

Algorithmic Ideals vs. Cultural Realities: Managing Independent Theatre in Romania

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Abstract

This paper explores the gap between the algorithmic idealism of artificial intelligence and the everyday realities of independent theatre management in Romania, in the broader context of digital transformation and cultural sector sustainability. The study begins with a critical dialogue with ChatGPT, which is used as an exploratory tool to identify the managerial models it proposes for independent theatres. These algorithmic responses are then compared with the lived experiences and institutional strategies of two key case studies: Replika Center for Educational Theatre (Bucharest) and Reactor for Creation and Experiment (Cluj-Napoca), both of which represent significant pillars in the Romanian independent cultural network. The research draws on interdisciplinary literature in cultural policy, creative industries, and organizational sustainability, employing a qualitative methodology that combines AI-based simulation, multiple case studies, and content analysis of internal documents and practitioners' reflections. This approach reveals systemic discrepancies between AI-generated managerial frameworks and the resource-constrained environments in which independent theatres actually operate. Key findings highlight the sector's structural precarity, shaped by inconsistent public funding, limited infrastructure, and the overextension of human resources. While AI models propose flexible and resilient team structures, in practice, multitasking and minimalism emerge as survival tactics rather than strategic choices. Despite this, the case studies demonstrate remarkable resilience, social innovation, and artistic relevance. The contribution of this paper lies in its contextualized and comparative reflection on how emerging technologies intersect with cultural practices, emphasizing the need to adapt digital strategies to local realities. It also offers a set of normative recommendations for cultural policy reform, including the establishment of operational funding schemes, improved sponsorship legislation, and long-term support for independent artistic ecosystems.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Cultural Policy; Independent Theatre; Organizational Sustainability; Resilience; Theatre Management.

Introduction

In 2024, I had the opportunity to engage with first-year students at the Faculty of Management of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in a discussion about the real-world challenges facing cultural management in Romania. In a context where ChatGPT has emerged, as for many, as an all-knowing interlocutor, a seemingly inexhaustible source of answers, I became interested in understanding the image this tool projects to those who are just beginning to navigate this professional field. Thus, I initiated a dialogue with ChatGPT to explore various aspects of managing an independent theatre in Romania, with the aim of assessing the accuracy of the information and viewpoints generated by Artificial Intelligence in relation to the actual context in Romania.

ChatGPT's ability to generate immediate and coherent responses to virtually any question (Roumeliotis & Tselikas, 2023) has positioned it as a general information source, increasingly replacing traditional search engines such as Google and Yahoo. It has the capacity to adapt to each individual user by learning their habits, preferences, language, tone, and style through continuous interaction (Aljanabi, 2023). At the same time, ChatGPT can present false information as if it were true. As Jesse G. Meyer (2023) notes, it is essential to remember that the model is not human: "it's not trained to respond in a

way that accurately reflects its own capabilities and limitations, but rather, it is trained to construct textual utterances modeled after similar ones found in its training text given the prompt.”

In an essay questioning the use of Artificial Intelligence in the production of contemporary art, visual artist David Serra Navarro (2023) employed dialogue with AI as a form of the Socratic method – drawing on the approach of the Greek philosopher Socrates, who engaged his students in questioning in order to help them discover truth for themselves. In the same “Socratic” spirit, I initiated this conversation as well.

The dialogue with ChatGPT was mirrored against a set of internal documents and reflections produced by artists from Replika Centre for Educational Theatre in Bucharest and Reactor for Creation and Experiment in Cluj – two dynamic independent spaces dedicated to the performing arts in Romania. This comparison highlighted the contrast between the managerial models proposed by a Large Language Model (LLM) platform and the operational realities of independent theatres in Romania, offering reference points for understanding the limitations of using ChatGPT in this professional field. These discrepancies raise a series of questions regarding the applicability, relevance, and limitations of the managerial solutions proposed by artificial intelligence within the Romanian cultural context.

The study explores how artificial intelligence frames independent theatre management, contrasts these models with Romanian case studies, and highlights practitioners’ resilience strategies, structural dysfunctions, and implications for cultural policy and emerging technologies.

Building on these directions, the research follows several complementary objectives. First, it seeks to critically analyze the algorithmic representations of how an independent cultural institution is organized through a controlled dialogue with ChatGPT, used here as an exploratory tool. Second, it aims to document in depth two relevant case studies – Replika Center for Educational Theatre in Bucharest and Reactor for Creation and Experiment in Cluj-Napoca – in order to identify alternative models of institutional functioning. At the same time, it intends to highlight the structural issues faced by the independent cultural sector in Romania, particularly regarding infrastructure, artistic labor, and funding sources. Finally, the study seeks to contribute to critical reflection on the role emerging technologies may play in shaping future cultural policies, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing such technologies in relation to local realities.

Literature review

Independent theatre management: definitions, stakes, and paradigms

In the post-communist Romanian cultural context, independent theatre has maintained a strong experimental dimension (Cadariu, 2018). It emerged as an artistic alternative to state-funded theatre (Popovici, 2016), as a reaction to the social, economic, and political landscape (Braniște, 2021). Over time, it has evolved into a space dedicated to aesthetic innovation, social experimentation, and serving as a fertile ground for autonomous civic and educational initiatives (Apostol, 2018). According to Horghidan-Anghel (2023), independent theatre in Romania emerged with the orientation of the new generation towards innovative theatrical formulas and projects with cultural impact. Among the essential directions were the relaunch of local dramaturgy and the elimination of hierarchies in the creative space, marking a transition towards a more open, participatory, and relevant artistic model for the local theatrical context.

Although many of these cultural entities were initially established as a direct response to immediate challenges – such as the lack of employment opportunities in public performing arts institutions, the need for young artists to practice their profession after graduating from theatre schools, or their lack of identification with the themes and topics addressed in state theatres – they gradually managed to articulate a distinct artistic vision. Theatre spaces such as Replika, Macaz, Reactor, unteatru, or Teatrul Fix have become key landmarks on Romania’s cultural map, contributing to the redefinition of the relationship between art, community, and education.

Independent theatre has often assumed a mission left unfulfilled by public cultural institutions: tackling sensitive or taboo subjects, engaging artistically with marginalized communities, producing contemporary Romanian texts, and fostering artistic experimentation free from ideological or administrative constraints. As Cristina Modreanu (2020) notes, these initiatives "do more for today's audiences than mainstream theatres with huge budgets," despite often operating at the edge of survival. The fragility of independent cultural spaces is not accidental, but rather the result of a systemic structure poorly adapted to current realities – one that actively discourages the sustainable development of the sector. As Rarița Maria Zbranca (2020) emphasizes, the absence of structural or multiannual funding mechanisms and the instability of fiscal regulations contribute to the ongoing precarity of the independent scene. Most of the time, the activities of independent institutions rely on one-off projects, which are dependent on non-reimbursable grants, and offer minimal wages or freelance contracts based on copyright agreements.

Consequently, managing an independent theatre in Romania requires not only a clearly defined artistic vision but also the efficient handling of insufficient resources – human, material, financial, and creative – alongside the capacity to survive within an unstable legislative and political framework.

These characteristics are not only typical of independent theater in Romania. As Manfred Brauneck (2017) also points out, in most European countries, the independent scene is defined by structural precariousness: artists cannot live on the remuneration received for artistic activity, and funding is obtained almost exclusively through short-term project-based applications, under conditions marked by self-exploitation and the lack of any social protection. In former socialist countries, the lack of permanent rehearsal or performance spaces, the absence of adequate sponsorship legislation in the cultural sector, and the lack of cultural policies that encourage experimentation and collaboration have created a structural context fundamentally unsuitable for the sustainable development of this field.

Artificial intelligence as a managerial modeling tool

The ChatGPT model, developed by OpenAI, has emerged as a tool designed to optimize work processes related to repetitive tasks, generate human-like content, support the development of automated and impartial decision-making systems (Ayinde, Wibowo, Ravuri, & Emdad, 2023), enhance and personalize customer service, reduce costs, and provide insights into consumer behavior (Paul, Ueno, & Dennis, 2023), among many other applications that are still being explored – and sometimes met with hesitation. Given that ChatGPT does not generate information ex nihilo but draws upon a vast database of pre-existing content, it is essential to understand what kind of information to request and how to formulate the query to obtain results that best match our needs. At the same time, ChatGPT can evolve and adjust its subsequent responses based on prior interactions and user feedback (Jo, 2024).

The rapid development of artificial intelligence – particularly conversational models capable of processing vast amounts of data in real time – offers new perspectives for developing, improving, or adapting management strategies. One of the enabling dimensions of AI is its support for knowledge management, resulting in a significant transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Zbucea, Vidu, & Pinzaru, 2019). This is important because it enables knowledge to be shared, documented, and reused across individuals and organizations, enhancing learning and efficiency.

Recent literature highlights the potential of ChatGPT and other Large Language Models (LLMs) to support managerial and operational processes through task automation, data analysis, decision-making assistance, and organizational communication facilitation (Jusman, Ausat, & Sumarna, 2023; Ayinde, Wibowo, Ravuri, & Emdad, 2023; Nugroho, Sitorus, Habibi, Wihardjo, & Iswahyudi, 2023).

In the cultural sector, such applications extend to supporting artistic work – such as marketing, audience engagement, and content creation – but are rarely backed by coherent digital strategies (Horváth, 2025). Studies in organizational design emphasize that ChatGPT performs best in collaborative and iterative environments, where it can act as an integrated knowledge provider and a contextualized thinking partner (Hu, Tian, Nagato, Nakao, & Liu, 2023). Its advantages in

communication – such as continuous availability, automatic translation, and the simplification of technical language – can help overcome the structural barriers often faced by cultural institutions.

Many managers in various sectors are increasingly turning to ChatGPT and other AI-based tools to improve internal and external communication within companies, streamline operations, and support decision-making. As Ayinde et al. (2023) point out, managers frequently use ChatGPT to automate routine tasks – such as writing emails, generating reports, or summarizing information – allowing them to focus on strategic activities. This tool supports both internal and external communication, allows for real-time interaction with customers, and can personalize marketing actions and HR processes based on user data (Rane, 2023). For example, it is widely used in customer service to provide quick and accurate responses, as well as in human resources for activities such as triaging resumes and training employees (George, George, & Martin, 2023). Moreover, ChatGPT plays an important role in data analysis, helping managers extract relevant information from complex datasets, thereby facilitating better-informed decision-making in much less time (Bajak & Spendel, 2024). Its integration into project management platforms, CRM systems, and collaborative tools also helps streamline organizational processes and improve knowledge management (Rane, 2023). However, the adoption of ChatGPT in management is not without its challenges — ethical issues, algorithmic biases, data privacy issues, and the risk of over-reliance on AI are factors that require close attention and rigorous governance mechanisms (Ayinde et al., 2023; Bajak & Spendel, 2024).

In the field of cultural management generally, and particularly within independent theatre organizations, emerging technologies offer promising solutions for persistent challenges such as funding, team coordination, and audience development. These tools may support efforts toward adaptation and sustainability. However, when compared to the lived experiences of independent cultural operators – especially in Romania, where chronic underfunding and limited access to relevant resources are structural issues – there is a clear discrepancy between ideal technological models and local realities. In this context, ChatGPT cannot be seen as a substitute for decision-making, but rather as a strategic simulation partner, whose potential must be carefully calibrated to each organization's infrastructure and capacity.

This tension between the managerial solutions proposed by a Large Language Model (LLM) and the everyday realities of independent theatres in Romania underscores both the potential and the limitations of such tools in practice. The confrontation between the projections offered by artificial intelligence and the lived reality of independent cultural work raises fundamental questions about the applicability, relevance, and feasibility of these AI-generated strategies in the Romanian context.

ChatGPT's initial response to the question 'What does managing an independent theatre entail?' was, in itself, quite telling: "Managing an independent theatre involves unique challenges and approaches compared to publicly funded theatres or those with larger budgets. These theatres typically operate with more limited resources and rely more heavily on creativity, flexibility, and community engagement. Here are the key components of independent theatre management..." (OpenAI, 2024).

Methodology

In order to analyze the contrast between the ideal algorithmic solutions proposed by artificial intelligence and the grassroots realities of independent theatre in Romania, this research employs a qualitative, exploratory methodology, structured across several complementary levels:

1. Exploratory dialogue with an artificial intelligence model (ChatGPT)

A structured dialogue was initiated with ChatGPT, a conversational AI model developed by OpenAI, to investigate several key aspects of independent theatre management. The choice of ChatGPT was due both to the level of popularity among users, but also to the fact that it is able to learn and improve over time and according to the conversations initiated. This approach aligns with the methodology proposed by Çalışkan (2023), who highlighted the usefulness of semi-structured interviews with AI for hypothesis generation and initial mapping of a research domain.

The aim of this component was to identify algorithmic perspectives on organizational structures, funding strategies, and sustainability in the cultural sector, thus offering a theoretical and predictive reference point for comparison. In an essay examining the use of Artificial Intelligence in the production of contemporary art, visual artist David Serra Navarro (2023) employed dialogue with AI as a form of the Socratic method – drawing on the Greek philosopher Socrates, who engaged students in questioning in order to guide them toward discovering the truth for themselves. This research methodology is likewise adopted in the development of the present study.

2. Multiple case study

The research is based on an in-depth analysis of two independent theatre organizations – Replika Centre for Educational Theatre (Bucharest) and Reactor for Creation and Experiment (Cluj-Napoca). These cultural spaces were selected for their significant contribution to the development of educational and socially engaged theatre, as well as for their commitment to education, artistic experimentation, and working with diverse communities. They also serve as relevant examples for highlighting the systemic challenges faced by the independent cultural sector in Romania. This method offers the researcher the opportunity to analyze data both individually and through comparison across different situations (Yin, 2009), with the aim of developing a more compelling theory (Gustafsson, 2017) based on contrasts and similarities (Vannoni, 2015).

3. Content analysis and internal documentation

The empirical material includes texts and interviews authored by the founders of these cultural spaces, administrative documents, project descriptions, published articles, and reflective writings. These sources offer an “insider” perspective on organizational processes, survival strategies, and work patterns specific to the independent theatre sector. Originally used as a method for analyzing newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, or political speeches (Harwood & Garry, 2003), content analysis is a versatile research method applicable to a wide range of issues in the field of information studies. It can be employed either as a standalone method or in combination with other research techniques (White & Marsh, 2006).

4. Theoretical contextualization and academic documentation

In parallel, a contextual analysis was conducted of the institutional and legislative frameworks that shape the activity of the independent cultural sector in Romania. Relevant literature was consulted in the fields of cultural policy, creative entrepreneurship, cultural labor, and organizational sustainability in order to empirically anchor the research within a solid analytical framework. A contextual analytical approach is both relevant and necessary when aiming to understand a phenomenon as a whole – composed of parts and the relationships among them (Svensson, 2021) – as is the case with the systemic challenges faced by independent theatre in Romania.

By combining these methods – AI-assisted dialogue, case study, empirical documentation, and theoretical contextualization – the research offers a critical reading of the relationship between emerging digital tools and the fragile infrastructure of the independent cultural sector in Romania.

Although participatory methods such as in-depth interviews or direct observation are commonly used in qualitative research, they were not included in this study for two main reasons. On the one hand, the research aims primarily at a reflexive and comparative analysis between a digital model (ChatGPT) and existing documentation of independent theatre practices, deliberately avoiding the author's positioning as a direct observer in the field. On the other hand, the available resources – both temporal and logistical – did not allow for a dedicated fieldwork phase. Instead, the study relied on primary sources originating from the artists themselves (previously published interviews, autobiographical materials, internal documents), thereby providing access to a relevant insider perspective, albeit one that is textually mediated.

Thus, the study examines how artificial intelligence conceptualizes independent theatre management and contrasts these algorithmic projections with the lived practices of two Romanian case studies. It further investigates the resilience strategies developed in precarious conditions, the systemic dysfunctions undermining sustainability, and the broader implications these findings hold for cultural policy and the use of emerging technologies in the arts.

Building on these directions, the research pursues several complementary objectives. First, it seeks to critically analyze the algorithmic representations of how an independent cultural institution is organized, through a controlled dialogue with ChatGPT, used here as an exploratory tool. Second, it aims to provide an in-depth documentation of two relevant case studies – Replika Centre for Educational Theatre (Bucharest) and Reactor for Creation and Experiment (Cluj-Napoca) – to identify alternative models of institutional functioning. At the same time, it intends to highlight the structural issues facing the independent cultural sector in Romania, particularly with regard to infrastructure, artistic labor, and sources of funding. Finally, the study aims to contribute to critical reflection on the role that emerging technologies may play in shaping future cultural policies, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing these technologies in relation to local realities.

While this research is relevant due to its interdisciplinary approach and integrative perspective on the relationship between technology and cultural practice, it also presents several important limitations.

First, the exploratory nature of the dialogue with the ChatGPT artificial intelligence model does not allow for empirical validation of the recommendations it provides, but rather offers a hypothetical basis for comparison. Since ChatGPT is trained on extensive text datasets, any biases or inaccuracies present in that data may be mirrored in its output. As a result, its responses can sometimes reinforce stereotypes or discriminatory views found in the training material (Kalla, Smith, Kuraku, & Samaah, 2023).

Second, the selection of the case studies – Replika Center for Educational Theatre (Bucharest) and Reactor for Creation and Experiment (Cluj-Napoca) – although justified by their relevance and visibility within the independent cultural sector, cannot be considered representative of the entire Romanian independent theatre landscape, which is highly diverse and heterogeneous. Furthermore, the research relies primarily on documentary sources and practitioner reflections, without incorporating fieldwork methods such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, thereby limiting the interactive dimension and dynamic scope of the investigation. These limitations may be addressed in future research by expanding the sample of case studies and integrating additional qualitative methods.

Artistic identity as a strategy for survival

In the simulation generated through interaction with ChatGPT, a “clear artistic vision” was presented as an essential component of success, encompassing elements such as defining the theatre’s identity and selecting an appropriate repertoire – both of which may also function, at times, as branding strategies.

“An independent theatre stands out through its uniqueness, whether in the topics it addresses or the style of its performances. It is important for the theatre to have a specific artistic identity that differentiates it from others and attracts a loyal audience... Independent theatres typically choose bolder productions, experiment with new theatrical forms, and address current, sometimes controversial, topics that resonate with younger audiences or cultural niches” (OpenAI, 2024).

The virtual perspective aligns with the reality of independent theatre, which – through its diversity of artistic visions –has distinguished itself through innovative aesthetic approaches, the exploration of relevant social and political themes, and the development of artistic research directions that resonate with the contemporary world. A defining example is the Replika Center for Educational Theatre in Bucharest – an independent cultural space that receives no direct financial support from local or national authorities, with all its activities funded through non-reimbursable project-based funding, written and implemented by the artistic team that manages the venue. Inaugurated in February 2015 in

a former industrial space in Bucharest's Tineretului neighborhood, Replika Center marked a pioneering initiative in Romanian educational theatre. Its motto, "An artistic mouse trap for community issues," reflects the Center's mission to use art as a tool for addressing and capturing the complexities of social reality (Replika, 2025).

The group of artists who founded the Replika Center for Educational Theatre chose not to limit themselves to their role as performing arts professionals. Drawing on their pedagogical experience – some of them being faculty members at the National University of Theatre and Film "I. L. Caragiale" in Bucharest (UNATC) – they set out to explore the concept of educational theatre and theatre-based education (Apostol, 2018).

Over the course of its ten years of activity, Replika Center has produced dozens of performances, organized numerous national and international tours, and coordinated creative workshops in more than 30 educational institutions in Bucharest and over 20 public libraries across the country. This endeavor has been recognized through several awards, including the AFCN Award for Social Inclusion and Intercultural Dialogue (2016) and the British Council Award granted at the UNITER Gala in 2018, as well as through its participation in many major festivals in Romania.

The artistic identity of the Replika Center emerged from a need identified by its founding team: to create a space for dialogue and mutual learning, where pedagogy is achieved through artistic practice and art regains meaning through its transformative relational power (Apostol, 2018). Over time, this identity has evolved into a recognizable cultural brand – an evolution that may also be seen as a confirmation of the answer provided by artificial intelligence.

Replika's repertoire plays a central role in shaping its institutional trajectory, engaging with sensitive or taboo subjects through a content strategy rooted in critical, participatory, and educational approaches. The center foregrounds marginalized realities – such as poverty, migration, symbolic violence, and systemic inequality – by centering vulnerable voices. Its model of a "theatre of rights" blends documentary elements, personal testimony, performative installation, and audience participation to address issues of education, identity, social justice, and power dynamics. This hybrid artistic strategy supports a repertoire oriented toward civic engagement and collective reflection, reaffirming theatre's role as a space for critical encounter and solidarity.

Developed through artistic research, Replika's productions function as forms of participatory pedagogy, activating empathy, stimulating critical thinking, and fostering informal education. They create shared contexts for negotiating urgent social themes – including inequality, gender identity, and affective education – through collaborative performance-making (Apostol, 2018).

Independent spaces provide a platform for artistic and creative expression for marginalized individuals and redefine the theatrical space as one dedicated to democratic education and attentiveness to the needs and concerns of the community. Iulia Popovici (2016) argues that "theatre becomes a civic instrument, documenting and engaging where public institutions fail." This positioning illustrates a vision of art as both intervention and testimony, highlighting its importance in the contemporary cultural and social landscape.

Another significant example in Romania's cultural landscape is Reactor for Creation and Experiment in Cluj-Napoca, a cultural center dedicated to the performing arts that has been active since 2014. It is described as "an oasis in the midst of a constantly transforming city, with a deep connection to the local community" (Reactor, 2025). Reactor, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2024, has had a notable impact on the emerging wave of change in the performing arts sector, embracing the mission of exploring contemporary social themes through devised theatre methodologies. Over time, it has evolved into a vital platform for young artists, providing crucial opportunities for the development of contemporary playwrighting and establishing itself as a multifunctional space dedicated to artistic experimentation and cultural education.

"Three directions cultivated consistently, in a decade of activity, define the Reactor for Creation and Experiment in the independent theater environment: the production of the new performance text, collective creation, and the free space of expression for young artists. But, in order to understand the essential contribution of the Reactor to the launch and affirmation of the young generation of artists and their theatre, one must add the research and cultivation of experimentation through performance, including hybrid forms such as visual arts and video techniques" (Grigorescu, 2024).

Reactor's artistic strategy is defined by a strong engagement with contemporary social anxieties and generational concerns, articulated through a diverse repertoire that spans autobiographical performance, immersive theatre, and speculative dramaturgy. Rejecting conventional theatrical forms, Reactor emphasizes experimentation, co-creation, and the amplification of underrepresented voices. Its commitment to social relevance is reflected in an interdisciplinary aesthetic that interrogates collective tensions, social traumas, and marginalized realities. By deliberately blurring the lines between documentary, fiction, autobiography, and speculation, Reactor fosters a research-based theatrical practice where performativity becomes a means of critically reimagining the present.

Both Replika Center and Reactor for Creation and Experiment are two cultural spaces that deliberately oppose the subordination of art to economic logic, promoting cultural programs and projects that explicitly target social inclusion, accessibility, and intergenerational or intercommunity dialogue – relying on art as a form of intervention in everyday reality. Zbucnea & Anghel (2023) emphasize that culture has always held a strong societal role, contributing to community well-being and cohesion. Historically valued for its public and social impact, culture has been a means of collective benefit. However, in contemporary society, this social dimension is increasingly overshadowed by economic considerations, with greater emphasis placed on culture's role in sustainable development and the creative industries. The authors highlight a key tension in cultural policy: the risk of neglecting culture's intrinsic social value in favor of its economic utility.

Framing survival as a mode of professional practice

While digital models often suggest structures based on small, dynamic, and collaborative teams – where each member frequently performs multiple roles as a key operational component – the reality of independent theatres in Romania is marked by the chronic overextension of professionals working in the field. Therefore, ChatGPT was enquired regarding human resource management, collaboration with external artistic teams, as well as the responsibilities of those who manage an independent theater space:

"Independent theatres operate with small teams, in which each member often takes on multiple roles. Flexibility and collaboration are essential. These theatres often work with directors, set designers, and actors who are not part of the permanent staff. Such collaborations can bring artistic diversity and fresh perspectives, while also reducing costs" (OpenAI, 2024).

To be independent means to continue managing, creating, and performing despite constant uncertainty; to design projects and develop artistic collaborations; to write grant applications; and to handle all bureaucratic procedures independently – from budgeting to financial reporting – all while still striving to remain an artist (Modreanu, 2008). Even when they consciously take on the responsibility of social and political engagement by addressing sensitive themes from contemporary society, independent cultural workers often engage in various forms of self-exploitation during their activity (such as working long hours without breaks, neglecting food, rest, or personal needs), which frequently leads to physical, mental, and financial exhaustion (Zbranca, 2020).

At both Replika Centre and Reactor, multitasking has become the norm over the course of their ten years of uninterrupted activity. The model proposed by ChatGPT – advocating for dynamic, multidisciplinary, and adaptable teams – is, in practice, often not a strategic choice but a necessity imposed by chronic underfunding. Artists are involved in writing, implementing, and reporting on cultural and educational projects; they create and produce theatre performances; and they manage the

physical spaces where they also perform a wide range of tasks – from cleaning to welcoming the audience. This approach to work, in which multitasking is perceived as a way to optimize limited human and financial resources, may be creatively generative in certain contexts but ultimately risks leading to burnout. The blurred boundaries between creative autonomy and overwhelming managerial or administrative duties point to a tendency toward self-exploitation and a systemic devaluation of artistic labor.

“We don’t have Saturdays, we don’t have Sundays, we don’t have free time... We know this is not how things should work in a society where a model like ours should eventually receive funding from the State. Cultural structures should not depend solely on a small group of dedicated people. Right now, the seven of us do everything – from cleaning the toilets to writing grant applications and developing performances, from answering reservation emails to welcoming the audience every evening. We build the sets, we take them down – together with the performance teams” (Michailov & Apostol, 2021).

Each of the seven artists who manage both the administrative and artistic dimensions of Replika Center holds a stable job outside the organization. This financial independence allows them to avoid relying on Replika’s activities and projects for their daily livelihood. As a result, they enjoy greater freedom and a certain boldness in addressing sensitive social issues, along with the “privilege” of being able to experiment artistically. However, this model cannot be considered a viable foundation for sustainable institutional development.

The concept of assuming multiple roles in the management of an independent cultural space is also evident in the case of Reactor. The prevailing mentality that “the show must go on”, combined with factors such as financial instability and the constant need to build networks, contributes to the development of a culture marked by overwork and potential exploitation (Ho, 2020).

Doru Talos, a founding member of Reactor – like all his colleagues – is required to fulfill multiple roles, including actor, co-manager, driver, producer, and more. “I think it’s important to know how to switch hats and to allocate time to each role without mixing them too much. Still, when I have to rehearse as well, the day becomes very full. There are long periods during which we have to work 12 hours a day, and that can be exhausting” (Talos, 2024).

It is important to note that these forms of resilience should not be mistaken for sustainability. In the absence of structural support mechanisms, artists are compelled to simultaneously act as creators, managers, communicators, and fundraisers – an overload that can compromise both their efficiency and their creative potential. As Alexandra Zbucnea (2023) emphasizes, “activity in the independent cultural sector requires an entrepreneurial mindset,” in which success depends not only on artistic inspiration but also on managerial competencies.

From grant to grant: the financial ecology of independent theatre

To support the funding of projects within an independent cultural organization, ChatGPT suggests a variety of strategies under the umbrella of “diversified and creative financing,” including grants, sponsorships, and public-private partnerships:

“Given that budgets are often limited, independent theatres turn to crowdfunding platforms to raise funds for productions or other expenses. A system of recurring donations can also be appealing to loyal supporters... Accessing available funds through cultural projects, private sponsorships, and local, national, or international grants” (OpenAI, 2024).

Nevertheless, the reality of the Romanian cultural sector shows that only one national grant program – namely the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN) – remains a key point of reference for transparency and predictability in funding sessions. However, critiques have been raised regarding the institution’s fulfillment of its mission. Dana Cristescu (2017) argues that the AFCN has become an institution that funds cultural projects “without a clear and coherent strategy,” leading to a waste of resources and a lack of meaningful impact within communities.

The AFCN is a public institution under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and, since 2005, has been the only one in Romania to provide consistent funding for independent cultural sector projects. These projects cover a wide range of activities – from theatre and dance performances to concerts, festivals, and exhibitions – many of which are implemented in rural areas or in communities with limited access to culture.

“The mission of the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN) is to finance projects that support contemporary Romanian creation and the valorization of cultural heritage, that contribute to a better understanding of artistic phenomena, and that promote broad public access to culture” (AFCN, 2025). The AFCN’s own revenues are generated from a variety of sources. These include: 20% of the income generated by economic operators selling publications prohibited to minors; 20% of the income from the sale or rental of phonograms and videograms not recommended for minors; and 10% of the income from erotic voice services provided by telecom operators offering value-added services. In addition, 2% of the revenues of the National Lottery Company of Romania (Loteria Română S.A.) are also allocated to the fund.

Project-based funding – such as the AFCN grants – provides temporary support but fails to address the core issues of predictability and infrastructure. Many relevant projects lose coherence, being constantly forced to reinvent themselves in order to access new funding opportunities. In the absence of operational funding, independent organizations are compelled to operate in survival mode, in what Diana Popescu (2024) describes as a state of “permanent discontinuity.” Although prolific and diverse, the independent sector remains largely absent from strategic cultural policies. Popescu further notes that “independent cultural actors create without infrastructure, without institutional support, and without predictability,” adding that they function in a system where “art becomes a form of risk” (Popescu, 2024).

Another potential source of funding for the cultural sector is sponsorship, regulated by Law no. 32/1994, which allows for tax deductibility within certain limits. Nevertheless, the actual practice of cultural sponsorship remains limited. Ioana Tamaş (2014) points out that, although there was an attempt to adopt the Western model after 1989, the initiative has been constrained by confusion between sponsorship, patronage, and donation, as well as by the lack of an organizational culture adapted to these mechanisms. Furthermore, current legislation limits tax deductibility to 0.5% of a company’s turnover and up to 20% of its profit tax, thresholds perceived by the private sector as discouraging. Therefore, in order to stimulate cultural sponsorship, legislative reform is needed, along with clearer definitions and the development of a more dynamic relationship between the cultural and private sectors. In Romania, the only cultural events that consistently receive sponsorship from private companies are large-scale events with high visibility and access to wide audiences.

Continuing the analysis of the case study on Replika Center, it becomes evident that the majority of its funding comes from non-reimbursable sources, and that the artist collective has learned – through practice – how to write, implement, and report on grant-funded projects. Between 2012 and 2018, the AFCN was a significant source of funding for its initiatives. Starting in 2019, Replika’s artists began successfully applying for European funding (through Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values program, ERASMUS+ and Creative Europe), thereby establishing international partnerships that led to the development of projects with meaningful impact – both for the artists involved and for the local community.

Donations, crowdfunding campaigns, and the redirection of a percentage of income tax by individual taxpayers are among the alternative funding solutions for cultural projects or activities – as my “Socratic” dialogue partner also suggested.

In Romania, the system that allows individuals to redirect 3.5% of their income tax (from salaries or pensions) is not used to its full potential by the active population. In 2022, NGOs attracted only one-third of this potential revenue source, according to the latest data published by the HELP Autism Association, based on reports from the National Agency for Fiscal Administration (ANAF).

“Nationwide, in 2022, Romanians redirected approximately 284 million lei (57 million euros), although the potential could reach up to 855 million lei (172 million euros) – the difference that would result if all 5.7 million eligible employees redirected their income tax, at an average of 150 lei per person. This is one of the greatest losses for the NGO sector” (HELP Autism, 2024).

To operate at a minimal level, the Replika Center requires approximately 27,000 lei per month to cover basic administrative expenses, including rent, utilities, internet, and electricity. In 2023, revenues from donations – whether direct or through income tax redirection – totaled only 22,370 lei, according to financial records. This amount is insufficient to cover even a single month’s expenses. Moreover, the Center has no salaried employees, and all administrative and operational activities are carried out solely through the voluntary work of the seven artists involved.

Alternative funding strategies such as crowdfunding have proven successful only in specific or urgent cases. In the spring of 2016, one year after opening, Replika Center launched a campaign on the Indiegogo platform (https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/let-s-raise-the-roof-at-replika?fse_1=c#/) entitled “Let’s Raise the Roof at Replika”, through which they raised \$8,200 for emergency repairs – specifically, to fix the building’s roof. Each time it rained or snowed, water would leak through the roof, forcing the Center to suspend activities during the winter, as conditions were unsuitable for hosting public events. Nonetheless, administrative expenses continued to accrue – and had to be paid.

In its first year of operation, Reactor’s only source of funding came from the artists’ own personal resources. Over time, however, the theatre managed to consolidate and diversify its funding sources.

“Funding has increased year by year, but that does not mean things have gotten any easier. The workload keeps growing, and the financial bottlenecks are getting more and more severe. Every project requires co-financing of between 10% and 25% - money you need to raise from other sources in order to implement your project – and the more projects you take on, the more problematic that percentage becomes. On top of that, every grant has a final installment, ranging from 15% to 50% of the total amount, which is paid only after the project has been reviewed and approved. This means large sums can be consistently tied up. Without a solid cash flow reserve, at some point growth can lead to nothing but increasing frustration” (Taloş, 2024).

Romania’s independent cultural sector operates in an environment lacking predictable funding, which creates chronic insecurity and contributes to a high abandonment rate among independent initiatives. An analysis of financing strategies reveals not only the economic vulnerability of the independent sector but also deeper dysfunctions within Romania’s cultural ecosystem. Almost entirely dependent on short-term grants, independent cultural organizations function under conditions of structural discontinuity, with no basic infrastructure and no budgetary predictability. This precariousness generates chronic organizational instability, undermining the coherence of cultural programs and endangering the long-term development of both teams and projects. In the absence of dedicated public policies and institutional funding instruments, the independent cultural sector remains caught in a state of systemic vulnerability, where artistic labor is constantly at risk of becoming unsustainable. Furthermore, the lack of a sponsorship culture and the absence of incentive-driven fiscal policies contribute to the perpetuation of an economically fragile environment. In this context, the creativity and adaptability of cultural actors – no matter how remarkable – cannot compensate for the systemic shortcomings that perpetuate unequal access to resources.

Forced minimalism and creative adaptation

The discrepancies between the algorithmic vision and the practical realities of independent theatres are particularly evident in infrastructure, physical space, and available resources. The idealized scenario described by ChatGPT portrays these independent venues as flexible and efficient actors in resource management, operating in adaptable spaces that can be transformed according to the needs of each production. Performance and rehearsal schedules are strategically designed to minimize costs and maximize audience impact.

While this portrayal is partially accurate, it omits several essential realities. In practice, the spaces used by independent theatres are often small and poorly equipped, resulting in fewer available seats and, consequently, lower revenue from ticket sales. Logistical constraints often necessitate minimalist scenographic concepts – easy to transport and store – which can affect audience perception, making the productions appear less elaborate. Theatre casts are generally composed of a small number of performers, not for aesthetic reasons but to reduce costs, manage limited performance space efficiently, and enable greater scheduling flexibility. In the independent sector, public events are primarily scheduled at the beginning of the week, in order to accommodate the broader structural constraints of the Romanian theatre landscape. Public cultural institutions also employ some of the artists involved in independent projects and can only dedicate time to independent work on their days off, mostly Mondays and Tuesdays. As a result, scheduling is driven not by audience availability or visibility opportunities, but rather by the limited availability of human resources.

In Romanian theatre, the season runs from September to June. Unlike the Western model, where a production is performed in a concentrated run of consecutive shows, here performances remain in the repertoire for several seasons. On average, a production is staged between once and six times per month. Consequently, actors simultaneously take on multiple roles across different productions, performing in both public theatres and the independent scene.

Replika Center operates in a former industrial space, which initially made it a financially accessible option for the founding artists due to its low administrative costs. Operational expenses – such as utilities, rent, and equipment – can only be partially covered through project-based funding (typically between 5% and 10%), which severely limits opportunities for infrastructure investment or the acquisition of new stage technology.

With a total area of approximately 397 square meters – including the stage, dressing rooms, audience areas, and technical spaces – the Center faces ongoing challenges related to insufficient storage space for scenographic elements. As a result, performances are designed with minimalist scenography that allows for quick assembly and dismantling, occupies minimal space, and is easy to transport. These spatial and material constraints are not the result of aesthetic or artistic choices, but rather survival strategies. In this context, minimalism becomes an adaptive tactic in response to an unstable cultural environment.

While conversational models such as ChatGPT project an image of efficiency and adaptability, the reality on the ground is often marked by precarity, compromise, and survival. Flexibility and minimalism are not strategic choices but necessities – imposed by the lack of resources and the fragile institutional context in which independent theatre in Romania operates.

Conclusions

As the Romanian proverb “Nu tot ce zboară se mănâncă” (*not everything that flies is good to eat*), or its English equivalent “All that glitters is not gold,” suggests, ChatGPT – like any tool designed to simplify or support the completion of certain tasks or objectives – should be used with prior knowledge of the subject matter. At the very least, its outputs should be consistently questioned and verified through multiple sources before being trusted or applied.

Although artificial intelligence can provide theoretically useful suggestions, its models often fail to capture the complexity, precarity, and specific context of Romania’s independent cultural sector. This limitation stems from the way AI generates responses – by generalizing from large, predominantly global datasets – which tends to produce standardized or idealized models that overlook local realities.

In this environment, flexibility, minimalism, and multitasking are not strategic choices but rather adaptive responses to the lack of institutional support and predictable funding. Moreover, efforts to implement sustainable practices are frequently undermined by overwork and forms of self-exploitation.

Nevertheless, the capacity of cultural actors to create spaces for dialogue, education, and community engagement, despite structural constraints, reveals valuable resources of creativity, solidarity, and resilience. This reality sends a clear signal regarding the urgent need to rethink cultural policies in Romania to support viable, equitable, and long-term structures for independent art.

Given the complexity and precarity of the independent sector's structure, this research opens up several directions for further investigation. On the scientific level, comparative studies are needed to situate Romanian independent theatre within a broader regional context, as well as research that captures the organizational and community dimensions of cultural work. At the same time, the critical exploration of emerging technologies – not only AI but also digital tools for production, funding, and dissemination – is necessary to assess their accessibility and relevance for independent spaces.

On the normative level, the need for structural reforms in national cultural policies becomes evident. Such reforms should include: (1) the creation of operational funding schemes for independent spaces with proven cultural and educational impact over time; (2) the development of support programs for infrastructure and core activities; and (3) the revision of sponsorship legislation to encourage private sector involvement.

A sustainable framework for independent art can only be developed through applied research, continuous consultation, and meaningful collaboration between practitioners, public authorities, and policymakers. Only then can independent art shift from being a form of temporary resistance to becoming a lasting democratic infrastructure.

Moreover, European funding programs across cultural and other sectors have shown that culture plays a key role in sustainable urban and regional development. Many cities have demonstrated that investment in culture brings cascading economic benefits: attracting visitors, supporting tourism, activating the hospitality industry, and stimulating related services.

The precarity of independent theatre in Romania should be understood as part of a broader phenomenon – a symptom of the wider fragility of the cultural infrastructure, which negatively impacts the well-being of communities that have been left behind. "A precariousness of the cultural infrastructure determines precariousness in terms of the ability of some communities to resonate with the great debates of the nation, to see the progress of the nation in certain directions. And it determines the risk that those communities remain anchored in the past, to become prisoners of values that no longer have anything to do with either the present or the future" (Ștefureac, 2023).

It is crucial to understand that cultural production does not generate immediate or direct financial gain. Rather, it produces a layered, progressive, and integrated economic and social benefit. This stratified impact is real, measurable, and deeply connected to the quality of life in contemporary society. Recognizing this should be a fundamental step in shaping the next generation of public cultural policies.

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