



Challenges of Project Management in the Romanian Cultural Sector: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Managing cultural projects has become increasingly complex in the context of the growing projectification of the cultural sector, the pressure generated by limited financial resources, and the rapid changes associated with digital transformation. While project management practices are widely discussed in business and public administration, fewer studies focus specifically on the realities faced by project managers operating within cultural organizations. Despite the growing body of literature on projectification, leadership, and innovation in cultural organizations, empirical evidence is limited on how these dynamics interact in the Romanian cultural sector. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of professionals involved in managing cultural projects in Romania. The study investigates four interconnected dimensions: the challenges encountered during project implementation, the lessons learned through project experience, the organizational adoption of acquired knowledge, and the role of projects in generating innovation. This paper explores the main challenges cultural project managers face in Romania and examines the extent to which cultural projects contribute to organizational learning and innovation. The research is based on an exploratory approach, using in-depth interviews with nine professionals involved in managing cultural projects across different fields. The interviews investigated the most difficult projects respondents managed, the lessons learned during implementation, the organizational adoption of acquired knowledge, the role of innovation generated by projects, and the main opportunities and challenges affecting the Romanian cultural sector. The findings indicate that funding remains the most significant challenge faced by cultural project managers, followed by difficulties with human resource quality, bureaucratic constraints, institutional rigidity, and the ongoing need to adapt to changing audience expectations. The results also show that projects serve as important mechanisms for experimentation and innovation, particularly in audience development, digital communication, and organizational practices. However, the institutionalization of lessons learned and innovative practices remains inconsistent across organizations. The study contributes to the growing literature on cultural project management by providing empirical evidence from the Romanian cultural sector and highlighting the importance of leadership, organizational learning, and adaptive management in project-based cultural environments. The findings contribute to both the academic literature and managerial practice by providing insights into the specific conditions under which Romanian cultural organizations operate.

Keywords

Project management; cultural sector; funding; leadership; innovation; digital transformation; Romania.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, culture has increasingly been recognized as an important driver of social, economic, and territorial development. At the same time, cultural and creative sectors have become more exposed to market pressures, competition, changing

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audience expectations, and the need to demonstrate measurable economic and social value (Addis & Rurale, 2020). Cultural organizations are therefore expected not only to produce artistic value but also to contribute to innovation, community development, and organizational sustainability.

In this context, project management has become an increasingly important component of cultural activity. According to recent evidence from the music sector, communication, project planning, and organizational skills are among the most important competencies required by cultural professionals today (Bauer & Kastler, 2023, as cited in Abfalter, 2023). Consequently, artists and cultural practitioners are often required to assume managerial responsibilities in addition to their creative roles, particularly in cultural systems characterized by limited resources and unstable funding mechanisms.

The growing reliance on projects has contributed to what scholars describe as the projectification of organizations and sectors. Projectification refers to the increasing tendency to structure activities, resources, and organizational objectives through projects, temporary teams, and project-based funding mechanisms (Fred & Godenhjelm, 2023). In the cultural sector, this phenomenon has intensified as organizations seek greater flexibility, innovation, and access to external resources while operating in increasingly uncertain environments (Holzmann & Mazzini, 2020).

Despite its potential benefits, projectification also generates significant managerial challenges. Project managers are expected to navigate financial uncertainty, stakeholder complexity, resource limitations, and increasing organizational demands while simultaneously maintaining the artistic integrity of cultural initiatives. Contemporary project environments are characterized by higher levels of uncertainty, greater geographical dispersion of teams, and increasing pressures related to communication, leadership, and organizational adaptability (Ballesteros-Sánchez et al., 2019).

These challenges become even more visible in countries such as Romania, where cultural organizations continue to rely heavily on public funding while private sponsorship and philanthropic support remain relatively limited. Moreover, recent data indicate relatively low levels of participation in several forms of cultural consumption, creating additional pressure on organizations seeking to attract audiences and secure financial sustainability (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2022).

At the same time, digital transformation creates both opportunities and challenges for cultural organizations. Projects are increasingly viewed as mechanisms capable of generating innovation, supporting audience development, facilitating experimentation, and introducing new managerial practices. Innovation in cultural organizations may emerge through audience engagement, value creation, digital technologies, or new forms of governance and organizational management (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2009). Furthermore, project-based work can facilitate organizational learning and the diffusion of innovative practices when knowledge generated through projects is successfully integrated into institutional routines (Gemünden et al., 2018).

Although international research has substantially advanced the understanding of projectification, leadership, organizational learning, and innovation in cultural organizations, comparable empirical evidence from Romania remains limited. Romanian scholarship has primarily focused on cultural participation, audience behavior, cultural policies, and the broader development of the cultural and creative sectors rather than on the managerial processes underpinning the implementation of cultural projects. For instance, the *Romanian Barometer of Cultural Consumption* provides valuable evidence regarding patterns of cultural participation and structural challenges affecting the sector (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2022), while European policy documents highlight the strategic role of cultural and creative industries in fostering innovation and sustainable development (European Commission, 2024). However, relatively little empirical research has examined how projectification, leadership, organizational learning, and

innovation interact in the day-to-day management of Romanian cultural organizations. By exploring these issues through interviews with experienced cultural project managers, the present study contributes empirical evidence to an area that remains insufficiently investigated.

Literature review

Projectification of the Cultural Sector

The increasing importance of project management within cultural organizations must be understood in the broader context of the transformation of the cultural and creative sectors. According to the European Commission (2024), cultural and creative sectors encompass activities based on cultural values and artistic expressions, playing an important role in economic development, entrepreneurship, and innovation. As cultural organizations operate in increasingly competitive environments, traditional institutional models have gradually incorporated managerial practices derived from business and project management.

One of the most influential perspectives on this transformation is offered by Addis and Rurale (2020), who argue that cultural organizations are evolving from traditional arts institutions into cultural businesses. In this context, organizations are no longer evaluated exclusively according to their artistic output but also according to their capacity to create economic, social, identity-related, and well-being value. Consequently, managers are increasingly required to balance artistic missions with financial sustainability, stakeholder expectations, and audience development strategies.

Substantial changes in the competitive environment have accompanied the transformation of cultural organizations. Cultural institutions no longer compete exclusively with organizations operating in the same artistic field. Instead, they compete for audiences' time, attention, and financial resources against a wide range of leisure, entertainment, and digital experiences (Addis & Rurale, 2020). Simultaneously, declining participation rates in several forms of cultural consumption have intensified the pressure on organizations to innovate and diversify their activities. In Romania, for example, recent data indicate declining attendance at theatre performances, cinema visits, libraries, museums, and art galleries (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2022).

Against this background, project management has become an increasingly attractive organizational solution. When financial resources are limited, and funding opportunities are often linked to temporary programs, organizations tend to structure their activities around projects. Projectification can therefore be understood as the growing tendency to organize work through temporary structures, project teams, and project-based objectives rather than through exclusively permanent organizational arrangements (Fred & Godenhjelm, 2023).

The literature distinguishes between projectification and projectization. While projectization refers to a broader managerial philosophy characterized by the dominance of project thinking within organizations and societies (Jain, 2002), projectification describes the practical process through which organizations increasingly adopt project-based forms of work (Lovett, Abraham, & Jung, 2023). In cultural organizations, projectification is evident in the growing reliance on grant-funded initiatives, temporary partnerships, collaborative networks, and externally financed cultural programs.

Several authors argue that projectification offers important advantages. Project-based structures can stimulate flexibility, innovation, experimentation, and organizational learning while allowing organizations to access external funding and respond more effectively to environmental uncertainty (Gareis, 2006). However, projectification also generates important risks. Research highlights challenges such as organizational

fragmentation, increased bureaucratic demands, deadline pressure, temporary employment arrangements, knowledge discontinuity, and employee emotional exhaustion (Cicmil, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2016; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014).

These tensions appear particularly relevant in the cultural sector, where organizations are expected to combine artistic creativity with managerial efficiency. As Jałocha and Ćwikła (2017) observe, the increasing dependence on project-based funding has transformed not only the organizational structures of cultural institutions but also the everyday practices of artists and cultural professionals. Activities that were previously centered primarily on artistic production are now increasingly accompanied by project planning, reporting, stakeholder management, and compliance with administrative requirements. Consequently, projectification has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary cultural management. Understanding its implications is essential for analyzing the challenges faced by cultural project managers and for explaining the growing importance of leadership, innovation, and organizational adaptability within cultural organizations.

Challenges of cultural project managers

The challenges faced by project managers have attracted increasing attention in the literature as contemporary organizational environments grow more complex. Rapid technological change, globalization, economic uncertainty, and the increasing reliance on project-based structures have transformed the competencies required for successful project management. According to Ballesteros-Sánchez, Ortiz-Marcos, and Rodríguez-Rivero (2019), project managers are increasingly expected to operate in contexts characterized by uncertainty, geographically dispersed teams, communication difficulties, and the need to balance multiple stakeholder interests. Consequently, leadership, communication, adaptability, and team management have become critical competencies for project success.

These challenges become even more pronounced within the cultural sector due to its distinctive organizational and institutional characteristics. Unlike many private-sector projects, cultural initiatives frequently operate under conditions of financial uncertainty, dependence on public funding, and strong accountability requirements toward funding authorities. In many European countries, including Romania, cultural organizations rely heavily on public resources, grants, and project-based financing mechanisms, making access to funding one of the most important managerial concerns (Rador, 2022).

The dependence on public funding creates a particular relationship between cultural organizations and governmental authorities. According to Styhre and Börjesson (2011), cultural institutions operate within a framework where artistic objectives must coexist with political, social, and economic expectations. As a result, cultural project managers are often required to align creative initiatives with the priorities established by funding bodies while simultaneously preserving artistic quality and institutional autonomy. This balancing act represents one of the defining challenges of cultural project management. Another important challenge concerns human resource management. Cultural projects frequently involve heterogeneous teams composed of permanent employees, temporary staff, freelancers, volunteers, artists, technicians, and external collaborators. Such diversity can enrich projects through complementary expertise and creative perspectives, but it can also generate coordination difficulties, communication barriers, and leadership challenges. Cultural managers are therefore expected to possess not only administrative competencies but also the capacity to motivate individuals with diverse professional backgrounds and expectations.

The temporal nature of cultural projects creates additional managerial pressures. Many cultural initiatives operate within strict deadlines and limited budgets while pursuing objectives that are often difficult to measure using conventional performance indicators. Productions in theatre, opera, music, and performing arts require extensive preparation

and coordination before reaching audiences, while their success frequently depends on artistic quality, reputation, and public reception rather than solely on financial outcomes (Styhre & Börjesson, 2011).

Furthermore, project managers in cultural organizations must continuously respond to changes in audience behavior and cultural consumption patterns. Digital technologies, social media, and new forms of entertainment have transformed how individuals engage with cultural products. Recent evidence from Romania suggests declining participation rates in several traditional forms of cultural consumption, increasing the pressure on cultural organizations to attract audiences, diversify activities, and demonstrate relevance within highly competitive leisure markets (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2022).

The literature also highlights the growing importance of communication and stakeholder management in cultural projects. Project managers must interact not only with artists and employees but also with sponsors, public authorities, donors, media representatives, audiences, and community partners. The diversity of these stakeholders often creates competing expectations regarding project objectives and outcomes. Consequently, successful cultural project management requires the ability to negotiate interests, build partnerships, and maintain trust among multiple actors involved in the project environment.

Taken together, these challenges illustrate the complexity of project management in the cultural sector. Beyond technical planning and administrative coordination, cultural project managers must navigate financial constraints, organizational pressures, stakeholder expectations, and artistic ambitions. Understanding how professionals address these challenges is essential for explaining the dynamics of contemporary cultural organizations and provides the foundation for analyzing the role of leadership and innovation in cultural project environments.

Leadership in cultural project management

Leadership represents one of the most important factors influencing the success of projects and organizations operating in dynamic environments. While management is generally associated with planning, organizing, budgeting, monitoring, and problem-solving, leadership is primarily concerned with establishing direction, creating a vision, inspiring people, and facilitating change (Kotter, 2013). In project-based environments, where uncertainty and complexity are inherent characteristics, leadership becomes particularly important for coordinating teams, maintaining motivation, and ensuring organizational adaptability.

The importance of leadership is especially evident in cultural organizations, where managers frequently operate at the intersection of artistic, administrative, financial, and political demands. Unlike many other sectors, cultural organizations often need to balance creative freedom with institutional accountability, artistic ambitions with financial constraints, and long-term cultural missions with short-term project objectives. These tensions require leadership approaches that can integrate diverse stakeholder expectations while preserving organizational coherence. The governance structure of cultural organizations further increases the relevance of leadership. According to Cray, Inglis, and Freeman (2007), many cultural institutions operate through dual leadership arrangements involving both artistic and administrative leadership roles. While artistic leaders focus primarily on creative vision, artistic quality, and reputation, administrative leaders are generally responsible for organizational sustainability, resource management, and operational effectiveness. The coexistence of these perspectives may create complementarities, but it can also generate tensions regarding priorities, resource allocation, and strategic direction.

Different leadership styles may influence the development and implementation of cultural projects in distinct ways. Charismatic leadership can contribute to

organizational visibility and reputation by attracting audiences, artists, and stakeholders. Transactional leadership may facilitate the achievement of project objectives through clear expectations and performance-oriented relationships. Transformational leadership, frequently associated with innovation and organizational change, can inspire teams to embrace new ideas, overcome resistance to change, and pursue ambitious goals. Participatory leadership, in turn, encourages collaboration and stakeholder involvement in decision-making, though excessive consultation can occasionally delay project implementation (Cray et al., 2007).

Leadership is also closely linked to organizational learning. Project environments generate valuable knowledge through successes, failures, experimentation, and problem-solving activities. However, the extent to which this knowledge contributes to organizational development depends largely on leadership practices. Leaders play a critical role in facilitating communication, encouraging reflection, supporting knowledge sharing, and integrating lessons learned into organizational routines. Without such processes, valuable project experience may remain confined to individuals rather than becoming part of institutional memory.

The relationship between leadership and organizational performance has also been illustrated through studies of major cultural institutions. Research on the Paris Opera suggests that strong and stable leadership facilitates the development of long-term strategies, organizational improvement, and sustainable artistic development. Conversely, unstable leadership structures may encourage short-term decision-making focused primarily on individual reputation rather than institutional development (Agid & Tarondeau, 2007).

Given the increasing projectification of cultural organizations, leadership can therefore be understood not only as a mechanism for coordinating project activities but also as a critical factor supporting innovation, organizational learning, and long-term institutional resilience. Examining how cultural project managers exercise leadership and how lessons learned are transferred within organizations represents an important step toward understanding the contemporary dynamics of cultural project management.

Innovation and digital transformation in cultural organizations

Digital transformation has become one of the most significant drivers of change affecting contemporary cultural organizations. Advances in digital technologies have altered the ways in which cultural products are created, distributed, consumed, and evaluated, forcing cultural institutions to reconsider traditional managerial practices and audience engagement strategies. Museums, theatres, opera houses, cultural centers, and other cultural organizations increasingly integrate digital tools into both their artistic activities and organizational processes in order to remain relevant in rapidly changing environments.

The impact of digital transformation can be observed across multiple dimensions of cultural activity. According to Massi, Vecco, and Lin (2020), digital technologies have expanded the possibilities for interaction between cultural institutions and audiences through virtual exhibitions, interactive installations, augmented reality applications, digital archives, and social media engagement. Such developments have transformed audiences from passive consumers into active participants in cultural experiences, creating new opportunities for cultural organizations to extend their reach and diversify their publics.

The growing importance of digital technologies is closely linked to the broader concept of innovation. Although creativity and innovation are often used interchangeably, the literature emphasizes an important distinction between the two concepts. Creativity refers primarily to the generation of ideas, while innovation involves the successful implementation and practical application of those ideas within organizations and

markets (Govindarajan, 2010). Consequently, cultural organizations may be highly creative without necessarily being innovative if creative outputs are not transformed into sustainable organizational practices or new forms of value creation.

Projects are frequently considered important vehicles for innovation. Project-based environments facilitate experimentation, collaboration, and the development of new solutions while providing organizations with opportunities to test ideas that might be difficult to implement through routine activities. According to Gemünden, Lehner, and Kock (2018), innovative organizations use projects not only to achieve operational objectives but also to generate knowledge, develop competencies, and create dynamic capabilities that strengthen their capacity to adapt to changing environments.

In the cultural sector, innovation may take several forms. Bakhshi and Throsby (2009) identify four major areas of innovation: audience development, artistic and cultural production, value creation, and organizational management. Audience-related innovation involves attracting new publics and creating new forms of engagement through digital communication and participation mechanisms. Innovation in artistic production may include the development of new formats, interdisciplinary collaborations, and experimental cultural practices. Innovation in value creation refers to cultural organizations' capacity to demonstrate and communicate their economic, social, and cultural impact. Finally, innovation in management and governance concerns the adoption of new organizational structures, managerial practices, and decision-making processes.

From a project management perspective, innovation is particularly important because projects often provide the resources, flexibility, and legitimacy necessary to implement change. Temporary project structures allow organizations to experiment with digital technologies, new partnerships, alternative funding models, and novel approaches to audience engagement. However, the long-term value of innovation depends on the extent to which knowledge and practices developed through projects are subsequently integrated into organizational routines and institutional strategies.

Therefore, innovation should not be understood solely as the production of new cultural content. It also involves organizational learning, the adoption of new technologies, the development of managerial capabilities, and the creation of sustainable mechanisms that allow cultural organizations to respond effectively to social, technological, and economic change. Understanding whether cultural projects generate such outcomes represents an important objective of the present study and provides a relevant framework for interpreting the experiences of Romanian cultural project managers.

Although the international literature provides valuable insights into projectification, leadership, organizational learning, and innovation in cultural organizations, empirical evidence focusing specifically on project management within Romanian cultural organizations remains limited. Existing Romanian contributions have predominantly examined cultural consumption, cultural policies, and the broader development of the cultural and creative sectors rather than the managerial processes underlying the implementation of cultural projects. For example, the Romanian Barometer of Cultural Consumption provides extensive evidence regarding audience participation and patterns of cultural engagement (Croitoru & Becuț Marinescu, 2022), while institutional reports published by the European Commission emphasize the strategic role of cultural and creative sectors in fostering innovation and sustainable development (European Commission, 2024). However, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how projectification, leadership, organizational learning, and innovation interact in the day-to-day management of Romanian cultural organizations. By exploring these dimensions through qualitative interviews with experienced cultural project managers, the present study seeks to contribute empirical evidence to this underexplored area of research.

Research methodology

Research design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by cultural project managers operating in Romania. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research focuses on understanding individual experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding project management practices within cultural organizations. Exploratory research is particularly useful for examining underexplored topics and for seeking a deeper understanding of complex social and organizational phenomena (Jain, 2021).

The study was guided by four main objectives: (1) to explore the challenges encountered by cultural managers and project managers in Romanian cultural organizations; (2) to investigate the extent to which cultural projects generate innovation in the context of digital transformation; (3) to identify lessons learned through project implementation; and (4) to examine whether knowledge acquired through projects contributes to organizational learning and institutional development.

Based on the literature review, four working assumptions informed the research process. First, funding was expected to represent the most important challenge for cultural project managers. Second, leadership was assumed to facilitate organizational learning and knowledge transfer. Third, team composition was expected to influence project effectiveness. Finally, projects were considered potential drivers of innovation within cultural organizations.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, all interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes were developed iteratively by grouping similar statements into broader analytical themes corresponding to the research objectives. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring patterns while preserving the richness of participants' individual perspectives.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provide sufficient flexibility to explore participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews through a common interview guide. The questions were developed based on the main themes identified in the literature, including projectification, leadership, organizational learning, innovation, and the specific challenges of cultural project management.

The sample consisted of nine professionals with significant experience in cultural organizations and cultural projects. Participants represented diverse areas of activity, including opera, symphonic music, museums, literature, cultural education, cultural entrepreneurship, and non-governmental organizations. A convenience sampling strategy was employed, selecting participants based on their experience in managing cultural projects and their ability to provide relevant insights regarding the research objectives.

Table 1 provides an overview of the professional backgrounds of the interview participants. The sample was intentionally heterogeneous in terms of cultural fields, organizational settings, and managerial experience, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives on cultural project management in Romania.

Table 1 Profile of the interview participants

Respondent	Cultural field	Professional role	Experience in cultural projects
R1	Cultural events	Entrepreneur and manager	4 years
R2	Museums / Cultural education	Project manager, NGO manager	9 years
R3	Literature and poetry	Project manager	12 years
R4	Opera	Artist and project manager	9 years (6 as artist, 3 as project manager)
R5	Cultural education	Cultural events project manager	7 years
R6	Symphonic music	Music project manager	10 years (project management)
R7	Museums / Cultural education	Cultural project manager	20+ years
R8	Bookshop and cultural hub	Cultural project manager	13 years
R9	Opera management	Cultural manager / Project manager	23 years

Source: Authors' research.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their professional experience in managing cultural projects. The final sample included professionals representing different areas of the Romanian cultural sector, including performing arts, museums, music, literature, cultural education, and independent cultural organizations. This diversity was intended to capture a broad range of managerial experiences and perspectives regarding the implementation of cultural projects in different organizational settings.

The interviews explored six main topics: the most challenging cultural projects managed by participants; lessons learned during project implementation; the organizational adoption of acquired knowledge; innovation generated through projects; the main challenges faced by cultural project managers; and the opportunities currently available within the Romanian cultural sector.

The interview guide was developed around the research objectives and included open-ended questions organized into four thematic areas: (1) challenges encountered during project implementation, (2) lessons learned through project experience, (3) organizational learning and the transfer of knowledge generated through projects, and (4) the contribution of projects to innovation within cultural organizations. Additional questions explored participants' professional background and their views regarding the evolution of the Romanian cultural sector. The semi-structured format allowed respondents to elaborate on issues they considered particularly relevant while ensuring consistency across interviews.

Five interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or through online communication platforms and were recorded with participants' consent. Two respondents preferred to provide written answers via email. All responses were subsequently reviewed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved repeated reading of interview materials, identification of recurring themes, coding of relevant statements, and the interpretation of patterns emerging across participants' experiences.

To protect participants' privacy, all respondents were anonymized and referred to through coded identifiers. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed

of the study's objectives, the anonymous treatment of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the research process at any time.

The analysis generated four major themes corresponding to the research objectives. Within these themes, several recurring subthemes emerged across participants and are presented below.

Findings

Challenges encountered during project implementation

Funding as the primary challenge

A recurring theme across all interviews was the central role of funding in shaping the implementation and sustainability of cultural projects. Regardless of the cultural field represented by the respondents, financial resources were consistently identified as the most significant challenge faced by cultural project managers in Romania. Participants described a professional environment characterized by uncertainty, competition for limited resources, and a continuous dependence on public funding schemes. This perception was consistently reflected in the interviews. As one respondent explained, *"Project management in Romania is generally understood as managing projects with non-reimbursable funds."* (R1). Another participant added that *"For cultural institutions, clearly the greatest opportunity that projects catalyze is the ability to make acquisitions that a state institution could not include in its minimal procurement plan."* (R8).

Several respondents emphasized that project development is often constrained by limited financial resources rather than by a lack of ideas or artistic initiatives. Interviewees reported that obtaining funding requires considerable administrative effort, extensive application procedures, and substantial time investments, frequently without guarantees of success. Even when funding is secured, delays in the disbursement of financial resources may create additional operational difficulties and place significant pressure on organizations responsible for implementing projects.

The findings also reveal concerns regarding the structure of cultural funding in Romania. Public financing remains the dominant source of support for many cultural organizations, while private sponsorship and philanthropic contributions continue to be relatively limited. Several participants argued that sponsors are generally more willing to support highly visible events capable of generating public exposure than smaller cultural initiatives with long-term educational or community-oriented objectives. As a result, access to financial resources often depends not only on project quality but also on visibility, institutional reputation, and networking capacity.

Funding challenges were frequently linked to broader sustainability concerns. Respondents highlighted that many cultural projects achieve their immediate objectives but struggle to sustain activities after the funding period ends. In the absence of long-term financial mechanisms, organizations often become trapped in a continuous cycle of searching for new grants and funding opportunities. The uncertainty associated with funding mechanisms was illustrated by one interviewee, who explained: *"The money arrived very late. We basically had to advance the amounts ourselves... Since then, we have not applied again."* (R3). Similarly, another respondent highlighted the lack of continuity after project completion: *"The biggest challenge for a cultural manager is designing a project that can become sustainable. Most often, projects have a short lifespan—as long as the funding lasts."* (R8). This situation contributes to organizational instability and limits institutions' capacity to engage in long-term strategic planning.

These findings strongly support the study's first working assumption and are consistent with previous research highlighting the vulnerability of cultural organizations to

financial uncertainty and resource constraints. The interviews suggest that project managers in the Romanian cultural sector spend a substantial portion of their professional activity identifying, securing, and managing financial resources, often considering funding challenges more difficult than the artistic or operational aspects of project implementation.

Beyond the direct impact on project implementation, funding limitations also influence other organizational dimensions, including staff recruitment, innovation capacity, technological development, and audience engagement activities. Consequently, financial sustainability emerges not merely as an administrative concern but as a structural condition influencing the overall development of cultural organizations and their capacity to achieve long-term impact.

Human resources and team management

Alongside funding, the quality and management of human resources emerged as one of the most frequently discussed challenges among the interview participants. Respondents consistently emphasized that the success of cultural projects depends not only on financial resources but also on the capacity to assemble, coordinate, and motivate competent teams capable of working effectively in complex and often unpredictable environments. Interviewees consistently emphasized that managing people represented the most demanding aspect of cultural project management. As one respondent noted, *"The team is large, and challenges as a project manager relate to how you form your team, how well you communicate with them, and the inherent tensions and conflicts that arise in any team."* (R2).

Several interviewees highlighted the difficulties associated with identifying professionals possessing both technical expertise and the flexibility required by project-based work. Cultural projects frequently involve multidisciplinary teams composed of artists, technicians, communication specialists, educators, administrative personnel, and external collaborators. While such diversity can generate creativity and innovation, it may also create coordination difficulties and increase managerial complexity. Participants also expressed concerns regarding the uneven quality of human resources available within certain cultural organizations. Some respondents argued that institutional rigidity, insufficient professional development opportunities, and the lack of performance-oriented organizational cultures may negatively affect the implementation of projects. In particular, interviewees working within publicly funded organizations described situations in which formal positions and administrative procedures did not always correspond to actual competencies or project requirements.

The temporary nature of many cultural projects further complicates human resource management. Because projects are often financed for limited periods, organizations frequently rely on short-term collaborations, freelancers, volunteers, or external experts. Although such arrangements provide flexibility, they may also generate discontinuity, reduce institutional memory, and increase the risk of knowledge loss once projects are completed. Several participants noted that valuable expertise acquired during project implementation often leaves the organization, together with temporary collaborators. Another participant described the managerial burden in large cultural institutions: *"Managing human resources and mediating between interest groups within the institution's bodies consumed the most time and caused the highest level of stress."* (R9)

Team composition was repeatedly identified as a critical determinant of project success. Respondents emphasized that successful cultural projects require not only professional competence but also effective communication, trust, adaptability, and a shared commitment to project objectives. In several interviews, participants suggested that the difference between successful and unsuccessful projects could often be explained by the quality of interpersonal relationships within the project team rather than by financial resources alone.

The findings also indicate that cultural project managers frequently perform leadership functions that extend beyond formal managerial responsibilities. Participants described situations in which motivating team members, resolving conflicts, facilitating collaboration, and maintaining morale became equally important as planning activities or monitoring budgets. This observation reflects the specific nature of cultural projects, in which creative processes, artistic sensibilities, and diverse professional backgrounds require a leadership approach grounded in communication, empathy, and collaboration.

Overall, the interviews suggest that human resource challenges represent a structural issue within the Romanian cultural sector. While financial resources remain a fundamental concern, the capacity to attract, develop, and retain competent professionals appears equally important for the long-term success and sustainability of cultural organizations. The findings provide substantial support for the assumption that team composition directly influences the effectiveness of cultural project management and highlight the central role of people in transforming project ideas into successful cultural initiatives.

Lessons learned through project experience

A central theme emerging from the interviews concerns the relationship between project management, leadership, and organizational learning. Participants consistently reported that cultural projects generate valuable professional knowledge, regardless of whether the projects are ultimately perceived as successful or unsuccessful. Challenging projects, in particular, were often described as important learning experiences that contributed to the development of managerial competencies, problem-solving abilities, communication skills, and strategic thinking. The interviews also highlighted the importance of deliberate team building. One project manager argued that *"One of the most important lessons is related to how you form your team... every time a new nucleus is created."* (R2).

When asked about the most important lessons learned throughout their professional experience, respondents frequently referred to the importance of planning, adaptability, stakeholder communication, risk management, and team coordination. Several participants emphasized that cultural projects rarely unfold exactly as initially planned and that the ability to react quickly to unforeseen circumstances often becomes more important than strict adherence to predefined procedures. Consequently, experience accumulated through project implementation was regarded as one of the most valuable sources of professional development.

Communication emerged as another recurrent lesson. As one respondent explained, *"Clear communication with each member and everyone among themselves"* is essential, while another stressed that *"Effective communication with all team members and stakeholders is crucial for the success of a project."* (R2; R6). Flexibility and contingency planning were equally emphasized. According to R2, *"Always have a plan B... something unexpected will always happen."* Similarly, respondent R7 argued that *"Time management is crucial. Planning activities should be done pessimistically, always leaving a time buffer."*

However, the findings reveal a significant distinction between individual learning and organizational learning. While participants generally agreed that projects produce important lessons for those directly involved in their implementation, opinions were more divided regarding the extent to which such knowledge becomes integrated into organizational practices. Several respondents suggested that lessons learned often remain at the individual level and are not systematically transferred to the wider organization.

Organizational learning and knowledge transfer

Interviewees identified multiple factors that may hinder organizational learning. These include bureaucratic rigidity, resistance to change, leadership instability, insufficient communication mechanisms, and the absence of formal procedures for documenting and disseminating knowledge acquired through projects. In some cases, participants described situations in which successful practices developed during projects were abandoned after project completion, despite their demonstrated effectiveness. In other cases, organizational structures were perceived as insufficiently flexible to accommodate innovation or institutional change. Beyond individual learning, several interviewees suggested that organizations benefit when these managerial practices become institutionalized through repeated collaboration, clearer communication routines, and shared project experience, although such organizational learning remains uneven across Romanian cultural institutions.

Leadership emerged as a critical factor influencing the transfer of knowledge from projects to organizations. Respondents frequently emphasized that leaders play an essential role in encouraging reflection, facilitating communication, and creating environments in which employees feel comfortable sharing experiences and proposing improvements. Organizations characterized by supportive leadership practices appeared more capable of integrating lessons learned into future activities and adapting their procedures based on previous project experiences.

The interviews also suggest that informal mechanisms of learning remain particularly important within cultural organizations. Participants frequently referred to mentoring relationships, peer discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and experiential learning as primary channels through which knowledge is transmitted. While these informal processes contribute significantly to professional development, their reliance on personal relationships may limit the broader institutionalization of knowledge.

Overall, the findings support the assumption that leadership contributes to organizational learning within cultural organizations. Nevertheless, the evidence also indicates that the transfer of knowledge from individual project experiences to organizational routines remains inconsistent. While projects create valuable learning opportunities, the long-term organizational impact of these experiences depends largely on leadership practices, institutional culture, and mechanisms that transform individual knowledge into collective organizational assets.

Projects as drivers of innovation

The interviews indicate that cultural projects function as important mechanisms for generating innovation, although the nature and scale of innovation vary considerably across organizations. Participants generally agreed that projects create opportunities for experimentation that would be difficult to achieve through routine organizational activities. By providing temporary resources, dedicated funding, and greater operational flexibility, projects allow cultural organizations to test new ideas, develop new partnerships, and explore alternative approaches to audience engagement and cultural production.

One of the most frequently mentioned forms of innovation concerns the use of digital technologies. Respondents described numerous examples involving digital communication tools, online promotion strategies, virtual content, digital archives, hybrid cultural events, and new forms of audience interaction facilitated through social media platforms. Several participants emphasized that digital solutions have become increasingly important not only as communication tools but also as strategic tools for reaching audiences that might otherwise remain disconnected from cultural activities.

Interviewees also associated innovation with the development of new cultural formats and interdisciplinary collaborations. Projects frequently brought together professionals from different artistic disciplines, educational institutions, technological sectors, and

community organizations, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange and creative experimentation. In many cases, these collaborations generated new perspectives and organizational practices that extended beyond the duration of individual projects.

At the organizational level, innovation was often perceived as a gradual rather than revolutionary process. Respondents rarely referred to major technological breakthroughs or radical transformations. Instead, innovation frequently took the form of incremental improvements in communication practices, audience development strategies, internal procedures, and project management approaches. Several participants argued that even relatively small innovations can produce meaningful organizational benefits when successfully integrated into everyday activities.

Despite these positive outcomes, the interviews also revealed limitations regarding the diffusion of innovation. While projects often generate creative ideas and new practices, their institutionalization remains uncertain. Some respondents noted that innovations developed during projects were abandoned after project completion due to financial constraints, leadership changes, or organizational resistance. Others emphasized that innovations were more likely to survive when supported by committed leadership and integrated into long-term organizational strategies.

A recurring observation among participants was that innovation should not be understood exclusively in technological terms. Many respondents highlighted the importance of managerial innovation, organizational flexibility, partnership development, and new approaches to audience engagement. In this respect, innovation was perceived not only as the introduction of new tools but also as the capacity of organizations to adapt continuously to changing social, technological, and cultural environments.

Overall, the findings support the assumption that projects constitute important drivers of innovation within cultural organizations. However, the long-term impact of innovation depends less on the creation of new ideas and more on organizations' capacity to institutionalize, scale, and sustain the outcomes generated through project-based activities. Beyond the innovations already implemented, participants identified several opportunities to strengthen future development of cultural project management in Romania.

Although respondents identified numerous challenges affecting the Romanian cultural sector, the interviews also revealed a range of opportunities that may support the future development of cultural organizations and cultural project management. Participants generally acknowledged that the current environment remains difficult, but many expressed cautious optimism regarding the potential for growth, innovation, and professionalization.

The most frequently mentioned opportunity concerns access to European funding programs. Respondents highlighted the importance of initiatives such as Creative Europe and other European financial instruments, which provide more stable funding opportunities, encourage international cooperation, and facilitate the implementation of innovative cultural projects. Several participants emphasized that European projects not only contribute financial resources but also expose organizations to international standards, professional networks, and new managerial practices.

International partnerships emerged as another important opportunity. Interviewees noted that collaborations with foreign cultural institutions enable the exchange of expertise, increase organizational visibility, and create access to new audiences and funding sources. Such partnerships were frequently seen as valuable mechanisms for organizational learning and professional development, particularly in contexts where domestic resources remain limited.

Digital transformation was also viewed as a significant source of opportunity. While digitalization presents challenges, respondents generally agreed that technological developments offer unprecedented possibilities for audience expansion, communication, cultural accessibility, and organizational innovation. Younger managers, in particular, emphasized the potential of digital platforms to overcome geographical constraints and engage audiences more interactively.

Several participants highlighted the growing recognition of the economic and social contribution of the cultural and creative sectors. Although public investment in culture remains limited, respondents observed increasing awareness of the role cultural activities play in local development, tourism, education, and community engagement. This broader recognition may lead to stronger policy support and more compelling arguments for future investments in cultural initiatives.

Finally, interviewees identified the increasing professionalization of cultural management as a positive development. The growing availability of specialized training programs, international exchanges, and educational opportunities was perceived as a factor that may strengthen managerial competencies and improve the overall quality of project implementation within the cultural sector.

Taken together, these opportunities suggest that the future development of cultural project management in Romania will depend not only on addressing existing challenges but also on organizations' ability to capitalize on emerging funding sources, international collaborations, technological innovations, and professional development opportunities. While structural difficulties remain significant, the findings indicate the existence of important resources that may contribute to a more resilient and dynamic cultural sector.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that cultural project management is shaped by a particular combination of managerial, financial, and artistic challenges that distinguish it from project management in many other sectors. While several of the difficulties identified by the respondents are also discussed in the broader project management literature, the interviews suggest that cultural project managers operate in a specific environment characterized by scarce resources, strong reliance on external funding, changing audience behavior, and the continuous need to reconcile artistic objectives with managerial requirements.

The most important finding concerns the centrality of funding in the professional reality of cultural project managers. The interviews consistently indicate that financial uncertainty remains the dominant concern across different types of cultural organizations. This result confirms previous observations regarding the dependence of cultural institutions on public funding and project-based financing schemes (Styhre & Börjesson, 2011; Jałocha & Ćwikła, 2017). In the Romanian context, this dependence appears particularly significant due to the relatively limited development of private sponsorship and philanthropic support for culture. Consequently, cultural project managers often dedicate substantial efforts to identifying financial resources and ensuring organizational sustainability before addressing artistic or developmental objectives.

The findings also highlight the relevance of the projectification process discussed in the literature. Similar to the arguments advanced by Fred and Godenhjelm (2023) and Holzmann and Mazzini (2020), the interviewed professionals described a cultural sector increasingly organized around projects, temporary funding opportunities, and short-term implementation cycles. However, the results suggest that projectification should not be interpreted solely as a positive form of organizational development. While projects create opportunities for experimentation, flexibility, and innovation, excessive

dependence on project-based financing may also encourage short-term planning and limit the development of long-term organizational strategies.

Another important result concerns the role of human resources. Although funding emerged as the most visible challenge, many respondents emphasized that the quality of project teams ultimately determines the success or failure of cultural initiatives. This observation supports the arguments of Ballesteros-Sánchez, Ortiz-Marcos, and Rodríguez-Rivero (2019), who emphasize the growing importance of communication, collaboration, and adaptability in contemporary project environments. The findings further suggest that cultural organizations face particular difficulties in attracting, retaining, and motivating qualified professionals, especially in contexts where financial resources remain limited and organizational structures are relatively rigid.

The relationship between leadership and organizational learning constitutes one of the most relevant contributions of the study. Participants consistently described projects as valuable sources of professional learning and competence development. At the same time, the interviews revealed that knowledge generated through projects is not always transferred successfully to the organizational level. This finding supports Kotter's (2013) argument regarding the importance of leadership in facilitating organizational change and highlights the distinction between individual learning and organizational learning. The results indicate that leadership practices play a crucial role in determining whether lessons learned during projects become institutionalized or remain confined to the individuals directly involved in project implementation.

The findings concerning innovation largely confirm the framework proposed by Bakhshi and Throsby (2009). Respondents identified innovation in audience engagement, communication practices, digital technologies, organizational procedures, and partnership development. Nevertheless, the interviews suggest that innovation within Romanian cultural organizations is more frequently incremental than disruptive. Rather than producing radical transformations, projects often generate gradual improvements that strengthen organizational capacities and create opportunities for future development. This observation reinforces the idea that innovation in the cultural sector should be understood not only in technological terms but also through managerial, organizational, and social dimensions.

A particularly interesting aspect emerging from the interviews is the growing importance of digital transformation. While respondents generally viewed digitalization as an opportunity, they also acknowledged that technological change creates new expectations regarding communication, accessibility, audience development, and organizational responsiveness. In this respect, projects appear to function as important mechanisms through which cultural organizations experiment with digital tools and adapt to evolving patterns of cultural consumption.

Finally, the study highlights several characteristics that appear particularly relevant for understanding the Romanian cultural sector. These include strong dependence on public funding, limited sponsorship culture, concerns about the quality of human resources, and relatively low participation in certain forms of cultural consumption. Together, these factors create a challenging environment in which project managers are required to combine artistic sensitivity, managerial competence, fundraising capabilities, and leadership skills. The findings therefore suggest that the future development of cultural organizations will depend not only on access to financial resources but also on managers' capacity to foster organizational learning, encourage innovation, and transform temporary project experiences into sustainable institutional capabilities.

Compared with findings reported in the international literature, Romanian cultural organizations appear to face many of the same managerial challenges, including projectification, temporary funding, stakeholder complexity, and the growing importance of leadership and innovation (Fred & Godenhjelm, 2023; Styhre & Börjesson,

2011). However, the interviews suggest that these challenges are intensified by several contextual factors specific to Romania, such as the strong dependence on public funding, the relatively limited development of private sponsorship and philanthropy, and lower levels of participation in certain forms of cultural consumption. Consequently, Romanian cultural project managers are often required to devote considerably more effort to securing financial resources and ensuring organizational sustainability than has been emphasized in many international studies.

The findings also have important practical implications for several stakeholder groups. For policymakers and public funding bodies, the results underscore the importance of developing more predictable and sustainable funding mechanisms that support not only individual cultural projects but also the long-term organizational development of cultural institutions. For managers of cultural organizations, the findings emphasize the need to strengthen leadership capabilities, invest in knowledge-sharing practices, and create organizational mechanisms that preserve and disseminate lessons learned across projects. Finally, for cultural project managers, the study highlights the strategic importance of communication, team building, adaptability, and stakeholder management as essential competencies for navigating increasingly complex project environments.

Conclusions

This study explored the challenges faced by cultural project managers in Romania through an exploratory qualitative investigation based on interviews with professionals from diverse cultural fields. The research sought to understand the main obstacles encountered during project implementation, the lessons learned through project experience, the mechanisms through which knowledge is transferred within organizations, and the role of projects in generating innovation in the context of ongoing digital transformation.

The findings indicate that funding remains the most significant challenge affecting cultural project management in Romania. Financial uncertainty, reliance on public funding, limited sponsorship opportunities, and concerns about long-term sustainability shape the everyday realities of many cultural organizations. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of human resources, leadership, and organizational adaptability as factors influencing project success. While access to financial resources is essential, the ability to assemble effective teams, facilitate collaboration, and maintain organizational learning processes appears equally important.

The study also confirms the relevance of projects as mechanisms for innovation and experimentation. Cultural projects create opportunities to test new ideas, develop partnerships, adopt digital technologies, and improve organizational practices. However, the long-term impact of innovation depends largely on organizations' capacity to institutionalize lessons learned and integrate successful practices into their regular activities. In this respect, leadership emerges as a key factor connecting project implementation, organizational learning, and innovation.

From a theoretical perspective, the article contributes to the literature on cultural project management by providing empirical evidence on the relationships among projectification, leadership, organizational learning, and innovation in the Romanian cultural sector. While many studies discuss these concepts separately, the findings illustrate how they interact in practice within organizations operating under conditions of financial and institutional uncertainty.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that cultural organizations should place greater emphasis on knowledge management, leadership development, and mechanisms to preserve and disseminate lessons learned from projects. Policymakers and funding institutions may also consider supporting longer-term organizational development

initiatives alongside project-based funding schemes in order to improve sustainability and reduce dependence on short-term financing cycles.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a relatively small convenience sample and therefore does not claim statistical representativeness. Furthermore, the qualitative design focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences rather than on quantitative measures of organizational performance. Future research may expand the sample, include comparative international perspectives, or employ mixed-method approaches to investigate the dynamics of cultural project management further.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights the growing importance of project management within contemporary cultural organizations and underlines the need for adaptive leadership, organizational learning, and sustainable funding mechanisms. As cultural institutions continue to operate in increasingly complex environments, the capacity to transform temporary projects into long-term organizational capabilities may become a defining factor of success in the cultural sector.

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