

Audiences and Cultural Diversity

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Cultural diversity in the arts is often focused on what is presented on stage and screen, but far less consideration is given to the cultural diversity of audiences.

In fact, the issue of engagement with diverse cultural communications and communities continues to be avoided by many.

Are arts administrators ignoring culturally diverse audiences, or are these audiences ignoring the arts?

Setting the scene

The language used to describe non-Indigenous Australians that don't come from Anglo-British backgrounds has changed over time—reflecting the reality of post-World War II migration and the development of official Multicultural Policies.

'Ethnic' began to be used in the 1970s and 1980s; followed by 'Non-English Speaking Backgrounds' (NESB) in the 1990s. Currently, terms like 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD), 'culturally diverse', multicultural and 'ethnic' are all regularly used. More recently, 'People of Colour' (POC) has entered as an import from the US.

Regardless of the terms we use to describe ourselves, the depth and growth of Australia's multicultural communities cannot and should not be ignored.

Immigration is the main contributor to Australia's growing population, with overseas migration bringing more than 200,000

people into the country each year.

According to 2016 census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 49 per cent of Australians were either born overseas, or had one or both parents who were born overseas. Population research group .id note that the top languages other than English spoken at home in 2019 were Mandarin, Cantonese, Italian, Greek, Hindi, Arabic, Spanish and Punjabi.

Multicultural Australians know that art and culture define their core identity. Our multicultural communities have well-established infrastructures with community centres, financial services, doctors, lawyers, media, schools, dance, music and theatre ensembles, arts and cultural festivals.

Ethnic festivals are platforms for established and emerging artists, and are used by our governments to promote our diverse cities and regions. They draw large audiences, and add to local economies. And there is no shortage of politicians keen to open them.

The real challenge

In choosing not to market to, or engage with, multicultural communities, a significant and growing market is left untapped.

The arts are one of the few sectors in Australia not to have actively taken on multicultural marketing. Communicating with culturally diverse audiences is too often considered as an optional outreach activity, or a response to a focus on access and equity. However, this approach largely ignores the economic, intellectual and political power of multicultural communities.

Australia's many multicultural festivals receive little arts funding and are on the whole ignored by arts organisations as opportunities for research, collaboration and audience development. It is not often that we see ethnic festivals secure funding from arts funders or arts organisations enlisting the support of ethnic festivals.

When campaigns targeting specific communities can be found, they often present those communities as homogenous. And yes, language, history, traditions, faith and what UNESCO describes as ‘intangible cultural heritage’ do result in some homogeneity. But not everyone within these communities is the same.

Geography (both in their original homelands or in Australia), their period of settlement, class, age, gender, disability, sexuality, faith, class, and education levels all make the definition of audience segments complex.

Some audience diversification campaigns tend to engage with hyper-visible groups like refugees, or groups deemed as needing more assistance. This means that larger and/or more established communities, as well as less-visible immigrants from other areas, can be ignored. Yet these groups may have the financial capacity and time to be involved as audiences, and have access to political and economic power that may be useful in a partnership with arts organisations.

Ethnic media (in English and other languages) is vital to the cultural and political sustenance of culturally diverse communities. Ethnic media outlets—including newspapers, radio and online—are deep and diverse. They are an excellent source of promotion and publicity, and natural advocates for arts projects. They are often made up of family-owned businesses that maintain deep historical links to the community they service and that have significant inter-generational networks. In Victoria alone, ethnic media communicates to over 1.5 million people each month. But in spite of being a vital engagement partner, ethnic media is rarely used by the arts.

Economics and class are often cited as barriers to attendance. However, Australian political author George Megalogenis writes that we are currently experiencing the largest wave of skilled, middle class migration since the mid-nineteenth century—from

“India, England, China, South Africa and the Philippines.”

After World War II, immigrant waves of Italians and the Greeks, then later Vietnamese and Lebanese, all started on the “lower rungs of the income ladder and we measured their integration through their uptake of small business and home ownership and the success of their Australian-born children through education.” However, twenty-first century immigration “inverted the relationship between new arrival and host, as our ethnic face changes from Anglo-European to Eurasian.”

Megalogenis writes that the new arrivals are younger and better educated, and land between the middle and the top of the income ladder.

“Two out of every three new arrivals since 2001 have been skilled immigrants. They come primarily from India, England, China, South Africa and the Philippines, to work as doctors and nurses, human-resources and marketing professionals, business managers, IT specialists, and engineers. Western Australia, for instance, is a global leader in recruiting doctors, with ‘the highest percentage of foreign-born medical practitioners at around 60 per cent’, according to the World Bank.”

The arts must recognise the aspirational nature of these immigrants, and that they enjoy greater upward mobility than the children born of long-term Anglo heritage.

Engaging with culturally diverse audiences is also an ethical imperative; given the taxes of culturally diverse Australians go towards funding our cultural ecology.

An invitation to the party

America's leader in audience diversification Donna Walker-Kuhne created an approach of "inviting people to the table" that she used to bridge the historic divide between African American audiences and Broadway musicals. The idea was developed when working for the Public Theatre in New York, when the director of the leading theatre company asked Walker-Kuhne to make their foyer as diverse as a New York subway station.

In doing so, Walker-Kuhne reminded us that "multicultural audiences don't need you, they are doing fine." But that they do need to feel 'invited' into an arts house or activity.

To achieve that invitation, Walker-Kuhne notes that multi-cultural audience development needs to be embedded within an organisation's mission, and supported from the boardroom to front of house.

Engagement and promotional activities need to be taken into communities (rather than waiting for them to come to us).

As Walker-Kuhne says, "we took [the show] wherever there was a gathering of people, so that the product, the cast, the show, and the concept was accessible to people in their own neighbourhood."

Pop-up performances, workshops, meet-and-greet events, and activities in schools, churches, businesses and community associations can also help create awareness and make people feel like they are invited to the party. Hospitality is a serious aspect of political and social engagement.

Things to keep in mind

- There needs to be a shift from only using access and equity as the driver of diverse community engagement. Multicultural communities do not need assistance; but the arts need communities as allies, audiences and collaborators.
- Arts organisations need to include engagement and communications with diverse audiences, patrons and communities in their vision (and support it from the top down).
- Research is essential. A greater awareness of culture, language, region, class and faith as motivations to consumption makes a difference in the way one communicates to different segments of each community.
- Understand the interests and aspirations of the communities you want to target. Multicultural Australians do not have their cultural and entertainment consumption determined by their cultural and linguistic background. However, an awareness of culture, language and faith as motivations to consumption makes a difference in the way we communicate to multicultural market segments.
- Employ people with expertise in multicultural marketing, ethnic media relations and engagement.
- Build relationships with professional associations, women's and cultural associations, and language schools.
- Invite community leaders and representatives to marketing and development committees and arts boards.
- Think about hospitality as an aspect of your engagement plans. Invite communities to functions, openings, celebrations and launches.
- Add ethnic media to a mix of community, business and grass-roots engagement to develop all-powerful word-of-mouth. Develop links with ethnic media journalists and editors. Buy

ethno-specific and no-ethno-specific ads.

- Look outside the arts for case studies. Australia's politicians know the power of Australia's political parties, and government services know the power of ethnic media and multicultural engagement. The telecommunications, banking, health, sports, fast food, supermarket and real estate industries all use sophisticated multicultural communication strategies—and have serious relationships with a range of ethnic media.

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