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# **Doctoral Thesis**

**Towards a Paradigm of Cultural Welfare.**  
**Culture in Strategic Approaches to Well-being**

[Summary](#)

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## Keywords

culture, well-being, culture and well-being, arts and health, cultural welfare, cultural participation, arts engagement, value of culture, public policy

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## Summary

Over the last twenty years, culture has experienced a significant shift in its position within society, transitioning from a relatively marginal sector to an important component of sustainable development. This change in paradigm is linked to social, political and economic transformations. Consequently, the role of culture in urban, regional, and European policies has accordingly shifted. Currently, culture is recognised as a significant driver for social change and renewal, as well as a measure of the level of individual and collective wellbeing.

‘Culture and well-being’ is an emerging interdisciplinary field promoting arts engagement with the goal to improve the well-being of individuals, organisations, communities, and society as a whole. It is a domain of cross-sector collaboration, encompassing the intersections between culture and sectors such as health, social care, education, labour, and urban planning.

**The main objective** of this research is to investigate the transformative role of culture and arts engagement in enhancing well-being and health, analysing emerging paradigms and structural changes, and identifying key factors and policy measures that could support the integration of arts and culture into comprehensive approaches to well-being.

### **The research questions of the thesis are:**

- What role can culture play in tackling societal challenges related to well-being?
- What are the main signs and implications of a paradigm shift concerning the role of culture in relation to well-being?
- How can impact assessments better capture the value generated by culture in relation to well-being?
- What are the main well-being outcomes related to cultural participation?
- How did engagement with art during the Covid-19 pandemic influence well-being, and what lessons can we draw about the possible role of culture in addressing challenges and disruptions?
- What are the main factors influencing the development of the emerging ‘culture and well-being’ area of practice?

- What policies and actions can mobilise the potential of culture and arts engagement in supporting societal well-being?

The findings are based on a mixed methodology, including literature review, qualitative interviews with experts, and quantitative data analysis. The thesis includes an introduction, a methodology section, eight chapters and references.

## Chapter 1: Framing the context. Tracking the shifts in the role of culture

The chapter contextualises the research by examining global challenges and the increasing role of culture in addressing them. Growing mental health problems, an aging population and successive and overlapping crisis are tasking decision makers to find sustainable ways to harness resilience and well-being, culture and culture-based solutions becoming of interest.

It elaborates on the value of culture, both as a fundamental human right and as an essential component of sustainable development, supporting social cohesion, territorial regeneration and innovation.

A discussion on the intrinsic, institutional, and instrumental values of culture, as articulated by Holden (2006), and their convergence with the models of culture "in", "for" and "as" sustainable development by Dessein et al. (2015), along with Sacco's (2011) concepts of Culture 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0, helps illuminate the co-existence of concurring paradigms. Each of these paradigms mobilises a different type of cultural value and serves the interests of different stakeholders. The chapter further presents the implications of these different models for how culture can foster sustainable development, and also provides an overview of policies and research shaping the area of culture and well-being.

## Chapter 2: Culture and well-being, an emerging area of interdisciplinary action

The chapter defines key terms and explores theoretical models linking arts with well-being and health. It establishes the foundation for understanding the interdisciplinary nature of cultural engagement in promoting well-being.

Building on the models discussed in the previous chapter, the research proposes a framework that illustrates the relations between culture and well-being, including:

'Culture in Well-being', 'Culture for Well-being', 'Culture as Well-being', and 'Culture and Well-being'.

The 'Culture in Well-being' model emphasises the institutional value of culture and the public mission of the cultural sector to deliver common good and safeguard cultural heritage. It suggests that supporting the cultural sector and facilitating access to culture can contribute to well-being. The 'Culture for Well-being' model sees culture as a means to promote and enhance well-being in non-cultural settings. It focuses on targeted interventions designed to achieve specific health or well-being goals, and highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and research. The 'Culture as Well-being' model regards culture itself as a source of well-being, emphasizing the intrinsic value of culture for human flourishing. It suggests activating people's innate creativity and need for expression and fulfilment, and integrating cultural practices into welfare policies and education systems. The 'Culture and Well-being' model emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence between culture and well-being. It recognizes the existence of the other three models and serves as an umbrella for all approaches.

The need of a socio-ecological approach of well-being, shifting the focus from individual to systemic perspectives, is presented to highlight the need for strategies at multiple levels.

### Chapter 3. Considerations about measuring the impact of arts engagement for health and well-being

The chapter focuses on the challenges and frameworks for measuring the impact of arts engagement, and examines how to measure well-being outcomes.

While economic contributions of the arts are more easily quantified, the long-term social, health, and well-being benefits are often overlooked due to their intangible and delayed nature. Research gaps include the need for longitudinal studies, and studies evaluating community well-being, especially in diverse communities. Comprehensive evaluation frameworks are essential for cross-country and temporal comparisons.

The chapter presents insights related to impact assessment from three studies on arts engagement and well-being. These include exploratory tools to capture dimensions of the intrinsic value of the arts in assessing peoples' connection with the arts, an attempt to link people's perception of the arts with well-being benefits, and an approach towards measuring the community impact of arts engagement. It proposes and validates a cultural appraisal index, and provides empirical evidence on the mediating role of cultural appraisal for the effects of arts engagement on subjective well-being.

#### Chapter 4: Types of well-being and health outcomes related to art engagement

This section presents evidence on the health and well-being effects associated with arts engagement, based on a scoping review, emphasising different categories of outcomes.

Research suggests that participating in cultural activities can have positive effects on promoting health, preventing illness, and managing and treating different conditions.

Arts and cultural engagement can enhance individuals' subjective well-being by fostering skill development, self-expression, empowerment, resilience, empathy, and confidence, reducing stress and anxiety, and increasing overall life satisfaction and self-reflection.

At community level, arts participation can promote bonding, reduce isolation, and combat stigma, particularly among disadvantaged groups. In educational and work settings, creative activities can improve well-being, learning, and professional development. Arts also contribute to local development through collaboration, place identity, and active citizenship, with heritage preservation and inclusive urban design positively affecting physical, mental, and social well-being.

However, the prevalence of small-scale interventions by grassroots organisations highlights the need for more systemic, robust research and policy frameworks to address diverse demographic needs through culture.

## Chapter 5: The significance of engagement with arts during the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on well-being for the possible role of culture in tackling challenges and disruptions

The chapter presents the main findings of a survey conducted during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, and explores the broader implications for future cultural policies and practice.

Findings suggest that cultural engagement increased during the pandemic, becoming the most frequent free-time activity (85.18% of respondents), that people felt a stronger connection to the arts, with 56% resonating with a particular work of art, indicating its role in providing personal support. Respondents recognised emotional, aesthetic, cognitive, and social benefits from arts engagement. Both receptive and active cultural participation significantly contributed to well-being, with active participation having stronger and more diverse benefits. Active participation was linked to higher Positive Affect, while receptive participation in core arts was associated with decreased Negative Affect.

The study highlights the importance of cultural engagement as a coping strategy during the pandemic. It suggests that increasing access to culture and encouraging regular arts engagement can build resilience to challenges and that embedding art-based solutions in strategies to manage disruptions can enhance societal well-being.

## Chapter 6: Mapping the factors influencing the development of the culture and well-being area of practice

The chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study mapping the factors that influence the emerging area of culture and well-being. It provides an in-depth analysis of strengths, limitations, opportunities, challenges, and criticisms, along with insights into the ecosystem of stakeholders involved in arts for health and well-being.

Strengths include the multimodality of the arts that offer diverse and versatile methods that can deliver both intrinsic and extrinsic value, the wide acceptability of arts interventions, their low cost and their effectiveness in destigmatising health conditions. Art-based approaches face limitations such as project-based



fragmentation, unequal cultural opportunities, and potential unintended negative effects. Mainstreaming and scaling up these approaches require significant effort, local adaptation, a coherent vocabulary and awareness in partner sectors.

Opportunities include growing interest from artists, partner sectors, and decision-makers, especially in response to crises like Covid-19 and rising mental health issues. Challenges include limited funding in both cultural and health sectors, misalignment between cultural business models and health systems, ethical and quality concerns, and the potential instrumentalisation of the arts, pressuring artists into roles of other professionals.

A multi-sector stakeholder map focusing on culture, health, social care, and education is suggested, emphasising the need for mutual and equal relations, increased awareness and improved skills. A socio-ecological mapping of factors influencing culture-related well-being benefits and possible responses to address these factors is presented.

## Chapter 7: Aiming for structural solutions to unlock the potential of culture as well-being. Policy and action recommendations

The chapter offers suggestions for policy and strategic action aimed at embedding culture within comprehensive strategies for well-being and health and transitioning to a paradigm of cultural welfare.

Recommendations for policies and strategic action are proposed in relation to the parallel paradigms of culture in/for/as well-being. These paradigms operate with different value regimes, and largely also with different business models. They also reflect the interests of different stakeholders, potentially explaining the tensions between the different priorities of different policy agendas.

In the culture in well-being paradigm, to enhance the impact of the arts on health and well-being, the cultural sector itself must be supported, though adequate funding and improved cultural infrastructure. Policies facilitating access to culture for all, with special focus on the inclusion of vulnerable populations are essential.

In the culture for well-being paradigm, the focus is on integrating culture in strategies of other sectors, such as health, education and social care. Effective delivery of

targeted interventions designed for specific health or well-being goals require scientific evidence, quality and ethical standards, skilled cultural professionals, and cross-sector collaboration frameworks. Shaping this interdisciplinary field involves creating new professional roles, institutions, and policies.

The culture as well-being model views culture itself as a source of well-being, emphasising intrinsic value of culture for securing human flourishing and restoring the capacity of our society to address current challenges in a holistic way. In terms of policies, it is aligned with the prioritisation of long-term, comprehensive approaches, through which both structural change and public narratives are being transformed.

## Chapter 8: Main findings

This chapter summarises the key findings and implications of the research.

The research explores the paradigm shift in the role of culture in society, from a marginal sector to an important component of sustainable development and well-being. It examines the theoretical models linking arts and well-being/health and provides a framework for understanding the different dimensions of culture's role in well-being. It explores different measurement instruments and approaches to understanding the effects of cultural participation on individual and community well-being. The study identifies the types of well-being and health outcomes related to arts engagement. It investigates the significance of engagement with arts for well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores how cultural participation during times of crisis can contribute to addressing challenges and disruptions.

The study maps the factors influencing the development of the culture and well-being area of practice and it examines the ecosystem of stakeholders involved.

The thesis proposes policy and action recommendations to integrate arts and culture into comprehensive approaches to well-being and transition to a paradigm of cultural welfare. The 'culture as well-being' model, aligned with a 'cultural welfare' paradigm, presents the potential of culture to support the transition to a society and economy of well-being, where welfare policies take holistic approaches, widening their focus from disease management to promoting healthy, purposeful, and sustainable living.