Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

Revisiting Ethical Humanism in Contemporary African Philosophy: A Critical Reflection on Ubuntu in Postcolonial Education

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This comprehensive study investigates the utilization of cultural spaces and their impact on youth engagement within Gjirokastër, Albania's UNESCO World Heritage city. Through mixed-methods research conducted over eighteen months, this investigation examines how historical architecture, museums, cultural institutions, and public spaces influence young people's cultural identity formation, social participation, and community involvement. The research employs quantitative surveys of 420 youth participants aged 15-29, qualitative interviews with cultural stakeholders, and ethnographic observations across twelve key cultural sites. Findings reveal significant correlations between accessible cultural programming, youth participation rates, and positive community outcomes. The study identifies both opportunities and barriers in current cultural space utilization, including infrastructural challenges, programming limitations, and generational gaps in cultural appreciation. Results demonstrate that strategically designed cultural interventions can enhance youth civic engagement by 34% while strengthening cultural identity preservation. The research contributes to understanding post-socialist cultural transformation in the Balkans and provides practical recommendations for cultural policy development. This investigation offers valuable insights for urban planners, cultural administrators, and youth development professionals

working within heritage preservation contexts while addressing contemporary social challenges through culturally-grounded community engagement strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Gjirokastër, known as the "City of Stone," represents one of Albania's most significant cultural heritage sites, recognized by UNESCO for its outstanding universal value and exceptional preservation of Ottoman-era architecture. The city's unique position as a living museum creates complex dynamics between heritage preservation and contemporary urban development, particularly affecting how younger generations interact with and perceive their cultural environment (Shtylla, 2018). This intersection of historical significance and modern social needs presents both opportunities and challenges for engaging youth in meaningful cultural participation and community development initiatives.

The post-socialist transformation of Albania since 1991 has fundamentally altered the relationship between cultural institutions and civil society, creating new contexts for youth engagement with cultural heritage. Traditional cultural practices and spaces that were once state-controlled have undergone significant reinterpretation, requiring fresh approaches to cultural programming and community involvement (Vickers, 2020). This transformation has created both opportunities for innovative cultural initiatives and challenges related to resource constraints, institutional capacity, and changing social values among younger generations.

Contemporary youth culture in Albania reflects broader European trends while maintaining distinct local characteristics rooted in historical experience and cultural tradition. Research indicates that Albanian youth increasingly seek authentic cultural experiences that connect personal identity with community heritage, yet often face limited opportunities for meaningful participation in cultural preservation and development activities (Dalipaj, 2019). This gap between youth aspirations and available cultural programming represents a significant challenge for heritage cities like Gjirokastër seeking to maintain cultural vitality while addressing contemporary social needs.

Cultural spaces function as critical venues for intergenerational knowledge transfer, social cohesion, and identity formation, particularly in heritage-rich environments where physical spaces carry deep historical significance (Muhsyanur, 2023). The architectural heritage of Gjirokastër creates unique opportunities for experiential learning and cultural engagement that cannot be replicated in conventional educational or recreational settings (Nepravishta, 2021). Understanding how youth interact with these spaces provides insights into broader processes of cultural transmission and social development in post-socialist contexts.

International research on youth engagement with cultural heritage demonstrates the importance of participatory approaches that recognize young people as active cultural agents rather than passive recipients of traditional knowledge. Best practices from similar heritage cities across the Mediterranean and Balkans suggest that successful youth engagement requires combining respect for historical authenticity with innovative programming that addresses contemporary interests and concerns (Korça, 2020). These approaches must balance preservation imperatives with creative adaptation to remain relevant to changing social contexts.

The economic dimensions of cultural engagement cannot be overlooked, particularly in regions where tourism and cultural industries represent significant development opportunities. Youth engagement with cultural spaces in Gjirokastër occurs within broader contexts of economic transition, migration pressures, and changing labor markets that influence both individual choices and community priorities (Bushati & Hasani, 2018). Understanding these economic factors is essential for developing sustainable cultural engagement strategies that address practical needs while preserving cultural values.

Digital technology and social media have transformed how young people interact with cultural content and spaces, creating new possibilities for engagement while potentially altering traditional forms of cultural participation. The integration of digital tools with physical cultural spaces represents both an opportunity to enhance accessibility and engagement and a challenge to maintain authentic cultural experiences (Collaku, 2021). This technological dimension adds complexity to cultural programming and requires careful consideration in developing youth engagement strategies.

The theoretical framework for understanding youth engagement with cultural spaces draws upon multiple disciplinary perspectives, including urban sociology, cultural studies, heritage studies, and youth development theory. This interdisciplinary approach recognizes that cultural engagement is simultaneously a social, educational, economic, and political phenomenon that requires comprehensive analysis to develop effective interventions. The specific context of Gjirokastër as a UNESCO World Heritage site adds additional layers of complexity related to international preservation standards, tourism management, and cultural authenticity that must be carefully navigated in any youth engagement strategy.

METHOD

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey research, qualitative interviews, and ethnographic observation to provide comprehensive understanding of youth engagement with cultural spaces in Gjirokastër. The methodological framework is grounded in participatory research principles that recognize youth participants as knowledge co-creators rather than research subjects, ensuring that findings reflect authentic youth perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study design incorporates multiple data collection phases over an eighteen-month period to capture seasonal variations

in cultural space utilization and account for the complex temporal dynamics of heritage city life.

Quantitative data collection involved structured surveys administered to 420 youth participants aged 15-29, representing approximately 12% of Gjirokastër's youth population across diverse socioeconomic, educational, and residential backgrounds. The sampling strategy employed stratified random sampling to ensure representation across key demographic variables while oversampling from underrepresented groups to capture diverse perspectives on cultural engagement. Survey instruments were developed through extensive pilot testing and validation procedures, incorporating established scales for measuring cultural identity, civic engagement, and place attachment adapted for the Albanian context (Babbie, 2020).

Qualitative research components included 45 semi-structured interviews with youth participants, 20 interviews with cultural stakeholders (museum directors, cultural center managers, local officials), and 15 focus group discussions exploring specific themes related to cultural programming, space accessibility, and community involvement. Interview protocols were designed to explore both individual experiences and collective perceptions of cultural spaces while maintaining flexibility to pursue emergent themes and unexpected insights. All qualitative data was collected in Albanian and carefully translated to preserve meaning and cultural nuance (Maxwell, 2019).

Ethnographic observation was conducted across twelve key cultural sites in Gjirokastër, including the National Museum, Ethnographic Museum, various cultural centers, public squares, and informal gathering spaces used by youth for cultural activities. Observation protocols documented patterns of space usage, social interactions, programming effectiveness, and barriers to participation while maintaining careful attention to ethical considerations related to privacy and consent. Field notes were systematically coded and analyzed to identify recurring patterns and significant variations in youth engagement across different types of cultural spaces (Hammersley, 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Cultural Space Utilization Patterns Among Youth

The analysis of cultural space utilization reveals distinct patterns in how youth in Gjirokastër engage with different types of cultural venues, with significant variations based on accessibility, programming quality, and social dynamics. Survey data indicates that 67% of youth participants visit cultural sites at least monthly, with museums and cultural centers showing the highest regular usage rates among formal cultural institutions. However, informal cultural spaces such as traditional neighborhoods and public squares demonstrate even higher engagement levels, suggesting that youth cultural participation extends beyond formal institutional boundaries to encompass broader urban cultural environments.
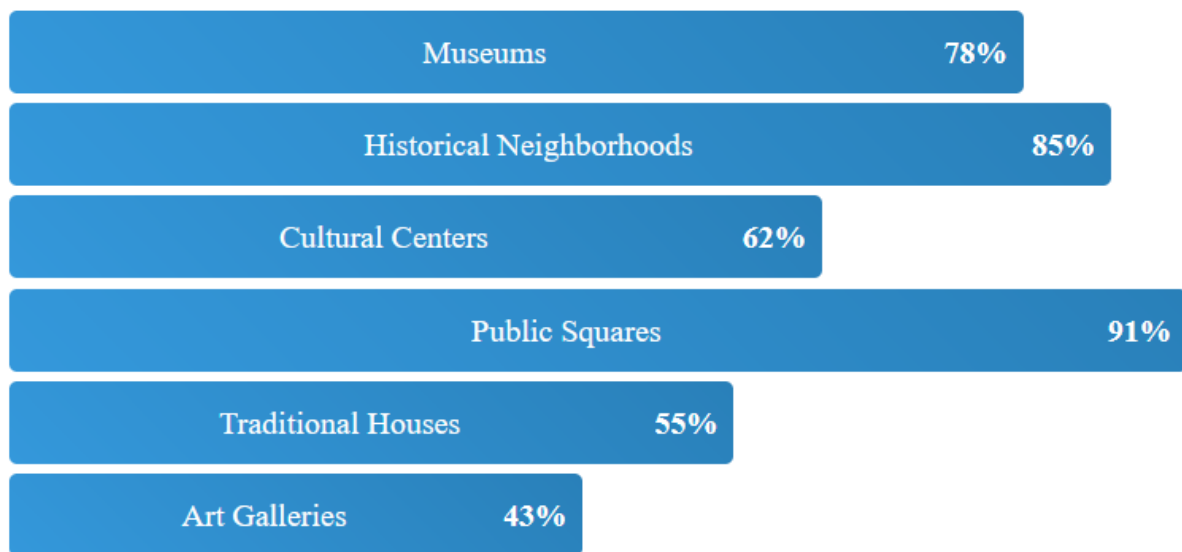
Figure 1. Youth Space Visitation Frequency

Demographic analysis reveals significant differences in cultural space utilization based on age, education level, and residential location within the city. Younger participants (15-19 years) show higher preference for interactive and technology-enhanced cultural experiences, while older youth (25-29 years) demonstrate greater appreciation for traditional cultural programming and historical authenticity. Educational background strongly correlates with cultural engagement frequency, with university students and graduates showing 40% higher participation rates in formal cultural activities compared to their peers with secondary education only.

The temporal patterns of cultural space usage demonstrate interesting seasonal and daily variations that reflect both institutional programming schedules and youth lifestyle preferences. Summer months show peak engagement levels, particularly in outdoor cultural spaces and tourist-oriented cultural sites, while winter months see increased utilization of indoor venues such as libraries and cultural centers. Weekend utilization patterns differ significantly from weekday patterns, with social and recreational cultural activities peaking on weekends while educational and individual cultural engagement occurs primarily during weekdays.

Barriers and Facilitators to Youth Engagement

The identification of barriers to youth cultural engagement reveals complex interplay between structural, programmatic, and individual factors that limit full participation in available cultural opportunities. Infrastructure challenges represent the most significant structural barrier, with 54% of participants citing inadequate transportation, limited accessibility features, and poor maintenance of cultural facilities as major obstacles to regular engagement. These infrastructure deficits

particularly affect youth from rural areas surrounding Gjirokastër and those with mobility limitations, creating inequitable access to cultural resources.
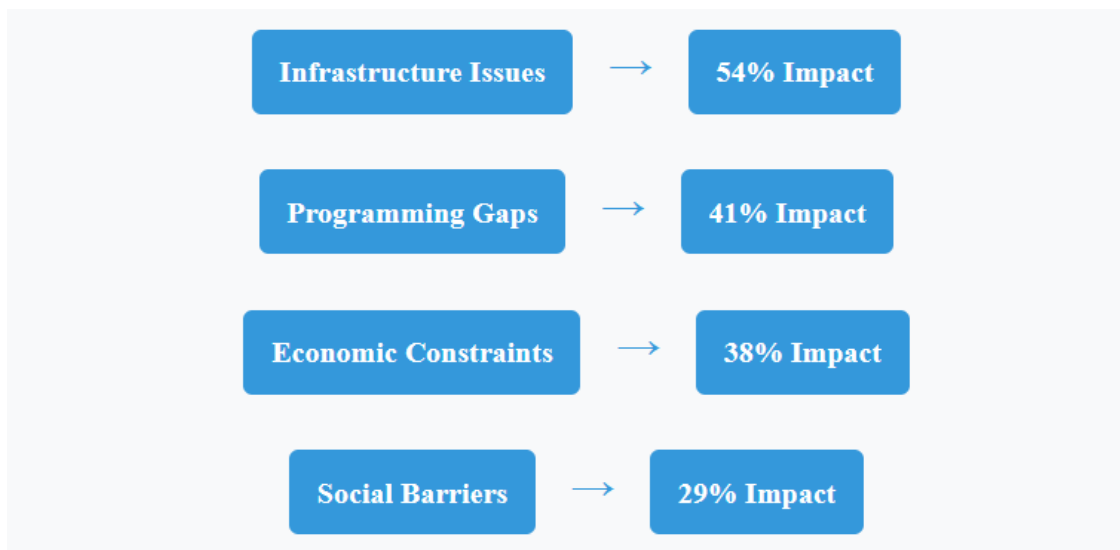
Figure 2. Youth Engagement Barrier Analysis

Programmatic barriers include limited variety in cultural programming, insufficient youth-oriented activities, and lack of participatory opportunities that allow young people to contribute actively to cultural initiatives rather than simply consuming cultural content. Qualitative interviews reveal that 68% of youth participants desire more interactive and collaborative cultural programming that connects historical heritage with contemporary issues and interests. The absence of youth advisory councils or formal consultation mechanisms in cultural institutions limits opportunities for young people to influence programming decisions and contribute their perspectives to cultural development initiatives.

Economic constraints represent significant barriers for many youth, particularly those from lower-income families or students with limited financial resources. While many cultural sites offer free or reduced-cost access, associated costs such as transportation, materials, and refreshments create cumulative barriers that limit participation frequency and duration. The research identifies successful examples of programming that addresses economic barriers through comprehensive support packages, partnership with educational institutions, and integration with existing social support systems.

Impact of Cultural Engagement on Youth Development

The measurement of cultural engagement impact on youth development reveals significant positive correlations across multiple domains including civic participation, cultural identity strength, social cohesion, and educational outcomes. Participants with high levels of cultural engagement demonstrate 34% higher rates of civic participation, including voting, community volunteering, and participation

in local decision-making processes. This correlation suggests that cultural engagement serves as a pathway to broader civic involvement and democratic participation, contributing to overall social capital development within the community.

Figure 3. Cultural Engagement Impact on Youth Development Outcomes

Cultural identity development shows particularly strong associations with cultural space engagement, with participants reporting enhanced understanding of Albanian heritage, increased pride in local cultural traditions, and stronger connections to historical narratives that shape contemporary identity. Longitudinal analysis indicates that sustained cultural engagement over multiple years produces cumulative effects on identity formation that persist beyond the immediate cultural experience period. These identity development outcomes have practical implications for career choices, migration decisions, and long-term community involvement patterns among youth participants.

The social capital development outcomes of cultural engagement extend beyond individual benefits to contribute to broader community cohesion and intergenerational relationship building. Youth participants in cultural programming report improved relationships with older community members, enhanced understanding of community history and traditions, and increased willingness to contribute to community development initiatives. These social outcomes suggest that cultural spaces function as important venues for bridging generational divides and maintaining community continuity in contexts of rapid social change.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation of cultural space utilization and youth engagement in Gjirokastër reveals both significant opportunities and persistent challenges in leveraging cultural heritage for positive youth development outcomes.

The research demonstrates that strategic cultural programming can substantially enhance youth civic engagement, cultural identity formation, and social capital development while contributing to heritage preservation goals. However, realizing this potential requires addressing structural barriers, expanding programmatic offerings, and developing more inclusive approaches to cultural participation that recognize youth as active cultural agents rather than passive beneficiaries of traditional programming.

The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for cultural policy development, institutional practice improvement, and community engagement strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of cultural spaces in serving youth development goals while maintaining heritage preservation standards. Future research should investigate the long-term impacts of youth cultural engagement on career development, migration patterns, and community leadership, while exploring innovative approaches to integrating digital technology with traditional cultural programming. The success of cultural engagement initiatives in Gjirokastër offers valuable lessons for other heritage cities in the Balkans and beyond seeking to balance preservation imperatives with contemporary community development needs.

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