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Understanding the full value of culture: Theory into policy

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ABSTRACT

While a large body of research has identified immense non-monetisable value in cultural activities, the economic benefits of cultural activities remain the predominant focus of cultural policy. This paper argues that this is in large part because the cultural sector does not yet have the tools to articulate and incorporate the qualitative nature of "intrinsic" cultural values into economic decision-making processes. Reviewing a thematic analysis of extant literature that identified an ecology of the values of cultural activity across seven domains: aesthetic, educational, financial, personal, sociocultural, technical, and wellbeing, it adds environment as an eighth domain and presents two tools that can be used to holistically identify the qualitative and quantitative values inherent in cultural activities, and to bring these values to the policy table.

Keywords:

Cultural value, cultural policy, policy discourse, cultural value domains, cultural policy tools.

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Introduction

According to the UK's *Creative Industries Sector Plan,* "The sector already acts as a dynamic growth engine for our economy across the UK's nations and regions, contributing 2.4 million jobs and £124 billion GVA to the economy, generating knowledge spillovers that drive innovation and activity across the economy. The government sees the high-growth value of the Creative Industries now and for the decades to come" (Nandy, 2025: 4). But also, "For too long, however, the sector has not been given the recognition it deserves and the backing it requires (…) We will work across government and industry to tackle misperceptions of the sector's value." (2025: 5). And yet the Sector Plan continues to express the value of film, literature, and other forms of culture only in economic terms: investment, jobs, and GVA, that drive innovation, with a focus on "our highest potential sub-sectors" (2025: 9).

The EU's Cultural Compass project recognizes the "limited consistency" of existing cultural "documents and tools" (European Commission, 2025: 2) and promises to take a more balanced approach by emphasizing "culture's positive impact on society, the economy, and international relations" (2025: 1). It seeks "an overarching strategic framework to guide and harness the multiple dimensions of culture", which aims at "embedding culture more visibly in the EU's overarching policy goals, ensuring it becomes more accessible for all and positioning it as a driver of democracy, security, competitiveness, innovation, societal resilience and international partnerships". Nonetheless, Creative Europe, "the only EU programme specifically dedicated to transnational cultural cooperation" (Culture Action Europe, 2023), is facing restructure and a budget cut of €40 million.

An extensive body of literature exists around the value of arts, culture and heritage across many academic disciplines including literary and cultural theory, sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology, and cultural economics (see summaries in Hutter and Throsby, 2008; Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016) that has identified an enormous diversity of benefits from tangible and intangible culture. Thus, the challenge for people who take a more inclusive view of the value of culture is to bridge this discourse gap and present a holistic view of the value(s) of culture to policy makers that highlights the full range of impacts of cultural activity on "society, the economy, and international relations".

Given the enormous range of cultural activities and values discussed in the literature mentioned above, the most useful definition of culture for this purpose is the broadest one, adopted by the United Nations in its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity: "(...) culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group, and (...) encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UN, 2001, p1).

This definition necessarily includes – alongside the arts, galleries, libraries, and museums, which are most commonly included in the definition of "culture" – sport, hospitality, fashion, religion, architecture, education, and a range of other human artefacts, practices, and heritage that constitute features of past and present

human cultures and sub-cultures. It encourages the integration of all culture into a coherent discourse, and consequently this paper argues that having certain forms of culture "radically divested" (O'Connor, 2024: 5) from others invites the continuation of policy silos. It views culture as a "public good" (Meyrick and Barnett, 2020) and includes everyday cultural practices (Wright, 2022) as being co-dependent with "high" culture (Kaszynska, 2024). Importantly, Kaszynska (2024) notes that the term "value of culture" should be distinguished from the broader term "cultural value". This paper will refer to "the value of culture" in its broadest sense unless it refers to cultural value specifically.

This paper builds on the findings of a thematic analysis of literature that identified seven domains of value in cultural activities (Brown, 2025) and provides a holistic framework for identifying many quantitative and qualitative values of cultural activity. It proceeds by providing a brief history of the topic, then outlining the revised framework's eight domains. It proposes some emergent tools that might be used to express those values in terms to which policy makers might be receptive and concludes by arguing for further research to validate the domains and bridge the discourse gap.

A brief history of this issue

The value of what is now known as culture has been debated since at least Aristole and Confucius (Brown, 2005; Holden and Balta, 2012; Brown, 2022). However, no framework has yet proven sufficiently robust to solve the problem of capturing the full value of culture in a policy context, however defined (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). Cultural values evolve, affected by time, knowledge, context, cultural background, economic factors, taste, ideas, and more (Lewens, 2015). Nonetheless, concepts of value appear in most of the legal and policy instruments that shape arts, culture and heritage practices (for example, see DCMS, 2015; Historic England, 2015; Council of Europe, 2005). Recently, First Nations scholars have introduced new ways of knowing and new perspectives to cultural policy (Althaus, 2020; Manero et al, 2022).

Discourse concerning the values of culture remained the domain of philosophers, artists, and writers for thousands of years until Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry" to critique what they viewed as a corruption of the real value of culture (Adorno & Bernstein, 1991 p106). Despite these and other critiques, the "absorption of the cultural sector into neoliberal policymaking, and its integration into the economic imaginary of the knowledge economy" (O'Connor, 2024: 26) resulted in a disregard for non-economic values of culture. This has primarily revolved around "creative industries", "creative economy" and "creative class" discourses in the Anglosphere since the late 1990s (de Bernard et al, 2022: 335), resulting in a bias that neglects non-urban, nonwestern locations in debates about the values of culture; unavoidably including the research that underpins this paper.

In the 21st century, systematic approaches to assessing the non-economic values of culture have recognised "intrinsic" values of cultural outputs, practices, and capital, which cannot be easily (if all) measured (Throsby, 2001). Throsby's definition of "cultural capital", which should be distinguished from Bourdieu's use of the

term (Haines & Lötter, 2022), distinguishes culture's aesthetic, spiritual, social, historic, symbolic, and authenticity properties from the "economic value" of commodified culture. Holden (2004, 2006) argued that the over-emphasis in public policy on "instrumental" value emphasised easily measured outcomes to the detriment of intrinsic and institutional values, which represent the greater part of the value of culture. O'Brien (2010) also acknowledged the inherent difficulties in measuring culture's worth beyond purely economic terms, arguing for a more nuanced approach to valuation because the "intrinsic/instrumental division" was too imprecise to be useful.

A more nuanced view proposed culture as an "ecology" or "ecosystem" (Holden, 2015; de Bernard et al, 2022: 339-343); a metaphor that has found growing influence in research and policy, albeit with some inconsistency in its framing language (Kaszynska et al, 2022). It underpins the approach preferred by the UK government's Cultural and Heritage Capitals project (Sagger & Bezzano, 2024) and is recognised in the *Creative Industries Sector Plan* (Nandy, 2025: 8). An ecological approach has been found to be better suited than previous models to understanding non-Western concepts and practices of culture (Liu, 2016; Watene and Yap, 2015). Gross and Wilson (2019) specify that their use of ecological language aims to explore the *interconnections* between the profit-making creative industries, the publicly funded arts, and everyday creativity, which requires encompassing the mundane and normative alongside the industrial and innovative. An ecological view also allows assessment of the values of culture over inter-generational timeframes, exposing their influence on issues such as social cohesion and entrenched poverty, or as a contributor to the Sustainable Development Goals (Zheng et al, 2021; Sabatini, 2019). However, ecological metaphors have limits (Lewens, 2015), since their fundamental cultural units, or "memes" are not easily identifiable or quantifiable. Further, humans play an active role, mediated by language and technology and therefore difficult to trace, in the evolution of their cultures. This complexity requires new mathematical modelling before a reasonable understanding can be claimed (Moss 2016).

Klamer (2017) identified environmental degradation, social inequality, and a loss of meaning and purpose among individuals and communities as specific problems that derive from economic policy fixations on quantitative measures like GDP and profit. He proposed a "value-based" approach that emphasises the intrinsic value of non-economic goods such as families, communities, knowledge, and art. This requires a critique of the evaluation process (O'Brien 2015); who does the valuing and how they do it – and thus who and what is excluded – are critical aspects of any valid assessment. This perspectivist view (Smith, 2022) recognises the subjective and political nature of the values of culture; contrasting an individual's response to an artwork with the community identity and cohesion derived from sharing that experience (Brown 2006). Brown argued that "repeat experiences lead to higher-order benefits" that produce measurable effects, inviting the possibility of evaluating culture via "spillovers" (Bina et al, 2012) or "externalities" (Bille, 2024) such as increased tourism, urban development, and increased productivity through education and wellbeing (ACE, 2015). These forms of cultural impact appear, for example, in the UK Department of Culture Media, and Sport's valuation of the health and wellbeing impacts of culture and heritage (Frontier Economics, 2024),

though this report is limited to the arts, excludes qualitative data, and focuses on a limited range of externalities.

Trembath and Fielding identified 12 domains of cultural and creative activity that "contribute to Australia's GDP, even when that contribution is numerically small" (2020, p11). They argued that poor data collection and management inhibited evaluations of Australia's cultural sector, and explored seven qualitative "transformative Impacts" of culture (Fielding and Trembath, 2019, p5). The Centre for Cultural Value tried to bring some degree of harmony to this chaos via their co-created evaluation principles (CCV, 2021), which encompass the politically unpopular notion that failure is an unavoidable outcome of innovation that can produce valuable learnings for the cultural sector (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023).

Research into the many qualitative and non-monetisable values of culture has tended to dig selectively into identifiable values of specific cultural practices without seeking to link these values into a holistic framework for appraising multiple values inherent in culture that can be reported as benefits from cultural projects, programmes, and organisations. An analysis of these disparate studies (Brown 2025) identified the original set of seven domains proposed below.

Alternative approaches to the focus on culture as an economic force have emerged from anthropology, sociology, behavioural economics, organisational and management studies (eg De Cunzo and Roeber, 2022; Maurer, 2006). Hoftstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, for example, analyses the difference in culture across countries and the way business is done through a series of binary concepts or indexes (Nickerson, 2023). However, these studies tend to take a different view of "culture" and thus a divergent appreciation of the value of culture from that of studies concerned with creativity and cultural *practice* (for a deeper critique, see Taras et al, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this paper to encompass this literature.

The result of this enduring inability to adequately define the values of culture has been that an "insufficiency of quantitative evidence, as well as the fragmentation of culture related data, produced by different institutions, have tended to marginalize culture in national and local development strategies and policies as well as within the identified United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) areas for funding" (UNESCO 2025). The response has been to seek "more reliable measurement systems" and more data "to provide a better understanding of the multiple ways culture contributes to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development" across "the role of culture as a sector of activity, as well as the transversal contribution of culture across different SDGs and policy areas". Suites of indicators such as the Culture|2030 Indicators (UNESCO, 2019), the Centre for Cultural Value's Vitality Indicators (CCV, 2025) or the Takso framework (CDN, 2025) might be used to identify specific examples and/or measures of value within each domain to provide "a reliable method to assess impact across a range of public policy areas."

However, this paper argues that without a firm theoretical foundation for understanding complex interplay between the full range of qualitative as well as quantitative activities and values of culture, the pursuit of better management and more data will only continue the “limited consistency” across policy documents and will fail to adequately encompass the intrinsic or qualitative benefits of culture. It next proposes a framework that suggests a useful theoretical foundation.

Eight domains of cultural value

The following list of domains is expanded from the seven originally proposed and explored in Brown (2022) and justified in Brown (2025). Those domains derived from an extensive – but far from comprehensive – inductive thematic analysis of available literature. This analysis focused on the value in cultural *activities;* asking *why* those activities happened and categorising values based on the motivations or expected outcomes of the creators and/or participants. The domain originally identified as “Wellbeing” has been amended to the narrower domain of “Health” because research aiming to validate the domains (publication forthcoming) identified that, in the views of cultural practitioners, “wellbeing” comprises an overarching purpose for cultural activity across these domains, whereas the impact of cultural activity on health (broadly defined) is a specific domain at individual and collective levels that has its own body of literature (see Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Similarly, although it was not identified in the original research, “Environment” was identified in the validation research as a significant domain and hence is explored in more detail than the others below.

These domains are not mutually exclusive. They form an ecology of values whose practices and manifestations differ between individuals, cultures, and sub-cultural groups, and have evolved over time, consistent with Brown’s (2006) view, Holden’s (2015) metaphor, and Lewens’s (2015) observations. The values that they describe can be positive or negative – for example, Socio-political value can lead to agreement or to conflict. Sub-categories of these domains were identified in the original research, though more work is needed to produce a workable taxonomy based on them – particularly one that includes non-Western cultures. Each domain has been studied on its own by diverse researchers and has its own body of literature. The domains are briefly described as follows.

1) Aesthetic - People participate in culture because it’s attractive – or not.

The aesthetic appeal of high art has been well studied but this domain also includes everyday aesthetics such as sub-cultural identity codes, political imagery, and other encoded cultural communication. It thus overlaps with the education and socio-political domains, and can create attraction or repulsion.

2) Educational - People participate in culture to learn and to teach.

This domain covers both teaching and research – neither of which must be deliberate. It includes individual and mass education, including practices of indoctrination and misinformation, both of which can produce positive or negative outcomes.

3) Environmental - People participate in culture to change their physical world.

The rise in ecological thinking about the cultural and creative sectors has in part been driven by the increasingly urgent need to support, for example, the Sustainable Development Goals. A growing literature explores cultural activities that focus on planetary care, and the Culture 2030 Indicators (UNESCO, 2019) attempt to provide a coherent system for mapping such activities and their progress. Combining this metaphor with the ecological view of culture, it seems appropriate to view culture as the oxygen that permeates and supports policies of all kinds, and users of this framework may adopt such Indicators to add depth and detail to the domains.

At a more mundane level, this domain encompasses cultural activities that, for example, decorate an urban setting, or build new facilities for religious observance. Each of these contributes to the environment of those involved in the activity and those with whom they share the space. This domain can also produce positive or negative value, as people from other cultures may resent the changes; and cultural activities can be environmentally destructive while producing social or personal benefits.

4) Financial - People participate in culture to make money.

The pursuit of a living is one perfectly acceptable reason for cultural practice. Even non-profit cultural activities need to be funded, and some are regularly derided as a waste of money. Participating in cultural activities costs money and many activities are organised in the hope of raising money for some purpose.

5) Health - People participate in culture to make themselves better.

Cultural activity is increasingly recognised as a driver of specific individual, social, and global health outcomes. The World Health Organisation commissioned a report into the social determinants of health (Organization et al, 2008), an area of research that has begun to explore the role of culture.

6) Personal - People participate in culture to feel ... something.

Catharsis, comprehension, identity, ecstasy, turmoil, achievement, development, and more result from cultural activities. Although this domain is called personal, it is not necessarily individual; this value accrues to groups that share, for example, sacred symbols or rituals, or icons of identity such as flags and anthems.

7) Socio-political - People participate in culture to understand and/or change their place in the world.

This domain encompasses social cohesion, tolerance and diversity, political discourse, and more. Relevant cultural activities include journalism, satire, public fora, and others. They can be normative or transformative at individual or social levels, and result in harmony or conflict.

8) Technical - People participate in culture to try out new techniques or technologies.

Technical value encompasses cultural activity requiring or inspiring technological innovation as well as the technical skill required of cultural practitioners as individuals and in ensembles. A complex interaction between these two emerges when development of a creative technique becomes experimentation that becomes innovation.

With the exception of the Financial domain, each of these can be assessed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. However, some of the value in many domains cannot be measured directly – it must be evaluated using externalities such as crowd sizes for aesthetic value, educational outcomes, or crime rates for socio-political value (Bille, 2024). Similarly, useful proxy measures might be found in the suites of Indicators discussed above.

Policy tools that arise from this framework

Firstly, this framework itself aims to help promote the holistic benefits of cultural activities to policy makers at the highest level by enabling a systematic and holistic appreciation. Whenever discussions arise concerning the importance of culture in general or the prospects for a specific cultural activity such as World Expos or the Olympics, this framework can be deployed to analyse the complete set of values – positive or negative, qualitative and quantitative – that are evidenced in that activity. It can further be applied to component activities of large-scale events; each one examined from multiple perspectives to evaluate its impact on local communities, sub-cultures, or even individuals. This should steer public discourses beyond purely economic impacts, and to instead enable discussion that is inclusive of the full range of effects of proposed cultural activity, and thereby to justify cultural policy investment with a clearer holistic picture of the long-term benefits or disbenefits of policy decisions.

Secondly, at an operational level this framework can be used to evaluate specific projects and review the impact of funding decisions. It could replace or augment the notoriously vague, but widely used under various aliases, “artistic merit” criterion (Lewandowska, 2023) via a statement of how important each domain is to a project funder. For example, a call for arts funding might specify a set of domain preferences that the funding body seeks from applicants, as shown in the blue line in Figure 1, which reflects an intention for applicants to produce educational materials concerning a politically sensitive topic that must be financially self-sustaining.

An expert panel might assess an application as shown in the red line and decide that the one shown is fundable despite the discrepancies. As part of acquitting the project, the final outcome(s) might be evaluated

as shown by the black line. This provides funding bodies with a significant dataset that can be used to demonstrate and track value for money across all domains, thereby responding to the call for better data from UNESCO (2025) and improving on the "limited consistency" that the Cultural Compass seeks to address (European Commission, 2025). Issues concerning the perspectivist problem are resolved by aligning the project with the funding body's objectives – i.e. the value is assessed as it accrues to the funding body or its specified stakeholder(s).

FIGURE 1: PROJECT EVALUATION SCHEMA USING THE 8 DOMAINS

This approach requires all stakeholders to consider the full range of project values from multiple perspectives. It also encourages evaluation of qualitative and intrinsic values as well as financial concerns, providing a better account of the kind of social and other benefits sought by the European Commission (2025). To effectively capture sentiment regarding intrinsic forms of value, evaluations need not be *scored* by the expert panel. As shown in Figure 2, they might use qualitative instruments that can be easily converted into scores, such as a sliding scale or a Likert scale.

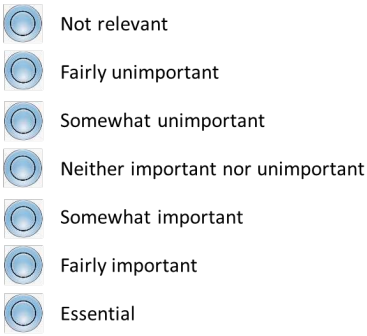

FIGURE 2: QUALITIATIVE EVALUATION METHOD TO BE USED ACROSS THE 8 DOMAINS

Conclusion (200)

This paper has presented a theoretical framework that describes eight domains of cultural value; qualitative and quantitative. It has proposed two tools that might be used to give cultural policy makers a holistic view of the inherent values of cultural activity. This in turn allows a more structured and complete collection of data concerning cultural activities and programmes, responding to calls from international policy-making bodies.

However, incorporating other perspectives may or may not change the framework substantively. Although this version is presented as a workable draft, a great deal more research is needed to validate it and explore its usefulness.

1) The details of each domain remain unclear, particularly with regard to the enormous diversity of human cultural activity. Further case studies and mapping are needed to explore and test this.

2) It is not clear whether this framework applies to a broader set of cultural activities than the one from which it has been derived. Examination of non-Western cultural activities, including First Nations knowledges and values, is essential to clarify and complete the set of domains.

3) These domains comprise the beginning of a way to understand the full values of cultural activity. The relationships within and between cultural ecologies require extended research aimed at a complete theory of the value of culture. Several systems of cultural Indicators might prove useful in identifying factors that define the domains and trace relationships between them. This will require widespread and sustained effort.

Finally, one stated aim of this ENCATC congress is to contribute to MONDIACULT 2025. Accordingly, the above framework is proposed to specifically contribute to the following MODIACULT objectives by providing a holistic framework for a shared understanding of the role of culture in human activities:

- Strengthen multilateral action, collaboration, and solidarity among countries to shape the global cultural agenda.

- Foster an inclusive and participatory dialogue on cultural policies by engaging a wide range of stakeholders.
- Support Member States in strengthening cultural information systems to inform evidence-based public policies.

With these in mind, this paper seeks to help restore culture to its rightful place as the oxygen that sustains the policy ecosystem.

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