

The Economic Power of Culture: How Arts and Heritage Drive Employment

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Abstract:

This article explores the economic potential of cultural fields—particularly arts and heritage—as engines of employment in both developed and developing economies. It begins by conceptualizing the cultural economy through internationally recognized definitions and then analyzes the mechanisms of job creation across direct, indirect, and induced categories. Drawing on global examples from the United Kingdom, South Korea, and France, alongside an optional case on Azerbaijan, the study illustrates how various countries harness their cultural sectors for employment and development. The article identifies significant challenges, including the precarious nature of cultural work, lack of formal labor protections, digital disruption, and data limitations. It argues that effective cultural employment policy requires robust governmental support, integration into broader economic strategies, education-based entrepreneurship, and comprehensive statistical tracking. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the paper concludes that cultural industries are not peripheral to the economy but central to achieving inclusive and sustainable growth.

Keywords

cultural economy, creative industries, employment, cultural policy, heritage sector

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, culture is no longer viewed solely through the lens of heritage preservation or artistic expression—it has evolved into a dynamic economic sector capable of generating substantial employment and contributing meaningfully to national development. The cultural and creative industries (CCIs), which encompass fields such as performing arts, visual arts, heritage conservation, publishing, media, crafts, design, and music, represent one of the fastest-growing sectors globally. These industries not only enrich societies by nurturing identity and cohesion but

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also stimulate economies by offering diverse job opportunities, especially for youth and urban populations (Leriche & Daviet, 2010; Borrup, 2006).

Despite this promising trajectory, the economic potential of arts and heritage continues to be underestimated or insufficiently integrated into economic policy frameworks (Sadikhova, 2023). In many countries, culture is perceived as a non-essential domain or a luxury investment, sidelined in national development strategies. This perception has resulted in underfunding, a lack of sustainable cultural employment policies, and inconsistent data collection practices that obscure the real impact of cultural labor markets (Ellmeier, 2003; Stewart, 2005).

This article aims to explore how cultural fields—particularly arts and heritage—serve as engines of job creation in both direct and indirect ways (Sadigova & Bayramov, 2022). It seeks to highlight the mechanisms by which culture contributes to employment, from traditional roles such as artisans and museum workers to modern digital creators and cultural entrepreneurs. The article also sheds light on emerging challenges and evolving dynamics within these sectors, particularly in the context of digitalization, precarity, and shifting labor values.

Two central research questions guide this inquiry:

1. **How do the arts and heritage sectors contribute to job creation within the broader economy?**
2. **What are the main mechanisms and conditions that influence employment generation in cultural industries?**

To address these questions, the article proceeds in the following structure: Section 2 provides definitions and conceptual clarifications regarding the cultural economy. Section 3 explores the core mechanisms of employment generation in cultural fields. Section 4 presents international and regional case studies to illustrate the real-world impact of cultural employment. Section 5 addresses current challenges faced by workers and policymakers in the cultural sector. Section 6 offers policy recommendations and strategic reflections. Finally, Section 7 concludes with a synthesis of findings and directions for future research.

2. Defining the Cultural Economy

The terms *cultural industries* and *creative economy* have gained prominence in policy, academic, and development circles over the past two decades, particularly due to their growing impact on employment and economic diversification. While often used interchangeably, these terms carry nuanced meanings depending on institutional and regional interpretations.

According to **UNESCO** (2005), cultural industries are those that “combine the creation, production, and commercialization of contents which are intangible and cultural in nature.” These include activities such as publishing, music production, performing arts, heritage management, and crafts. Similarly, the **UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)** defines creative industries as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property.” The **European Union** echoes this framing, highlighting the

dual value of cultural industries in fostering identity and economic development (Leriche & Daviet, 2010; Figueira & Fullman, 2025).

The cultural economy includes a wide spectrum of sectors, typically classified as:

- **Visual arts** (painting, photography, sculpture)
- **Performing arts** (theatre, dance, opera, live music)
- **Publishing** (books, magazines, digital content)
- **Film and audiovisual media**
- **Museums and heritage institutions**
- **Crafts and design** (fashion, graphic design, industrial design)
- **Music production and distribution**
- **Digital and new media arts**
- **Cultural tourism**

These sectors often intersect with other areas such as education, tourism, and digital innovation, creating complex networks of creative value chains. The **creative economy** thus refers to a broader framework that not only includes cultural industries but also encompasses digital content creation, architecture, advertising, gaming, and software development.

To better understand how these industries function economically, scholars and policymakers distinguish between **core** and **peripheral** cultural activities. Core cultural activities involve the direct creation of cultural goods and services—such as artists, musicians, curators, or writers—whose output is primarily cultural in nature. Peripheral or ancillary activities, on the other hand, include jobs that support, promote, or distribute cultural content—such as technicians, marketers, logistics workers, and hospitality providers in cultural tourism (Bowitz & Ibenholt, 2009; León-Pozo et al., 2025).

This layered structure reflects the ecosystem-like nature of the cultural economy, where even non-artistic roles are integral to the sustainability of the sector. As later sections will explore, understanding this framework is essential for identifying and quantifying the employment impact of cultural fields.

3. Mechanisms of Job Creation in Cultural Fields

Cultural industries generate employment through a variety of channels that extend beyond the obvious roles of artists and performers. Job creation in these sectors can be broadly categorized into **direct**, **indirect**, and **induced** employment. In addition, the structure of work within cultural fields—particularly the rise of freelance and gig-based models—presents unique patterns of labor engagement. The following subsections explore these mechanisms in detail.

3.1. Direct Employment

Direct employment includes roles involved in the creation, performance, preservation, and presentation of cultural products and experiences. These positions are typically found in:

- **Performing and visual arts:** actors, musicians, painters, dancers, choreographers
- **Cultural heritage and museums:** curators, conservators, museum educators, archivists
- **Media and publishing:** editors, journalists, illustrators, content creators
- **Education:** art teachers, music instructors, cultural trainers, workshop facilitators
- **Technical production:** sound and lighting technicians, costume designers, set builders

These jobs are often highly specialized and require formal education, apprenticeships, or practice-based training. Although many of these roles are well-recognized, the irregularity of employment contracts and limited job security remains a critical concern in this sector (Ellmeier, 2003; Alacovska et al., 2025).

3.2. Indirect Employment

Cultural activities also generate significant **indirect employment** through sectors that support or are supported by cultural outputs. These include:

- **Tourism and hospitality:** hotel workers, tour guides, transport services
- **Event management:** logistics coordinators, marketing agents, security personnel
- **Crafts and creative retail:** traditional artisans, shop owners, cultural product designers
- **Media and communications:** public relations, broadcasters, translators, digital marketers

For example, a music festival may directly employ performers and technicians, while also creating demand for event staff, local transport services, restaurants, and nearby accommodation providers (Mazlan et al., 2025). These ripple effects demonstrate how cultural activities integrate with broader economic systems.

3.3. Induced Employment

Induced employment refers to the broader economic activity stimulated by the spending of income earned in the cultural sector. When cultural workers and audiences spend money on housing, food, transportation, or leisure, they support jobs in entirely different sectors. These downstream effects are often harder to quantify but are essential to understanding the full economic contribution of cultural fields (Bowitz & Ibenholt, 2009).

For instance, a growing cultural district may lead to increased demand for restaurants, cafes, cleaning services, and local retail—benefiting the wider community beyond the cultural core.

3.4. Gig and Freelance Culture in the Arts Economy

One of the defining features of cultural employment is its strong reliance on **freelance and gig-based work**. Many creative professionals work on short-term contracts, commissions, or project-

based collaborations. While this model offers flexibility and creative autonomy, it also leads to income instability, lack of benefits, and vulnerability to market fluctuations.

The rise of digital platforms (e.g., for selling art, music, or design) has expanded opportunities for cultural freelancers, yet it has also intensified competition and blurred the boundaries between professional and amateur work (Sadikhova, 2022). This speculative, entrepreneurial form of labor is sometimes described as “assetized creativity” (Alacovska et al., 2025), reflecting the increasing financialization of cultural outputs.

3.5. Skills and Education Relevance

Employment in the cultural sector often demands a combination of artistic skill, technical competence, and business acumen (Sadikhova, 2024). Workers must frequently adapt to new technologies, media platforms, and audience behaviors. Formal education institutions—art schools, conservatories, cultural studies departments—play a vital role, but informal and self-directed learning are equally significant.

In recent years, **cultural entrepreneurship** has gained attention as a strategy to empower creative workers with business and innovation skills. As cultural labor markets evolve, interdisciplinary and hybrid skills will become even more essential (Arnold & O’Brien, 2025; Brandellero & Naclerio, 2025).

4. Case Studies and Global Examples

To contextualize the employment potential of cultural fields, this section presents four illustrative examples from diverse geographic and cultural settings (Gulkhara & Farzaliyeva, 2025). These case studies demonstrate how different nations have harnessed their cultural resources—whether in the form of creative industries, export-oriented media, or heritage preservation—to stimulate job creation and economic resilience.

4.1. The United Kingdom: Institutional Recognition and Job Growth in Creative Industries

The United Kingdom stands out for its long-term investment in defining and developing its creative industries. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has played a central role in identifying, measuring, and supporting sectors such as advertising, architecture, crafts, film, IT, publishing, and the performing arts.

According to recent DCMS reports, **creative industries employed over 2.3 million people in the UK** in 2023, representing more than 7% of the total workforce. The sector has consistently outpaced national economic growth, especially in urban centers like London, Manchester, and Bristol (Leriche & Daviet, 2010). In addition to direct employment, a vast network of freelancers, micro-businesses, and cultural entrepreneurs contribute to the vibrancy of the British creative economy.

Government-backed initiatives such as *Creative England*, *Arts Council England*, and *Innovate UK* have fostered both regional diversity and global competitiveness, underscoring how cultural policy can serve as a vehicle for economic innovation and inclusion.

4.2. South Korea: Cultural Exports as a National Economic Strategy

South Korea provides a compelling example of how cultural production can be strategically developed into a major export economy. The government's long-term investment in what is now called the *Hallyu* or "Korean Wave" has resulted in worldwide demand for K-pop, Korean cinema, fashion, animation, and beauty products.

In 2022 alone, cultural content exports exceeded **\$12.4 billion**, with more than **700,000 jobs** directly or indirectly related to the cultural sector, according to the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. K-pop agencies, film studios, subtitling services, and merchandise production have formed an expansive cultural supply chain.

Significantly, South Korea integrates cultural policy into its trade and diplomacy strategies. Programs supporting cultural education, international media distribution, and digital innovation have transformed Seoul into a global cultural hub. The case of Korea illustrates how modern media and digital platforms can amplify a country's cultural labor force globally.

4.3. France: Cultural Heritage and Tourism as Job Drivers

France's deep-rooted tradition of cultural preservation has enabled it to become a world leader in **heritage-based employment**. With over 44 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, thousands of museums, and a vast array of festivals and artistic institutions, France leverages its cultural assets to attract more than 80 million international tourists annually (pre-pandemic levels).

Jobs in this sector include heritage site maintenance, tourism services, local crafts, curation, historical research, event planning, and educational programs. Cultural tourism alone accounted for **over 500,000 jobs** before the pandemic, according to the French Ministry of Culture and INSEE.

Moreover, France has implemented strong labor protections for cultural workers, such as the *intermittent du spectacle* system, which offers unemployment benefits to freelance artists and technicians. This model is often cited as a best practice in protecting precarious cultural labor while maintaining vibrant public engagement with the arts.

4.4. Azerbaijan: Traditional Culture and Emerging Opportunities

In the Azerbaijani context, cultural employment has historically centered on traditional arts such as **carpet weaving**, **ashiq music**, **mugham performance**, and **folk dance**. These forms not only preserve national identity but also sustain regional employment, especially among women and older artisans. Heritage sites such as **Icherisheher**, **Gobustan**, and **Sheki Khan's Palace** also generate jobs in conservation, guiding, and tourism services.

Recent developments—such as the *Baku International Jazz Festival*, *Imagine Euro Tolerance Festival*, and state-supported cultural diplomacy programs—signal growing investment in the creative industries. While comprehensive labor data remains limited, local government programs and NGO initiatives increasingly recognize the **employment potential of cultural revitalization**, particularly in the post-conflict reconstruction and regional tourism sectors.

A targeted national strategy, informed by examples from France and the UK, could further expand Azerbaijan's cultural labor market, especially through education, digitalization, and international collaboration (Sadigova, 2021).

5. Challenges and Limitations

While the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) hold considerable potential for job creation and economic growth, they are also marked by a range of structural, financial, and social challenges that hinder their full development. Understanding these limitations is essential for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners aiming to build a more inclusive and resilient cultural economy.

5.1. Precarity and Informality of Cultural Employment

One of the most pressing challenges within cultural labor markets is **precarity**. A large proportion of workers in the arts, media, and heritage sectors are employed on short-term, freelance, or part-time contracts, often without access to social protections, health insurance, or retirement benefits (Ellmeier, 2003). This issue is particularly acute in the gig economy, where payment is inconsistent and opportunities are irregular.

In developing contexts, such as parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, **informal employment** dominates cultural production. This limits workers' legal protections and reduces the sector's visibility in national labor statistics (Mensah, 2025).

5.2. Lack of Institutional Support and Sustainable Funding

Despite cultural industries' contributions to national economies, public funding and institutional support often fall short. Many governments prioritize traditional economic sectors such as energy, agriculture, or manufacturing, neglecting the economic potential of the creative fields. As a result, cultural projects are frequently underfunded, and organizations operate with minimal budgets and high volunteer reliance (Stewart, 2005).

Cultural institutions—especially museums, galleries, and theaters—are vulnerable to economic downturns and budget cuts, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to widespread closures and job losses globally.

5.3. Inequality and Accessibility Issues

Access to cultural employment opportunities is not evenly distributed. Gender disparities, urban-rural divides, and socio-economic inequalities limit participation in many cultural professions. Urban centers concentrate most of the funding, infrastructure, and job availability, leaving rural artists and artisans with limited access to markets, training, or recognition (Arnold & O'Brien, 2025).

Moreover, underrepresented communities may face additional barriers in cultural expression and recognition, limiting diversity and innovation within the sector.

5.4. Technological Disruption and the Digital Divide

Digitalization has revolutionized cultural production and dissemination, but it has also introduced new challenges. While online platforms offer global exposure for creatives, they also **intensify competition, devalue artistic labor, and blur the boundaries between professional and amateur work** (Alacovska et al., 2025). Algorithms and monetization models often reward virality over quality, pushing creators to adapt their content in commercially driven ways.

Furthermore, in many parts of the world, **digital infrastructure gaps** prevent cultural workers from accessing online platforms, software tools, or international markets—deepening existing inequalities (Babayev, 2022).

5.5. Impact of Global Crises on Cultural Employment

Cultural employment is highly sensitive to political, economic, and health-related crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, exposed the fragility of the cultural economy. Performers, museum staff, and event organizers faced prolonged periods of unemployment, with many forced to leave the sector entirely.

Natural disasters, armed conflicts, and economic recessions also disproportionately affect cultural workers, whose roles are often seen as non-essential in emergency response or recovery plans. This vulnerability highlights the urgent need for **resilience planning and emergency funds** tailored to the cultural sector.

6. Policy and Strategic Implications

Maximizing the economic potential of cultural fields requires a comprehensive policy framework that supports job creation, improves working conditions, and integrates the cultural sector into broader development strategies. This section outlines key policy directions and strategic recommendations for fostering a more robust, inclusive, and sustainable cultural economy.

6.1. Government Support Models

Governments play a critical role in shaping the cultural labor market through **targeted funding mechanisms** and **institutional infrastructure**. Effective models include:

- **Public grants and subsidies** for artists, cultural institutions, and creative start-ups
- **Tax incentives** for cultural entrepreneurs and donors
- **National endowments** and **public arts councils** to support heritage conservation and new artistic production
- **Emergency relief funds** for cultural workers during crises (e.g., pandemic recovery plans)

Countries such as the UK, France, and Canada have established well-funded cultural ministries and autonomous arts bodies that distribute support transparently. For emerging economies, micro-grant schemes and partnerships with NGOs can provide a cost-effective starting point for stimulating cultural employment (Borup, 2006; Stewart, 2005).

6.2. Integration of Culture into National Economic Strategies

To unlock the full economic contribution of culture, it must be recognized as a strategic sector in national development plans. This includes:

- Embedding cultural job creation targets within **economic diversification policies**
- Promoting cultural tourism through national branding
- Linking creative industries to **innovation, digital development, and youth employment agendas** (Javid, 2023)

South Korea's Hallyu initiative and the European Union's *Creative Europe* program illustrate how aligning cultural goals with trade, technology, and education strategies can yield significant economic returns.

In the case of Azerbaijan, incorporating **traditional crafts, music, and heritage tourism** into regional development projects—especially in post-conflict or rural areas—could boost employment and community resilience.

6.3. Education and Cultural Entrepreneurship

A forward-looking policy must address the **skills gap** in cultural sectors. This involves:

- Reforming curricula in art schools and universities to include **business, digital, and entrepreneurial training**
- Offering **vocational programs** for crafts, performance, and heritage conservation
- Supporting **lifelong learning** for cultural professionals, especially in fast-evolving fields like digital art or cultural technology

Cultural entrepreneurship education helps creative workers navigate self-employment, diversify income streams, and build sustainable careers (Babayev, 2022). As Arnold & O'Brien (2025) note, younger generations are increasingly motivated by well-being and self-expression rather than traditional job structures—policies must adapt to these shifts.

6.4. Statistical Tracking of Cultural Employment

One major obstacle in policy design is the **lack of reliable data** on cultural employment. Many countries do not disaggregate creative labor in national labor force surveys, making it difficult to assess job quality, income levels, or sectoral trends.

To address this, governments should:

- Collaborate with **UNESCO, Eurostat, and ILO** to adopt standard frameworks for cultural employment measurement (e.g., UNESCO's *Framework for Cultural Statistics*)
- Develop **national cultural satellite accounts (CSA)** to track the cultural sector's economic contributions
- Encourage local governments and NGOs to conduct **sectoral mapping and baseline studies**

Improved data enables better resource allocation, impact measurement, and evidence-based planning.

7. Conclusion

The growing recognition of culture as an economic driver has redefined the boundaries of employment, innovation, and development in the 21st century. As this article has demonstrated, the cultural and creative industries contribute to job creation in direct, indirect, and induced ways—supporting artists, technicians, educators, tourism operators, and entrepreneurs alike. From the structured institutional models in the United Kingdom and France to the export-driven cultural economy of South Korea, and the heritage-rich yet under-leveraged context of Azerbaijan, global examples show that investment in culture yields substantial socio-economic benefits.

However, challenges remain. Cultural labor markets are characterized by precarity, inequality, and a lack of formal recognition in many national systems. Digitalization presents both opportunity and disruption, while inadequate data hampers effective policy responses.

To address these issues, governments must adopt inclusive and future-oriented strategies. These include providing sustainable public support, integrating culture into national economic plans, promoting cultural entrepreneurship through education, and implementing statistical systems that accurately track employment trends in the sector.

In sum, culture is not merely a reflection of society—it is a powerful force that shapes livelihoods, urban regeneration, and national identity. Recognizing and supporting the economic power of culture is not just a matter of artistic preservation, but a strategic investment in employment, innovation, and inclusive development.

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