

Summary

What does culture mean to people?

Cultural engagement in the 2010s

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Wat hebben mensen met cultuur?

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Summary and discussion

To answer the question of what culture means to people, we need to start by defining what we mean by culture. It might seem obvious what the word culture means, but in fact culture has been defined in many diverse ways. There is no authoritative definition of the concept of culture that is widely accepted. Moreover, the concept of 'culture' is often paired with the concept of 'art', which adds to the confusion. As in previous publications by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) regarding people's engagement with culture, in this report we refer to culture as comprising both art and heritage. Art includes the performing arts (music, dance and theatre), visual arts, film and literature, and video art; heritage comprises both tangible (movable and immovable) and intangible heritage (such as rituals and traditions). Art includes not only classical ballet and opera, but also rock music, hip-hop and folk music traditions. The survey that this report is based on did not ask people about culture in abstract terms, nor about art and heritage, but focused on people's specific interests and activities.

Engagement with culture can manifest itself in various ways. Five forms of engagement with culture have been defined and examined here: an interest in culture; making culture-related visits; the use of culture-related media; amateur culture; and support for culture. When these definitions are applied, almost everyone has some level of engagement with culture. When we take a closer look, however, there are differences in the degree to which certain segments of the population engage with particular forms or expressions of culture. Differences in individuals' capacity to comprehend cultural codes and mores stem from differences in a person's cultural capital – in terms of both quantity and composition, as well as from differences in educational background, differences in ancestry or ethnicity and generational differences.

Interest

The vast majority of the population (approximately 85%) is quite or very interested in one or more forms of art, with the most popular being film (almost two thirds), pop music (over half) and stage performance (one third). Of the 'higher' or classical art forms (classical music, modern dance, classical ballet and theatre), classical music is the most popular (one fifth). Two-thirds of people are quite or very interested in one or more aspects of heritage, with the most popular form being built heritage (half). For three-quarters of the population, culture is a topic of conversation, either sometimes or often. This applies less to heritage (50%) than to art (70%).

Heritage became a more frequent topic of conversation in 2018. The reason for this may have been the fierce debates around the 'Zwarte Piet' (Black Pete) tradition. The word 'tradition' plays a major role in that debate, and this word is also included in the question regarding interest in heritage.

People with a higher educational level are more likely to be interested in culture and to talk about it than people who have spent less time in education. Interest in art is somewhat lower among older people, while interest in heritage is lower among younger people.

Culture-related visits

Over 90% of the population makes at least one culture-related visit per year. This could be a visit to the opera, a pop concert or a historic location. Over 85% of respondents went to see some form of art: almost three-quarters saw some kind of performing art (of which 60% were popular performing arts and 36% classical performing arts), two-thirds went to see a film, half went to see visual arts and just under 10% went to a literary event. About two-thirds of respondents visited a heritage location, particularly built heritage (approximately 60%).

There were no major changes in the degree of cultural visits in the 2010s. If there was any change at all, it was the growing reach of culture, including art museums, film and heritage. The credit crisis and its aftermath, including the cuts in public spending on subsidised culture, seem to have left no traces in the reach of culture. Neither has the frequency of culture-related visits been affected, although we will never know whether there would have been (even more) growth if the financial crisis had never taken place.

Culture-related visits are distributed unevenly across the population. The most important factor here is a person's cultural capital, which relates to the length of education. The longer the educational career, the more likely a person is to make culture-related visits. This applies not only to the classical performing arts, museums and visual arts, but to also popular performing arts, festivals and film. The reach of culture is often more limited among people from a non-Western migration background, with the exceptions being film and libraries (although film can be explained here by the younger demographics of that group). In the case of classical performing arts, visual arts and museums, there are major differences in the reach of culture by education, with indices of approximately 75% among people with a lower level of education and 135% among those with a higher level of education. Age has a variable relationship with culture-related visits, the broad picture being that the reach of museums and classical performing arts is greater among older people, while the reach of popular performing arts, film and festivals is greater among young people.

Culture via media

The culture-related use of media follows broadly the same patterns as culture-related visits. The reach is wide (approximately 90%), with the reach of art (approximately 85%) being greater than that of heritage (approximately 65% in 2018). The use of digital facilities is on the rise.

Just as with interest in culture, the culture-related use of media with respect to engagement with heritage has also grown recently, possibly due to discussions around 'Zwarte Piet' as mentioned.

The culture-related use of media is somewhat lower among those with a lower level of education and those from a non-Western migration background. Internet applications have been embraced less among the oldest demographic groups.

Amateur culture

Almost two-thirds of people are active as amateurs ('amators') in culture every year, mainly in the form of playing music, painting/drawing, making photographs/films or engaging in historical research. Over 40% practice some form of culture once a month or more often. Amateur participation is much more common in art than in heritage activities: approximately 70% of art amateurs do this frequently, while 70% of heritage amateurs do so occasionally.

In the 2010s, the share of amateur participation in art was consistently above half of the population, while that in heritage increased by 25% to one third.

People with a higher level of education are more likely to practice culture; young people are more likely to be active practitioners of art.

Support for culture

About one third of the population support the cultural sector. Donations are the most common form of support (20%), with almost one in ten people engaging in culture-related volunteer work.

The overall reach of support for culture (donations, volunteer work and membership of supporters' associations) declined slightly in the 2010s, reaching just under 30% in 2018. Donations and volunteer work are less common among people from a non-Western migration background. Donations come mainly from older people and higher-income groups. Voluntary work is not related to these characteristics, but here there are differences associated with educational level.

Patterns: trends over time

Engagement with culture appears to be fairly stable. Engagement seems to be rising in certain areas: more people are taking an interest in culture, there is more use of media around heritage and art museums, film and heritage are extending their reach somewhat. On the other hand, support for culture is waning slightly.

Patterns: population distribution

Cultural engagement is not distributed evenly among the population. There are often subtle differences in the extent to which particular demographic groups engage with culture in particular ways, but sometimes these differences are more striking. People who are not culturally engaged are not discussed or identified separately here (for this, see: Van den Broek 2013; Van Eijck and Boele 2018), but in fact they represent the mirror image of those who are engaged, and so in this sense they are covered.

Several patterns can be discerned in people's cultural engagement. Cultural capital (the capacity to comprehend cultural codes and mores) plays a major role in these. Cultural cap-

ital varies between individuals in both quantitative and qualitative terms, resulting in varying degrees of mental distance from certain forms of culture. This is evident in differences in the educational level of people themselves and of their parents, in their ethnicity and ancestry and in their age or year of birth. This mental distance is more important than geographic or financial distance. As a rule, cultural engagement is somewhat lower among those who have had a shorter education (or whose parents had a shorter education), and among people from a non-Western migrant background. This applies across the board: interest in art and heritage (with the exception of interest in heritage and migration background), talking about culture, culture-related visits (to performing arts, visual arts, film, museums and festivals), use of cultural media, amateur culture and support for culture. The differences caused by level of education are the greatest with respect to the reach of classical performing arts, visual arts, museums and cultural volunteer work. In the case of libraries, the relationship with a migrant background is reversed: slightly more people with a non-Western migrant background visit libraries.

Cultural engagement is correlated with age or year of birth in a variety of ways. Art is a more frequent topic of conversation among younger people; heritage more frequently among older people. More young people visit art venues: performing arts and film are especially popular and attract many more younger people than older people. The same applies to cultural venues such as libraries and festivals. Among adults, the classical performing arts and visual arts are more popular among older people. More younger people than older people use digital media for purposes relating to culture. Art is actively practised the most among younger people, while heritage is actively practised least among middle-aged people. The number of cultural volunteers is highest among younger people and the over-65s, while the proportion of donors to culture rises sharply with age.

Generally speaking, living in a city has little or no effect on the reach of culture. The same applies to gender, with the provision that slightly more men actively participate in heritage activities and slightly more women are interested in art, visit classical performing art and libraries, and actively practise art.

Income is often related to cultural engagement in a descriptive sense. However, when controlled for the influence of other characteristics this relationship is weaker as in the case of culture as a topic of conversation, of culture-related visits and of donations, or completely absent, as in the case of active participation in art. Only for donations does a (major) difference remain in the proportion of donors per income group. In some instances, income is not even relevant in a descriptive way, such as in the case of library visits or festival visits, active participation in heritage activities and voluntary work.

The smaller variations by income after controlling are due to cultural capital. A higher level of education is not only associated with a higher level of cultural engagement, but also with higher income. Consequently, the descriptive relationship between income and engagement with culture is partly illusory because it depends on the effect of education on both of these characteristics. An additional indication that cultural capital plays a more important role in cultural engagement than financial capital is that cultural capital is also associated with the use of culture-related media, which involves no costs at all.

Cultural engagement in the 2010s in context

As a decade, the 2010s were bookended by two crises. The beginning of the decade was dominated by the aftermath of the credit crisis, while its end was marked by the start of the coronavirus pandemic. This normality makes the 2010s a unique decade, which can serve as a benchmark by which to evaluate the consequences of the credit crisis and the coronavirus crisis. The consequences of the coronavirus crisis will depend on how long that crisis continues, on the resilience of cultural life and the cultural sector, and on the support for culture provided (see the SCP report: *Coronavirus and the meaning of cultural life*, Van den Broek 2020), but at present these factors remain unknown.

Any consideration of cultural engagement over the 2010s is impossible without outlining the broader context. It was a decade of economic recovery following the credit crisis, with cuts made to government spending on culture in the first instance, in the aftermath of that crisis, partly fuelled by a rhetoric that did not cast a positive light on those sections of the cultural sector that received subsidies. It was also a decade in which services, including cultural services, underwent steady digitization (with the advent of audio and video streaming). Over the course of the decade, the theme of diversity also returned to the cultural-political agenda, this time under the name of inclusion.

The decision to cut spending on culture stemmed from the coalition agreement of the first Rutte government of September 2010. One PVV member of the Dutch House of Representatives set the tone by characterising subsidised cultural institutions as 'subsidy guzzlers'. Due to the four-year programme of government funding for culture, those cuts had a long-term impact. Many municipalities – which combined, incidentally, spend more than twice as much on culture than national government – had less money to spend as a result of the credit crisis and also made cuts to culture budgets.

Yet no sign of the financial crisis, the accompanying rhetoric and subsequent budget cuts can be discerned in levels of cultural engagement in the years 2012-2018. Part of the explanation for this is that the rhetoric and spending cuts did not affect culture as a whole, but 'only' those areas of culture that receive government funding. Whatever the case may be, the level of engagement with culture has been an example of continuity. To the extent that any change in levels of engagement with culture has occurred, there has generally been an increase rather than a decrease: interest in heritage and the use of media in heritage have increased, as has the reach of museums, film and heritage. Active participation in culture was also on the rise. Only support for culture saw a slight fall. There was no popular movement to make up for the spending cuts. One disclaimer regarding the observation that there was no discernible effect on cultural engagement in the aftermath of the credit crisis and the spending cuts is the unanswerable question of whether cultural engagement might otherwise have risen to an even higher level than its current level.

The growing availability of culture online, often at little or no cost, has not been accompanied by a rise in interest in culture or in a reduction in the physical reach of culture. The consequences have remained limited to slight shifts within the use of culture-related media, with the reach of digital media growing at the expense of print media and broadcasting.

Over the course of the 2010s, the theme of diversity returned to the cultural and political agenda. This relates to the issue of diversity in the areas of programming, audiences, staff and partners, a diversity which turned out to be somewhat limited (Berkers et al. 2018; Van der Veen et al. 2018). In museums, programming is about presentation, particularly in relation to the history of colonialism and slavery (Modest and Lelijveld 2018), which cannot be seen in isolation from wider – and sometimes fierce – debates around identity. It remains to be seen whether renewed attention to diversity will lead to any changes in cultural presentations, and whether this will have any effect on diversity in cultural engagement. An additional complication that arises is that the challenge of tackling the coronavirus crisis may detract from the focus on diversity within the four areas mentioned above.