Managing cross-cultural diversity in Rotterdam: an exploration of how cultural venues engage with highly diverse international audiences

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ABSTRACT

Rotterdam, as one of the Europe's busiest ports over the past century, has attracted a highly diverse population, shaping the city into an international oriented and culturally vibrant urban space. Many of the city's cultural venues not only reflect the multi-cultural demographics of Rotterdam, but also play a significant role in fostering intercultural conversation, mutual understanding and network creation through the development of diverse programming. Furthermore, as liminal spaces, they often provide individuals mental support, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to express themselves freely. However, diversity and inclusion research in the Netherlands has primarily focused on the largest ethnic minorities for decades, while relatively little attention has been paid to international students and expatriates. Yet, as the number and diversity of international residences continue to grow, their contribution to the diverse and multicultural dynamic of Rotterdam and other major Dutch cities becomes increasingly significant. Hence, this study explored how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with this highly diverse audience, particularly expatriates. The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews, followed by thematic analysis to examine how professionals in cultural venues perceive and approach engagement with Rotterdam's international residents. All nine cultural practitioners emphasized the significant role of cultural venues in fostering diversity and inclusion within the city, showcasing the impact they can have on creating a more inclusive urban environment. However, several challenges emerged for venues to maintain diverse programs. The dispersed nature of international audiences requires venues to constantly invest efforts, time, and resources to draw the audience's attention. Additionally, insufficient funding and resources often constrain the implementation of comprehensive inclusion strategies, affecting the long-term sustainability of the venues. However, despite these challenges, the interviews revealed several extensive strategies grounded in the practitioners' extensive experience in navigating Rotterdam's diverse urban environment. These strategies include, for example, flexible use of language, co-creation with international communities, and the formation of diverse teams representing a variety of backgrounds. Such approaches not only introduce new perspectives but also create an environment rooted in and striving for genuine diversity and inclusion.

KEYWORDS: *Diversity, Inclusion, Cultural venues, Expatriates, International students, language usage, co-creation, scattered audiences*

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1. Introduction

Rotterdam, home to one of Europe's busiest ports, plays a key role in global logistics and migration processes not only because the extensive Maritime trade networks but also due to colonial past, which has brought diverse population to the city since the seventeenth century. With the characteristic of highly mobile society, Rotterdam fosters extensive international social and economic exchanges and this dynamic environment has contributed to a rich and diverse population (Scholten et al., 2019, p. 3). Since the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, the city has welcomed numerous immigrants and workers from around the world. Nowadays, with more than 180 nationalities – including communities from Surinam, Turkey, Morocco, the former Dutch Antilles, various Western countries, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, Rotterdam has evolved into one of the most diverse cities globally (Scholten et al., 2019, p. 15). It is not only considered a "superdiverse" city but also a majority-minority city, with native residents comprising less than half of the total population (Scholten et al., 2018, p. 15). This intensive multicultural interaction has significantly shaped Rotterdam's unique urban landscape, particularly evident in its cultural venues and public spaces. Furthermore, Rotterdam is characterized by high levels of mobility and diverse population flows, with a high influx of international students (Nuffic, 2025, pp. 45-48)[1], as well as expatriate employees and their accompanying family members (Van Bochove & Engbersen, 2013, p. 295). These individuals often reside in Rotterdam temporarily without a predetermined duration, yet many eventually transition into long-term migrants or maintain sustained transnational engagements (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 770). Intercultural travelers not only adapt to their new country of residence but also actively contribute to it, introducing new cultural elements and stimulating critical discussions on issues like community identity, multicultural integration, or policy strategies. These fluid and mobile populations constantly reshape Rotterdam's cultural and social landscape and development, highlighting the complexity of intercultural interactions that arise from intense international mobility within a superdiverse urban environment.

In cities like Rotterdam, the urban environment is characterized by spaces where multicultural groups intersect and engage with each other. Among these, cultural venues stand out as key sites of intercultural interaction and exchange. According to Van Schaik (2018), cultural venues serve as physical meeting places that enhance social interactions, inspiration, and wonder. They operate as semi-public places that connect public and private spheres, facilitating a dynamic two-way interaction between individuals and the broader society, where physical and social spaces mutually influence one another (p. 51). For

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[1] In the 2024–25 academic year, 131,004 international students were enrolled in full-degree programs at publicly funded universities of applied sciences and research universities in the Netherlands, representing 16.6% of the total student population at these institutions (Nuffic, 2025, p. 8). In the same year, Rotterdam was home to 11,129 international full-degree students, including 8.393 students at Erasmus University Rotterdam and 2,736 at the Hogeschool Rotterdam (Nuffic, 2025, pp. 44-48).

example, spatial design can raise political awareness, and cultural spaces can influence how international expatriates perceive and relate to the city (Zisakou & Figgou, 2023, p.1655).

Cultural venues often represent multiple meanings in society. On the one hand, they contribute to shaping community identity and nurturing civic pride in Western societies. On the other hand, cultural venues like theatres, art galleries, and cinema transform reality into fantasy, operating as "in-between-spaces" where the transition from private to public occurs (Van Schaik, 2018, p.54). These spaces offer a sense of home, something many sojourners seek as they engage with the city. Cultural venues help fulfil the fundamental human need to feel at home, offering international audiences opportunities to connect, participate, and cultivate a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment.

Moreover, creative events in cultural spaces reflect the dynamic interaction between organizers and audiences, as they require both production and consumption to come together in a participatory manner (Laing & Mair, 2015, p. 256). The connection between cultural venues and international communities not only shapes the city's cultural landscape but also influences the policies that impact the city's broader development.

These dynamics raise an important question: How do cultural venues in Rotterdam cater to the city's highly diverse population and, in particular, to its international audiences? In recent decades, diversity and inclusivity efforts in Rotterdam and the Netherlands more broadly have primarily focused on ethnic minority groups who have moved to the country in the previous century, often overlooking the large group of temporary sojourners, such as international students and expatriates (Janssen & Verboord, 2022, p. 7). In other words, several recent reports focus on migrants who have settled in Rotterdam and formed new families over the past decades. They are different from international students or expatriates, whose duration of stay in the city is comparatively shorter or more uncertain (Tersteeg, Bolt, & van Kempen, 2015, p. 4). Nevertheless, these transient groups constantly bring new dynamics to the city's cultural scene, contributing new perspectives and revitalizing energy. Hence, to effectively serve and engage such a diverse audience, cultural events and content must be genuinely inclusive – something that differs significantly from programming designed for a single national or cultural group. Moreover, it is crucial to understand what motivates organizers at these cultural venues to continually create diverse events and content, the challenges they encounter in doing so, and what strategies they employ to reach and serve internationally and culturally diverse audiences. Therefore, the following overarching research question is raised: *How do cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with highly diverse, international audiences?*

This research aims to understand the roles those cultural venues – such as cinemas, museum, or theatres – play in an international and hybrid city like Rotterdam. Specifically, it investigates why and how cultural venues, along with the professionals who operate them, develop events that foster multicultural engagement beyond formal policies and everyday interactions. In doing so, the study aims to gain insight into the complexities of cross-cultural interactions between cultural organizations and audiences.

However, this study does not focus on a single type of venue, as different kinds of cultural spaces each play a distinct role in the cultural landscape and carry unique social and cultural significance (Van

Schaik, 2018, p.252). These venues collectively attract diverse audiences and reflect the dynamic, multicultural character of Rotterdam. Moreover, according to Van Schaik (2018), some types of venues are more focused on social values, while others are more oriented toward striking a balance between artistic and broader economic aspects (p.152). For example, comedy clubs and storytelling venues offer immersive live performance experiences that evoke emotional resonance and enhance community interaction, contributing to a vibrant and engaging urban lifestyle. On the other hand, museums serve as custodians of historical narratives and cultural heritage through their collections and exhibitions. They play a crucial role in cultural transmission by providing educational content and offering insight into cultural identities, thereby deepening public understanding of both local and global histories.

The diversity in the roles and functions of these venues opens opportunities to meet a wide range of audience needs from various perspectives (Van Schaik, 2018, p.268). By examining this heterogeneous spectrum of events and activities, this study not only reveals how different venues engage with their audiences but also offers insights into how different arts forms and types of cultural events interact with and reflect the various communities within the city. Moreover, these distinct insights obtained from various sites can foster collaboration and mutual learning, thereby strengthening both the capacity to accommodate international visitors and the operational efficacy of venues. Through this pluralistic intersection of roles, shared creativity and innovation can emerge to benefit the ongoing development of Rotterdam's cultural landscape.

2. Theoretical framework

To understand how cultural spaces in Rotterdam develop programs that engage internationally diverse audiences, this section reviews current research and relevant literature on the meanings of cultural space, as well as the management of diversity and inclusion within the cultural sectors. First, I will explore the significant functions that cultural venues can provide to the city and examine existing venues in Rotterdam to understand the important role they play within the urban fabric. Second, I will discuss concepts of diversity and inclusion, focusing on how cultural venues operationalize these to connect with international audiences. Approaches for engaging with diverse audiences are expected not only to reveal the motivations and factors which foster more inclusive, multicultural programming in the venues but also to identify the challenges encountered in the process. Several strategies of programming and marketing strategies will be discussed to address these obstacles, showcasing the valuable experiences from existing venues in Rotterdam that have thrived alongside the increasing international population.

2.1. The role of cultural venues in Rotterdam

2.2.1. Cultural venues as liminal spaces for nurturing personal development

According to Van Schaik (2018), the experience of space encompasses not only its physical dimensions but also its mental, historical, and symbolic aspects that shape it. This perspective highlights that interactions between people and places involve collaborative processes that strengthen shared values within the public realm (p. 50). Cultural spaces, in particular, have a significant impact, as they not only foster societal dialogues but also influence cultural policies and give visibility to important social issues

(Bérubé et al., 2024, p. 3). The existing literature underscores the multifaceted role of cultural venues and spaces.

First, cultural spaces serve as meeting points where people can engage in cross-cultural exchanges, which may enhance intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding, intergroup contact, and the development of new networks (Peters et al., 2025, p. 6). This underscores one of the most significant values of physical venues in today's digital and global society. Even though innovative technology creates a new way of building communities and online engagement culture, physical cultural venues still strive to have an important position for cultural practitioners not only as spaces to present their work in person but also as crucial bridges between the city and its international residents (Van Schaik, 2018, p. 11). With the ability to bring together a diverse group of people, cultural venues provide a platform for international audiences to engage with local communities and participate in intercultural dialogue, allowing them to navigate the diverse and complex dynamics of the urban environment.

Second, they can facilitate the integration and acculturation of internationals by contributing to identity formation, instilling a sense of pride, and nurturing feelings of belonging in the new environment (Rössel et al., 2025, p. 5). Additionally, as "liminal spaces", cultural venues offer a temporary escape from everyday reality while simultaneously it is where close to migrant's home experiences (Murcia, 2018, p.1523). According to Van Schaik (2018), the experience of a space depends not only on physical aspects but also on emotional and historical context (p. 54). Hence, cultural venues create an "in-between-space" where transitions - either from private to public or across different cultural boundaries - can take place. This is especially crucial for migrants, expats, and international students, for whom these spaces can serve as important arenas for forging connections and cultivating a sense of belonging in their host societies (Tran & Pham, 2016, p. 562).

Furthermore, research suggests participation in cultural activities positively impacts individuals' well-being by enhancing feelings of social inclusion and community belonging, which may help mitigate experiences of alienation (Holla et al., 2025, p. 7). Given the significant benefits that participation in cultural activities can bring, both cultural policymakers and researchers have increasingly explored the relationship between individuals' engagement in art and cultural events and their overall well-being (Verboord et al., 2024, p.1). This is especially critical for international students or expatriates, since research suggests that immigrants can encounter significant obstacles while adapting to a new country. Specifically, acculturative stress that is caused by the intensive shifting to an entirely unfamiliar culture or environment can lead to depression or influence migrants' performance at work (Bernal et al., 2022, p. 4). Hence, cultural venues can support international audiences in adapting to the host environment more smoothly, as well as enhance their well-being by supporting diverse programs that resonate with them.

Given these multifaceted roles, it is essential to examine how cultural venues in highly diverse, international cities like Rotterdam – home to residents of over 180 nationalities – interact with internationally diverse audiences to fulfil these socially and culturally vital functions.

2.2.2 Exploring the social significance of the venues

To gain a comprehensive perspective of how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with the city's internationally diverse population, this study examines a variety of cultural venues, each uniquely contributing to the cultural landscape. Cultural venues differ not only in the types of art forms they present but also in their organizational structures, resources, and audience strategies. Such diversity in form and function suggests that approaches to inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural representation are not uniform but vary in meaningful ways depending on the nature of the venue and the genre it specializes in.

First, **art house cinemas** like *Kino* serve as accessible entry points for diverse audiences through their programming choices and attention to linguistic inclusivity. By providing films with English subtitles, Kino lowers language barriers for non-Dutch-speaking residents and visitors. Moreover, its diverse, global selection of films exposes audiences to a diverse range of cultural narratives, enabling viewers to engage with stories from around the world. The art house cinema's programming model, focused on curation and film literacy, often integrates post-screening discussions or thematic festivals, which can further deepen intercultural dialogue and critical reflection among both international and local audiences (Banerjee, 2024, p.38).

Second, **multi-disciplinary art spaces** such as *WORM*, which support visual arts, performance, film, music, and media, exemplify flexibility and experimentation in cultural programming. They offer exhibitions with English-language descriptions, include artists from a wide range of backgrounds, and feature cross-cultural themes, making them key spaces for exploring diverse artistic expressions and facilitating dialogues across different cultural groups. Additionally, WORM's participatory and community-based ethos enables more grassroots-level engagement, where the boundaries between artist, audience, and curator are more fluid. Such a model not only allows for the presentation of diverse artistic expressions but also fosters dialogue and co-creation among various cultural groups. Compared to more formal institutions, WORM's open, DIY structure enables a more responsive approach to diversity, although it may also face limitations in terms of resources and institutional support.

Third, **comedy venues** like *Comedy Club Haug* offer a unique cultural experience through humor, a medium that can both connect and challenge audiences across cultural lines. Comedy Club Haug offers English-language performances and invites comedians from around the globe, creating a space where different perspectives are shared and negotiated through satire, storytelling, and improvisation. The club's commitment to linguistic accessibility ensures that both Dutch and non-Dutch speakers can engage with the performances. However, the genre of stand-up comedy also presents particular challenges: humor is culturally contingent and may not always translate across different backgrounds (Nevo et al., 2001, p.144). The approach broadens the range of cultural insights shared through humor but may also challenge and enrich audiences with diverse perspectives. As such, comedy spaces must navigate the balance between universal themes and culturally specific references, making them dynamic but complex arenas for intercultural engagement.

Fourth, **public museums** such as the *Maritime Museum* in Rotterdam are included in this study because of their crucial role in shaping and reflecting the city's identity by interpretating collective memory from the past till the present. The Maritime Museum not only presents Rotterdam's harbor history and the stories of migrants and their descendants, but also offers contemporary perspectives

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through its reinterpretation of historical narratives. While the shipping industry is historically linked to complex colonial legacies, the museum has gradually shifted away from a predominantly industrial and Eurocentric viewpoint. It now embraces more diverse and inclusive narratives. For example, exhibitions such as "Anchored?!" explore migration stories from various cultural backgrounds, while other exhibitions shed light on previously underrepresented groups, such as female workers in the shipping industry and postcolonial interpretations of trade and migration. These evolving representations do more than educate visitors about the past; they actively enhance dialogue within Rotterdam's multicultural society. As Beyen and Deseure (2015, p. 155) argue, public cultural institutions like the Maritime Museum serve as platforms for communicating both historical backgrounds and contemporary perspectives to local and international audiences.

Fifth, **multi-functional cultural venues** such as *CultureHub Rotterdam* and *Verhalenhuis Belvédère* offer programs that transcend specific genres or art forms and play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and diverse environment. By curating a wide range of artistic, educational, and social events, multi-functional cultural venues encourage intercultural dialogue, creative exploration, and collaboration, as well as community participation of the heterogeneous audience base in a highly diverse city like Rotterdam. Diverse perspectives can therefore reflect the city's multicultural composition.

CultureHub Rotterdam serves as an important platform for the in-betweens to further experiment and develop. In other words, they serve as a safe place, akin to a living room, for diverse visitors to engage with the complex context of a multicultural city, while exploring their identity, creativity, personal development, and societal discussions. The phrase "hub" indicates their intention as a space to facilitate cultural exchanges, serving as a mediator for diverse intercultural interaction (Van Schaik, 2018, p .46). Furthermore, these venues act as vital bridges - not only nurturing professionals and amateurs across disciplines, but also fostering an environment where people can constantly exchange insights and grow together. In addition, they welcome participants from all ages and cultural backgrounds, encouraging active engagement with the community and participation in dialogue that enhances a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives.

Verhalenhuis Belvédère is another multifunctional cultural space, dedicated to cultural exchange and storytelling with inclusive narratives. As a meeting point for individuals and communities from diverse backgrounds, Verhalenhuis Belvédère is a space where personal experiences, collective memories, and emotions can be shared safely. By focusing on participatory culture and grassroots engagement, Verhalenhuis Belvédère curates programs that reflect the city's multicultural character but also give voice to the lived experiences of its residents. Through a wide range of events, such as community dinners with dialogic elements, exhibitions, and performances, the venue plays a leading role in fostering intercultural conversations and an inclusive environment. It exemplifies how cultural venues serve as a mediating space, transforming differences into stories and using shared meanings and emotional connections to strengthen community bonds. further. However, as a non-commercial organization, it faces ongoing challenges in sustaining its operations due to insufficient resources.

Lastly, the study also includes two freelance curators with a multicultural background, who frequently collaborate with multiple cultural venues in Rotterdam, including *Rotterdam Central Library* and *Garage Rotterdam*. Their participation broadens the study's perspective, as their professional experiences and responses may shed light on the values and choices of the institutions they work with – particularly regarding inclusivity. Given their international backgrounds, their contributions help examine the significance of diverse teams and multi-cultural collaboration in fostering innovation and creativity, as discussed in the previous section.

Given their distinct characteristics, these various types of venues will likely employ different strategies and approaches to cater to the needs of Rotterdam's international citizens. By comparing and contrasting these diverse organizational practices, this research aims to shed light on the varied ways cultural venues contribute to inclusion, dialogue, and belonging in a superdiverse urban context.

2.2 Managing diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector

The past decades witnessed a growing attention to issues of diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector, specifically concerning the cultural participation and representation of migrant communities (Janssen & Verboord, 2022, p. 3). However, research on how cultural organizations address the diversity and inclusion of diverse, international audiences is still scarce. This gap is also evident in the Netherlands, where research on the topic has mainly focused on the major ethnic minorities in the country, such as those of Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish, or Moroccan descent (Janssen & Verboord, 2022, p. 7). While this long-term focus is understandable from a historical and demographic perspective, cultural policy and related research have largely overlooked other internationally mobile populations in the Netherlands, such as students, expatriates, and short- or mid-term migrants, who now form a significant part of the urban cultural landscape.

International students and expatriates represent distinct categories of intercultural travelers, typically characterized by higher levels of education, global mobility, and professional expertise or academic engagement (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 770). Unlike long-term immigrants or short-term tourists, these groups occupy an in-between position – often residing temporarily in a host country, but for extended periods that call for meaningful forms of cultural integration. Their cross-cultural adaptation involves navigating unfamiliar social norms, institutional systems and cultural codes, all of which require tailored communication and engagement strategies. However, this demographic is frequently overlooked in both academic research and public discourse on diversity and inclusion, which tend to focus on either permanent migrant communities or tourists.

Furthermore, Bierwiaczonek and Waldzus pointed out that international students and expatriates have distinct motivations and conditions for moving abroad, which in turn shape their cultural adaptation processes in different ways. Expatriates tend to prioritize work-related aspects of adaptation, while international students are often viewed as an especially accessible group for research as well as for exploring cross-cultural concepts (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 785). Their varied characteristics underscore the importance of differentiated communication strategies by cultural venues. However, discussion of diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector have often been overly generalized, neglecting

the rapidly growing numbers of people in multicultural cities like Rotterdam, who not only come from a wide variety of other international and cultural backgrounds but also move to these cities for different reasons. Studies indicate that current marketing strategies by such venues often fail to address the nuanced needs of these groups, resulting in ineffective outreach and limited engagement (Bérubé et al., 2024, p. 8).

As a result, the discussion of including diverse international population within cultural spaces should therefore move beyond generalized and reductionist approaches to diversity and instead create spaces that genuinely include the superdiversity of a city like Rotterdam.

Existing studies have examined several aspects that determine the quality of events for diverse audiences, like definitions of inclusiveness, the linguistic usage in the cultural activities and lastly, diversification of personnel in the cultural sector. Regarding inclusion, Laing and Mair (2015) argued that the openness of mainstream social, cultural, economic, and political events for people to participate is the key to inclusion. When individuals as residents are willing but unable to engage with these daily activities, it is a sign of exclusion of the activities (Laing & Mair, 2015, pp. 30-32).

Furthermore, the language that is used to communicate is crucial for fostering inclusion. Research noted the significance of language use for communication on the process of acculturation. Since it can relate to the level of individuals social integration (Hammer, 2017, p. 43). According to Rössel et al. (2025), linguistic integration is paramount for migrants and internationals in adapting to the new society. The requirement for migrants to adopt the majority language can alienate them, especially in societal systems like the labor market, educational system, or cultural sectors (p. 4). Moreover, language relates to emotional bond to certain groups and the sense of cultural identity. This underscores the language usage of venues can influence the degree of inclusion to diverse audiences (Hammer, 2017, p. 44).

Lastly, cultural spaces as a workforce are also an important aspect to investigate. Since sense of belonging and personal identity are critical for internationals when moving abroad, studies shows that diversified personnel in the cultural sector can be a key solution to understand their diverse audiences instead of providing programs that are from the perspective of dominated and highly educated individuals from a Western non-migrant background (Peters et al., 2025, p. 8).

Moreover, audiences are not passive recipients of cultural content, but actively seek out content and experiences that resonate with their personal values and interests. According to this active participation paradigm, audiences consciously choose to be involved in activities that not only reflect their personal interests but also enhance their engagement with society (Livingstone, 2013, p. 3). Consequently, organizers must strive to design and promote events that actively encourage participation from a diverse audience, which, in turn, requires effective communication strategies to reach and engage these audiences.

3. Methods and data

This section outlines the research methodology used to address the central research question and details the analytical steps and strategies employed. The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews, followed by thematic analysis to examine how professionals in cultural venues perceive and approach engagement with Rotterdam's international residents. To gather insights into the complexities of organizing internationally inclusive events, nine expert interviews were conducted with cultural professionals actively involved in programming and audience outreach.

These interviews focused on identifying the motivations and underlying factors that drive the organization of diverse cultural programs. They also aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of how cultural venues contribute to Rotterdam's cultural landscape through their daily engagement with international residents. The collected data primarily consists of participants' personal interpretations and professional experiences in organizing cultural events. Notably, a recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was the set of challenges that professionals face when attempting to implement inclusive values in their programming. These findings highlight the broader, often complex, obstacles that cultural venues encounter when striving to effectively engage with highly diverse audiences, challenges that are deeply rooted in the day-to-day realities and individual experiences of cultural practitioners.

The inductive, qualitative approach of my study aligns with my research goal of gaining a nuanced understanding of each unique case and uncovering the underlying meanings embedded in participants' experiences, rather than generalizing findings (Babbie, 2020) By conducting one-on-one interviews, I was able to engage in in-depth conversations, allowing for flexibility in questioning and responsiveness to each participant's input. This inductive, qualitative approach contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex but profound insights held by these individuals (Babbie, 2020).

3.1 Sampling

During the data collection phase, purposive sampling was applied to recruit participants from selected cultural venues in Rotterdam, based on specific criteria. This approach was chosen to ensure that each interview would yield meaningful insights, as it required both a deep understanding of the venue on my part and a personalized question list tailored to the context of the organization.

3.1.1 Cultural venues

Several key criteria guided the selection of cultural venues for this study. First, each venue offers programs and/or information in English, rather than exclusively in Dutch, thus addressing the significant barrier that language can pose to cultural participation. By making their offerings linguistically accessible, these organizations demonstrate their intention and commitment to communicating with and engaging a broader, international audience.

Second, the selected venues represent a diverse range of cultural genres, including film, music, multi-disciplinary performance, museum exhibition, and stand-up comedy. This diversity enabled a

comprehensive view of internationally inclusive programming within Rotterdam's cultural landscape. The variation in genre not only enriched the scope of the study but also facilitated the identification of diverse communication strategies, methods and insights by different venues. Moreover, it enabled the exploration of genre-specific obstacles and opportunities in engaging diverse international audiences.

Based on the above criteria, a total of 17 cultural venues were identified and contacted with a request to share their perspectives and experiences. Six venues did not respond to this request, while four venues indicated that they are not able to participate in the research because the challenges to maintain extensive workload during the peak season of the business. Seven venues responded positively and were subsequently included in the study: *Comedy Club Haug, CultureHub Rotterdam, Kino, Maritime Museum, Storytelling Rotterdam, WORM, Verhalenhuis Belvédère.* Each of these venues was well suited to the research objectives of providing a broad and nuanced understanding of internationally inclusive programming, as they demonstrate a clear awareness of Rotterdam's diverse audiences and inclusive values, while offering distinct perspectives and practices shaped by their artistic focus, the nature of their offerings, and institutional context.

- **Comedy Club Haug** is a venue dedicated to English-language stand-up comedy, regularly hosting international performers and fostering intercultural dialogue through humor.
- **CultureHub Rotterdam** serves as a platform for emerging artists and creatives from diverse backgrounds, with a strong emphasis on community engagement and cultural exchange.
- **Kino** is an independent cinema known for its curated selection of international films, often accompanied by English subtitles and thematic screenings that appeal to a broad, global audience.
- **Maritime Museum** integrates global maritime history with interactive exhibitions and family programming, and increasingly aims to reflect Rotterdam's multicultural identity in its storytelling.
- **Storytelling Rotterdam** is a grassroots organization focused on narrative and spoken word, offering multilingual events that encourage community participation and cultural reflection.
- **WORM** is an experimental, multi-disciplinary art space that supports boundary-pushing projects in film, music, visual arts, and media, with a strong emphasis on inclusivity and cross-cultural exploration.
- **Verhalenhuis Belvédère** is a cultural house that foregrounds lived experiences and oral histories, particularly those of migrant communities, and is known for its human-centered, inclusive programming.

Together, these venues offer a rich cross-section of Rotterdam's cultural scene and reflect the varied approaches institutions take to engage with the city's internationally diverse population.

Interview participants

For each selected venue, one or two interview participants were recruited to explore the research questions in depth. Participants were selected based on several criteria. First, all respondents held roles as either program curators or marketing managers, as these positions are central to shaping and communicating cultural offerings and provide critical insights into how diverse audiences are understood

and engaged. These professionals typically have significant practical experience in curating cultural offerings or communication materials that speak to diverse audiences. Notably, many participants had responsibilities and/or experiences that spanned both programming and marketing, allowing them to offer perspectives that bridged both areas of expertise.

Second, all the respondents have either worked for at least two years at one of the selected cultural venues or as freelancers for multiple cultural venues that offer internationally inclusive events. This requirement ensured that responses were grounded in personal, experience-based reflections, providing great depth and reliability in addressing the study's core themes.

Third, diversity in participants' ethnic or cultural backgrounds was organically incorporated in the sampling process, allowing this study to explore how a diverse workforce contributes to internationally inclusive programming and communication. While all participants were Dutch citizens, approximately half of them had migrant backgrounds, while the other half were native Dutch. The demographics of the respondents are presented in Appendix C.

By interviewing program curators and marketing managers, this study uncovered not only the strategies employed by cultural venues to engage international residents of Rotterdam, but also the challenges, conflicts, and tensions they face in managing diversity. A key issue identified was the misalignment that can arise between the intended goals of culturally inclusive programming and the realities of engaging a highly diverse public. Insights drawn from a range of cultural venues providing different types of offerings, revealed subtle difficulties or unexpected situations that are often overlooked or generalized in broader discussions of diversity and inclusion. These nuanced findings will be further discussed in the following chapter.

3.2 Operationalization

To execute the research using the aforementioned approaches, a detailed interview guide (see Appendix A) was designed iteratively to capture participants' insights and experiences related to internationally inclusive events and content from cultural organizations in Rotterdam. The questions were designed to explore how these professionals perceive the cultural needs and interests of international audiences in Rotterdam, and, more broadly, how cultural venues in Rotterdam adapt their programming and communication strategies to meet those diverse needs and interests. This approach ensured that the interviews yielded rich, context-specific data aligned with the study's objectives. In addition, with the flexibility of interview method, personalized questions have been asked spontaneously according to the response of participants. Particularly, follow up questions has been added to clarify details about specific diverse programs of the venue or related challenges along with the strategies to engage with their diverse audiences.

The interview guide was divided into four main sections.
The first section focused on how programmers and marketers at cultural venues perceive their institution's role in engaging and serving Rotterdam's diverse, international population. By examining their perspectives and practices, this section aims to uncover how cultural venues in Rotterdam support expatriates and other international residents, not only by offering accessible and culturally relevant content but also by fostering a sense of belonging, encouraging the exploration of diverse stories and

narratives, and facilitating open, intercultural dialogues. Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on how native residents perceive internationally oriented programming. These reflections offered valuable insights into how cultural venues seek to strike a balance between serving local communities and embracing international diversity in their programming strategies.

The second section concentrated on the assessment of Rotterdam's cultural landscape from the perspective of professionals working within it, specifically in relation to international audiences. Through questions centered on the visibility and popularity of international programs, participants offered insights into the current level of cross-cultural inclusion and diversity within the city's cultural scenes. This section aimed to get a better sense of how well the existing cultural offerings reflect and respond to the needs of a globally diverse population.

The third section focused primarily on the marketing and programming strategies when organizing cultural events for diverse urban and international audiences, as well as the alignment between these two functions. Participants provided insight into how cultural venues promote their events and communicate effectively with a multilingual and multicultural audience. Several key challenges emerged during these discussions, most notably, issues related to language use policies. Participants elaborated on both the practical difficulties they encounter and the solutions they have developed to navigate these challenges.

Lastly, the final section focused on the sense of community fostered by the cultural venues and its connection to inclusivity. Participants were asked series of questions aimed at understanding their perspectives on inclusivity, not only as a guiding principle but also as a vision to achieve within their organization. This section also explored practical approaches to inclusivity, such as the composition and diversity of the staff working within the organization, and how internal organizational structures may reflect or support broader inclusive values.

3.3. **Positionality and ethical considerations**

It is also important to acknowledge my position as an international student in the context of conducting this research. My personal experiences and the challenges I encountered when reaching out to venues and conducting the interviews reflect, to some extent, the current state of diversity and inclusivity within the cultural sector. During the process of identifying potential cultural venues that cater to diverse audiences, the use of language, particularly the availability of English-language programs and related promotional content, proved a key element for selecting and engaging cultural venues for this research due to my limited proficiency in Dutch.

As an international student, I found it significantly easier to interact with and understand online content when it is presented in English. While many cultural venues in Rotterdam focus on diversity, those that primarily communicate in Dutch posed challenges for me as automated website translations often fail to convey the full meaning or nuance of the original language. Furthermore, the initial outreach messages and the interviews themselves were in English, which inadvertently filtered out venues that mainly communicate in Dutch. This underscores the vital role that language, especially English, plays in shaping accessibility and enabling the participation of international residents in cultural events. A venue's willingness to engage with diverse audiences can, to some extent, be identified in its decision to offer programs and communications in English or other non-Dutch languages. Conversely, the exclusive use of Dutch, may unintentionally limit the audience to Dutch speakers, even if inclusivity is a stated goal. In the

process of exploring venues, it also became apparent that different type of art forms carry varying levels of linguistic dependency, which consequently influenced the accessibility the offerings of a venue, hence, the decision to include the venue in my research.

Venues that focus explicitly on international audiences and cultural exchange, such as CultureHub Rotterdam or the Maritime Museum, tended to showcase greater awareness of and responsiveness to international audiences. This increased the likelihood of securing interviews and often resulted in more directly relevant discussions on topics related to expatriate experiences. However, certain art forms, particularly theater, presented greater challenges in terms of linguistic accessibility. "Language-no-problem" performances are relatively difficult to locate in many theater venues, as theatrical productions often rely heavily relied on the original language – typically Dutch, which limits opportunities participation and, consequently, for engaging these venues in my interview study. Nonetheless, there are notable examples of venues in language-dependent art forms that still strive to embrace international diversity, such as Kino, Comedy Club Haug, and Storytelling Rotterdam. These venues actively attempt to engage both Dutch-speaking and international audiences. Their efforts offered me valuable insights into the complexities of balancing the needs of diverse audiences and the challenges involved in maintaining accessibility across linguistic and cultural lines. However, my position as an international student may create certain biases into this study. For instance, organizations that primarily use Dutch on their websites might appear to lack inclusivity from my perspective, because I am unable to fully access or interpret their content. As a result, they may have been excluded from the study, even though they might practice inclusion in various ways that are not immediately visible to non-Dutch speakers. This language barrier reflects how my international background could unintentionally narrow the scope of inclusion assessed in this research. This underscores the possibility of how my positionality as an international student may have shaped and potentially limited my perspective throughout the research process. Since, apart from language barriers, my perception my also be influenced by my own cultural background, and values. Hence, I might unconsciously examine inclusion through a lens formed by my personal experiences and norms and unable to include other potential forms of inclusion and diversity within broader aspects.

Furthermore, ethical considerations form an important aspect of this study and warrant further reflection, especially since it involved face-to-face interviews about potentially sensitive topics. Ensuring the protection of participants' emotional safety and personal information throughout the study was essential. Firstly, the data collection process adhered to the principle of credibility, as defined by Korsten and Moster, where the aim is to ensure that the collected data are a truthful representation of participants' experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 121). To enhance credibility, this study employed both prolonged engagement and persistent observation (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 122). According to the authors, interviews should be conducted over a sufficient period of time to build trust, allowing participants to feel relaxed and familiar with the questions. This trust is also critical for eliciting responses that are both reflective and relevant to the research topic.

To support this process, I began each interview by sharing my own experiences engaging with the venue, along with the profound inspiration and insights I gained as an international audience member. In this way, I was able to build rapport with the participant, but also helped participants understand my

deeper motivation for doing this research, encouraging them to share their perspectives as well. The average duration of the interviews exceeded one hour, which allowed sufficient time for follow- up questions and requests for clarifications or examples when needed. At the beginning of each interview, a consent form was presented and explained participants. This form outlined the purpose of the interview, how the data would be used, and, most importantly, reassured participants of their rights—including the ability to pause or withdraw from the interview at any point. To ensure privacy, participants were informed that all personal information would remain anonymous. Additionally, explicit consent was obtained for audio recording, with clear explanations that recordings would be used solely for transcription and data analysis purposes. Moreover, persistent observation will be explored further in the following section.

3.4 Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to analyze the collected data, supported by the use of the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. One of the key advantages of thematic analysis lies in its flexibility, which allows for the extraction of comprehensive, detailed insights from qualitative data (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p.78). Through this approach, I was able to capture the complexity and variation of participants' responses and organize them into several significant themes and patterns that address the research questions.

The analysis began with open-coding, in which I labeled relevant ideas and concepts directly from the interview transcripts (Boeije, 2010, p.). This is the phase where I constantly read the data and immersed myself in participants' personal insights. By rereading the data and analyzing them repeatedly, I ensured that the generated codes aligned with the aims of this research. This was followed by axial coding, through which I grouped similar or related codes and explored their relationships and underlying causes. Thirdly, I developed broader categories that informed the formation of three overarching themes. This coding process was closely aligned with the core objectives of my study and the employment of Atlas.ti enhanced both the dependability and reflexivity of the analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 121).

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Specifically, the analysis shed light on two key aspects: first, the defining characteristics of venues offering diverse cultural content, and the social and cultural functions they fulfil for international audiences in Rotterdam; second, the recurring challenges and strategies related to engaging with diverse

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audiences. These patterns emerged naturally from participants' perceptions and formed into coherent, thematic groups. It is worth noting that the code "challenges to create diverse programs" emerged most frequently, appearing 67 times across all responses. This was followed by "consciousness of diversity programming," which reappeared 48 times in the data set. Hence, through observing the frequency of the emerged codes, I was able to identify the most prominent themes. These can be seen as reliable since they emerged from the data rather than being shaped by my specific preferences and perspectives.

Lastly, some reflection is warranted regarding potential influences on the research due to my own biases or the relationship between me and the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, p. 121). All participants were contacted through researcher-initiated communication, with no prior personal relationships, which minimized the risk of relational bias during data collection. While it is possible that my identity as an international student could have influenced participants to emphasize more positive perspectives on diversity and inclusion, this effect was likely mitigated by the selection of venues—each known for their robust and inclusive programming. In this way, the participants' positive and relevant responses appear to reflect the venues' actual values and practices rather than being unduly influenced by my positionality.

4. Results

This chapter presents the research findings, concentrating on key insights derived from the analysis of the interview data in relation to the research questions. The thematic analysis revealed three main themes, each comprising several sub-themes, which are discussed in the following sections.

The first section examines how diverse representation within cultural venues contributes to connecting people from varied backgrounds through shared experiences of humanity and the provision of a safe environment for the expression of identity and the development of a sense of belonging. Three sub-themes emerged from professionals' insights, including how storytelling creates bonds among people from different backgrounds, and how cultural venues can serve as a "way home" and a platform to express identities for expatriates.

The second section discusses the challenges cultural venues face in catering to the needs and interests of international audiences, drawing on personal experiences shared by programmers and marketers within these organizations. Three related sub-themes highlight the difficulties professionals encounter in reaching dispersed international audiences and in balancing the often diverging interests of local identities and global communities.

The third section focuses on the strategies employed to create inclusive spaces that accommodate cultural diversity. Four main approaches are identified based on the extensive experience of professionals in the cultural field, including the critical role of language use within venues and the value of co-creation practices that create mutual benefits among various stakeholders.

Overall, the findings reveal how cultural practitioners perceive and navigate pluralistic environments, as well as how they engage with highly diverse audiences in practice. By discussing the role of cultural venues, the strategic insights of programmers and marketers, and the challenges they face, this chapter contributes to a broader conversation on enhancing cross-cultural diversity and inclusivity, both within Rotterdam's cultural landscape and potentially in other multicultural urban contexts.

4.1 The empowerment of diverse representation with shared human

The significance of cultural venues in fostering cultural inclusivity to support residents' personal development across multifaceted dimensions within the highly diverse urban space is prominently reflected in the findings. A central theme that emerged from participants' reflections is that venues inherently embody diversity, as they are fundamentally committed to presenting narratives from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and human experiences. Several respondents indicated that the introduction of broad, international programming plays a critical role in shaping both their programming and marketing strategies with the aim of facilitating cultural inclusivity. They emphasize that this diversity is not imposed, but rather emerges organically, particularly in environments where inclusion is already part of the venue's operational ethos. As participant 1, programmer at a Rotterdam-based cinema, explained, she and her colleagues regularly watch films from around the globe, driven by artistic curiosity and a deep appreciation for global storytelling. This practice, she noted, not only shapes programming decisions but also enriches her own worldview as a curator. The following quote from her illustrates how diversity is not treated as a formal requirement, but as a natural and evolving part of the venue's identity, one that is cultivated and deepened through ongoing engagement with international artistic content. This case exemplifies how cultural inclusivity can be achieved through authentic and sustained artistic exploration, rather than through prescriptive policy alone.

"So, we watch movies from all around the world, so this is the first thing. But we, I think, when we first started, we did a lot of Western American titles, special programming. And then later we do our special programming, I mean like our own classics that we screen." (participant 1)

Reflections from participant 3 similarly highlight the role of genuine artistic curiosity in shaping inclusive programming within multi-arts venues. Her account illustrates how a sustained passion for discovering new art forms or marginalized voices may broaden curators' understanding of the world. This ongoing engagement fosters deeper appreciation, respect, and awareness of diverse cultures and lived experiences of people from other cultural backgrounds.

"So, people who like to discover new scenes, new worlds in performance art, in sound art, in music, in visual arts, that's what we are trying to be. And I think in that sense, we are looking at the size of the place and the volume of the program." (Participant 3)

The responses from both participants 1 And 3 underscore that the efforts of venues to feature diverse voices stem not only from an appreciation of artistic variety, but also from a deliberate intention to expose audiences to new perspectives, ideas and lived global experiences.

Moreover, the accounts of the participants suggest that the representation of plurality in cultural programming serves a dual purpose: it empowers individuals from distinct, underrepresented backgrounds while simultaneously connecting people through the demonstration of shared humanity within programs. This theme of empowerment through diverse representation and shared humanity will be explored in detail through four sub-themes.

Respondents emphasized that the diverse representation in their cultural venues fosters meaningful connections across different social groups, revealing shared humanity and commonalities that

transcend individuals' backgrounds. In addition, several respondents noted that by showcasing cross-cultural stories or artworks, venues can create a safe environment, allowing individuals, particularly international students, to feel a sense of belonging and express their identities freely. Finally, another important factor contributing to this inclusivity is the low barrier to entry, which allows broader and more equitable access. This factor will also be analyzed further in the sections that follow.

4.1.1 We are all human: stories connect us, not divide us

When discussing whether professionals intentionally differentiate programs based on cultural backgrounds, most curators emphasized their preference for creating programming that is as inclusive as possible, rather than targeting specific demographic or cultural groups. Maintaining openness and accessibility in cultural programming – so that it can simultaneously serve and engage audiences from various backgrounds – was a recurring theme among participants. As a result, diversity within programming is seen as emerging either naturally or through curatorial decisions aimed at fostering broad cultural representation. This inclusive approach is often rooted in a genuine appreciation for a diverse range of artistic expressions, including film, performance, and storytelling from around the world. It reflects a commitment to ensuring that cultural venues remain spaces where everyone feels welcome, regardless of their background.

However, responses from participants suggest that presenting diverse representation does not create divisions among various groups. On the contrary, it appears to strengthen the capacity of cultural venues to highlight shared human experiences across cultural boundaries. Even when stories originate from distinct cultural contexts, universal emotions, such as love, loss, fear, or hope, are easily recognized by the audiences. These shared emotions serve as bridges for intercultural understanding, fostering connections between individuals from diverse backgrounds. Participant 1 articulated this insight particularly clearly. In the following quote, she emphasizes that while cultural differences are important, it is the underlying similarities in human experience that often resonate most deeply with audiences. Through film, this common humanity becomes both visible and relatable, ultimately encouraging broader curiosity and appreciation for culture difference.

> "Because we're all humans and we have the same needs and wants, so you can see these in films and then also see that we're also very similar, but there are also differences, and I think those differences are very interesting to see and learn from." (Participant 1)

Another compelling perspective on the significance of storytelling comes from participant 9, the founder of Storytelling Rotterdam. Reflecting on the motivation behind the initiative, he emphasized the need for deeper cross-cultural understanding in a city as diverse as Rotterdam. While the city accommodates people from a wide range of cultural and social backgrounds, participant 9 noted that this does not automatically lead to mutual understanding. People often interpret others' actions through the lens of their own experience, which can obscure awareness of differing worldviews and life stories

> "If there's a place where you can share stories and be vulnerable, this is where people can connect with one another, and I hope that it would be the norm to share stories.…… When you share a

story, you share what happened, you share your feelings, and that's not an opinion, that's what you've experienced in life. This is the power of stories, you can listen to the story, and then it's a different story you haven't experienced from the other person, and you can think about it, and then be informed, and give yourself the advice you need, based on that story you've just heard" (Participant 9)

Participant 9's perspective underscores the transformative value of sharing stories, especially in multicultural settings where interpersonal understanding cannot be taken for granted. By providing a space where people can be vulnerable and share personal experiences, storytelling enables individuals to connect across cultural boundaries, fostering empathy and insight.

Exposure to stories beyond one's own lived experience not only enhances appreciation for different cultures but also offers a source of personal empowerment and collective belonging.

In this sense, cultural venues play a crucial role: they serve not only as platforms for sharing knowledge and stories across borders, but also as spaces where audiences can develop a deeper understanding of shared humanity. This corresponds to the broader theme that stories do not divide us but remind us that we are all human.

4.1.2 Cultural venue is a way home

Beyond the empowerment that stems from sharing collective human experiences through diverse stories and art forms, another prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is the idea of cultural venues as places that feel like home. This was one of the most frequently mentioned values participants associated with their work, particularly in relation to the needs of international audiences. Throughout the interviews, the notion of feeling at "home" appeared repeatedly, reflecting a common aspiration among participants to create environments where people - especially expatriates and international students - experience a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and freedom of expression. perspectives. Participant 6 particularly articulated this aspiration. He explained that one of the core ideas behind the initiative is to offer a space akin to a living room - a welcoming, informal place where people can relax, connect, and simply be themselves.

"You start somewhere in a room to get to know the city. You only have a room. You don't have a living room. You are very lucky if you have a living room in Rotterdam as an international or an expat. So, in that way, let me be this living room where you just can come. And that's more for that was the idea for the street in general, because there's a lot of rooms rented out here for students. And it's grown out to be more, but this that's where it started. Just be a living room for people. So that people can work during the day somewhere else than on their bed." (Participant 6)

A similar perspective emerged in the interview with participant 7, who runs a place called space101, a side project of Verhalenhuis Belvédère. She explained that space101 is intentionally designed to feel like a living room – a space where people are welcome to walk in spontaneously, to take a break from the hectic pace of city life or engage in informal, open dialogues with others. The aim is to create a setting that facilitates natural encounters and human connection.

The responses from both participant 6 and 7 illustrate how cultural venues serve not only as platforms for intercultural exchange but also as mental and emotional shelters for international audiences navigating life in a foreign city. Their aspirations aligned with Chaney and Goulding's research about the liminal phase for transition from private to public that cultural venues can provide for an individual (Chaney and Goulding, 2024).

Another recurring theme across interviews was the notion of the cultural venue as a "safe space", which plays a vital role in the context of a diverse urban environment. On the one hand, these venues offer platforms to present stories and perspectives from around the world, fostering emotional connection and empathy that transcend cultural barriers. On the other hand, they provide spaces of emotional release and openness, where individuals can find relief from the pressures of daily life and express themselves freely. For example, participant 2, a co-founder of a local comedy club with extensive experience in the field, noted that comedy itself is a form of emotional relief. According to her, comedy allows people to see the world through a chosen lens, often addressing heavy or difficult topics in a lighter way that enables both personal catharsis and shared laughter.

> "Things hurt, we have a lot of problems, we have a lot of issues going on in the world. We need a safe space to share those feelings and maybe laugh about it, so to make it a little bit lighter for all of us" (Participant 2)

Participant 2's reflections align with current research on the positive impacts of cultural participation on individuals' well-being (Holla et al., 2025, p. 7). Cultural venues, as public spaces, have the ability to bridge the private and public spheres, providing not only entertainment but also mental support and a platform for dialogue. This can be especially significant for expatriates and international students, who may face challenges related to acculturation and the difficulties of daily life in a new environment.

Participant 5' perspective further supports arguments made in the literature review, particularly regarding the importance of creating a genuine sense of belonging for international residents, regardless of the duration of their stay. Feeling at home and supported is crucial for successful integration and wellbeing (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016, p. 770).

> "If you talk about either students or expats, whenever they live here for one year or for 10 years, I think it's better for the city, and people really feel at home. I think you feel at home somewhere if you understand something of the city." (Participant 5')

Although academic research remains relatively limited, cultural practitioners and venues recognize the importance of creating inclusive urban environments. Such environments not only support individual well-being, but also enhance the social fabric of the city, as international residents who feel at ease are more likely to engage with local stories, appreciate cultural differences, and contribute meaningfully to the city.

Additionally, participant 6 emphasized that cultural venues can normalize international presence within the urban landscape, further underscoring their role in shaping a cultural inclusive and diverse cultural landscape.

4.1.3 Cultural venues as safe spaces for voicing identities

Another notable theme that emerged from the interviews is the role of cultural venues as safe spaces for voicing personal and collective identities, particularly for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. When discussing the cultural functions of their venues, nearly all participants emphasized the importance of providing an open space for dialogue and expression. Participant 5 shared an example from her experience at the Maritime Museum, where she worked on the "Anchored" exhibition. Unlike traditional exhibitions curated solely by museum staff, Anchor was distinctive in its participatory approach: it was the first program in which the museum invited young artists to co-create an exhibition focused on stories of migration.

"We did this Anchored exhibition, and this is really, we wanted to tell a story about migration and not our story, so not a story of the curators and the objects, so to say, but we really wanted to give the floor to young people from Rotterdam and around, give them the opportunity to look into their family history, and make a kind of exhibit, and put it in this exhibition." (Participant 5)

According to participant 5, the Maritime Museum thus offered a space for young artists to explore their family stories and voice their identities, while also engaging with peers from various cultural backgrounds. This initiative exemplified cultural venues like museums give visibility to underrespented groups by bridging the past and the present that has contributed to a broader cultural diversity of Rotterdam (Beyen and Deseure 2015, p. 155).

In addition, given by response of participant 4, who is a curator from Maritime Museum as well, that cultural venue is also a space to introduce historical backgrounds and local identity which can foster intercultural conversation between local and international communities.

"For many centuries the Rotterdam harbor has been very important for the city. We are a Maritime Museum so we show the people the past the present and a little bit of the future of mainly the Rotterdam harbor and the harbor and the city itself which have influenced each other for centuries. It's a very important part of Rotterdam as a city." (Participant 4)

With the venues narratives and further exploration of the city historical backgrounds, it enables international audiences to reflect their own position of situating within the city by deeper understanding of the host country.

Importantly, the Maritime Museum is not alone in this effort - several other cultural venues also curate programs centered around immigrant narratives, enriching the city's multicultural landscape.
For instance, participant 7 described a key program at Verhalenhuis Belvédère, which invites individuals from various backgrounds to act as "guest chefs". These participants prepare traditional meals from their home countries while sharing personal stories with the audience. She further explained how sharing food becomes a powerful medium for storytelling, transforming the venue into a welcoming and intimate space – a living room - where people can more easily connect with one another and immerse themselves in stories that are rarely shared in public. Through such events, as research suggested that

venues are an important meeting point that give spaces to immigrants and expats to express their identities and personal histories and to be seen, heard, and understood (Peters et al., 2025, p. 6). These programs offer opportunities for participants to make their identities and personal histories visible in the diverse urban environment, while also fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion among diverse audiences.

4.1.4 Accessibility as the door for inclusion

In addition to offering universal emotional support, another key concept that came up in the interview was the idea of "low entrance", both literally and metaphorically, as a means of enhancing accessibility to cultural experiences. This theme was mentioned by several participants and reflects a shared understanding of the importance of removing barriers to cultural participation.

While discussing the willingness to attend cultural events, participant 1, for instance, noted that international audiences are often more engaged with film culture due in part to the availability of the Cineville pass, a monthly subscription that grants unlimited access to films. She observed that this model not only makes cinema financially more accessible but also encourages audiences to be adventurous and explore diverse programming, including films and stories they might not otherwise have chosen. This example illustrates that, regardless of the art form or storytelling medium, maintaining a low entrance threshold, whether through pricing, language, or atmosphere, allows people from different backgrounds to enter cultural venues and immerse themselves in stories they can relate to. Moreover, it facilitates greater interaction and dialogue between diverse social groups of people, contributing to a more open and interconnected urban cultural environment.

4.2 Challenges for cultural venues in an international setting

The previous sections highlighted the vital role of cultural venues, not only in supporting the acculturation process of international residents, but also in fostering harmonious multicultural engagement in a diverse city through offering international programs. However, nearly all participants identified multiple obstacles and challenges in maintaining and developing diverse programming. Among the themes that emerged from the analysis, the challenge of continually sustaining diverse programs was the most frequently mentioned, underlining the persistent struggles faced by programmers and marketers in this field. For example, consider the case of a comedy club. As participant 2 noted in her interview, humor is a universal emotion that can bring people from different backgrounds together. However, despite laughter being a shared human experience, cultural differences significantly influence how jokes are perceived, as discussed earlier (Nevo et al., 2001, p.144). Participant 2 explained that promoting work comedy in the Netherlands presents unique difficulties. She pointed out that comedy often receives limited attention and is not taken as seriously in Dutch society. This is partly because comedic content may not always align with the humor preferences of Dutch people, making it harder to attract a broad audience. This lack of popularity, in turn, creates challenges in maintaining program diversity while ensuring the organization's sustainability. Moreover, various types of art forms and venues face distinct challenges depending on the nature of their programs and the varying preferences of diverse audiences.

Therefore, this section will further delve into the theme of challenges as discussed by several professionals.

4.2.1 Engaging diverse, mobile, and scattered audiences

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges in marketing is the difficulty of effectively targeting international audiences. This finding matches how research suggested about the difficulties for marketers to communicate with the diverse audiences effectively engagement (Bérubé et al., 2024, p. 8). This issue arises partly because expatriates move to Rotterdam for a wide range of reasons, resulting in their dispersion across the city. Additionally, the high mobility of international residents, as well as the often-uncertain nature of this mobility, necessitates greater communication efforts. In other words, promotional campaigns aimed at international audiences often have only short-term effectiveness, as these individuals may leave the city at any time, making sustained engagement particularly challenging.

On the one hand, when discussing marketing strategies for reaching various audiences, participant 2 shared that she often has to post promotional materials across multiple Facebook groups and other social media platforms. While this approach requires significant efforts, it tends to have insufficient responses as return. Similarly, participant 5's comments regarding the target audiences of the Maritime Museum reflect the difficulties participant 2 mentioned. Participant 5 noted that one of their current target groups consists of tourists arriving via cruise ships, as it is relatively easy for the museum to establish direct contact with cruise companies for collaboration. Additionally, as the curator of the "Anchor" program, which presents stories of immigrant experiences, participant 5 noticed that attendance at this program was lower than anticipated. She explained that the museum's primary visitors tend to be families who may showed less interest in Anchor, further underlining the challenge of developing diverse programming that appeals to a broader audience.

On the other hand, when discussing the challenge of sustaining audience engagement to ensure the venue's viability, participant 6 noted that despite having a relatively large number of followers on the official Instagram page, it remains difficult to secure enough people for individual events. This issue not only stems from the diverse interests of the audience, which leads to people being spread across different events, but also from the high mobility of the international residents, many of whom may leave Rotterdam within a short period and are thus unable to continue participating. This highlights a fundamental issue in targeting international audiences. Their transient nature makes it difficult to build and maintain a stable, loyal audience base. Furthermore, participant 2 pointed out that while some special programs may naturally attract audiences from specific cultural backgrounds, their relative rarity compared to regular offerings presents an additional challenge in consistently drawing participants. As a result, cultural venues must continuously invest significant efforts and marketing resources to engage newly arriving expatriates and maintain visibility within this ever-changing market.

4.2.2 Limited resources to manage comprehensive inclusion

In addition to the challenges posed by the high mobility and dispersed nature of international audiences, the issue of limited resources for achieving meaningful inclusion emerged repeatedly in

participants' responses. They indicated that they often struggle not only to access international productions but also to manage multilingual communication, which requires significant time, energy, and financial investment.

For example, participant 1 from the Kino cinema, known for screening films from many different countries, explained that Japanese or Korean movie titles are often too expensive to license, particularly for a non-subsidized cinema. This financial barrier limits the ability to maintain a truly diverse program.

Other venues experience similar challenges, such as CultureHub Rotterdam. As participant 6 reflected, it is more sustainable for the venue to maintain regular programming that caters to an established audience base. It demands considerable resources to continuously developing new programs, and certain programs with its relatively marginalized perspectives, often appeal to niche audiences that make them more challenging to sustain financially.

On the other hand, one of the most representative responses came from participant 7, a curator at Verhalenhuis Belvédère, where the primary language used on the official website and social media is Dutch. She noted that although their website may appear to lack inclusivity and diversity, this is not intentional. Instead, the limitation stems from a lack of financial and staffing resources, which makes it difficult to develop multilingual communication content to connect with international audiences. As participant 7 explained:

"I don't even have a communication department, and it's all done by our head of ourselves like the curators. Because we don't promote our locations or program. You don't do that because everything is non-commercial, and everything is very organic." (Participant 7)

The above quotation expresses the dilemma faced by smaller or non-commercial cultural venues that strive to serve as a platform for diverse stories, while keeping their offerings affordable. This highlighted the practical limitations in sufficient funding and staffing as the constrain to implement multilingual communication for engaging with broader audiences.

In contrast, venues where all marketing materials are presented in English, like WORM or CultureHub Rotterdam, tends to attract more diverse audiences. As participant 3 explained, based on her extensive experience at WORM, using English material is more practical for multiple reasons. Not only is the staff composition at WORM international, but most of their programs also feature international programs which are often in English or in multiple languages. Similarly, participant 1 emphasized that English is essential in their marketing material to engage with the city's growing international population, At the same time, Dutch subtitles are retained in films while some screening offer English subtitles, which remains its accessible to local communities.

4.2.3 Negotiating between local communities and international representation

In line with the earlier discussion, the scarcity of resources often forces organizations to consider how to prioritize and allocate them. This naturally raises the issues of how resources should be distributed between local and international communities. When asked whether the municipality of Rotterdam should support the development of international programs, interviewees expressed slightly differing perspectives, particularly regarding the reallocation of resources and language policy. Participant 4 emphasized the importance of aligning with values of inclusion and diversity, but noted that it is not necessary to give

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priority to expatriates. He elaborated that while engaging international audiences is valuable, there are more pressing issues, such as environmental concerns or minority equality, that may require more urgent attention than the inclusion of international audiences.

"I think that's more important within the city itself than international like not just focusing on the international. Like more focusing on everybody but especially local people in the city itself. I think that's the inclusiveness and diversity that is more important than for international visitors" (Participant 4)

Participant 4's reflections align with observations found in existing literature, which suggest that both research and public discourse tend to focus on the representation of migrants or economically disadvantaged groups, while the inclusion of expatriates has received relatively less attention or consensus (Janssen & Verboord, 2022, p. 3). While his response my derive from his focus of the topic might not be related to expatriates but other issues.

In addition to resource allocation, language policies in programming and marketing material were also frequently discussed by participants. Regarding the inclusivity of communication content, participant 2 emphasized the importance of addressing the needs of both local communities and international groups. She cautioned against relying exclusively on English, as doing so may exclude certain populations or even challenge the distinctiveness of Rotterdam's local identity.

"I think we should focus especially on Rotterdam, and with all its inhabitants, so I don't think it should be, if we do everything in English, we wouldn't have our own identity anymore, and I think it's good to show international people the Rotterdam identity, and everybody gets the Rotterdam identity." (Participant 2)

However, a slightly different perspective was voiced by other participants, who underscored the importance of ensuring that individual feels welcome in the city, especially given the increasing population of internationals in Rotterdam. For example, both participant 8 and 9, who both have international backgrounds, shared how they have personally benefited from cultural venues supported by the municipality of Rotterdam. Participant 9 organizes both storytelling and stand-up comedy events aimed at bringing together international and local communities. These events are regularly held at the Rotterdam Public Library, a space symbolically significant as a meeting point for the city's diverse population. Participant 9 noted that with adequate support, he is able to make these events not only more accessible but also more impactful in fostering dialogue among diverse participants.

Similarly, participant 8, who has an Asian background, participated in interactive events such as in Space 101, a venue focused on the Asian community. Through these experiences, she was able to connect with people from diverse backgrounds and engage in deep conversations that explored a range of life experiences.

In short, both participant 8 and 9 emphasized how essential institutional support can be for individuals navigating and adapting to life in a foreign city and has aligned with current research that

inclusive cultural programming plays a significant role as in-between space for personal and community development (Van Schaik, 2018, p.11).

4.3 Approaches for accommodating cultural diversity in venues

In addition to the challenges discussed in the previous section, participants also shared valuable insights into strategies that have helped them overcome obstacles or successfully accommodate diversity in their venues.

4.3.1 Flexible linguistic usage as a key to inclusion

Although programmers do not intentionally differentiate audiences based on background, the choice of language used in cultural venues plays a crucial role in whether the values and messages of their artistic offerings are effectively communicated to diverse audiences. For example, Comedy Club Haug offers shows with both Dutch and English lineups, and Kino offers movies with either Dutch or English subtitles options, to cater to both local Dutch residents and international audiences.

When discussing their reasons for offering programs in different languages, several participants emphasized the importance of making everybody feel welcome. They also observed a growing presence of English-speaking groups in Rotterdam, noting that switching from Dutch or other languages to English has become an efficient way to communicate with the city's increasingly diverse audiences.

"Sometimes and online, I switched to from Dutch to English while communicating because I see that our expat group is growing a lot. It was not like this when we started in 2016." (Participant 1)

Participant 1's observations highlight that the growing presence of international students and expatriates in Rotterdam, groups that have the potential to participate in and contribute actively to the city's cultural scene. Their involvement can significantly shape and enrich the local cultural landscape.

However, some respondents shared perspectives derive from their experience while engaging with native audiences. While some expressed concern about losing the tradition and prominence of the Dutch language, others describe the native audiences worries about their limited proficiency in English might be a challenge to enjoy cultural events fully. The responses from the native audiences also showcase language can related to not only emotional connecting but also a sense of belonging as research suggested (Hammer, 2017, p. 44). Hence, participant 2 explained that programs are increasingly being designed using a mix of languages as response to the concerns. This approach not only helps to blur linguistic boundaries but also gradually normalizes the use of English, making events more inclusion and accessible for the diverse audience, while still acknowledging and respecting the local language and community.

"What we do is because we cannot reach all the English-speaking people, for all the international shows, we also invite English-spoken speaking comedians into the Dutch shows, so if we have a

lineup, we try to put one English comedian on the lineup, and that's our way of telling Dutch people, you will understand it." (Participant 2)

Participant 2 further explained that everybody is welcome everywhere, so they even attempt to program different comedy shows in multiple other languages like Spanish or Mandarin.

4.3.2 Ongoing efforts to understand differences without reinforcing stereotypes

Beyond the effort by cultural venues to switch languages or develop more inclusive communication strategies to accommodate international audiences, another prominent theme that emerged from participants' responses was the continuous commitment to understanding cultural differences rather than reinforcing stereotypes through programming. It can be clear seen that constant effort and high awareness to learn differences of multicultural is a key for practitioners to fulfill their aim of inclusion. For example, in Kino's Taiwanese New Wave series, participant 1, as the programmer, took great care to research and curate films that authentically reflect Taiwanese values and cultural contexts.

"The trailer we made for the program is in traditional Mandarin. So I wanted to be... because I know that there's a difference. So, I wanted to not have simplified Mandarin, but like traditional, because that's the preferred way in Taiwan. So, I tried to think about, you know, these sensitive kinds of things and incorporate them into the film. So, yeah, that's what we tried to do." (Participant 1)

Such cultural sensitivity was also clearly present in participant's 5 response during a discussion about the display of ship models in the Maritime Museum.

"When you look at the ship model from the 17th or 18th century, it's about colonial history, and maybe, and I really admire the way it's made, because it's really beautiful in a way, but now, I understand better that for some people, this ship is not beautiful, it's a pain." (Participant 5)

Reflection from both participant 1 and 5 highlights the vital role of deeper level of cultural sensitivity to foster genuine inclusion without reinforcing stereotypes.

4.3.3 Co-creation practices as a mutually beneficial strategy

Co-creation emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned and effective practices for fostering cultural diversity in venues and opening meaningful dialogue with multicultural communities. Participants emphasized that collaborative programming not only enriches the cultural offerings but also creates mutually beneficial relationships between venues and diverse communities align with current researh (Grott, et al., 2019, p. 546). For example, participant 1 highlighted the value of working with external partners for both financial and diversity-related reasons.

"What we do now with these Japanese titles, is we work together with an anime festival, and they book titles, and then they screen it here. So, yeah, that's for us a very good way to cater to a different audience." (Participant 1)

She further elaborated that inviting different festivals or organizations to collaborate with Kino allows them to screen films that these partners have unique knowledge about, thereby deepening the cultural relevance and authenticity of the programming.

Participant 8 shared another example of co-creation at Verhalenhuis Belvédère. In preparation for an exhibition on Vietnamese migrants, they invited members of the Vietnamese community to participate in the programming process, ensuring the exhibition reflected lived experiences and cultural insights of the community.

Participant 5 also expressed strong support for co-creative approaches. In her interview, she underlined the importance of bringing people from diverse backgrounds together in the development process, noting that such collaboration fosters mutual learning and deeper cultural understanding.

4.3.4 Organic diverse representation in multicultural teams

While co-creation with diverse groups of people has been discussed as an important strategy to enhance inclusivity, another frequently mentioned theme among participants is the concept of organic diversity, particularly in relation to the composition of programming and marketing teams. Participants emphasized that both the diverse composition of the team and team members' sensitivity to cultural diversity are key factors in achieving organic diverse representation. WORM is a leading example in this regard. According to participant 3, the venue's organic diversity stems mainly from its recruitment practices, which naturally attract curators and marketers from around the world. She explained that this diversity not only brings a rich variety of perspectives but also fosters distinct and effective communication strategies that resonate with different communities, especially those that are less prominent in Rotterdam society.

"I guess it already starts with the curator themselves being maybe from a different part of the world. I guess that already helps in having a broad horizon to where you get your input from and where your audiences are. They kind of know how to mirror this or how to represent this international perspective, international way of communicating" (Participant 3)

Another prominent perspective that comes from participants with diverse backgrounds is their ability to offer distinct ideas rooted in their unique personal experiences. This is clearly reflected in participant 8's responses. As an international freelance curator, participant 8 shared her experiences of being invited by Garage Rotterdam to join the program *Underdeveloped*. Her involvement was specifically sought to incorporate diverse perspectives that derived from her lived experiences as a recent immigrant in Rotterdam.

"I would say that I'm a part of this immigrant community. I'm not doing these things *for* immigrants; I'm doing them *as* an immigrant. I want to work with others who are in the same situation." (Participant 8)

She explained further that her inclusion in the team reflected Garage Rotterdam's belief that her cross-cultural background could add unique and valuable perspectives to the program. At the same time, the experience allowed her to deepen her personal understanding of the city. Participant 8' reflection

illustrate the mutual benefits that can arise from such collaborations, both for cultural venues seeking diverse input and for international professionals to connect more meaningfully with their local context.

On the other hand, cultural awareness and multicultural sensitivity are increasingly recognized as essential professional qualifications to ensure the quality of work related to cross-cultural topics. As participant 1 noted, while Dutch language proficiency is sometimes a requirement for employment, the management team often places greater value on a candidate's ability to apply and engage in cross-cultural thinking.

In short, intercultural competence, whether gained through immersion in diverse environments or through a strong awareness of intercultural dynamics and contexts, can significantly enhance the quality and inclusivity of programming in cultural venues.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with the city's highly diverse audiences. This was examined through in-depth interviews with professional programmers and marketers working at a cross-section of cultural venues in Rotterdam. Cultural venues are identified as significant platforms that offer residents not only knowledge acquisition across cultures but also support international residents in their adaptation process, helping them explore their identity, bond with the community, and engage in cross-cultural interactions in a highly diverse city like Rotterdam. Interview participants noted they have witnessed a growing presence of international programs around the city in recent years, in response to the increasing international population. However, despite this trend, there remains limited discussion about the acculturation of expatriates in Rotterdam in both the scholarly literature and public discourse (Janssen & Verboord, 2022, p. 7). This gap is echoed in the challenges shared by many of the professionals interviewed. This chapter presents and discusses the key findings of the study in relation to the theoretical framework. Several key themes emerged from the participants' responses, offering profound insights into the research question. The discussion is organized around four central aspects that were most frequently mentioned and richly described. These are elaborated in detail in the following section.

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Cultural venues as inclusive and empowering spaces for international audiences

Firstly, the interviewed professionals working in cultural venues consistently and clearly emphasized that they intend to cultivate a sense of belonging and home for their audiences, including international residents of the city. This commitment is closely tied to the values they uphold in their work. Through accessible artistic offerings and inclusive programming, cultural venues serve as a bridge between individuals' private lives and the public sphere, offering international residents a space to bring their personal and cultural narratives into the broader urban community. Most venues actively present stories and artworks from around the world that can enhance transnational cultural understanding and address topics that have long been marginalized in mainstream society. Rather than narrowly focusing on a singular cultural narrative, the venues strive to reflect the city's multicultural reality. By providing multicultural representation and curating diverse programs, cultural venues not only normalize diversity

but also empower international communities to share their perspectives and participate in valuable public conversations that transcend cultural boundaries.

The results indicate that cultural venues significantly contribute to expanding the international scope of the city's cultural landscape, By doing so, they fulfil functions similar to those identified in previous studies (Van Schaik, 2018, p218), providing both emotional and practical support for international residents as they get acquainted and adapt to the new environment. Insights from the interviews underscore the important role cultural venues play in enhancing intercultural dialogue by providing safe, welcoming, and inclusive spaces. They also offer opportunities for building communities, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to connect, interact, share experiences, and engage in meaningful conversations with one another (Stern & Seifert, 2010, pp. 2-3). In doing so, they help reduce feelings of exclusion and promote active participation in public and cultural life among Rotterdam's international population.

5.1.2 Co-creation, collaboration, and diverse teams as tools for inclusive cultural practice

Furthermore, in discussing opportunities for open dialogue between diverse groups, co-creation and collaboration were among the most highlighted practices among programmers. Participants believe co-creation can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and enhance the inclusivity of programs by integrating diverse perspectives and knowledge. Several programmers also noted that collaboration between different organizations, involving people from diverse cultural backgrounds, often yields mutual benefits. They also observed that co-creation programs focusing on cross-cultural topics tend to convey messages that are more aligned with culturally preferred contexts and resonate more deeply with diverse audiences. In addition, the sharing of resources between collaborating organizations not only extends audience research but also contributes to the sustainability of cultural venues. Participants' insights for co-creation are align with current studies indicating mutual benefits such as cost efficiencies, higher relevant insights, and the chance to mitigate risks (Grott, et al., 2019, p. 546).

Furthermore, the inclusion of team members from diverse backgrounds enhances organic inclusivity and broadens the range of diverse perspectives within the programs, while the lack of such diversity can have the opposite effect (Campbell & Chung, 2022, pp. 7-8). In this context, the interviewees also underscored that sensitivity to cultural diversity is a critical professional quality for programmers and marketers in cultural venues with extensive international programs. This sensitivity enables cultural professionals to navigate diverse insights and perspectives, allowing them to collaborate more effectively and harmoniously within teams comprising people from different backgrounds

Overall, the findings suggest that intercultural collaboration in the cultural sector can significantly contribute to the development of a more inclusive, connected, and harmonious urban environment.

5.1.3. Challenges of (internationally) inclusive programming: Language, identity, and cultural tensions

Despite the vital role that cultural venues can play in shaping the city's social and cultural landscape, the interview participants frequently emphasized the challenges they face or have faced in maintaining inclusive programs and communicating effectively with diverse audiences. These challenges emerged as

one of the most consistent themes across participants' reflections on their years of professional experience.

Among the most prominent challenges identified is the management of multilingual communication, which can result from a lack of information about market trends or limitations in available resources. This The result responds to the Rössel et al. current study which indicate the communicating difficult for migrants to integrate fully (2025, p. 155). This study finds that linguistic accessibility, whether in programming or marketing, is an important indicator of inclusivity and diversity. Language barriers can significantly hinder individuals' ability to interact meaningfully with cultural programs and surrounding contexts. As previous research suggested that language create emotional bandings to certain groups, while individuals can be excluded when they interact with languages they are not familiar with (Hammer, 2017, p. 44). Moreover, flexible multilingual communication appeared as a key factor in enabling international audiences to access and participate in cultural events. Programs or marketing materials presented exclusively in Dutch can create significant obstacles for non-Dutch speakers, particularly international audiences. When reflecting on their language policies and practices, several respondents who were particularly aware of the importance of including international audiences pointed out that English content is both a strategic and practical way for them to reach a broader audience beyond the local Dutch-speaking community.

Although linguistic integration remains one of the most crucial pathways for understanding and participating in society, it also requires time, effort, and motivation to get acquainted with the local language, resources that may not be readily available to expatriates, especially those with short-term or uncertain stays. As Rössel et al. (2025, p. 4) argue, this makes language an especially critical factor in determining the accessibility and inclusivity of public cultural life. Furthermore, research shows that individuals can become "lost in translation" when content is not presented in their native language, which may create barriers for international residents to engage meaningfully with the societal context. In response to this challenge, several venues participating in this research – such as CultureHub Rotterdam and Comedy Club Haug – have begun offering performances in languages other than Dutch or English. With these efforts, they aim to create more authentic cultural experiences that resonate more deeply with international audiences.

Participants largely agreed that it is crucial to use multiple languages to communicate effectively with every resident in the city. However, they also acknowledged a tension between maintaining a strong sense of local identity and fostering multicultural and/or international programming. While most participants noted that multicultural programs generally attracted open-minded audiences who are eager to engage with diverse cultures, a few expressed concerns about the potential erosion of local cultural identity due to the growing dominance of multicultural and internationally focused programming (Peters, et al., 2025, pp. 312-315). These concerns reflect a broader debate about government support for the development of such programs as well as the challenges of balancing diverse cultural needs within the constraints of limited resources.

5.1.4 Variations in international inclusivity across different types of cultural venues

Lastly, different types of cultural venues appeared to exhibit varying degrees of diversity and inclusivity, shaped by their unique characteristics and roles within the city.

For example, multi-disciplinary art spaces such as WORM are known for their fluid boundaries - not only between artists, audiences, and curators, but also in their dedication to showcasing marginal or experimental artwork that challenges conventional norms. This type of venue embraces diversity through its flexible, open-ended approach to programming and its willingness to feature alternative artistic voices. In such a setting, diversity emerges organically, reflected in both the team's diverse composition and the wide range of artworks being curated. This inclusive ethos allows for the expression of multiple perspectives, positioning venues like WORM as spaces where diverse, unconventional, and often underrepresented forms of cultural expression can flourish.

Furthermore, venues like Comedy Club Haug, CultureHub Rotterdam, and Kino demonstrate how program accessibility and inclusivity are often closely tied to language usage. The choice of language in both programming and communication materials has a strong impact on the inclusivity of the venues. By offering content in multiple languages, these venues can reduce barriers for international audiences and allow them to fully engage with the event without concern for linguistic exclusion (Hammer, 2017, p. 43). For example, Kino frequently screens films with both English and Dutch subtitles, making their diverse programming accessible to both local Dutch and international audiences. This flexible approach to language use underlines the venue's commitment to serving various audiences. Such practices also illustrate the importance of cross-cultural awareness among cultural professionals. By being mindful of linguistic accessibility, they are better equipped to curate content that resonates with a wider range of audiences and fosters deeper intercultural engagement.

Similarly, public institutions such as the Maritime Museum serve as important platforms for presenting both historical backgrounds and contemporary social issues from a local perspective (Beyen & Deseure 2015, p. 155). They target not only local families but also international tourists by providing multiple language services to enhance accessibility for non-Dutch audiences. However, the findings suggest that the museum still faces limitations in reaching a broader range of audiences, particularly expatriates residing in the city. Despite the availability of multilingual materials, insufficient marketing and outreach efforts aimed at the expatriate community may contribute to the museum's relative invisibility among this group. This highlights a broader challenge faced by cultural professionals: the need to implement more comprehensive inclusion strategies that go beyond language accessibility. Effective communication with international residents requires intentional and multifaceted efforts across programming, outreach and institutional policies.

Lastly, a distinct case emerges in considering how inclusivity is taking shape at a non-commercial cultural organization such as Verhalenhuis Belvédère. While the venue faces challenges due to limited resources, particularly in managing multilingual marketing and communication with multicultural audiences, its inclusive approach is evident in other significant ways. With a diverse team and programming centered on personal narratives—such as migrant and refugee stories—Verhalenhuis Belvédère fosters meaningful cross-cultural engagement, even with limited multilingual resources. This case illustrates that inclusivity can manifest in various forms, some of which may not be immediately visible. Additional institutional support and resources could further strengthen the venue's capacity to broaden its inclusive practices and reach an even more diverse audience.

5.2 Limitations of the study

This study investigated several aspects of how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with internationally diverse audiences, drawing on insights from selected cultural professionals. However, some limitations should be acknowledged in order to guide future research and support more comprehensive outcomes on this topic.

First of all, one notable limitation was the inability to collect responses from professionals across a wider range of venues such as theaters, live music venues, and dance performance spaces. Each of these venues likely offers a distinct perspective on inclusivity and diversity, shaped by the characteristics of the cultural genres they specialize in. Particularly, music and dance are often considered more universally accessible art forms, as they can communicate meaning without relying heavily on language, making them especially relevant for cross-cultural engagement. Although these types of venues were initially included in the study's target scope, scheduling challenges and heavy workloads prevented many professionals from participating in the interviews. This barrier could itself be further explored to gain a better understanding of the pressures and constraints these professionals face in their daily operations, especially in maintaining inclusive practices.

Additionally, the timing of the data collection may have contributed to limited participation. The period from April to June is typically a busy season for many cultural venues. The seasonal workload may have limited professionals' availability commit to interviews, highlighting the need to consider timing more strategically in future research.

Furthermore, the representation of marketing and curatorial participants in the participant sample was unbalanced, with a greater number of program curators being included in the study. As a result, some important topics, particularly the alignment between programming and communication, were only briefly discussed with one or two participants and could not be explored in sufficient depth to identify specific themes. This gap is especially relevant, given that flexible linguistic usage has emerged as a key indicator of inclusion, a theme particularly relevant to the field of marketing. Moreover, marketers who are directly responsible for engaging with diverse audiences, including international publics, may offer perspectives and experiences that differ significantly from those of curators, especially in how they address the challenges of reaching and engaging with broader, multilingual audiences. While this study focused more on curatorial approaches to international programming, future studies would benefit from a more balanced inclusion of marketing professionals. A deeper analysis of their strategies and the challenges could enrich the understanding of inclusive cultural engagement and contribute to a more comprehensive picture of organizational practices in this area.

Lastly, the participants in this study are mostly professionals over the age of 35, with extensive experience across various life and career stages. Their reflections provided a wealth of profound insights and perspectives grounded in years of professional expertise. However, several curators noted that, in recent years, their venues have become increasingly aware of the importance of including younger, emerging professionals in their team. According to the participants, these younger professionals can not only contribute novel and fresh perspectives but also foster intergenerational collaboration, contributing

to a more inclusive and diverse team. Based on these reflection, it is evident that incorporating the voices of professional under 35 could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural venues engage with international audiences. Including this younger demographic would not only capture the perspectives of professionals' insights at an early stage of their career can be explored, but also reveal generation differences in approach and insight, thereby enriching the overall findings of the study.

5.3 Directions for future research

Building on the earlier discussion, several avenues can be considered for future research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with diverse audiences.

First, this study included a range of venues, including cinemas, comedy clubs, museums, storytelling events, and multi-functional venues, which provided an opportunity to understand how different types of venues interact with the city's diverse residents. However, future research is encouraged to explore a broader spectrum of art forms and genres to gain a more comprehensive picture of Rotterdam's cultural landscape and the different approaches and challenges associated with various types of venues and cultural offerings.

It would be particularly valuable to examine each art form individually, as different genres may operate within unique ecosystems and face distinct challenges related to inclusivity and diversity. For instance, music and theatre present contrasting modes of audience engagement: music often transcends language barriers, allowing broader accessibility, while theatre typically requires language comprehension, potentially limiting access for non-native speakers. Comparative analysis between venues such as live music houses and theatres could yield meaningful observations regarding audience inclusion, communication strategies, and the specific challenges each venue encounters when engaging with a multicultural population.

Moreover, this study included publicly funded venues like the Maritime Museum, which not only reflect local narratives but also represent dominant perspectives in the city's cultural identity. To further examine how public narratives are constructed and disseminated, future research could incorporate additional public institutions such as the Rotterdam Library. As an inclusive space that attracts residents of all ages, genders, occupations, and nationalities, the library offers a valuable site for exploring grassroots perspectives and evaluating inclusivity in prominent public venues within broader civic discourse.

This study aimed to highlight effective strategies in both marketing and programming to support the future development of inclusive (international) programming in cultural venues. While the current findings provide valuable insights into how diverse programs are organized, they offer fewer concrete strategies for addressing the challenges of marketing to wider and more varied audiences. Several professionals interviewed expressed difficulties in implementing effective marketing practices that reach broader and more international demographics.

One notable challenge is the transient and dispersed nature of expatriate communities. Participants emphasized the significant effort and resources required to track and engage with these audiences, often

with limited or unpredictable returns. As a result, future research could focus more specifically on identifying and evaluating communication strategies tailored to international and mobile audiences. Including more marketing professionals in such studies could provide deeper insight into the unique challenges that cultural venues face when trying to connect with a fluctuating and diverse international audience base.

In addition to including more marketing professionals in future studies, expanding the demographic diversity of participants—such as incorporating young professionals under the age of 35 and individuals from a broader range of cultural backgrounds—can significantly enrich the research. Gathering insights from participants with diverse personal experiences, coming from different parts of the world, would allow for a broader and more nuanced understanding of the topic. Even with a relatively scattered participant pool, the diverse responses can reveal meaningful contrasts and deepen the study's inclusivity. Unique narratives shared during interviews can further enhance the study's ability to reflect the complexity of international engagement in cultural venues.

Beyond demographic diversity, examining how cultural venues in different cities engage with international audiences is particularly relevant in today's increasingly globalized world, where international contexts have become part of everyday life. Yet, this area remains underexplored in both academic research and public discourse. Comparative studies across multiple cities can offer valuable cross-cultural insights, allowing researchers to identify differences in local narratives and uncover successful strategies that can inform and enhance inclusive practices across various urban contexts.

Lastly, in discussing the support available from government and organizations for expatriates living in Rotterdam, some respondents emphasized the value of having a comprehensive list of resources—including cultural events and networking opportunities—readily accessible to newcomers. Such support is essential, as adapting to a new culture and lifestyle in a foreign city can be overwhelming, often leading to feelings of isolation, confusion, and even depression. For me, as an international student, arriving in a city without prior cultural grounding or personal history has been quite challenging. Language and cultural barriers can create a profound sense of alienation and disconnection, as previously discussed. When one no longer recognizes the familiar version of themselves, acculturation becomes not just a practical adjustment, but an emotional journey, which is sometimes filled with distress and uncertainty. In such moments, it can be difficult for international individuals, including myself, to find an accessible and meaningful entry point into the local culture.

However, engaging with cultural venues in Rotterdam has helped me mediate this process. These spaces offered me opportunities to reconnect with aspects of my own cultural identity while simultaneously exploring Rotterdam's history and contemporary narratives. Through diverse programming and inclusive environments, my sense of belonging has steadily grown stronger. strengthened. These interactions not only connected me more deeply with the city but also allowed me to become part of its cultural fabric.

In short, adapting to a new culture and city demands significant emotional effort, time, and resilience. Yet, with intentional support systems and the inclusive role of cultural venues, expatriates can find meaningful pathways into their host communities. This mutual engagement fosters a shared sense of

identity and co-creates a vibrant, diverse urban environment that benefits both newcomers and the city as a whole.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Introduction

Firstly, the research will briefly explain the research and the interview to the participants and will collect some questions about the respondents background.

- Explanation of research
- Anonymity/Privacy protection
- Recording/ Consent form

Background characteristics

- Full name
- Age
- Gender
- City of residence (e.g. Rotterdam)
- Country of Origin (if not from the Netherlands, how long in the Netherlands)
- Workplace (e.g,. WORM, Culturehub Rotterdam)
- Position/ Job title (please specify your exact job title)
- Duration of Employment at the venue (e.g., start date or years of service)

2. Role and function of cultural venues in a diverse city

This section examines how cultural venue professionals in Rotterdam view their role in engaging a diverse, international audience.

(1) How would you describe the cultural functions that your venue fulfills in Rotterdam? For example, how does your venue contribute to the city's cultural scene?

(2) When developing programs, does your venue intentionally differentiate the programs based on diverse audience" background? (e.g. from varied cultural or linguistic backgrounds, or specific groups like international students or expats residing in the city)

(3) If so, what are the main reasons for your venue to organize programs for diverse audiences and international audiences in particular?

(4) In your experience /opinion, does the international programming at your venue have a negative or positive impact on the attendance of native-born visitors?

(5) Did your venue ever receive criticism – for example from native Dutch visitors/ citizens or local politicians – for offering programs in another (e.g. English subtitle)? If so, please elaborate, e.g. how was this addressed.

3. Assessment of Rotterdam's cultural landscape for international audiences

(6) Would you say that your venue venue occupies a unique position in the Rotterdam landscape in terms of catering for internationally audiences? please elaborate.

(7) Are you aware of any other venues – in other fields of culture – who offer a significant number of international programs? Could you give examples?

(8) More generally, how would you assess the engagement between cultural venues and diverse international audiences in Rotterdam?

(9) In your opinion, should the Municipality of Rotterdam stimulate and support cultural venues in the development of international programs? If so, how could they do this?

4. **Strategies and challenges to organize cultural events for diverse urban audiences**

This section explores strategies and challenges in organizing cultural events for diverse urban, especially international, audiences through current program examples.

(1) Can you describe any specific **programming strategies** that your venue uses (or has tried in the past) to create offerings that can speak to international audiences?
Could you elaborate on how effective these strategies are/ were.

(2) Can you describe any specific **communication strategies** that your venue uses (or has been using to attract international audiences? Could you elaborate on how effective these strategies are/were.

(3) To what extent do programming decisions and marketing strategies of your venue align with another? Can you think of instances, where programming and marketing did not accord very well or conflicted with each other?

(4) What challenges has your venue encountered when promoting its offerings in a city with over 180 nationalities?

(5) How do you evaluate the role of language in your programs and promotion materials?

5. **Community and inclusivity**

Questions will be asked to understand their insight about international audiences' consumer insights that affect their policy.

(1) Do you think international students/ expats in Rotterdam are open to exploring diverse cultural events or do they mainly attend events that reflect their own background?

(2) Have you noticed any communities emerging around of your venues and cultural events? If so, in what ways have these communities influence your venue's programming?

(3) What is composition of the team at your venue? In your opinion, does employing team members from diverse backgrounds enhance the venues capability to effectively produce and promote events for diverse international audiences in Rotterdam?

(4) Does your venue have any new plans or considerations for enhancing the inclusivity and diversity of offerings in the future? Why?

6. Closure

Thank you so much for your precious time for the interview, please let the interviewer know if you have any questions or want to add anything that had been discussed.

Appendix B: CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

For questions about the study, please contact:
Huang Chun Ping
700814ch@student.eur.nl

1. Description

You are invited to participate in a research study on how cultural venues in Rotterdam engage with the city's diverse international audiences. The purpose of this study is to understand the roles that venues such as cinemas, galleries, and theatres play in a multicultural city, and how cultural professionals design events that foster cross-cultural engagement.

By agreeing to participate, you consent to being interviewed. During the interview, you will be asked questions such as:

- What are the goals and motivations behind organizing certain events or programs?
- How do you perceive and address the diversity of Rotterdam's audiences?
- What challenges or strategies are involved in fostering multicultural engagement?

Your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural institutions respond to and shape intercultural dialogue in a highly diverse urban context.

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for academic analysis and may be used in the final study.

2. Duration

The interview with your participating will take around 30-50 min, depending on the extend of how your responses. However, you stop the interview anytime if you want to.

3. Participants Rights

If you decided to join the research, please kindly understand it's a voluntary participation and you can interrupt the interview or withdraw the consent at any time. You will have the right to refuse to answer any questions. Furthermore, the response will be used in the study and personal information will be anonymous to protect your privacy.

4. Benefits and risks

Firstly, it is hoping that the interview can help participants gain deeper insights and understanding of the topic of gender representation which influence their gender norms perception and is able to be empowered with it. Furthermore, there is barely risks attending this research interview, as every information gather within the interview will exclusively used anonymous for this research which you won't be identified.

5. Contacts and questions

If you have questions about the study or your right as a participant in the research, you can contact the researcher of the study from the contact info mentioned above, even anonymously, if you prefer.

6. Signing the consent from

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form and agree to participate this study. Your responses will also be used in the research with your permission. You will receive a copy of this signed consent from.

_____   _____   _____
Name   Signature   Date

Appendix C: Demographics respondents

Number	Age group	Residence	Gender	Workforce/ position	Duration of employment	Dutch citizenship	Migrant backgrounds
1	30-40	Rotterdam	Female	Kino/ programmer & marketer	9 years	Yes	Yes
2	50-60	Rotterdam	Female	The Comedy Haug / marketer	Founder	Yes	Yes
3	60-70	Rotterdam	Female	WORM / programmer	18 years	Yes	No
4	50-60	Middelharnis	Male	Maritime museum / programmer	9 years	Yes	No
5	50-60	Amsterdam	Female	Maritime museum / programmer	7 years	Yes	No
6	30-40	Rotterdam	Male	CultureHub Rotterdam / programmer & marketer	5 years	Yes	No
7	40-50	Rodeurijs	Female	Verhalenhuis Belvédère / programmer	5 years	Yes	Yes
8	30-40	Rotterdam	Female	Freelance programmers	2 years	Not sure	Yes
9	30-40	Rotterdam	Male	Storytelling Rotterdam/ programmer & marketer (freelance)	2 years	Yes	Yes