



Leadership in Cultural Organizations: Meaning Construction, Symbolic Legitimacy and Research Gaps. A Structured Review

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Abstract

Cultural organizations activate at the intersection of economic production logic and the symbolic logic of cultural meaning creation. This dual nature confers a distinctive organizational status, requiring specific forms of leadership, particular legitimation mechanisms, and structural tensions that are irreducible to general managerial models. Despite the centrality of leadership to organizational performance in the cultural sector, the international literature remains theoretically fragmented and geographically concentrated. The present article offers a structured review of this literature through a bibliometric analysis of a corpus of 297 documents indexed in Scopus for the period 2006–2026. Three complementary analyses were conducted using the bibliometrix package for R: a performance analysis examining annual scientific production, most productive countries and authors, and document-type distribution; a keyword co-occurrence network analysis identifying four thematic clusters; and a thematic map classifying research themes by centrality and density. Results show a significant acceleration of academic interest after 2020, a pronounced Anglo-Saxon geographic concentration, and marked theoretical fragmentation with no dominant authors or consolidated schools of thought. Most critically, the keyword network and thematic map confirm the near-total absence of sensemaking, symbolic legitimacy, and Bourdieusian field-theory perspectives in the existing literature - though these are central to understanding the actual mechanisms of leadership in cultural organizations. The article identifies four structural research gaps and argues for developing an integrated psychological-sociological-managerial framework to address the specificities of cultural leadership across diverse organizational types and geographic contexts, including Eastern European settings that are currently underrepresented in the field.

Keywords

Cultural leadership; cultural organizations; symbolic legitimacy; sensemaking; bibliometric analysis; structured literature review.

Introduction

Cultural organizations - museums, theaters, orchestras, cultural non-governmental organizations, and creative economy entities - operate at the intersection of two distinct logics: the economic logic of service production and the symbolic logic of cultural value creation. This duality confers a distinctive organizational status, which implies specific forms of leadership, particular mechanisms of legitimation, and structural tensions that are irreducible to general managerial models (Bourdieu, 1993; Kolb, 2005).

Despite the centrality of leadership to organizational performance and resilience in the cultural sector, academic research on this topic remains theoretically fragmented and geographically concentrated. Although the general leadership literature is vast - spanning psychological, sociological, and managerial dimensions - its application to cultural organizations has received limited attention and has focused almost exclusively

How to cite

Soaita, A. Cojanu, V., & Mateescu, V. (2026). Leadership in Cultural Organizations: Meaning Construction, Symbolic Legitimacy and Research Gaps. A Structured Review. *Culture. Society. Economy. Politics*. 6(1), 45-64. <https://doi.org/10.2478/csep-2026-0004>
ISSN (online) 2810-2010
<https://website.sciendo.com/publication/culture-society-economy-politics/>
<http://www.facultateademanagement.ro/culture-sep/>

on organizations in Western Europe and North America (Byrnes, 2015; DeVereaux, 2021). Cultural organizations in Central and Eastern Europe are systematically absent from this literature.

This absence is not merely a bibliographic oversight. The cultural sector in Eastern Europe operates within a distinctive institutional context, shaped by post-communist legacies, the incomplete transition of public cultural institutions, the recent emergence of cultural entrepreneurship, and the particularities of cultural funding systems. These factors produce specific leadership configurations that models developed in Anglo-Saxon contexts cannot anticipate or explain without significant adaptation.

To substantiate the analysis of these dynamics, the article uses the Romanian theater sector as an illustrative case throughout both the conceptual and empirical sections. This choice is motivated by the visibility of tensions among inherited bureaucratic structures, project-based funding pressures, and emerging community-oriented artistic practices in the Romanian post-communist cultural landscape.

This article systematically maps the international literature on leadership in cultural organizations, identifies dominant thematic clusters, and documents persistent structural gaps in the research field. Four research questions guide the analysis: (RQ1) How is leadership conceptualized in cultural organizations in the existing literature? (RQ2) What role does symbolic legitimacy play in the practice of cultural leadership? (RQ3) What structural tensions arise between managerial and symbolic logics in cultural organizations? (RQ4) What are the principal research gaps identified in the literature?

Methodologically, the article employs bibliometric analysis applied to a corpus of 297 documents retrieved from Scopus for the period 2006–2026. The analysis combines bibliometric performance indicators, keyword co-occurrence network analysis, and thematic mapping to produce a structured image of the research field and its conceptual dynamics. This approach is consistent with recent bibliometric practices (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Osadci-Baciu & Zbucnea, 2025; Barbu, 2025) and enables both a quantitative description of the field and a qualitative interpretation of its intellectual structure.

Conceptual framework: cultural leadership, symbolic legitimacy, and sensemaking

Conceptual clarification is a necessary step in a literature review spanning multiple disciplines - cultural management, the sociology of culture, and organizational psychology - each with partially overlapping and partially distinct terminologies. This section delineates three central concepts and proposes an operational typology of cultural organizations relevant to this article's purposes.

Cultural leadership

In the scholarly literature, the concept of cultural leadership is used in at least two distinct senses that must be clearly differentiated. The first, predominant in studies of cultural management and administration, designates leadership within organizations in the cultural sector, such as museums, theaters, heritage institutions, cultural non-governmental organizations, and creative economy entities (Byrnes, 2015; DeVereaux, 2021; Hewison & Holden, 2011). The second, more frequently cited in the general organizational leadership literature, refers to leaders' capacity to shape organizational culture - that is, the shared values, norms, and practices within any type of organization (Schein, 2010). The present article operates in the first sense: cultural leadership designates leadership exercised within and through cultural organizations, regardless of their legal form.

Within this framework, the cultural leader is not merely an administrator of resources or a manager of processes. Their functions include articulating and communicating the organization's cultural mission, negotiating the organization's relationship with the broader cultural field, mobilizing teams around symbolic values that transcend the economic logic of performance, and representing the organization to communities, funders, and authorities. These functions position the cultural leader at the intersection of manager, cultural mediator, and symbolic agent (Kolb, 2005; Turbide & Laurin, 2009). Unlike in other organizational contexts, the effectiveness of the cultural leader cannot be evaluated solely by economic performance indicators; it must encompass symbolic dimensions - recognition within the cultural field, coherence of the artistic mission, and legitimacy vis-à-vis the professional community.

The concept of cultural leadership has evolved significantly over the past three decades. Early scholarship emphasized a heroic or charismatic model of the visionary leader - a singular figure who embodies the organization's artistic identity and whose personal authority is the primary driver of institutional legitimacy (Byrnes, 2015). More recent contributions, reflecting broader transformations in organizational theory, have shifted toward distributed and collaborative models of leadership, in which authority is shared between artistic and administrative functions and legitimacy is constructed collectively rather than concentrated in a single individual (Inglis & Cray, 2011; Järvinen, Ansio, & Houni, 2015). This shift reflects not only theoretical progress but also practical pressures: growing organizational complexity, increased accountability to multiple stakeholders, and the cultural sector's progressive professionalization have made the heroic model increasingly untenable as an organizational reality. The analytical challenge for the field is therefore not merely to describe who leads cultural organizations but to understand the mechanisms by which leadership authority is constructed, negotiated, and sustained across diverse institutional contexts.

Symbolic legitimacy

The concept of symbolic legitimacy is rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields (Bourdieu, 1993). In this theory, the cultural field is a social space structured by power relations, in which actors compete to accumulate cultural capital and gain recognition for it - a form of capital distinct from economic capital, grounded in competence, recognition, and prestige within the field. Cultural capital takes three forms: embodied (competencies, dispositions, habitus), objectified (works, cultural instruments), and institutionalized (diplomas, titles, recognized positions within the field).

For cultural leadership, symbolic legitimacy is the recognition of a leader's authority by the relevant actors within the cultural field - artists, critics, cultural institutions, and the professional community. This recognition does not follow automatically from a formal position; it is constructed and continuously negotiated through the demonstration of adequate cultural capital. A leader with formal authority but lacking symbolic legitimacy within the field will encounter resistance from artistic teams and face difficulties in representing the organization within the professional environment (Bourdieu, 1993).

Symbolic legitimacy interacts in complex ways with managerial logic. Cultural organizations that receive public or private funding face legitimation pressures from funders - pressures that often privilege economic performance indicators over symbolic recognition within the cultural field. This tension - analyzed in the institutionalist literature as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) - can lead to mimetic isomorphism, in which cultural organizations adopt managerial behaviors and structures to secure legitimacy vis-à-vis funders, at the expense of identity coherence vis-à-vis the artistic community.

This tension between managerial responsibility and artistic identity is especially pronounced in post-communist contexts, where independent cultural organizations

often operate amid chronic resource insecurity. The Romanian independent theater sector offers an illustrative example: the cultural system as a whole is persistently underfunded – only 0.07% of GDP is allocated to culture in 2025 – and everything depends on winning individual projects. To stay afloat, companies are forced to adopt a managerial logic and speak the language of funders. The problem is that this managerial approach repeatedly collides with the experimental, socially engaged, and educational spirit they embody. The result is growing mimetic isomorphism and a genuine risk that their artistic identity slowly dissolves.

A complementary perspective emerges when considering music-based cultural institutions such as philharmonic orchestras, operas, and musical theaters. While theaters have often been discussed as spaces of artistic experimentation and public engagement, these other organizations present distinct leadership challenges rooted in their structural complexity and long-term institutional responsibilities. Unlike many project-based cultural initiatives, orchestras and operas coordinate large, permanent artistic ensembles, maintain extensive administrative structures, operate within highly formalized regulatory frameworks, and are often publicly owned or supervised. In this context, leadership cannot be reduced to either managerial efficiency or artistic authority alone. Rather, cultural leaders must continually mediate among artistic personality and aspirations, financial sustainability, public accountability, and the expectations of diverse stakeholder groups, including political ones. The legitimacy of leadership, therefore, rests not only on formal organizational hierarchies but also on professional recognition, artistic credibility, and the capacity to articulate a coherent institutional vision.

This way, dynamics become particularly visible in post-socialist cultural systems, where many performing arts organizations continue to operate within institutional arrangements inherited from previous governance models while simultaneously facing pressures to modernize, innovate, diversify audiences, and increase transparency. Consequently, leaders in philharmonic institutions, opera companies, and musical theatres frequently occupy hybrid positions that require them to navigate between stability and change, preservation and innovation, and artistic excellence and social relevance. Those characteristics may suggest that music-based cultural organizations provide particularly fertile contexts for exploring how symbolic capital, organizational legitimacy, and leadership practices interact within modern cultural fields. It also illustrates how leadership in the arts increasingly extends beyond the management of cultural production toward the broader challenge of ensuring institutional resilience and long-term societal relevance.

The construction of symbolic legitimacy in cultural leadership is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing social process sustained by concrete practices. These include cultivating public visibility through media presence, critical reception, and participation in high-prestige cultural events; accumulating relational capital through peer networks within the artistic and academic fields; and securing institutional consecration through formal recognition — prestigious appointments, awards, or affiliations with established cultural institutions. Leaders who successfully navigate these mechanisms can exercise authority that exceeds their formal positional power and endures even amid organizational instability. Conversely, leaders with strong formal authority but lacking symbolic recognition within the cultural field often face resistance from artistic teams, difficulty building coalitions with external stakeholders, and vulnerability to legitimacy challenges during institutional crises. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing leadership effectiveness in cultural organizations beyond purely managerial metrics.

Sensemaking

Weick's sensemaking framework provides tools for understanding the cognitive and communicative processes through which cultural leaders produce and disseminate

interpretations of organizational reality (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is, in essence, the process by which organizational actors retrospectively construct meaning from the events they face - a process that involves selecting, retaining, and updating interpretations in light of previous actions.

The cultural leader's sensemaking has a distinct symbolic dimension that is irreducible to other organizational contexts. In cultural organizations, the mission is fundamentally expressive and value-laden: a museum exists not merely to manage a collection but to give meaning to heritage in relation to the community; a theater does not produce performances solely to maximize ticket sales but to generate cultural experiences that are valuable in themselves. In this context, the leader's capacity to construct coherent narratives about the organization's identity and purpose is not an auxiliary competence but a constitutive one (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Integrating sensemaking processes into the analysis of cultural leadership yields a richer understanding of how leaders navigate the inherent tensions between artistic and managerial logics.

The integration of these three perspectives (the Bourdieusian field, symbolic legitimacy, and Weickian sensemaking) provides an analytical framework that captures the specificities of cultural leadership beyond purely functional dimensions and grounds organizational leadership in the social and symbolic structures of the cultural field. It is precisely this integration that is absent from the existing literature, as the bibliometric analysis in subsequent sections will demonstrate.

Typology of cultural organizations

For this review, cultural organizations are classified into three principal types based on ownership structure, funding model, and organizational mission. The first type comprises public cultural institutions: national and local museums, publicly funded theaters and orchestras, libraries, and public cultural centers. These operate under specific bureaucratic and political constraints, with a leader (director) appointed through administrative procedures and evaluated against public objectives.

The second type comprises cultural non-governmental organizations: associations, foundations, and independent cultural centers. These operate with greater programmatic autonomy but have more limited resources, relying on grants and donations. The leader's legitimacy is constructed primarily in relation to the artistic community and to private or international funders.

The third type encompasses creative entrepreneurship entities: companies, studios, and cultural agencies with commercial purposes. These combine the economic logic of the market with the symbolic logic of the cultural field, creating specific tensions in the relationship between the artistic and commercial value of their productions.

Illustrative case: public institutions versus independent theatres in post-communist Romania

The Romanian theatrical field, and the Replika Center for Educational Theatre in particular, are selected as the primary illustrative case for two complementary reasons. First, this field offers an unusually sharp structural contrast between the two dominant organizational logics analyzed in this article — state-subsidized public institutions and project-based independent companies — making the theoretical tensions especially visible. Second, one of the authors of this article (V.C.) is a co-founder and executive director of Replika Center, which affords privileged access to organizational data, decision-making processes, and institutional dynamics that would be unavailable through external observation alone. This insider position introduces an acknowledged interpretive proximity, managed through explicit theoretical framing and triangulation with published secondary sources, but it also enables a degree of empirical depth that justifies the repeated use of this case as an anchor point throughout the article.

The typology outlined above receives a particularly sharp empirical illustration in the Romanian theatrical field. The structural divide between public repertory theatres and independent companies reflects contrasting configurations of cultural capital, legitimacy mechanisms, and institutional logics, thereby offering a concrete demonstration of the theoretical framework proposed in this article.

Public theatres occupy the dominant position in the national theatrical field, benefiting from stable state subsidies and accumulated institutional cultural capital (Popovici, 2024). Directors of these institutions construct legitimacy through a dual mechanism: institutional-bureaucratic (formal position within the state apparatus and continuity in the public system) and professional-artistic (mastery of the national canon and repertorial tradition). Selection criteria for management positions often explicitly privilege experience accumulated inside the public system. For instance, the 2026 competition for the National Theatre in Bucharest required “10 years of experience in management within public cultural institutions” (Ministry of Culture, 2026). This configuration reproduces inherited bureaucratic logics from the communist period while maintaining strong symbolic authority derived from institutional consecration.

In contrast, the independent theatre sector operates in a more precarious and heterogeneous space. Legitimacy must be continuously negotiated through artistic innovation, critical recognition, professional networks, public visibility, and the capacity to attract project-based funding, predominantly from the National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN). Some companies align closely with autonomous artistic logics and community-oriented missions, while others combine entrepreneurial strategies with limited resources. A notable example is the Replika Center for Educational Theatre, where founding members simultaneously assume multiple roles (artistic direction, dramaturgy, acting, communication, and administration). By addressing contemporary social issues — such as children left behind by labor migration, school trauma, or educational system failures — they transform loyal niche audiences and critical acclaim into alternative forms of symbolic capital despite chronic resource scarcity (Cojanu, 2024).

This Romanian case illustrates how leadership in cultural organizations is not a set of universal competencies but a context-specific practice of positioning within a field structured by unequal distribution of capital and competing institutional logics (Bourdieu, 1993; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). It also highlights the intensified struggles in post-communist settings, marked by the tension between inherited statist doxa and emerging entrepreneurial and community logics, further aggravated by sectoral policy instability (34 Ministers of Culture over 36 years, 1990–2026).

Research methodology

This structured review uses a bibliometric approach to map the literature on leadership in cultural organizations systematically. Bibliometric analysis enables both quantitative and qualitative assessment of a corpus of scholarly publications, identifying trends, intellectual structures, and research gaps within a given field (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This methodology was selected for its ability to process large volumes of bibliographic data and produce visual representations of a field's conceptual structure — advantages particularly relevant in the context of a fragmented research field such as cultural leadership.

Search strategy and data collection

Data were collected from Scopus, selected for its broad coverage of the social sciences, arts, and management disciplines. Scopus indexes more than 25,000 journal titles and provides standardized bibliographic data, including abstracts, author keywords, and automatically indexed Keywords Plus. Limiting the analysis to a single database is a recognized methodological constraint, discussed in the limitations section.

The search was conducted across the title, abstract, and keyword fields (TITLE-ABS-KEY) using a query that combined cultural leadership terms with the principal types of cultural organizations.

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("cultural leadership" OR "arts leadership" OR "cultural management") AND ("cultural organization*" OR "arts organization*" OR "museum*" OR "theatre*" OR "performing arts" OR "cultural institution*"))

The following filters were applied: publication period (2006–2026), document types (articles, reviews, and book chapters; DOCTYPE: ar, re, ch), and subject areas (Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Management; SUBJAREA: ARTS, SOCI, BUSI). The standalone term "leadership" was excluded from the query to avoid capturing medical or educational literature, where the term is equally common. The initial search returned 1,087 records. The lower temporal boundary of 2006 was selected for two reasons: first, it marks the emergence of cultural management as a recognizable field of inquiry in Scopus-indexed journals, and publication volumes before this date were insufficient for meaningful bibliometric mapping; second, it coincides with broader shifts in the governance of cultural organizations across Europe, particularly in post-communist contexts, following the consolidation of post-1989 institutional reforms. Reviews and book chapters were included because they constitute substantive scholarly contributions in the humanities and social sciences, where theoretical synthesis and edited volume chapters are primary vehicles of knowledge dissemination - a practice distinct from STEM fields. Conference proceedings were excluded because they typically represent work in progress and preliminary findings, and their inclusion would have introduced significant heterogeneity in methodological maturity and peer review standards, complicating the comparability of the corpus.

Corpus refinement

Following standard bibliometric practice (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Osadci-Baciu & Zbucnea, 2025), an additional keyword filter was applied to refine the corpus. The selection and exclusion process is documented in Table 1, following the model proposed by Osadci-Baciu et al. (2024). Inclusion criteria emphasized direct relevance to cultural leadership, cultural management, or specific types of cultural organizations. Exclusion criteria targeted overly generic terms (Human, Article), terms too broad relative to the article's focus (Sustainable Development, Education), or contextually ambiguous terms (Performance - which can denote either artistic or organizational performance). After this process, the final corpus comprised 297 documents.

Table 1. Keywords used for corpus filtering

Keyword	n	Decision	Rationale
Leadership	117	Included	Central concept of the study
Cultural Management	53	Included	Directly relevant to the field
Museums	49	Included	Key type of cultural organization
Museum	42	Included	Singular variant, merged with Museums
Performing Arts	25	Included	Relevant cultural subsector
Human	22	Excluded	Generic term - automatic Scopus indexing
Sustainable Development	19	Excluded	Too broad; outside article focus
Cultural Policy	18	Included	Relevant institutional dimension
Arts Management	17	Included	Directly relevant to the field
Education	17	Excluded	Too broad; different context
Theatre	16	Included	Relevant type of cultural organization
Article	16	Excluded	Document type, not a research theme
Culture	15	Included	Central concept
Performance	15	Excluded	Ambiguous (artistic vs. organizational)
Innovation	14	Included	Relevant to organizational dynamics

Cultural Heritage	14	Included	Relevant cultural subsector
Art	14	Included	Relevant to the field
Gender	13	Excluded	Peripheral to the article's focus
Teaching	13	Excluded	Educational context, irrelevant
Sustainability	13	Excluded	Too broad

Note: n = the number of documents indexed with each keyword in Scopus.

Source: authors' own elaboration based on Scopus data.

Analytical tools and procedures

Scopus data exported as CSV were processed using the bibliometrix package for R, accessed through the Biblioshiny visual interface. Bibliometrix is an open-source package dedicated to comprehensive bibliometric analysis and is widely used in the specialist literature.

Complementary types of analyses were conducted, each addressing a distinct dimension of the research field's intellectual structure. The performance analysis maps the quantitative contours of the field - its growth trajectory, geographic distribution, and authorial fragmentation - establishing the empirical baseline against which conceptual gaps can be assessed. Keyword co-occurrence network analysis reveals the conceptual architecture of the field by identifying thematic clusters and, crucially, the terms absent from that architecture; this is the primary analytical instrument for demonstrating the gap the present article addresses. The thematic map extends this analysis by positioning each cluster along two axes, centrality and density, thereby enabling classification of research themes by their degree of development and relevance to the field as a whole. Together, these three analyses produce a layered image of cultural leadership research: what exists, how it is organized conceptually, and what remains peripheral or absent. Technically, the performance analysis examines annual scientific production, the most productive countries and authors, document-type distribution, and impact indicators (e.g., citations). The keyword co-occurrence network analysis uses the Louvain community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008), with association-coefficient normalization to control for term-frequency differences. The thematic mapping follows the Callon et al. (1991) model, which classifies identified themes by two parameters: centrality (the degree of relevance to the research field, measured by the cluster's external links) and density (the degree of internal cohesion of the cluster, reflecting the theme's maturity).

Bibliometric analysis results

Performance analysis

The analyzed corpus comprises 297 documents published between 2006 and 2026, drawn from 228 distinct sources - specialist journals, edited volumes, and monographs. The document typology shows a predominance of research articles (238, 80.1% of the total), followed by book chapters (36, 12.1%) and systematic reviews (23, 7.7%). The presence of 23 review articles in the corpus indicates that the field has already produced literature syntheses, although, as the conceptual analysis will demonstrate, these have not systematically addressed symbolic and interpretive perspectives.

The average citations per document is 12, reflecting a moderate academic impact consistent with a field in expansion, though its theoretical base remains under consolidation. The annual growth rate of scientific production is 3.94%, indicating positive but more moderate dynamics than in related domains (e.g., sustainability in cultural and creative industries, which records higher rates - Osadci-Baciu & Zbucnea, 2025).

The temporal evolution of scientific production (Figure 1) shows three distinct phases. The first (2006–2012) is characterized by slow accumulation, with 3–9 publications annually, suggesting that cultural leadership was treated as a peripheral topic in the management literature. The second (2013–2019) marks gradual growth, with 10–19 publications annually, reflecting the topic's progressive institutionalization. The third (2020–2025) records a significant acceleration, reaching an absolute peak in 2025 (46 publications). This growth is likely associated with the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on cultural organizations and with increased academic interest in the resilience and transformation of the cultural sector.

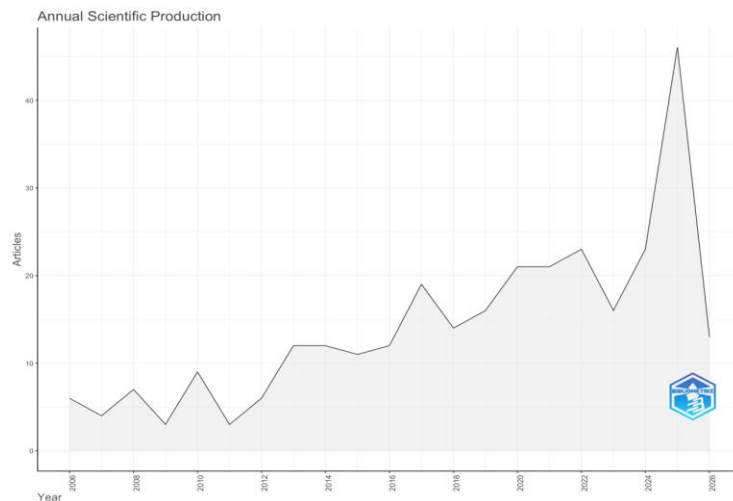


Figure 1. Annual scientific production, 2006–2026

Source: authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix

From a geographic distribution perspective (Figure 2), research is heavily concentrated in the Anglo-Saxon world: the United States dominates scientific production, followed by the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Other countries in the top include Spain, Indonesia, Italy, Norway, Poland, South Africa, Germany, India, Sweden, and Finland. The complete absence of Eastern Europe and Romania from the list of the top productive countries is significant to the central argument of this article, empirically confirming the geographic gap identified in the specialist literature.

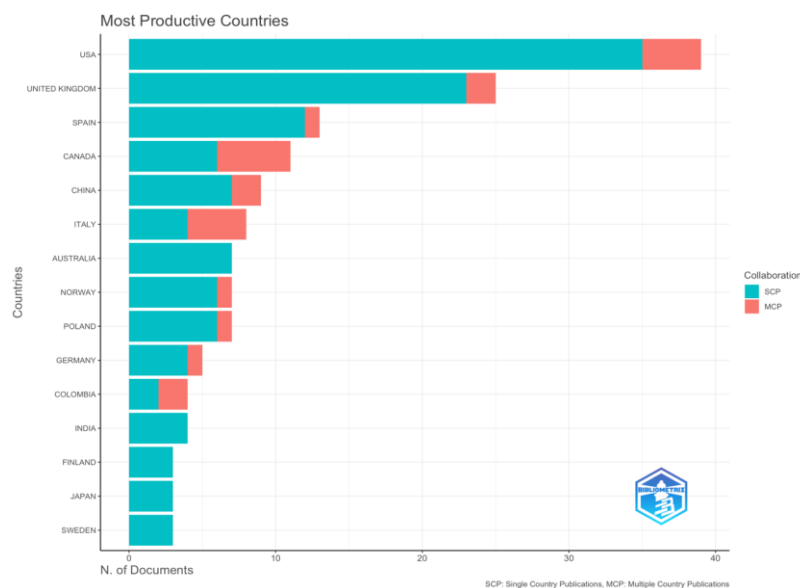


Figure 2. Most productive countries

SCP = Single-Country Publications; MCP = Multiple-Country Publications.

Source: authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix

Authors	N. of Documents
WALL-ANDREWS C	2
STEFANOVIC M	2
SCHRAD A	2
RAVANAS P	2
KUMAR A	2
KAWASHIMA N	2
JAMIN B	2
GOMBAULT A	2
GELFAND MJ	2
GANTZIAS GK	2
DRAGLIA MS	2
CRISPI M	2
AYCAN Z	2
AMES MM	2
RIUS-ULDEMOULINS J	3

Conceptual structure of the field

[illegible]

Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence network
Clustering: Walktrap algorithm; normalization: association coefficient.
Source: authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix

Table 2. Keywords per cluster / co-occurrence network

Cluster 1 — Green (Leadership / Central)	Cluster 2 — Red (Museums / Nonprofit)	Cluster 3 — Purple (Performing Arts / Educ.)	Cluster 4 — Blue (Behavioral)
Leadership	Museums	Performing arts	Human
Organizational culture	Nonprofit organization	Education	Decision making
Policy	Organizational change	Social justice	Responsibility
Sustainable development	Fundings	Psychology	Empathy
Art	England	Interview	Skill
Cultural anthropology	Carbon footprint	Motivation	Adaptation
Cultural factor		Learning	Social behavior
Organization		Thematic analysis	Conceptual framework
		Consciousness	Social interaction

Source: authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix

Cluster 1 (green), centered on the term leadership, includes organizational culture, policy, sustainable development, art, and cultural anthropology. This cluster represents the field's core — a research space in which leadership is analyzed in relation to organizational culture and the political dimensions of cultural management.

Cluster 2 (red) centers on museums and nonprofit organizations, including references to organizational change, funding, and geographic locations (England). This reflects a well-established research tradition focused on the management of museums and nonprofit cultural organizations, predominantly in the British context.

Cluster 3 (purple) focuses on performing arts, education, social justice, psychology, and interviews, signaling a qualitative research direction oriented toward the social and educational dimensions of the performing arts.

Cluster 4 (blue), centered on human, decision-making, responsibility, and empathy, represents a behavioral and psychological approach to leadership, with individual and relational aspects at its core.

A crucial observation for this article's argument is the complete absence of terms associated with the sensemaking and symbolic perspectives from the network: sensemaking, symbolic legitimacy, meaning construction, Bourdieu, and field theory do not appear as relevant nodes in any cluster. This absence empirically confirms the theoretical gap that the present review seeks to address.

The thematic map (Figure 5), based on the Callon et al. (1991) model, classifies identified themes by centrality and density. In the Motor Themes quadrant - well-developed and central themes - we find culture, art, and creativity, indicating that research on the artistic and creative dimensions of culture is the most mature direction in the field. The Basic Themes quadrant - central but theoretically underdeveloped themes - includes two significant groupings: theatre, culture, and art on the one hand, and leadership, gender, and organizational culture on the other, along with cultural management, cultural policy, and arts management.

The placement of leadership in the Basic Themes quadrant is revealing: although the term is common and relevant, the theoretical depth of existing approaches remains limited. In other words, leadership appears as an invoked term rather than a systematically developed concept in relation to the symbolic specificity of cultural organizations. The Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant includes sensemaking, museums, and institutions - a placement that confirms the peripheral status of meaning-construction perspectives in the current literature.

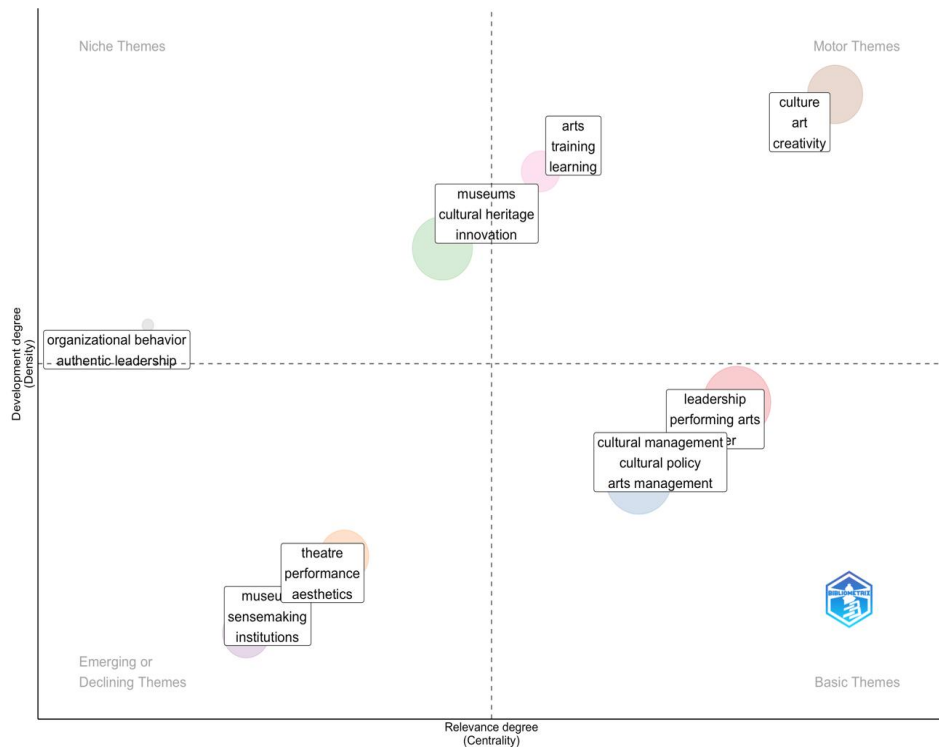


Figure 5. Thematic map

Classification follows the model of Callon et al. (1991).

Source: authors' elaboration using Bibliometrix

Cultural leadership and meaning construction: between practice and the symbolic

Conceptualizations of leadership in cultural organizations

The literature analyzed reveals considerable diversity in how cultural leadership is conceptualized, reflecting both the sector's heterogeneity and the disciplinary tensions among management studies, the sociology of culture, and organizational psychology. Three principal research directions can be identified in the corpus analyzed.

The first direction treats cultural leadership primarily as a managerial function focused on organizational efficiency, governance, and institutional performance. This perspective dominates research on museums and nonprofit cultural organizations, in which the leader is treated as an administrator of symbolic and financial resources, responsible for balancing the cultural mission with economic constraints (Turbide & Laurin, 2009). Recent studies in the corpus examine the specific roles of executive and artistic directors in nonprofit arts and cultural organizations, highlighting the structural tension between the administrative and artistic functions of leadership, identified in the specialist literature as dual leadership (Jamin & Gombault, 2021).

The second direction conceptualizes cultural leadership as a relational and symbolic practice in which the leader serves as a mediator between the organization and the broader cultural field. From this perspective, the leader's authority derives not solely from hierarchical position but from the symbolic recognition accorded by the artistic community and other relevant actors within the field (Bourdieu, 1993). Studies of the performing arts document how the leader's legitimacy is constructed and negotiated through artistic reputation, public visibility, and the capacity to articulate a coherent cultural vision. This perspective aligns with Weick's concept of enactment (1995) - the process by which the leader actively contributes to the construction of organizational reality rather than merely its administration.

The third, more recent, and more fragmented direction approaches cultural leadership through the lens of identity, diversity, and inclusion. Studies of women in leadership positions in the creative industries, the representation of minorities in leadership roles, and the promotion of inclusive leadership in arts organizations indicate that access to leadership positions in the cultural sector is structured by exclusionary mechanisms similar to those in other sectors, but amplified by the particularities of the cultural field - informal recruitment networks, the valorization of specific forms of cultural capital, and the concentration of power around figures with recognized symbolic authority. Research in this direction documents a persistent gender gap in senior leadership positions across museums, orchestras, and theater companies, with women more frequently occupying administrative rather than artistic director roles, a pattern that intersects with the differential valuation of symbolic and managerial capital within cultural organizations. Studies also highlight the self-reinforcing character of these exclusions: leadership networks in the cultural sector operate through peer recommendation and informal mentorship, mechanisms that tend to reproduce existing sociodemographic profiles at the expense of underrepresented groups. The implications for symbolic legitimacy are significant: when the criteria for recognition within the cultural field are themselves structured by social inequalities, the concept of merit-based legitimacy requires critical interrogation. This direction, however, remains the least theoretically elaborated of the three - its contributions are predominantly empirical and descriptive, and they remain largely disconnected from the Bourdieusian and Weickian frameworks that could provide explanatory depth.

These conceptual approaches, while insightful, gain additional depth when examined in specific institutional settings. The Romanian theatrical field, with its pronounced divide between public institutions and independent companies, offers a compelling case study that highlights the practical interplay of managerial, symbolic, and identity-related dimensions of cultural leadership (see Illustrative Case).

Symbolic legitimacy and sensemaking in cultural leadership practice

A common thread - insufficiently theorized in the literature analyzed - runs through all three research directions: the cultural leader's legitimacy is, in essence, a symbolic construction rather than merely a derivative of technical competence or formal authority. This observation links the analyzed corpus to the theoretical framework proposed in Section 2.

In Bourdieu's tradition (1993), symbolic legitimacy is constituted through recognition - the attribution of authority by the relevant actors within a field. The legitimized cultural leader is not necessarily the most managerially competent, but the one with the highest symbolic recognition in the field. Studies in the corpus indirectly document this dynamic: analyses of legitimacy conflicts between artistic and executive directors, tensions between artistic and managerial logic in public cultural institutions, and processes of organizational identity construction around the leader's figure provide relevant empirical material, although these dynamics are rarely articulated explicitly within the Bourdieusian field theory framework.

Complementarily, Weick's sensemaking framework offers tools for understanding the processes by which cultural leaders produce and disseminate interpretations of organizational reality (Weick, 1995). Studies of leadership in museums and performing arts organizations suggest that the effective leader is not merely a good manager but one who confers meaning on collective activity and connects it to broader cultural values. Crucially, none of the identified studies explicitly employs the Weickian sensemaking framework as an analytical instrument - a remarkable gap, given its relevance to the cultural organizational context.

The Romanian theatrical field offers concrete illustrations of these dynamics. In public institutions, symbolic legitimacy rests heavily on positional and institutional capital: occupying a directorship in a state-subsidized theatre confers immediate recognition within the field. However, this legitimacy remains vulnerable to political changes and may be contested by artistic teams if perceived as insufficiently grounded in professional prestige.

Independent leaders, by contrast, must actively construct legitimacy through continuous sensemaking practices – articulating coherent narratives that connect artistic choices, social relevance, and audience engagement in conditions of uncertainty. The Replika Center exemplifies this process: its leaders transform precarious project-based existence into a recognized artistic and social mission by producing meaning around urgent societal themes, thereby accumulating symbolic capital through critical reception and community impact rather than institutional position. Such practices align closely with Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework, whereby leaders retrospectively construct and prospectively enact organizational identity in ambiguous environments.

These examples demonstrate that symbolic legitimacy in cultural organizations is not a static attribute but an ongoing achievement that varies markedly across organizational types and dominant institutional logics.

Together, these observations point to a fundamental mismatch in the existing literature: the empirical material is richer than the theoretical frameworks used to analyze it. Cultural leadership is documented as a complex, symbolic, relational practice — yet theorized as a standard managerial function with cultural content. Bridging this mismatch requires the integrated framework outlined in this article's conceptual section.

Structural tensions, research gaps, and conclusions

Structural tensions between managerial and symbolic logics

The literature synthesis identifies a recurring structural tension in cultural organizations: the tension between managerial logic, oriented toward efficiency, measurability, and performance, and symbolic logic, oriented toward cultural value, expressive mission, and recognition within the artistic field. This tension is not accidental but inherent in the dual nature of cultural organizations, which operate simultaneously as economic actors and symbolic agents (Bourdieu, 1993; Kolb, 2005).

The literature documents this tension in at least three concrete forms. The first is the tension between the artistic and executive directors in organizations with dual leadership - a dynamic frequently identified in research on theaters, orchestras, and dance companies. Each leader operates under different legitimacy criteria: the artistic director invokes the authority of the cultural field, while the executive director invokes managerial authority and accountability to funders. The absence of a framework for negotiating these logics is a frequent source of organizational conflict and institutional instability (Jamin & Gombault, 2021).

The second form is the tension between funders and organizational leadership over performance evaluation criteria. The imposition of indicators derived from economic

logic, such as visitor numbers, own revenues, and cost coverage rates, can conflict with the organization's symbolic mission and generate institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Cultural organizations that adopt managerial behaviors to secure legitimacy vis-à-vis funders may partially sacrifice identity coherence vis-à-vis the artistic community - a trade-off with significant implications for long-term organizational sustainability.

The third form is the tension between the professional logic of artists and the organizational logic of the institution. Artists often operate under the norms of the artistic field - creative autonomy, peer recognition, and the primacy of aesthetic value - norms that can conflict with organizational requirements for coordination, planning, and administrative compliance. The thematic map structurally confirms this tension: leadership, cultural management, and arts management occupy the Basic Themes quadrant, whereas sensemaking and institutions appear in the Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant, suggesting that perspectives that could mediate the tension remain peripheral in the literature.

The Romanian context further illuminates these tensions. In public theatres, the dominant conflict occurs between bureaucratic-institutional logic (measurable efficiency through occupancy rates, budget execution, and accountability to local or central authorities) and professional-artistic logic (repertorial balance and preservation of national cultural heritage). Independent companies face a different configuration: artistic and activist logics oriented toward social intervention coexist with extreme economic precarity and dependence on competitive, short-term grants. Here, responsibility is not primarily institutional but derives from the social relevance of the artistic act itself (Cadariu, 2018; Modreanu, 2019).

This public-independent divide produces distinct leadership strategies. Public directors often operate as mediators between political expectations and artistic autonomy, while independent leaders adopt more activist and entrepreneurial models, combining artistic direction with intensive institutional work aimed at securing visibility and resources.

Several mediation strategies are documented in the analyzed corpus, though none has achieved sufficient theoretical elaboration to constitute a model. The first is a structural strategy: explicitly formalizing roles and decision-making domains within organizational governance structures, so that the artistic director retains authority over programming and artistic standards while the executive director manages financial and administrative functions - a model associated with reduced conflict and improved organizational performance in performing arts contexts (Järvinen et al., 2015). The second is a relational strategy: cultivating trust-based relationships between artistic and administrative leaders, grounded in shared values and mutual recognition of each function's legitimacy - a dynamic analyzed in research on collaborative leadership as a distinctive form of dual leadership (Inglis & Cray, 2011). The third, less frequently documented, is an interpretive strategy: the leader's use of sensemaking practices to articulate a common organizational narrative that frames artistic and managerial imperatives as complementary rather than contradictory - a strategy whose effectiveness has received insufficient study but whose theoretical relevance to the cultural sector is evident.

Identified research gaps and future directions

The bibliometric analysis and thematic synthesis enable the identification of four structural gaps with direct implications for the future research agenda.

The first gap is the absence of an integrated theoretical framework. The existing literature approaches cultural leadership from a single disciplinary perspective - managerial, sociological, or psychological. No model in the corpus systematically articulates the relationships among symbolic legitimacy, sensemaking, and

organizational effectiveness in the specific context of cultural organizations. Developing such an integrated framework - operationalizing Bourdieu's and Weick's concepts in relation to organizational typologies in the sector - is a priority research direction.

The second gap concerns underrepresented geographic contexts. The analyzed scientific production is heavily concentrated in the Anglo-Saxon world - the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia - with an almost complete absence of Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia. This geographic concentration mirrors a concentration of institutional contexts: Anglo-Saxon cultural systems, with their specific mix of public and private funding and particular governance traditions, are not representative of the global diversity of cultural organizations. Empirical research in Eastern European contexts, where post-communist institutional legacies, public funding models, and the tensions between artistic autonomy and administrative control create a distinct landscape, is almost absent from the international literature.

While Western models tend to view theatrical management as flexible and partially market-oriented, the Romanian case reveals a much clearer structural rupture between heavily subsidized repertory theatres inheriting bureaucratic logics and a vibrant but fragile independent scene - a configuration rooted in the specific post-communist transition (Malița, 2006; Cadariu, 2018).

The third gap concerns neglected organizational types. Existing research is concentrated in two subsectors: museums and the performing arts. Cultural non-governmental organizations, creative entrepreneurship entities, digital cultural platforms, and hybrid forms of cultural organization are largely absent from the corpus (Osadci-Baciu et al., 2024). This concentration overlooks the cultural sector's structural transformations over the past two decades, which have led to significant diversification of organizational forms.

The fourth gap, the most relevant to this article's central argument, concerns the absence of symbolic and interpretive perspectives. Sensemaking, symbolic legitimacy, organizational identity construction, and the mediation of field tensions are almost absent as explicit research objects. Cultural leadership is studied predominantly as a practice, not as a process of symbolic production - a reduction that limits the explanatory power of the existing literature on the most distinctive phenomena of leadership in cultural organizations.

This analysis also points toward the need for a more systematic investigation of adaptive leadership processes within cultural and musical organizations. Existing scholarship has devoted considerable attention to different leadership styles, governance arrangements, and institutional structures. Nevertheless, comparatively less attention has been paid to how cultural leaders respond to uncertainty, complexity, and continuous environmental change, especially political change.

This issue has become increasingly relevant as cultural organizations face multiple, distinct, and overlapping pressures, including digital transformation, changing audience expectations, demographic shifts, especially financial instability, and evolving public policy priorities. In most cases, leaders are expected not only to preserve institutional traditions and artistic standards but also to stimulate innovation with almost no resources, develop new partnerships, attract diverse audiences, and secure alternative sources of support.

Also, future research could therefore benefit from examining how cultural organizations are developing adaptive capacities and organizational resilience under conditions of uncertainty. Such investigations may prove particularly valuable in the context of publicly funded performing arts institutions, where formal bureaucratic structures often coexist with growing expectations for flexibility and innovation. Furthermore, comparative studies involving orchestras, opera houses, theatres, museums, major

festivals, and independent cultural organizations could certainly help clarify whether different organizational forms generate distinct leadership requirements and adaptive strategies. Such research would not only enrich theoretical debates but also provide practical insights for cultural managers and policymakers seeking to strengthen the long-term sustainability of cultural institutions, national or private.

Conclusions

This structured review maps the international literature on leadership in cultural organizations, using a bibliometric approach to analyze a corpus of 297 documents from 2006 to 2026. The analysis has answered the four research questions and generated contributions at three levels.

From a descriptive standpoint, the article documents a significant acceleration in academic interest after 2020, pronounced geographic concentration in Anglo-Saxon countries, and marked fragmentation of academic production, with no dominant authors or consolidated schools of thought. These findings confirm both the topic's growing relevance and the absence of cumulative theoretical development within the field.

From an analytical perspective, the keyword co-occurrence network and the thematic map indicate that cultural leadership is a frequent yet theoretically shallow concept — present as a term, absent as an elaborated construct in relation to the symbolic specificity of cultural organizations. Although essential for understanding leadership mechanisms in the sector, the sensemaking and symbolic legitimacy perspectives remain peripheral or absent from the dominant research agenda.

From a propositional perspective, the article argues for an integrated psychological-sociological-managerial framework that transcends the limitations of isolated disciplinary approaches and provides adequate theoretical tools for analyzing leadership across the diverse contexts of cultural organizations — including Eastern European contexts, which are currently underrepresented in the international literature. This framework serves as the theoretical foundation for future empirical research on cultural organizations in Romania, where post-communist legacies, public funding structures, and the emergence of cultural entrepreneurship shape a distinctive organizational landscape that warrants systematic academic attention.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this review has implications across three distinct lines: for academic researchers, for policymakers and funders, and for cultural organizations and their leaders.

For academic researchers, the most immediate implication is the need to move beyond single-disciplinary frameworks. The bibliometric results show that cultural leadership is studied predominantly from managerial perspectives, while sociological and psychological approaches remain largely siloed. Future theoretical work should aim to integrate Bourdieu's field theory, Weick's sensemaking model, and organizational identity frameworks into a single analytical architecture suited to the dual economic and symbolic nature of cultural organizations. Additionally, the near-total absence of Central and Eastern European, Latin American, and Asian contexts from the corpus points to an urgent need for geographically diverse empirical research. Scholars working in post-communist institutional environments are particularly well positioned to contribute with distinctive insights, given the tensions between legacies of artistic autonomy and the managerial accountability demands introduced by post-1990 sector reforms. Methodologically, the field would benefit from a shift toward qualitative and longitudinal approaches capable of capturing leadership as a process of symbolic production, rather than relying exclusively on survey-based performance metrics.

For policymakers and funders, the findings on institutional isomorphism are directly relevant. Performance evaluation frameworks that rely solely on economic indicators —

visitor numbers, own-source revenues, cost-coverage ratios - risk accelerating the erosion of the symbolic legitimacy they are nominally designed to protect. Cultural organizations that sacrifice field credibility to satisfy managerial accountability requirements may find their capacity to attract talent, audiences, and private support progressively diminished. Evaluation architectures that are sensitive to the symbolic dimensions of cultural performance - incorporating peer recognition, mission coherence, artistic field impact, and community trust alongside financial metrics - are better aligned with the sector's institutional logic. Furthermore, the systematic geographic underrepresentation identified in the literature suggests a structural policy implication: targeted investment in cultural management research capacity in countries where the field remains underdeveloped - including Romania and the broader post-communist region - would generate both scientific and practical returns for sectors navigating complex institutional transformations.

For cultural organizations and their leaders, the review's most actionable finding concerns the dual-competency gap. Effective leadership in cultural organizations requires simultaneous command of both symbolic and managerial registers: constructing meaning and managing resources, and maintaining legitimacy within the artistic field while meeting governance and accountability obligations to public and private funders.

The findings suggest three concrete directions for organizational practice. First, cultural organizations should invest in structured leadership onboarding programs that explicitly address the dual-competency gap — equipping incoming directors with both symbolic capital management tools and managerial governance frameworks, rather than assuming these will be developed informally. Second, organizations operating under dual leadership structures would benefit from formalizing decision-making domains in their governance documents, clearly delineating the artistic director's authority over programming and mission interpretation from the executive director's accountability for financial and administrative functions — a structural mechanism shown to reduce institutional conflict in performing arts contexts (Järvinen et al., 2015). Third, and particularly relevant for organizations in post-communist institutional environments, leadership resilience requires deliberate cultivation of external legitimacy networks — peer recognition within the artistic field, critical reception, and community partnerships — as a buffer against the volatility of public funding and political appointment cycles.

Current arts administration training programs rarely address these two dimensions in an integrated way, prioritizing either managerial tools - financial governance, strategic planning, stakeholder communication - or artistic vision, without equipping leaders with conceptual frameworks for understanding the symbolic authority that underpins their organizational position. Leadership development initiatives that incorporate sensemaking practices, symbolic legitimacy management, and conflict mediation between artistic and administrative logics would directly address the structural tensions documented in this review. At the governance level, organizations operating under dual leadership structures would benefit from explicitly formalizing decision-making domains - clarifying which competencies and authorities belong to the artistic director and which to the executive director - as a structural mechanism to reduce institutional conflict and improve organizational resilience.

Limitations

The present review has several methodological limitations that must be explicitly acknowledged. The first concerns the use of a single database (Scopus), which excludes publications indexed only in Web of Science, Google Scholar, or specialized arts and humanities databases. The second concerns the inherent limitations of any search strategy: relevant terms may be absent from article titles or abstracts, and the applied filters may exclude some significant contributions. The third concerns the retrospective

character of bibliometric analysis: the conceptual map describes the state of the field at the time of analysis, not emerging directions or trends in the process of crystallization.

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Acknowledgments

The authors, non-native English speakers, used Grammarly for grammar and style corrections. Elicit.com, an AI-powered research assistant, was used to identify and map foundational literature across the review's main analytical themes. The authors independently verified all AI-identified sources. All intellectual content, analysis, argumentation, and interpretive decisions are the author's sole responsibility.

Received: May 1, 2026

Revised: June 12, 2026

Accepted: June 15, 2026

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