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THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN PLACE-BASED DEVELOPMENT AND TERRITORIAL INEQUALITY

A conceptual and empirical framework for assessing how cultural interventions scaffold agency and wellbeing in marginalised regions

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Introduction

Across Europe, peripheral and left-behind regions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) are facing persistent challenges related to demographic decline, economic marginalisation, and uneven access to services and opportunities. In response, a growing number of policy frameworks and local initiatives have turned to culture, cultural heritage, and creative practices as potential levers for place-based development. Culture-led approaches are increasingly expected to contribute not only to economic revitalisation, but also to social cohesion, wellbeing, and the capacity of communities to shape their own futures. As a result, culture has progressively entered the domains of regional development, social innovation, public policy, and impact evaluation. (Belfiore & Bennet, 2008, 2009).

Despite this expanding role, significant uncertainty remains around how the impacts of culture should be understood, assessed, and governed (Belfiore, 2002), particularly in structurally disadvantaged territories. While a substantial body of interdisciplinary research documents positive associations between cultural participation and outcomes such as wellbeing (Blessi et al, 2014), or place attachment (Brokalaki & Comunian, 2019), these effects are often evaluated through fragmented or partial lenses. Economic indicators, experiential outcomes, and social benefits are frequently assessed in isolation, making it difficult to understand how cultural interventions interact with structural inequalities and long-term development trajectories in peripheral regions.

This dissertation starts from the assumption that evaluating the impact of culture and cultural interventions in peripheral territories requires an interdisciplinary and place-based perspective (Barca et al. 2012), capable of integrating insights from regional development theory, cultural policy, social innovation studies, and approaches to wellbeing and agency (Barca, 2009; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Rather than asking whether culture generates "impact" in abstract or general terms, the thesis focuses on how cultural practices operate within specific territorial contexts, through which organisational and institutional mechanisms, and under what structural conditions they contribute to (or fail to contribute to) durable forms of development.

Within this perspective, the dissertation defines peripheral territories not merely as spatially disadvantaged areas, but as complex socio-institutional environments in which cultural practices, organisational forms, and structural constraints interact in shaping wellbeing and agency (Soini & Dessein, 2016; Robeyns, 2017). The Abruzzo region is adopted as a coherent

empirical field and interpreted as a laboratory for observing these interactions in inner and left-behind areas characterised by demographic decline, weak labour markets, and limited institutional capacity.

Particular attention is given to community-based cooperatives as hybrid organisational forms operating at the intersection of cultural valorisation, social innovation, and local economic activity (Bartocci, Picciaia, 2013; Borzaga, Zandonai, 2015; Mori, Sforzi, 2018) Community-based cooperatives are analysed not only as actors within cultural policy, but as mediating institutions that connect cultural and patrimonial resources to broader regional development dynamics. Their relevance lies in their dual nature: they simultaneously function as collective governance arrangements and as territorial business models, making them especially suitable for examining how cultural interventions attempt to translate symbolic and aesthetic value into social and economic practices.

Building on this empirical and theoretical positioning, the dissertation develops its argument through a progressive analytical trajectory articulated across three interrelated papers. Each paper addresses a distinct dimension of the relationship between culture, territory, and development, and each contributes to refining the overall analytical framework by revealing the limits of the previous perspective. The structure of the thesis therefore reflects a step-by-step construction of the research problem, moving from the governance of cultural and patrimonial assets, to the recognition of structural inequalities and their effects on wellbeing and agency, and finally to the development of a theoretically grounded framework for evaluating the impacts of cultural interventions in peripheral regions.

Structure of the thesis

This dissertation is structured as a cumulative thesis composed of three interrelated papers that together contribute to regional development theory by specifying the mechanisms through which cultural interventions mediate wellbeing and agency in peripheral territories. The thesis is grounded in a place-based perspective and takes the Abruzzo region as a coherent empirical field, interpreted as a laboratory of development dynamics in left-behind and inner areas. Within this context, as aforementioned, particular attention is given to community-based cooperatives as hybrid institutions operating at the intersection of cultural innovation, social organisation, and local economic development.

Rather than presenting independent or loosely connected studies, the three papers are organised as a progressive analytical sequence. Each paper addresses a specific limitation of the previous one, thereby advancing the analysis from culture-led regeneration narratives toward a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural interventions interact with structural inequalities, institutional mediation, and agency formation in disadvantaged regions. The overarching objective is to move beyond descriptive accounts of cultural vitality and to contribute to regional development theory by clarifying under what conditions cultural initiatives can support sustainable wellbeing and development rather than remaining confined to symbolic or experiential effects.

The first paper adopts a place-based and institutionally grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) to regional development by focusing on the governance and management of a local patrimonial asset in a peripheral context. Rather than analysing culture as an abstract driver of regeneration, the paper examines how the valorisation of a cultural and territorial heritage asset is organisationally embedded in a specific territorial business model, namely the community-based cooperative. Drawing on the Abruzzo context, it shows how the management of the patrimonial asset is intertwined with a cooperative form of organisation that enables the active involvement of the local community, combining cultural, social, and economic functions within a single institutional framework. Within this perspective, the paper highlights the role of community-based cooperatives as mediating institutions capable of transforming cultural heritage from a passive symbolic resource into an actively managed common good. In line with regional development approaches that emphasise endogenous assets (Ray, 1998), collective ownership (Ostrom, 1990), and locally embedded organisational forms (Sotarauta & Beer, 2017) the analysis demonstrates how cooperative governance can mobilise local actors, foster social innovation (Moulaert et al, 2013), and create territorially rooted economic practices in areas characterised by demographic decline, fragile labour markets, and limited institutional capacity. At the same time, the paper identifies a critical analytical insight that becomes central to the dissertation as a whole: cultural valorisation, if not organised through participatory and community-based models, is not sufficient in itself to generate durable development trajectories. This insight leads to the recognition of a potential risk inherent in culture-led regeneration strategies, namely the emergence of an *aesthetic trap*, whereby cultural revitalisation enhances visibility, identity, and experiential value without fully translating into long-term economic opportunities or structural transformation. The mechanisms underlying

this tension between cultural activation and structural constraint are therefore taken up and examined in depth in the second paper.

The second paper addresses this limitation by explicitly situating culture-led initiatives within the broader framework of territorial inequality and structural disadvantage (Miles & Paddison 2005; Pritchard, 2020);. Through the in-depth case study of Aielli, it examines how cultural practices function as emotional devices that scaffold wellbeing and agency across affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions. While confirming that cultural interventions can significantly enhance subjective wellbeing, social cohesion, and place attachment, the paper introduces the concept of the aesthetic trap to capture a key tension in culture-led regional development: the coexistence of high cultural vitality with persistent constraints related to employment opportunities, service provision, mobility, and long-term economic sustainability. In this analysis, community-based cooperatives emerge as critical mediating institutions that partially translate cultural and aesthetic activation into collective agency, organisational capacity, and economic practices. At the same time, the paper demonstrates that cooperative models alone cannot fully resolve structural inequalities, thereby revealing the need for a more explicit theoretical framework capable of distinguishing different layers of agency and their relation to territorial conditions.

The third paper responds to this analytical necessity by developing a theoretical and evaluative framework that integrates the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) and situated cognition (Robbins & Aydede 2009). It starts from a recognition of the need to characterise what is meant by culture when we refer to impact assessment and, consequently, it conceptualises cultural interventions as mechanisms of agency scaffolding and provides an analytical model for assessing how such interventions operate across affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions of agency within specific territorial contexts. This framework directly addresses long-standing challenges in regional development and cultural policy research, particularly the difficulty of evaluating culture-led strategies without collapsing them into either instrumental success stories or purely symbolic accounts. Rather than being introduced as an abstract or standalone contribution, the framework emerges from the empirical tensions identified in the previous papers and offers conceptual tools to assess when cultural interventions, supported by mediating institutions such as community cooperatives, can escape the aesthetic trap and contribute to sustainable, place-based development.

Taken together, the three papers construct a step-by-step research trajectory that advances regional development theory by linking cultural interventions, institutional mediation, and agency formation in peripheral territories. The dissertation argues that culture can play a meaningful role in mediating wellbeing and development in left-behind regions, but only when analysed in relation to structural inequalities, governance arrangements, and the situated conditions under which agency is scaffolded. By progressively integrating cultural analysis, territorial inequality, and evaluative theory, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of culture-led development within contemporary regional studies.

Why inner areas of Abruzzo

Abruzzo is a central-southern region that ranks, among the Italian regions, below the average value for the absolute number of inhabitants (1,293,941 residents in 2020) and also for the level of population density (119 inhabitants / km2). It has an area of 10,831 Km2 and its territory is 65% mountainous, hosting the highest peaks of the Apennines. One-third of the territory is classified in class 1 seismic zone (the highest level of danger) placing it in second place in the national ranking. The coastal area, which extends for 130 km, borders the Adriatic Sea to the east. L'Aquila is the region's capital and has a population of 69,900. However, the most populous city is Pescara, on the coast, with 119,500 inhabitants, followed by Teramo with 53,000 inhabitants and Chieti with 50,000. The demographic contraction detected at the national level, particularly in the southern regions, also affected the Abruzzese population which in the period 2014-2020 decreased by 3%.

According to the Istat report (2022) “The geography of inland areas in 2020 - Vast territories between potential and weaknesses”, two-thirds of the municipalities of Abruzzo (202 out of 305) are located in internal areas, where however only one-third of the total population lives, ie 460,328 people, compared to a total of 1,281,012 residents. The study identifies the municipalities with a joint offer of three types of service - health, education, and mobility - called Inter-municipal Poles and Poles and, based on the distance from the poles, classifies the other municipalities, into four bands with increasing relative distance: Belt, Intermediate, Peripheral, Outermost. The Intermediate, Peripheral, and Ultraperipheral municipalities represent the set of internal areas. In Abruzzo five municipalities are classified as Poli, 98 as Belt, 89 as Intermediate, 80 as Peripheral, and 33 as Ultraperipheral.

Of the total of 10,831 square kilometers of the Abruzzo territory, 6,836 concern the internal areas. Over 2,400 square kilometers fell in internal areas classified as protected areas (out of a regional total of protected areas equal to 3,052 km) and 2,924 kilometers of internal areas that fall within the Natura 2000 network. As concerns the cultural offer, in Abruzzo there are 140 libraries, of which 76 are in inland areas. Similarly, out of a total of 110 museums, 66 - that is more than half - are in the same areas. In the internal areas, there are 1,744 of the 3,271 hotel and non-hotel accommodation facilities in Abruzzo: in this sense, the available beds are 58,658 compared to a regional total of 115,320. Arrivals in inland areas in 2020 were 472,532, against 597,335 in the remaining municipalities, while attendances were 1,659,223 (2,353,569 in the other centers).

In this context, Abruzzo is experiencing a deep push towards innovation thanks to the birth of new business models of community cooperation. In these places which, as the data show, on the basis of a purely demographic logic, would be doomed to depopulation, community cooperatives are experimenting with a new form of territorial planning, starting from the needs of the communities to which they refer, by triggering bottom-up transformative processes that are a virtuous example of social innovation, understood as the ability to give a sustainable and non-extractive collective response to rooted social needs.

More specifically, in Abruzzo there are 32 community-based cooperatives distributed in the 4 provinces. Each of these cooperatives has particular characteristics as regards, for example, degree of maturity, local roots, and relations with the public administration. Indeed, virtuous examples such as Aielli or Calascio show the role of culture in regeneration processes. Instead, realities such as Campo di Giove or San Vincenzo Valle Roveto are examples of how models of proximity care can be built starting from the enhancement of sustainable food chains or through the construction of community emporiums.

Why community-based cooperatives as units of analysis

The dissertation focuses on community-based cooperatives as a privileged empirical site for observing agency formation. These peculiar forms of cooperatives occupy a meso-level position between individual experience and public policy, combining economic activity with social and cultural objectives. Unlike one-off cultural events or purely symbolic interventions, they represent durable organisational forms that embed cultural practices within everyday economic and social life. Community-based cooperatives are cooperative societies whose

primary objective is to generate benefits, such as goods or services, for the well-being of a specific territorial community (Bartocci, Picciaia, 2013; Borzaga, Zandonai, 2015; Mori, Sforzi, 2018). These enterprises diverge from traditional cooperatives in that their services are not confined to a particular group of individuals (such as working members), but are of general interest to all citizens within the territory served. Community enterprises, therefore, are organisations that act not only in the interests of their members, but also in the interests of all inhabitants of a specific territory. In order to achieve their stated objectives, these organisations rely on an inclusive governance model that allows for the active participation of community members in the management, financing and implementation of the organisation's activities (Sforzi, 2018). In this way, they adopt a model of "extended mutuality" (Ronchi, 2013; Chiaf et al., 2013; Sforzi, 2018), which is more inclusive of the various interests present in a given territory. Thanks to this strategic organisational structure, citizens can participate in governance and thus contribute to the development of their environment.

Community-based cooperatives can be considered a strategic governance tool to enhance local development in marginalized rural and urban areas. Rural and marginal areas, indeed, face significant challenges stemming from organizational inefficiencies, management deficiencies, and a lack of professionalism, all of which are deeply embedded in structural and socio-political frameworks. Governance in these areas is often characterized by weak institutions and a lack of local engagement, leading to ineffective service delivery and long-term dependence on external actors (Bock & Shortall, 2017; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Management issues further exacerbate these problems, with local leaders often lacking the strategic vision and professional networks necessary to implement sustainable development initiatives (Pugh, 2003). The scarcity of skilled professionals in rural contexts, coupled with limited access to training and professional development, results in poor management of resources and services (Moseley, 2003; Knickel & Renting, 2000). This skills gap is perpetuated by the exclusion of rural areas from national professionalization programs, leaving them ill-equipped to address their unique development challenges (Shucksmith, 2000; Shortall, 2008). Addressing these structural deficiencies is not obvious, since requires investments in capacity-building, the decentralization of governance, and the creation of professional networks that include rural actors, which could significantly improve the management and professionalization of rural development efforts. Community-based cooperatives, while not effective in tackling structural problems, seem to promote a positive trend. Their rapid spread throughout Italy (Euricse, 2020; Albanese, 2022; Euricse, 2022) has led to their development in contexts such as rural inner

areas, where they provide essential services and employment opportunities and address problems related to depopulation (Teneggi, 2018). The primary characteristics of these community enterprises revolve around several key principles (Mori & Sforzi, 2018) . Primarily, these enterprises aim to produce tangible benefits for the community. This entails engaging in concrete actions, such as the production or provision of goods and services, that serve the general interest of the community as a whole they reference. Another essential feature is ensuring community participation. This implies that all community members should have the opportunity to be involved in the governance of the enterprise. They should be able to assume various responsibilities, whether managerial, financial, or operational, and benefit directly or indirectly from the activities undertaken by the enterprise. Inclusive governance is also a hallmark of community-based cooperatives. This principle guarantees that all individuals and groups, whether public or private, have equal access to the organisation and its activities, without any form of limitation or discrimination. Such inclusivity can be achieved within the organization's social base or through specific mechanisms of active community participation, which enable interested parties to influence the enterprise's decisions, strategies, and actions. Furthermore, community-based enterprises adhere to the principle of limited profit distribution and the indivisibility of accumulated reserves from previous financial years. This means that the value produced by the enterprise is used only marginally to reward capital investors. Conversely, most profits are reinvested into the enterprise and directed towards community development. The non-scalability of the enterprise also represents a critical aspect. Community-based cooperatives are dedicated to the production and management of goods and services of general interest. This ensures that capital concentration and the alteration of the enterprise's purpose cannot be controlled by a few individuals. This safeguards the community-focused mission of the enterprise and prevents the monopolization of its benefits. Finally, another aspect that renders community-based cooperatives a particularly intriguing model for territorial management is their capacity to sustain and defend common goods (Euricse, 2020). This is strictly connected to their ability to interact and integrate with other forms of enterprising communities, such as energy communities, community hubs, neighbourhood concierge services, or collaboration pacts, which makes them a potential tool for not only reactivating local economies but also for rethinking the governance of the territories (villages and neighborhoods) where they operate.

The problem of evaluating the impact of Culture

The question of impact represents one of the most contested and conceptually complex issues in the evaluation of cultural interventions and initiatives. To evaluate, in its literal sense, implies an act of valuation: it entails assigning significance to change and determining whether and how an intervention has generated value. In the cultural field, this task is particularly challenging, as the effects of cultural interventions are often indirect, mediated, and unfold over time rather than producing immediate and easily attributable outcomes.

In this thesis, impact is understood as long-term and potentially sustainable change (positive or negative, primary or secondary) (Rogers, 2008) in people's conditions or in the environment, to which a cultural intervention has contributed (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This definition emphasises contribution rather than direct causality and foregrounds the temporal and processual nature of change. Cultural interventions rarely act as isolated causal drivers; instead, they interact with existing social, institutional, and territorial conditions, shaping trajectories of transformation that are only partially observable in the short term.

As culture has increasingly been recognised as a lever for individual wellbeing, social cohesion, and sustainable development (Hawkes, 2003; UNESCO, 2013; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Cicerchia, 2022), the demand for effective impact assessment has grown accordingly. International policy agendas and cultural policy frameworks now explicitly attribute to culture a role in advancing broader societal objectives, from inclusion and participation to sustainability and quality of life. Yet this growing recognition has not been matched by a comparable convergence around how cultural impact should be conceptualised and assessed.

Historically, impact assessment in the cultural field has developed through a domain-based logic. Cultural impact assessment (Partal and Dunphy, 2016) has focused on changes in cultural values, meanings, identity, heritage, and symbolic resources, often privileging qualitative approaches aimed at capturing significance, interpretation, and cultural continuity. Social impact assessment (Takyi, 2014; Vanclay et al 2015) has instead concentrated on effects related to social relations, participation, empowerment, inclusion, and community cohesion, drawing on methodologies from the social sciences to analyse changes in social structures and practices. Economic impact assessment (Pagiola, 1996; Throsby, 2001) has addressed the contribution of cultural interventions to economic activity, employment, income generation, and value creation, typically through cost–benefit analysis, valuation techniques, or return-on-investment approaches. Environmental impact assessment (Glasson & Therivel, 2013; Morgan, 2012) has examined the ecological implications of cultural and heritage-related activities, including their effects on natural resources, landscapes, and environmental sustainability.

Each of these domains has produced robust methods and valuable insights. However, their separate development has contributed to a fragmented understanding of impact. By isolating cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions, domain-based approaches risk overlooking the ways in which these dimensions interact and co-evolve. Cultural interventions, particularly those that are place-based and participatory, often generate effects that cut across these domains simultaneously: changes in cultural meaning may reshape social relations; social practices may influence economic behaviour; and environmental perceptions may be transformed through cultural experience.

In response to these limitations, cross-domain approaches to impact assessment have progressively emerged (Soini & Dessein, 2016). These approaches seek to integrate multiple domains within a single evaluative framework, recognising that cultural interventions produce interconnected social, economic, and environmental effects. Heritage impact assessment represents a significant development in this direction, as it explicitly addresses the interdependencies between cultural value, social use, economic viability, and environmental sustainability. Similarly, socio-economic and environmental–social assessment frameworks attempt to bridge disciplinary boundaries, moving beyond single-domain evaluations.

More recently, fully holistic approaches to cultural impact assessment have gained prominence. These frameworks aim to capture the complexity of cultural interventions by considering their effects across multiple dimensions simultaneously, often emphasising systems thinking, interdependence, and long-term transformation. Holistic approaches (Langen & Garcia, 2009; Dunphy, 2015) reflect an important conceptual shift: they acknowledge that cultural value cannot be disaggregated into independent components without losing much of its meaning.

Nevertheless, this thesis argues that even integrated and holistic approaches face a critical limitation. While they succeed in broadening the scope of evaluation, they often remain focused on outcomes rather than on the underlying processes that generate them. As a result, they may describe what has changed without adequately explaining how and why change has occurred. This limitation becomes particularly problematic in peripheral and marginalised territories, where cultural interventions frequently operate not by delivering discrete outputs, but by reshaping conditions of agency, perception, and collective orientation.

The central challenge of cultural impact assessment, therefore, is not only to integrate domains, but to develop frameworks capable of accounting for the mechanisms through which cultural interventions mediate change. Without such a process-oriented perspective, impact risks being reduced either to a checklist of effects aligned with policy priorities or to a descriptive aggregation of heterogeneous indicators.

This thesis positions itself within this gap by reframing the problem of impact as a problem of mediation and agency. Cultural interventions are approached as mechanisms that reconfigure the spaces within which individuals and communities perceive, act, and imagine possible futures. From this perspective, impact cannot be fully understood without attention to how cultural practices scaffold or constrain agency over time. This shift provides the conceptual foundation for the evaluative framework developed in the following chapters, which seeks to move beyond domain-based assessment toward a mechanism-sensitive understanding of cultural impact.

Methodological Framework

This dissertation adopts a qualitative-dominant (Maxwell, 2012), mixed-methods research (Silverman, 2000; Plano Clark, 2017) design grounded in a process-oriented and mechanism-based epistemology. The overarching aim is not to establish causal effects in a narrow experimental sense, but to understand how cultural practices contribute to the formation, scaffolding, and limitation of agency in specific territorial contexts, and how such processes can be meaningfully evaluated.

The research is positioned at the intersection of cultural policy analysis, human development theory, and cognitive science. It draws on an interpretive tradition that recognises social phenomena, such as cultural participation, wellbeing, and agency, as context-dependent, relational, and dynamically produced, rather than as stable variables that can be isolated from their environments (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Accordingly, the dissertation privileges depth of understanding, process tracing, and analytical generalisation over statistical representativeness.

A central methodological premise of this work is that conventional impact evaluation frameworks are ill-suited to capture agency formation, particularly in the domain of cultural policy. Standard evaluation approaches typically focus on outputs (e.g. participation rates), outcomes (e.g. self-reported wellbeing), or behavioural changes, often without a clear articulation of the mechanisms linking cultural interventions to these indicators.

To address this limitation, the dissertation adopts a mechanism-based approach (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010), seeking to reconstruct the causal chains through which cultural practices affect affective, cognitive, and relational dimensions of experience, and how these dimensions interact with structural conditions. This approach is compatible with the capability framework,

which conceptualises agency as a process mediated by conversion factors rather than as a direct function of resources or interventions (Sen, 1993; Robeyns, 2017).

Methodologically, the integration of cognitive science does not imply the use of experimental neuroscience or laboratory-based methods. Rather, insights from cognition sciences are used as an analytical lens to interpret empirical material. This perspective supports the examination of how cultural practices engage embodied and affective dimensions of experience; reshape perception and meaning-making; scaffold expectations, aspirations, and future-oriented imaginaries; and are enacted through situated social and material practices. By adopting this lens, the analysis avoids reducing agency either to internal psychological states or to externally observable behaviours, instead treating it as an emergent property of situated interaction (Gallagher, 2020).

Case Study Selection and Data Collection

The dissertation employs a multiple case study design (Yin, 2009), centred on cultural initiatives developed in inner areas of the Abruzzo region. Case studies are particularly suited to this research because they allow for in-depth exploration of complex social processes within their real-life contexts, especially where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred. Cases were selected according to theoretical rather than statistical criteria (Eisenhardt, 1989). Three main considerations guided the selection, in order to supports analytical generalisation by identifying patterns and mechanisms that may be transferable to similar contexts, rather than claiming universal applicability:

(i) **Territorial marginality**: Inner areas of Abruzzo are characterised by demographic decline, limited access to services, and structural socio-economic disadvantages. These conditions provide a demanding context in which claims about cultural empowerment can be critically tested.

(ii) **Community-based organisational forms**: All cases involve forms of community enterprise or collective organisation that combine cultural, social, and economic dimensions. These hybrid forms allow for the analysis of agency at the meso level, bridging individual experience and structural constraints.

(iii) **Variation in cultural practices**: The cases differ in terms of cultural modality (community-based tourism, urban artistic intervention), enabling analytical comparison

across different types of cultural engagement.

Data collection was designed according to a convergent mixed-methods strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, with a deliberate and explicit emphasis on qualitative inquiry. This choice reflects the core objective of the thesis, namely to reconstruct the processes and mechanisms through which cultural interventions operate, rather than to test predefined causal relationships.

Qualitative data constitute the backbone of the empirical analysis. They were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including community members, cultural organisers, local entrepreneurs, and institutional actors involved in the interventions. Interviews explored participants' lived experiences, motivations, perceptions of change, and the constraints shaping their engagement, allowing insight into how cultural practices were interpreted and appropriated across different social positions. This material was complemented by participant observation conducted during cultural activities and within organisational settings. Observation made it possible to analyse the embodied, relational, and affective dimensions of participation that are often inaccessible through self-reported data alone, and to capture how agency was enacted, negotiated, or limited in situ. In addition, document analysis was undertaken, including project reports, policy documents, communication materials, and local media coverage, in order to reconstruct the institutional framing of the interventions and their public narratives.

The integration of these qualitative sources enabled systematic triangulation and supported a fine-grained reconstruction of the processes through which cultural practices generate effects at the individual and collective level.

In selected cases, qualitative analysis was complemented by quantitative and mixed-method tools. Survey instruments were employed to capture dimensions such as subjective wellbeing, sense of belonging, perceived self-efficacy, and future orientation, which are central to the capabilities-oriented framework adopted in the thesis. Descriptive statistical analysis was used not to establish causal claims, but to contextualise qualitative findings and to identify patterns consistent with the mechanisms observed in the field. In this sense, quantitative data functioned as an interpretive support rather than as a standalone evidentiary base.

This mixed-methods strategy contributes to strengthening internal validity by systematically cross-checking interpretive insights against independently collected data, in line with established approaches to convergent mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and abductive logic (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), characterised by continuous movement between empirical material and theoretical constructs. Rather than applying a fixed analytical grid ex ante, the analysis evolved through a progressive refinement of concepts in response to recurring patterns and anomalies in the data.

Qualitative material was analysed through thematic coding, with particular attention to affective responses, shifts in perception, relational dynamics, and explicit or implicit expressions of agency and constraint. This was complemented by process tracing, aimed at identifying sequences through which cultural practices contributed to specific experiential, organisational, or institutional changes. Finally, cross-case comparison was employed to examine similarities and differences across contexts, focusing on how agency was variously scaffolded or limited by different intervention designs and territorial conditions.

Together, these analytical strategies made it possible to connect situated empirical observations with the broader theoretical framework of the thesis, allowing mechanisms of cultural impact to emerge from the interaction between data and theory rather than being imposed a priori.

Validity and Limitations

The dissertation acknowledges several limitations. First, the qualitative and case-based nature of the research limits statistical generalisability. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce bias. These limitations are mitigated through triangulation, transparency of analytical procedures, and careful interpretation of findings. Beyond its substantive findings, the dissertation contributes methodologically by proposing an approach to cultural impact evaluation that is process-oriented, cognitively informed, and sensitive to structural constraints. By foregrounding agency as an object of analysis and integrating insights from cognitive science into qualitative policy research, the methodology offers a framework that can inform future studies and evaluation practices in the field of culture-led development.

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Heritage-Led Sustainable Development in Rural Areas: The Case of Vivi Calascio Community-based Cooperative1

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Abstract

Innovative entrepreneurial practices have the potential to drive heritage-led rural revitalization by promoting sustainable cultural tourism as a catalyst for community development. This article presents an exploratory case study analysis of Vivi Calascio, a community-based cooperative in the rural area of Calascio (Abruzzo, Italy), which focuses on human-centric development through heritage-led cultural tourism. The data analysis reveals that Vivi Calascio's cooperative model prioritizes inclusivity and active community involvement, integrating diverse member contributions into its decision-making processes and activities. The cooperative reinvests its profits to ensure sustainable growth and community development, with a strong emphasis on eco-sustainability and respectful tourism, thereby preserving local culture and heritage. Unlike conventional tourism models, Vivi Calascio fosters empathetic relationships and responsible behaviors, enhancing the community's well-being and creating a sustainable, enriching environment for both residents and visitors. This case exemplifies what we term the "empathic tourism paradigm" by illustrating empathy as a practice of embodiment in the relationship between cultural heritage tourists and the community.

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1. Introduction: Community-based Cooperative as a strategic tool for local revitalization

Innovative entrepreneurial practices hold the potential to catalyze heritage-led rural revitalization, particularly by promoting sustainable cultural tourism as a driver for community development. Despite acknowledging the negative impacts of cultural tourism on local communities and ecosystems, there is increasing recognition of the necessity for regenerative approaches, emphasizing circular economy models, human-centric development, and sustainability. Aligned with the objectives of the Horizon 2020 Be.CULTOUR project, this study examines the local development initiatives of the community-based cooperative of Calascio (Abruzzo, Italy), which preserves the cultural heritage of the area, Rocca Calascio, through a redistributive perspective that engages the local community.

Calascio is a small municipality in the Italian Abruzzo region, situated at the convergence of the Gran Sasso mountains and the Tirino River. It is characterised by unique geographical and cultural attributes. As with many other rural communities in Italy, the village is confronted with considerable difficulties associated with depopulation and economic decline, counting only 125 residents in 2022 (ISTAT). Despite these challenges, Calascio is home to a number of historical and cultural assets, most notably the Rocca Calascio, which is a prominent tourist attraction and has been used as a filming location for numerous movies. The village has a permanent population of around 80, but sees an influx of approximately 2,000 tourists per day during the summer. This disparity between tourists and residents has highlighted the need for sustainable management and job creation.

In 2020, the residents of Calascio, recognising both the potential and the risks facing their home, established the Vivi Calascio Community-based Cooperative with a dual mission: to combat depopulation and create employment opportunities for the younger generation, while preserving the cultural and historical identity of the area. The cooperative brought together a diverse group of individuals, including older, experienced members who had chosen to reside in Calascio due to their passion for the area, and local youths eager to engage with their community. The primary motivation behind the cooperative was to create employment opportunities for residents and address the issue of depopulation.

This paper examines how this cooperative has employed heritage-led sustainable development to revitalize the rural area, creating economic opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for its residents, highlighting the significant social impact of culture-based initiatives in rural development.

Community-based cooperatives are cooperative societies whose primary objective is to generate benefits, such as goods or services, for the well-being of a specific territorial community (Bartocci, Picciaia, 2013; Borzaga, Zandonai, 2015; Mori, Sforzi, 2018). These enterprises diverge from traditional cooperatives in that their services are not confined to a particular group of individuals (such as working members), but are of general interest to all citizens within the territory served. Community enterprises, therefore, are organisations that act not only in the interests of their members, but also in the interests of all inhabitants of a specific territory. In order to achieve their stated objectives, these organisations rely on an inclusive governance model that allows for the active participation of community members in the management, financing and implementation of the organisation's activities (Sforzi, 2018). In this way, they adopt a model of "extended mutuality" (Ronchi, 2013; Chiaf et al., 2013; Sforzi, 2018), which is more inclusive of the various interests present in a given territory. Thanks to this strategic organisational structure, citizens can participate in governance and thus contribute to the development of their environment.

Community-based cooperatives can be considered a strategic governance tool to enhance local development in marginalized rural and urban areas. Rural and marginal areas in particular, face significant challenges stemming from organizational inefficiencies, management deficiencies, and a lack of professionalism, all of which are deeply embedded in structural and socio-political frameworks. Governance in these areas is often characterized by weak institutions and a lack of local engagement, leading to ineffective service delivery and long-term dependence on external actors (Bock & Shortall, 2017; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Management issues further exacerbate these problems, with local leaders often lacking the strategic vision and professional networks necessary to implement sustainable development initiatives (Pugh, 2003). The scarcity of skilled professionals in rural contexts, coupled with limited access to training and professional development, results in poor management of resources and services (Moseley, 2003; Knickel & Renting, 2000). This skills gap is perpetuated by the exclusion of rural areas from national professionalization programs, leaving them ill-equipped to address their unique development challenges (Shucksmith, 2000; Shortall, 2008). Addressing these structural deficiencies is not obvious, since requires investments in capacity-building, the decentralization of governance, and the creation of professional networks that include rural actors, which could significantly improve the management and professionalization of rural development efforts. Community-based cooperatives, while not effective in tackiling structural problems, seem to promote a positive trend. Their rapid spread throughout Italy (Euricse, 2020;

Albanese, 2022; Euricse, 2022) has led to their development in contexts such as rural inner areas, where they provide essential services and employment opportunities and address problems related to depopulation (Teneggi, 2018). The primary characteristics of these community enterprises, as outlined by Mori and Sforzi in 2018, revolve around several key principles. Primarily, these enterprises aim to produce tangible benefits for the community. This entails engaging in concrete actions, such as the production or provision of goods and services, that serve the general interest of the community as a whole they reference. Another essential feature is ensuring community participation. This implies that all community members should have the opportunity to be involved in the governance of the enterprise. They should be able to assume various responsibilities, whether managerial, financial, or operational, and benefit directly or indirectly from the activities undertaken by the enterprise.

Inclusive governance is also a hallmark of community-based cooperatives. This principle guarantees that all individuals and groups, whether public or private, have equal access to the organisation and its activities, without any form of limitation or discrimination. Such inclusivity can be achieved within the organization's social base or through specific mechanisms of active community participation, which enable interested parties to influence the enterprise's decisions, strategies, and actions.

Furthermore, community-based enterprises adhere to the principle of limited profit distribution and the indivisibility of accumulated reserves from previous financial years. This means that the value produced by the enterprise is used only marginally to reward capital investors. Conversely, most profits are reinvested into the enterprise and directed towards community development. The non-scalability of the enterprise also represents a critical aspect. Community-based cooperatives are dedicated to the production and management of goods and services of general interest. This ensures that capital concentration and the alteration of the enterprise's purpose cannot be controlled by a few individuals. This safeguards the community-focused mission of the enterprise and prevents the monopolization of its benefits.

Finally, another aspect that renders community-based cooperatives a particularly intriguing model for territorial management is their capacity to sustain and defend common goods (Euricse, 2020). This is strictly connected to their ability to interact and integrate with other forms of enterprising communities, such as energy communities, community hubs, neighbourhood concierge services, or collaboration pacts, which makes them a potential tool for not only reactivating local economies but also for rethinking the governance of the territories (villages and neighborhoods) where they operate.

In the present paper, the case study of Vivi Calascio will be analyzed through a six key-dimensions model. This analysis reveals how the community, in an enactive process, becomes the creator of the place, shaping it based on the values in which it recognizes itself. This new empathic tourism paradigm is both heritage-led and community-led, effectively transmitting the intrinsic values of the place to visitors.

We have formulated the concept of an empathic tourism paradigm drawing upon enactivist principles, as articulated by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) and further developed by Gallagher (2017). The role of empathy is not a new concept in tourism studies (Tucker, 2016; Gnoth, Wang, 2015; Sharifi-Tehrani et al., 2022). In this new framework, empathy is recognised not just as an emotional response but as an embodied and participatory process, rooted in mutual recognition and shared narratives. In other words, empathy arises from dynamic, embodied interactions between tourists and local communities. The approach presented supports a self-selecting mechanism within the tourist experience: visitors drawn to meaningful, value-based engagement are naturally compatible with the empathic model, while those with consumptive tourism expectations may find it less appealing. Through this selective process, the empathic model fosters sustained connections over superficial interactions, thereby promoting sustainable engagement and cultural preservation. This theoretical conceptualization did not originate from pre-existing theoretical frameworks but emerged directly from data, following a grounded theory methodology. Through a data-driven process, the research uncovered patterns of interaction that pointed toward a tourism model centered on mutual empathy and embodiment. The methodology allowed theoretical constructs to develop iteratively, with concepts and categories shaped by recurring observations and insights from the field rather than predetermined hypotheses. Thus, this empathic paradigm evolved organically as a grounded response to the patterns observed in the interactions between Vivi Calascio's community and visiting tourists.

2. Heritage-Led Sustainable Development: A Model for Rural Revitalization

The success of Vivi Calascio exemplifies the potential of heritage-led sustainable development in rural areas. By leveraging cultural assets and fostering community involvement, the cooperative has created a model that other rural communities facing similar challenges can emulate. Central to this model is community engagement, which involves residents in decision-making processes and aligns efforts toward common goals. This engagement has led to job creation, and developing economic activities that provide local employment opportunities,

particularly for young people. Furthermore, the cooperative has integrated tourism management with community service development, benefiting both visitors and locals. This integration ensures that economic development activities promote and preserve the local cultural and historical heritage.

The cooperative has become a pivotal socio-economic engine for Calascio. By aligning the interests and efforts of local residents, the cooperative is committed to mitigating the scourge of depopulation that is affecting Calascio in a way that seems irreversible. A significant factor contributing to the cooperative's success has been the creation of new employment opportunities, which has provided the younger generation with reasons to remain and invest in their hometown. This, in turn, has fostered a sense of community and resilience, which are vital for the long-term sustainability of rural areas. A key objective of Vivi Calascio is to present itself as an authentic and protected community that offers a meaningful human experience to visitors, rather than merely focusing on profit-driven tourism. The cooperative's dedication to preserving the village's identity is evident in its various initiatives, including the maintenance of local green spaces and the provision of voluntary snow removal services. This approach ensures that the cultural heritage of the village is not eroded by tourism development. Vivi Calascio's objective is to enhance the quality of life for local residents by developing new community services and undertaking projects to regenerate the village. This includes the maintenance and management of local properties, integrating these efforts with their tourism services. The cooperative's activities ensure that both visitors and residents benefit from improved infrastructure and services. A core objective of Vivi Calascio is the preservation and promotion of Calascio's historical and cultural identity. The cooperative's sustainable economic activities focus on environmental conservation and the restoration of historical monuments. This not only enhances the visitor experience but also instills pride and a sense of ownership among local residents.

Beyond tourism, Vivi Calascio is engaged in several projects to improve the quality of life for all residents, with a particular focus on the elderly. In collaboration with Confocooperative and with funding from Assimoco, a pilot project is underway which involves the development of a health monitoring bracelet for seniors. The device in question monitors the user's vital signs on a 24-hour basis and notifies the relevant healthcare professionals in the event of any irregularities. The cooperative plays a pivotal role in the project's implementation, visiting residents, ensuring they utilize the devices correctly and monitoring their well-being. This

initiative challenges the assumption that life in a small village is lonelier than in a big city, demonstrating how modern technology can enhance rural living.

3. The Role of Vivi Calascio Cooperative in rural culture-based tourism

The Vivi Calascio case study, from a Tourism Studies perspective, exemplifies rural cultural-based tourism by integrating cultural heritage preservation with community involvement, sustainable practices, economic empowerment, and innovative approaches. Its success in creating authentic, responsible, and community-driven tourism experiences makes it a model for other rural areas aiming to leverage their cultural assets for sustainable development.

Rural tourism, commonly offered in rural areas, is characterized by small-scale enterprises, open spaces, and contact with nature and heritage. It often involves traditional societies and practices, and its growth is typically slow and organic, involving local families and reflecting the complexity of the rural environment, economy, history, and location (Lane, 1994). Many attractions of rural tourism can be classified as elements of cultural tourism, including traditions, historical contexts, and unique settlements. Some authors refer to this as “cultural rural tourism” (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003).

For cultural rural tourism, it is crucial to recognize, develop, and organize the distinct tangible and intangible heritage of a rural area to create authentic visitor experiences and ensure preservation for future generations. Issues such as the interpretation of culture, authenticity, commodification, and ownership of culture are important in contemporary tourism literature (Smith, 2015). These issues have a greater impact in rural communities where local culture is vital to residents' identity. Preserving local sites, monuments, and traditions is often rooted in community pride and the importance of culture for social interaction (Cole, 2007). When developing tourism with rural culture as a core resource, involving local community members is key to success. This involvement not only ensures a more authentic visitor experience and maintains local control over cultural interpretation but also addresses the often limited financial resources available at the local level.

While economic globalization and new possibilities in connectivity became forces that have disrupted traditional tourism supply chains enabling technology-savvy travelers to customize their experiences, collaborative tourism products, such as car-sharing and home exchanges, have become popular.

However, collaborative models do not always guarantee fair redistribution and sustainability (Mariani et al., 2022). In recognition of this complexity, community-based cooperatives have emerged as a viable model for rural development across Italy, demonstrating that local communities can take control of their resources and become the primary agents of their economic and social development. Vivi Calascio, located in the village of Calascio in the province of L'Aquila, is a prime example of this model.

The presence of a heritage site, such as the Rocca Calascio, can facilitate the creation of a business by providing a direct source of income. However, the governance of a rural heritage site by its community is not a given. It is clear that a village of 80 inhabitants, most of them elderly, cannot control a large number of visitors. This scenario could encourage other forms of external, extractive and speculative management. With the community-based cooperative the community itself becomes the custodian of the heritage site, redistributing the benefits to the residents by reinvesting in social projects and creating employment opportunities for locals. This approach not only preserves the heritage site, but also ensures that the economic benefits remain within the community, promoting sustainable development and social cohesion. The cooperative was indeed founded to harness the skills and talents of local residents to meet the needs of the community.

In this sense, literature explores the evolving nature of tourism in contemporary society, transitioning from traditional, sedentary perspectives to a more mobile and interconnected reality. In the article "The Shifting Spatial Logic of Tourism in Networked Hospitality" by Antonio Paolo Russo and Alan Quaglieri Domínguez it is shown how the traditional views of tourism as a temporary escape are being challenged, being now seen as an integral part of modern life, intertwining leisure, sociality, professional development, and cultural aspirations. The clear distinction between tourism and everyday life is diminishing. The experience of the Vivi Calascio Community Cooperative in Abruzzo aligns closely with the trends discussed in Russo and Quaglieri Domínguez's article, particularly in the context of what they called “human quality” tourism, namely the sensibility of being able to empathize with the very nature of places.

4. Data Collection and Methodology

The research is based on an exploratory case study analysis. It is an ethnographic qualitative case study, incorporating grounded theory to investigate an under-researched phenomenon through empirical observation and theoretical development. The selection of ethnography and

grounded theory is particularly pertinent given the complexity of heritage-led and community-driven cultural regeneration, which requires a deep understanding of context, actor perspectives, and emergent patterns within real-life settings. Ethnography allows for an immersive, contextually rich exploration, essential for identifying implicit cultural dynamics, while grounded theory facilitates the construction of theoretical frameworks directly informed by the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This combination of methods provides a robust basis for deriving insights grounded in empirical evidence rather than speculative theorization, a necessity for the novel and context-sensitive research question posed. This is particularly useful in cases where, as in this case study, the research question is not adequately reflected in the existing literature. This methodology thus enables the generation of a theoretical, rational and articulated interpretation that provides an account of the reality under study. The method under consideration modulates the grounded, data-driven approach, as evidenced by this study. The theoretical constructs that emerge from this methodology are not the result of theoretical speculation constructed in isolation, but rather are derived from experience in the field. The theoretical constructs are based on factual experience.

The initial choice to focus on the Vivi Calascio Cooperative was not arbitrary but emerged through participant observation with various community cooperatives, where Vivi Calascio's distinctive approach to heritage management highlighted it as a compelling case for deeper investigation. This observation, which is described in detail in the following paragraphs, informed the research question, which seeks to understand the mechanisms through which cultural regeneration efforts, grounded in heritage, can simultaneously foster community engagement and sustainability.

That is the reason why the research question was subjected to a qualitative analysis using the case study method (Yin, 1994, 1999). This entailed an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context were not clearly defined. The case study is therefore the most appropriate type of research to investigate the existence of a context underlying the chosen case, with a view to generalizing the findings. This methodology enables the codification of theoretical constructs derived from the empirical analysis of specific contexts, particularly when the role of context is crucial for comprehending the phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is not always feasible to entirely disassociate the phenomenon from the context in a real-world setting. Indeed, the study of context necessitates a situation in which the variables to be identified are considerably more numerous than the problems to be analyzed. Consequently, it

is necessary to utilize a range of evidence sources, with a requisite triangulation of data. This necessitates a theoretical framework to inform data collection and analysis (Yin, 1999).

The case study method is therefore appropriate when there is a need for theoretical constructs to emerge on the basis of the regularities that emerge from the particular case being observed. This is achieved through the collection and analysis of qualitative data, which also makes it possible to explore the meaning that actors give to the reality being studied. The objective was to develop a cultural regeneration model that is both *heritage-led* and *community-led*.

The data collection process was thus informed by a developing theory, which was then tested in the context of the data collection itself. This took place through the use of multiple sources of evidence.

Data were collected using several qualitative methods designed for methodological rigor and data triangulation. These included document analysis, semi-structured interview, and direct and participant observation. Document analysis involved examining both theoretical sources in the literature and organizational documents produced by Vivi Calascio, which revealed insights into the cooperative's self-defined value orientation, goals, and operational practices (Luhmann, 2018). This documentation provided a preliminary understanding that was then further enriched by primary data from semi-structured interview and field observations.In particular, the following means of data collection were used: documentation through theoretical sources found in the literature and documents produced by the Vivi Calascio cooperative; semi-structured interview with the president of the cooperative, Franco Cagnoli; occasions of participant observation, establishing rapport with the research participants under investigation with several occasions of talk; occasions of direct observation of the group's (both tourists and cooperative's members) behavior and interactions. Participant observation of the community-based cooperative in Calascio was conducted through two main approaches. The first involved attending meetings of the Abruzzo network of community-based cooperatives, in which the Vivi Calascio cooperative participated on the following dates: February 2, 2023; February 17, 2023; April 7, 2023; September 8-10, 2023; October 3, 2023; January 29, 2024; February 29, 2024; and March 21, 2024. The second consisted of site visits to Calascio and activities organized by the cooperative on February 10, 2023; February 21, 2023; and May 29, 2024, the latter date coinciding with a network meeting held in Calascio. The meetings of the community-based cooperative network provided a platform for discussing both the initiatives and the challenges faced by this specific legal form of organization. These discussions informed the identification of relevant literature, which guided this article, and helped define the impact dimensions reported here. The visits to Calascio offered a deeper insight into the cooperative's

activities and governance, as well as a direct understanding of the management of the heritage site of the Rocca.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with a key stakeholder, the cooperative's president, Franco Cagnoli, and was aimed at uncovering personal and organizational perspectives on heritage management and community involvement. One long interview was conducted between May and June 2024. The interview, structured to allow flexibility for emergent themes, focused on the cooperative's strategies, challenges, and objectives, as well as personal experiences of cultural engagement. Participant observation, initiated in April 2022, was both a voluntary, immersive experience and a structured part of the research. It involved regular engagement with cooperative members and tourists, observing interactions, behaviors, and informal dialogues that provided nuanced insights into the community dynamics at play. This voluntary, ongoing interaction was critical for building rapport and understanding the embedded meanings attributed to heritage and community by different actors. To ensure robust findings, the study employed data triangulation, integrating evidence from documents, interviews, and observations to confirm the regularities observed. Themes identified in cooperative documents were cross-referenced with interview data to validate the cooperative's stated goals and self-identity against personal accounts from its members. This triangulated approach enhanced the reliability and depth of findings, allowing for a well-rounded theoretical framework that accurately reflects the lived experiences within the cooperative.

While the study offers valuable insights into community-driven cultural regeneration, it has certain limitations we are aware of. First, the research is based on a single case study, which, while providing depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to multiple cooperatives would allow for a comparative analysis that could refine and further validate the theoretical constructs. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, though rich in contextual detail, does not incorporate quantitative measures that could strengthen the empirical evidence supporting the conclusions. Future research could integrate mixed methods, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data to assess broader trends and impacts. Moreover, we are eager to conduct longitudinal studies to examine the long-term sustainability and evolution of heritage-led community initiatives. Further research could also explore the intersection of cultural regeneration with policy frameworks and economic viability, providing a more holistic understanding of its implications.

5. Key Dimensions framework for the case study analysis

In this study, we developed a semi-structured interview approach informed by dimensions extracted both from literature on rural and cultural tourism and from literature on community-based cooperatives and tourism, as outlined in the present research.

The analytical framework we designed comprises several key dimensions that emerged directly from our data; these dimensions were not pre-defined, rather, they were shaped through continuous interaction between our observations and the theoretical constructs that we identified as relevant. These dimensions emerged from the challenges and initiatives reported by the cooperative during the network meetings in which we participated, highlighting the practical issues and opportunities that define this particular organizational form. The interview, in turn, was conducted to validate these dimensions and explore them in greater detail. Specifically, we identified 6 key dimensions including *Governance Model, Profit Distribution and Business Model, Common Goods Management, Hospitality Management, Services and Regeneration and Impacts on Life Quality and Well-being,* which are crucial for framing Vivi Calascio as a best-case of community-based cooperative focused on heritage-led rural tourism because they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the cooperative's effectiveness and sustainability. Each dimension highlights a fundamental aspect of Vivi Calascio's approach and success: the governance model serves as a key indicator of community involvement, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that decision-making processes are inclusive and reflect the needs and aspirations of residents. Governance is fundamental in community-based tourism initiatives, where structured and inclusive governance models are key to sustainable rural development and community empowerment. Studies have highlighted the role of governance in building social capital and establishing clear, participatory decision-making processes (Díaz Rocca & Zielinski, 2022). For instance, the Governance Analysis Model, which emphasizes participation, transparency, and effectiveness, provides a relevant source for examining how Vivi Calascio operates. Moreover, cooperatives often serve as empowering governance structures in community-based tourism by integrating community values and fostering social cohesion (Arratia et al., 2022). The inclusion of the Governance Model as a dimension allows us to assess how Vivi Calascio's cooperative framework promotes community engagement and decision-making. This democratic framework fosters trust and adaptability, essential for the cooperative's long-term sustainability.

Profit distribution and the business model function as indicators of economic empowerment and sustainability, creating local economic opportunities and addressing issues such as unemployment and rural depopulation through equitable profit-sharing mechanisms; the dimension is critical in evaluating how economic benefits are generated and shared within a

community-driven tourism initiative. Cooperative business models in community-based tourism can address economic and environmental concerns by promoting community entrepreneurship (Mohamad & Hamzah, 2013). Research indicates that community-led income distribution models often enhance visitor engagement and willingness to support local initiatives (Pang et al., 2024). Including this dimension helps explore how Vivi Calascio not only generates income through various projects but also reinvests profits for sustainable growth, community projects, and job creation, thus aligning with broader goals of socio-economic sustainability.

Common goods management highlights the cooperative's commitment to preserving and enhancing cultural and natural heritage, involving the community in stewardship practices that foster a sense of ownership and pride (Tartari et al., 2022), ensuring that tourism activities remain sustainable and beneficial. Effective common goods management is essential for preserving natural and cultural assets in rural areas, particularly where tourism is a significant economic activity. Studies emphasize that collective action, shared values, and equitable value-sharing are crucial for managing community resources, as seen in agricultural and service cooperatives (Saikouk & Badraoui, 2014; Chrostowski & Kostera, 2019). Vivi Calascio's emphasis on eco-sustainability and community-led stewardship of heritage sites aligns with these principles, ensuring that tourism does not compromise the long-term integrity of local resources. By including Common goods management, we assess how the cooperative's actions safeguard shared assets while fostering community pride and sustainable development.

Hospitality management serves as an indicator of service quality and visitor experience, offering authentic and high-quality services that promote responsible travel practices and support local economic diversification. Hospitality management within community-based tourism is essential for supporting the local economy and preserving rural authenticity. Rural hospitality and tourism are recognized as drivers of rural diversification, transitioning communities from agrarian economies to tourism-based ones (Gannon, 1994). Innovative and community-integrated hospitality models, such as homestays, have shown success in fostering meaningful tourist-host interactions (Macek, 2012). Vivi Calascio's approach contrasts with mass-market tourism, offering a model where visitor accommodations are deeply embedded within the local community. This dimension allows us to analyze how Vivi Calascio manages hospitality in a way that respects local culture and supports responsible tourism.

The dimension of Services and Regeneration is crucial for evaluating how community-based tourism initiatives contribute to both the functional and socio-cultural revitalization of rural areas. Literature on rural development emphasizes that introducing or improving local services,

alongside regenerating cultural and physical infrastructure, can significantly enhance the attractiveness and sustainability of rural communities (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). By creating essential services that support both residents and tourists, such as transportation, healthcare, and community spaces, these initiatives help address common rural challenges like service access and social isolation, which are frequently cited issues in rural wellbeing studies (Mueller et al., 2020).

Finally, the impacts on life quality and well-being are indicators of social cohesion and community resilience, demonstrating the cooperative's role in improving living standards and addressing social and economic challenges. Improving life quality and well-being is central to the objectives of community-based tourism, particularly in rural areas where social isolation and limited resources impact daily life (Mueller et al., 2020). Research highlights how community engagement and support systems contribute positively to rural well-being, addressing issues like unemployment, life satisfaction, and mental health (Inder et al., 2012). This dimension is strictly related with the emotional and narrative connections that the cooperative fosters between visitors and the community. Empathy for place, as a relational and embodied practice, enhances the authenticity of tourist experiences and helps visitors appreciate the culture and values of the host community. The literature underscores the role of rural tourism in storytelling, where heritage sites serve as focal points for place-based narratives that resonate with visitors (de Almeida & Emmendoerfer, 2023). By cultivating empathy, Vivi Calascio allows tourists to connect meaningfully with the local culture, promoting a tourism experience that is both heritage-led and community-centered. Including this dimension enables us to examine the extent to which Vivi Calascio enhances the well-being of its residents by creating local jobs, fostering community pride, and supporting mental and social health. This perspective provides insights into how community-based tourism can contribute to the overall resilience and socio-economic development of rural communities, aligning with Vivi Calascio’s mission to offer an enriching experience.

Each dimension was translated into a set of open-ended questions designed to explore, together with the key-stakeholder, the practices, strategies, and outcomes associated with these aspects within the context of Vivi Calascio. The semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow for flexibility and depth in validating the dimentions by triangulating them with perspectives and experiences of those involved in the management and promotion of Vivi Calascio.

Dimensions	*Semi-structured interview questions*
Governance Model	Could you describe the governance model of Vivi Calascio? How is it practically implemented, and what is the decision-making process?
Profit Distribution and Business Model	How are the profits of Vivi Calascio distributed (projects, areas) ? How many new job positions - projects per year - funding received - collaborations with regional partners (...)
Common Goods Management	How does Vivi Calascio manage common goods? What measures do they take to enhance and protect these assets? How do you account for sustainability strategies within your model?
Hospitality Management	How does Vivi Calascio manage hospitality services? Do they offer an alternative model to the typical Airbnb-style tourism?
Services and Regeneration	What specific actions has Vivi Calascio implemented regarding the creation and provision of services, as well as the regeneration of spaces?
Impacts on life quality and well-being	In what ways do you think these experiences contribute to the overall growth and development of the community? In what ways do you think staying here contributes to a sense of fulfillment or satisfaction in your life? and in the life of tourists?

Governance Model of Vivi Calascio

The governance model of Vivi Calascio is structured as a cooperative that prioritizes inclusivity, shared responsibility, and active community involvement. Decision-making within Vivi Calascio is characterized by a collective and consensus-driven approach. Members are encouraged to participate actively in discussions, ensuring that their ideas and passions are integrated into the cooperative's initiatives. This model manifests through a comprehensive organizational framework and a well-defined decision-making process that can be related to a model of "extended mutuality". "*Out of a town with 80 actual residents, around 100 residents*

including those eligible to vote, the cooperative comprises 38 members". "*They decided to become members because they see the cooperative as valuable. Because while it might not be obvious that the Rocca is valuable, the cooperative is seen as a value. When discussing inland Abruzzo, depopulation is certainly the worst plague for many villages, and we are part of this context as depopulation is a significant issue here as well. However, we have a unique situation with the great attraction of the Rocca Calascio tower, which brings in an average of 2,000 tourists per day in the summer*".

The age range of the members spans from younger individuals in their thirties to older participants over fifty, each bringing unique skills and perspectives. This diversity is instrumental in enriching the cooperative's activities, which include music workshops, e-bike repairs, and guided tours: "*people associated with the cooperative are able to express their inclinations. For example, as a musician, I will conduct handpan workshops, the instruments I play, and anyone with specific passions can bring their ideas and use the place, always in a way that earns something for the cooperative, because the goal is always the survival of the cooperative and that it also gratifies and benefits the individual."*

Profit Distribution and Business Model of Vivi Calascio

The business model of Vivi Calascio is designed around a cooperative framework that emphasizes community development, financial sustainability, and equitable profit distribution. The cooperative generates an annual income of approximately 160,000 euros, derived primarily from a combination of membership fees and diverse project revenues. Notably, 20% of the income is sourced from membership contributions, while the remaining 80% is generated through various projects and services that generated 10 job positions. Internal cooperative providing services allows diversified income stream ensures a stable financial base that supports the cooperative's broad range of activities and initiatives, such as: Shuttle service from Calascio to Rocca, generating income and employment; revenue generated from activities or services associated with the historic tower, possibly through tours or events; Various municipal works (green cleaning, maintenance, etc.); e-bike rental and training courses for members and guides with guided tours in the region; guided visits to archaeological areas, including the reopening of a previously closed church, which now attracts visitors. "*This generates significant employment opportunities, and we've also brought two young people to live in Calascio through our work".*

The profit distribution model of Vivi Calascio is strategically oriented towards reinvestment in funding of new projects and the maintenance of existing services, thus fostering a sustainable

growth model. This reinvestment approach not only sustains ongoing operations but also facilitates the continuous expansion of the cooperative's activities and the enhancement of its service offerings. "*Well, let's say we are fortunate enough to manage to survive with our activities, but over the years we have also received fundings from Regional and National calls".* Furthermore, the cooperative's business model incorporates a significant focus on community engagement and local development. By involving local residents in their activities and addressing local needs through their services, Vivi Calascio ensures that its operations are closely aligned with the interests and well-being of the community. This alignment is particularly evident in their approach to tourism management, where the cooperative seeks to regulate existing tourist flows to protect local culture and prevent over-tourism, rather than aggressively pursuing new tourist markets.

Common Goods Management at Vivi Calascio

Vivi Calascio's approach to managing common goods revolves around a multifaceted strategy aimed at preserving and enhancing the natural and cultural assets of the region, particularly amidst increasing tourist activity. The cooperative operates within a unique context where the ratio of tourists to residents is notably high, underscoring the importance of responsible tourism management. With approximately 50,000 tourists visiting annually, the cooperative faces the dual challenge of catering to visitor interests while safeguarding local traditions and resources to nurture the culture, precisely, of respecting the very nature of the place that also passes through the capacity of the place. *"We're not* (Disneyland's) *extras. We're people who have a real story of connection to this place and tell that story, not fairy tales. This is an important concept. While instead the line we give, as much as possible, to those who arrive is that of respecting the place they visit. Making them understand that we have limited spaces and we have a fragility that is not always perceptible. Making them understand that this fragility must be respected, that they must adapt to our times and our spaces. And this is a difficult challenge."*

To mitigate the environmental impact of tourism, Vivi Calascio implements eco-sustainability measures such as waste reduction initiatives and promoting eco-friendly practices, aiming at an "empathetic tourism": "*The problem is not to bring as many people as possible, as quickly as possible to the fortress. The problem is instead contingent, it's the exact opposite. It's like bringing in less and spreading it over longer periods. (...) Here, sensitive people are needed. And a sensitive person, an empathetic person, can be either poor or extremely rich. My point isn't about classism.*"

Culturally, by actively involving local residents in these activities, Vivi Calascio fosters a sense of community ownership over shared resources, thereby reinforcing the sustainable management of common goods. This community-centric approach extends to governance practices where decisions regarding the use and preservation of common assets are democratically discussed and agreed upon among members.

By safeguarding Rocca Calascio and other shared resources through collaborative efforts and proactive measures, the cooperative not only sustains the local's natural and cultural heritage but also enriches the visitor experience while supporting local livelihoods. This holistic approach underscores the cooperative's commitment to fostering sustainable development and preserving the essence of Calascio for future generations.

Hospitality Management at Vivi Calascio

Vivi Calascio aspires to a distinctive model that diverges from conventional Airbnb-style tourism. At the heart of their approach lies a commitment to community integration, sustainability, and authentic cultural experiences, which collectively redefine the visitor's encounter with Calascio. Unlike traditional lodging options, which often prioritize individual profit motives, Vivi Calascio's accommodations are embedded within the fabric of the local community, and the low capacity of the place. "*There are another couple of rooms, a few more rooms in Rocca Calascio. And then down in Calascio, where theoretically we should have quite a few beds, we have very few accommodations. (...) Half of the village or more has inaccessible private houses, closed by owners who don't rent them out, sell them, or put them to community use, especially. A concept we should be addressing now is this, putting these assets to community use. I always like to use this term. Instead, there is a general lack of trust here."*

In contrast to the transient nature of conventional tourism, Vivi Calascio promotes a sustainable tourism model that prioritizes long-term relationships and mutual respect between visitors and locals: "*the idea of becoming a dormitory (* for tourists) *is not appealing at all*". This alternative approach emphasizes responsible tourism behaviors, such as minimizing environmental impact, respecting local features, and contributing positively to the community's well-being.

Services and Regeneration

The cooperative also engages in several local projects, such as a telemedicine initiative funded by Assimoco insurance, which provides health monitoring devices to elderly residents. The project, which is of strategic importance to the cooperative, has the objective of redistributing the profits generated by tourism to the community. In addition to digital monitoring, the

cooperative Vivi Calascio also guarantees a human presence, offering the elderly of the village home visits that are necessary to combat loneliness: "*To overturn the paradigm that one lives better in the city rather than in the countryside, right? Maybe instead a person who is here, who is well-monitored, lives better than someone on the fifth floor in the city.*"

Additionally, cultural and recreational services, including music workshops and e-bike repair workshops, contribute to the cooperative's offerings. Successful crowdfunding and sponsorship efforts have further bolstered the cooperative's financial stability, enabling the renovation and adaptation of their headquarters: "*Well, let's say we are fortunate enough to manage to survive with our activities, but over the years we have also received funding. For example, we won a grant from the GAL. Now we have rented a place for which we requested direct funding from the Invitialia measure 'Resto al Sud'. We are participating, yes, to renovate it, to adapt it to our needs. It will serve as our headquarters. We will also provide some catering, it will be a multifunctional place. We will have the e-bike workshop and the repair shop [...]"*

Community engagement is a cornerstone of Vivi Calascio's operations. Efforts to involve local residents in cooperative activities aim to overcome initial resistance, particularly from those skeptical of tourism. The cooperative's approach to tourism management focuses on regulating existing tourist flows rather than attracting new ones, positioning Vivi Calascio as a guardian of local culture and interests. "*Because we have to manage tourism, not attract it, which is a great advantage over other inland villages [..] A concept that we should be setting ourselves now is to put these assets at community value. [..] I want quality tourism here. I want tourism of people. When I say quality, I don't mean quality in terms of purchasing power. That is not quality. That is something different from my point of view. I am talking about human quality. I would like the selection, the famous selection that we talk so much about in terms of accommodation in these places, to be based on the tourist's ability to empathise with these places, to appreciate them."*

This strategic positioning aligns with the cooperative's mission to serve as a hub for local development, culture, and creativity.

Impacts on Life-Quality at Vivi Calascio

Vivi Calascio has significantly enhanced the life quality of its residents by fostering a profound sense of belonging and pride within the community. Through their cooperative model and sustainable tourism practices, Vivi Calascio has revitalized local traditions and cultural heritage, instilling residents a renewed sense of identity. The cooperative's inclusive approach

encourages active participation in community events, artisan workshops, and cultural exchanges, which not only preserve traditional practices but also empower residents to showcase their skills and talents, fostering new job creation: "*So let's start by saying that our main source of business, let's put it this way, of income, at the moment, is the shuttle bus. So the shuttle bus is the transport Calascio - Rocca Calascio, on days when the municipal road that connects the two hamlets is closed. [..] Ten people work every day when the service is active. [..] Then there's me, for example, I'm mainly in charge of the opening of the Rocca Calascio tower and the tourist reception. We have a souvenir shop with a lady who is mainly in the shop, which is another job. We also have a full-time secretary who has even moved here to Calascio with her partner who also works for us. So, to make you understand, this has also been a great source of satisfaction because we have brought two people, two young people, to live in Calascio with our work.*"

Moreover, Vivi Calascio serves as a catalyst for generating new knowledge, skills, and competencies among residents. Collaborative projects with visitors and experts provide opportunities for learning and innovation, particularly in areas such as sustainable agriculture, artisan craftsmanship, and hospitality management. These interactions contribute to the community's intellectual capital, equipping residents with valuable skills that enhance their employability and entrepreneurial spirit: "*So we are entrusted by the municipality with these services, with the management of these resources. Then there are the activities that we have on our own, that we have created ourselves, so there are e-bikes, for example. We have a rental service for e-bikes, pedal-assisted bikes, and we have also trained some of our members to be bike tour guides. So we do both rental and guided tours.*" Residents of Calascio also benefit from enhanced personal well-being and positive emotions resulting from their involvement in cooperative activities. The cooperative's emphasis on cultural authenticity and environmental stewardship fosters a sense of pride in Calascio's natural beauty and historical significance. Residents often express feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment from sharing their heritage with visitors, promoting a deeper appreciation for local traditions and fostering meaningful connections within the community. By nurturing a sense of belonging, promoting continuous learning, and fostering positive emotions among residents, the cooperative has effectively contributed to enhancing the overall quality of life in Calascio, positioning itself as a model for sustainable community development through responsible tourism practices. The concept of empathy in places and its relationship with high-quality tourism involves creating environments where visitors and residents engage in meaningful exchanges that enrich both parties' experiences: "*we work first and foremost because we care about our territory, because*

we love it, because we know it and because we can transmit its essence. An essence made up of historical details, made up of curiosity, made up of the true knowledge you have of a territory. So this is the internal policy, this is the line we give ourselves. To show ourselves for what we are: authentic people in love with the place where they work."

Residents are actively involved in shaping the tourism experience, sharing their stories and traditions with visitors, which in turn enhances the authenticity and depth of the visitor experience: "*The church at Rocca Calascio has been closed for the last few years. We have an agreement with the parish priest to use it as a base for guided visits. So, on the pretext of using it as a base for guided visits, we keep it open."* Moreover, high-quality tourism in this context emphasizes sustainable practices that minimize negative impacts on the environment and local culture while maximizing positive outcomes for both residents and visitors: "*There is a road that has enormous space limitations, we cannot put five buses or a train carrying people on it. The same goes for the Rocca, for the archaeological area, here the problem is not to get as many people as possible. The problem is contingency, it's the opposite. It's like bringing less and spreading it over a longer period of time."* This approach not only preserves the unique character of Calascio but also enhances its appeal as a destination that values empathy, authenticity, and responsible tourism: "*I would like the selection, the famous selection, of which so much is said about accommodation in these places, to be based on the tourist's ability to empathise with these places, to appreciate them."* Empathy is a pivotal element in fostering a life quality as a key driver for the relationship between high-quality tourism experiences that prioritize meaningful connections, cultural exchange, and sustainability and the local ecosystem.

"I can say that I learned here, working at Rocca Calascio, at the tower, welcoming hundreds of people a day, I learned that it's the people who make the place. That even the most beautiful place in the world is made by the person". Empathy in places like Calascio is cultivated through initiatives that promote cultural exchange, environmental stewardship, and mutual understanding. The cooperative model adopted by Vivi Calascio ensures that tourism benefits are distributed equitably and contribute to the community's well-being. By nurturing empathy between residents and visitors, Vivi Calascio exemplifies a model where tourism enhances rather than detracts from the local community, contributing to a more enriching and authentic travel experience for all involved.

6. Discussion: empathy as a practice of embodiment in the relationship between tourists and the community

Urry (1992) introduces the concept of the tourist's gaze and examines how the tourist's perspective evolves and varies across different social contexts and historical periods. These perspectives are shaped through a process of differentiation, as there is no singular, universally applicable experience that can be attributed to all tourists across all contexts. The specific perspective of a given tourist is contingent upon the antithetical experiences that they encounter in their everyday lives. This concept has been adopted by Bonadei and Volli (2003). In their work, "The Tourist Gaze and the Narrative of Places," the two authors define tourist places not only as physical spaces, but also as constructs generated by narratives and representations. Such narratives may originate from a multitude of sources, including tourist guides, brochures, websites, and even the accounts of other tourists. In this context, the tourist's gaze is not merely an act of observation; rather, it is an active process that can have a considerable impact on the places visited. This active act can be of two kinds, positive and negative. On the one hand, it can enhance a place by highlighting its unique characteristics, thus preserving it by helping to conserve its cultural and natural features. On the other hand, the tourist gaze can also consume a place, leading to physical and cultural changes in an extractive perspective.

The analysis of the data reveals that, as in the present case study, a cooperative member's role as custodians of its cultural heritage can exert a profound influence on the formation of the tourist gaze. Data showed the pivotal function of the concept of empathy, which is reflected in the respect and patience exhibited by tourists visiting Calascio. By applying the framework of the tourist's gaze, it can be stated that, in a sense, the tourist gaze is mediated by the gaze of the community that narrates its places, thereby restoring values of care and preventing the affirmation of an extractive tourist paradigm based on the expectations of hit-and-run tourism. Consequently, the cooperative's actions also succeed in redirecting tourist flows, attracting only those individuals who are able to empathize with a place and the community that defends it, towards the affirmation of a tourism practice that is embodied in places.

The concept of *embodiment* was introduced by Varela, along with Thompson and Rosch (1991). In their pioneering work, they introduced a new form of cognitive science called *enaction*, which considers both the environment and first-person experience as aspects of embodiment. *Enactive embodiment,* in their view, is not the acquisition of an independent, external world by a brain, mind or self; rather it is the creation of an interdependent world in and through embodied action. Gallagher (2017) has further developed the concept of *enactivism* by emphasizing the close coupling of the brain, body, and environment rather than strong boundaries that isolate the brain in its internal processes. He posits that, as well as the

basic phenomena of perception and action, sophisticated cognitive phenomena such as reflection, imagery, and mathematical reasoning are best explained in terms of affordance-based skilled coping. In a sense, drawing on the theory of enactivism, it can be said that space and cognition co-evolve in a relationship of structural coupling, rather than cause and effect, resulting from pragmatic and dynamic exchanges between agent and environment (Gallagher, 2017; Varela et al., 1991).

In the case of Vivi Calascio, this translates into a tourism model where visitors are invited to actively co-create meaning with the local community, embodying the values and history embedded in the place through participatory engagement.

Consequently, the community, in an enactive process, becomes the creator of the place, shaping it on the basis of the values in which it recognises itself. This results in the creation of a true empathy for the place, built precisely on the values of those who guard it and, consequently, narrate it. In this manner, the selection that is frequently referenced when discussing the receptivity of places is naturally imposed upon the capacity of tourists to empathise with these places and to appreciate them. This new tourism paradigm is simultaneously *heritage-led* and *community-led*, and it is capable of transmitting to those who visit places the values inscribed in them. Furthermore, by empathising, it contributes to the creation of a positive, value-based narrative of the place. We have called this approach the "empathic tourism paradigm".

It is important to underline that the concept of empathy applied to tourism studies is not new, but has long been a fundamental pillar for understanding and improving interactions between visitors and local communities. Since the earliest studies of the tourism phenomenon, the ability to put oneself in the other's shoes has been seen as crucial to building genuine relationships and moving beyond the superficial observation of events. Urry's (1992) pioneering studies laid the groundwork for understanding how the tourist 'gaze' is influenced not only by external factors, but also by the cultural and narrative representations that accompany each visit.

In this context, Tucker (2016) highlights how an empathic approach, when used reflexively (Pedwell, 2013), can foster a deep intercultural understanding capable of critically interrogating the power dynamics that characterise the relationship between tourists and host communities. Empathy in this sense is not a simple spontaneous feeling, but a critical process (LaCapra, 2014, 2004) that requires awareness and analytical skills to prevent it from becoming 'lazy empathy' (Dean, 2005), i.e. a superficial emotional response that ends up reinforcing existing inequalities.

In parallel, Gnoth and Wang (2015) showed how empathy, understood in an existential sense, is fundamental to the creation of authentic and participatory knowledge. Drawing from these

authors we state that empathy emerges when the tourist, through active and embodied participation, co-creates the meaning of the place with the host community, recognising and experiencing the intrinsic and authentic values of the place. However, such empathy must be critically engaged, continually questioning its own assumptions and the narratives that underpin it. This approach, which transcends the traditional dichotomy between subject and object, makes it possible to transform the tourist experience into a dynamic process of cultural exchange and shared construction of meaning.

We position ourselves in this debate about empathy in tourism studies by giving the community a role as an enactive agent, actively shaping the environment based on collective values and local narratives. As described by Urry (1992) in his exploration of the tourist's gaze, the perception of places by tourists is not static; rather, it is continuously shaped by socio-cultural influences and the narratives surrounding the place. In empathic tourism, this gaze is further transformed by the cooperative's active involvement in mediating how visitors experience and interpret Calascio. The community's role thus becomes a form of embodied narrative transmission, encouraging a "positive gaze" that aligns with values of cultural preservation and sustainable engagement, counteracting the tendencies of mass tourism towards commodification and environmental degradation.

Thus, by mediating the tourist experience through the lived values and local narratives of the community, an "empathic tourism paradigm" emerges - one that not only enhances the cultural and natural features of a destination but also challenges the commodification and decontextualization of its heritage. Furthermore, because empathy must be critically interrogated and embodied to be truly transformative, it is essential that tourism be mediated by those who live in and care for the place, such as community cooperatives. This mediation ensures that the tourist gaze remains respectful, sustainable, and deeply intertwined with the authentic identity of the community.

Empathic tourism, in this context, diverges from traditional tourism models that often impose an extractive gaze upon visited places. Instead, it emphasizes an experience where tourists are not passive observers but co-participants in a living narrative shaped by the local community. This interaction is facilitated by the community members, who serve as custodians of their cultural heritage and engage visitors in ways that foster empathy, respect, and a sense of shared stewardship over the environment. The enactive approach to empathy thus redefines the tourist experience as one of embodiment—where the visitor, through meaningful engagement, becomes part of the place's socio-cultural landscape.

If it is indeed the case that the tourism industry can have a detrimental impact on territories due to mass tourism, which can result in issues such as overbuilding, pollution, the destruction of the natural environment and the loss of local culture, the emergence of tourism paradigms based on those who take care of places can contribute to a change of course. It is, after all, undeniable that all human beings, at least once in their lifetime, take on the role of tourist. The solution to the problem of mass tourism, therefore, cannot be the mere negation of the model; rather, it must be a paradigm that respects cultural heritage, places, and people. It is important to note that free and voluntary mobility, which is therefore privileged, is in fact associated with social groups that may have advantages in terms of acquiring empathy and the positive impacts that entail. This suggests a need for regulation in favour of models such as Calascio that precisely support this path.

7. Conclusion

The case of Vivi Calascio exemplifies what we term the "empathic tourism paradigm", an approach to tourism that positions the local community as an enactive agent in shaping visitor experiences and place narratives, going beyond traditional tourism models. The "positive gaze" of the Calascio tourism that aligns with the values of the local community, fostered a profound social impact of the cooperative's culture-based initiatives on rural development. Indeed, the Vivi Calascio Community Cooperative demonstrates the powerful impact of heritage-led sustainable development in revitalizing rural areas. By addressing the socio-economic challenges through community-driven initiatives, the cooperative has not only preserved the rich cultural heritage of Calascio but also created a sustainable future for its residents; by leveraging local cultural heritage and fostering community engagement, the cooperative has not only revitalized Calascio's economy but also preserved its cultural identity. This case study gives indeed a clear example of the potential of community cooperatives to drive sustainable development and resilience in rural areas, offering valuable lessons for similar communities worldwide.

While this case study serves as an inspiring example for other rural communities looking to harness their heritage for sustainable development and resilience, many further challenges persist.

A future research perspective involves a more systematic impact assessment, which can be conducted using the "Be.CULTOUR Dashboard – Local Impact Indicators for Circular Cultural Tourism". This comprehensive tool was developed as part of the Be.CULTOUR

project and is employed to assess the impact of heritage-led sustainable development initiatives. The tool is designed to provide a systematic assessment of the impact of heritage-led sustainable development initiatives, such as those undertaken by the Vivi Calascio Community Cooperative. The primary objective of the instrument is to measure the local impact of circular cultural tourism strategies, providing a set of local impact indicators that cover various aspects of socio-economic and cultural impacts,and may also prove to be a valuable tool for other community-based cooperatives because it has the potential to facilitate the sharing of best practices and lessons learned among cooperatives, contributing to the advancement of heritage-led sustainable development. Further theoretical development could include the evaluation of the quality of tourists role's negotiation as an active participant body of the community in shaping the environment through collective values and local narratives. Where the community functions as an embodied narrative, it moves tourists beyond the role of passive observers, inviting them to become empathetic co-participants. We believe that this approach can help counter the commodification and environmental degradation often associated with mass tourism.

This could provide a comprehensive evaluation of the socio-economic and cultural impacts of such initiatives, thereby contributing to the development of more effective and sustainable heritage-led strategies on tourism.

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Cultural Practices as Emotional Devices: Agency, Inequalities and Wellbeing in Left-Behind Regions. Evidence from Aielli[2]

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural practices function as "emotional devices" in left-behind regions, using Aielli, a small Italian mountain village transformed through street art and community initiatives, as a case study. Employing mixed methods (survey N=51; qualitative interviews N=6), we analyse how aesthetic interventions may scaffold agency across affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions. Our findings show that residents report high wellbeing and social cohesion yet recognise persistent structural inequalities; visitors experience strong emotional benefits but limited self-efficacy gains. Cultural practices effectively activate affective and perceptual agency, but their translation into cognitive agency remains structurally constrained for residents and situationally contingent for visitors. We conceptualise this dynamic as an "aesthetic trap" that culture-led regeneration may escape only when embedded within cooperative structures and multi-level governance frameworks. The study advances regional development theory by specifying mechanisms through which cultural interventions mediate wellbeing in peripheral territories.

Keywords: cultural regeneration, left-behind regions, emotional devices, agency, territorial injustice, wellbeing

1. Introduction

Across Europe, growing attention has been devoted to the geography of territorial injustice and the uneven distribution of opportunities, wellbeing, and cultural capital between metropolitan centres and peripheral regions. In left-behind areas (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), processes of demographic decline, deindustrialisation, and institutional fragility have generated not only economic deprivation but also symbolic and affective marginalisation. These territories often experience a cumulative loss of agency: a reduced capacity of local communities to imagine,

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negotiate, and enact their own futures (Hertrich & Brenner, 2025). Within this framework, cultural participation and creative practices have increasingly been recognised as potential drivers of place-based regeneration, fostering wellbeing, identity, and collective capability (Abreu et al., 2024). Yet, empirical research still lacks a fine-grained understanding of how such interventions interact with structural inequalities, and how their effects unfold across different forms of agency. This optimism about culture-led regeneration has not gone unchallenged. Critics have questioned the instrumental use of cultural policy for urban regeneration (Belfiore, 2002, 2009), noting that such initiatives frequently serve property development interests rather than community needs, and that evidence for broader social benefits remains contested. Miles and Paddison (2005) argue that culture-led strategies often fail to address the underlying structural inequalities and may exacerbate gentrification and displacement. More recently, Pritchard (2020) introduced the concept of "artwashing" to describe how aesthetic interventions can mask or legitimise processes of exclusion. Creative placemaking scholarship (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010) similarly emphasises that successful cultural interventions call for sustained community engagement and cannot be imposed from outside.

This paper contributes to this debate by examining Aielli, a small mountain village in the Marsica area of Abruzzo, Italy: a region long marked by depopulation, infrastructural disadvantage, and limited institutional resources. Over the past decade, Aielli has become an unexpected cultural laboratory, known for large-scale street art projects and community-led initiatives that have transformed the local landscape and attracted a growing number of visitors. Its evolution provides a valuable entry point for analysing how culture-led regeneration operates within structurally constrained environments, and how cultural practices may mediate the relationship between wellbeing, perceived inequalities, and local agency. Importantly, the Aielli case emerges from community initiative rather than external imposition, making it potentially distinctive within the broader landscape of culture-led regeneration.

Our approach is based on the premise that wellbeing in peripheral contexts (Mouratidis, 2021) cannot be understood solely as an individual condition, but rather as a relational and situated process (Ballas, 2020) shaped by the affective, social, and infrastructural fabric of place. Cultural interventions, when embedded in local governance processes, may act as emotional infrastructures, enhancing belonging and shared meaning while also exposing persistent structural limitations. In this sense, Aielli offers a microcosm in which to explore the fabric of

wellbeing, that is, its emotional, cognitive, and spatial dimensions, and how they intersect with territorial injustice.

The paper adopts a mixed-method approach (Silverman, 2000) integrating theoretical reflection, participant observation, a small-N survey, and qualitative interviews. This methodological triangulation (Carter et al. 2014) enables a layered reading of relationships between aesthetic experience, emotional engagement, and perceived self-efficacy. Specifically, it investigates how engaged local respondents and visitors differently experience and interpret the impacts of cultural practices, and how these experiences reveal both the potential and constraints of culture-led strategies in left-behind regions. A critical caveat is necessary at the outset: the local respondents in this study are predominantly individuals actively involved in Aielli's cultural regeneration project, representing engaged community members rather than typical residents. This sampling characteristic shapes the interpretation and generalisability of our results.

By linking theories of agency, emotion, and place-based development to an empirical case of cultural transformation, this study contributes to debates in regional and planning studies on how to conceptualise and govern wellbeing in disadvantaged territories. Moreover, the analysis characterises cultural practices as *emotional devices*: a formally defined mechanism explaining how aesthetic and participatory interventions may reconfigure the emotional and perceptual conditions through which agency can emerge in left-behind regions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework and conceptual articulation of agency across affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions. Section 3 presents the case study of Aielli. Section 4 describes data collection and our mixed-method design. Section 5 presents the analytical results, and Section 6 situates them within broader theoretical and policy debates. Section 7 concludes with implications for planning, governance, and cultural regeneration of left-behind areas.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Agency, wellbeing, and territorial injustice

The relationship between wellbeing and agency has long been central to debates on human development and spatial justice. Within the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Abreu, 2024), wellbeing is defined not by resources or achievements alone, but by real opportunities offered to individuals to pursue lives they value. These opportunities are shaped by personal conversion factors such as education, health, self-efficacy, but also by structural

conditions embedded in the geography of opportunity (Panori et al., 2025). From a territorial perspective, inequality is spatially and relationally produced. Regions marked by infrastructural scarcity, depopulation, and weak institutions often develop forms of collective exclusion that erode trust, aspiration, and agency (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

But how can we define what agency is? Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we start with the definition of agency as "*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imag- ination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*." (p.970). Then, moving forward, we conceptualize agency not only as the capacity for bodily action but also for mental and emotional action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Bandura, 2008; Wu 2023). Human agency is manifested not only in physical behavior, but also in cognitive, perceptual, and affective engagement: reflecting and understanding, actively responding to stimuli, and reacting in action-guiding ways. Our approach builds on research in situated cognition (e.g. Newen, De Bruin & Gallagher 2018; Robbins & Aydede 2009) and philosophy of mind and cognitive science (e.g. Sterelny 2010; Vernazzani 2019, 2023).

In left-behind areas (Pike et al. 2024), the limits to individual agency and collective efficacy (the concept of collective efficacy will be introduced in the following paragraph) are structural and spatial, reflecting long-term imbalances in the access to mobility, education, and symbolic recognition. Planning and regional policy literatures have addressed this through the topic of territorial injustice (MacKinnon et al., 2022), capturing how uneven development translates into unequal conditions for wellbeing and self-realisation. At the European level, cohesion policy and the EU's place-based approach (Barca, 2009; Barca et al., 2012) have sought to address these disparities through spatially targeted interventions, though effectiveness in genuinely empowering peripheral communities remains controversial. However, less attention has been paid to how people affectively experience living in places considered marginal, and whether aesthetic and symbolic experiences might reconfigure those feelings into renewed belonging and self-efficacy.

2.2. Place-based leadership, emotional mobilisation, and collective efficacy

Place-based leadership has emerged as a central concept in regional studies for understanding how peripheral territories may overcome structural disadvantage. Sotarauta and Beer (2021) define it as the mobilisation of key resources, competencies, and powers aimed at advancing

the wellbeing of a place. Unlike formal institutional authority, place leadership is relational, collaborative, and context-dependent: it operates across organisational and sectoral boundaries, drawing on informal networks, civic entrepreneurs, and community actors (Beer et al., 2019; Sotarauta, 2016). Critically, what distinguishes effective place leadership from mere governance is its mobilising function, namely the capacity to align diverse actors around shared purposes and to activate resources that would otherwise remain dormant (Vallance et al., 2019). In structurally disadvantaged territories, where material and institutional resources are scarce, this mobilising capacity must draw on assets beyond the economic and the political.

It is precisely here that the affective[3] dimension becomes central as a resource that place leaders actively mobilise. Place-based leadership (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021), indeed, depends not only on networks and resources but also on the capacity to mobilise hope, empathy, and belonging within communities. Emotional geographies (Davidson et al., 2012) have shown that the affective atmosphere of a place can either reinforce marginality through resignation, shame, and disengagement or become a foundation for collective renewal (Di Maso et al., 2025). In peripheral contexts like Aielli, where material resources are scarce, what we may term affective capital, that is the collective ability to generate and sustain positive emotional meaning, can become a vital ingredient of regeneration. However, such capital does not emerge spontaneously. It must be cultivated through specific practices: shared rituals, aesthetic interventions, participatory experiences that transform the emotional relationship between inhabitants and their place. Cultural practices, in this sense, function as technologies of emotional mobilisation, reshaping how communities feel about themselves and their territorial condition.

When emotional mobilisation succeeds, it may create the conditions for a further transformation: the emergence of collective efficacy. Bandura (2000) distinguishes between personal self-efficacy (beliefs about individual capabilities) and collective efficacy (shared beliefs about a group's capacity to achieve goals together). This distinction is analytically important for our framework. Cultural interventions may generate collective efficacy through

[3] Throughout this paper, we use "affective" as the broader term, encompassing the full range of felt states (moods, atmospheres, dispositions, and embodied responses) that characterise the experiential relationship between individuals, communities, and places. "Emotion" refers more specifically to discrete, intentional states such as pride, empathy, or belonging, typically directed toward an identifiable object or situation (see Thrift, 2004). Cultural practices operate on both registers: they shape the diffuse affective atmosphere of a place (what we term affective capital) while also eliciting specific emotions in participants. When we speak of "emotional mobilisation" or "emotional devices," we refer to interventions that work through discrete emotions to reshape the broader affective conditions of a territory.

shared pride, coordinated action, and cooperative structures, even when individual self-efficacy remains constrained by a lack of personal opportunities. In community contexts like Aielli, the sense that "we can make a difference together" may emerge from shared cultural experiences and cooperative practices even when individual empowerment is limited by structural constraints. Affective capital and collective efficacy, however powerful, cannot substitute for systemic interventions in infrastructure, education, or employment. Emotions can open pathways toward renewed agency, but these pathways require multi-level governance mechanisms addressing structural inequality if they are to translate into durable change. Hence, cultural practices contribute to wellbeing not as isolated experiences but as mediating devices within broader territorial systems, a dynamic we formalise in the scaffolding model (Candeloro et al. 2026) that follows.

2.3. A multilayered model of scaffolding agency

We conceptualise agency as a multilayered phenomenon encompassing affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions (Candeloro et al., 2026). This articulation draws from cognitive science, embodied cognition, and enactive approaches (Varela et al., 1991; Gallese, 2018; Bortolotti et al., 2025), as well as from social theories of place-based leadership (Sotarauta & Beer, 2021) and the capabilities approach. Agency includes not only capacity for physical action, but also capacity to engage in mental and emotional actions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Bandura, 2008; Wu, 2023), that is, the capacity to engage through reflection and understanding, and to respond to stimuli actively rather than passively.

A cultural intervention scaffolds agency by modifying the environment in which decision-making occurs, structuring or enabling different forms of engagement without determining specific outcomes. We identify three mechanisms through which such scaffolding operates:

(i) perceptual scaffolding, which modulates sensory interaction with the environment, facilitating access to some features of the environment and direct action towards something (e.g., Vernazzani 2023);
(ii) affective scaffolding, which modulates the affective-emotional reactions, interacting with the affective condition of the agent (e.g., Piredda 2020);
(iii) cognitive scaffolding, which supports reasoning, memory, imagination and problem solving, broadening horizons of understanding (e.g., Sterelny 2010; on understanding, see Elgin 2017).

This model addresses how environmental resources contribute non-trivially (Newen & Fabri, 2023) to exercising agency in situational contexts (Vernazzani, 2023). It is not mainly a question of different types of agency, but rather of how environmental resources scaffold an agent's capacity. A clarification is warranted regarding the scope of this model in relation to established psychological taxonomies. Classical psychology distinguishes three domains of mental activity: cognition, affection, and conation, namely knowing, feeling, and striving (Hilgard, 1980). Our framework deliberately does not include conation, or the domain of volition, effort, and goal-directed behaviour, as a scaffolding dimension. This reflects a substantive theoretical choice. Our model concerns the conditions under which agency may be scaffolded, not the mechanisms through which it is converted into action. The distinction matters. Approaches that target the conative dimension directly,most notably behavioural nudges operating through choice architecture, aim to steer specific behaviours, often bypassing reflective deliberation (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Our framework operates differently: it asks how cultural practices may reshape the affective, perceptual, and cognitive landscape within which individuals and communities experience their own capacity to act. In this sense, the three scaffolding dimensions do not culminate in conation as their logical endpoint. Rather, they reconstitute the agentic ground from which intentional action may or may not follow, depending on structural opportunities, individual circumstances, and the exercise of autonomous will. Claiming that cultural interventions scaffold conation directly would overstate their reach and, paradoxically, reproduce the paternalistic logic of behavioural steering that this paper seeks to move beyond.

2.4. Framework for analysis and hypotheses

Drawing these perspectives together, we propose that cultural practices mediate between territorial structure and individual wellbeing through a layered process of agency activation:

> (i) Structural determinants (depopulation, infrastructural deficit, socio-economic inequality) shape all three scaffolding dimensions, though not uniformly. Material deprivation can erode affective scaffolding by fostering resignation and emotional withdrawal; limited access to cultural infrastructure can impoverish perceptual scaffolding by narrowing the aesthetic and sensory experiences available to residents. However, it is cognitive scaffolding that is most directly constrained by structural conditions, as self-efficacy and the perceived capacity to act depend on the existence of

real opportunities that no amount of affective or perceptual enrichment can manufacture on its own;

(ii) Cultural practices (murals, community cooperatives, aesthetic reimagination of space) primarily enhance affective and perceptual scaffolding, strengthening emotions of belonging, pride, and empathy. These shared affective experiences, when sustained over time, foster social cohesion, understood here as a relational outcome of collectively felt emotional bond;

(iii) Mediating process: affective and perceptual scaffolding may serve as bridges toward cognitive scaffolding, but this translation is either facilitated or hindered by the surrounding structural context;

(iv) Outcomes: improved subjective wellbeing and sense of community for engaged residents; personal growth and emotional enrichment for visitors.

This framework generates several expectations that distinguish our approach from previous culture-led regeneration research. First, we expect affective and perceptual outcomes to be relatively uniform across participants, as these dimensions are activated through direct aesthetic experience. Second, we expect cognitive outcomes (particularly self-efficacy) to vary according to structural position: higher for those embedded in ongoing community processes, lower for transient visitors. Third, we expect recognition of structural inequalities to persist even among those reporting high wellbeing, as cultural practices reshape feeling and perception without eliminating the awareness of material constraints. Fourth, we expect collective efficacy to emerge through cooperative structures even where individual self-efficacy remains limited, though this dimension requires qualitative exploration, as standard self-efficacy measures capture individual rather than collective beliefs.

This layered structure also exposes a potential vulnerability of culture-led regeneration. If cultural practices primarily activate affective and perceptual scaffolding, while the translation to cognitive scaffolding depends on structural conditions that lie largely outside the reach of cultural interventions, a characteristic asymmetry may arise: communities that feel differently about their place without knowing themselves to be in a materially different situation. We term this configuration an "aesthetic trap": a condition in which cultural initiatives successfully reshape the affective and perceptual experience of place without shifting the structural inequalities that constrain cognitive scaffolding and, ultimately, the real conditions for the exercise of agency. The aesthetic trap could be seen as a predictable consequence of operating

on only two of the three scaffolding dimensions. Whether and how the trap can be avoided is an empirical question that the Aielli case allows us to explore.

This analytical framework directly informed our survey design. For local respondents, we measured: social cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001) as a relational outcome of affective scaffolding, capturing the density of emotional bonds and mutual trust within community life; quality of life (Grossi et al., 2011) indexing overall subjective wellbeing; social support (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016) reflecting network density; perceived inequalities (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) capturing cognitive appraisal of territorial injustice; and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2011) operationalising cognitive scaffolding. For visitors, we measured general wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2020), perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2011), and personal growth (Dhokai et. al., 2023).

3. Case Study

3.1 Aielli, Borgo Universo and La Maesa community-based cooperative

Aielli is a small mountain village in the Marsica area of the Abruzzo region, in Central Italy. Situated at 1,030 metres of elevation on Mount Sirente, Aielli belongs to Italy's "Aree Interne" (Inner Areas), the national classification (SNAI - Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne) for peripheral and ultra-peripheral territories characterised by depopulation, limited accessibility to essential services, and fragile local economies. The SNAI, launched in 2014 as part of Italy's cohesion policy implementation, identifies these territories as requiring targeted interventions combining improved service accessibility with local development strategies.

The municipality covers 36 km² and is home to just over 1,300 residents, declining steadily from over 3,000 in the 1950s. This demographic contraction has deep historical roots. The devastating earthquake of January 13, 1915, which killed over 30,000 people across the Marsica region, destroyed much of Aielli's historic centre and initiated a century of gradual abandonment. The trauma of 1915 remains inscribed in collective memory; several murals explicitly reference this history, transforming spaces of destruction into sites of aesthetic renewal. The earthquake's legacy created both a wound calling for healing and a narrative resource for cultural regeneration.

Aielli’s territorial configuration is divided into two distinct nuclei: Aielli Alta, the historical settlement of medieval origin perched on the hillside (ca. 800 inhabitants), and Aielli Stazione,

developed in the 20th century along the railway line in the valley below (ca. 500 inhabitants). This spatial division created distinct community identities that the cultural project has worked to bridge. The murals are concentrated in Aielli Alta, but cooperative activities and events involve residents from both nuclei, fostering integration across this historical divide.
The village did not possess features of particular landscape or monumental relevance prior to the transformation: no famous churches, no renowned cuisine, no distinctive craft traditions. Its ordinariness was, paradoxically, its resource: blank walls awaiting transformation, modest buildings open to reimagination. The introduction of participatory artistic practices triggered a process of territorial rediscovery, encouraging inhabitants to actively care for spaces previously overlooked or abandoned.

The transformation began in 2017 when "Borgo Universo" was launched by the municipality to reactivate the village through public art, astronomy (the village hosts a historic astronomical observatory), and community events. Initially conceived as a summer festival featuring mural art and science-related performances, the project evolved into a year-round culture-led regeneration initiative. The artistic process follows a distinctive model. Artists, selected through a combination of open calls and direct invitation, spend extended residencies in Aielli, living among locals, participating in community conversations, absorbing local narratives, and developing site-specific works. This is not an instance of "parachute art" where external creators impose their visions on passively receptive communities. Rather, murals emerge from dialogue: artists interview elderly residents about memories, children about dreams, cooperative members about aspirations. The resulting works encode local narratives in contemporary visual language. A mural depicting constellations references the observatory's heritage; another showing hands reaching upward evokes post-earthquake reconstruction; a portrait of an elderly woman honours the generations who kept the village alive through decades of decline. By 2024, over 40 large-scale murals covered facades throughout Aielli Alta, transforming the medieval streetscape into an open-air contemporary art gallery. The initiative has attracted an estimated 30,000 visitors annually, a remarkable figure for a village of 1,300 residents, generating modest but meaningful economic activity through guided tours, a small museum, hospitality services, and artisanal products.

The project's most profound effects extended beyond tourism. It catalysed new forms of collective agency: residents offered hospitality to artists, schools integrated mural-making into educational activities, volunteers organised tours and cultural events. In 2021, these organic

dynamics were formalised through the creation of La Maesa, a community-based cooperative managing cultural events, environmental restoration projects, and sustainable tourism initiatives. The cooperative now employs several residents and has become a vehicle for collective decision-making about the village's future. Unlike top-down regeneration schemes, Borgo Universo emerged as a bottom-linked initiative (Healey, 2004), locally driven but open to external collaborations. Its success lies in its hybrid nature: part artistic experiment, part civic enterprise, part strategic place branding. Importantly, it reframed Aielli's marginality not as a deficit but as an aesthetic and emotional asset. The very isolation that once symbolised abandonment became the background for an alternative narrative: one of creativity, openness, and collective imagination.

3.3 Structural constraints and the aesthetic trap

The trajectory is consistent with broader debates on culture-led regeneration in rural and peripheral areas (Evans, 2020; Duxbury et al., 2021). In contexts where economic infrastructures are weak, cultural practices often operate as soft infrastructures: mobilising affective resources, encouraging community participation, generating new imaginaries of development. Nevertheless, such transformations do not automatically translate into structural empowerment.

In Aielli, the multiplication of murals and growing visitor flows have strengthened subjective wellbeing and enhanced symbolic capital, fostering pride, belonging, and some economic revenue. Yet the underlying structural conditions remain largely unchanged: limited employment opportunities beyond tourism and agriculture; poor public transportation making private vehicles indispensable to access services in nearby towns; an ageing population with continued youth outmigration for education and careers; absence of secondary schools, medical facilities, or non-basic retail.

This tension exemplifies what we term an "aesthetic trap" (§ 2.4): cultural initiatives successfully activating emotions and visibility without immediately shifting material inequalities. However, the trap is not inevitable. Cultural interventions may flip the script through: (a) a focus on sustained community engagement and not on one-off events; (b) integration with formal planning and governance structures; (c) creation of economic opportunities directly linked to cultural activities; (d) development of cooperative or collective ownership models. Aielli presents some such conditions (particularly community engagement and cooperative development) but lacks others (notably integration with regional planning

frameworks). The SNAI designation has not yet translated into coordinated investment linking cultural vibrancy to service provision or infrastructure improvement.

4. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-method (Silverman, 2000), theory-building research design that integrates participant observation, a small-N survey, and semi-structured interviews. Given the complexity of cultural regeneration dynamics in structurally disadvantaged territories, a mixed-method strategy is particularly suitable for capturing the interplay between emotional, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions of agency. The aim is not statistical representativeness but conceptual depth, contextual understanding, and triangulation of experiential, perceptual, and narrative data. The case study approach (Yin, 2009) supports this exploratory logic by situating the phenomenon within its real-life context, where boundaries between context and intervention are interdependent and cannot be analytically separated.

It is important to acknowledge the study's exploratory nature. Small sample size limits generalisability; self-selection bias may have favoured participants already interested in cultural initiatives. However, these constraints are consistent with small-community research and theory-building designs. The goal is not inference but analytical generalisation, achieved through triangulation, long-term field engagement, and conceptual clarity. Triangulation occurred across experiential dimensions (participant observation and fieldnotes), perceptual dimensions (survey responses), and narrative dimensions (interview accounts). This integration followed a sequential exploratory logic: initial qualitative observation informed survey design; quantitative patterns were then used to guide deeper qualitative inquiry; finally, both datasets were synthesised through interpretive comparison. This design is an instance of pragmatic mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), which values complementarity over hierarchy. The small-N quantitative data provide structure and comparability, whereas qualitative insights capture nuance and contextual depth.

Data collection took place between August 2024 and October 2025 and unfolded in three iterative phases:

4.1 Participant Observation

Researchers engaged in the everyday life of Aielli, attending cultural events, cooperative meetings, tours, and artistic activities. Fieldnotes focused on social interactions, emotional

atmospheres, spatial practices, and the evolving meanings attributed to artworks as the process unfolded. These observations informed the development of the survey and interview protocol.

4.2 Survey

A small-N questionnaire (N=51; 20 residents, 31 visitors) was administered through convenience sampling, appropriate for small communities and exploratory studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The questionnaire was administered anonymously and in full compliance with European data protection regulations (GDPR). The visitor sample size (N=31) reflects both practical and epistemological considerations. Surveys were administered exclusively to visitors who opted for the paid guided tour, which represents a self-selected subset of the broader visitor flow. More importantly, the visitor survey was not designed for statistical inference but as a conceptual scaffold for the qualitative phase: identifying which scaffolding dimensions are activated by the visitor experience, and generating descriptive patterns to orient the subsequent interviews. The instrument measured:

(a) For residents: social cohesion (Forrest & Kearns, 2001), quality of life (Grossi et al., 2011), social support (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016), perceived inequalities (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2011);
(b) For visitors: wellbeing (Fancourt & Finn, 2020)., perceived self-efficacy (Bandura (2011), and personal growth (Dhokai et. al., 2023)

All survey items were developed for this study to operationalise theoretical constructs drawn from the literature. Items are not adapted from pre-existing scales but designed to capture each construct in a manner appropriate to the specific context of cultural regeneration in a small peripheral community. Table 1 and Table 2 reports each item alongside the theoretical source of the construct it measures. All items used a 7-point Likert scale. The survey served primarily as a descriptive and conceptual scaffold, not for hypothesis testing. Descriptive statistics (means, SDs, frequencies) guided the identification of patterns and informed the subsequent qualitative phase.

Table 1. Survey items for residents

Item	Dimension	Theoretical source
I feel that I belong to a community and/or to a cohesive social group.	Social Cohesion	Forrest & Kearns (2001)
I am satisfied with my life.	Quality of Life	Grossi et al. (2011)
I believe that the place where I live offers good opportunities for a high-quality life.	Quality of Life	Grossi et al. (2011)
I believe that the murals in Aielli have improved the quality of life in the town.	Quality of Life	Grossi et al. (2011)
I feel that I can count on the support of people outside my family if needed.	Social Support	Crossick & Kaszynska (2016)
I believe that social networks are strong and well-developed in the place where I live.	Social Support	Crossick & Kaszynska (2016)
I believe that there are significant social and economic inequalities in the place where I live. (r)	Perceived Inequalities	Rodríguez-Pose (2018)
Opportunities for personal development are equally distributed among residents in the place where I live.	Perceived Inequalities	Rodríguez-Pose (2018)
I feel capable of positively influencing my community / other people.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)
I believe I can actively contribute to improving the place where I live.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)
I believe I am able to succeed in the things I want to do / that matter to me.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)

Table 2. Survey items for visitors

Item	Dimension	Theoretical source
Visiting the murals in Aielli improved my overall mood.	General Well-Being	Fancourt & Finn (2020)
After visiting the murals, I feel more relaxed and calm.	General Well-Being	Fancourt & Finn (2020)
The visit to the murals positively engaged me on an emotional level.	General Well-Being	Fancourt & Finn (2020)
I would recommend the mural tour in Aielli to other visitors to enhance their well-being.	General Well-Being	Fancourt & Finn (2020)
After seeing the murals, I feel more capable of facing daily challenges.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)
The visit to the murals inspired me to start new projects or activities.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)
I feel more confident in my abilities after visiting the murals.	Self-Efficacy	Bandura (2011)
Visiting the murals made me feel culturally enriched.	Personal Growth	Dhokai et. al. (2023)
After visiting the murals, I feel more open to new experiences and ideas.	Personal Growth	Dhokai et. al. (2023)
The visit to the murals stimulated my creativity and imagination.	Personal Growth	Dhokai et. al. (2023)
The visit made me feel more connected to the community of Aielli, even though I am not a resident.	Personal Growth	Dhokai et. al. (2023)

A methodological caveat applies specifically to the visitor items. Several formulations embed a presupposition of positive effect (e.g., "After seeing the murals, I feel more capable of facing daily challenges"), which may orient respondents toward confirmatory answers. This phrasing reflects the study's exploratory intent, namely items were designed to probe whether specific

scaffolding mechanisms resonate with visitors' experience, not to measure effect sizes under controlled conditions. Nevertheless, the directional wording introduces a potential acquiescence bias that limits the diagnostic value of the visitor survey taken in isolation. This is why the research design treats the survey as a preliminary mapping tool, whose patterns are then interrogated and nuanced through qualitative interviews, where respondents could challenge, qualify, or contradict the constructs embedded in the questionnaire.

4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The qualitative analysis is grounded in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allows categories and relationships to emerge from empirical observation rather than being imposed through pre-established coding schemes. This approach is consistent with the study's theory-building orientation: we examined how cultural practices act as scaffolds of agency in left-behind regions, letting the mediating mechanisms emerge from participants' discourse before mapping them onto the scaffolding framework. Six interviews (three residents, three visitors including one street artist) were conducted to gain further insight and explore the mechanisms linking cultural practices and agency. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Participants discussed emotions, perceptions, community life, inequalities, and reflections on empowerment. The interviews were analysed through thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive identification of recurrent patterns with deductive mapping. In line with the survey design, the interview material was analysed separately for residents, focusing on Social Cohesion and Social Support, Quality of Life, Perception of Inequalities, and Perceived Self-Efficacy, and for visitors, focusing on General Well-Being, Sense of Self-Efficacy, and Perception of Personal Growth.

The transcripts were coded inductively and then organised in ATLAS.ti (Ajay Gupta, 2024) through a structured coding process that identified mediating codes (e.g., emotional connection, aesthetic experience, support networks, curiosity, empowerment) capturing the mechanisms through which cultural practices shape participants' experiences. All coding was performed manually by the researcher. Transcripts were read iteratively and initial codes were assigned line-by-line, following an inductive logic. This process generated 21 codes organised on three levels. At the first level, six construct codes correspond to the survey dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: Social Cohesion and Social Support, Quality of Life, General Well-Being, Perceived Growth, Perceived Self-Efficacy, and Perceived Inequalities. At the second

level, 12 mediating codes capture the experiential mechanisms through which cultural practices shape participants' responses: Emotional Connection, Emotional Reaction to Artistic Environment, Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals, Aesthetic Experience and Mood, Contribution to Relaxation and Emotional Renewal, Connection with the Community and New Perspectives, Community Engagement, Support Networks, Satisfaction with Life, Built Environment Contribution, Creativity Imagination and Curiosity, Cultural Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation, Empowerment, Capability to Influence the Community, Feelings of Capability Motivation and Confidence, Expressions of Confidence and Doubt, Inspiration for New Activities and Projects. At the third level, three scaffolding codes (affective, perceptual, cognitive) and two structural codes (Structural Constraints, Unequally Distributed Opportunities) provide the theoretical anchoring. Relationships between codes were established using three link types available in ATLAS.ti: "is part of" (a mediating code feeds into a construct), "is associated with" (a scaffolding dimension operates through a mediating mechanism), and "is cause of" (structural constraints causally affect constructs). No auto-coding or AI-assisted functions were used. The resulting network is visualised in Figure 1.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Results

5.1.1 Sample Characteristics

The survey was completed by 51 respondents: 20 local respondents (Age: M=38.10, SD=10.57, range=20-60 years) and 31 visitors (Age: M=41.03, SD=16.27, range=15-63 years). The local sample consisted predominantly of males (75.0%), and the visitor sample was predominantly female (67.7%). Educational attainment varied between groups: local respondents were distributed across high school (35.0%), bachelor's degree (40.0%), and master's degree (25.0%), whereas visitors showed greater heterogeneity, including middle school (16.1%), high school (38.7%), bachelor's degree (3.2%), master's degree (29.0%), post-graduate specialisation (3.2%), and PhD (9.7%).

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Residents	Visitors
Sample size	20	31
Age M (SD)	38.10 (10.57)	41.03 (16.27)
Age Range	20-60	15-63
Gender - Male n (%)	15 (75.0)	9 (29.0)
Gender - Female n (%)	5 (25.0)	21 (67.7)
Gender - Prefer not to say n (%)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.2)
Education - Middle school n (%)	0 (0.0)	5 (16.1)
Education - High school n (%)	7 (35.0)	12 (38.7)
Education - Bachelor degree n (%)	8 (40.0)	1 (3.2)
Education - Master degree n (%)	5 (25.0)	9 (29.0)
Education - Post-graduate specialization n (%)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.2)
Education - PhD n (%)	0 (0.0)	3 (9.7)

5.1.2 Residents

Descriptive statistics for engaged community members expressed high levels of social cohesion (M=6.05, SD=1.07), quality of life (M=5.98, SD=1.09), and perceived social support (M=6.10, SD=0.92). Notably, quality of life was underpinned by strong agreement with "The murals have improved the quality of life in Aielli" (M=6.70, SD=0.66), reflecting a widely shared perception among this engaged group of the cultural intervention's positive impact. By contrast, perceived inequalities yielded substantially lower scores (M=3.40, SD=1.56), indicating that even highly engaged respondents recognise persistent social and economic disparities. This dimension exhibited highest standard deviation, suggesting considerable variability in perceptions of territorial injustice. The reversed item "There are significant social and economic inequalities where I live" obtained M=2.70 (SD=1.26), with 55.0% scoring at or below 2, signalling strong agreement with the persistence of inequality. Conversely, perceptions of equitable distribution of development opportunities were moderate (M=4.10, SD=1.59). Perceived self-efficacy among engaged community members was moderately high (M=5.80, SD=1.12). Respondents expressed the strongest agreement with "I believe I can actively contribute to improving the place where I live" (M=6.10, SD=1.12), while ratings of personal capability to influence the community were slightly lower (M=5.60, SD=1.19). Confidence in achieving personally meaningful goals was moderate (M=5.70, SD=1.08). These patterns suggest that while engaged respondents feel capable of contributing to collective

improvement, their sense of broader personal and communal influence remains constrained, potentially reflecting structural limitations inherent to the territorial context.

5.1.3 Visitors

General wellbeing scores were consistently high (M=6.09, SD=1.23), with "The visit to the murals engaged me positively on an emotional level" receiving the highest mean score (M=6.32, SD=1.08). Over 61% rated emotional engagement at the maximum level (7), and 93.5% scored 5 or above. Similarly, visitors reported strong improvements in mood (M=6.16, SD=1.10) and feelings of relaxation (M=5.68, SD=1.30). Willingness to recommend the mural tour was also high (M=6.19, SD=1.40). Perception of personal growth was likewise elevated (M=6.01, SD=1.27). Visitors felt culturally enriched (M=6.35, SD=1.08), more open to new experiences (M=5.90, SD=1.27), and creatively stimulated (M=6.06, SD=1.21). Notably, non-resident visitors reported feeling more connected to the Aielli community (M=5.71, SD=1.47), suggesting that aesthetic and cultural engagement can foster place-based affective bonds beyond residential ties.

In contrast, self-efficacy among visitors was considerably weaker and more variable (M=4.80, SD=1.66). Confidence in personal capabilities following the visit was the lowest-rated item (M=4.55, SD=1.84), with responses distributed across the entire scale. Inspiration to undertake new projects was moderate (M=4.97, SD=1.56), as was perceived capacity to face daily challenges (M=4.87, SD=1.63). These findings indicate that cultural experience fuelled strong affective and perceptual effects (enhancing mood, emotional engagement, openness) but did not consistently translate into sustained cognitive empowerment or self-efficacy. The situational nature of the visit may explain this discrepancy: affective and perceptual activation occurred during the experience, but self-efficacy requires sustained engagement and structural support to consolidate. An alternative interpretation is that self-efficacy, as typically conceptualised, may simply be less responsive to brief aesthetic encounters than to longer-term participatory engagement; such measure may be more appropriate for residents embedded in ongoing processes than for transient visitors.

5.1.4 Comparative Patterns Across Groups

When comparing engaged community members and visitors, several patterns emerge. Both groups exhibited high scores on dimensions related to affective engagement: local respondents through social cohesion and perceived support (M=6.05 and M=6.10), and visitors through

general wellbeing and personal growth (M=6.09 and M=6.01). These findings align with the theoretical model of cultural practices as affective scaffolds that activate emotional resonance, sense of belonging, and openness even in structurally constrained contexts.

However, self-efficacy (linked to cognitive agency) was moderate for engaged community members (M=5.80) and notably lower for visitors (M=4.80). This divergence suggests that self-efficacy operates differently depending on relational proximity to the place: engaged locals, embedded in ongoing community processes and collective action, report higher efficacy despite the structural disadvantage; visitors experience self-efficacy as situationally contingent, arising within the bounded temporality of the visit.

Moreover, engaged community members' awareness of inequalities (M=3.40) underscores a critical tension: high subjective wellbeing coexists with the recognition of persistent territorial injustice. This paradox reflects the limits of cultural interventions in addressing the structural determinants of agency.

5.2 Qualitative Results

Building on the quantitative patterns, the qualitative analysis reveals how residents and visitors make sense of Aielli's transformation in their own words. The analysis draws on six semi-structured interviews (three residents, three visitors) coded through 18 mediating codes, three scaffolding codes, and two structural codes. The resulting network is visualised in Figure 1, which maps the relationships between experiential mechanisms, survey constructs, and scaffolding dimensions. In line with the research design, the qualitative section is organised around the two participant groups, residents and visitors, showing how cultural practices produce distinct but interconnected effects across the three scaffolding dimensions

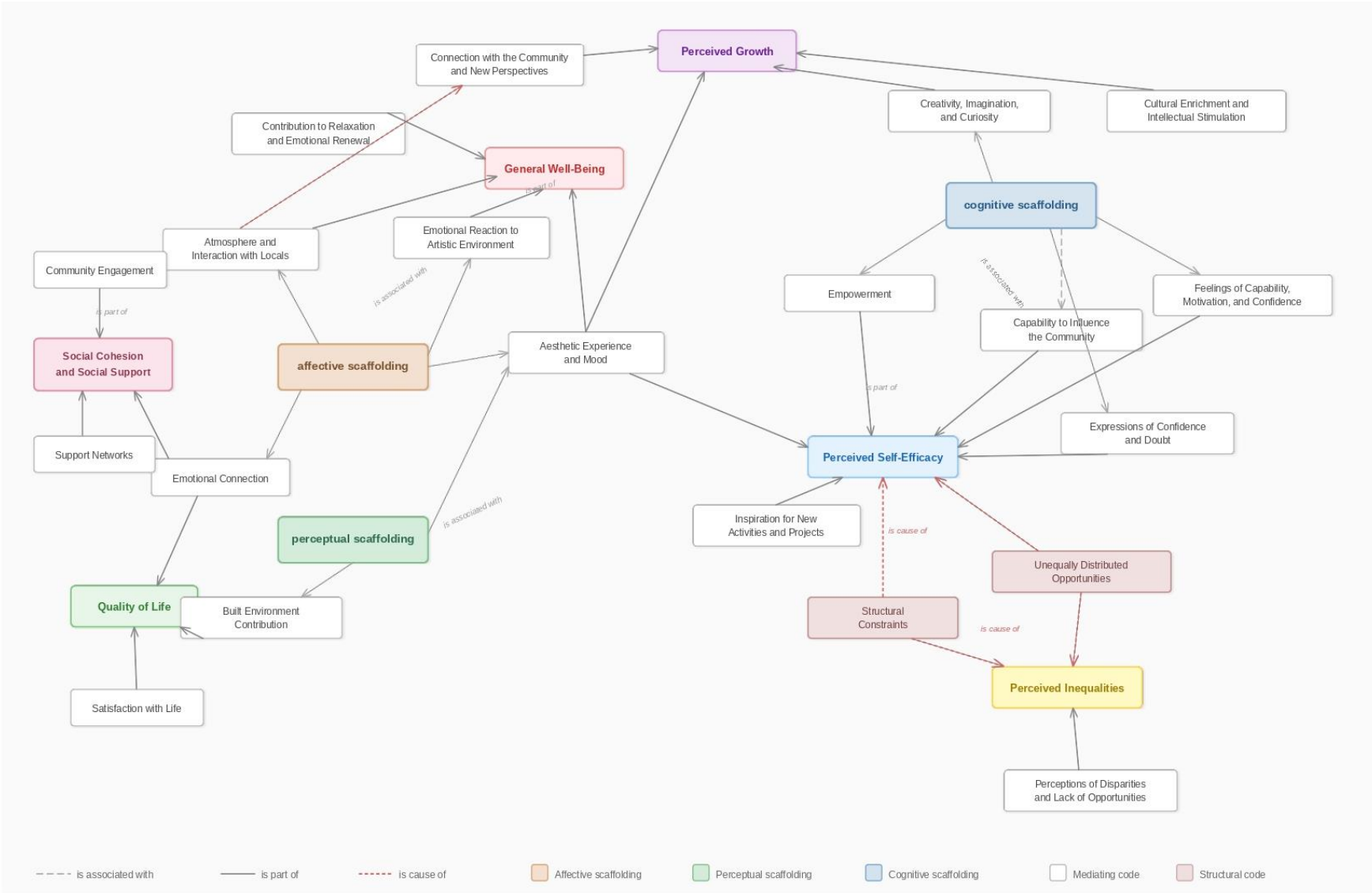

Perceived Growth
Connection with the Community and New Perspectives
Creativity, Imagination, and Curiosity
Cultural Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation
Contribution to Relaxation and Emotional Renewal
General Well-Being
cognitive scaffolding
Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals
Emotional Reaction to Artistic Environment
Community Engagement
Empowerment
Feelings of Capability, Motivation, and Confidence
Capability to Influence the Community
Social Cohesion and Social Support
affective scaffolding
Aesthetic Experience and Mood
Expressions of Confidence and Doubt
Support Networks
Emotional Connection
Perceived Self-Efficacy
Inspiration for New Activities and Projects
perceptual scaffolding
Unequally Distributed Opportunities
Quality of Life
Built Environment Contribution
Structural Constraints
Perceived Inequalities
Satisfaction with Life
Perceptions of Disparities and Lack of Opportunities
is part of
is associated with
is cause of
is associated with
is part of
is associated with
is part of
is cause of
is cause of
is associated with
is part of
is cause of
is associated with
Affective scaffolding
Perceptual scaffolding
Cognitive scaffolding
Mediating code
Structural code

Figure 1. Code relationships, Atlas.ti analysis.

Figure 1 displays the network of code relationships emerging from the qualitative analysis. The diagram should be read from the periphery inward: mediating codes (white nodes) capture the experiential mechanisms identified in participants' narratives and are linked to construct codes (coloured nodes) through "is part of" relations, indicating which survey dimension each mechanism contributes to. The three scaffolding dimensions, affective (orange), perceptual (green), and cognitive (blue), are connected to their respective mediating codes through "is associated with" links, mapping how each scaffolding layer operates through specific experiential channels. Two structural codes, Structural Constraints and Unequally Distributed Opportunities, enter the network through causal links ("is cause of") to both Perceived Self-Efficacy and Perceived Inequalities, visualising the tension at the core of the analytical framework: while affective and perceptual scaffolding are activated through cultural experience (left side of the network), cognitive scaffolding and its associated constructs remain constrained by material conditions (right side). The network thus provides a visual representation of the asymmetry that the paper conceptualises as the aesthetic trap: a dense web of affective and perceptual connections on one side, and the gravitational pull of structural constraints on the other.

5.2.1 Residents

Social Cohesion and Support. Engaged community members consistently describe Aielli as characterised by dense, reliable, and emotionally warm social relationships. In the code network, this construct is fed by three mediating codes (Emotional Connection, Support Networks, and Community Engagement) all associated with affective scaffolding (Figure 1). The sense of community is expressed through stories of everyday conviviality, annual rituals, and practices of mutual aid. One respondent explains: "*I feel part of the community every single day, because beyond the cooperative, we are all people who live this place together. We are a reference point for each other*" (local respondent #1). The strength and openness of local ties is also emphasised: "*These social networks have been consolidated over time, and they're not closed networks, they're open and ready to welcome anyone who arrives, whether as a tourist or as a new inhabitant*" (local respondent #1). Rituals further reinforce cohesion by fostering shared emotions and collective identity. Describing the Sant'Antonio celebration, the same resident notes: "*Every neighbourhood comes together to prepare a dish, and as you walk through the village, people offer food to whoever passes by. That moment really makes you feel deeply part of a community*" (local respondent #1). Residents also describe the relational texture of small-community life in terms of mutual knowledge and trust: "*Living in Aielli allows me to have a different level of familiarity and confidence with everyone*" (local respondent #3). This suggests that what the survey captures as social cohesion is experienced concretely as interpersonal trust and accumulated knowledge of one another, namely a relational fabric sustained by proximity and reinforced by shared cultural practices. The cooperative itself emerged from mural-based regeneration as a formalisation of organic collective action: "*The community-based cooperative was created because there was a need*

for something that could respond to this demand to visit the murals. There has been a rediscovery of all this, a process that we have undertaken and that we recount at the beginning of every story and every tour. Before showing it to visitors, it was a process of rediscovery for us. Thanks to the murals, we are healing a wound that was opened in 1915 by the earthquake. Today, there is a plan behind it all: we have managed to involve different people with different skills and know-how who are now helping us to grow. Today, we can call ourselves a true community cooperative, a company that seeks to develop the local area and create new ideas" (local respondent #2). This narrative explicitly connects aesthetic renewal to historical trauma, positioning cultural practice as reparative, an instance of affective scaffolding that transforms collective memory from a source of loss into a resource for cohesion.

Quality of Life. Residents attribute improvements to aesthetic renewal, increased village vitality, and emotional connection to the place. In the network, Quality of Life is linked to the mediating codes Emotional Connection, Satisfaction with Life, and Built Environment Contribution, the latter associated with perceptual scaffolding (Figure 1). Many describe murals as catalysts elevating emotional tone and liveability: "*You feel better, that's a fact. The murals have improved the quality of life, people come, there's movement, Sundays are full of life*" (local respondent #3). This is linked to a sense of stability and satisfaction: "*I am satisfied with my life here, because this is the place where I can have the quality of life I want*" (local respondent #2). The perceptual dimension plays a distinctive role here. The material transformation of the built environment (captured by the code Built Environment Contribution) has changed how inhabitants see and inhabit their village: "*Houses are selling, the village is full on Sundays, but beyond that, there's a new way of seeing the place. People take care of the walls, of the spaces*" (local respondent #3). Another notes the tangible effects: "*There are now families living from this, new bars, the Casa Verde that didn't exist before, accommodation that wasn't there, all of this was born with Borgo Universo*" (local respondent #1). Respondents describe not merely passive appreciation but active stewardship: living within an open-air museum has cultivated heightened care for public spaces, making of residents the custodians of collective beauty.

Perception of Inequalities. Despite high cohesion and satisfaction, engaged community members maintain a clear and often critical awareness of structural constraints. In the network, Perceived Inequalities is fed by the mediating code Perceptions of Disparities and Lack of Opportunities and is causally linked to the structural codes Structural Constraints and

Unequally Distributed Opportunities (Figure 1). One resident states: "*The main problem is work. It's not just Aielli, it's the whole area. You believe in the cooperative because you are from here and you've seen the project grow, but it's hard to get someone from outside to believe in it without stable opportunities*" (local respondent #1). Another describes uneven development: "*Houses are selling and the village is full on Sundays, but then again, we need political action. You can't rely only on cultural events, structural issues remain*" (local respondent #3). These narratives reveal a sophisticated understanding of culture's limits: affective and perceptual scaffolding do not erase material constraints but coexist with them. The network visualises this tension: while the left side shows a dense web of affective and perceptual connections feeding into wellbeing constructs, the right side reveals the causal pressure of structural constraints on self-efficacy and inequality perceptions, the asymmetry at the heart of the aesthetic trap.

Self-Efficacy. Residents express growing perceived empowerment linked to cultural transformation, though moderated by structural constraints. In the network, Perceived Self-Efficacy is the most densely connected construct, fed by five mediating codes (Empowerment, Capability to Influence the Community, Feelings of Capability, Motivation, and Confidence, Expressions of Confidence and Doubt, and Inspiration for New Activities and Projects) all associated with cognitive scaffolding, while simultaneously subject to causal pressure from the two structural codes (Figure 1). This dual connectivity explains the ambivalence that characterises residents' narratives. Several describe learning new skills, participating in the cooperative, and contributing to local initiatives as sources of empowerment: "*I feel like I'm growing every day. The cooperative gives me the opportunity to learn, to do things I never thought I would*" (local respondent #1), with a consequent perceived capacity to shape the community: "*I believe I can contribute to improving this place, because we've already seen what cooperation can achieve*" (local respondent #1). Another frames this capacity in collective terms: "*The effort we must make is to see ourselves as a network of people who share a common goal, to save not just our own place, but to save ourselves together*" (local respondent #1). Yet self-efficacy is tempered by structural awareness. The code Expressions of Confidence and Doubt captures this tension: "*Until maybe a couple of years ago, I was more overwhelmed by moments of discouragement, because perhaps I didn't have clear objectives either. I kept learning, trying, making mistakes. Now I see things more clearly, but the structural problems haven't changed*" (local respondent #1). Another resident notes: "*We can do a lot, but there are limits. Some things depend on us, but many depend on the region and on politics*" (local

respondent #3). This bounded optimism (perceived efficacy within acknowledged constraints) characterises the cognitive dimension for residents and explains why self-efficacy scores (M=5.80), while positive, remain lower than affective indicators.

5.2.2 Visitors

General Well-Being. Visitors describe intense emotional responses shaped by aesthetic experiences, atmospheric qualities, and encounters with locals. In the network, General Well-Being is fed by four mediating codes (Emotional Reaction to Artistic Environment, Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals, Contribution to Relaxation and Emotional Renewal, and Aesthetic Experience and Mood) spanning both affective and perceptual scaffolding (Figure 1). This dual association reflects the visitor experience: an encounter that is simultaneously emotional and sensory. One visitor recalls: "*As soon as you pass the coloured portal, you feel joy and serenity. It's the sensation of entering a lively place, which is rare in many villages in the area*" (visitor #1). Another emphasises the surprise of entering such an animated environment: "*Suddenly the sky opened, the village appeared suspended above the clouds. It felt like stepping into a place outside of time, then the people made it even better*" (visitor #2). These responses, coded as Emotional Reaction to Artistic Environment, capture the immediate affective activation that the survey registers as high well-being scores (M=6.18). The social atmosphere surrounding the murals, as well as the atmospheric quality of the encounter, is influenced by a distinct mechanism. One visitor describes: "*There was a festive atmosphere, and I felt connected to the community even though I was just visiting*" (visitor #1). The code Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals is linked through a causal relation to Connection with the Community and New Perspectives, suggesting that the atmospheric encounter triggers a shift in perspective that feeds into Perceived Growth, in a pathway from affective exposure to cognitive reorientation.

Self-Efficacy and Personal Growth. Visitors' self-efficacy is more situational than that of engaged residents: a momentary activation rather than sustained agency. In the network, Perceived Growth is fed by Connection with the Community and New Perspectives, Creativity, Imagination, and Curiosity, and Cultural Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation (all associated with cognitive scaffolding) while the bridging code Aesthetic Experience and Mood also feeds into both Perceived Growth and Perceived Self-Efficacy, linking perceptual activation to cognitive outcomes (Figure 1). One visitor evokes confidence triggered by the

village's vitality: "*The sensation you get is of visiting a place full of life, and that gives you joy, it stays with you even as you continue seeing the murals"* (visitor #1). Another recounts being inspired to consider new possibilities: "*I discovered new artists, new spaces... and this incredible community spirit. It really made me think about new possibilities*" (visitor #2). Yet another feels energised by the tour: "*The visit made me feel capable and motivated, it was like a creative recharge*" (visitor #3). Visitors frequently describe the visit as enriching and perspective-shifting: "*I ended up staying for an aperitivo and felt completely part of the community, welcomed, not treated like a tourist*" (visitor #1). Broader implications are also noted: "*Synergies and collaborations like the ones here could rebalance development across the region. Seeing it made me think differently about inner areas*" (visitor #1). Another highlights artistic discovery: "*It was a journey of discovery within discovery, because I was moving through and discovering street art, but at the same time these works were also telling me a different story*" (visitor #2). However, these moments of cognitive activation remained largely situational, a creative opening rather than sustained agency. The codes Creativity, Imagination, and Curiosity and Cultural Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation feed into Perceived Growth but do not connect to the structural and relational infrastructure that sustains cognitive scaffolding for residents. This asymmetry is consistent with the quantitative findings showing high personal growth scores (M=6.01) alongside variable self-efficacy among visitors.

5.2.3 Comparative Patterns and Structural Constraints

Although residents and visitors were analysed across different outcome dimensions, reflecting their distinct roles in the research design, the qualitative material shows significant cross-contamination. Mediating codes such as Emotional Connection, Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals, Aesthetic Experience and Mood, and Cultural Enrichment and Intellectual Stimulation emerge across both groups. These shared codes demonstrate that Aielli's cultural practices generate effects that exceed categorical distinctions: residents' experiences shape visitors' perceptions, and visitors' enthusiasm reinforces residents' pride and perceived agency. However, the network also reveals a fundamental divergence. For residents, the experiential mechanisms connect not only to affective and perceptual constructs but also, through the cooperative, through sustained relational engagement, through accumulated learning, to cognitive scaffolding and perceived self-efficacy. For visitors, the connections are dense on the affective and perceptual side but thin on the cognitive side, where activation remains momentary and unanchored by structural support. The two structural codes (Structural Constraints and Unequally Distributed Opportunities) enter the network exclusively through

residents' narratives, exerting causal pressure on both Perceived Self-Efficacy and Perceived Inequalities. This structural layer is entirely absent from the visitor experience, which is insulated from material constraints by its transient nature.

This comparative pattern illuminates the core dynamic of the analytical framework. Cultural practices activate affective and perceptual scaffolding across both groups with comparable intensity. But the translation into cognitive scaffolding, namely the perceived capacity to act, to influence, to imagine alternative futures, depends on conditions that the cultural experience alone cannot provide: institutional embedding, relational continuity, and real structural opportunities. Where these are present, as in the cooperative, cognitive scaffolding emerges; where they are absent, as in the visitor experience, affective and perceptual gains remain unanchored. It is this asymmetry, observed across both groups and confirmed by both quantitative and qualitative data, that the analytical framework conceptualises as the aesthetic trap.

6. Discussion

The qualitative and quantitative findings, taken together, allow a systematic assessment of the four analytical expectations formulated in Section 2.4. The first expectation, that affective and perceptual outcomes would be relatively uniform across participants, finds consistent support in the data. Both residents and visitors report strong emotional responses and sensory engagement with Aielli's cultural environment. The mediating codes Emotional Connection, Aesthetic Experience and Mood, and Atmosphere and Interaction with Locals emerge across both groups, suggesting that cultural practices activate affective and perceptual scaffolding through direct aesthetic experience regardless of the participant's structural position. This is mirrored quantitatively in the convergence of high scores for Social Cohesion (M=6.10), General Well-Being (M=6.18), and the affective components of Quality of Life across respondent groups.

The second expectation, that cognitive outcomes would vary according to structural position, is also confirmed. Residents embedded in cooperative structures report sustained empowerment and perceived capability, while visitors describe momentary cognitive activation that does not translate into durable self-efficacy. The code Expressions of Confidence and Doubt, which captures the ambivalence between growing capacity and persistent constraint, appears exclusively in resident narratives. Quantitatively, self-efficacy scores show greater within-group variation than affective indicators, consistent with the

framework's prediction that cognitive scaffolding is more directly dependent on structural conditions.

The third expectation, that recognition of structural inequalities would persist alongside high wellbeing, finds clear confirmation. Residents who report the highest cohesion and satisfaction are also the most articulate about structural limits. The co-presence of the codes Emotional Connection and Structural Constraints in several quotations demonstrates that affective scaffolding does not neutralise critical awareness but coexists with it in what residents describe as a productive tension. This finding challenges simpler accounts of culture-led regeneration in which subjective wellbeing is assumed to compensate for material deprivation.

The fourth expectation, that collective efficacy would emerge through cooperative structures even where individual self-efficacy is limited, is partially confirmed. The cooperative provides a concrete mechanism for translating individual emotional engagement into collective action, and several residents describe their perceived capacity in explicitly collective and relational terms. However, the qualitative data also reveal that collective efficacy in Aielli remains fragile, dependent on a small core of committed individuals and vulnerable to external policy neglect. This fragility underscores the limits of cultural scaffolding in the absence of multi-level governance integration, a point to which the policy implications (§ 7) return below.

6.1. Cultural practices as emotional devices scaffolding agency

The Aielli case illustrates how cultural practices may scaffold different layers of agency with differential success. Affective and perceptual scaffolding, manifested in emotional connection, aesthetic appreciation, and social cohesion, represent the most accessible level of impact. These dimensions were consistently activated across both local respondents and visitors, as evidenced by high scores on cohesion, wellbeing, and personal growth measures. The relative uniformity of affective outcomes supports our theoretical expectation: these dimensions rely on shared experiences and meanings rather than material redistribution, making them achievable even in resource-poor environments.

Cognitive scaffolding linked to self-efficacy, decision-making, and real opportunities requires, however, a supportive structural environment. Here the findings diverge sharply between groups. Residents reported moderate self-efficacy (M=5.80), while visitors reported notably lower and more variable self-efficacy (M=4.80). This pattern supports our framework's prediction that cognitive outcomes depend on relational proximity and sustained engagement:

those embedded in ongoing community processes and collective action experience cultural interventions as empowering; transient visitors experience emotional uplift without durable perceived capability enhancement.

The persistence of inequality awareness among engaged community members (M=3.40 on a scale where higher scores indicate less perceived inequality) is theoretically significant. High subjective wellbeing coexisted with a clear recognition of structural constraints as respondents simultaneously reported satisfaction with life in Aielli and the acknowledgment that "structural issues remain." Cultural practices reshape feeling and perception without eliminating the awareness of material constraints. Affective transformation is real but bounded. This transformation, indeed, is not merely symbolic: it alters affordances, rhythms, and embodied orientations, expanding what the environment invites people to perceive, imagine, and do. The murals and associated cultural practices act as what we theorize as “emotional devices”, namely technologies of affect capable of expanding wellbeing and reinforcing community cohesion even under conditions of scarcity. By mobilising emotions such as pride, empathy, and shared curiosity, they foster what we define as affective and perceptual agency: the vitality and the capacity to feel, perceive, and imagine collectively. These forms of scaffolding agency are not merely by-products of cultural participation; they constitute the primary gateway through which change becomes possible in low-resource settings.

The use of the term “emotional devices” is deliberate and represents our contribution. With this term we indicate discrete, identifiable mechanisms such as murals, festivals, or participatory cultural practices that actively organise, amplify, and circulate collective emotions. Unlike the broader concept of emotional infrastructure (which describes ambient affective conditions), emotional devices are interventions that can be designed, implemented, and evaluated. They are "technologies of affect" that work upon the emotional infrastructure of a place, potentially reshaping it over time. At this point, it is appropriate to characterize this term in relation to two others, in order to achieve analytical precision. By emotional devices, we do not mean “soft infrastructure,” which is the broadest category, referring to intangible systems supporting social and economic life: norms, networks, knowledge systems, cultural institutions. This encompasses everything from educational systems to informal support networks, contrasting with "hard" infrastructures (roads, buildings, utilities). Neither do we mean “emotional infrastructures”, which is a narrower concept within soft infrastructure, referring specifically to affective dimensions of place: collective feelings, atmospheres, and emotional patterns characterising a community or territory. This draws on emotional geographies (Anderson & Smith, 2001; Thrift, 2004), recognising that places have emotional textures shaping how people

experience and engage with their environments. This distinction matters for both theory and policy. If we describe all cultural interventions simply as "soft infrastructures," we lose the specificity needed to understand how they work. If we speak only of "emotional infrastructures," we risk treating affect as a background condition rather than something that is actively shaped. "Emotional devices" identifies specific mechanisms through which cultural practices may scaffold agency and allows the evaluation of whether they succeed or fail. A clarification is warranted regarding the use of "engagement" in this paper. Our empirical instruments capture perceived engagement (self-reported emotional involvement, aesthetic attention, and felt connection) not behavioural engagement in the sense of observable participation in activities or decision-making. When we refer to "aesthetic engagement" or "emotional engagement" as indicators, we mean the perceived intensity of the experience, consistent with the analytical choice not to include the conative dimension as a separate scaffolding layer. Behavioural engagement was observed ethnographically but not systematically measured, and its relationship to perceived engagement remains a question for future research.

6.2. Collective efficacy and the cooperative model

The qualitative data reveal a dimension not fully captured by our individual self-efficacy measures: collective efficacy. While we did not administer a validated collective efficacy scale, respondents consistently framed empowerment in relational terms: "*we've already seen what cooperation can achieve*"; "*we are a reference point for each other*", suggesting that shared beliefs about group capacity may emerge even where individual opportunities remain limited. The cooperative structure appears central to this collective efficacy. La Maesa provides not merely employment but a vehicle for collective decision-making, skill development, and shared ownership of the village's cultural assets. Bandura's (2000) distinction between personal and collective efficacy is insightful for this finding: cultural interventions may generate collective efficacy through shared pride, coordinated action, and cooperative structures, even when individual self-efficacy remains structurally constrained. This has implications for how we evaluate culture-led regeneration: metrics focused solely on individual outcomes may miss the collective agency that represents these interventions' most significant achievement. Future research should incorporate validated collective efficacy measures to test this interpretation more rigorously.

6.3. The aesthetic trap: conditions and escape routes

As outlined in Section 3.3, cultural interventions may get trapped in purely symbolic effects when disconnected from local economic structures, dependent on external actors, or failing to generate sustained community engagement. Aielli partially escapes this trap through several mechanisms: the cooperative creates local ownership and employment; its community-led nature ensures that benefits are locally retained; the integration with everyday village life (and not a self-referential "cultural district") embeds the intervention in the social fabric; the dialogical artistic process with artists in residence and community narratives painted on murals generates genuine participation rather than passive exposure.

However, the escape is incomplete. Structural challenges (employment, mobility, services) persist. The cooperative provides meaningful work for some residents but cannot substitute for broader economic development. The SNAI designation has not translated into coordinated investment linking cultural vibrancy to infrastructure improvement. Long-term sustainability remains uncertain: What happens when the novelty fades? When key leaders move on, or away? When external funding diminishes? This analysis resonates with the critical literature on culture-led regeneration discussed in Section 1, while identifying conditions under which aesthetic interventions may generate more than symbolic uplift. The Aielli case suggests that community-led initiation, cooperative structures, and dialogical artistic processes offer some protection against the aesthetic trap, but only partially. A full emancipation requires a closer integration with regional planning frameworks and a level of structural investment that Aielli has not yet achieved.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study reveals a central paradox characterising culture-led regeneration in left-behind territories: cultural practices reliably activate affective and perceptual dimensions of agency, yet their translation into cognitive agency and durable empowerment remains contingent on structural and institutional conditions that extend beyond the cultural sphere. Cultural participation's transformative impact depends less on direct investment and more on systemic alignment: the presence of cooperative structures, sustained community engagement, and integration with broader governance frameworks. We acknowledge the limitations of the study in the sample of local respondents to the qualitative interviews, which is composed mainly of individuals actively involved in the Aielli cultural project. Therefore, our results reflect the opinions of cultural activists rather than those of typical residents. The small sample size of the quantitative analysis (N=51) and convenience sampling limit statistical generalizability. Cross-sectional data do not allow us to establish causal relationships between cultural participation

and outcomes, hence the transferability of Aielli's experience depends on contextual conditions that may not be present elsewhere. A further limitation concerns the nature of what we measure. Our instruments capture perceived capacity to act and expressed intentions and not actual behaviours. As Lewicka (2011) argues in her review of place attachment research, the relationship between place-based attitudes and concrete action is far from linear: individuals may feel strongly attached to a place, perceive themselves as capable of contributing to its transformation, and yet not translate these dispositions into sustained behavioural change. This intention-behaviour gap is well documented in psychology and is particularly relevant for studies of culture-led regeneration, where the emotional intensity of the experience may inflate self-reported efficacy without producing durable changes in conduct. Our cross-sectional design cannot establish whether the perceived empowerment reported by Aielli's residents corresponds to observable behavioural shifts over time. Longitudinal research tracking the transition from perceived capacity to actual participation, sustained cooperative engagement, and concrete decision-making would be necessary to assess whether affective and perceptual scaffolding eventually catalyse behavioural change or remain at the level of intention.

Nevertheless, we can indicate key enabling factors in the pre-existing social capital and community networks providing foundation for collective action; in the local leadership willing to take entrepreneurial risks and sustain effort over the years; relative isolation limiting gentrification pressures that might displace residents as cultural value increases; in the legal frameworks providing the organisational vehicle and in the concentration of cultural attractions that make the village a distinctive destination. Contexts lacking these conditions may require different approaches: more intensive external facilitation where social capital is weak; protective mechanisms against displacement where gentrification risk is high; alternative organisational forms where cooperative frameworks are unavailable, etcetera. The Aielli model is not a template for mechanical replication but a case that illustrates a possible route for culture-led regeneration to escape the aesthetic trap. Based on these findings, and with appropriate caution given the aforementioned limitations, we offer five recommendations:

1. Recognise culture as an essential soft infrastructure within territorial policy. Cultural participation generates affective resources of pride, cohesion, collective imagination that are social foundations for material development. This recommendation draws directly from the study's quantitative and qualitative findings: residents report high social cohesion (M=6.10) and quality of life (M=5.60) attributable in significant part to cultural activation, while the qualitative analysis shows that mediating codes such as Emotional Connection and Aesthetic

Experience and Mood feed consistently into wellbeing constructs across both participant groups. Regional planning frameworks should include cultural vibrancy indicators alongside economic metrics. Concretely, this might mean requiring cultural impact assessment in SNAI territorial strategies; developing composite indicators measuring affective, perceptual, and cognitive dimensions of community wellbeing; funding cultural coordination activities at local government level.

2. Embed cultural projects within multi-level governance architectures. Isolated cultural initiatives risk the aesthetic trap. This recommendation is grounded in the persistent gap between affective outcomes and structural change documented throughout the study. Residents who report the highest emotional engagement are also the most vocal about governance failures: "Houses are selling and the village is full on Sundays, but then again, we need political action. You can't rely only on cultural events, structural issues remain" (local respondent #3). The causal links from *Structural Constraints* and *Unequally Distributed Opportunities* to both *Perceived Inequalities* and *Perceived Self-Efficacy* in the qualitative network confirm that cultural scaffolding alone cannot substitute for institutional action. Integration requires formal linkages between cultural associations and municipal planning; regional coordination ensuring that cultural investment complements (rather than substitutes for) infrastructure development; EU cohesion policy mechanisms translating cultural activation into institutional responsiveness. The SNAI framework offers a model but currently lacks mechanisms connecting cultural vibrancy to service provision.

3. Support cooperative and collective ownership models. This recommendation is directly supported by the qualitative finding on collective efficacy (Section 6.2). Residents consistently frame empowerment in relational and collective terms "*the effort we must make is to see ourselves as a network of people who share a common goal*" (local respondent #1) and the cooperative emerges as the primary mechanism through which affective engagement translates into economic activity and shared governance. Without the cooperative, Aielli's cultural transformation would likely remain confined to affective and perceptual scaffolding.. Policy should provide legal and financial support for cultural cooperatives; offer training in cooperative governance; create pathways for cultural projects to transition from volunteer-driven to sustainable organisational forms. The Italian cooperative legal framework enabled La Maesa; other countries may need to develop equivalent vehicles.

4. Develop differentiated evaluation frameworks. Current cultural policy evaluation often conflates affective, perceptual, and cognitive outcomes. he analytical framework proposed in this paper demonstrates that these dimensions respond differently to cultural intervention and are conditioned by different structural factors. The quantitative data confirm this: affective indicators are uniformly high across groups, while cognitive indicators (self-efficacy) vary significantly by structural position (M=5.80 for residents vs. M=4.80 for visitors). Differentiated frameworks would track affective indicators (pride, belonging, emotional tone); perceptual indicators (aesthetic engagement, attention to place); cognitive indicators (self-efficacy, skill acquisition, collective decision-making capacity). This allows assessment of where interventions succeed and where additional support is needed. We acknowledge, however, that this recommendation extends beyond the empirical evidence of a single case study: the development and validation of such frameworks would require comparative research across multiple sites and policy contexts.

5. Address structural complementarity explicitly. Cultural vibrancy does not cancel structural injustice. This is the clearest finding of the study: residents' inequality perception scores (M=3.40, indicating high perceived inequality) coexist with high affective wellbeing, and the qualitative data document this tension extensively. As one resident puts it: "*The main problem is work. It's not just Aielli, it's the whole area*" (local respondent #1). Policy should require that culture-led regeneration initiatives be paired with complementary measures addressing employment (job creation beyond cultural tourism); mobility (transportation connecting peripheral villages to services); services (healthcare, education, retail). Without structural complementarity, cultural interventions risk to be an "aesthetic uplift" that masks rather than addresses the underlying inequalities.

The Aielli case shows how art may be a potential political infrastructure: an initial, necessary scaffold for reimagining what peripheral communities can be and do. The murals of Aielli do not solve Marsica's structural problems: unemployment persists, services remain distant, young people still leave. But they have transformed how residents feel about their place and themselves, generated perceived collective capacity to act, and attracted attention that creates new possibilities, including economic ones, as the cooperative's growth, new accommodation structures, and increased visitor flows suggest. Our study captures most clearly the affective and perceptual dimensions of this transformation, which are its most immediate and observable effects. Economic outcomes may require longer time horizons to materialise and consolidate,

and a substantial body of research demonstrates that culture can and does contribute to economic development over time (Sacco et al., 2014; OECD, 2022). Our findings do not contradict this evidence; rather, they suggest that affective scaffolding may constitute a precondition for economic impact, a necessary early stage in a longer trajectory that this cross-sectional study is not positioned to trace in full. When individuals and communities perceive themselves as agents of change, they may generate new forms of cooperation, local leadership, and policy demand expanding the reach of cultural action beyond traditional boundaries. Culture does not merely accompany development; it may prepare and condition it, cultivating the emotional and cognitive grounds from which equitable futures can emerge. However, this potential remains contingent, contested, and context-dependent, as the persistence of structural inequality in Aielli confirms. The fabric of wellbeing in left-behind regions requires multiple threads: material investment, institutional support, political voice, and the emotional infrastructure that cultural practices may provide. The fabric metaphor is apt: wellbeing is woven from multiple threads, each necessary but none sufficient on its own. Weaving these together is the challenge facing territorial policy; understanding how they interact is the contribution this study has attempted to make.

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Scaffolding Agency in Cultural Policy. A Capabilities Framework for Evaluating Cultural Interventions[4]

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Abstract: The role of culture in promoting social and behavioral change has gained increasing attention in cultural policy, yet mechanisms of intervention, which we situate on a spectrum ranging from nudges to cultural interventions, remain insufficiently conceptualized. This lack of clarity obscures how different interventions relate to one another and complicates their evaluation, contributing to the well-known limitations of "toolkit" approaches. This paper develops a unifying framework that understands interventions as ways of scaffolding agency across multiple dimensions. Drawing on the capabilities approach, philosophy, and situated cognition, we argue that nudges and cultural interventions are best conceived as points on a spectrum defined by the degree of agency they afford. This perspective provides principled criteria for both intervention design and impact assessment, offering an alternative to reductive evaluation models while accommodating the complexity of cultural engagement.

Keywords: Cultural policy evaluation, Cultural interventions, Nudges theory, Behavioral change, Situated cognition, Agency, Capabilities approach, Cultural impact assessment

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Introduction

The role of culture in promoting positive social and behavioral change has received growing attention in recent years. Research in cultural economics and social science highlights the transformative potential of cultural participation in fostering social cohesion, empathy, and civic engagement (Throsby, 2001; Sacco & Segre, 2009). Cultural activities and institutions contribute not only to individual well-being but also to the collective values that underpin resilient and inclusive communities. This transformative potential suggests that arts-based approaches may offer distinctive pathways for behavioral influence that have so far been largely overlooked by behavioral economics (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In line with this perspective, UNESCO has recognized culture as a key means of promoting peaceful and sustainable societies, emphasizing its role in shaping attitudes, encouraging dialogue, and supporting social cohesion (UNESCO, 2013). In philosophical aesthetics, it has likewise been argued that the arts enhance our cognitive (e.g., Elgin 2002) and perceptual (e.g., Vernazzani 2023) engagement with the world. Culture can thus be understood as enabling forms of behavioral influence that operate through expanded awareness and deeper understanding of the psychobiological roots of human behavior, rather than through the exploitation of manipulable features of cognition.

Despite these promising prospects, there is no unifying framework or precise characterization of the mechanisms through which culture produces behavioral and social change. Part of the difficulty stems from the plurality of concepts of culture (Palecek, 2020), and from the diversity of contexts in which cultural interventions are studied. Existing work ranges from analyses of cultural experience (Smith, 2006; Urry, 1992), to accounts of the arts as resources for addressing social challenges (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007), to perspectives emphasizing culture's systemic role in urban innovation (Landry, 2000), and to sociological approaches that treat cultural participation as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) and as a basis for participatory practices (Bishop, 2012). This conceptual heterogeneity reflects a deeper theoretical fragmentation and, crucially, a lack of clarity about the mechanisms through which different interventions shape human agency.

We use the term 'mechanisms of intervention' to refer to a family of approaches aimed at eliciting societal change. Among these, nudging occupies a central position at the intersection of behavioral economics and behavioral change. Nudges, as characterized by Thaler and Sunstein's (2008) notion of "libertarian paternalism," guide individuals toward beneficial

choices while preserving freedom of choice. Grounded in dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2012), nudges target automatic (System 1) processes by exploiting cognitive biases through modifications of choice architecture. This approach contrasts with many forms of cultural intervention, especially those rooted in artistic and aesthetic practices. Whereas nudges leverage cognitive shortcuts and constrain deliberation, arts-based interventions tend to expand reflective capacity, stimulate critical engagement, and invite participants to actively construct meaning. This contrast raises fundamental questions about how different mechanisms of intervention relate to *agency* and how their contributions to social transformation should be evaluated.

Relying on resources from cognitive science, philosophy, and behavioral economics, in this paper we argue that mechanisms of intervention are best understood as occupying a *spectrum* defined by the degrees of *agency they scaffold*. This perspective can be further articulated along distinct dimensions of agency. While nudges typically operate by subtly restructuring choice environments, cultural interventions engage individuals in reflective and participatory processes. This perspective contributes to ongoing debates in behavioral economics (e.g., Pesendorfer, 2006; Angner & Loewenstein, 2007) by capturing dimensions of behavioral influence that nudging alone fails to address.

The need for such conceptual clarity extends beyond theory to cultural policy. As Belfiore and Bennett (2010) argue in their critique of 'toolkit' approaches to arts evaluation, the absence of robust theoretical frameworks leads to oversimplified assessment methods that fail to capture the complexity of cultural engagement. Their critique reinforces the importance of developing a framework that accounts for the varying degrees of agency afforded by different mechanisms of intervention.

The paper is organized around two interconnected research questions. First, how can the diverse mechanisms through which nudges and cultural interventions influence agency be situated within a single, theoretically grounded conceptual framework? Second, how should the impact of such interventions be evaluated when standard behavioral metrics fail to capture the forms of change they produce? These questions guide the argument that follows.

We proceed as follows. Section 2 reviews the current state of the art on cultural interventions and evaluation. Section 3 introduces the spectrum of agency model and situates cultural interventions and nudges within the capabilities approach (e.g., Nussbaum 2011; Robeyns

2017; Sen 1999). Section 4 develops an impact evaluation framework emphasizing interventions as ways of shaping freedom and agency. Section 5 discusses the implications of our account. Section 6 concludes.

2. Cultural Interventions, Impact, and Assessment

2.1 A Fragmented Landscape

The current literature on culture and social change is characterized by significant terminological and conceptual fragmentation. Concepts such as "the arts," (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007) "participatory arts," (Reason & Rowe, 2017) "cultural experiences," (Rausell-Köster et al., 2022) and "cultural fruition" (Reeves, 2002), are frequently employed across different research traditions, each embodying distinct assumptions about the mechanisms through which cultural activities influence behavior and social outcomes (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016; Faulkner et al., 2006). This terminological diversity reflects genuine differences in how researchers conceptualize the field of action, that is, what counts as a cultural practice, who its subjects are, and what kinds of change it can produce. Crucially, the literature tends to place greater emphasis on understanding the impact of cultural phenomena than on characterizing the phenomena themselves, which generates a persistent asymmetry: impact frameworks are developed before the interventions they are meant to evaluate have been adequately defined. Attempts to settle on shared terminology reflect a genuine recognition of this problem. Reason and Rowe (2017), for instance, adopt the wording "participatory arts" to signal a focus on the active, co-creative doing of art-making and to broaden the category beyond the figure of the professional artist. Rausell-Köster et al. (2022), approaching the problem from cultural economics, propose "cultural experiences" as a more operational concept, emphasizing the cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic resonance that cultural engagement produces in participants. Yet each of these solutions carries its own conceptual assumptions and disciplinary constraints, and none has achieved broad cross-field adoption. The result is a landscape in which interventions that share similar mechanisms and objectives are described in incompatible terms, making systematic comparison and cumulative evaluation extremely difficult.

This fragmentation has two unfortunate consequences for the purposes of this paper. First, it remains unclear how to position cultural interventions in relation to other mechanisms of

behavioral influence, such as nudges. Second, the lack of conceptual clarity makes it difficult to develop adequate frameworks for impact assessment: without a clearer characterization of what these interventions do, the nature of the intended impact remains underspecified, and the corresponding methods of assessment remain equally indeterminate (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Hawkes, 2001).

We adopt the term cultural interventions to provide a stable conceptual foothold for the analysis that follows. Cultural interventions are actions designed to engage the public and encourage critical reflection on information and values through artistic or intellectual forms. Implemented by cultural institutions, artists, government agencies, or communities, they aim to promote social, behavioral, or cultural reflection and change (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010; Sacco et al., 2018). This raises two key questions that structure the remainder of this section: what is meant by "cultural," and what is meant by "intervention"?

2.2 Cultural Intervention

The term "cultural" is employed here in a broad sense that encompasses the full range of practices through which individuals and communities engage with symbolic, aesthetic, and participatory forms of meaning-making. This includes interventions rooted in what Sacco et al. (2018) term Culture 3.0, characterized by the active, co-creative role of participants as both producers and consumers of cultural content, but is not limited to it. Books, films, public art, and other more traditional cultural forms can equally function as mechanisms of agency scaffolding, provided they are deployed with deliberate transformative intent. What matters for the purposes of this framework is not the cultural form per se, but, as shown in the following sections, the degree to which an intervention structures the perceptual, affective, and cognitive space available to its participants.

Moving forward, we adopt the concept of “intervention” for its emphasis on intentionality and its capacity to capture a wide range of actions aimed at transformative outcomes. Unlike notions such as cultural experience or participation, “intervention” highlights the deliberate and goal-directed character of practices designed to address specific societal, economic, or individual challenges. This allows us to treat cultural interventions as purposeful mechanisms of change rather than incidental byproducts of cultural engagement. Crucially, this emphasis on intentionality distinguishes them from ambient cultural exposure and enables systematic comparison with other behavior-change mechanisms, such as nudges (Michie et al., 2011). We

illustrate this notion through two examples: Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* and Mónica Mayer's *El Tendedero* (The Clothesline).

Eliasson's *Ice Watch* is a public art installation in which blocks of Greenlandic glacial ice are transported to urban spaces such as Copenhagen, Paris, and London and arranged in a clock-like formation. By inviting passers-by to touch the ice and observe its melting, the installation creates a direct, embodied encounter with the material effects of climate change (Eliasson, 2019). It exemplifies a cultural intervention insofar as it pursues an explicit transformative aim, namely fostering awareness and engagement, through sensory and affective experience. Rather than relying on informational persuasion or cognitive shortcuts, it seeks to elicit reflection and behavioral change through emotional engagement and perspective transformation (Curtis et al., 2014; Sommer & Klöckner, 2021).

Mayer's El Tendedero is a participatory art project initiated in the 1970s and repeatedly reactivated in different contexts. It invites women to write accounts of harassment and violence on pink slips of paper, which are then displayed on a clothesline in public or exhibition spaces (Cabrera Garcia, 2023). By reappropriating a domestic symbol as a site of collective expression, the project transforms individual experiences into a shared space of visibility and solidarity. As a cultural intervention, it operates by enabling processes of consciousness-raising and collective empowerment, illustrating how participatory practices can generate social change through mechanisms that differ fundamentally from individualized behavior modification (Kester, 2011; Thompson, 2012).

2.3 Implications and Open Problems

In the foregoing sections, we have shown that the debate is conceptually fragmented. While it is widely assumed that these interventions promote transformative social change, this fragmentation has two unfortunate consequences.

First, it remains unclear how to position cultural interventions in relation to nudges and other mechanisms of behavioral influence. Nudges, as characterized by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), operate through subtle modifications of choice architecture that steer behavior by exploiting cognitive biases, typically without requiring sustained cognitive or emotional engagement. Classic examples include default rules in green energy programs or the strategic placement of products to increase their salience (Johnson & Goldstein, 2003; Hansen & Jespersen, 2013).

Such interventions are often effective in promoting simple or repetitive behaviors, but they generally rely on automatic rather than reflective processes and may be less suited to fostering sustained, complex change (Szaszi et al., 2022).

By contrast, cultural interventions typically involve participatory and meaning-making processes that engage individuals cognitively, emotionally, and socially, thereby fostering agency and more enduring transformations. However, in the absence of a clear conceptual framework, these differences remain insufficiently articulated. As a result, cultural interventions risk being conflated with nudges, obscuring their distinctive mechanisms and normative significance.

Second, the lack of conceptual clarity makes it difficult to develop adequate frameworks for impact assessment. Although "impact" broadly refers to effects on individuals, communities, or social systems, there is little consensus on how to measure the kinds of change cultural interventions aim to produce. Existing approaches tend to prioritize short-term or easily quantifiable outcomes, thereby failing to capture the complex and often long-term transformations at stake (Hawkes, 2001; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Cicerchia, 2022). A useful distinction can be drawn between primary change (immediate effects directly attributable to an intervention) and secondary change (more indirect and longer-term effects that emerge over time) (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Rogers, 2008). Yet even this distinction remains difficult to operationalize when the nature of the intended impact is not clearly specified.

Although this conceptualization is widely accepted, the type of impact targeted by cultural interventions often remains unclear, generating significant ambiguity. When the nature of the intended impact is underspecified, the corresponding methods of assessment remain equally indeterminate, undermining efforts to evaluate and substantiate the role of cultural interventions in driving meaningful change.

Traditional approaches address this by dividing impact into discrete domains (social, cultural, economic, and environmental) each associated with specific indicators, such as social cohesion, cultural innovation, economic development, or environmental sustainability (Takyi, 2014; Vanclay et al., 2015; Partal & Dunphy, 2016; Pagiola, 1996; Morgan, 2012; Glasson & Therivel, 2013). More recent work seeks to integrate these dimensions into holistic frameworks that capture their interdependence (Soini & Dessein, 2016). However, these models have largely been developed for conventional cultural programs and do not adequately capture the

agency-enhancing mechanisms that distinguish cultural interventions from other forms of behavioral influence (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Galloway, 2009). Without a clearer characterization of the impact at stake, it remains difficult both to distinguish cultural interventions from alternatives such as nudges and to assess their specific contributions to social change.

2.4 Beyond Libertarian Paternalism

The contrast between nudges and cultural interventions is not merely descriptive. It carries normative weight that deserves explicit acknowledgment. The nudging framework, as developed by Thaler and Sunstein (2008) under the banner of libertarian paternalism, has attracted sustained criticism on three interconnected grounds. First, critics have questioned whether nudges genuinely respect autonomy: by targeting automatic, pre-reflective processes rather than engaging deliberative capacities, nudges steer behavior without the agent's informed awareness, raising concerns about the boundary between influence and manipulation. As Hausman and Welch (2010) argue, nudges diminish the extent to which individuals have control over their own evaluations and deliberations, because the resulting actions reflect the design choices of the choice architect rather than the agent's own assessment of alternatives. Saghai (2013) develops a related concern, arguing that nudges violate autonomy as agency precisely because they target shallow cognitive processes, namely the processes that are fast, automatic, and pre-reflective, without engaging the rational and effortful capacities through which agents guide their own behavior. Second, the sustainability of nudge-induced behavioral change has been challenged empirically: effects frequently attenuate or disappear when the environmental modification is removed, suggesting that nudges produce behavioral compliance rather than durable change in agents' dispositions or capacities (Hu et al, 2025; Szaszi et al., 2022). Third, White (2013) raise a deeper concern about the paternalistic structure of nudging: by substituting the judgment of designers for that of agents by determining in advance what counts as a beneficial outcome and engineering the choice environment accordingly, nudges bypass rather than engage the agent's capacity for self-determination, raising questions about manipulation that libertarian paternalism's appeal to freedom of choice does not fully resolve.

These criticisms do not lead us to dismiss nudges as illegitimate intervention tools. In certain contexts, for instance where rapid behavioral change is required, where cognitive engagement is limited, or where the costs of deliberation are prohibitive, lower-agency interventions may

be not only appropriate but ethically defensible. The normative question is not whether nudges should ever be used, but when they are sufficient and when something more is required. This is precisely what the agency scaffolding framework is designed to answer. By locating nudges and cultural interventions along a spectrum defined by the degree of freedom they afford, the framework provides principled criteria for intervention choice: where the goal is durable capability expansion, expanded self-direction, or the transformation of collective imaginaries, high-agency interventions are preferable not as a matter of ideological commitment but because low-agency alternatives are structurally incapable of producing those effects. The critical literature on nudges, on this reading, is not an obstacle to the framework but part of its normative motivation.

2.5 The Cultural Policy Evaluation Debate

Debates on the instrumentalization of culture have dominated cultural policy scholarship for over two decades, generating persistent tensions within the field. Gray (2007) identifies a broad shift since the late 1970s and early 1980s, whereby cultural policy has increasingly been subordinated to external objectives such as economic development, social cohesion, and urban regeneration. On this view, culture is treated instrumentally, that is as a means to non-cultural ends, reflecting a wider trend toward the commodification of public policy. This shift represents not merely a change in policy priorities but a reconfiguration of the relationship between culture and society, with evaluation frameworks privileging measurable outcomes and thereby obscuring dimensions of cultural engagement that resist quantification.

Belfiore and Bennett have developed one of the most influential critiques of this instrumental turn. They argue that reducing cultural practices to predetermined outcomes generates both conceptual and methodological distortions. Early critiques (Belfiore, 2002) show how such approaches misrepresent the nature of cultural engagement, while later work on "toolkit" models (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010) highlights how the absence of robust theoretical foundations leads to oversimplified evaluation methods. These approaches often derive their appeal from policy advocacy rather than explanatory adequacy, revealing a deeper disconnect between policy discourse and the realities of cultural practice (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007).

At the core of this debate lies a persistent tension. On the one hand, democratic accountability requires cultural institutions to demonstrate public value; on the other, the most transformative aspects of cultural engagement often resist reduction to predefined metrics. This tension is

exacerbated by what Belfiore (2009) characterizes as the prevalence of rhetorical inflation in cultural policy, driven by the absence of adequate conceptual frameworks for understanding cultural impact.

This debate motivates our framework. Rather than proposing another evaluative toolkit, we address the underlying conceptual problem. We argue that the central question is not whether cultural interventions achieve specific outcomes, nor whether they should be valued purely for their intrinsic qualities, but how different intervention mechanisms scaffold human agency across multiple dimensions.

This agency-centered perspective reframes the instrumentalization debate. It moves beyond the opposition between instrumental and intrinsic value by focusing on the processes through which interventions enable or constrain freedom and capability development. Drawing on the capabilities approach, it offers evaluative criteria that accommodate both accountability requirements and the complexity of cultural engagement. At the same time, by situating nudges and cultural interventions along a spectrum of agency scaffolding, the framework enables systematic comparison without reducing cultural phenomena to simplified metrics. In doing so, it provides a principled basis for evaluation that preserves the transformative potential of cultural practices while meeting the demands of policy assessment.

3. Agency on Stage: A new conceptual model

In this section, we conceptualize cultural interventions and nudges along a spectrum defined by the degree of freedom they afford to subjects. Agency, on this view, is not binary but scalar, varying with the extent to which individuals are able to act autonomously. We develop this account by integrating the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1999) with situated approaches to cognition in philosophy and cognitive science (Newen, De Bruin & Gallagher, 2018; Robbins & Aydede, 2009).

The resulting framework emphasizes that action emerges from the interaction between individuals and their environments, which provide opportunities for action that scaffold agency (Clark, 2008; Hutchins, 2010). This scaffolding perspective offers a neutral basis for analyzing how different intervention types structure the relationship between agents and their choice environments, and thus for situating nudges and cultural interventions along a continuum of agency.

3.1 Scaffolding Agency

Agency, broadly understood, includes not only the capacity for bodily action but also for mental and emotional action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Bandura, 2009; Wu 2023). Human agency is manifested not only in physical behavior, but also in cognitive, perceptual, and affective engagement: reflecting and understanding, actively responding to stimuli, and reacting in action-guiding ways. Our approach builds on research in situated cognition (e.g. Newen, De Bruin & Gallagher 2018; Robbins & Aydede 2009) and philosophy of mind and cognitive science (e.g. Sterelny 2010; Vernazzani 2019, 2023), and construes agency as shaped through situated interactions with tools and environments that *scaffold* action.

But what is "*scaffolding"*? In cognitive science and philosophy of mind, a "scaffold" is any environmental structure within the social or physical world, or any artefact or tool, that supports, enhances, or enables in a non-trivial way some cognitive and affective processing (cf. Newen & Fabry, 2023; Vernazzani, 2023). This scaffolding framework is empirically supported by research in cognitive science showing how environmental structures can either constrain or enable different forms of cognitive and behavioral engagement in a process of niche construction (Kirsh & Maglio, 1994; Kirsh 2009; Menary 2018; Norman, 1993; Sterelny, 2010). As an example of scaffold, consider a smartphone where we save the phone number of dozens or hundreds of people. As a consequence of employing the smartphone, we offload the cognitive task of memorizing phone numbers, modifying the structure of our agency when performing actions involving the task of calling others. Another example of scaffold includes the use of scents in environments to obtain some affective effects, such as soothing and calming.

We argue that intervention mechanisms (such as nudges and cultural interventions) should be conceptualized as *ways of scaffolding* individuals' agency, leaving them a margin of freedom while modifying the way they perceive and relate to their decision-making, cognitive, and affective space. We can distinguish between three types of scaffolding frames pertaining to three different frames of agency, or behavioral spaces:

- **perceptual scaffolding**, which modulates sensory interaction with the environment, facilitating access to some features of the environment and direct action towards something (e.g., Vernazzani 2023);

- **affective scaffolding**, which modulates the affective-emotional reactions, interacting with the affective condition of the agent (e.g., Piredda 2020);
- **cognitive scaffolding**, which supports reasoning, memory, imagination and problem solving, broadening horizons of understanding (e.g., Sterelny 2010; on understanding, see Elgin 2017).

Each of these types of scaffolding frames modulates the subject's actions — and hence the subject's freedoms — within a different frame of agency at various scales of magnitudes. Notice that a single scaffold can affect multiple frames of agency at the same time.

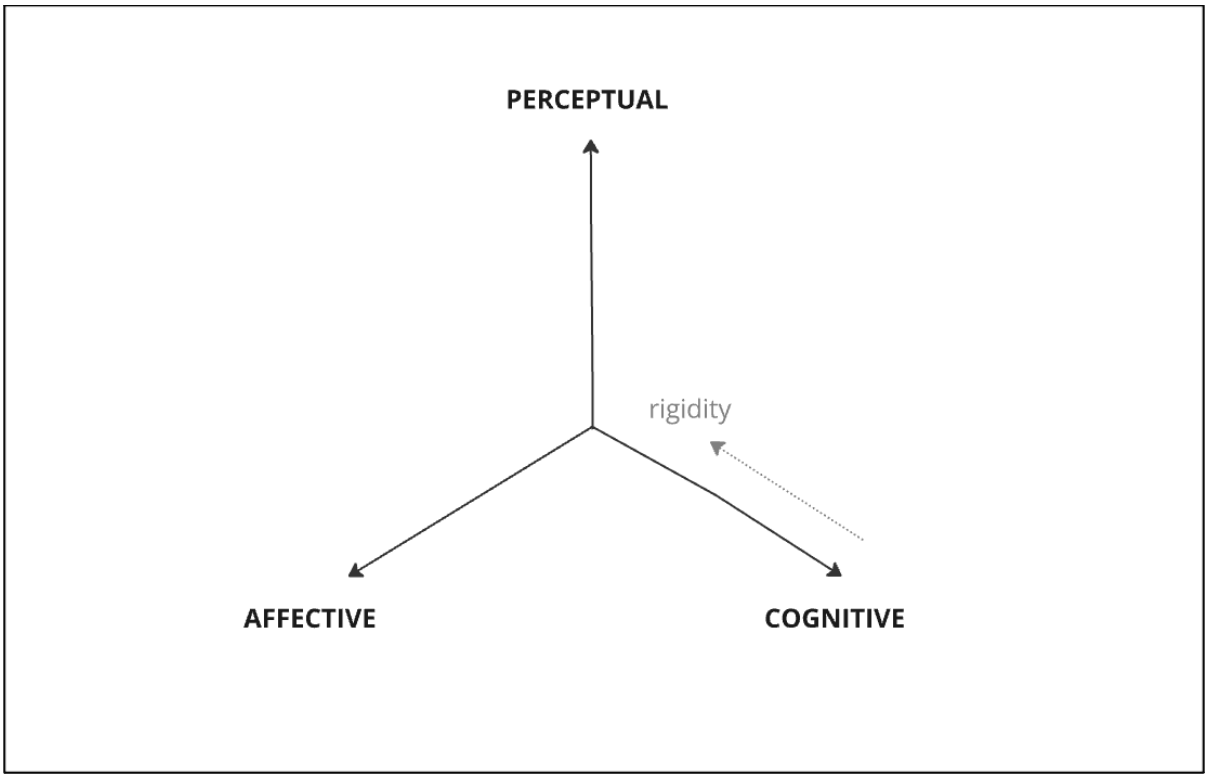


Fig.1: Dimensions of agency scaffolding created by intervention mechanisms.

This framework can be represented by means of a spider graph (Fig. 1), where each axis represents a type of scaffolding (perceptual, affective, cognitive) that varies according to the freedom left to the individual. In the center of the graph, freedom is minimal, indicating a greater degree of *rigidity* in supporting the action of the individual. As one moves down the axes, the rigidity decreases and the action space that is left to the individual increases. We shall say that a scaffold is "high" or "low" relative to some frame (i.e. affective, cognitive, and perceptual), where a scaffold is "high" on some frame, it means that it leaves more freedom of

action relative to that frame of agency. This graph enables the positioning of interventions according to the degree of scaffolding provided.

To illustrate the framework, consider three cases. The 'Food Positioning' nudge (Fig.2) involves high perceptual scaffolding: it directly structures visual attention and influences choice in a largely pre-reflective way, leaving minimal room for deliberation. Affective scaffolding is weak, as it does not significantly engage emotional responses, and cognitive scaffolding is virtually absent, since the mechanism operates without requiring reflection or understanding.

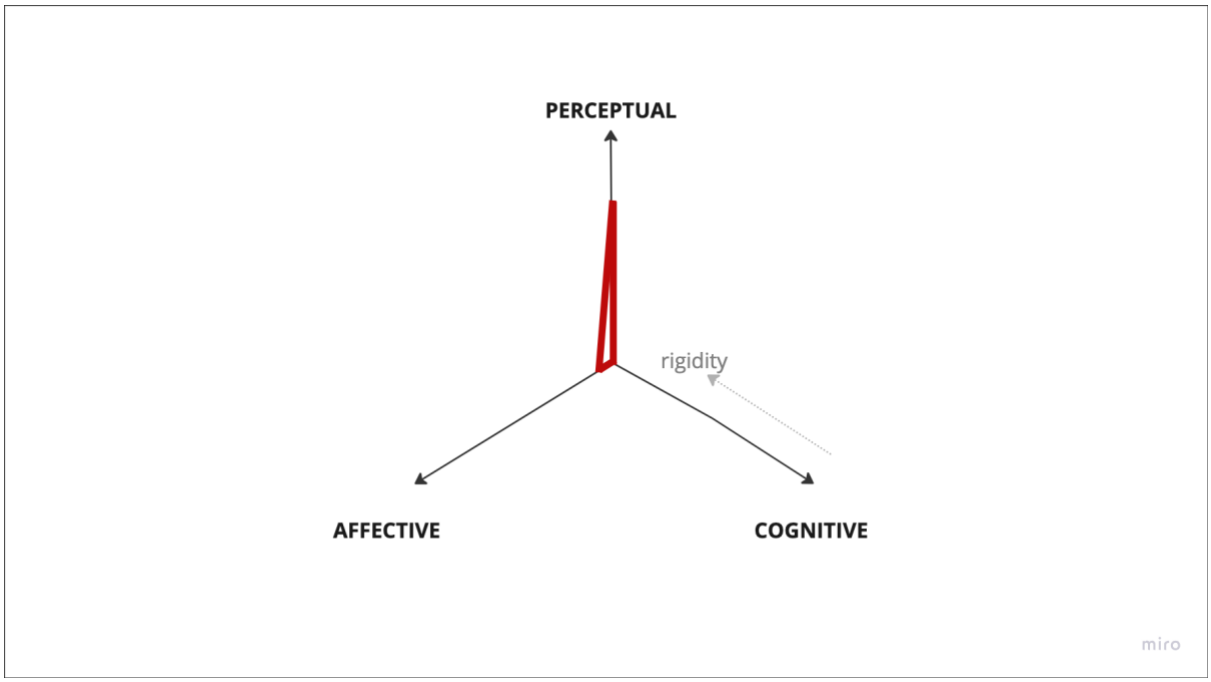


Fig.2: Food Positioning Nudge

The cultural intervention 'Ice Watch' (Fig.3) — which brings blocks of Arctic ice into urban spaces to raise awareness of climate change — exhibits a more balanced profile (§2.2). Perceptual scaffolding is medium-high, given the salience of the anomalous ice blocks. Affective scaffolding is moderate, eliciting emotions such as urgency or sadness, while cognitive scaffolding supports reflection on climate change and expands participants' understanding. Studies of environmental art installations suggest that such multimodal engagement can produce more durable attitude change than information-only interventions (Marks et al., 2016; Roosen et al., 2018).

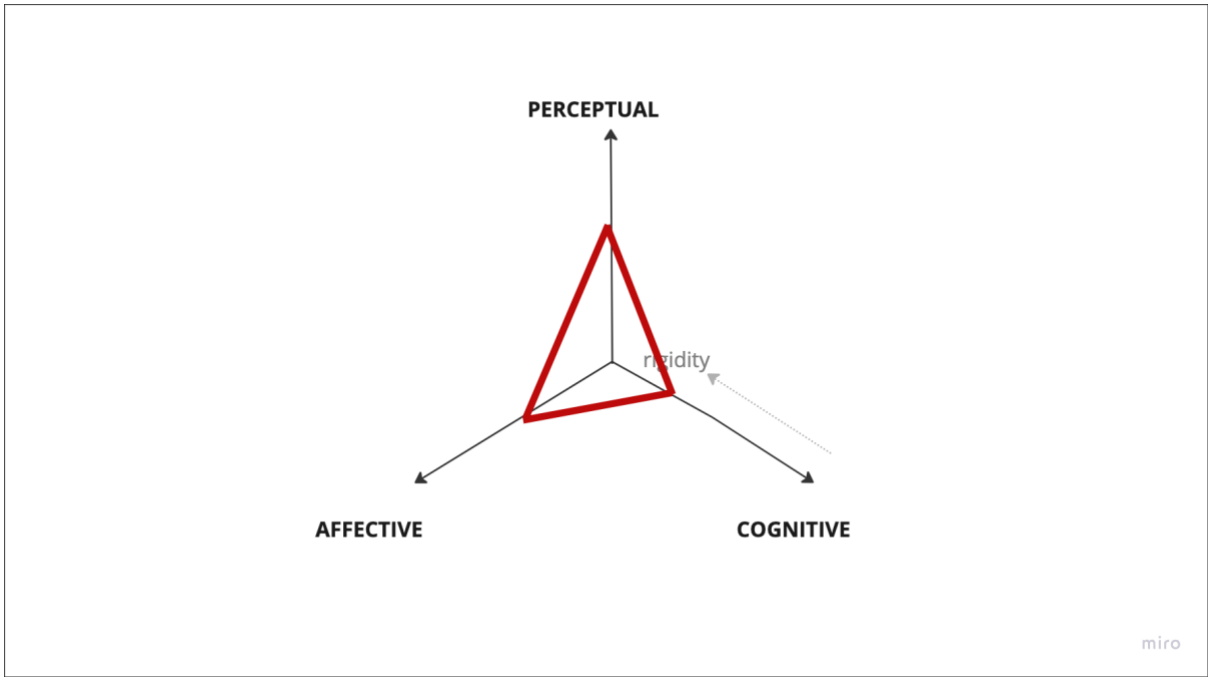


Fig.3 Ice Watch's Installation

Finally, in "El Tendedero" (§2.2) (Fig.4), perceptual scaffolding is moderate: the display renders personal and collective experiences perceptually accessible. Affective scaffolding is high, eliciting emotions such as empathy, indignation, and solidarity. Cognitive scaffolding is likewise strong, prompting reflection on violence and encouraging the reinterpretation of social experience. Research on participatory art and trauma indicates that such interventions can facilitate both emotional processing and cognitive reframing through mechanisms distinct from traditional therapeutic or educational approaches (Sapouna & Pamer, 2016; Green, 2024).

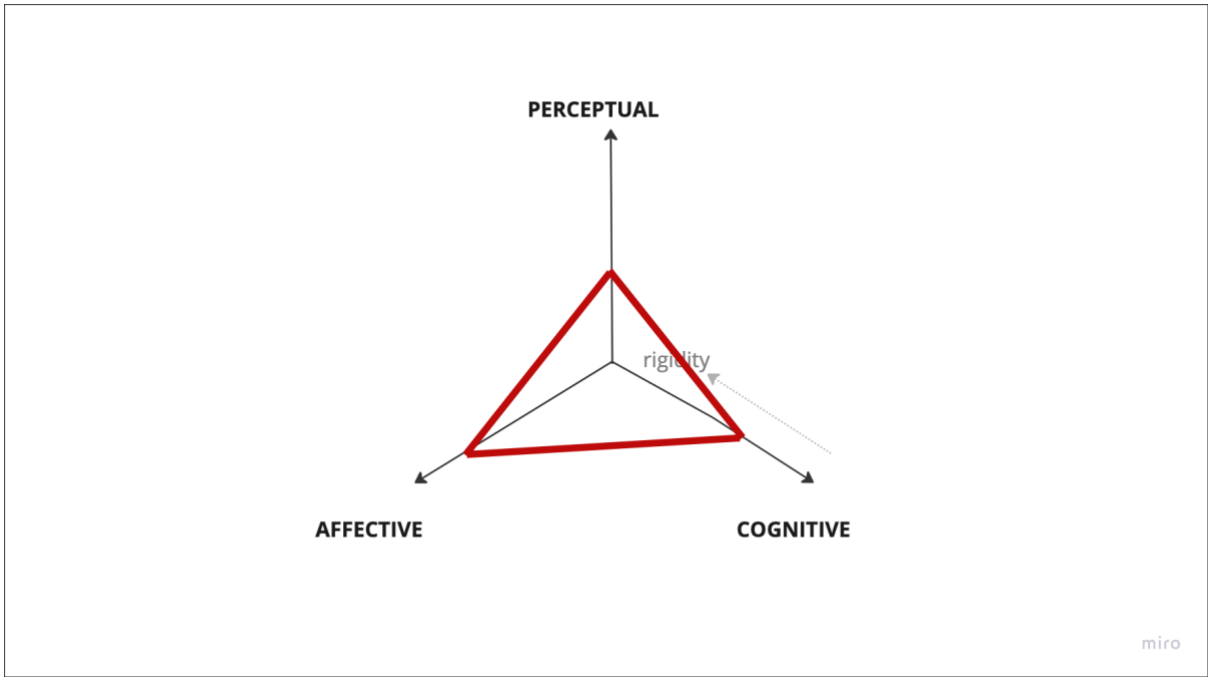


Fig.4. El Tendedero

These examples illustrate how intervention mechanisms shape agency. We construe the frame of agency as an action space, namely a space of possible actions, structured by perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Nudges and cultural interventions are inherently situated: they operate within contexts that constrain this action space. Such constraints derive from (a) the agent's capacities, including both their type and level of proficiency, and (b) contextual factors, including the physical environment and the socio-cultural setting.

The perceptual frame concerns the deployment of attention and sensory engagement (cf. Watzl 2017); the affective frame concerns the range and modulation of emotional responses; and the cognitive frame concerns processes of knowledge, imagination, and understanding. These frames may, but need not, translate into observable behavior. The magnitude of a scaffold refers to the degree to which it modulates a given frame of agency.

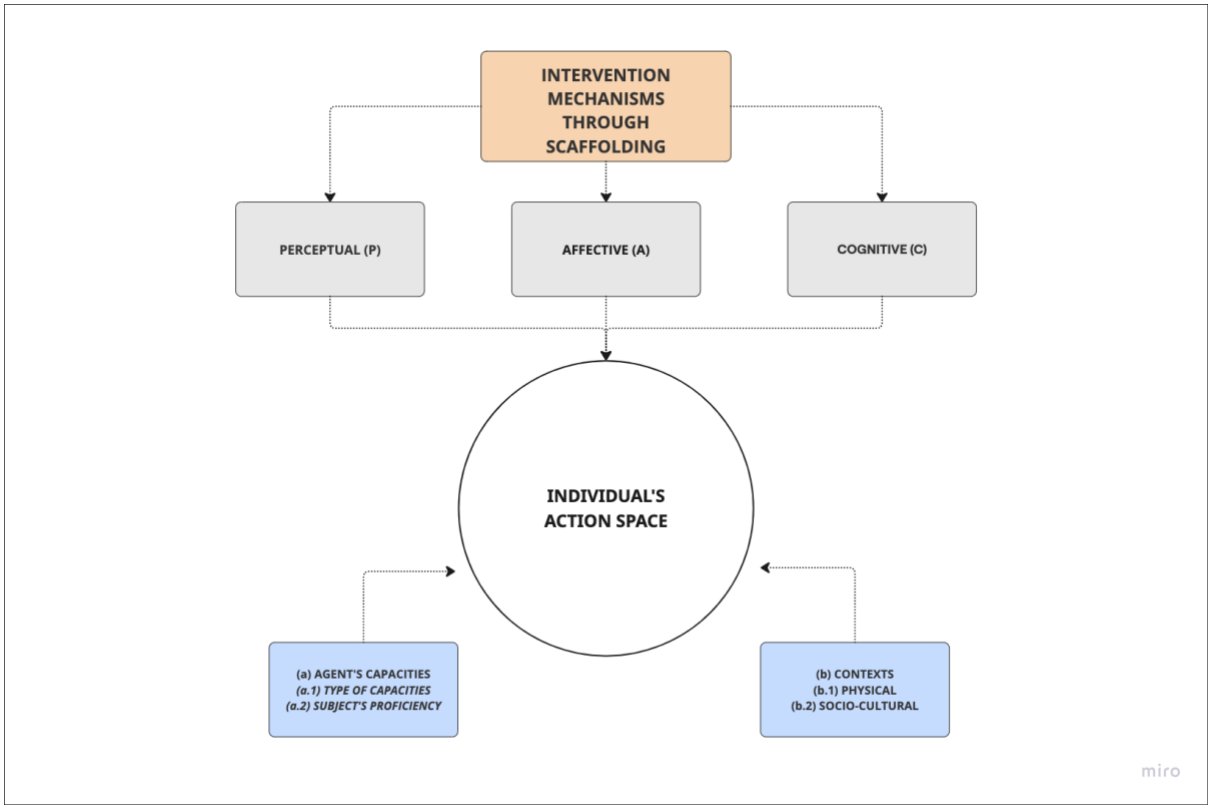


Fig. 5 Individual's Action Space

Intervention mechanisms such as nudges and cultural interventions often scaffold multiple behavioral spaces: rather than operating exclusively at the perceptual, affective, or cognitive level, they can engage all three frames of agency to varying degrees. This allows us to profile interventions along multiple dimensions of scaffolding within the action space (Fig. 5). Scaffolds also vary in rigidity, affording more or less freedom within each frame; in this sense, they shape the space in which individuals can act, reflect, and feel.

Consider Vernazzani's (2023) notion of Art-to-World: engagement with artworks can restructure our perceptual and cognitive orientation, enabling us to recognize aesthetic and expressive properties in our environment. This idea extends to nudges and cultural interventions more broadly. As situated interventions embedded in structured environments, they shape action and, depending on their degree of rigidity, either constrain behavior or foster constructive imagination.

Nudges typically exemplify more constrained forms of agency. By modifying choice architectures, they steer behavior toward specific outcomes with minimal cognitive engagement, for example, through product placement that makes certain options more

perceptually salient. Their effectiveness often depends on targeting automatic, low-deliberation processes (Hummel & Maedche, 2019). Cultural interventions, by contrast, tend to involve richer, multi-dimensional scaffolding across perceptual, affective, and cognitive domains. Rather than channeling behavior toward predetermined outcomes, they create open-ended contexts that invite active interpretation. In doing so, they increase rather than reduce cognitive and affective engagement, positioning participants as co-creators of meaning. The contrast is not absolute but indicative: where nudges prioritize efficiency through constraint, cultural interventions expand the space of agency by cultivating interpretive freedom, often with longer-term effects on how individuals perceive, feel, and think. In other words, both nudges and cultural interventions scaffold agency by modulating the freedom available within perceptual, affective, and cognitive domains. Rather than forming a strict dichotomy, they are best understood as points along a continuum, differentiated by the degree and distribution of scaffolding they impose.

3.2 Intermediate Interventions: Participatory Design, Community-Based Social Marketing, and Gamification

The spectrum developed above has so far been illustrated primarily through its endpoints: nudges as low-agency interventions and cultural interventions such as Ice Watch and El Tendedero as high-agency ones. However, the framework's analytical value depends equally on its capacity to characterize interventions that occupy intermediate positions. Three such cases deserve explicit treatment: participatory design, community-based social marketing (CBSM), and gamification.

Participatory design involves stakeholders directly in the process of creating solutions, products, or policies that affect them (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). On the scaffolding account, participatory design exhibits moderate-to-high cognitive scaffolding, since participants are invited to deliberate, imagine alternatives, and contribute to the design of outcomes. Affective scaffolding is moderate: the process engages ownership and collective investment, though affective engagement is typically instrumental rather than transformative. Perceptual scaffolding is relatively low, as the intervention does not primarily restructure sensory experience. The resulting profile is distinctive: unlike nudges, participatory design requires active cognitive engagement; unlike cultural interventions, it is oriented toward functional outcomes rather than open-ended meaning-making.

Community-based social marketing (CBSM), as developed by McKenzie-Mohr (2011), combines behavioral insights with community engagement to promote sustainable behaviors. CBSM identifies specific barriers to action and designs interventions that address them through commitments, social norms, prompts, and incentives embedded in community contexts. Its scaffolding profile is mixed: perceptual scaffolding is moderate, as environmental prompts and cues restructure attention; cognitive scaffolding is moderate, engaging participants in identifying barriers and solutions; affective scaffolding varies, depending on whether the intervention mobilizes community solidarity or relies primarily on instrumental incentives. CBSM thus occupies a genuine middle ground: it goes beyond the pre-reflective targeting of nudges by involving communities in the design process, but it remains more goal-directed and behaviorally oriented than cultural interventions.

Gamification applies game-design elements such as points, levels, challenges, and narrative framing to non-game contexts in order to motivate engagement (Deterding et al., 2011). Its scaffolding profile depends heavily on implementation. At its most constrained, gamification resembles a sophisticated nudge: perceptual scaffolding is high (visual feedback, progress indicators), affective scaffolding is moderate (reward cycles, competitive motivation), but cognitive scaffolding is low if participation requires only compliance with pre-set rules. At its most open-ended, gamification can involve narrative construction, strategic decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving, producing higher cognitive and affective scaffolding. This variability illustrates a key feature of the spectrum: the same intervention type can occupy different positions depending on its design parameters. A further complication deserves acknowledgment: gamification involves extracting ludic elements (reward structures, competition, narrative progression) from their original context of free play and repurposing them for instrumental ends. This decontextualization carries risks. When game mechanics are stripped of the voluntary, autotelic character that defines play (Huizinga, 1949), they may function as elaborate nudges rather than genuine agency-expanding interventions, appealing to extrinsic motivation and compliance without fostering the intrinsic engagement that characterizes higher-agency scaffolding. The scaffolding framework makes this risk analytically visible: gamification designs that preserve open-endedness and interpretive freedom score higher on cognitive and affective scaffolding, while those that reduce participation to stimulus-response loops collapse toward the nudge end of the spectrum, regardless of their ludic surface.

These three cases illustrate how the mid-range of the spectrum is not a theoretical residual but a space of genuine analytical interest. Intermediate interventions combine elements of behavioral steering and agency expansion in ways that neither pure nudges nor cultural interventions do, and the scaffolding framework makes these combinations visible and comparable.

3.3 Agency Scaffolding and the Limits of Belief-Based Accounts

A potential objection to the framework proposed here deserves direct engagement. One might argue that what cultural interventions such as Ice Watch or El Tendedero actually do is change people's beliefs, for instance about climate urgency, about gender-based violence, and that any downstream behavioral or social effects are mediated by this epistemic shift. On this view, the mechanism-level description that does the real explanatory work would be belief change, not agency scaffolding, and the latter would be either redundant or misleadingly abstract.

We argue that this objection, while pointing to something genuine, rests on an empirically and theoretically problematic assumption: that belief change reliably produces behavioral change. This assumption underlies what has been called the information deficit model of behavior, namely the idea that interventions work by generating knowledge, which shapes attitudes, which in turn lead to action (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Despite its intuitive appeal and its continued dominance in policy design, this model does not hold up well in practice. The empirical record on this point is extensive and consistent. In a landmark meta-analysis of 47 experimental studies, Webb & Sheeran (2006) demonstrated that a medium-to-large change in behavioral intention produces only a small-to-medium change in subsequent behavior ($d = 0.66$ vs. $d = 0.36$), establishing experimentally that even caused intention change translates poorly into action. This finding, replicated across domains from health behavior to environmental psychology, points to a structural decoupling between the cognitive-propositional level, where beliefs and intentions reside, and the level of situated action. Kollmuss & Agyeman (2002), in their influential review of pro-environmental behavior research, reach a similar conclusion: the link between environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior is "broadly fractured," and purely cognitive or informational interventions consistently fail to produce the behavioral changes they target. The discrepancy between what people believe and what they do has been documented so persistently across contexts that it now goes under multiple names, namely intention-behavior gap, value-action gap, belief-action gap, KAP-gap, each reflecting the same underlying structural problem (Sheeran & Webb, 2016; Blake, 1999).

This body of evidence has a direct implication for how we should conceptualize intervention mechanisms. If belief change were a reliable path to behavioral and social change, then an intervention framework organized around beliefs would be both theoretically sufficient and practically appropriate. But if the belief-behavior link is systematically weak, as the literature shows, then a framework that targets beliefs directly is not merely incomplete: it is poorly calibrated to the actual mechanisms through which human action changes. The relevant question for intervention design is not only "what does this intervention lead people to believe?" but "what does it make possible for them to do, feel, and reflect upon?", and these are different questions.

This is precisely where the concept of agency scaffolding becomes indispensable. Rather than targeting beliefs as cognitive representations to be updated, the scaffolding framework attends to the structural conditions that shape action: the perceptual opportunities for action available to agents, the affective orientations that motivate or inhibit engagement, and the cognitive resources that enable or foreclose understanding and deliberation. These conditions operate at the interface between agents and their environments, that is the level at which, as research in situated cognition demonstrates, behavior is most proximally organized (Clark, 2008; Hutchins, 2010; Kirsh & Maglio, 1994).

On this account, Ice Watch does not work primarily by updating propositions about climate change in the minds of passers-by. It restructures their perceptual and affective engagement with the material reality of glacial loss: it makes ice present in a city, touchable, melting. Whatever belief revision may or may not follow is downstream of this restructuring of the action space. Similarly, El Tendedero does not function primarily as an argument for taking gender-based violence seriously. It transforms a domestic object into a collective site of testimony, modifying the affective and cognitive space within which participants can act, speak, and recognize solidarity. The mechanism is environmental and relational before it is epistemic.

Crucially, this does not mean that belief change never occurs as a result of such interventions: it may, and often does. But when it does, it does so because the conditions for new understanding have been scaffolded: participants have been moved affectively, their attention has been restructured perceptually, and their cognitive horizons have been expanded. Belief change, in this picture, is a possible trajectory through a restructured action space, not the

mechanism that drives the restructuring. The scaffolding comes first; the epistemic shift, where it happens, is among its effects.

This distinction also carries direct evaluative consequences, which inform the capabilities-based framework developed in §4. If we evaluate interventions by measuring belief change, we capture only one downstream effect, and a fragile one at that, precisely because of the weak belief-behavior link documented above. A capabilities-based evaluation, by contrast, asks whether the conditions for expanded agency have been genuinely created: whether individuals have new perceptual, affective, and cognitive possibilities available to them that were not available before. This is a richer and more adequate criterion for assessing the impact of cultural interventions, and one that is more directly tied to the mechanisms through which they operate.

A clarification is needed regarding the place of behavioral change within the framework. Both the scaffolding account and the evaluative framework developed in §4 below are sometimes read as replacing behavioral change with agency as the relevant object of analysis. This is a misunderstanding. The framework does not deny the importance of behavioral outcomes but reinterprets their explanatory and evaluative status.

The reinterpretation proceeds as follows. Behavioral change, when it is durable and transferable, is best understood as a downstream expression of expanded agency rather than as an independent target. Nudges may produce behavioral compliance, i.e. a specific action performed in a specific context, but this compliance is structurally fragile: it depends on the continued presence of the environmental modification and does not generalize to contexts where the nudge architecture is absent (Szaszi et al., 2022). Cultural interventions, by contrast, aim to restructure the conditions under which agents perceive, feel, and deliberate, producing changes that are in principle transferable across contexts precisely because they operate on capabilities rather than on isolated behaviors.

This asymmetry can be represented within the framework. A complete account of any intervention mechanism should specify both (a) the scaffolding profile, that is, how it structures agency across perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions, and (b) its behavioral orientation, i.e. the degree to which it targets specific, pre-defined behavioral outcomes versus open-ended capability expansion. Nudges are high on behavioral orientation and low on agency scaffolding; cultural interventions are high on agency scaffolding and low on behavioral orientation; intermediate interventions such as CBSM and gamification combine moderate levels of both. This dual characterization avoids telling only half the story: it captures the full

range of mechanisms through which interventions produce change, and maintains the theoretical claim that durable behavioral change is most reliably produced when the conditions for expanded agency have been scaffolded.

Figure 6 represents this dual characterization schematically. The horizontal axis captures the degree of agency scaffolding (composite of perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions); the vertical axis captures behavioral orientation, understood as the degree to which an intervention targets specific, pre-defined behavioral outcomes. The resulting space makes visible the structural differences between intervention types: nudges occupy the upper-left region (high behavioral orientation, low scaffolding), cultural interventions the lower-right (high scaffolding, low behavioral orientation), and intermediate interventions such as CBSM, gamification, and participatory design occupy the middle ground with varying combinations of both. The dashed ellipse around gamification reflects its design-dependent variability (§3.4). The shaded region indicates the typical trajectory along which interventions fall, though exceptions are possible.

Fig. 6: Agency scaffolding and behavioral orientation across intervention types

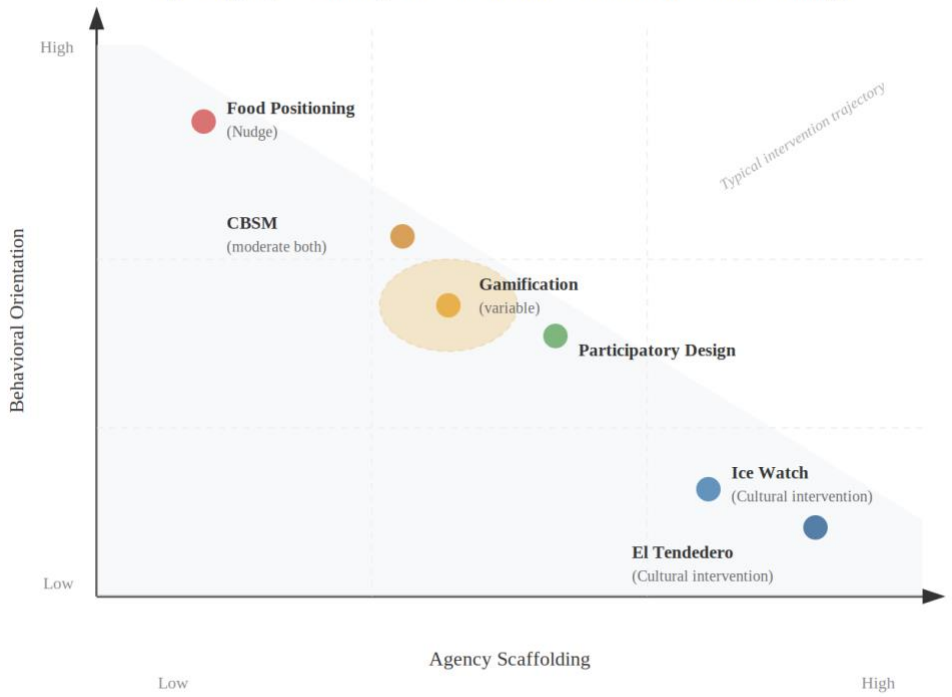


Fig. 6: Agency scaffolding and behavioral orientation across intervention types.

3.4 From Classification to Evaluation

The framework developed in the preceding sections provides a principled theoretical basis for classifying interventions: it explains why nudges and cultural interventions are structurally distinct yet positioned along a continuum, and characterizes how each structures the action space available to agents across perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions. The radar graph representation makes these structural differences visible, but the positioning of interventions along the spectrum is a theoretical characterization, not an empirical measurement. It answers a conceptual question, i.e. what kind of intervention is this, and how does it structure agency?, not an evaluative one: how much agency has actually been expanded, and for whom? These are different questions requiring different tools. The Capabilities Approach, introduced in §4, provides precisely those tools: capabilities depend on the interaction between what an intervention makes structurally possible and the actual conditions, resources, and constraints of the people it reaches, and observing their expansion requires empirical and normative instruments that go beyond structural classification. The relationship between the two frameworks is therefore one of complementarity and sequencing, not redundancy: the scaffolding account provides the theoretical grammar for describing what interventions do; the capabilities framework provides the evaluative vocabulary for assessing what they achieve. Neither is sufficient alone.

A clarification is in order regarding the criteria for distinguishing low-, medium-, and high-agency interventions along the spectrum. One might expect such criteria to be specified within the scaffolding framework itself, as explicit thresholds or operational definitions that allow an observer to classify an intervention independently of its context. We argue, however, that this expectation reflects a misunderstanding of the framework's architecture. The scaffolding account is a classificatory framework: it provides a principled theoretical basis for characterizing how different interventions structure the action space available to agents across perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions. The graph representation makes these structural differences visible, and the examples of Food Positioning, Ice Watch, and El Tendedero illustrate how the framework applies in practice. But the question of how much agency has been expanded, and therefore whether an intervention should be classified as producing low, medium, or high agency effects for a given population, is an evaluative question that cannot be answered from the design of an intervention alone. It depends on the actual conditions, resources, and constraints of the people the intervention reaches. This is precisely the question that the Capabilities Approach, developed in §4, is designed to answer. The criteria for distinguishing levels of agency expansion are therefore not absent from the framework:

they are located in the evaluative phase, where they can be specified contextually through the Defining, Measuring, and Evaluating phases of §4.3. This division of labor between classification and evaluation is not a limitation of the framework but a principled theoretical choice that reflects the situated and context-dependent nature of agency itself.

4. An Impact Evaluation Framework Based on the *Capabilities Approach*

4.1. Introducing the Capabilities Approach

The aim of this section is to integrate the situated perspective on agency introduced above (§3.1) with the Capabilities Approach (CA) (Nussbaum 2011; Robeyns 2017; Sen 1999). This integration is natural: both frameworks conceptualize the agent's freedom as a contextually constrained exercise of capacities. Within the CA, capabilities are understood as relational, depending not only on what individuals achieve but also on the social, economic, and institutional conditions under which they act.[5]

The frame of agency developed in §3 is construed as a "individual's action space" (see Fig. 5) determined by three sets of factors: (a) the agent's capacities, including both the types mobilized and the individual's level of proficiency; (b) the context or situation, encompassing the physical environment and the socio-cultural setting; and (c) further normative constraints on action, such as the socio-cultural-specific norms that regulate the appropriateness of actions in a given context. The same three sets of factors that structure the action space in the scaffolding framework correspond precisely to what Sen and Nussbaum identify as the determinants of capabilities: individual endowments and conversion factors (a), social and environmental conditions (b), and institutional and normative structures (c). In both frameworks, freedom is relational: it is something that emerges from the interaction between what agents bring to a situation and what their situation makes available to them. A capability, on Sen's account, is a real opportunity, not an abstract possibility, but one that is genuinely accessible given the agent's actual conditions. An action space, on the situated cognition account, is similarly constrained by contextual or environmental structures, not what an agent could in principle do, but what the structured environment actually makes possible for them to perceive, feel, and think.

[5] The CA has been empirically applied to evaluate public health interventions, demonstrating its utility in capturing multidimensional outcomes beyond traditional metrics (Lorgelly et al., 2010; Greco et al., 2016).

It follows directly from this correspondence that when nudges and cultural interventions scaffold the subject's freedom to exercise agency, that is modifying their action space across perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions. They are, by the same token, acting on that agent's capabilities. An intervention that expands the perceptual and affective space available to a participant creates real opportunities for functionings that were not previously accessible: new forms of understanding, new emotional orientations, new possibilities for collective action. Conversely, an intervention that constrains the action space, as nudges typically do by channeling behavior through pre-structured choice architectures, may produce specific functionings while leaving the underlying capability set unchanged or even diminished.

It is worth noting that the capabilities-based evaluative framework developed here would not be equally well-served by a belief-change account of intervention mechanisms. If what cultural interventions do is primarily change beliefs, then evaluation should focus on measuring propositional attitude change, a task for which standard survey instruments are already available. But as shown in §3.2, the belief-behavior link is systematically weak, which means that an evaluative framework organized around belief change would be poorly calibrated to detect the actual effects of interventions. The capabilities framework, by contrast, asks whether new possibilities for action, feeling, and understanding have been genuinely created, a question that remains evaluatively appropriate regardless of whether those possibilities are subsequently exercised. This is a further reason why the CA is the right evaluative partner for the scaffolding account, and not merely a contingent choice: both frameworks are oriented toward conditions of possibility rather than toward discrete cognitive states.

Following Sen and Nussbaum, Robeyns (2017) distinguishes between functionings — the states of being and doing an individual actually achieves — and capabilities, understood as the real opportunities to achieve those functionings. Capabilities concern what is possible; functionings, what is actual. For instance, being educated is a functioning, whereas the genuine opportunity to access education is the corresponding capability. Crucially, capabilities do not exist in isolation: they depend in part on the actions and decisions of others and on broader structural conditions. A woman's access to higher education, for example, may be constrained by the social structures in which she is embedded.

This distinction highlights an important feature of the CA: while some functionings may be treated as broadly universal, capabilities are often deeply context-dependent, as they vary with existing social arrangements. This context sensitivity is essential for understanding how

different types of interventions expand or constrain opportunities across populations (Östlund 2024). It also aligns naturally with our account (§2), which emphasizes the importance of opportunities rather than mere outcomes.

Although nudges and cultural interventions occupy different positions on a spectrum of intervention, they share the aim of promoting socially beneficial change. In complex environments, however, access to such interventions typically requires significant cognitive and motivational engagement. Whether individuals can recognize and take up these opportunities depends on their capabilities. Empirical work on cultural participation supports this view, showing that engagement both presupposes and cultivates capabilities, generating a recursive dynamic between participation and opportunity (Zitcer et al. 2016).

As noted in §2.3, a key challenge is the lack of a clear conceptual framework for characterizing interventions and assessing their effectiveness. The issue of characterization has been addressed in §3. What remains is to articulate an evaluation framework. From a capabilities perspective, evaluation must consider not only outcomes (e.g., participation rates) but also whether individuals have genuine opportunities to achieve them, given existing constraints. On this view, interventions can be understood as attempts to reshape capabilities by scaffolding agency.

To operationalize this framework, we follow Robeyns (2017) in adopting a modular approach to the Capabilities Approach. Specifically, we draw on what she terms the necessary design choices: the structural components that must be specified according to the context and purpose of any given application of the CA. These choices establish the evaluative architecture within which the impact of different intervention types can be assessed. They include**:**

- **Purpose:** The goal of the intervention or evaluation, such as improving well-being, reducing inequality, or fostering social agency, which guides all subsequent decisions.
- **Selection of Dimensions:** Identification of the specific functionings and capabilities relevant to the context. Depending on the intervention's objectives, these may include dimensions such as environmental literacy, empathic understanding, expressive voice, or civic engagement.
- **Human Diversity:** Recognition of the variations in individuals' contexts and conversion factors, ensuring that the framework remains sensitive to different needs and circumstances rather than assuming a uniform population.

- **Focus on Agency:** Specification of the level of agency the intervention aims to promote, ranging from structured behavioral choices, as in nudges, to open-ended co-creation, as in participatory cultural interventions.
- **Structural Constraints:** Identification of the systemic barriers, socioeconomic inequality, cultural norms, institutional access, that may limit individuals' ability to convert opportunities into expanded capabilities.
- **Evaluative Space:** A determination of whether the evaluation prioritizes capabilities (what individuals are genuinely able to do), functionings (what they actually achieve), or a combination of both, a choice that shapes both what is measured and how results are interpreted.
- **Meta-theoretical Commitments:** The broader normative principles, such as equity, sustainability, social justice, that frame the evaluative exercise and inform how findings are used.

4.2. Impact Evaluation: Strategies

The traditional approach to impact assessment in cultural contexts divides impact into distinct domains: social, cultural, economic, and environmental. Social impact (Takyi 2014; Vanclay et al. 2015) concerns effects on social cohesion, participation, and inclusion. Cultural impact (Partal & Dunphy 2016) addresses the preservation, transformation, and innovation of cultural identity and heritage. Economic impact (Pagiola 1996) evaluates contributions to local economies and sustainable development. Environmental impact (Morgan 2012; Canter and Wood 1996; Glasson & Therivel 2013) includes both direct and indirect effects on environmental awareness and practices. Increasingly, these domains are treated holistically in order to capture their interdependence (Soini & Dessein 2016).

Our CA-based framework does not aim to replace these approaches, nor does it simply integrate them into a unified model. Instead, it shifts the evaluative perspective. The focus is not on aggregating domain-specific outcomes, but on assessing how interventions shape what individuals are able to do and be. This perspective is person-centered, but not individualistic: it is explicitly situated, emphasizing how capabilities and functionings are co-determined by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This shift entails a corresponding methodological inversion. Standard impact assessments typically begin with predefined outcome categories and then measure their realization. A capabilities-based approach reverses this order. It starts from the analysis of the concrete freedoms and constraints that structure participants’ agency

in specific contexts, and only then asks what counts as meaningful change. What matters, on this view, is not merely whether outcomes are achieved, but whether individuals genuinely have the opportunity to achieve them.

To operationalize this inversion, the framework we propose proceeds through three interconnected phases. These phases are designed to capture both the situated variability of capabilities and the different ways in which interventions scaffold agency across the spectrum from nudges to cultural interventions. This approach responds to longstanding concerns in cultural policy research about the limits of outcome-driven evaluation. As Belfiore (2002) argues, attempts to reduce cultural engagement to predefined social effects risk overlooking how culture actually functions in people's lives. A capabilities-based framework offers a middle path: it preserves the normative importance of evaluating interventions, while providing tools sensitive to the contextual and experiential dimensions of cultural participation.

4.3. The Capabilities Approach as Framework of Assessment

The CA-based framework for impact evaluation we propose consists of three interconnected phases:

(i) Defining. This is the phase related to the application of the *Capabilities Approach*. It consists of the identification of objectives and dimensions as set out in paragraph 4.1, as well as specific functions and capabilities to be expanded, agency, and constraints.

(ii) Measuring. Combine qualitative and quantitative methods to assess how interventions expand capabilities and transform agency. *Qualitative methods*: Participant interviews and ethnographic observations to capture subjective experiences. *Quantitative methods*: Metrics such as social network analysis to evaluate changes in community engagement or pre- and post-intervention surveys to measure shifts in empathy or empowerment.

(iii) Evaluating**.** Compare the outcomes achieved in phase (ii) with the pre-defined objectives emerging from phase (i) and integrate the findings into broader normative frameworks, such as equity or sustainability, to assess the systemic relevance of the intervention.

A central feature of the framework is the role of agency in differentiating types of intervention. Interventions can be positioned along a spectrum depending on how they scaffold or constrain agency. As we have seen (§3), nudges typically operate under conditions of reduced agency, steering behavior within pre-structured choice architectures. Cultural interventions, by contrast, tend to engage participants in reflective and creative processes that expand their capacity for self-directed action. This difference is not incidental: it directly affects how capabilities are defined, measured, and evaluated across the three phases.

Each phase is applied to specific cases in order to demonstrate the framework's adaptability across different intervention types.

(i) Defining

The **Defining** phase involves five elements: (1) identifying the objectives of the intervention; (2) specifying the dimensions and capabilities to be expanded; (3) consideration of human diversity, or how the intervention accounts for differences in individual and contextual factors, ensuring inclusivity and adaptability; (4) positioning the intervention on the agency spectrum to determine whether it functions primarily as a nudge or a cultural intervention; (5) considering external or systemic factors that may limit the intervention's effectiveness or accessibility; (6) specifying whether the intervention prioritizes capabilities, functionings, or both as its evaluative space; and (7) reflecting on broader theoretical principles that inform the intervention, such as equity, justice, or sustainability. The level of agency (4), therefore, serves not as an evaluative criterion but as a conceptual tool to differentiate between these intervention types and clarify their intended mode of engagement.

Cultural Intervention – Ice Watch

Purpose	Inspire awareness of climate change and foster emotional and civic engagement.
Selection of Dimensions	Environmental literacy (understanding climate impacts), emotional resonance (connecting with the urgency of climate change), and civic engagement (mobilizing collective action)
Human Diversity	Accounts for diverse environmental knowledge, emotional responses, and sociocultural contexts, ensuring accessibility for individuals

	regardless of their prior awareness of climate issues
Focus on Agency	Medium- High. Participants are invited to freely interpret the sensory experience and decide how to act upon the emotional and intellectual stimulus, placing this firmly in the realm of cultural intervention
Structural Constraints	Limited by logistical barriers, such as the physical reach of the installation, reliance on media coverage, and potential for unequal access based on location.
Choices	Prioritizes capabilities, particularly the ability to understand climate science (cognitive capability), and connect emotionally to environmental challenges (emotional capability), while also fostering functionings related to reflection and action.
Meta-theoretical Commitments	Aligns with principles of sustainability and the promotion of global environmental consciousness.

Cultural Intervention – El Tendedero

Purpose	Promote awareness and solidarity regarding gender-based violence while empowering participants to share their narratives
Selection of Dimensions	Emotional expression (articulating personal stories), relational empathy (connecting with others' experiences), and collective solidarity.
Human Diversity	Designed to accommodate participants from diverse cultural, social, and personal backgrounds, particularly those affected by gender-based violence.
Focus on Agency	High. Participants actively shape the intervention through their personal contributions, sparking a co-creative process that emphasizes reflection and collective action. Positioned as a cultural intervention.
Structural	Faces societal stigma, cultural taboos, and potential resistance to

Constraints	discuss gender-based violence openly.
Choices	Emphasizes capabilities, to articulate personal stories (expressive capability), empathize with others (relational capability), and mobilize for social justice (civic agency).
Meta-theoretical Commitments	Rooted in frameworks of social justice and equity, particularly regarding gender equality and empowerment.

Nudge – Food Positioning

Purpose	Encourage healthier eating habits through strategic adjustments to food placement.
Selection of Dimensions	Nutritional awareness, behavioral adjustment, accessibility of healthy options.
Human Diversity	Individual dietary preferences, cultural attitudes toward food, and socioeconomic barriers to accessing healthier options could be taken into account, however, this dimension is not necessarily present.
Focus on Agency	Low. The intervention relies on choice architecture to subtly steer decisions, categorizing it as a nudge.
Structural Constraints	May be less effective in environments with limited availability of healthy food or resistance to behavioral change.
Choices	Emphasizes functionings, such as immediate behavioral shifts toward healthier choices, over long-term capabilities.
Meta-theoretical Commitments	Supports public health goals, particularly those addressing diet-related diseases and long-term well-being

(ii) Measuring

The **Measuring** phase combines qualitative and quantitative methods to assess how interventions expand capabilities and influence agency. Research on capability measurement has developed various instruments and approaches, from standardized capability questionnaires to context-specific participatory methods (Anand & van Hees, 2006; Lorgelly et al., 2015; Frediani, 2019). Following the example of the present study, for Ice Watch, qualitative instruments include participant interviews to capture emotional and cognitive responses to the installation, as well as observation of public discussions and actions inspired by the intervention, such as environmental campaigns or policy advocacy; quantitative methods involve surveys measuring changes in environmental awareness and willingness to adopt sustainable behaviors, alongside tracking of media coverage and event participation rates to evaluate the intervention's reach. For El Tendedero, qualitative analysis focuses on narratives shared by participants to identify recurring themes of empowerment and solidarity, and on observation of interactions among contributors and attendees to assess the creation of a reflective community space; quantitative instruments include counts of stories contributed and pre- and post-intervention surveys measuring changes in empathy and willingness to discuss gender-based violence. For the Food Positioning nudge, qualitative interviews explore participants' awareness of the nudge and its influence on their decision-making, while quantitative analysis of sales data tracks changes in the purchase of healthier food options and demographic data is used to assess the intervention's differential impact across participant groups.

(iii) Evaluating

The **Evaluating** phase compares the outcomes achieved in phase (ii) with the pre-defined objectives emerging from phase (i) and integrate the findings into broader normative frameworks, such as equity or sustainability, to assess the systemic relevance of the intervention. For Ice Watch, evaluation assesses whether the intervention increased environmental literacy and motivated sustained civic engagement, and examines its alignment with sustainability goals such as increased participation in climate activism or public policy discussions; studies of similar environmental art interventions suggest possible capability expansion effects in terms of enhanced environmental agency and collective efficacy (Galafassi

et al., 2018). For El Tendedero, evaluation examines whether the intervention led to greater awareness and advocacy against gender-based violence, and attends to the emergence of longer-term impacts such as support networks or advocacy campaigns within frameworks of social justice and equity; experimentation with participatory arts addressing trauma has shown capability development in areas of voice, narrative agency, and collective action (Maguire & McCallum, 2019). For the Food Positioning nudge, evaluation compares observed behavioral changes to the intervention's objective of encouraging healthier eating and assesses the potential for sustained dietary improvements; longitudinal studies of nudge interventions have shown varying sustainability of effects, with some behaviors reverting when environmental modifications are removed (Ling et al., 2023), which underscores the structural difference between behavioral compliance and genuine capability expansion.

5. Discussion

The framework developed in this paper responds to a problem that is at once theoretical and methodological. The absence of a principled account of how cultural interventions work and through what mechanisms they produce change, and for whom has long constrained the quality of impact evaluation in cultural policy. As Belfiore and Bennett (2010) argue, the dominant "toolkit" approaches to evaluation are not merely technically insufficient: they are conceptually inadequate, because they presuppose a linear relationship between cultural activity and measurable outcome that fails to capture the complexity of cultural engagement. What this paper adds to that critique is a diagnosis of why this inadequacy persists, and a framework for addressing it.

The core problem is one of misalignment between the level at which cultural interventions operate and the level at which their effects are typically measured. Standard evaluation frameworks focus on behavioral outputs, such as attendance figures, attitude surveys, short-term behavioral change, because these are tractable and quantifiable. But as the agency scaffolding account developed in §3 makes clear, cultural interventions operate primarily at a different level: they modify the structural conditions (perceptual, affective, and cognitive) within which individuals and communities act. These modifications may or may not translate into immediately observable behavioral change; when they do, the causal pathway runs through transformed capabilities, not through direct behavioral steering. Measuring outputs without attending to this intermediate level is not merely imprecise: it systematically misses what cultural interventions actually do.

This misalignment has a further consequence that deserves explicit attention. When evaluation frameworks are calibrated to detect behavioral outputs, they implicitly model cultural interventions as if they worked like nudges, namely producing discrete, measurable behavioral shifts through targeted stimuli. But as the spectrum developed in this paper shows, nudges and cultural interventions are structurally distinct: they operate through different mechanisms, target different dimensions of agency, and produce different kinds of change at different timescales. Conflating them methodologically, i.e. evaluating both by the same behavioral metrics, not only produces inaccurate assessments of cultural interventions; it actively distorts the understanding of what cultural policy can and should aim to achieve.

The capabilities-based evaluation framework proposed in §4 addresses this misalignment by inverting the standard evaluative logic. Rather than beginning with predefined outcome categories and measuring their realization, it begins from the analysis of the concrete freedoms and constraints that structure participants' agency in specific contexts, and asks what counts as meaningful change from that starting point. This inversion has direct methodological implications. It requires evaluation instruments that can detect changes in capabilities, that is in what individuals are genuinely able to do, feel, and reflect upon, rather than changes in discrete behaviors. It requires longitudinal designs, because capability expansion unfolds over time and may not be visible at the moment an intervention ends. And it requires context-sensitive methods, because the same intervention may expand very different capabilities depending on the structural conditions (social, economic, institutional) within which it is embedded.

This methodological reorientation has implications that extend beyond evaluation technique. If cultural policy is to be assessed in terms of capability expansion rather than behavioral output, the criteria by which interventions are designed, funded, and compared must also change. Policymakers would need to specify, at the outset of an intervention, which capabilities they aim to expand, for which populations, and under what structural constraints: the questions that the necessary design choices of the capabilities approach, as developed in §4.1, is designed to answer. This is a more demanding form of accountability than the one currently required by most evaluation frameworks, but it is also a more honest one: it forces an explicit confrontation with the normative assumptions embedded in cultural policy, rather than allowing them to remain implicit in the choice of metrics.

Several limitations of the framework must be acknowledged. First, capability expansion is inherently harder to measure than behavioral output, and the methodological infrastructure for doing so at scale remains underdeveloped. Second, the framework requires interdisciplinary expertise, namely in behavioral science, philosophy of action, and normative theory, that is not always available to practitioners or policy institutions. Third, the positioned nature of the framework complicates standardization: because capabilities are context-dependent, the same intervention may warrant different evaluative criteria in different settings, limiting the scope for generalizable guidelines. Fourth, while the paper argues theoretically that behavioral change is downstream of agency scaffolding rather than an alternative to it, this relationship remains empirically undemonstrated within the present framework. The claim that scaffolding perceptual, affective, and cognitive conditions leads to more durable and transferable behavioral change than direct behavioral targeting is a theoretical prediction, not an established finding. Empirical validation of this causal pathway represents a priority for future research and a necessary condition for the framework's full operationalization. These are genuine constraints, but they are constraints on implementation, not on the validity of the framework itself. They point toward a research agenda rather than a refutation.

That agenda has several priority directions. Empirical work is needed to develop and validate capability-sensitive measurement instruments that can be deployed in real evaluation contexts. Research should investigate how interventions can be dynamically adjusted along the agency spectrum as participants develop greater capacity for self-direction, including when lower-agency interventions can function as stepping stones toward higher-agency engagement rather than substitutes for it. Finally, the growing availability of digital technologies opens the possibility of more adaptive forms of agency scaffolding that combine the efficiency of nudges with the empowerment potential of cultural interventions, and the ethical and methodological implications of such hybrid approaches deserve systematic attention.

6. Conclusions

This paper proposes a unified framework for conceptualizing and evaluating nudges and cultural interventions by situating them along a spectrum of agency. Drawing on situated cognition and the Capabilities Approach, it addresses persistent conceptual and methodological ambiguities by shifting evaluation away from resource-based or metric-driven models toward an account grounded in degrees of freedom. This reframing captures cultural interventions as complex processes capable of generating multidimensional and long-term change.

Methodologically, the framework replaces reactive, outcome-based evaluation with a model of proactive intervention design. It enables policymakers to select and calibrate interventions on the basis of explicit theoretical principles, while bridging behavioral science and normative evaluation. Its modular structure — distinguishing perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions of scaffolding — provides a diagnostic tool that can be applied across contexts without sacrificing rigor.

For practitioners, this approach offers a way to navigate the tension between accountability and cultural complexity. Rather than relying on simplified outcome metrics, interventions can be assessed in terms of how they expand capabilities under specific constraints. In this sense, cultural policy is not merely a matter of delivering outcomes, but of structuring the conditions under which agency can develop.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the causal claim that agency scaffolding produces more durable behavioral change than direct behavioral targeting remains a theoretical prediction that requires empirical validation through longitudinal comparative studies. Second, the operationalization of capability-sensitive measurement instruments at scale is an ongoing methodological challenge. Third, the context-dependence of capability assessment limits the scope for standardized evaluative guidelines across different policy settings. These constraints point toward a research agenda prioritizing the development of validated scaffolding indicators, longitudinal tracking of capability expansion, and comparative studies across intervention types, and should not be read as a refutation of the framework itself.

More broadly, the framework functions as both an analytical model and a practical resource for designing socio-cultural interventions, supporting approaches that address concrete challenges while enabling individuals and communities to shape their own trajectories.

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Conclusions

This thesis has addressed a persistent blind spot in both cultural policy and regional development research: the difficulty of conceptually and methodologically capturing the impact of cultural interventions in peripheral territories without reducing them to either symbolic value or instrumental outcomes. By bringing together cultural economics, regional studies, cognitive sciences, and the capabilities approach, the thesis advances a framework that repositions impact evaluation as a problem of agency, mediation, and mechanisms, rather than one of isolated indicators or sectoral effects.

A first major contribution concerns the problem of impact evaluation itself. The thesis shows that much of the existing literature remains trapped in what has been described as a "toolkit approach" (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010) to cultural impact, where heterogeneous indicators are applied ex post without a clear theory of change linking intervention, experience, and outcome. This approach proves particularly inadequate in peripheral contexts, where cultural interventions do not simply add value to existing systems, but often reconfigure the very conditions under which social, economic, and cognitive processes unfold. The thesis therefore argues that impact cannot be meaningfully assessed without first clarifying what kind of intervention is at stake and what form of change it is expected to generate. In this sense, impact evaluation is shown to be inseparable from intervention theory.

This leads to the second advancement of the thesis: the analytical characterization of cultural interventions. Rather than treating culture as a homogeneous category, the thesis conceptualizes cultural interventions as intentional mechanisms that scaffold agency, operating across perceptual, affective, cognitive, and social dimensions. Drawing on situated and enactive approaches to cognition, cultural interventions are not understood as stimuli that produce linear behavioral responses, but as environments that enable individuals and communities to reorganize their interpretive frameworks, emotional dispositions, and future-oriented expectations. This characterization proves crucial for impact evaluation: without specifying how an intervention acts upon agency (whether it constrains, nudges, or expands it) any attempt at measurement risks conflating fundamentally different processes under the same evaluative lens.

In this respect, the thesis advances a relational and process-oriented understanding of impact, where change is not limited to observable behaviors or economic outputs, but includes

transformations in people's capacity to perceive possibilities, imagine alternatives, and engage meaningfully with their environment. This move allows the thesis to overcome the dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental value that has long structured debates in cultural policy. Cultural interventions are neither reducible to economic multipliers nor insulated in an autonomous symbolic sphere; they operate instead as mediating infrastructures that shape how individuals and communities relate to place, time, and collective futures.

The third and most integrative contribution of the thesis lies in the construction of a regional development approach capable of making visible the mechanisms through which cultural interventions mediate wellbeing in peripheral territories. By embedding the analysis within the capabilities approach, the thesis reframes regional development not as the accumulation of assets, but as the expansion of substantive freedoms (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2017) under conditions of structural constraint. Peripheral territories are shown to be characterized not only by material scarcity, but by limited horizons of action, weakened institutional mediation, and reduced opportunities for collective sense-making. Cultural interventions, when properly designed and governed, can intervene precisely at this level: not by compensating for deficits, but by reconfiguring the action space within which individuals and communities operate.

The empirical and theoretical analyses developed in the thesis demonstrate that cultural interventions mediate wellbeing through a set of intertwined mechanisms: by fostering embodied and affective engagement with place; by enabling shared narratives and forms of collective recognition; by activating forms of agency that are anticipatory rather than reactive. These mechanisms are particularly relevant in peripheral contexts, where standard development policies often fail to address the experiential and cognitive dimensions of marginality. The thesis thus shows that culture contributes to regional development not simply by attracting resources or visitors, but by reshaping how territories are lived, interpreted, and projected into the future.

From a methodological standpoint, the thesis proposes a shift from outcome-driven evaluation to mechanism-sensitive impact assessment, grounded in the analysis of agency scaffolding and capability expansion. This does not imply abandoning measurement, but rather reorienting it: indicators must be derived from an explicit theory of intervention, attentive to context, diversity, and temporal depth. In this sense, the capabilities-based framework developed in the

thesis offers a way to reconcile democratic accountability with the complexity of cultural processes, without falling into either normative inflation or reductive quantification.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the field by demonstrating that evaluating cultural impact in peripheral territories requires more than better indicators: it requires a reconceptualization of what counts as impact, of how cultural interventions operate, and of how development itself is understood. By foregrounding mediation, agency, and mechanisms, the thesis opens a pathway toward a more robust, interdisciplinary, and policy-relevant understanding of culture as a driver of wellbeing-oriented regional development.

The findings of this thesis have direct and non-trivial implications for cultural policy, regional development strategies, and impact evaluation frameworks, particularly in relation to peripheral and marginalised territories. These implications concern not only what should be supported through public policy, but how cultural interventions are designed, classified, and evaluated.

First, cultural policy requires a shift from output-oriented funding to mechanism-sensitive intervention design. Public policies continue to support cultural initiatives primarily through indicators related to attendance, economic spillovers, or sectoral growth. The thesis shows that such criteria are insufficient when applied to interventions whose primary effects operate through agency expansion, cognitive reconfiguration, and social mediation. Policy frameworks should therefore require an explicit theory of intervention as a condition for funding: cultural projects should articulate the mechanisms through which they are expected to act on individuals and communities (e.g. perceptual, affective, cognitive, or relational mediation), rather than merely listing expected outputs. This would enable policymakers to distinguish between fundamentally different types of interventions that are currently evaluated under the same metrics, in line with critiques of the “toolkit approach” to cultural impact evaluation

Second, cultural interventions should be classified according to their degree of agency scaffolding, not their sectoral domain. The thesis demonstrates that the key policy-relevant distinction is not between “arts”, “heritage”, “participatory culture”, or “creative industries”, but between interventions that constrain, guide, or expand agency. Policymakers should therefore adopt classificatory frameworks that position interventions along a spectrum of agency scaffolding, ranging from low-agency mechanisms (e.g. nudges and informational campaigns) to high-agency cultural interventions that enable reflective, embodied, and co-

creative engagement. This would allow public authorities to align intervention types with policy goals more coherently, for instance, recognising that interventions aimed at long-term wellbeing, social resilience, or democratic capacity require higher degrees of agency than those aimed at short-term behavioural adjustment.

Third, impact evaluation frameworks should prioritise capability expansion over isolated behavioural change. In peripheral territories, policies that focus exclusively on observable behaviours or economic indicators risk overlooking the structural conditions that limit people's ability to convert resources into valued functionings. The capabilities-based framework developed in the thesis implies that cultural policies should be evaluated in terms of their contribution to expanding real opportunities: opportunities to participate, to imagine alternative futures, to build social relations, and to engage meaningfully with place. This requires evaluation protocols that combine qualitative and longitudinal methods with quantitative data, and that explicitly differentiate between immediate functionings and longer-term capability formation. Such an approach allows policymakers to justify cultural investment not as symbolic expenditure, but as structural intervention on the conditions of wellbeing.

Fourth, regional development strategies should recognise cultural interventions as mediating infrastructures, not ancillary assets. Cultural policy is often treated as complementary to "core" development strategies focused on infrastructure, labour markets, or service provision. The thesis suggests a different approach: cultural interventions function as mediating infrastructures that shape how individuals and communities relate to these very systems. In peripheral territories, where institutional density is low and future horizons are often compressed, cultural interventions can restore forms of collective sense-making and anticipatory agency that are prerequisites for sustainable development. Regional policies should therefore integrate cultural interventions upstream in development planning, rather than relegating them to compensatory or cosmetic roles.

Fifth, place-based policies should explicitly leverage the embodied and experiential dimensions of wellbeing. Standard wellbeing metrics tend to privilege subjective satisfaction or objective living conditions, but neglect the embodied, affective, and spatial dimensions through which wellbeing is actually lived. The thesis shows that cultural interventions mediate wellbeing precisely by reconfiguring how people experience their environment, how they perceive opportunities, relate to others, and inhabit place. Policymakers working in peripheral areas should therefore support interventions that operate on these experiential layers, recognising

that wellbeing is not only a matter of access to services, but of meaningful engagement with one's social and physical surroundings.

Finally, cultural policy evaluation must be reframed as a learning-oriented process rather than a compliance exercise. If cultural interventions are understood as context-sensitive mechanisms rather than standardised treatments, evaluation cannot be reduced to ex post accountability. Instead, impact assessment should function as a reflexive governance tool, supporting adaptive learning across policy cycles. This implies investing in evaluation capacities at the local level, fostering collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and institutions, and accepting a degree of epistemic uncertainty as intrinsic to high-agency interventions. Such a shift would allow cultural policy to move beyond defensive justification and toward a more mature role within public action.

Taken together, these policy implications suggest that supporting culture in peripheral territories is not primarily a matter of increasing cultural supply, but of designing and governing interventions that expand agency under conditions of constraint. By aligning cultural policy with a capabilities-oriented understanding of development, policymakers can better harness culture's distinctive capacity to mediate wellbeing, social cohesion, and future-oriented transformation.

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