

Measuring Cultural Participation: A Comprehensive Study in Kayseri

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Abstract

This study investigates cultural participation in Kayseri, a secondary city in Türkiye with rich historical heritage yet persistently low levels of cultural engagement. Drawing on a quantitative survey conducted with 166 residents, the research identifies key barriers to participation, including socio-economic constraints, limited accessibility, and low awareness of cultural opportunities. The study is situated within the theoretical frameworks of cultural capital and socio-spatial inequality, emphasizing how demographic and geographic factors shape engagement with cultural life. The findings point to uneven distribution of cultural resources and highlight the need for localized, inclusive policy interventions. By offering data-driven insights into cultural behavior and access patterns, the study aims to inform municipal and institutional strategies and contribute to broader efforts for equitable cultural development in non-metropolitan urban contexts.

Keywords: cultural participation, access to culture, cultural policies, cultural capital, arts and culture

1. Introduction

Cultural participation has increasingly become a critical domain for examining spatial, social, and policy-related dimensions of urban life. As cities attempt to promote inclusive development, the question of who participates in cultural life—and who is excluded—remains a persistent challenge. Particularly in the context of secondary cities with rich cultural heritage but low levels of cultural engagement, such as Kayseri, Turkey, understanding the dynamics of cultural participation is essential for designing more equitable and responsive urban cultural policies.

Kayseri, a historically significant city located in central Anatolia, possesses a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural assets. Despite this potential, cultural participation rates remain considerably low, and access to cultural resources is unevenly distributed across socio-economic and spatial lines. The lack of comprehensive, data-driven assessments of cultural participation in such cities limits the capacity of local stakeholders—municipalities, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations—to develop inclusive strategies that ensure broader cultural access and engagement.

In Türkiye, regional disparities in cultural engagement remain a persistent issue. While metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir have experienced diversification in cultural offerings and the emergence of participatory policy frameworks, mid-sized cities like Kayseri often struggle to establish sustainable cultural ecosystems. Limited institutional support, insufficient cultural infrastructure, and a lack of locally grounded cultural policies contribute to these persistent gaps. As a result, secondary cities remain peripheral in the national cultural landscape, despite their significant historical and demographic presence.

This study aims to fill this empirical and policy gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the cultural participation landscape in Kayseri. The research investigates who participates in cultural life, what barriers inhibit participation, and how strategies can be developed to foster inclusive and equitable access to arts and culture. By addressing both the structural inequalities embedded in cultural participation and the experiential realities of local residents, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of culture-led urban development.

The study is framed within broader theoretical and policy debates on cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), socio-spatial inequalities in cultural access (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978; Stevenson et al., 2017), and participatory cultural governance (UNESCO, 2012). It responds to recent calls in European and Turkish literature for more localized, bottom-up assessments of cultural engagement, especially in regions outside major metropolitan centers.

2. Theoretical Framework

Cultural participation is increasingly understood as a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by intersecting social, spatial, and institutional dynamics. Rooted in classical sociological traditions yet evolving through contemporary critiques and policy discourses, scholarly debates on cultural participation interrogate not only who participates in cultural life, but also how, why, and under what conditions such engagement occurs—or fails to occur. A foundational reference point remains Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital, wherein cultural consumption is understood as a form of distinction that reflects and reproduces social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984). In this framework, participation in “legitimate” cultural forms—such as museums, concerts, or theatre—is closely aligned with educational attainment, occupational prestige, and class-based dispositions acquired through socialization. DiMaggio and Useem (1978) further argue that educational systems and cultural institutions contribute to this stratification by privileging certain tastes and competencies, rendering high culture more accessible to dominant groups while alienating others.

Yet, Bourdieu's determinism has been critically revisited in light of empirical research suggesting more fluid and hybrid modes of cultural consumption. The “cultural omnivore” thesis posits that high-status individuals increasingly engage with diverse forms of both highbrow and popular culture, reflecting an eclecticism that transcends rigid class boundaries (Peterson and Kern, 1996). Studies from Flanders support this view, revealing new consumption clusters that blend traditional and contemporary cultural preferences (Vander Stichele and Laermans, 2006). These findings underscore the need for analytical approaches that accommodate evolving patterns of engagement shaped not only by class, but also by generation, urban context, and cultural hybridity (Bennett et al., 2009).

At the same time, critical policy scholars have drawn attention to the structural barriers that inhibit participation, especially in secondary cities or marginalized communities. European cultural policy often constructs non-participation as a “problem” to be solved, legitimizing top-down strategies that fail to address deeper socio-economic exclusions (Stevenson et al., 2017). The cultural sector's tendency to promote narratives of success while ignoring systemic failures has also been critiqued, with calls for more reflexive and inclusive models of cultural governance (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2023). These critiques resonate in the context of cities like Kayseri, where formal cultural policies often lack embeddedness in everyday lived experiences, and where community needs and alternative cultural expressions remain underrecognized (Finkel et al., 2019).

Feminist and relational approaches further underscore the importance of intersectionality and social networks in shaping cultural access. Cultural participation—particularly among women—is strongly influenced by the diversity and density of social ties, with exclusion often emerging from time poverty, caregiving responsibilities, or absence of supportive networks (Kane, 2004; Chan et al., 2008). These insights complicate traditional models and call for an understanding of participation that is attuned to both structural and interpersonal constraints.

Building on this relational turn, the concept of “classed cognition” has been proposed to describe how cultural policy initiatives often fail to recognize the ways in which class-based experiences and perceptions mediate engagement (Roaldsnes, 2025). When participation is framed as a universally attainable goal, cognitive and affective exclusions shaped by classed experiences are often overlooked. Cultural institutions are thus urged to shift from instrumental rationality to more dialogical, value-centered models of cultural legitimacy (Holden, 2006).

In parallel, the contribution of cultural participation to subjective well-being and quality of life has attracted growing attention. Regular engagement in cultural activities can enhance emotional resilience, life satisfaction, and social cohesion, although these outcomes depend on the accessibility, form, and frequency of participation (Reyes-Martínez et al., 2020; Galloway, 2006). Galloway cautions against reductive, instrumentalist interpretations and instead advocates for frameworks that capture the experiential and symbolic dimensions of cultural life, particularly in urban contexts marked by uneven access and identity-based exclusions (Grogan, 2021).

Globally, the measurement of cultural participation has been systematized through UNESCO's Framework for Cultural Statistics, which defines participation as encompassing attendance, creation, access, and digital engagement (UNESCO, 2009; 2012). This approach views participation as both a right and a public good, essential for inclusive development and cultural sustainability. However, critics highlight the limits of universal metrics and emphasize the importance of contextually grounded indicators that reflect diverse cultural practices and

infrastructural conditions (Tomka, 2013; Schuster, 2007). Recent scholarship further stresses that digital divides—often shaped by socio-cultural rather than merely technological gaps—have become increasingly significant in determining access to cultural participation (Selwyn, 2004; Heikkilä and Sassi, 2021).

Altogether, this theoretical framework positions cultural participation as a site where social stratification, institutional design, symbolic boundaries, and subjective meaning converge. By drawing on classical theory, post-Bourdieuian perspectives, policy critiques, and international frameworks, the study constructs a conceptual foundation capable of interrogating the uneven landscape of cultural engagement in Kayseri and advancing grounded insights for equitable cultural policy-making. Culture must be read as “a web of significance” through which social life is interpreted and made meaningful (Geertz, 1973).

3. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, exploratory research design to investigate the patterns, motivations, and barriers of cultural participation among residents of Kayseri, Türkiye. Developed as a pilot study within the scope of a scientific research project funded by Erciyes University, the research constitutes a preliminary empirical inquiry into cultural participation in mid-sized Anatolian cities. The study aims to test the local applicability of UNESCO's (2012) cultural participation framework and generate baseline insights for future, more comprehensive investigations.

The survey consisted of 38 structured questions divided into four thematic sections:

- **Demographics:**

Age, gender, education level, household income, employment status, and neighborhood.

- **Cultural Participation Behavior:**

- Frequency of engagement with cultural activities (e.g., theater, museum, festivals, concerts)
- Preferred cultural formats (physical attendance vs. digital participation)
- Frequency of participation (never, rarely, occasionally, frequently)

- **Barriers to Participation:**

Participants were asked to evaluate potential obstacles such as:

- Economic factors (ticket prices, transportation costs),
- Physical and spatial barriers (venue accessibility, distance),
- Informational barriers (lack of knowledge about events),
- Sociocultural reasons (lack of interest, cultural mismatch).

- **Perceptions and Attitudes:**

- The perceived importance of cultural life,
- Role of the municipality in promoting culture,
- Suggestions for improving access and relevance of cultural services.

All questions were either multiple-choice, Likert-type scale (1–5), or single-answer categorical variables.

Data collection took place between March and May 2025 using both digital and paper-based formats to ensure inclusivity. Approximately 60% of the responses were gathered via Google Forms, while the remaining 40% were collected in-person in locations such as university campuses, community centers, and public squares. The sampling strategy was non-probabilistic and purposive, designed to reach individuals from different age groups, income brackets, and neighborhoods across Kayseri. This dual-mode approach helped include digitally marginalized or older populations who are often underrepresented in online surveys.

The final dataset comprised responses from 166 participants. Descriptive statistical methods were employed to analyze the data, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores. Cross-tabulation techniques

were used to explore relationships between cultural participation levels and demographic indicators such as age, gender, education level, and income. Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS, and analytical categories were structured in alignment with UNESCO's typology of "active," "occasional," and "non-participant" cultural users.

As a pilot study, the research is subject to limitations, particularly concerning the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings. While the study offers valuable initial insights, the conclusions should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive. These results are intended to inform the design of future studies utilizing probabilistic sampling methods and more robust inferential statistical techniques.

All participation was voluntary and anonymous. Prior to survey administration, respondents were briefed about the purpose of the research, and verbal consent was obtained. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical protocols of Erciyes University, ensuring confidentiality and the responsible handling of data throughout the research process.

4. Findings

This section presents the core empirical findings of the study, organized thematically to reflect the main dimensions explored through the survey. These include the sociodemographic characteristics of participants, patterns of offline and digital cultural engagement, perceived barriers to participation, attitudes toward cultural life, improvement expectations regarding municipal cultural services, and everyday conceptions of "culture." The analysis integrates both descriptive statistics and thematic coding to highlight how structural factors, personal dispositions, and spatial conditions intersect in shaping cultural participation in a mid-sized Anatolian city.

4.1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

The survey collected responses from 166 participants residing in Kayseri. Of these, 51.8% identified as female and 48.2% as male, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. In terms of age, the 25–34 age group constituted the largest share of respondents, followed by the 35–44 and 18–24 cohorts. Participants aged 45 and above were less represented, suggesting a skew toward younger, working-age adults in the overall sample. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the percentage distribution of respondents across gender, age, education level, employment status, and monthly income brackets, offering a demographic snapshot that contextualizes the cultural participation patterns explored in this study.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of respondents (%)

Gender (%)	F (51.8)	M (48.2)				
Age (%)	18-24 (17.5)	25-34 (41)	35-44 (20.5)	45-54 (12)	55-64 (5.4)	65+ (3.6)
Education Level (%)	Prim. (9.6)	Sec. (22.9)	BA (53)	MA (13.9)	PhD (0.6)	
Employment Status (%)	Public (19.3)	Private (28.9)	Self-employed (6)	Student (18.7)	Unemployed (23.1)	Retired (3)
Monthly Income (TRY, %)	0-20.000 (34.3)	20.001-40.000 (22.3)	40.001-60.000 (14.5)	60.001+ (13.3)	Prefer not to say (15.7)	

In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents held bachelor's degrees (53%), followed by secondary education (22.9%), master's degrees (13.9%), and primary education (9.6%), while less than 1% reported holding a doctoral degree. This indicates a participant pool that is largely composed of individuals with tertiary-level qualifications, with approximately 67% holding at least a bachelor's degree.

Regarding employment status, the largest group of respondents were employed in the private sector (28.9%), followed by individuals who reported being unemployed (22.9%), working in the public sector (19.3%), and students (18.7%). A smaller portion identified as self-employed (6%), retired (3%), or homemakers (1%), indicating a diverse labor force composition within the sample. In terms of monthly income levels, 34.3% of participants reported earning between 0–20,000 TRY, followed by 22.3% in the 20,001–40,000 TRY range, and 14.5% between 40,001–60,000 TRY. Notably, 13.3% reported earning above 60,000 TRY, while 15.7% preferred not to disclose their income. These figures reflect a concentration in lower- to mid-income brackets, with a significant number of respondents indicating financial constraints that may affect their access to cultural activities.

4.2. Patterns of Cultural Participation

4.2.1. Offline Participation: Frequency and Preferences

Respondents reported relatively low-to-moderate engagement with cultural events in the past year. 40.4% attended 1-2 events, and 24.1% attended 3-5 events, while only 15.7% reported participating in more than five events (Figure 1). This suggests a modest but non-negligible level of cultural engagement.

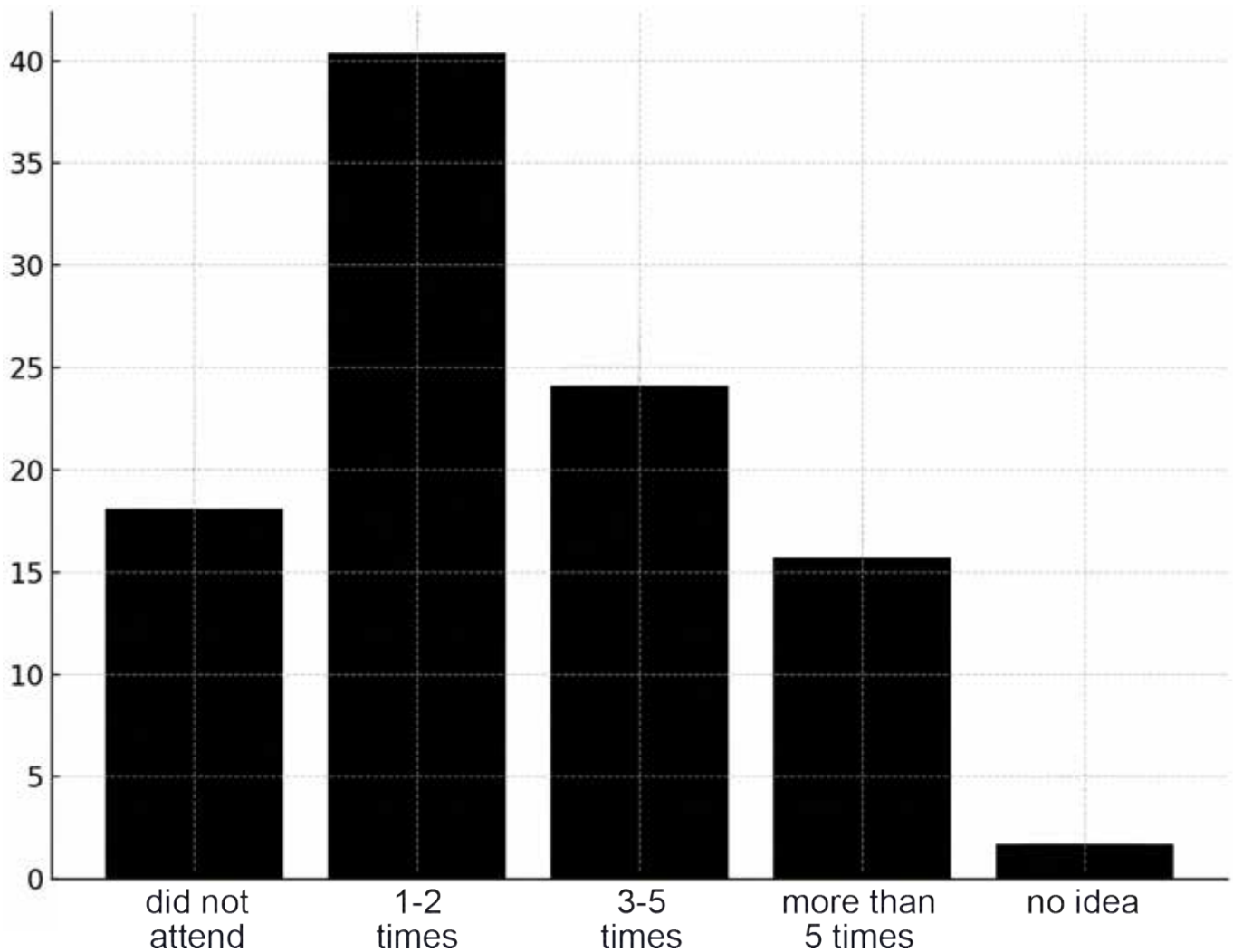


Figure 1. Frequency of cultural participation in the past year (%).

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of respondents' most recent cultural event participation, grouped into broader thematic categories. The most commonly attended events were concerts and musical performances, followed by cinema and film-related activities. Theater and performative arts also had a notable share, reflecting continued interest in live artistic expression. Museum visits, exhibitions, and literary events constituted a smaller but significant portion. The "Other" category includes responses such as traditional ceremonies, religious gatherings, local fairs, educational panels, and family-oriented social events. This diversity suggests that while mainstream cultural formats dominate participation, respondents also engage with a wide range of community-based and informal cultural expressions, highlighting the importance of recognizing alternative forms of cultural engagement in policy and planning frameworks.

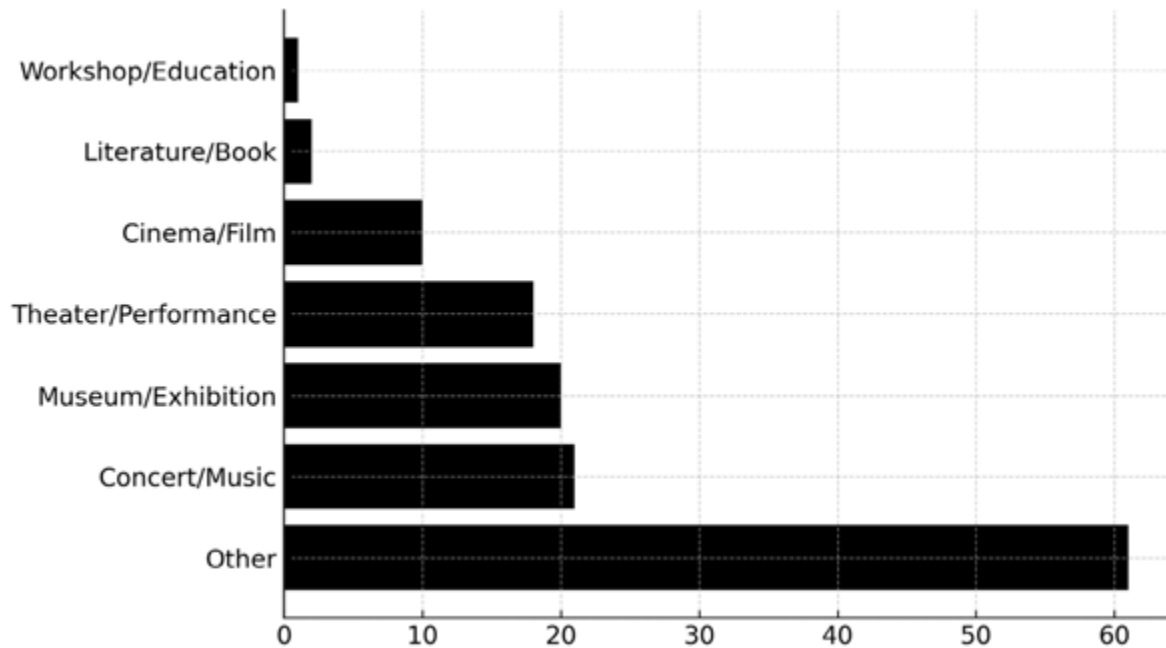


Figure 2. Types of most recently attended cultural events (%).

Based on the data visualized in Figure 3, respondents demonstrated a clear preference for certain cultural formats they would like to see more frequently organized by local authorities. Music and performing arts ranked highest, selected by 71.1% of respondents, followed by historical and cultural excursions (59%), and visual arts and exhibitions (42.8%). Workshops and educational activities also garnered significant support (41.6%), indicating a strong public interest in participatory and skill-based formats.

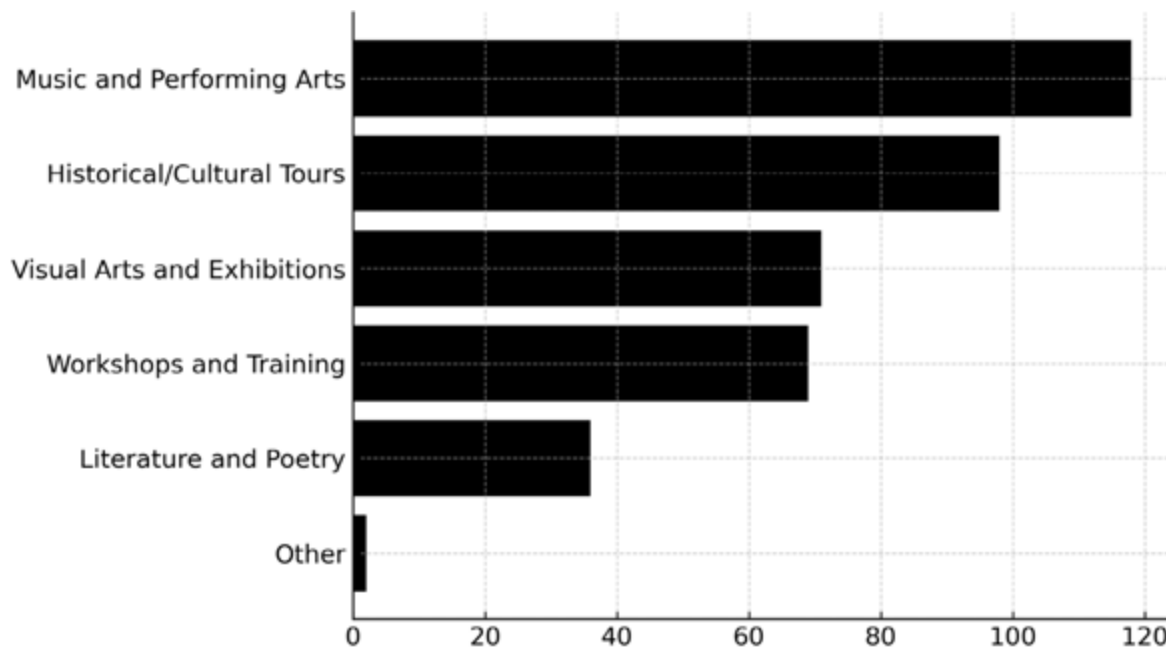


Figure 3. Preferred cultural event formats desired from local authorities (%).

Although mentioned less frequently, literature and poetry events (21.7%) still reflect a notable cultural demand among a segment of the population. These preferences suggest that residents of Kayseri expect municipalities

to go beyond conventional event programming and adopt a more proactive and inclusive cultural strategy. The results support the broader argument that diversifying and expanding cultural offerings—especially through accessible and experiential formats—can act as a catalyst for deeper and more widespread cultural participation.

4.2.2. Digital Participation: Platform Use and Activity Types

Survey findings reveal that digital cultural participation is highly shaped by platform preferences and content accessibility. As shown in the first chart, a substantial majority of respondents (77.7%) reported using social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) to engage with cultural content. In contrast, culture-specific applications such as YouTube, Netflix, or Spotify were used by 27.7%, and only 9% reported engaging with cultural events through online platforms like Zoom or Teams. Additionally, 15.7% indicated that they do not use any digital platforms for cultural participation, suggesting the presence of a digitally disengaged segment.

When asked about the types of digital cultural events they had attended, the most common response was online education and workshops (43.8%), followed by online theater/cinema screenings (32.8%), digital exhibitions or virtual museum visits (20.4%), and online concerts (16.1%). These preferences indicate a tendency toward more structured or performative formats, though overall participation rates remain modest.

The third chart, which illustrates the frequency of participation across five types of online activities over the past year, shows a clear variation in engagement. Film and series streaming stood out as the most frequent activity, with a large number of participants reporting 10 or more viewings. However, participation in online education, e-book reading, and virtual museum tours was considerably lower. In each of these categories, the most frequent response was no participation at all, indicating limited uptake of more cognitively or culturally intensive formats.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital engagement is widespread primarily through social media and entertainment platforms, while educational and heritage-related content remains underutilized. These patterns point to gaps not only in digital access but also in content relevance and awareness. Enhancing digital cultural participation will require targeted communication strategies and inclusive programming that reflect the diverse needs and digital habits of the local population.

4.3. Barriers to Cultural Participation

The survey findings confirm that a significant portion of respondents face obstacles to full cultural engagement. While nearly half (48%) stated they cannot participate in cultural activities as much as they would like, an even higher proportion (68%) reported that there are specific cultural events they wanted to attend but were ultimately unable to. These responses underline the presence of a consistent gap between cultural interest and realized participation.

When asked to elaborate on the reasons behind their inability to attend cultural events, respondents identified a diverse set of barriers (Figure 8). The most frequently cited issue was lack of time, selected by 52.6% of participants, followed closely by economic limitations (40.1%) and the absence of such events in Kayseri (40.9%). This indicates that both structural deficits in event availability and personal constraints significantly shape participation patterns.

Additional barriers included a lack of events suitable for families (10.9%), insufficient awareness or communication about events (22.6%), and the inadequacy of event content with respect to quality or relevance (24.8%). Social constraints also emerged: 8% reported not having someone to attend with. Practical challenges like difficulty in accessing tickets (5.8%), transportation problems, and family responsibilities—such as recent parenthood—were cited by a smaller but important portion of respondents.

These results reaffirm that cultural non-participation in Kayseri is shaped not merely by individual disinterest but by overlapping constraints across time, cost, access, relevance, and social support. Addressing these complex layers will require coordinated efforts to enhance both the infrastructure and inclusivity of the cultural environment.

4.4. Attitudes Toward Cultural Engagement

Although actual levels of participation in cultural activities remain relatively modest, respondents' attitudinal profiles reveal a more complex and hopeful picture. As illustrated in Figure 4, a majority of participants (57.2%) regard cultural activities as either "important" or "very important" in their daily lives. This normative appreciation is further supported by the fact that nearly three-quarters (74.7%) have attended at least one free cultural event—an encouraging indicator of public interest, even when structural limitations exist.

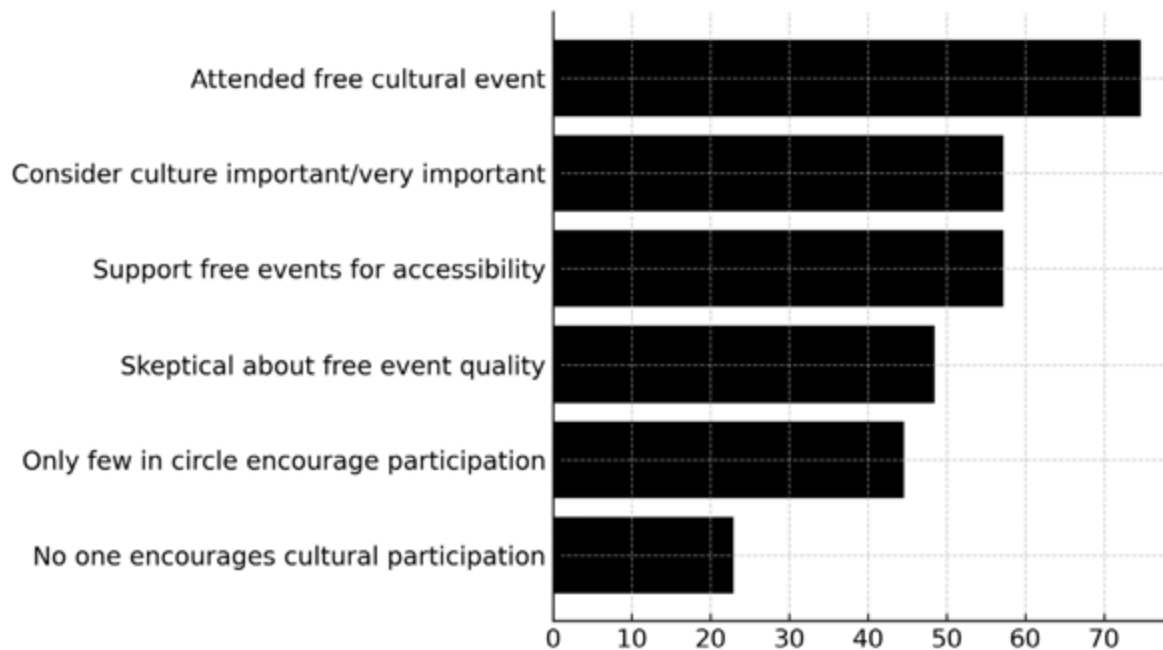


Figure 4. Key indicators of cultural engagement attitudes (%).

However, the presence of such interest does not automatically translate into widespread participation. The same figure shows that 48.5% of respondents expressed skepticism about the quality of free cultural programming, suggesting a perceived trade-off between accessibility and content richness. Additionally, 57.2% agreed that free events play a vital role in broadening access to culture, yet this support was tempered by ambivalence regarding their qualitative merit.

Social dynamics also appear to influence participation: while only a minority (13.9%) reported having a highly encouraging peer network, a significant portion (44.6%) noted that only a few people in their social circles support or promote cultural engagement. Meanwhile, 22.9% stated they lack any such supportive network entirely. This indicates that social encouragement remains unevenly distributed and may act as a hidden barrier, particularly among younger or more isolated individuals.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while cultural value orientations are largely positive, their impact is moderated by perceptions of quality, affordability, and social support. Strategic interventions should therefore go beyond merely increasing event quantity or lowering costs—they must also address content curation and community-building to convert positive attitudes into active participation.

4.5. Expectations for Cultural Development in Kayseri

When asked about their expectations for the improvement of cultural activities in Kayseri, respondents highlighted several priority areas (Figure 5). The most frequently expressed expectation was the diversification of event types, with a clear demand for a broader range of cultural programming that appeals to different age groups, interests, and artistic forms. This was closely followed by the need for enhanced communication and promotional strategies to ensure that cultural opportunities are widely known and accessible. Respondents also emphasized the importance of lowering ticket prices or expanding the availability of free events, reflecting economic concerns as a major constraint to participation.

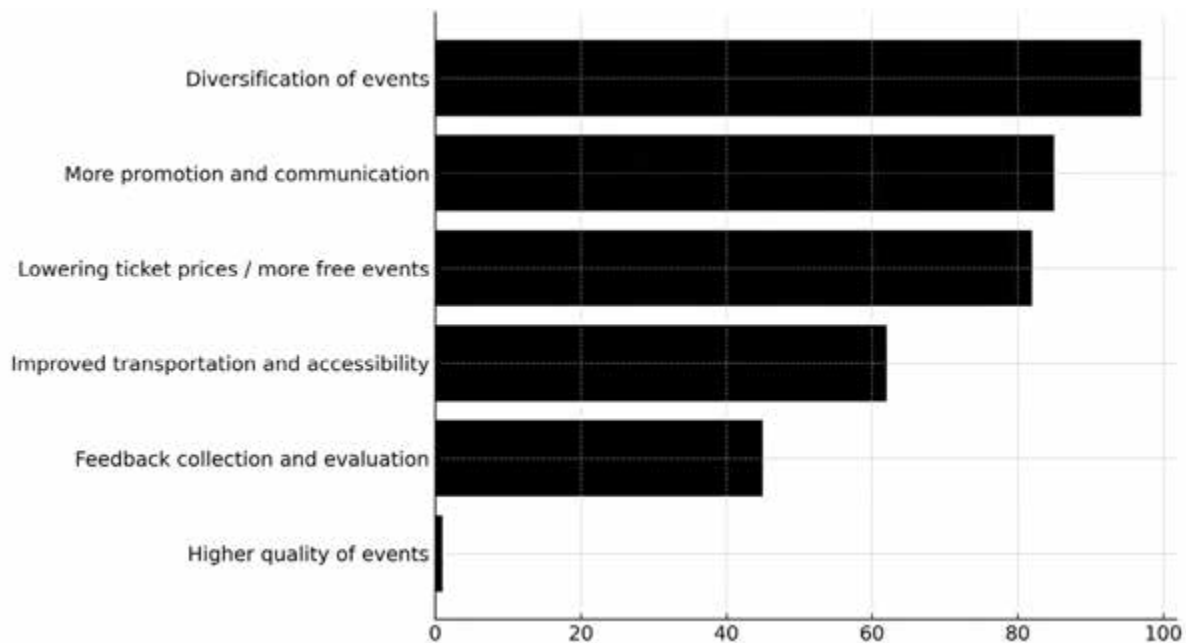


Figure 5. Public Expectations for Improving Cultural Life in Kayseri (%).

Transportation and spatial accessibility also emerged as key themes, with participants calling for easier access to venues and improved mobility, particularly for those living in outlying areas. In addition, a significant portion of respondents expressed a desire for their feedback to be considered in the planning and evaluation of cultural activities, indicating a preference for more participatory and responsive cultural governance practices.

These expectations signal a strong public demand for a more inclusive and responsive cultural ecosystem in Kayseri. Participants envision cultural services that are not only affordable and accessible but also better tailored to community interests. As such, policy responses should aim to diversify programming, enhance outreach, reduce financial barriers, and integrate resident feedback into cultural planning and delivery. Taken together, these improvements could contribute to a more vibrant and equitable cultural life across the city.

4.6. Perceptions and Meanings of Culture

In addition to measuring participation behavior, the survey asked respondents an open-ended question: “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘culture?’” Thematic analysis of these responses—coded and aggregated from 166 participants—offers insight into how individuals conceptualize culture in their everyday lives. The results reflect a rich and multidimensional understanding of culture that goes beyond institutional or elite associations.

The most frequently mentioned concept was “gelenek” (tradition), followed by “sanat” (art), “tarih” (history), “yemek” (food), and “müze” (museum). This distribution indicates that participants associate culture both with intangible heritage and artistic expression, as well as with material spaces and everyday practices. Notably, food and museums serve as symbolic anchors, connecting the personal and the institutional dimensions of cultural memory. These associations align with UNESCO’s (2003) expanded definition of culture as encompassing “ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs”, alongside creative and artistic output.

The prominence of tradition and history points to a conception of culture that is grounded in continuity and collective memory. At the same time, art and museum-related references indicate that respondents also perceive culture as something cultivated and displayed—tied to aesthetics, curation, and public representation. The mention of food reveals the extent to which culture is also seen as embodied and experiential, embedded in daily life rather than restricted to high-cultural institutions. These findings resonate with anthropological perspectives that frame culture as a “web of meaning” (Geertz, 1973) and with contemporary sociological accounts that

emphasize culture as both structure and practice (Swidler, 1986).

Importantly, the variety of associations suggests that respondents do not view culture as static or monolithic, but rather as plural, layered, and context-dependent. This is consistent with studies highlighting the increasingly hybrid and localized definitions of culture emerging in non-metropolitan urban contexts (Moulin, 2021). In the context of Kayseri, the data points to a public imaginary where culture is simultaneously communal and curated, lived and learned—a framework that offers fertile ground for inclusive, place-based cultural policy development.

Digital Cultural Participation by Age and Income The analysis of average participation frequencies in digital cultural activities across age and income groups reveals distinct generational and socio-economic divides. Younger participants, particularly those aged 18–24 and 25–34, exhibit the highest engagement across nearly all digital cultural forms, especially in film and series streaming and online education. Conversely, engagement levels decline steadily with age, with respondents aged 45 and above reporting significantly lower frequencies of participation—particularly in e-book reading and virtual museum tours.

Income-based variations further underscore disparities in cultural access. Respondents in higher income brackets (e.g., 40,001–60,000 TRY and above) tend to engage more frequently in diverse online cultural formats. Notably, those earning below 20,000 TRY still demonstrate high engagement in film/TV streaming, likely due to the relative affordability and accessibility of such platforms. Participants who opted not to disclose their income generally exhibited lower participation levels, especially in educational and literary content.

These findings point to both generational and economic factors shaping patterns of digital cultural consumption. They also suggest that streaming services may play a crucial compensatory role for lower-income groups, while digital educational and heritage-oriented offerings remain underutilized among older and economically disadvantaged populations.

4.7. Perceptions of Kayseri's Cultural Capacity

In addition to behavioral patterns and barriers, the survey included specific items aimed at gauging how residents perceive the city's overall cultural infrastructure and institutional responsiveness. The results, summarized in Figure 6, reveal a generally critical but nuanced public assessment.

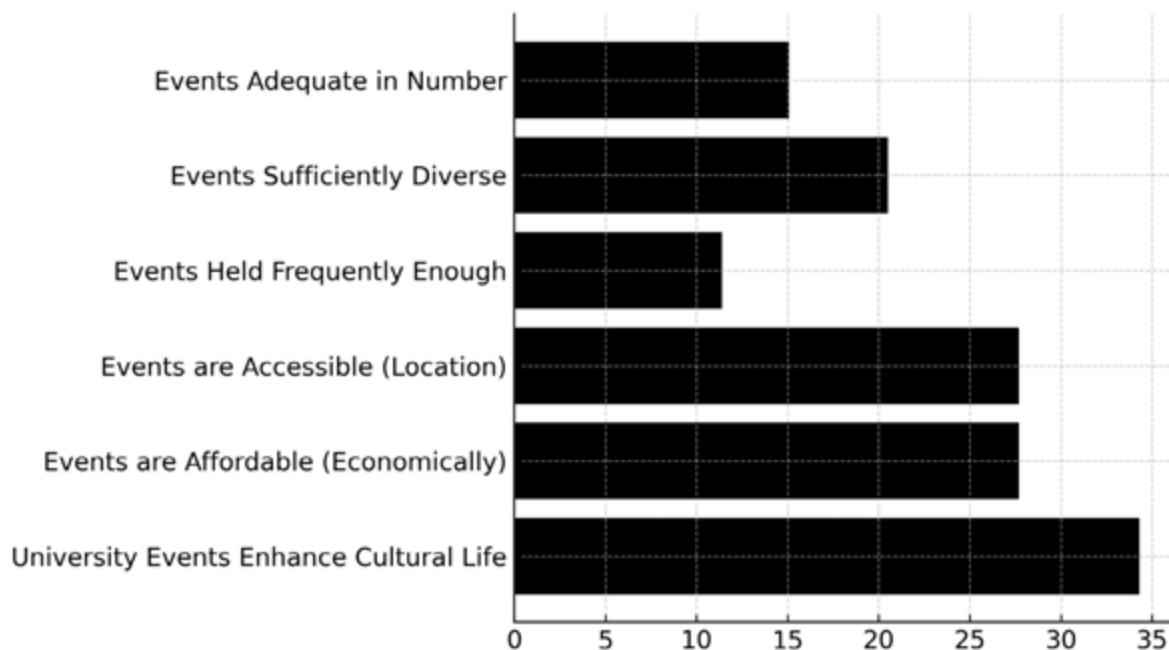


Figure 6. Overall perceptions of cultural infrastructure and participation opportunities in Kayseri (%).

Only 15.1% of respondents believe that cultural events in Kayseri are adequate in number, and an even lower share (11.4%) think they are held frequently enough. This highlights a perceived scarcity in both volume and continuity

of cultural offerings. Diversity also appears to be lacking, with just 20.5% agreeing that events reflect a sufficient range of interests and formats.

More encouraging responses were recorded for spatial and economic accessibility: 27.7% of participants found event locations to be reasonably accessible, and an equal percentage stated that cultural events are economically affordable. These figures suggest that while physical and financial access remains a challenge for many, there is a partial recognition of ongoing municipal efforts in these areas.

Notably, the most positive result emerged in relation to universities: 34.3% of respondents agreed that university-led cultural activities contribute meaningfully to the city's cultural life. This points to the prominent role higher education institutions may play in compensating for broader gaps in public cultural provision.

Together, these findings indicate that Kayseri's cultural ecosystem is perceived as limited in diversity, frequency, and scale, yet with modest successes in affordability and location, and with universities emerging as key cultural actors. These perceptions underscore the need for coordinated municipal-university partnerships and expanded efforts in event programming, frequency, and outreach to enhance cultural vitality across the city.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a persistent pattern of uneven cultural participation in Kayseri, driven primarily by socio-economic, spatial, and informational barriers. These results corroborate long standing theoretical arguments emphasizing the role of cultural capital, educational attainment, and social positioning in shaping access to cultural life (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1982). Despite Kayseri's wealth of cultural heritage and infrastructure, participation remains limited, particularly among lower-income groups, women, and youth with limited exposure to institutionalized culture. The survey results indicate that affordability, awareness, and accessibility are the most frequently cited barriers—each mapping onto broader structural dynamics that inhibit inclusion.

These empirical patterns resonate with recent critiques of cultural policy discourse in Europe, which problematize non-participation without sufficiently addressing the socio-structural conditions that produce it (Stevenson et al., 2017; Jancovich & Stevenson, 2023). In the context of Kayseri, the absence of participatory planning mechanisms and the dominance of top-down cultural programming result in a limited responsiveness to local needs. This reinforces symbolic boundaries and maintains a disconnection between formal cultural institutions and the everyday cultural practices of residents.

Moreover, the findings reveal that cultural participation in Kayseri is not merely a matter of personal interest but is closely tied to place-based factors such as proximity to venues, urban transport connectivity, and neighborhood-level social networks. These insights align with intersectional and network-based approaches, which highlight the role of relational infrastructures in enabling or constraining cultural engagement (Kane, 2004). In this light, cultural participation must be understood not only as an outcome of individual choice, but also as a relational and spatial practice embedded within urban inequalities.

The results also raise critical questions about the universality of cultural metrics. While this study draws upon UNESCO's Framework for Cultural Statistics (2012) to guide the design and interpretation of survey instruments, the application of such frameworks in secondary cities like Kayseri reveals key limitations. Standardized indicators may obscure context-specific dynamics and overlook alternative, informal, or non-institutional forms of cultural expression that are vital to local identities. In line with Roaldsnes (2025), this study underscores the need to attend to the spatial-temporal embeddedness of participation—how seasonal rhythms, municipal planning calendars, and local traditions mediate cultural engagement in context-specific ways.

These findings collectively indicate that increasing cultural participation in Kayseri will require multi-level interventions that not only address structural barriers, but also recognize and integrate local cultural practices. This necessitates a shift in cultural policy toward inclusive, participatory planning that reflects the lived realities of diverse populations in secondary cities.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of cultural participation patterns in Kayseri, a city that possesses significant cultural heritage yet continues to exhibit relatively low engagement levels. The findings confirm that while many residents value culture and express a desire to participate, structural and symbolic barriers often inhibit their ability to do so. This phenomenon echoes broader scholarly debates on cultural inequality, wherein participation is shaped not solely by individual preferences but by socio-economic, spatial, and informational asymmetries (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio & Uusem, 1978).

One of the study's most striking revelations lies in the discrepancy between attitudinal support for culture and actual engagement. Despite nearly two-thirds of respondents deeming culture "important" or "very important," only a minority regularly attend cultural events. This gap reinforces prior claims that positive dispositions alone do not guarantee participation in the absence of enabling conditions (Miles & Sullivan, 2012). Instead, our data suggest that participation is mediated by an ecology of access, where economic hardship, time poverty, limited spatial mobility, and informational deficits intersect.

The strong presence of economic and temporal constraints—identified as the most significant barriers—resonates with cultural access literature that foregrounds cost and time as recurrent inhibitors (Chan et al., 2008; Stevenson, 2013). In the Kayseri context, ticket prices, transportation costs, and competing responsibilities among working-age adults represent core challenges. Moreover, the urban geography of cultural provision remains highly centralized, limiting access for residents in peripheral districts—an issue corroborated in spatial justice and cultural planning literature (Grogan, 2021; Finkel et al., 2019).

The findings also point to substantial informational and social barriers. The prevalence of late or inadequate announcements, limited outreach through digital or local channels, and a lack of event diversity reflect an ongoing misalignment between supply and demand. This is consistent with Holden's (2006) argument that cultural institutions must evolve from traditional producer-consumer models toward dialogic, audience-responsive frameworks. Furthermore, the lack of a supportive peer environment for cultural engagement—reported by nearly half of the respondents—suggests that cultural participation is not only an individual act but a socially embedded practice, often shaped by networks of encouragement and belonging (Bennett et al., 2009).

The digital dimension of cultural engagement in Kayseri also reveals significant disparities. While social media use for cultural content is high, more substantive formats such as online workshops or virtual museum visits remain underutilized. Age and income were found to be major predictors of digital participation, confirming findings in other studies highlighting the digital divide in cultural access (Selwyn, 2004; Heikkilä & Sassi, 2021). These disparities underscore the need for inclusive digital strategies that move beyond passive content delivery to foster interactive and meaningful online experiences.

Finally, respondents' open-ended definitions of culture demonstrate a pluralistic and hybrid understanding that encompasses both tangible heritage and lived practices—aligning with UNESCO's broader definition of culture (2003) and anthropological perspectives that frame it as a "web of meaning" (Geertz, 1973). The prominence of food, tradition, art, and museums as cultural referents suggests that policies should not limit themselves to high-cultural institutions but instead embrace everyday and community-based expressions.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the structural and experiential dimensions of cultural participation in Kayseri. Through the use of a standardized survey grounded in UNESCO's (2012) methodology, the research identifies both the scope and limitations of cultural engagement in a historically rich yet under-researched secondary city. The findings underscore that cultural participation is not evenly distributed across the urban population and is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, educational, spatial, and symbolic barriers (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1982).

Despite Kayseri's wealth of tangible and intangible cultural assets, participation remains limited, particularly among lower-income groups, women, and youth. Barriers such as affordability, lack of awareness, and restricted physical access align with broader structural conditions, highlighting the embedded nature of cultural exclusion. These findings resonate with critiques of European cultural policy discourses that often individualize non-participation while neglecting systemic inequalities (Stevenson et al., 2017; Jancovich & Stevenson, 2023).

In response, this study proposes a series of policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable cultural environment:

- **Adopt Participatory Cultural Planning** Cultural institutions and local authorities must adopt participatory mechanisms that actively involve underrepresented groups in decision-making processes. This includes co-designing cultural programs with local residents and diversifying content to reflect plural identities, needs, and interests.
- **Develop Targeted Outreach and Awareness Strategies** Informational gaps should be addressed through strategic communication efforts, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods. These efforts must be complemented by improved transportation infrastructure and the establishment of decentralized cultural hubs embedded in residential areas.
- **Recognize Informal and Everyday Cultural Practices** Cultural policy in Kayseri should shift from a supply-driven model toward a needs-based, place-sensitive approach that acknowledges informal and everyday cultural practices as legitimate forms of participation. This reframing requires the integration of cultural access into broader urban and social policy frameworks, linking it to education, mobility, and social cohesion.
- **Adapt Standardized Metrics to Local Contexts** While UNESCO's cultural statistics framework offers a valuable starting point, its application in secondary cities like Kayseri reveals limitations. Standardized indicators may obscure local dynamics and overlook non-institutionalized forms of expression vital to community identities. In line with Roaldsnes (2025), the study calls for the development of culturally sensitive, spatially embedded, and temporally attuned metrics that reflect local patterns of engagement.
- **Expand Research Methodologies** Future research should complement quantitative surveys with qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic observation to capture the lived experiences and cultural meanings of participation. Longitudinal and comparative studies across cities in Türkiye would further enrich the evidence base for inclusive cultural policy-making.

By shedding light on the local dynamics of cultural participation, this study not only contributes to academic debates on culture-led urban development but also provides actionable insights for policymakers, planners, and cultural actors. Advancing inclusive cultural governance in secondary cities like Kayseri demands both structural reform and a reconceptualization of participation that values diversity, everyday practices, and the co-production of cultural life.

While future research should expand the empirical base through longitudinal and comparative studies, this investigation provides a foundational step toward rethinking cultural participation in Türkiye's secondary cities. By positioning cultural engagement as both a right and a process, policymakers can begin to build more just, inclusive, and resilient cultural ecosystems.

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