IFFR and the Role of Cross-Cultural Dialogue Among Young Audiences

Student Name: Beatriz Quevedo Carballo

Student Number: 564099

Supervisor: Fraser Robinson

Master in Media and Creative Industries

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master Thesis

June 25th, 2025

Word Count: 16007

IFFR and the Role of Cross-Cultural Dialogue Among Young Audiences

ABSTRACT

In an era of cultural polarization and algorithmic media consumption, it becomes increasingly important to encourage cross-cultural dialogue among young people. This thesis explores how the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) facilitates cross-cultural dialogue between young audiences (ages 18-25). While the literature is rich in examining programming and the festival industry, little is known about how young audiences experience cultural difference through film festivals. By acknowledging festivals as curated contact zones, this research highlights the ways in which young attendees engage emotionally, socially, and digitally with international cinema.

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study featured ten semi-structured interviews with young IFFR attendees. The thematic analysis of the interviews illustrates the ability of IFFR's programming, filmmaker Q&As, and spatial arrangement to help facilitate cross-cultural dialogue by encouraging emotional identification and intercultural exchange. The participants reported how they connected with unfamiliar cultural contexts, engaged with peers through post-screening discussions, and broadened their dialogue into online spaces such as Instagram and Letterboxd.

Physical and symbolic barriers to access were also present, including ticket prices, prioritizing festival industry representatives, and limitations regarding institutional outreach. Although they did have institutional outreach components and aimed to attract youth through student program participation and digital communication, structural inequalities and varying levels of engagement prevented equal access. Despite this, young audiences were found to be active cultural interpreters who reframed global cinema through personal experience, digital commentary, and social dialogue.

This research contributes to festival studies through the lens of young audiences as co-creators of cultural meanings. The practical implications of this research refer to ways in which festivals can enable equal active participation and amplify diverse voices. On a social level, this research finds value in illustrating the transformative capacity that cinema has to generate opportunities for intercultural empathy, meaningful engagement, and youth agency in an increasingly polarized media landscape.

KEYWORDS: cross-cultural dialogue, film festivals, IFFR, young engagement, intercultural communication

Table of Contents

1. **Introduction**

In an increasingly polarized society shaped by media algorithms, the ability to engage with different cultures is gaining importance. Cross-cultural dialogue can be defined as the interactive process through which individuals from different cultural backgrounds communicate, interchanging ideas and opinions with the aim of achieving mutual comprehension and meaning making (Adler & Aycan, 2018, p. 308). Additionally, it involves an open-ended interaction that challenges assumption, and produces new meanings. Aririguzoh (2022) claims that successful cross-cultural communication involves a certain degree of cultural literacy and competence. It enables to transcend the miscommunication and misunderstanding that is normally experienced because of different cultural assumptions and symbolic meanings (p. 2).

Furthermore, film festivals are valuable cultural institutions, acting as platforms of cinematic exchange, artistic exchange, and cross-cultural encounters (Diestro-Dópido, 2021, p. 15). They allow conversation to occur in the form of cinematic narrative, interaction with the audience, and post-movie discussions where films create a space for dialogue across national, linguistic, and ideological borders (Diestro-Dópido, 2021, p. 15).

The International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) is well-known for its dedication to international and independent film, and it is a platform where diverse audiences encounter international narratives and aesthetics (IFFR, 2025). In contrast to commercial mainstream theaters or streaming websites, which are prone to reinforce algorithmic content suggestion, film festivals expose viewers to unfamiliar and challenging perspectives, allowing space for cultural negotiation and exchange (Chan, 2011, p. 253).

Amidst the growing globalization of media consumption, it is valuable to know how festivals work as a place of cross-cultural exchange. IFFR, through its varied programming, allows for contact among global filmmakers and audiences. In this regard, the role of IFFR is important, as the festival has had a long-standing tradition of inclusiveness and transnationalism. This is seen through their different programming sections such as Bright Future, which aims to showcase emerging talents from filmmakers around the world. Additionally, the IFFR Media Outreach & Inclusion Scheme aims to make the festival more inclusive and accessible to underrepresented audiences through initiatives such as collaborating with schools or universities or providing discounted tickets to students or community groups (IFFR, 2025). Therefore, the festival promotes a cosmopolitan cinema culture, introducing its audiences to new and different forms of cinematic languages. (IFFR, 2025). Unlike larger festivals such as Cannes or Venice, which emphasize industry networking and exclusivity, IFFR has built its identity around accessibility, diversity, and independent filmmaking (Pedersen & Mazza, 2011, p. 145; IFFR, 2025). IFFR's mission is to "expand, enrich, and challenge people's views of the world and each other through film and audiovisual arts" (IFFR, 2025). However, while there has been considerable research on festival programming and industry networking, little research has been done on how young audiences experience cross-cultural film experiences at IFFR. Existing literature tends to focus on institutional analysis, or the relevance of festivals, without taking into account how people think and feel about festivals. This thesis seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the ways young audiences engage with different cultures at IFFR, as active participants in meaning-making.

In order to understand its significance, it is important to delve into the festival experience itself. According to Koehler (2012), cinephilia is at the heart of film festival culture, which explores a passion for cinema as both cultural memory and art. Genuine cinephilic festivals do not simply screen films, but also advocate for cinema as art and culture, offering spaces in which past, present, and future cinematic traditions intersect (Koehler, 2012, p. 83). IFFR mirrors this ethos by combining historical retrospectives with experimental current productions. This, it fosters temporal and stylistic diversity that can encourage cultural dialogue.

International film festivals like IFFR are important for expanding the cultural understanding of audiences. This is especially true in a media world where algorithms and platforms often shape what people see. Unlike streaming services that usually stick to what people already like, festivals carefully choose a variety of films that encourage viewers to explore new cinematic experiences. Liang (2023) describes festivals as "irreplaceable", as they contribute to a unique cultural perspective to the diversity of world films (p. 13). Additionally, festivals are important places for different cultures to communicate and share new insights. By showing different political, language, and stylistic-based films, festivals do not simply make different things accessible, but also provide places where individuals can meet, understand, and debate these differences in a meaningful manner (Liang, 2023, p. 14). It can therefore be stated that film festivals act as a cultural foundation connecting diverse people from different cultures, which is important for young audiences growing up in this increasingly polarized society.

The potential of film festivals to make contributions to public value is particularly relevant in the current media culture. Zemaitye et al. (2024) discuss that public value in the case of cultural industries comes through diversity, innovation, and democratization of access to cultural products (p. 3). A crucial aspect of how film festivals contribute to public value is through curating diverse programming of films that disrupt dominant narratives, amplifying marginalized voices. They enhance the cultural sphere by offering alternatives to commercial media, catering to both local and international audiences. (Zemaitye et al., 2024, p. 4). IFFR can therefore be seen as a primal example in this regard. By programming films from underrepresented areas and hosting initiatives such as the Hubert Bals Fund, which supports filmmakers from the Global South, the festival not only diversifies its content but also disrupts traditional hierarchies in film production and distribution (IFFR, 2025). In doing so, it supports what Zemaityte et al. (2024) describe as "contributing diversity", which refers to programming that differs from the mainstream and thus contributes to the overall festival (p. 4).

The role of film festivals as cross-cultural instigators is rising as society is increasingly polarized and existing within digital echo chambers. Therefore, film festivals like IFFR are crucial for stimulating cultural awareness among young audiences. Additionally, examining the cross-cultural effect of festivals on young people is increasingly relevant as many festivals face difficulties in attracting young attendees (Puccia et al., 2025, p. 2). However, attracting young people is important for the shaping of culture in cities such as Rotterdam.

Therefore, IFFR serves as a significant case study in the wider problem of youth involvement in film festivals due to their role as future meaning-makers and their importance in engaging with cross cultural

dialogue. Only 18% of film festival attendees in Europe are under the age of 25, which highlights a generational gap in cultural participation, threatening the sustainability of such events for future years (Puccia et al., 2025, p. 2). Like many other festivals around the world, IFFR struggles to gain traction among a younger audience, with the majority of its attendees being older cinephiles (De Valck, 2007, p. 182). As future decision- makers and digital cultural participants, young people play a vital role in shaping how cross-cultural encounters are interpreted, shared, and circulated. However, due to lack of motivation, their participation remains at a low level, without having the opportunities to generate their own interpretations (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 57). Although the festival has engaged in several activities aimed at younger audiences, including student screenings and digital outreach programs, how successful these initiatives have been remains a question (Banerjee, 2024, p. 37). Therefore, it is important to move beyond the perception of youth as passive participants and recognize their significance in actively shaping meaning through interactions such as cross-cultural dialogue. For this reason, festivals should focus and implement youth-driven models of communication rather than top-down strategies, as these can foster authenticity and dialogue-exchange. Youth are therefore not just audiences, but active meaning-makers, and these can be represented through young communicators at film festivals. They have become essential cultural interpreters able to make different films more accessible and relevant to their peers without compromising creative value. (Puccia et al., 2025, p. 9). Puccia et al. (2025) advocate for a shift towards youth-driven communication models, in which young people are enabled to take on the role of cultural intermediaries and co-producers of meaning (p. 5).

In this thesis, IFFR is used as a case study to explore these dynamics. This research specifically examines how IFFR facilitates cross-cultural dialogue among young audiences through programming, outreach strategies, and festival environment. By focusing on young audience members, this research aims to understand how cross-cultural meaning is established, negotiated, and exchanged within the context of a film festival. To guide this investigation, a research question has been formulated: *How does the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) facilitate cross-cultural dialogue among young audiences?*

By situating IFFR within wider debates of cultural diversity and youth engagement, this thesis contributes to an emerging field of research that views audiences as active participants in the cultural process. It therefore emphasizes the significance of film festivals as places of education, negotiation, and transformation within the current and fragmented media landscape.

This thesis will start with a theoretical framework explaining relevant concepts in this research. It will be followed by the methodology, explaining the research process and how it has been conducted. The results section will then discuss the relevant findings from the interviews conducted. A discussion section will be implemented to connect the findings with the literature. Lastly, this will be followed by a conclusion to answer the initial research question.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework will explore how international film festivals are places for cross-cultural dialogue, intercultural exchange, and youth participation. As cultural events in the age of globalization, film festivals act as curated spaces where cinematic narratives and social relations meet. It is therefore important to discuss the mechanisms that facilitate cultural exchange in festivals.

The framework is structured around three interconnected themes. The first theme, Cross-Cultural Dialogue, envisions festivals as intercultural "contact zones" that generate affective and intellectual encounters among global audiences. The second theme, Diversity and Intercultural Connectivity, investigates representation, programming, and structural inclusion within film festivals. Lastly, the third theme, Youth Engagement and Participatory Spaces, highlights the ways young audiences creatively engage and critically question festival culture. Collectively, these lenses provide conceptual tools for analyzing how film festivals function as locations of meaning-making, identity building, and cultural power.

2.1 Conceptualizing Cross-Cultural Dialogue in Film Festivals

2.1.1 Intercultural Dialogue

Cross-cultural communication at film festivals is a two-way process through which people from different cultures share information and achieve understanding. Film festivals should not be conceptualized simply as screens where individuals sit and watch films, but as experimental events where audience members engage with films, festival environments, and other audience members (Koefoed et al., 2020, p. 707). These act as experiences that go beyond the aesthetics; they are social and political too, shaping how audiences engage in cultural differences and discourses at the festival. Film festivals are places to educate and shape identity, especially where institutions are unsupportive (Vanhaelemeesch, 2021, p. 24). This idea shows that festivals are active cultural spaces where audiences do not just watch films, but take part in wider discussions about culture, exchanging meaning. Through understanding festivals as contact zones, these can help cultural exchange. The audience experience is not just determined by films, but by curational, spatial, and institutional environments.

Cross-cultural communication in film festivals can be grasped as a relational process through which different cultural understandings are traded and reinterpreted on various cinematic, social, and institutional terrains. It is not just film content; it encompasses also those moments of encounter between audiences, filmmakers, and curators, both face-to-face and virtual. As Liang (2023) writes, international film festivals play an "irreplaceable role" bringing a distinctive cultural outlook to the variety of world films" and cross-border understanding (p. 14). Therefore, IFFR and other provide a space where difference can be experienced, questioned, and understood together. For young people, these events have the potential to develop cultural knowledge and sensitivity through cinema and discussion, placing the festival as a space of intercultural engagement instead of passive reception.

At film festivals, discussion among different cultures is generally considered as an exchange of ideas, however, affective engagement plays a crucial role in understanding different people. According to Lee et al., (2017) films from different cultures tend to engage our senses and emotions, giving audiences a language and culture transcending experience (p. 9). Koefoed et al. (2020) examine how the emotional intensity within audiences in festivals allows participants to emphasize and relate with stories that differ from their lives (p. 709). Young audiences, more specifically, become invested in films by living through other people's struggles, aspirations, and hopes on screen. This affective connection enables empathy, allowing people to intensely live cultural differences before reflecting upon them. As Vanhaelemeesch (2021) mentions, learning from other cultures occurs best if is drawn from personal experiences and not enforced through strict teaching methods (p. 142). Festivals such as IFFR are multicultural and offer platforms where individuals can emotionally relate to different stories. This can enhance in-depth conversations between cultures and audiences viewing the world with reason as well as emotion.

Film festivals facilitate cross-cultural dialogue in various ways. Screening international films enables viewers to see other cultural narratives, while Q&A and post-film discussions offer the chance for audience members to interact with filmmakers. Additionally, workshops and educational sessions increase audience participation by providing historical and cultural context for films, which facilitates cross-cultural understanding (No Title Productions, 2025). Film festivals help to create community by enabling people to have a sense of belonging through sharing experiences and conversation.

2.1.2 Communication Barriers and Cultural Translation

However, language barriers can make it challenging to understand foreign films. As Howard (2012) mentions, language differences might prevent people from fully enjoying international movies, which requires translation methods like subtitling and dubbing (585). These methods are not just ways to make films easier to understand but are also important in how the culture of the film is presented. As Zhang et al. (2023) mention, dubbing replicates dialogue and recreates linguistic and cultural expressions by adopting elements such as idioms and tone, to make films appealing to the target group (p. 2). Cultural translation has the potential to influence how audiences emotionally engage with characters or values that differ from themselves. Therefore, translation becomes a crucial medium for cross-cultural communication, as viewers often interpret films through their intercultural perspective (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 2). Additionally, minimal linguistic variations within the dubbing processes are sufficient to affect the audience's emotional interpretations. For example, a line that expresses irony or a certain culture's humor in one language will be lost in translation, affecting how the audience perceives the scene (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 2). For this reason, pre-screening introductions and post-screening discussions are important in reducing these barriers by providing additional context, which affects how audiences receive and react to culturally different films (Stevens, 2017).

Beyond language, curatorial framing can shape how culture is translated. Lee (2017) criticizes how Western festivals often present films from non-Western territories with exotic or stereotypical content to meet certain expectations of the audience (p. 38). Western film festivals will celebrate non-Western films

due to their complex storytelling, and will depict them as the "other", failing to generate new understanding of the films (Lee, 2017, p. 80). Similarly, De Valck (2007) notes that international film festivals are drawn to films that adhere to established narratives of suffering, which limits the diversity of cultural expression available to global audiences (p. 94). For members, these biases can change their interpretation of other cultures. These curatorial choices act as a form of cultural translation through the enhanced visibility of certain narratives over others, shaping how global audiences come to understand cultural difference.

2.2 Diversity and Intercultural Connectivity

2.2.1 Framing Diversity

Diversity at international film festivals does not only mean screening films from different countries, but it addresses whose stories are being told, how they are told, and who gains access to these cultural spaces. Festivals act as culture guides, enabling the public to understand diversity through the curatorial lens of their programming (De Valck, 2007, p. 42). Many festivals attempt to include various kinds of acts to attract more employees, yet actual intercultural engagement relies on people's connection with the films (Marks, 2000, p. 2). Majsa (2014), in her analysis of Gothenburg International Film Festival and Clandestino Festival, shows that while many festivals present themselves as being international and open, they rely on old-fashioned public relations models that hinder communication (p. 3). Their use of social media is often top-down, rather than allowing ongoing, open communication with their audiences. This contradicts the values of openness and sharing they want to embrace.

Thus, the diversity experience is attributed to the environment it occurs in. Dickson (2014) points out that festivals are well-organized and socially constructed experiences. Her study of the Glasgow Film Festival shows that audiences experience diversity by the internal design of the event, post-screening discussions, or opportunities for social interactions (p. 66). These affect how stories are interpreted and whether they help different cultures better understand one another. Stevens (2017) thinks about how technology changes participation and argues that new websites, social media, and apps offer different ways for individuals to participate. In festivals like Melbourne, people both accept and reject digital tools. This is because technologies provide more access and different ways of participation, but also disrupt traditional models of participation (p. 661). As audiences shift between watching alone and with others, festivals should consider how digital technologies can change the way people perceive and know different forms of content.

These views illustrate that diversity at film festivals is multifaceted. It does not simply depend on which films are shown, but also how they are presented, discussed, and consumed. For festivals to foster intercultural dialogue, it is important they pay attention to structural accessibility, and creating enough opportunities for engagement, whether online or offline, where people can participate.

2.2.2 Intercultural Engagement Through Festival Experiences

As Liang (2023) emphasizes, film festivals play an important role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation by enhancing the accessibility of cinematic stories in non-Western areas (p. 14). IFFR's focus on aesthetically and politically diverse cinema is in line with this, marking it as a venue for exposure to narratives from around the world that might otherwise be at the margins. Diversity, however, does not necessarily ensure connection, but facilitates discussion and social opportunities, such as post-screening Q&A and casual social venues, that intercultural exchange can occur. These elements encourage audiences, particularly young people, to move out of passivity into critical thinking and shared meaning-making across cultural divisions (Liang 2023, p. 14). Additionally, Thomson (2021) states that interculturality acts as a rich and dynamic process where identity is formed by the interconnectedness of varying narratives and creative outputs (p. 51). Film festivals are locations to explore one's identity, as they are temporary events in selected places. This is true for filmmakers as well as audiences, who are invited to share new perspectives and narratives.

An important theoretical approach to incorporate in this study is Hall's (1976) theory of intercultural communication. This provides an avenue to comprehend how audiences interpret international films based on their cultural communication styles. His high-context vs. low-context model of communication helps determine how various audiences from different backgrounds interpret cinema. In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan, China) implicit narration, symbolism, and shared cultural knowledge is preferred. Contrastingly, low-context cultures (e.g., the Netherlands, America) prefer direct communication, explicit narratives, and linear storytelling.

2.2.3 Diversity and Structural Bias

Though international film festivals like to present themselves as advocates of cultural diversity, more recently scholars call for a more critical approach towards such diversity. Zemaityte et al (2024) claim that the representation of films from various countries is not sufficient if the programming does not significantly vary regarding themes and languages. They make a distinction between internal diversity, such as the variety present within one film festival, and external diversity, the festival's contribution to the richness of global cultural diversity in general terms (p. 3). Loist (2016) adds to this debate by further showing how festivals intended for marginalized groups, like LGBTQ+ film festivals, can become incorporated into mainstream circuits, suggesting that efforts towards inclusion are often shaped by institutional pressures (p. 53). Dennison (2018) criticizes "world cinema" branding schemes that promote privileged narratives while excluding less "marketable" aspects of culture (p. 57). Together, these critiques illustrate that genuine intercultural exchange entails more than symbolic representation; it requires programming practices that maintain thematic and linguistic diversity. For young festival audiences like those who attend IFFR, critically working with these structural facts requires building nuanced and authentic understanding of world cinema.

2.2.4 Diversity as Identity Reflection and Emotional Engagement

Interculturality is not imagined as a fixed dialogue between distinct cultures, but rather as a dynamic and

fluid engagement, in which identity is reshaped by encountering different perspectives, narratives, and artistic forms (Thomson, 2021, p. 51). Therefore, for many audiences struggling with questions of belonging, exposure to alternative cinema can act as a moment of introspection. Additionally, Thomson (2021) states how the concept of "resonance" is important when building connections, leading to greater identity formation (p. 50). This allows individuals to learn from other cultures in a way that is emotional and natural, rather than institutional. Even in societies that are not post-conflict, films can assist individuals in coping with emotions of uncertainty, or social disintegration. Vanhaelemeesch (2021) demonstrates that watching foreign films is not simply a matter of understanding the "other" but can act as a reflection of one's own identity in such a diverse world (p. 36).

Intercultural relationships through film festivals are experiences when audience members watch different movies and engage with people from different cultures (Banerjee, 2024, p. 39). This is achieved through immersive participation in events such as director discussions, panel sessions, and casual networking, which allows audiences to movie from passive watching to conversations. Digital spaces such as social media create space for intercultural exchange through online discussions and online festival programming. They offer a platform for individuals who cannot physically attend festivals but still wish to discuss different films (Peranson, 2009, p. 39).

Despite these opportunities, some scholars think that certain intercultural activities remain superficial. Western film festivals may promote diversity for appearance rather than to foster a deep connection among other cultures (Lee, 2017, p. 72). Therefore, this research will explore how young festival audiences manage these communicative differences, and whether discussions within festivals can help overcome cultural divides.

2.3 Youth Engagement and Participatory Spaces

Youth engagement can foster cross-cultural dialogue as young people consume global cinema and reinterpret it within their own social and cultural contexts, facilitating new meanings and creations (Soto-Sanfiel & Angulo-Brunet, 2021, p. 564). However, the issue of youth participation in film festivals is of the highest significance since many festivals face the problem of attracting younger viewers. De Valck (2007) has noted that such festivals tend to serve the interests of older cinephiles and industry professionals, excluding younger spectators (p. 182). Festivals that try to include the youth usually fall back on educational initiatives or lower-priced tickets; yet these measures might not go far enough towards creating inclusive participatory settings for young viewers.

2.3.1 Youth as active cultural interpreters

It is crucial to note that young audiences attending film festivals should be perceived as active cultural interpreters who critically engage with the films they view. Puccia et al. (2025) explain how youth communication teams at the Huelva Ibero-American Festival created social media content that was interactive, re-telling the narratives of the festival in their own voice. Therefore, this reflects a shift in agency

from the institution to the audience (p. 4). As discussed by Jenkins (2006), the theory of participatory culture ties into how young audiences are involved as co-producers of meaning, particularly in festival contexts where interaction, discussion, and digital feedback are possible (p. 3). Rather than being passive consumers of foreign cultural products, young audiences tend to recontextualize content in their own unique social settings. This active interpretive role is critical in understanding the aim of festivals such as IFFR, which seek to facilitate cross-cultural exchange. When young people engage in the process of meaning-making, they help transform festivals from simple institutions with a top-down cultural approach, to spaces that express different modes of understanding identity and formation.

2.3.2 Hybrid Identities and Third Space Theory

Hybrid cultural spaces are important as they can enable cross-cultural dialogue amongst people. They offer possibilities of encounters between individuals from different backgrounds in non-hierarchal spaces, where mutual understanding is generated through affective, symbolic, and emotional encounters. Bhabha's (1994) Third Space theory is relevant, as it explains how cultural hybridity emerges when different identities meet in open- ended, non-hierarchal spaces. Film festivals can act as such spaces for young people, allowing them to engage with global stories while reshaping cultural meanings through their own interpretations. Such efficiency is achievable if the festival creates spaces that encourage young spectators to engage actively rather than as passive consumers (Bhandari, 2022, p. 175). Vanhaelemeesch (2021) explains the common; a space in which culture is collectively created independent of traditional market or hierarchal powers (p. 20). Within this space exists what is called as the "creative multitude", which consists of individuals who bring affective, symbolic, or intellectual labor to collective cultural projects. This includes audiences, curators, volunteers, and cultural workers. They all take part in meaning-making and community building, even though they are presented with challenges or little support from institutions (Vanhaelemeesch, 2021, p. 60). Lifinstev et al. (2025) illustrate how Gen Z employees perceive intercultural competence as an experiential and emotional process in life, rather than a transmission of institutional knowledge. Their preference for authentic interactions and digital literacy implies that inclusive festival spaces need to embrace informal and formal ways of youth involvement in order to engage in co-creation of cultures (p. 235). Therefore, whether or not young people are employed formally in the cultural industries, they act as affective laborers. Their engagement contributes to shared cultural value and knowledge through feeling invested, knowing content, joining online, and engaging socially (Kirillova, 2023, p. 13). Young audiences are highly relevant as they combine hybrid tastes and various experiences that shape the way films circulate and how individuals engage and interpret them.

Many studies highlight the importance of interactive programming such as youth-led- panels, audience voting mechanisms, and mentorship programs that empower young attendees (No Title Productions, 2025). IFFR also has similar initiatives targeted at youth such as student screenings and interactive Q&A sessions, yet it lacks evidence about the long-term nature of such engagement (IFFR, 2025).

2.3.3 Digital Platforms and Festival Engagement

It can be argued that digital platforms extend the possibility for cross-cultural dialogue beyond the festival itself. This is because they enable participants to engage in transnational discussions, share interpretations, or build intercultural communities online. They promote discussions in ways that traditional film festivals may not necessarily take into consideration (Laurell & Björner, 2018, p. 529). Puccia et al. (2025, p.5) observe how social media campaigns driven by young people in the context of the Huelva Film Festival were effective in reframing the festival's cultural message, rendering it more accessible to younger audiences. Additionally, festivals create more "public value" as they extend their presence through media networks, enabling further exchange between the film and viewer (Zemaitye et al., 2024, p. 9).

Social media should therefore be understood as a participatory cultural space. Wibowo et al. (2023) contend that social media is an online facilitator that deepens user relationships and enhances social connections, enabling individuals to share ideas, co- create, build communities, and form identities online (p. 364). This is an active way young audiences decode cultural meaning and express their sense of belonging. Additionally, this establishes a feeling of ownership, making festival attendance a hybrid cultural practice combining live and digital interaction.

2.3.4 Youth as Cultural Capital Mediators

As Puccia et al. (2025) illustrate with the example of the Ibero-American Film Festival of Huelva, including young communicators in the festival's communication strategy reshaped the dynamics of audience engagement (p. 4). These semi-autonomous young communicators played the role of cultural intermediaries by converting institutionalized cultural capital into popular culture via social media platforms such as Instagram. By doing so, they helped cultivate an appreciation for cinema among their peers, actively closing cultural and generational divides. Therefore, through their participation, they helped expand the festival's cultural value and popularity. The project also demonstrated how collaborative models could democratize access to film culture, reframing young audiences as co-creators of meaning. By doing this, the festival changed traditional sender-receiver models of communication into a dialogical exchange that recognized and exploited youth cultural codes. Young audiences engage with a variety of media texts as a way of expressing their identity and negotiating their belonging in different cultural spaces. For the majority, discussing or reviewing films is important, transforming cultural consumption into self-legitimation and social mobility (Dhoest, 2019, p. 389).

In this context, young people's involvement in festivals goes beyond entertainment; it becomes an organized platform for cultural learning, differentiation, and creative expression. Youth therefore serve as cultural interpreters, constructing the reception of international cinema with their local communities. This prioritizes cross-cultural dialogue through bridging the gap between global narrative and local comprehension. This study will therefore address the issue of youth participation in IFFR while focusing on how the festival facilitates cross- cultural dialogue.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research strategy and data collection

This research aims to find out whether IFFR facilitates cross-cultural dialogue amongst young audiences. As this study focuses on audience interpretation, meaning-making, and response to festival programming, a qualitative study is most suitable, as it enables in- depth examination of individual's subjective experience and cultural negotiation (Creswell, 2014, p. 22). For this purpose, the research will use semi-structured interviews to obtain knowledge about young festival attendees 'experiences regarding their engagement with cross-cultural cinematic discourse. This study will employ a snowball sampling method to recruit participants, which will provide access to a pool of diverse young audience members.

A qualitative method is selected for this research because it enables insight into personal perspectives and experiences in the festival environment. This allows for a deeper examination of audience reception, cultural negotiation, and participatory engagement (Creswell, 2024, p. 22). In this research, 12 semi-structured interviews, each lasting around 1 hour, will be conducted as it enhances the depth and adaptability of the study (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 438). It will also allow to obtain nuances interpretations of cross-cultural dialogue, allowing participants to share their experience of film narratives, festival space, and encounters with filmmakers or other audience members. In particular, this research will examine:

- How young audiences engage with culturally diverse films.
- How they negotiate meaning in a transnational cinema environment.
- The role of festival structures (Q&A, discussions, events) in fostering cross-cultural dialogue.

3.2 Operationalization

Cross-cultural dialogue refers to the exchange by which individuals from different cultures share their perspectives, understanding, and emotional interactions through film. It is not simply a one-way cultural exchange, but a participatory process that is reciprocated and mediated by interactions between films and audiences. This includes not only watching foreign films but also engaging with their contexts, questioning their representations, and connecting with the stories. Thus, cross-cultural dialogue includes intellectual comprehension, emotional connection, and interpersonal relationships that arise from festival interactions (Lee et al., 2017, p. 9). Moreover, cross-cultural dialogue can occur through formal contexts such as Q&As or panel talks, as well as through informal contexts such as conversations between audience members. It can also occur in online environments, where audiences expand meaning making through social media. Therefore, dialogic exchange takes multiple forms, including verbal discussion, emotional reflection, or social negotiations.

Youth engagement is defined as the extent to which young audiences are actively involved in the social and cultural experience that film festivals offer. It is not just the motivations to attend the festival, but also the nature of engagement during and between the screenings. Engagement can include anything from conscious film selection to social media expression and cultural reinterpretation (Soto-Sanfiel & Angulo-

Brunet, 2021, p. 564; Dhoest, 2019, p. 389). Importantly, young people's involvement is not only evaluated in terms of physical attendance. Instead, it involves emotional investment, symbolic identification with certain narratives, peer-driven participation, and digital documentation of experience. Young people, as cultural participants, and interpreters, often reshape film culture by connecting global cinema to narratives that matter to them. Their involvement in festivals mirrors broader generational changes in how culture is consumed, discussed, and shared.

Together, these concepts shape the study's focus with how young audiences who attend IFFR process and feel about international films, how they engage with festival culture, and how they use both online and offline festival platforms to negotiate meaning, identity, and belonging.

3.2.1 Dimensions of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

To effectively measure cross-cultural dialogue, this research breaks the concept into three interconnected points: interpretive engagement, affective resonance, and dialogic interaction. Each of these represent a different aspect of how cultural meaning is exchanged and negotiated within the festival itself.

Interpretive engagement

Interpretive engagement is the intellectual side of cultural reception. This characterizes how individuals understand, question, and make sense of external narratives (Koefoed et al., 2020, p. 707). It involves paying attention to different cultural references or issues that they might not otherwise come across. In this study, indications of interpretive engagement are whether the participants could relate to a film's location with broader social issues, pick up on symbolism, or critically analyze how different cultures were portrayed. Notably, interpretive engagement is not based on prior cultural knowledge. It emphasizes the process of learning and meaning-making. This type of engagement demonstrates how audiences portray and construct understanding through the observation of different cultures (Liang, 2023, p. 14).

Affective resonance

Affective resonance is the emotional response that audiences experience when watching foreign films (Lee et al., 2017, p. 9). It is the expression of empathy, recognition, nostalgia, or personal introspection, showing strong engagement with a certain narrative or theme. These feelings can often be the foundation for higher levels of cultural understanding, especially if they cause audiences to consider what their personal values and beliefs are regarding the message the film conveys (Thomson, 2021, p. 51). Audience members can also connect with their characters or situations across cultures to find common experiences. These moments can indicate that cross-cultural dialogue is not only rational but an emotional response that comes with watching, processing, and sharing a film.

Dialogic Interaction

Dialogic interaction can create mutual meaning and interpersonal relationships as a form of cross-cultural dialogue (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). It includes verbal interaction through Q&A's, audience discussions, as well as

online discussions. As mentioned earlier, the focus lies on collaborative meaning-making by learning from one another, sharing knowledge, and building meaning through interaction. This study uses dialogic interaction as an indicator of cross-cultural dialogue as it is indicative of the shift between private consumption to creating shared meaning with others. When audiences use these social contexts to critique films, ask questions, or simply share ideas with others, they engage in cultural negotiation, which can influence their general festival experience (Laurell & Björner, 2018, p. 529).

These three dimensions will be coded thematically using ATLAS.ti. Codes such as "cultural reference", "emotional resonance", or "audience engagement" will be used to investigate how young audiences engage with cross-cultural dialogue at IFFR.

3.2.2 Dimensions of Youth Engagement
Youth engagement in this research is multi-faceted, as it includes affective, symbolic, and digital modes of participation. There are three dimensions that arise within this topic including participatory access, individual expression, and mediated interaction.

Participatory access

Participatory access describes the material and organizational resources by which youth come to be involved with the festival. This is therefore a logistical consideration as well as a precondition for active involvement. Therefore, this will also evaluate which obstacles young attendees encounter when accessing the festival (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3).

Individual Expression

This aspect encapsulates how young people use festivals as places of expression or confirming their identities. Through film choices, affective encounters, or identification with certain narratives that resonate with their own experiences, young attendees can position themselves in the cultural content they consume (Thomson, 2021, p. 50). It entails the ambience of the festival itself, that is, how young people perceive the environment as inclusive, stimulating, or alienating. This study will view these expressions as signs of personal connection and involvement.

Mediated Interaction

This refers to the digital practices young audiences employ to extend or document their festival experiences. Social media platforms can be used to create meaning, preserve memories, and build community. These digital aspects of festival engagement can be personalized, interactive, and reflective, allowing youth to tell stories about their cultural environment (Wibowo et al., p. 364). Such interactions online contribute to participatory culture, as audience members curate their own experience. Therefore, this can shape how young people frame their festival experience to themselves and others.

These dimensions will be coded in themes like "festival accessibility", identity exploration" and "social media engagement". These will illustrate how youth participation can shape and create cultural meaning through different forms of cultural interactions.

3.3 Sampling

The target population of this research is young audience members (18 to 25 years old) of IFFR. This group is selected as young audiences interact with media in innovative ways and take part in transnational and digital networks that affect how they receive global cinema, which results in the shaping of culture. They have the capability of shaping future festival audience trends (Diestro-Dópido, 2021, p. 15).

This study uses purposive sampling, as it is necessary to choose participants that have engaged with IFFR and watched films from different cultures. According to Nyimbili & Nyimbili (2024) purposive sampling facilitates the incorporation of cases that are rich in information, making the obtained data more valid and applicable (p. 90). It helps in choosing participants based on how effectively they can help with the purpose of the study, especially when the aim is to understand complex social phenomena. The participants have been recruited through a personal network, identifying individuals such as friends, family or acquaintances that have the necessary attributes to conduct this research on. Participants have also been recruited through social media, particularly via Instagram. A recruitment post has been shared as an Instagram story, inviting individuals ages 18-25 who attended IFFR and watched international films to participate in the study. Those who are interested have been asked to contact the researcher directly for further details. The message was the following,

"Hello everyone,
If you're 18-25 and went to IFFR this year and watched films from different cultures or countries, I'd love to chat! Please message me if you're interested"

If contacting participants through personal networks and social media was not enough, a snowball sampling strategy was put in place. It is a capable approach as it allows the researcher to find active festival audience members who have experiences cross-cultural films. Additionally, it organically expands the group of participants through social networks, thereby making sure that a variety of opinions are represented. This helps the researcher gain different ideas to the study through referrals (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024, p. 96). Participants were invited to name peers who have attended IFFR and taken part in festival discussions, events, or screenings.

The interviews have been conducted in English and have lasted around 1 hour. Participants were given the option to conduct the interviews online to ensure comfortability and to provide a safe environment. However, most were conducted in cafes throughout Rotterdam, as face-to-face contact was preferred by most. The interviews have been recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. These have been coded and put into a code book that can be viewed in Appendix B.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

The reliability of this research will be ensured using the coding platform Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates systematic coding and the organization of data. Developing a code tree prior to the

analysis will guide the structure of the coding process. This will facilitate the categorization of codes, while the platform's structured data management will enhance the consistency and transparency of the analysis (Housely & Smith, 2011).

This research will maintain its validity through ensuring that the questions of the interview stay consistent with each participant. This will allow for comparison between interviewees and their responses which can be used to further analyze emergent themes throughout the process. Furthermore, by incorporating a diverse range of perspectives, the study strengthens its findings, reinforcing the connection between theoretical framework and real-world audience experiences.

3.5 Ethical and Private Considerations

Ethical and private concerns will be ensured by the interviewee by giving verbal consent prior to the interview. Additionally, they will sign a consent form letting them know the important aspects of the research and whether direct quotes from them can be incorporated into the results section. Participants will be given the option to stop the interview at any given moment if they feel uncomfortable. Moreover, the interviewees 'identity will remain anonymous, and the results section will ensure this through the incorporation of pseudonyms. A table with participant's pseudonyms, age, nationality, and gender can be found Appendix C.

3.6 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis with a deductive coding approach has been conducted. Once the interviews were completed, they have been transcribed into a Word document and stored securely in Erasmus University's OneDrive. These documents will be kept for five years before being deleted. The transcripts have been uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to allow for a systematic and deductive coding process. The coding stages began with initial axial codes form the theoretical framework of the study. The codes have been used to sort interview responses based on pre-existing theoretical concepts, facilitating a deeper analysis of the responses. Next, the axial codes have been derived to selective codes, to identify relationships among initial categories. These codes identify the central themes and concepts relating to the research aims. This is recorded in the codebook, which can be seen in the Appendix. Additionally, the final codes will be structured into a codetree, which visually presents the links between the variables, and therefore make visible the research theme. The results contain direct quotes from the interviews. However, these will include pseudonyms to guarantee participant's anonymity, thus respecting the ethical principles of the research. The quotes portray the key findings derived from the analysis, providing in-depth information and strengthening the validity of the findings.

4. Results

This chapter discusses how young audiences at IFFR experience and engage in cross-cultural dialogue, basing this on the ten interviews conducted. It presents six general themes where the social, emotional, and institutional aspects of engagement are unraveled. The first theme, Cross-Cultural Dialogue, discusses how individual interactions such as Q&As with filmmakers, or audience discussions, offer the possibility of understanding and engaging. The second theme, Cultural Encounters and Meaning-Making, showcases the way people interact with films on a personal and emotional level, making them capable of empathizing with others from different cultures. The third theme, Programming and Representation, discusses how curatorial decisions impact people's possibilities for understanding other cultures. The theme Accessibility and Inclusion considers the physical and symbolic dimensions that enable cross-cultural dialogue. The fifth theme, Barriers to Accessibility, examines factors that limit intercultural dialogue. Young Engagement and Participatory Culture, the fifth theme, discusses how social motivations and digital spaces enable youth to work together to create meaning and maintain dialogue outside of just the screenings. Lastly, Festivals as Spaces of Belonging and Community explores how identity, relationships, and shared experiences maintain cross- cultural dialogue amongst young attendees.

4.1 Cross Cultural Dialogue

One of the most prominent themes across interviews was the role of IFFR a space for cross-cultural dialogue, both through Q&As and audience interactions. Participants described IFFR as an environment that facilitates interpersonal exchange, cultural reflection, and dialogue engagement.

4.1.1 Filmmaker Interaction and Q&A Moments

One key aspect that shaped participants' engagement at IFFR was the opportunity to interact with filmmakers. Q&A sessions, director introductions, and informal conversations were frequently mentioned as enhancing the viewing experience. Encounters with filmmakers therefore claimed to provide deeper understanding of the films offered and insights into the creative intentions behind them. Participants highlighted how these interactions helped them interpret the films they watched. For instance, Luca noted "You could tell their drive and passion for filmmaking. That was really special. It just felt more interactive. I think that's what is nice about IFFR". This sense of interaction allowed participants to contextualize the films beyond the screen. Mia similarly commented on how learning about a director's interests and influences contributed to her interpretation, "He talks about how he loves making stuff about technology and nostalgia. So then it makes a lot more sense. I think it's important to engage in discussions."

These statements suggest that filmmaker engagement not only clarified thematic or stylistic choices but also encouraged a more informed viewing position. Rather than relying on individual interpretation, participants were able to draw on the filmmaker's framing to better understand the film's meaning. Deniz provided a specific example of this, referencing a pre-film talk that altered her engagement with *La Quimera*:

IFFR provided an introduction talk [...] and for me that made the film so much more valuable [...] I didn't have to search for it while watching the film, but instead I could just experience the film a lot more and then afterwards reflect on it better.

This highlights how contextual knowledge prior the screening enabled her to focus more on the film and reflect more effectively afterward. This points to the role of Q&As and introductions as tools for interpretive support, particularly in films with complex or culturally specific content.

Conversely, the absence of such moments could create challenges. Sasha expressed how films without post-screening discussions left her uncertain about the filmmaker's original intent, "Every single time I go to a movie where there isn't like a Q&A at the end, it's very hard to imagine if the director or the producer or the writer had imagined this version". This implies that for certain viewers, having an interaction with a filmmaker acts as interpretive validation, strengthening their confidence in their own responses to a film.

In some cases, filmmaker engagement acted as a catalyst for discussion among other audience members. Sami indicated that her interaction with the director and other viewers enhanced her experience of a film characterized with manga-inspired aesthetics, "It was very cool to hear from the director obviously [...] but also just talk with people who are manga readers and diehard anime fans and their take on the action sequences."

Therefore, filmmaker interactions and Q&As played an important role in shaping participants' interpretation of films at IFFR. These moments provided insight into creative intentions, supported deeper engagement, and encouraged both individual reflection and social exchange. Additionally, Q&A sessions and filmmaker interactions show the importance of dialogic interaction for cross-cultural dialogue. By allowing young audiences to ask questions and understand the creative ideas behind international films, IFFR helps filmmakers and viewers from different cultures create shared meaning.

4.1.2 Audience Discussions and Peer Exchange

In addition to filmmaker interaction, informal discussions among audience members emerged as a key aspect of the IFFR experience. Participants highlighted the importance of informal discussions prior to, during, or after the screenings in helping them understand and enjoy the films more. They often emerged spontaneously, shaped by cultural familiarity or mutual passion. Several participants explained that screenings provided a platform more intercultural interaction. Theo, an Italian participant, explained his experience at an Italian movie screening where most of the audience was also Italian, which facilitated social interaction. He stated, "The Italian movie was great because, of course, it was full of Italians, and I started talking with people". Similarly, Mia described a Romanian film screening at the festival, where the presence of a culturally connected audience enhanced the post-screening discussion "Half of the audience was Romanian. It was like a big hangout afterwards". These instances suggest that shared cultural backgrounds can foster a collective atmosphere of interpretation, encouraging more fluid and casual conversations.

Besides having language and nationality as a common ground, many participants noted that film content itself could spark personal reflection and shared stories. Deniz described how a film evoked a cross-cultural conversation with a friend about childhood experiences:

That film definitely brought up this conversation between us [...] she was always going to her grandparents' house out in the country and that's a very normal thing in Eastern Europe [...]. To me, growing up in the Netherlands, I never had that.

In this example, the film acted as a point of comparison that revealed both cultural difference and interpersonal understanding. It illustrates how festival screenings can prompt participants to articulate their own cultural frames in response to others.

Casual conversations also played a role in shaping meaning, especially for those who described themselves as curious or observant. Sasha mentioned how she would intentionally join or listen in on post-film discussions, stating "Usually, when I already heard like a conversation going somewhere [...] I slid in very casually [...] I was curious to see and hear their opinions". She also described witnessing an emotionally resonant conversation between two strangers after a film that addressed themes of memory and familial connection "I remember it deeply resonated with her, the whole idea of people trying not to get forgotten by their family members. I was just standing there, nodding because it clearly moved her". These observations indicate that peer conversations not only allow for exchange of interpretations but also provide an emotionally supportive space for processing intense or personal reactions.

Finally, several participants emphasized that these social aspects were fundamental to the festival experience. Luna made this explicit "I think it's like the second most important thing during festivals, besides the movies, obviously the discussions about the movies, because they are only a pretext". This suggests that for many, films serve as starting points of conversation. The viewing experience is rooted in reflection, dialogue, and meaning-making.

Therefore, peer discussions at IFFR played a significant role in shaping participants 'engagement. These interactions facilitated intercultural exchange and allowed audiences to test or refine their interpretations through dialogue with others.

4.2 Cultural Encounters and Meaning-Making

4.2.1 Emotional and Personal Resonance

This theme was found to be a crucial aspect of cross-cultural dialogue. For the majority of the participants, the emotional resonance of the films they watched at IFFR was directly linked to their personal or cultural background. This often occurred when the rituals, themes, or location explored in the films resonated with the participant's real-life experience. As Luca explained, watching a film set in Hong Kong, which is a part of where her family is from, "hit a little bit of my heart." The representation of Cantonese mourning customs in the movie introduced her to cultural practices she had not been explicitly taught, which resulted in a desire

to share this experience with her grandparents. "That movie really impacted me," she noted, emphasizing both narrative and cultural familiarity as sources of emotional connection.

Similarly, Mia recalled a Turkish-Serbian documentary reflected her cultural background, down to "the food they ate, the way they acted with each other, the way the place looked." Although the film touched her profoundly, her Dutch friend had a more casual reaction, highlighting the role of personal and cultural proximity in shaping emotional responses to cinema. These contrasts point to the ways cultural specificity can both facilitate and limit empathic engagement.

Other moments of affective intensity came from confronting historical or socio- political narratives unfamiliar to the viewer. Luna described being shaken by a Brazilian film that introduced her to the country's history of anti-communist repression, as it triggered reflections of Poland's communist past, stating "It was really tragic for me to learn about this." In another case, she witnessed Chinese viewers leaving a COVID-19 film visibly moved, noting that it featured real footage not shown in European media. This demonstrates how film can provoke powerful emotions by highlighting underrepresented stories and exposing different cultural narratives.

However, not all participants experienced this level of connection. While watching a foreign film, Theo admitted "I couldn't get emotionally connected with the movie from the Philippines." Similarly, Hana described her response to an Indian film as "passive," due to her unfamiliarity with the country's context. These reflections suggest that emotional resonance is not guaranteed by exposure alone, but often requires cultural familiarity.

Moreover, several participants noted that even if they were not familiar with the cultural background or theme of a film, they could still connect to its emotional core. It therefore highlights the festival's ability to foster empathy across cultures. One respondent stated, "What I can actually connect with is the most human parts," emphasizing that shared emotions often transcend cultural backgrounds. Another participant, Luna, reflected on a film set in India saying, "I've never been to India, so I couldn't relate to the things they were living through there, but the topic of love and family, these connections, I really felt them". These observations highlight how universal themes such as love, longing, grief, or familial relationships allowed audiences to connect with stories despite unfamiliarity with the cultural context or references.

These emotional reactions demonstrate how affective resonance works, revealing that cross-cultural dialogue at IFFR involves not just thought but also strong feelings. Young viewers from different countries connected through shared human experiences like grief, live, or family, even if they were unfamiliar with the film's cultural background.

4.2.2 Cultural Learning and Discovery

For many participants, watching international films at IFFR provided a chance to learn about societies and histories unfamiliar to them. This learning was often shaped by an awareness of cultural distance, where participants recognized that they lacked the references necessary to fully grasp the depth of a film's meaning. Theo, after watching a film from the Philippines, noted, "I really saw the effort of the director describing

their society, and I enjoyed it even if I couldn't get all the references." Rather than feeling excluded, participants like Theo described these moments as valuable entry points into other cultural worlds.

Several viewers described how films prompted reflection on societal issues, especially when the content contrasted with their own lived experiences. Deniz shared that the film *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024) changed how she viewed women's lives in India, stating, "I would now look at India very differently." In another screening, she learned from the filmmaker that five languages were spoken throughout an Indian film, a detail she initially could not recognize herself. "Getting to learning about that beforehand made me try and be more aware of it... I feel like you do kind of lose some nuance in that. Which makes me sad," she said.

Others described how cultural elements in films helped them connect distant experiences with their own. Sasha reflected on a film with a metaphor about family pressure that ultimately led to a character's death. She found the imagery powerful and culturally significant, saying, "Maybe it's stereotypical thinking, but I feel like this may be pretty common practice in some Asian countries [...] the shelf literally fell on her because of the pressure." While she acknowledged her outsider perspective, Sasha also described how these stories stayed with her: "Every single time I watch a foreign movie, it leaves something in my mind. Either a gender policy that still has to be changed or extreme state of poverty that is still occurring in that country."

Overall, this section highlights interpretive engagement. These reflections demonstrate how IFFR functioned as a space of cultural exposure and self-reflection, where participants were not only entertained but also invited to think critically about the world beyond their own.

4.3 Programming and Representation

One of the predominant ways in which respondents interpreted IFFR's programming was in its ability to bring to screen a diverse range of cinematic perspectives. This relates to cross- cultural dialogue as it showcases the cultural stories that audiences connect with. In the interviews, respondents connected their experiences of film with broader questions of national identity, creative experimentation, and tensions between commercial viability and curatorial depth.

4.3.1 National Identity and Cultural Representation

Many participants described selecting films based on their country of origin, either to connect with their own heritage or to explore cultures they rarely encountered on screen. Luca, being half Chinese, shared that she always seeks out Asian cinema at festivals because "they're pretty hard to come by in regular cinemas, especially in Italy or in Poland", which are two countries she resides in. Similarly, Theo emphasized how watching an Italian historical film "felt connected with the environment and the community in the cinema," while also noting the contrast when watching a film from the Philippines: "these were two opposite sides in this case."

Sami reflected on the unexpected familiarity of certain films, citing a Vietnamese horror retelling of Cinderella: "They added was a monster [...] which I later read was a really big part of Vietnamese culture." She stated that the cultural specificity of this reinterpretation made her rethink a story she'd known her whole

life. This aspect of programming allowed audiences to see the world through unfamiliar lenses, reinforcing the role of festivals as sites for cultural translation and reflection.

4.3.2 Curatorial Tensions and Audience Perception

This subtheme captures participants' interpretations of IFFR's curatorial decisions, reflecting the festival's identity, values, and target audiences. It includes both appreciation for the platforming of bold, experimental cinema and critiques of the perceived imbalance between niche artistic works and more commercially appealing titles.

For instance, Deniz valued IFFR's "diverse festival in terms of experimentation," explaining that it "always opens me up to experiencing new kinds of film as well." Similarly, Hana noted that "it's not necessarily entertainment [...] I'd rather learn more about the culture or the story," highlighting an audience expectation for more reflective or educational content.

However, some participants questioned the festival's programming balance. Sasha remarked on the unexpected volume of screenings for a Nicolas Cage film: "There were movies shown such as *Surfer*... and from what I saw, there were a bunch of screenings of that movie," implying a bias toward celebrity or commercial appeal. Another participant, Luna, suggested smaller film festivals should "focus on the movies that are hard to reach [...] and just bring it to the bigger screen," stating how for such a film festival she prioritizes niche and independent curation of films rather than blockbusters.

These perceptions reveal how audience members negotiate their own cultural expectations within the framework of IFFR's selection. The programming directly influences the extent of cross-cultural dialogue as it expands or limits the number of narratives people can relate to. Additionally, when the programming highlights independent and underrepresented voices, it allows deeper engagement and emotional impact. However, with larger, commercially driven productions, people felt there were fewer opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue as these gave fewer opportunities for interpretive engagement.

4.4 Accessibility and Inclusion

When asked about the accessibility of the festival, participants revealed that this concept was multifaceted, involving language inclusivity, symbolic openness, and spatial design. For many, these elements contributed to a sense that the festival was available to them regardless of their background or film knowledge, inciting them to become active participants and engage in intercultural interactions.

4.4.1 Language Accessibility

Language emerged as a central theme in how accessibility was experienced, especially for international participants and non-Dutch speakers. Several interviewees explicitly praised the fact that all films were subtitled in English, including those from countries where English- language versions are rare or nonexistent. Sami repeatedly emphasized this: "The fact that absolutely every movie had English subtitles. That was really nice." She also mentioned that even Q&As were accessible due to English subtitling, which "made it again, a bit more accessible to some extent, talking about the films."

This was echoed by Hana, who contextualized this against the lack of availability on digital platforms: "Even on streaming platforms or illegal websites, sometimes you cannot even find the English subtitles." In this sense, IFFR was seen not only as a site of cultural exchange but also as a rare venue where audiences could access global cinema in a comprehensible format.

Sami also praised IFFR for its range of foreign-language films, contrasting it with the availability of these in countries such as Italy or Poland. She stated,

> *There were a lot of English language films, but still I had so much opportunity to choose [...] There were movies from different areas and there was really everything represented, and everything was super accessible. I could watch any movie with subtitles*

For her IFFR became an opportunity to engage with global cinema in its original form. Therefore, universal English subtitles turn language barriers into chances for interpretive engagement. They allow audiences to share and understand different cultures rather than keeping them apart.

4.4.2 Perceptions of Inclusivity and Symbolic Openness

The accessibility of the festival was also symbolic. It signaled that the festival was built with a wide, multicultural audience in mind. As Deniz noted,

> *Rotterdam is an immigrant city, we have 50 % of immigrants here, it's been a harbored city for centuries, it's always been a place where so many cultures come together as a melting pot, that having IFFR being a melting pot of cultures and stuff as well is so great*

Therefore, the film festival fits very well into the city due to its multilingual accessibility, which can be seen as a symbol of cultural inclusivity.

In contrast to the exclusivity often associated with elite film festivals, several participants reflected on how IFFR felt open and for everyone. Hana acknowledged her prior assumptions of the festival saying,

> *This kind of film festival, I feel like it's exclusive and only for like people in the film industry. But this one feels like it's really for everyone, you could just participate in the Q&As, ask a lot of questions.*

Therefore, this indicates that IFFR challenged that expectation, making it seem like an inclusive environment where people are open and encouraged to participate, increasing its accessibility.

However, not everyone recalled this positively. Sasha mentioned a very high demand for celebrity-attended events, such as when Cate Blanchett was present, "It was just impossible to sign up." While she acknowledged that it is "hard to provide the same opportunity for every single moviegoer," this highlighted the festival's broad accessibility with its demands for specific events. Even with its inclusive atmosphere, it remains a challenge for the festival to be equally open to all.

Since the festival openly celebrates Rotterdam's diverse identity, attendees expressed they felt emotionally secure enough to engage with films beyond their own experiences. This is a crucial requirement for affective resonance within cross-cultural dialogue.

4.4.3 Spatial Accessibility and Urban Design

One of the most immediately noticeable forms of accessibility noted by participants was spatial. Sami appreciated that the venues were "within five minutes of walking distance from one another," describing this as something she did not know she would appreciate so much. This physical layout not only made the festival easier to navigate, but also encouraged random social encounters and accessible mobility between screenings. Such spatial cohesion fostered an environment that felt welcoming and manageable, rather than overwhelming or exclusive.

Thus, this suggest that accessibility at IFFR is not only about practical infrastructure, but relies on cultural, symbolic, and emotional levels. Participants appreciated how language support, symbolic openness, and physical proximity allowed them to feel welcome and included. Yet, minor moments of exclusivity or inaccessibility, such as high-demand events or limited Q&A spaces, reveal the ongoing negotiation between ideals of inclusion and practical constraints.

The close proximity between venues encouraged hallway chats between attendees, illustrating how spatial design can bring about the dialogic interaction dimension of cross- cultural dialogue.

4.5 Barriers to Accessibility

While many participants praised IFFR for its linguistic, symbolic, and spatial accessibility, some came across barriers to participation. This was apparent for younger audiences, students, and those outside the industry. These barriers included ticket availability, affordability, and scheduling.

4.5.1 Ticketing Systems and Institutional Prioritization

A recurring point of frustration was the difficulty in obtaining tickets, especially for popular screenings. Mia expressed that participating in IFFR as a regular audience member required a very high level of attention, "It's really hard to get tickets because you need to be on top of your game [...] It's just a fact there's a huge demand, you need to be there early on." This issue became more relevant when participants became aware of the allocation dynamics between general audiences and those with press or industry status. Mia noted a feeling of exclusion when she discovered that a significant portion of tickets was set aside for professionals,

I feel like they reserve way too many press tickets. Because one of the movies that I wanted to see... there were only press and industry tickets left... for certain screenings, I think for all of them, they reserve a number of tickets just for press and industry.

This system contributed to a subtle perception of hierarchy and exclusivity, despite the festival's commitment to inclusivity.

4.5.2 Financial Constraints and Unequal Access

Another key barrier was the financial expense of attending. Although tickets were considered relatively affordable compared to other international festivals, most interviewees discussed that the overall cost of attending multiple screenings added up quickly. This was an especially prominent issue for students and emerging film professionals. Sami, who volunteered at IFFR and received a certain number of free tickets, recognized this privilege when reflecting on financial inaccessibility for others within her social circle,

I went alone to like all of the screenings; I mean again because like my tickets were free and my friends didn't want to pay." She then added, "I think it was like 10 to 12 euros per ticket for students or something like that, which if you want to go to multiple screenings does add up."

Deniz was even more direct, stating, "One thing I do want to mention is that it's expensive. As fuck. So as a student or a young film professional, it's of hard to fully go for it."

This financial strain ultimately influenced how many screenings people could attend, whether they brought friends, or whether they had to prioritize certain films over others. Despite the cultural richness of the festival, the economic cost became a gatekeeper to fuller engagement.

4.5.3 Temporal Accessibility: The Time Poverty of Students

Lastly, time itself also emerged as a form of inaccessibility. Having many screenings during the day made it challenging for full-time students or those with part-time jobs. Tristan described his past experience of barely attending any screenings due to academic obligations, "Many students aren't able to attend the screenings during the day because they're usually busy with their studies. That was me last year, I barely found time just because I was so consumed." This insight complicates assumptions that financial barriers alone explain low student participation. Even when ticket prices or free options were available, scheduling also impeded young people's participation.

Therefore, accessibility plays an important role in allowing or restricting cross- cultural dialogue. While language and space accessibility at IFFR promote inclusive participation and discussion, barriers like cost and institutional gatekeeping limit who can join in this dialogic exchange.

4.6 Young engagement and Participatory Culture

4.6.1 Youth Appeal Through Atmosphere and Events

Participants noted how IFFR strategically curated its environment to attract younger visitors. Mia reflected on the demographic saying that most people she interacted with were in the age range of 20 to 30, and observed targeted outreach, "I think the festival is trying to speak to young audiences through their visual language, musical programming, and art programming. As well as with some of the movies that they choose". This intentional appeal was not limited to film curation. Social events, such as parties organized by IFFR, played a key role in drawing younger crowds. Sami emphasized the the importance of the festival, "Almost every night there was an after party, so you could go from a movie to an after party. Which I thought was really cool for young people". This therefore showcases IFFR as an immersive cultural experience, making it more attractive to students and young creatives.

4.6.2 Entry Points and Youth Involvement

Additionally, several interviewees highlighted IFFR's collaborations with universities and its openness to student participation. Hana mentioned how student-targeted initiatives made the festival more approachable, "They did a collaboration with the university [...] They work with also a lot of students and really also open for young people."

She also stressed the importance of first-hand learning opportunities, "IFFR also do student discounts and work with many student volunteers or interns. So it also a platform for the young generation to learn and get into the movie industry." These partnerships created both formal and informal paths into the festival for youth, encouraging them to participate not just as viewers but as contributors.

Luna shared how this social dimension translated into a shared atmosphere of engagement by stating how the parties gather people and encourage participation. She claimed it makes attendees feel like they're "part of something" and that everyone is "living through it." Here, the sociability of the festival becomes as meaningful as the films themselves, fostering a sense of communal experience and generational connection.

However, not all perspectives were fully positive. Sofia, who had interned with IFFR and therefore had greater insight into the festival, noted structural issues that made consistent youth engagement difficult "They offer seasonal jobs for young people, not long-term. So they struggle to gain traction with young audiences because they're not consistent. They have to improve their marketing." Despite these concerns, most attendees did not feel this was the case. They mostly expressed a strong sense of inclusion, suggesting that even if organizational structures fall short, the atmosphere of the festival remains socially inviting.

Therefore, festival parties, shared events, and social spaces helped young people interact and build relationships across cultures. Cinema served as a way to start conversations and connections with people from diverse backgrounds.

4.6.3 Social Media as a Continuation of the Festival

While some young participants engaged with IFFR purely in-person, others extended the festival experience into digital spaces by using Letterbox, Instagram, and video platforms. For many, these platforms did not simply serve to document film-watching, but became active sites of meaning-making, interpretation, and even connection. Some participants turned to digital platforms to express their excitement, engage in discussion, or stay socially connected. Mia, who volunteered at the festival, noted the social impulse behind her posts by saying, "I think I posted some Instagram stories. Just like, hey guys, working at IFFR. Just trying to get some human interaction." This desire for dialogue also extended to her reactions to specific films "I was like, oh, I need to talk about this. So I posted about it on my story." Similarly, another participant explained how Instagram served as a social bridge:

I posted some Instagram stories just to make it known to the world. Hey, I'm at IFFR as well. Which helped me because then I had friends reaching out like, oh what films are you watching? And then you can kind of start talking about it again.

In these cases, social media acted as both a record of participation and a conversation starter, which extended the community aspect of the festival beyond its physical spaces.

4.6.4 Letterboxd as Personal Archive

A recurring motif among participants was the use of Letterboxd as a private or semi-private archive, which acted as a space to reflect on. Luca noted that while she did not share much publicly, she used the platform to track her own journey, "I'm not one to really share much on Instagram, that type of social media, but on Letterboxd, I like to keep track of the movies I watch." Her use of the platform was self-reflective, as she then claimed it to be "more of a personal thing". Sami echoed this sentiment, noting that she does not typically post about films online in a social sense, "I also don't really have a tendency to post social media. I did really just do it for myself because that's what I enjoy doing."

For some participants, digital platforms filled a gap when face-to-face conversation was unavailable. Sami described how her solo viewing experience led her to turn to Letterboxd as a space for emotional processing, "I watched it alone. I didn't have anyone to talk to it with. So I just went and I ran to it on Letterboxd and posted it." Hana also turned to Letterboxd in search of others 'interpretations, "I didn't have anyone to talk to about the film afterwards. But then I went on the Letterboxd and then just see other people's reviews. I just checked how others people the movie." In these instances, the platform functioned as a sort of virtual community by enabling solo viewers to find shared meaning or different opinions of a film.

These examples suggest that even in digital contexts, participatory culture can include non-public forms of engagement, and instead act as platforms for personal reflection.

4.6.5 Digital Platforms as Catalysts for Deeper Engagement

Participants also acknowledged the role of online media in expanding their understanding of a film. Sahsa mentioned how she watched movie analysis videos on YouTube or Instagram referring to the fact that "they certainly give you more reasons to talk about something". In one instance, digital engagement led to an unexpected connection. Sahsa recounted how her friend's Letterbox review gained traction from the director, "She put the Letterbox review immediately after seeing it and the director of the movie liked this review. This completely influenced the way she has been feeling about this movie." This interaction illustrates how digital spaces can reduce traditional hierarchies between audience and filmmaker, turning passive viewers into participants in a larger dialogue.

Platforms like Letterboxd and Instagram brough cross-cultural dialogue into digital spaces. They let young users think about cultural meaning, share their feelings, and express their views within their friend groups. These platforms created mixed spaces where people could keep engaging and interacting with each other beyond the film screenings.

4.7 Festivals as Spaces of Belonging and Community

For many young participants, IFFR functioned as a social and community landcape.. The festival became a temporary community where identities could be explored, relationships formed, and cultural engagement was made accessible and enjoyable even to those outside of traditional cinephile circles.

4.7.1 A Social and Cultural Atmosphere

The atmosphere of IFFR was often described in terms that emphasized collective energy throughout the city. As Luca observed, "The whole city is so much livelier when IFFR is happening." Her comment reflects how the festival's presence transcended cinema spaces and transformed the city environment with excitement and connection. Events such as parties, panels, and hangouts played a large role in fostering that social landscape. Luca noted, "I did meet people at the events they throw. Seeing people at an event that's more for leisure than entertainment is nicer." For others, the openness and physical design of the venues encouraged informal connection and spontaneous conversation. As Sami put it, "I don't think you have to be super into cinema to enjoy being there. Every location has a bar or coffee shop or something like that where you can sit down and talk with people." She also stated that for younger people, IFFR acts as more of a "social thing". Luna expanded on this by saying, "I met many people because of festivals and during Rotterdam, there were many events where you could get to know people that have shared interests."

These reflections highlight that, for youth in particular, participation in IFFR is not just about viewing films, but acts as a common ground, forming new relationships, and feeling part of something larger. The sociability of IFFR created a welcoming environment for young people to engage in dialogue, allowing a diverse range of people to connect across cultural and personal boundaries.

<u>4.7.2 Identity Formation and Self-Affirmation</u>

Beyond its role as a social hub, IFFR also served as a space for self and creative expression. Several participants reflected on how being at the festival helped affirm or expand their sense of self. Sami shared that even small gestures, like wearing her volunteer tote bag, contributed to a feeling of belonging, "I watch films almost every day, I also had my volunteer tote bag. I did feel cool being there, even though I was there alone." Therefore, this acted as a sense of self-affirmation and belonging, as she felt acceptance of her identity within the festival grounds.

Inspiration was another form of identification. Seeing young filmmakers present their work in an international film festival helped bridge the gap between aspiration and reality. Again, Sami noted,

I just really felt inspired after that whole thing. Not just professionally, but also creatively because I there are so many young people out there who just do stuff like this and now they have a film premiering at one of the more famous film festivals in Europe.

Others expressed how the festival enabled them to embrace identities that might otherwise not be expressed. Sahsa, a medical student, reflected on how IFFR allowed her to integrate her love of the arts with her academic path. She explained how,

At the end of the day, I treat movies and arts as my hobby, which I love. But at the same time, my career is involved in something completely else [...] it's a nice change of scenery to talk about something else.

Participation in festivals also seemed to have long-term effects on confidence and openness. Luna described a personal transformation, "Because of festivals, I met many people and I'm more open now. I was really like anxious and maybe shy before."

These experiences illustrate that for many young attendees, IFFR is a valuable space to engage in cultural discourse and explore personal identities. The festival acts as a stage for young people through forming connections, expressing creative interests, or simply feeling seen.

5. **Discussion**

This discussion aims to elaborate the findings detailed previously by contextually connecting them to the theoretical frameworks of cross-cultural dialogue, diversity and intercultural connection, and youth engagement. The central research question, *How does International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) facilitate cross-cultural dialogue among young audiences?* Is explored to provide an in-depth analysis of the participants' interview data across the emotional, intellectual, and participatory experiences of the festival.

The findings show that IFFR participants attended an international film festival to engage with global cinema in complex and affective ways, both through face-to-face encounters with filmmakers and with their peers, as well as the processes of meaning-making across both digital and physical spaces. This

discussion illustrates engaging with film festivals not only as exhibition spaces but as relational spaces in which audiences can negotiate culture, identity, and communities. Contextualizing participants' reflections within the broader theoretical framework of "contact zones" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), "the creative multitude" (Vanhaelemeesch, 2021, p. 60), and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), ensure a critical reflection on the capacity and limitations of IFFR as a potential youth inclusive, intercultural understanding space.

5.1 IFFR as a Space for Cross-Cultural Dialogue

The study's findings demonstrate that cross-culture dialogue is not automatically achieved when engaging with international films due to attending IFFR. It is something that is built. Participants relied heavily on Q&A sessions, filmmaker talks, or peer dialogue when processing unfamiliar cultural narratives. While previous research acknowledges film festivals as "contact zones" (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), this study complicates this idea, showing that contact zones need to be mediated. Without pre-and post-screening support some participants expressed confusion or disconnectedness, signalling that the development of interpretative engagement is dependent on institutional design and not only on individual engagement.

This implies that film festivals are more than sites of film screening but operate as infrastructures of cultural literacy. Their effectiveness in facilitating dialogue is largely dependent on how they equip audiences, especially young audiences, to engage with cultural complexity. As Liang (2023) indicated, festivals create singular value in cultivating cross-cultural understanding, but this value is contingent upon not only what the festival programs, but also on how audiences are guided to interpret it (p. 13).

The role of emotional resonance in activating dialogue is equally as important. The participants engaged most with films when there was some personal connection such as memory, heritage, or familiarity with a lived experience, even when the cultural setting was new to them. This finding contributes to Lee et al., (2017)'s statement of emotional engagement as a pathway to transcultural understanding (p. 9). Importantly, not all empathetic connections were facilitated by the festival; participants also created their own cultural references or participated in informal conversations to create meaning. The festival then becomes a mediating space, as it enables encounters, but leaves emotional interpretation largely unstructured.

Ultimately, the findings illustrate a reconceptualization of cross-cultural dialogue. Rather than being a passive result of exposure, it is a delicate, negotiated space contingent on festival infrastructures that invite reflection, conversation, and emotional investment. Therefore, this reconsiders the role of the festival not just as a curator of film, but as a dialogic space that must be actively maintained.

5.2 Representation and Curation

While IFFR positions itself as a platform showcasing cinema and voices from around the globe and from emerging filmmakers, participants' reflections point to the fact that representation on its own does not necessarily translate into meaningful intercultural engagement. In other words, many were impressed that IFFR featured films from underrepresented areas and experimental filmmakers. However, these examples were voiced alongside some critiques about the curatorial direction of the overall festival. Programming such

as *the Surfer* with Nicolas Cage (Finnegan & Martin, 2024), raised concern that commercial-driven programming was prioritized over curatorial intent, which supports Dennison's (2018) suggestion that "world cinema" can become a brand that commodifies the potential for genuine cultural exchange (p. 57).

Participants were not critiquing the decision to screen popular films, but the imbalance represented in those choices. Some also expressed a desire for a more transparent and intentional approach to programming. Young audiences recognize and care about what is programmed, and how and why these decisions are made. As Loist (2016) argues, festivals that espouse to promote diversity domestically prioritize institutional influence over radical potential for inclusion (p. 53).

In any event, for many participants, their experience watching films was a source of self-reflection and awareness about their own identity, which they connected back to in the films they watched. This was true whether it was through engaging imagery, language, or symbolic rituals. Seeing Luca's personal response to a film that depicted Cantonese rituals related to mourning, or Sami's ability to connect with Vietnamese traditions embedded into a horror narrative, reveals how festivals emerge as opportunities for identity reflection due to personal resonance (Thomson, 2021, p. 50). As these examples indicate, young audiences do not just receive stories that they will frame as global, but actively reframed these films in ways that compare and critique their own sociocultural frames of reference.

However, the interpretative process did not always happen smoothly. Some participants were aware of their disconnection or discomfort, particularly when confronted with cultural contexts that were unfamiliar to them. Nonetheless, they offered their own understanding of how cultural difference could be productive rather than alienating. This process resonates with Marks' (2000) idea of intercultural affect where emotional involvement facilitates understanding (p. 2).

These particular dynamics are critical for creating opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. Emotionally resonant and layered narratives tend to elicit more reflective engagement, supporting Thomson's (2021) argument that intercultural understanding depends on shared emotional labor (p. 50). As Dennison (2018) observes, programming that leans toward commerciality or simplified narratives risks losing opportunities for dialogue (p. 57). Therefore, representation conditions which voices are heard, and whether they invite dialogue or critique. Representation at IFFR thus shapes how, and with whom, dialogue becomes possible.

5.3 Hybrid Practices of Youth Engagement

For young audiences at IFFR, engagement moved fluidly between physical and digital, personal and collective. Hybrid practices are not incidental to discussions of cross-cultural dialogue, but are the means by which meanings are created, redefined and shared. As Jenkins (2006) asserts, participatory culture moves audiences from consumers to cultural producers (p. 8). In terms of IFFR, this shift was particularly accurate in the way young people could access emotional connection, and social engagement across platforms.

Participants repeatedly described IFFR as a space of cultural consumption, as well as a social and atmospheric experience. Parties, connections, and student partnerships contributed to a perception of a festival that was not just about cinema, but about belonging. As Luna reflected, the feeling of "living through

it" with others, created an embodied experience of feeling engaged. The informal opportunities for connection reflect Bhabha's (1994) third space, a space of hybridity in which identities are tied up in negotiating cultural boundaries. This space allows for cross-cultural dialogue to be affective and relational rather than significant only in a cognitive sense.

In addition to face-to-face engagement, online spaces were another crucial avenue for extending cross-cultural dialogue. Some participants saw Letterboxd as a place for personal reflection, while others engaged with Instagram and video essays to provide their opinions and connect with their community. These behaviours are consistent with Wibowo et al.'s (2023) characterization of social media as an "online enabler," promoting cross-cultural exchange by fostering co-creation, identity expression, and networked conversation. Importantly, digital engagement in this context was not only promotional, but dialogic (p. 364). When participants posted reactions to films, searched for thoughts from others, or even reflected on feedback they received from a director, they were instinctively engaging in a decentralized, meaning-making practice.

This hybrid engagement shifted the spatial and temporal boundaries of cross-cultural dialogue too. For an individual viewer, online spaces bridged existing gaps caused by lack of real-time discussion. Others leveraged the shared excitement of Instagram posts to create conversations with friends, and effectively multiply the social life of a film well beyond the festival. This suggest cross-cultural dialogue is not limited to default, curated spaces, such as Q&As or panels, but it occurs wherever audiences emotionally and critically engage with cultural texts and with each other.

Therefore, at IFFR youth engagement exist in hybrid spaces that combine physical presence with digital presence. What these practices create is not simply a reflection of festival participation, but new practices of cross-cultural engagement as a result. Youth at IFFR are not only culturally engaged; they are emotionally engaged in global narratives and turning them into personal meaning and sharing them within their social networks. It can be stated that young audiences at IFFR are co-authors of the global imaginary of the festival.

5.4 Accessibility in the Shaping of Dialogue

The results of this study highlight the role of accessibility as a central feature affecting young audiences ' ability to engage in cross-cultural dialogue. While IFFR was largely considered a youth-friendly environment by participants, financial and symbolic access were identified as essential in enabling or constraining levels of dialogic engagement. These areas of access are more than just logistical issues, as they form the dialogic conditions through which intercultural meaning can be constructed. De Valck (2007) notes, festivals are structured environments where inclusion must be facilitated (p. 207).

In addition to material access, the data also indicated barriers related to symbolic capital. Participants expressed uncertainty about the ticketing processes and screening categorizations. These barriers limited some young audiences 'willingness to engage with dialogue, underscoring the significance of what Vanhaelemeesch (2021) describes as an environment where participants feel entitled and empowered to equally engage (p. 24). Many participants noted that while student discounts were appreciated, financial decisions still limited their ability to engage with multiple screenings. This limited their potential for

intercultural engagement, as their reduced exposure limited their chances for coming across new narratives and perspectives. As De Valck (2007) argues, the extent to which the democratic capacity of film festivals is realized is closely tied to audiences 'access to alternative content, allowing them to engage in comparative analysis, critical reflection, and broader cultural awareness (p. 207).

Together, these findings illustrate that, accessibility is a structuring force rather than a background condition affecting cross-cultural dialogue. Material affordability shapes the narratives encountered; symbolic competence helps determine who participates and converses; temporal flexibility conditions the possibility of deeper reflection; and interpretive engagement supports dimensions of cultural understanding. For cross-cultural dialogue to be productively realized, festivals must operationalize access in terms of physical entry, as well as a cross-institutional set of practices that allow or constrain the co-production of intercultural meaning.

5.5 Implications and Contributions

This study contributes to a growing body of literature that conceptualizes film festivals as cultural infrastructures. They can be defined as constructed spaces where meaning is co- created by interaction, curation, and emotional investment. IFFR provides a space where young audiences are not simply receivers of global narratives, but active participants in the construction of cross-cultural dialogue.

The first contribution centers on rethinking of cross-cultural dialogue not as a passive result of being exposed to diverse films, but as a process shaped by emotional, institutional, and dialogic infrastructures. Vanhaelemeesch (2021) describes the need for symbolic labor and interpretive support for cultural understanding, and this study supports that perspective, while also demonstrating how Q&As, peer exchange, and digital reflection can impact the viewer's participation in engagement across difference (p. 36). Second, the findings extend existing theories of Jenkins '(2006) participatory culture by positioning affiliations such as informal encounters as fundamental for engagement (p. 3). In this sense elements such as Letterboxd and Instagram do not just serve as a means of promotion or documentation of attendance, but became dialogic extensions of the festival. This evidence suggests festivals are spaces where audiences negotiate meaning across time, through different forms of media. Third, the study points to ways institutions can responsibly manage access, interpretation, and youth labor. Zemaityte et al. (2024) argue that inclusive participation must be built into the structure (p. 4). From making the scheduling, to framing cultural texts, influences who engages in cross-cultural dialogue, and to what depth.

Each of these contributions confirms that cross-cultural dialogue in the context of a festival is not a guaranteed condition. It must be facilitated and sustained by both institutions and audiences.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to look at how the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) fosters a space for cross-cultural dialogue for audiences aged 18 to 25. The study focused on young people's interpretation,

engagement, and reflection on film narratives from different cultures within the context of the festival. The study explored three interrelated dimensions; the tools and moments young audiences use to facilitate their sense-making of unfamiliar content; participatory contexts, both physical and digital that enable or disable youth participation; and institutional infrastructures that justify the extent of intercultural dialogue among audiences. Furthermore, the study examined how the processes of affective connection, symbolic competence, and structural inclusion enabled or constrained the cross-cultural process at IFFR.

The central research question is: *How does IFFR facilitate cross-cultural dialogue among young audiences?* The findings suggest IFFR positively supports cross-cultural dialogue when three enabling conditions are achieved. These include; dialogic opportunities such as Q&As, filmmaker interactions, and post-screening discussions, which help participants negotiate cultural differences; affective resonance, where viewers internalize and relate to the foreign narrative by personally or emotionally relating with the content; and accessible infrastructures that include affordable, flexible, and inclusive participatory environments.

When all three preconditions are present, cross-cultural dialogue becomes a significant and affective experience for young audiences. When one or two are missing, the potential for intercultural understanding diminishes. Cross-cultural dialogue is fragile and relational, meaning that while it is not a given outcome of international programming, it is an outcome dependent on relational achievement.

The theoretical framework drew together four core ideas: contact zones (Pratt, 1991, p. 34), creative multitude (Vanhaelmeesch, 2021), cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Each provided productive analytical traction when assessing the findings. The idea of contact zones helped conceptualize the festival as a multicultural point of contact, but the data demonstrated that contact zones require institutional mediation for meaningful dialogue to occur. Vanhaelemeesch's (2021) explanation of the creative multitude was particularly relevant when examining young peoples' agency as co-producers of meaning in their various interactions on social media and informal conversations. Bhabha's notion of a third space also provided a framework for understanding negotiation of identity and crossing cultural boundaries, although it was less valuable when exploring questions of access such as ticket prices, or symbolic accessibility. Finally, Jenkins' (2006) theory of participatory culture highlighted the ways in which young people engaged with IFFR, not only as passive spectators, but also, as active participants within cultural production and meaning-making. Participants extended IFFR's dialogic space through practices such as reflecting on Letterboxd or posting on Instagram. This extended the festival's dialogue beyond just cinema, creating new social hybrid environments.

Together, these ideas helped navigate the intricacies of the processes of meaning-making, affective labor, and cultural interpretation, which underscore how cross-cultural dialogue works at film festivals. However, the results also highlight the need to focus on material and symbolic access, which is central to youth engagement with IFFR.

6.1 Evaluation of the method

This research conducted consisted of a qualitative method through ten semi-structured interviews with young IFFR attendees. This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced, personal, and affective aspects of cross-

cultural dialogue. This was an appropriate approach to explore how participants engaged in the construction of meaning as well as with the festival's infrastructure, programming, and social relations. However, this study faced methodological limitations. These interviews were based on mediated accounts of experiences, thus, the findings were clearly shaped by participants 'reflections rather than direct observations. In the future, qualitative studies like this one may benefit from supplementary research methods like ethnography to study engagement and capture spontaneous dialogue.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provided useful information about youth engagement and cross-cultural dialogue at IFFR, it had a limited approach. The sample size was small (ten participants) and was predominantly composed of students already involved in cultural or film events. Therefore, the findings presented in this study are not representative of less engaged youth, or youth from diverse socioeconomic situations.

Additionally, the research was limited to audience point of views. The study could have benefited from incorporating the perspectives from festival organizers, curators, and/or workers. This could provide more depth to the analysis of largescale events, as an analysis of how institutional logistics shape cross-cultural dialogue. A multi-stakeholder approach could provide better understanding of the enablers and constraints that shape festival engagement.

Future research could investigate cross-cultural dialogue in other festival contexts such as smaller events, regional film festivals, niche or genre specific events, and other contexts where intimate or community orientation may represent different dynamics. More longitudinal studies tracking the way young people engage in festivals over time may reveal how cross-cultural dialogue develops over time. It might also be appropriate to conduct a larger comparative study on the way digital forms of engagement and physical forms of engagement interact, to assist cultural organizations to design hybrid strategies that are only accessible and informative

6.3 Reflection

In an increasingly polarised media environment, places for collective engagement and reflection are necessary for the vitality of cultural diversity. This thesis has demonstrated that IFFR has acted as a site allowing cross cultural dialogue to be meaningful to young participants.

Young audiences are therefore socially embedded meaning-makers with their own emotional investments. Their contributions extend beyond the cinema hall into digital and affective spaces. Acknowledging their agency is not simply an issue for audience development; it is integral to fulfilling the cultural and democratic possibilities of film festivals in the 21st century.

7. Bibliography

Adler, N. J., & Aycan, Z. (2018). Cross-Cultural Interaction: What We Know and What We Need to Know. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 5(1), 307–333. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104528

Aririguzoh, S. (2022). Communication competencies, culture and SDGs: effective processes to cross-cultural communication. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01109-4

Banerjee, S. (2024). Film festivals and cultural diplomacy: The role of international cinema in global relations. Shodh Sagar Journal of Language, Art, Culture and Film, 1(1), 36- 41. https://doi.org/10.36676/jlacf.v1.i1.7

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The location of culture. Routledge.

Brabant, K. (1985). Film and cross-cultural communication: The film festival in retrospect. Anthropology Today, 1(6), 22-25. https://doi.org/10.2307/3033253

Brinkmann, S. (2014). Interview: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Chan, F. (2011). The international film festival and the making of a national cinema. Screen, 52(2), 253-264. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjr013

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Dennison, S. & Song Hwee Lim (2006). Remapping world cinema : identity, culture and politics in film. London ; New York: Wallflower Press.

De Valck, M. (2007). Introduction: Film Festivals as Sites of Passage. In Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9789048506729-002

Dhoest, A. (2019). Young people's media practices: From consumption to cultural capital. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 22(4), 379–394. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418823202

Dickson, L. (2018). Film festival and cinema audiences: a study of exhibition practice and audience reception at Glasgow Film Festival - Enlighten Theses. Gla.ac.uk. https://theses.gla.ac.uk/5693/1/2014DicksonPhD.pdf

Diestro-Dópido, M. (2021). Film Festivals. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1wsgqzv

Ezra, E., & Rowden, T. (2006). Transnational cinema: The film reader. Routledge. Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. Social Text, 25/26, 56-80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240 Hall, E. T. (1976). Beyond culture. Anchor Books.

Finnegan, L. (Director), & Martin, T. (Writer). (2024). *The Surfer* [Film].

Howard, L. (2012.). FILM SUBTITLING: A CHALLENGE FOR THE TRANSLATOR. https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/iulmyt/pdf/encuentros_v/70_howard.pdf

IFFR. (2025). International Film Festival Rotterdam: Mission, programs, and outreach. https://iffr.com

Jenkins, H. (2020). Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. Oapen.org. https://doi.org/1004003

Kapadia, P. (Director & Writer). (2024). *All we imagine as light* [Film].

Kirillova, N. B. (2023). Impact of digital culture on shaping young people's creative activity. Perspectives of Science and Education, 62(2), 10–22. https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2023.2.1

Koefoed, L., de Neergaard, M., & Simonsen, K. (2020). Cross-cultural encounters in urban festivals: Between liberation and domination. Space and Culture, 25(4), 706-719. https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331219897036

Koehler, R. (2012). Cinephilia and film festivals. In M. de Valck, B. Kredell, & S. Loist (Eds.), Film festivals: History, theory, method, practice (pp. 81–90). Routledge.

Kredell, L., Loist, S., & de Valck, M. (2016). Film festivals: History, theory, method, practice. Routledge.

Laurell, C., & Björner, E. (2018). Digital Festival Engagement: On the Interplay Between Festivals, Place Brands, and Social Media. Event Management, 22(4), 527–540. https://doi.org/10.3727/152599518x15300559276930

Lee, S.-A., Tan, F., & Stephens, J. (2017). Film Adaptation, Global Film Techniques and Cross-Cultural Viewing. International Research in Children's Literature, 10(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2017.0215

Lee, J. Y. (2017). Travelling Films: Western Criticism, Labelling Practice and Self-Orientalised East Asian Films - Goldsmiths Research Online. Gold.ac.uk. https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/28569/1/CUL_thesis_Lee_2005.pdf

Liang, Y. (2023). The irreplaceable value of international film festivals in a digital age. Journal of Global Media Studies, 12(1), 12–15.

Lifintsev, D., Zelihic, M., Grebliauskiene, B., Wellbrock, W., Patel, S. V., & Sharma, R. K. (2025). Young professionals' perspectives on cross-cultural communication: Assessing competence and employer support across regions. International Journal of Cross Cultural Management, 25(1), 233–254. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705958251319695

Livingstone, S. (2007). On the material and the symbolic: Silverstone's double articulation of research traditions in new media studies. New Media & Society, 9(1), 16–24.

Loist, S. (2016). The politics of diversity in film festival programming. Film Festival Yearbook 5, 51–64.

Majsa, B. (2016). Communication, Diversity and Internationalism. A Comparative Analysis of Gothenburg International Film Festival and Clandestino Festival from a PR perspective. Ub.gu.se. http://hdl.handle.net/2077/36323

Marks, L. U. (2000). The skin of the film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses. Duke University Press.

No Title Productions. (2025, February 17). How are Film Festivals Important? Why They Shape Success. No Title Production Films -. https://www.notitleproductionfilms.com/introduction-to-film-festivals/

Nyimbili, F., & Nyimbili, L. (2024). Types of purposive sampling techniques with their examples and application in qualitative research studies. British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies:

English Language, Teaching, Literature, Linguistics & Communication, 5(1), 90–99. https://doi.org/10.37745/bjmas.2022.0419

Pedersen, J. S., & Mazza, C. (2011). International Film Festivals: For the Benefit of Whom? Culture Unbound Journal of Current Cultural Research, 3(2), 139–165. https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.113139

Peranson, M. (2009). First you get the power, then you get the money: Two models of film festivals. Cineaste, 33(3), 37-43.

Puccia, L., Martin, D., & Jiménez, S. (2025). Engaging young audiences in film festivals: Strategies from the Huelva Ibero-American Film Festival. Youth Media Journal, 3(1), 1–15.

Saldanha, A. (2019). Festivals and the formula of authenticity: Rethinking global cinema through cultural expectations. Cultural Critique, 103(2), 390–408.

Soto-Sanfiel, M.-T., & Angulo-Brunet, A. (2021). How European adolescents get engaged with films?: Psychometric properties of the narrative engagement scale. El Profesional de La Información. https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.sep.02

Stevens, K. (2017). Between Like and Love: Cinephilia and connected viewing in film festival audiences. Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies 14.2 (2017). https://www.academia.edu/35311039/Between_Like_and_Love_Cinephilia_and_conne cted_viewing_in_film_festival_audiences

Thomson, N. R. (2021). Resonance. (Re)forming an Artistic Identity through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaboration. Trio, 10(2), 49–56. https://doi.org/10.37453/trio.113284

Vanhaelemeesch, D. (2021). Film festivals and commoning: Towards a festival-based cultural citizenship. Ghent University Press.

Wibowo, G., Hanna, Ruhana, f., Usmaedi. (2023). The Influence of Social-Media on Cultural Integration: A Perspective on Digital Sociology. ResearchGate; Goacademica Research and Publishing. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373935065_The_Influence_of_Social-Media_on_Cultural_Integration_A_Perspective_on_Digital_Sociology

Zemaityte, V., Karjus, A., Rohn, U., Maximilian Schich, & Indrek Ibrus. (2024). Quantifying the global film festival circuit: Networks, diversity, and public value creation. PLoS ONE, 19(3), e0297404–e0297404. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0297404

Zhang, L., Chen, J., & Ruiz, T. (2024). Youth audiences and cultural participation: Challenges in traditional cultural institutions. European Cultural Studies Quarterly, 10(1), 53–59.

Zou, J., Zhao, F., Zhang, Y. (2023). Research on Dubbing in Campus-Themed Feature Films. Beijing Union University, 1-5. https://doi.org/10.23977/artpl.2023.041301

Appendix A: Topic List

1. **Introduction**

   - Purpose statement

   - Informed verbal consent

   - Ensure participants have no discomfort

   - Brief introduction about participant (e.g., age, nationality)

2. **Festival experience and motivation**

   - What motivated you to attend IFFR?

   - How did you choose which films to watch?

   - Did you attend alone or with others? How did this shape your experience?

3. **Engagement with cross-cultural cinema**

   - How would you describe your experience watching international films at IFFR?

   - Were there any cultural elements that stood out to you in the films you watched?

   - Did you feel emotionally connected to a story that came from a different cultural background?

4. **Cross-cultural dialogue**

   - Did you talk to others about the films (audience, filmmakers etc). If so, how did it go?

   - Did the festival provide enough opportunities for discussion such as Q&As, panel talks, or casual spaces?

   - Did these interactions help you understand the films or the cultures they represent?

5. **Programming and representation**

   - Do you think the films shown at IFFR represented enough cultures and voices?

   - Do you think the festival's film selection is culturally inclusive?

6. **Accessibility & Inclusion**

   - How easy was it for you to access the festival (tickets, information etc)?

   - Do you feel like the festival was inclusive toward young people?

   - Did you have any barriers affecting participation? (Language, cost etc)

7. **Youth participation and identity**

   - In what ways do you feel the festival catered to younger audiences?

   - Was there anything about the festival experience that resonated with your identity or personal interests?

   - Do you feel like your generation connects differently to film festivals compared to older audiences?

8. **Role of social media**

   - Did you share your festival experience or opinion on social media? (Instagram, TikTok, Letterboxd)

- Did these platforms influence your experience of the festival? Whether before or after?

9. **Meaning-making**

- How have your thoughts or feelings changed after attending the festival?
- Did IFFR help you learn something new about another culture or yourself?
- What do you feel like is the role of film festivals? (educational, entertaining, political etc)

10. **Conclusion**

- Anything else to add?
- Thank you for your time

Appendix B: Code book

Theme	Definition	Codes	Example
Cross-Cultural Dialogue	Investigates how IFFR promotes intercultural engagement through Q&As, discussions, and peer discussions	Audience discussion Dialogue beyond screening Dialogue through aesthetics Filmmaker interaction Intercultural dialogue Intercultural exchange Q&A sessions Shared interpretations Symbolic interaction	"Half of the audience was Romanian. It was like a big hangout afterwards"
Cultural Encounters and Meaning Making	Emphasizes how young audiences engage emotionally with narratives to form personal and reflective interpretations	Affective resonance Cultural discovery Cultural interpretation Cultural learning Cultural resonance Identity reflection Introspection Meaning making Personal connection Universal emotions	"It was really tragic for me to learn about this"
Programming and Representation	How curatorial decisions shape young audiences' exposure to a diverse range of voices, while highlighting the tension between artistic intent and commercial viability	Appreciation for cinema Curatorial diversity Emerging filmmakers Experimental cinema Film availability Independent films Niche cinema Programming critique Representation Thematic diversity Underrepresented voices	"It was by the director who's actually a Polish painter [...] I didn't hear anyone in Poland talk about this movie at all. I had a chance to see it in Rotterdam."

Accessibility and Inclusion	How financial, symbolic, and logistical barriers shape youth participation at IFFR. This affets who can partake in cross-cultural dialogue at the festival	Accessibility Affordability Barrier to access City multicultural identity Inclusivity Institutional access Language accessibility Physical proximity	"Absolutely every movie had English subtitles"
Barriers to Accessibility	This examines factors that limit intercultural dialogue	Press priority Ticketing Difficulty navigating program Economic barrier Exclusive event	"It's really hard to get tickets because you need to be on top of your game [...] It's just a fact there's a huge demand, you need to be there early on."
Young Engagement and Participatory Culture	Investigates how young audiences extend the festival experience through digital platforms and peer exchange.	Creative discovery Digital participation Digital platform Festival atmosphere Gen z behavior Identity exploration Mediated interaction Peer engagement Personal archive Social media Youth inclusion Youth motivation	"Almost every night there was an after party […] which I thought was really cool for young people"
Festivals as Spaces of Belonging and Community	How IFFR creates a sense of belonging through its social environment, and how young audiences express identity and community.	Belonging Community building Emotional environment Festival hangout Festival space Identity exploration Social bonding Social interaction	"The whole city is so much livelier when IFFR is happening"

		Spatial familiarity Temporary community	

Appendix C: Participants

Name Participant	Age	Background	Gender
Luca	22	Belgian/Chinese	Female
Mia	23	Romanian	Female
Sami	22	Serbian	Female
Theo	23	Italian	Male
Hana	23	Dutch	Female
Deniz	19	German/Indian	Male
Sofia	24	Japanese	Female
Sasha	20	Polish	Female
Luna	23	Polish	Female
Leo	25	Dutch	Male

Appendix D: AI Declaration

I confirm that AI tools were used only for activities explicitly permitted under the 2024-2025 academic policy. All uses were supplementary, non-substantive, and did not involve the analysis of private or sensitive data.

Thesis Question Refinement:

I used ChatGPT to help refine the wording of my research question, in order to gain better academic clarity.

Prompt used:

"Can you help me reword my current thesis research question: How can young people at IFFR enable cross-cultural dialogue?"

Idea Generation:

ChatGPT was used in the initial research stages to help with the brainstorming of themes that could help with the coding process. No private data was used.

Prompt used:

"What are key themes that arise when discussing cross-cultural dialogue at film festivals?"

Grammar and Clarity:

Grammarly was used in non-analytical sections of the thesis to improve the grammar and reader clarity. The sections include the abstract, introduction, and discussion. No original ideas were generated by AI, only refinements.