis of their development is modern technologies that allow participation in culture in a hybrid way, allowing the reception of culture through online communication. In addition, based on the analysis, the key challenges facing cultural institutions in Poland were identified. The author's intention was to identify possibilities for improving the activities of these entities in the new hybrid reality that most likely awaits us all in the coming years.

KEYWORDS: cultural participation, cultural institutions, change, challenges, pandemic reality

STRESZCZENIE

Uczestnictwo w kulturze w rzeczywistości pandemicznej – wyzwania dla instytucji kultury w Polsce

Przedmiotem podjętych rozważań było uczestnictwo w kulturze w rzeczywistości pandemicznej i wynikające z tego stanu konsekwencje oraz wyzwania dla instytucji kultury w Polsce. Ich rozpoznanie stanowiło główny cel artykułu o charakterze eksploracyjnym i problemowym. Sformułowane wnioski oparto na bogatych źródłach literaturowych, wynikach badań prowadzonych

przez różne wyspecjalizowane instytucje w postaci raportów oraz egzemplifikacji wybranych praktyk stosowanych przez instytucje kultury w zakresie dostępu do dóbr kultury. Uzyskane wyniki ujawniły zmiany w sposobach i formach uczestnictwa w kulturze obserwowane w warunkach rzeczywistości pandemicznej. Podstawą ich rozwoju stają się nowoczesne technologie, które pozwalają na uczestnictwo w kulturze w sposób hybrydowy, dopuszczający odbiór kultury za pośrednictwem komunikacji online. Na podstawie przeprowadzonej analizy zidentyfikowano ponadto najważniejsze wyzwania, jakie pojawiają się przed instytucjami kultury w Polsce. Zamierzeniem autorki było wskazanie możliwości usprawnień działań tych podmiotów w nowej, hybrydowej rzeczywistości, jaka nas wszystkich najprawdopodobniej czeka w najbliższych latach.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: uczestnictwo w kulturze, instytucje kultury, zmiany, wyzwania, rzeczywistość pandemiczna

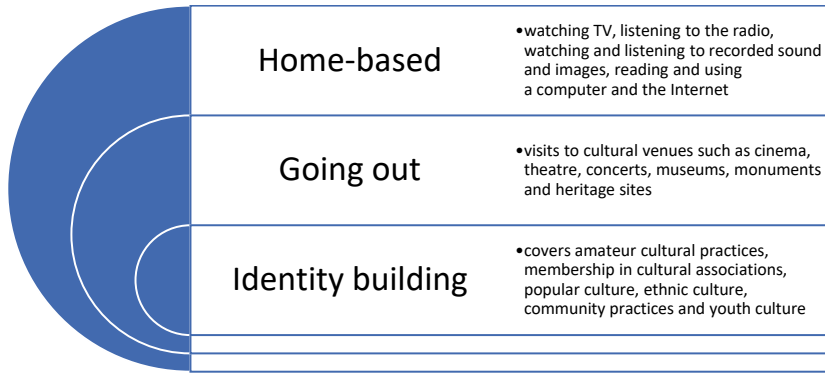
1. Cultural participation and cultural institutions – conceptualization of terms

Cultural participation is a basic category that determines the existence and development of cultural institutions. In the literature the term can be analyzed through a broad and narrow view. According to the first approach, this concept means the active process of inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups, objects, ideas, behavior, and their configurations in specific situations (every day and festive) regulated by culture (Fatyga, 2014). According to the narrow view, on the other hand, participation in culture should be identified with the use (consumption) of available cultural resources created by individual cultural institutions (Kwiecień, 2018).

In turn, according to the definition developed for statistics related to cultural participation, the term cultural participation covers cultural activities as reading habits (books and newspapers), going to the cinema, attending live performances (plays, concerts, operas, ballet, and dance) and visiting cultural sites (historical monuments, museums, art galleries or archaeological sites), etc. (Eurostat¹, 2016). The definition provided Eva Ardielli (2017, p. 35) identifies three types of cultural participation – see Figure 1.

1 Eurostat – the statistical office of the European Union, based in Luxembourg, which ensures the production of European statistics in accordance with established statistical rules and principles. After the establishment of the European Community, it became one of the basic units of the European Commission.

Figure 1. Three types of cultural participation.



Source: own based on Eurostat, 2016; Ardielli, 2017.

From the figure above it can be seen that participation in culture does not require a direct relationship between the recipient of culture and cultural institutions. This is because it refers primarily to a situation of being active, of being immersed in culture understood as a process of continuous modification. As Anna Kwiecień (2018) notes, it is not only the consumption of culture disseminated by the institutions of the cultural sector, manifested in being a recipient, viewer, listener, or reader of certain content, but first and foremost the inclusion of each person in the circulation of culture, both to draw from its richness, but also to bring into it the values of “culture independently discovered or invented by oneself.”

In accordance with the definitions presented, the statements by Oriana Brook (2011) appear to be correct, who states that participation in cultural activities is a fundamental human behavior and is promoting human well-being. However, it should be noted that in the last two years, coinciding with the pandemic period, the importance of cultural participation has changed significantly. Previously, as Jolanta Kędzior (2019, p. 68) claims, cultural participation consisted of participation in artistic culture, which was the subject of institutional dissemination activities. It included attending the theater, cinema, opera, philharmonic, gallery, or museum, and did not consider what people “practice” outside the institutional circuit – in non-commercial circuits, at home and with friends, especially practicing pop culture.

As mentioned in the introduction, participation in culture is a basic condition for the existence of cultural units in Poland. Therefore, it was necessary, according to the author of the study, to refer to the definition of cultural institutions presented in the literature. On this basis, it was assumed that a cultural institution is “a public entity established by state

or local government administrative units, for which cultural activities are the main purpose of functioning” (Kosińska, 2020, p. 25).

2. Key changes in cultural participation in Poland in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The last two years have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the world in a significant way (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020; Gorynia, 2021), and with it, the existing consumer behavior. Within it, there is a change in the ways of satisfying many needs, including those related to cultural participation (Tataj, 2020; Cyboran & Kluzowicz, 2021).

The first of the key changes in cultural participation in Polish society during the pandemic concerns the ways and forms of participation in events organized by the sector’s entities. The prospect of being temporarily confined to the home has motivated many people to make much greater use of the potential and resources of the Internet than before the pandemic (Grzega, 2021). This phenomenon has compounded the threat of face-to-face contact that has characterized participation in traditional forms and types of cultural events, resulting in the most widespread way of participating in culture becoming participation in online events and through mobile applications (Juszczak & Wójcik, 2022). These activities enabled activities undertaken by cultural sector institutions during the pandemic period characterized by significant use of new technologies. They included, among others: digitization, record keeping, presentation, digital promotion of cultural assets and interactive contact with cultural audiences (Pluszyńska, Konior, & Gawel, 2020).

Activities initiated by cultural institutions in Poland have increased participation in culture offered through online entertainment, movies and programs on online platforms, social media, and digital social platforms. But on the other hand, as the authors of the report *Kultura w czasie pandemii Covid* (Czyżewski et al., 2020) note, the pandemic excluded those people from participation in online culture those who did not have the necessary equipment, Internet access, or, due to age or economic situation, lacked the necessary competence to interact with digital culture. The results of the cited report indicate that this condition mainly affected the elderly, residents of smaller towns and rural areas, in addition to people who were not able to cope with security issues and new technologies (Czyżewski et al., 2020).

Important change has been noticed in online cultural participation among the senior citizens (60+), who were considered a key segment of

the cultural market before the pandemic.² However, the pandemic resulted in two types of behavior within this segment. The first can be described as a complete lack of participation in online culture, as shown by various studies (np. *Seniorzy a uczestnictwo...*, 2020; *Jałkość życia osób starszych...*, 2021). This attitude distinguishes people who are considered digitally excluded, who do not have remote tools suitable for receiving online materials, nor the competence/skills to use them (Widawska, Wysocka, & Wiczorek, 2014).³

The second type of cultural participation within the senior group (60+) can be considered as a trend opposite to the previous one, which indicates the participation of older people in online cultural events (Garwol & Stebila, 2021). This applies to individuals who can navigate well in certain online media, such as Facebook, where there trailers of these events, opinions about them, recommendations from famous people, friends, or families of seniors are found. A study conducted by Centrum Badań Opinii Publicznej (CBOS) in 2022 shows that among the elderly, Internet users are a minority: two-fifths among those 65 to 74 years old and about one-fifth among the oldest people. Compared to the previous measurement a year ago, the largest increase in the percentage of online users was in the 75+ group, up by 9% (*Korzystanie z Internetu...*, 2022).

Another change in cultural participation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic relates to the behavior of young people, especially children, who are increasingly seeking entertainment on the Internet (Przybysz, 2021). However, there are some dangers associated with this trend. One is the perpetuation of the habit of participating in entertainment/cultural products exclusively online. The second behavior is related to the undesirable consequences of this phenomenon, which can be caused by the inability, and ignorance of participation in collective culture, as well as the ill-considered encouragement and inclusion of children in the use of the Internet (Chajbos & Liss, 2021).

The changes in cultural participation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic furthermore affect a very diverse group of people with disabilities in terms of their ability to enjoy the online offer. For many who move around in wheelchairs or with the support of other orthopedic equipment, remote culture is a desirable, preferred activity (Goryń, 2020).

2 According to the GUS (Central Statistical Office) in 2019 seniors in Poland constituted a collective of 9 million 703 thousand people. This is about 25% of Poland's population (GUS, 2020).

3 To reduce the phenomenon of digital exclusion in the group (60+), various support programs are being implemented in Poland. Among them, it is worth mentioning such programs as Culture on the Web, Cultural Education, and Accessible Culture.

Paradoxically, the pandemic has made it easier for these people to have contact with culture, and the same access to it as any other participant in the cultural market. However, among this community there are also individuals whose type of disability does not allow them to participate in online culture, and who are looking for other ways to enjoy cultural events.

This phenomenon affects people with visual and hearing impairments, who, like other social individuals, have the right to participate in culture (Karcz-Kaczmarek, 2020). Satisfying this goal is made possible by various solutions offered by cultural sector units, such as: audiodescription,⁴ tyflographics,⁵ magnifying glasses for viewing exhibits to be viewed in strong close-up, or specialized audio guides.⁶

Research conducted by Katarzyna Chajbos and Bartosz Liss in 2021 shows that, unfortunately, only the largest events or online discussions created with the intention of reaching a nationwide audience are held with the presence of a highly visible (1/8 of the screen) Polish Sign Language interpreter (Chajbos & Liss, 2021). This means that blind or visually impaired people who do not visit museums, galleries or other cultural venues are left with the audible reception of traditional media (radio), movies equipped with audiodescription (Netflix) or listening to interesting podcasts, which have begun to emerge in quite large numbers during the pandemic period.

The presented changes in cultural participation caused by the development of the COVID-19 pandemic should be regarded as key, that is, the most significant, in terms of participation in various types and forms of events offered by cultural institutions in Poland. It can be predicted that the transfer of cultural activities to the Internet does not fully fulfill the expected role in the current situation caused by the global pandemic. This is evidenced by the need, declared by nearly 1/4 of Poles, to participate in culture to its fullest extent (Chajbos & Liss, 2021).

The behavior of participants in the cultural market further indicates that culture is a highly ritualized area, which makes it associated not only with mere participation in a cultural event (exhibition, film, concert, theatrical/musical performance, etc.), but also with contacts with other people (e.g., friends, actors, musicians, writers, etc.).

4 Description enabling blind people to receive films, theatrical performances, visual arts, and any other visual messages.

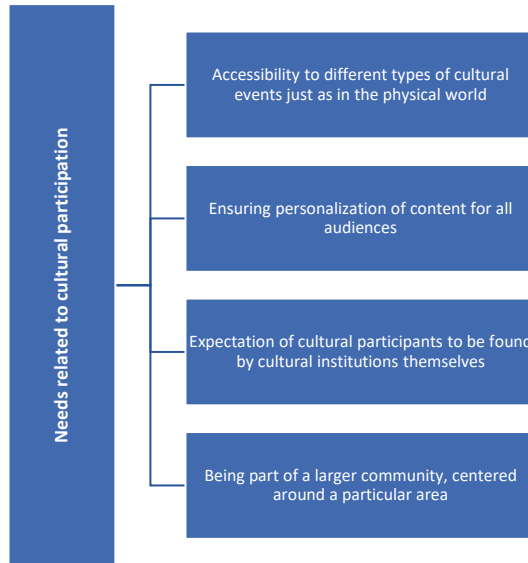
5 Graphic representation of a given object in the form of a convex drawing, which a blind person interacts with through touch.

6 Wireless devices with preloaded audio content, which guide the listener through a given object, exhibition or area providing information and directions for a tour.

3. Major challenges for cultural institutions in Poland caused by the pandemic reality in terms of the main trends related to cultural participation

Meeting the current cultural participation needs of Polish society triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant strategic challenge for cultural institutions. It requires constant monitoring of changes in the environment, providing the basis for decisions and solutions tailored to the needs and preferences of individual segments of the cultural market. Among them, four groups of needs can be discerned, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Four groups of needs of cultural sector participants during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Source: own compilation based on *Zmiany w obszarze aktywności kulturalnych...*, 2022.

The first need for cultural participation in a pandemic reality is the expectation of accessibility to different types of cultural events. It can be assumed that the determinant of this need is the desire to participate in culture as a kind of respite from everyday life, built in the pandemic era largely on fear and uncertainty. The second need is related to ensuring the personalization of the content of cultural events for all audiences. It is most likely caused by the changing role of cultural institutions in the network. Responding to the needs of their audiences, institutions, community centers or independent entities also perform an educational function,

creating broad programs targeted at children. This, in turn, makes those outside this group feel bypassed and excluded, because the proposed program does not meet their needs. The third need indicates that cultural participants expect to be found by the cultural institutions they have previously attended. Thus, we are dealing with a kind of role reversal. Before the pandemic, it was people themselves who decided whether and in what event or cultural activity they would participate. Now, during the ongoing pandemic, the effort is largely on the side of cultural institutions. The last major need relates to the desire to be part of a larger community centered around a particular cultural field, which suggests that cultural participation is not just about attending a concert or exhibition, but also about exchanging comments and experiences (*Zmiany w obszarze aktywności kulturalnych...*, 2022).

Another significant challenge for cultural institutions in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic concerns the accessibility of their offerings. This is because during its duration, the need to use new technologies and the related need to digitize activities increased, as already mentioned in the study. Some previously recorded events (concerts or performances) during the isolation could not be broadcast due to contracts that did not cover the reuse of artists' content. Currently, during the pandemic, a lot of events are available for free or for nominal amounts. It is possible that audiences accustomed to this situation after the end of the pandemic will no longer want to pay as much for tickets to various cultural events. Therefore, taking appropriate solutions in this regard should be seen as another important strategic challenge emerging for cultural institutions in Poland.

The next perceived long-term challenge relates to the service area. The transfer of operations to the web has reflected the cultural sector's considerable shortcomings in precisely this area. Some of the tasks have fallen directly to the PR and production departments, which often have the highest digital competencies. Another aspect is change management, an area that involves the cancellation of massive events, including festivals or premieres.

Yet another type of challenge facing cultural institutions in Poland is the issue of accessibility in the broadest sense. A few factors should be considered here, including technological, economic, social, as well as health-related. The role of cultural institutions in the network is changing, as mentioned earlier. Responding to the needs of cultural participation, cultural institutions are also performing an educational function, creating broad programs aimed at different segments of the market, such as age groups, excluding others. The strategic challenge is therefore to ensure personalization of content for all audiences.

Another challenge facing cultural institutions during the period under review is the appropriate distribution of cultural goods.

The last major challenge worth highlighting in this study is communication. The need to act online has shown that the lack of an established relationship with audiences/participants in the cultural sector in the analog world also translates into online contact. This is because participants are more willing to use the offerings of institutions they know and miss (and they miss mostly the people and the atmosphere, rather than the offerings). In this situation, it may be necessary to offer hybrid forms of cultural participation, combining e-culture with its traditional forms.

This challenge is undoubtedly related to the issue of the widespread lack of digital competence and technological facilities of cultural institutions. The strategic challenges outlined should be seen as the most important for most cultural institutions in Poland, in the era of the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

Concluding the considerations presented in this article, it should be emphasized that the issues addressed expresses the voice of its Author in the discussion of cultural participation observed in the new pandemic reality in Poland, drawing attention to the strategic challenges associated with the analyzed issues.

The observations and analyses carried out show that the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the ways and forms of participation in culture by Polish society. It is worth adding that the dynamic and direction of these changes largely depend on the degree of awareness of recipients of culture and their ability to use modern technologies including access to the Internet.

The analysis presented showed a clear change in the needs and expectations of cultural market participants observed in the pandemic reality. Their identification made it possible to recognize the forms and modes of participation in culture, as well as to identify the main challenges facing cultural institutions in the future.

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Beata Reformat – PhD, professor at the University of Economics in Katowice, specialist in economic sciences in the discipline of Management and Quality Sciences. Her research activity and scientific achievements are focused on the issues of services (trade, tourism, and culture), innovation and sustainable development. Since 2020, she has been a member of the PAN commission in economic sciences. She is the author and co-author of numerous scientific papers and articles, both Polish and English, and editor of several monographs.

