




Research Fellow 

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The Inclusion mille-feuille:  
Investigating Presence and  
Representation in immersive  
art through inclusive  
immersive theatre

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# THE INCLUSION MILLE- FEUILLE:

INVESTIGATING PRESENCE AND  
REPRESENTATION IN IMMERSIVE ART  
THROUGH INCLUSIVE IMMERSIVE THEATRE.

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for: CIRCE - Creative Impact Research Centre Europe



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# A. Insights into Cultural and Creative Economies

This research project is founded on recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on traditional theatre, leading to a need to explore alternative ways to produce artistic experiences. Immersive theatre in virtual spaces emerged as a creative solution to engage audiences safely. Additionally, there is a growing awareness of the imperative of inclusion and representation, mainly focusing on currently marginalised communities.

The project is also informed by prior research in immersive technology and virtual reality (VR), highlighting a significant gap in understanding disability representation in virtual spaces. The research adopts the social model of disability, viewing disability as a result of societal barriers and attitudes, not an inherent individual characteristic.

Leveraging 18 months of ethnographic research in inclusive theatre and six months in Technology-enhanced Theatre Touch Tours services (Tzanidou et al., 2022; Tzanidou et al., 2023), in this fellowship, we engaged in extensive discussions, collaborative idea generation, and knowledge exchange sessions with THEAMA inclusive professional theatre ensemble, focusing on two main areas:

- Proposing guidelines to aid creative sector practitioners in utilising immersive art to engage audiences through times of crises or to reach those excluded from artistic expression due to access barriers.
- Exploring the use of avatars to enhance representation and inclusion in immersive theatre, with guidelines to respect audience members' identities.

To comprehensively address our inquiries, we concluded this research by interviewing four creative sector practitioners, seemingly unrelated to the topic of disability, to gather their perspectives on access and inclusion.

Our study resulted in three main insights regarding the dynamics of cultural and creative economies, offering a condensed yet informative glimpse into our findings.

## **A.1. Collaborative Synergies & Curational Roles in Multidisciplinary Endeavors:**

Our study emphasises the importance of collaboration in multidisciplinary projects. Understanding, respecting, and recognising distinct expertise among team members is crucial for success. Additionally, the urgent need to excel in interdisciplinary cooperation across diverse disciplines and the technology sector requires the adoption of new professional positions within the team to curate the process.

## **A.2. Addressing the Accessibility Gap through Informed Policies:**

Access to artistic expression is limited for most of the population and is often treated as a luxury rather than a necessity. This gap is connected to inadequate training within the creative sector regarding access and inclusion. As per our data, artists and creative professionals express interest in inclusion but lack knowledge on the topic or the opportunity to initiate collaborations with accessibility experts. This study emphasises the urgent need for well-informed policies shaped in cooperation with access experts. Financial constraints and the rush for immediate results hinder the implementation of adequate access services. Inclusive artistic creations are closely linked to the inclusive practices of creative teams and require time for development. The study advocates for the involvement of access and inclusion experts in artistic creation to ensure widespread accessibility through dedicated funding. Participants stress the importance of integrating inclusion into the creative process, considering it a multifaceted factor and addressing systemic inequalities.

## A.3. Fluid Identity Representation in Immersive Spaces:

One of the outcomes of our participatory processes during this study, the 'Inclusive Glossary Project', explores diverse experiences, emphasising the significance of perceiving an experience through various cultural backgrounds. Virtual reality offers a platform to redefine and present identities fluidly. Avatars in virtual spaces can adapt, reflecting the dynamic nature of self-identity. Fluid avatars enhance understanding, fostering empathy. They can convey valuable information and act as educational tools, enabling enlightening exchanges. Integrating fluid avatars in immersive spaces, guided by diverse perspectives on identity, can shape policies promoting inclusion and diversity. However, challenges regarding representation in creative domains persist, emphasising the need for policies empowering individuals to shape their virtual identities authentically and prevent misrepresentation.

These insights target to advocate for a future where inclusion, informed policies, and the strategic use of technology come together to revolutionise the cultural and creative sectors, ensuring a more diverse and empowered creative landscape.



## B. Research problem

The foundation of this research project emerged from a recognition of the profound impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the traditional theatre landscape (Chatzichristodoulou et al., 2022). As theatres faced closures and restrictions on live performances, a pressing need to explore alternative avenues for delivering artistic experiences to audiences safely and socially distanced arose. It became evident that immersive theatre could provide a creative solution to these challenges with its potential for live engagement in virtual spaces.

Simultaneously, there was a growing awareness within the cultural and artistic community about the imperative of inclusion and representation (Sandahl, 2018; Prescod-Lovell, 2023). This awareness was a response to the societal demand for diversity and inclusion and a genuine commitment to breaking down barriers that had traditionally excluded individuals from underrepresented communities, including people experiencing disability, marginalised backgrounds, and diverse cultural and linguistic identities.

The research was also inspired by prior insights from academic literature on immersive technology and virtual reality (VR). While existing research explored gender and race representation in VR avatars (Pröbster et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023; Morris et al., 2023), a significant gap existed in understanding disability representation in virtual spaces (Park & Kim, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Most notably, the main focus had primarily centred on visible impairments, overlooking the broader spectrum of disability. For this reason, there is a clear need for a shift in perspective towards a more comprehensive approach to inclusion in virtual worlds, as 'Digital realities can be just as exclusionary and ableist as the physical worlds they seek to transcend' (Spiel & Gerling, 2022).

Additionally, there is a sound belief in the transformative power of the cultural sector to facilitate access to artistic expression and drive social change ("Transforming Community Development through Arts and Culture - Volume 14, Issue 2," 2019) based on the understanding that the cultural sector uniquely engages audiences and artists from underrepresented communities, bridging the gap created by various access barriers.

This research project builds upon these foundations by addressing critical research questions and contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding inclusion, representation, and access in immersive theatre and virtual worlds, which are inherently intertwined with the topic of disability. Recognising that disability is a multifaceted aspect of human uniqueness, our project explores how immersive theatre and virtual reality can act as inclusive platforms for people experiencing disability.

Our approach to this topic is deeply rooted in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and informed by the more synchronous human-rights model of disability. The social model of disability, as a foundational framework for our research, asserts that disability is not solely an inherent characteristic of an individual but is instead a result of societal barriers and attitudes. This perspective reframes disability as a social construct, emphasising addressing these societal barriers to create an inclusive and accessible environment.

This approach is especially relevant in immersive theatre and virtual worlds. Traditional barriers to participation, such as physical accessibility limitations in physical, creative spaces, can be transcended in virtual spaces. However, new challenges and opportunities arise in the digital realm, and it's essential to adopt a perspective that acknowledges the potential for both exclusion and inclusion.

By adopting the social model of disability, our research project explores how immersive theatre can break down digital barriers and create environments that empower individuals experiencing disability to engage in artistic expression and cultural participation. It also guides us in developing guidelines and tools that consider disability not as a limitation but as a factor that enriches the diversity of experiences in these immersive spaces.

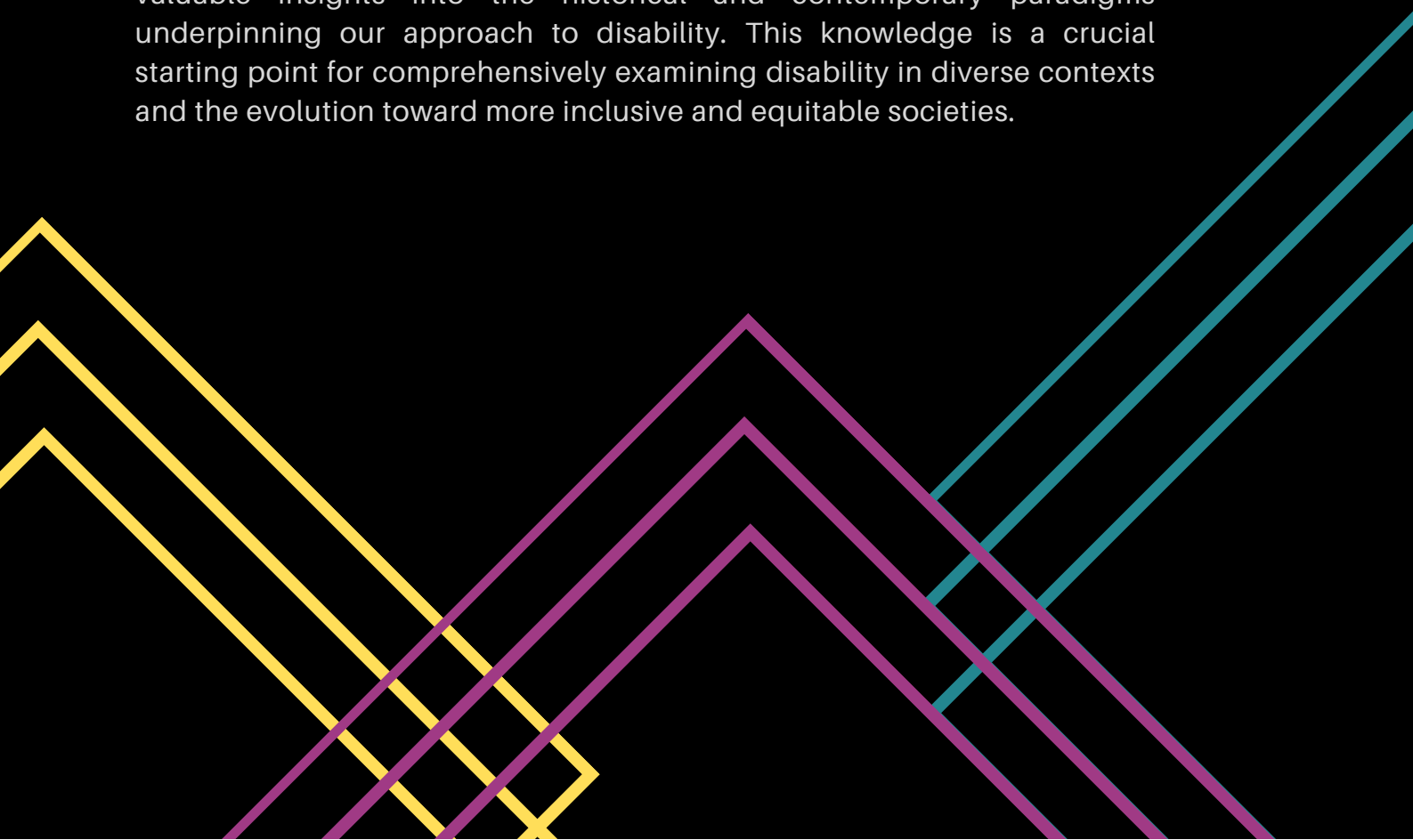
In essence, our project aligns with the social model of disability by recognising that including and representing with equity individuals experiencing disability is not only a matter of technological accessibility but also a profound societal transformation that involves dismantling preconceived notions and fostering a truly inclusive cultural and artistic landscape.

## B.1. About Inclusion:

While inclusion has been a prominent topic of discussion within the cultural and creative sector and society at large, there continue to be concerns and misconceptions regarding its implementation among stakeholders in this sector. This chapter provides essential context and insights into ongoing inclusion discussions. We believe that as individuals within the cultural and creative sector gain a deeper understanding of inclusion and its fundamental principles, they will experience increasing confidence in actively integrating inclusive practices into their work.

## B.2. Models of Disability:

In exploring disability and its multifaceted dimensions, it is important to examine the dominant models that have shaped our understanding of disability in the frame of this study. Often regarded as conceptual frameworks, these models offer distinct perspectives on disability, influencing how society perceives, accommodates, and interacts with individuals experiencing disability. By delving into these models, we gain valuable insights into the historical and contemporary paradigms underpinning our approach to disability. This knowledge is a crucial starting point for comprehensively examining disability in diverse contexts and the evolution toward more inclusive and equitable societies.





## B.2.B. The Social Model: Disability As A Result of Bad Design

The Social model of disability, as described by Oliver (Oliver, 1990), states that "impairment" is some kind of dysfunction. In contrast, "disability" refers to the limitations that this dysfunction creates for people with impairment because society is not organised and structured properly to provide the infrastructure needed to avoid excluding people with impairments. This separation highlights that the problem is not that disabled people don't use their potential and abilities but that society tends to emphasise their weaknesses.

The separation of the body from the culture and the impairment from the disability, proposed by the social model, can be of great value in developing disability policies. The social model assigned the "body" to medicine, making it synonymous with impairment or physical dysfunction, and categorised the impairment as a medical term. According to Hughes and Paterson (Hughes & Paterson, 1997), the social model has to overcome the Cartesian Dualism (of body and mind) without being driven to a reactionary perspective of identifying itself with the medical model of disability. This statement implies that the social model should accept as an epistemological necessity that the disabled body is a part of the sphere of history, culture, and meaning and not an ahistorical, pre-social, physical object, as the medical model considers it.

The theory of the social model of disability was initiated in Great Britain in the 70s by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). This initiation marked the beginning of questioning the medical model of disability and the definitions of impairment, handicap, and disability, raising the issue of oppression and social marginalisation experienced by disabled people within the framework of a capitalist society.

## B.2.A. The Medical Model: Disability As A Problem

The medical model of disability views disability as a problem connected to the individual resulting from a medical condition or impairment (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This perspective primarily concentrates on diagnosing, treating, and seeking to cure the individual's impairment rather than addressing the social and environmental barriers that prevent the individual's full participation in society. Rooted in the belief that disabled individuals rely on medical professionals for intervention and that their impairments require correction or elimination, the medical model places significant emphasis on reducing the impact of the impairment. Moreover, discussions within the framework of the medical model often revolved around the impairment itself, with terminology such as 'paralysed' being used to define individuals, framing their identities within the context of their condition. This model's focus on limitation and function loss has been criticised for fostering low expectations and diminishing individual independence.

Inclusionlondon.org.uk.  
(2019). Factsheet - The Social  
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[https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Factsheets\\_TheSocialModel.pdf](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Factsheets_TheSocialModel.pdf)

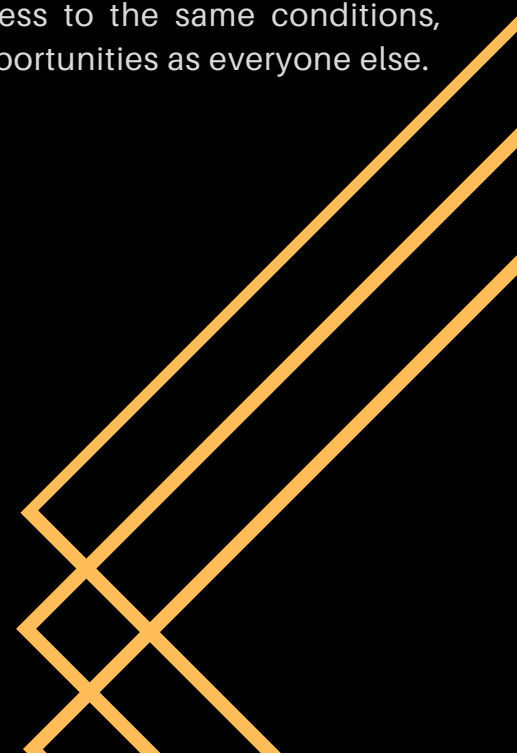
### B.2.C. The human rights model: Disability - A human rights issue

The human rights model of disability is based on basic human rights principles. It recognises that disability is a natural part of human diversity that must be respected and supported in all its forms (Theresia Degener, 2016, pp. 31–49). This model is based on a robust activist ideology and builds on the foundations of the social model of disability, thus making the two models complementary (Lawson & Beckett, 2020), with the human rights model focusing on the various economic and social processes that constitute disability. It was finalised during the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. Through a rights-based lens, the human rights model emphasises protecting and promoting the fundamental rights and dignity of individuals experiencing disability by recognising the need for the establishment of relevant policies for dignity and equality, inclusion and participation, non-discrimination, accessibility and accommodation, empowerment, legal framework, awareness, and education.

The human rights model is all about moving from seeing people as passive entities with no rights to understanding the many economic and social factors that construct what we consider as disability.

The shift towards a human rights perspective holds immense significance in emphasising the necessity to enable access to fundamental freedoms often overlooked in arts and cultural activities that are often ignored on an equal basis. Embedded within the human rights model is the recognising that engaging in artistic endeavours is a human right. As outlined in Article 30 of the CRPD (*Article 30 - Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport | United Nations Enable, 2019*), addressing 'Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport,' individuals experiencing disability possess the entitlement to partake in arts and cultural activities with equity. This underscores the importance of implementing inclusive policies and practices that facilitate the active involvement of people in the creative sector. Such initiatives encompass providing appropriate training and education for artists and cultural facilitators to foster inclusive and enriching creative environments.

The human rights model represents a comprehensive and modern perspective on disability and disability rights, signifying a shift in the prevailing paradigm. This paradigm shift is geared towards ensuring every individual, including people experiencing disability, has fair and unrestricted access to the same conditions, facilities, and opportunities as everyone else.

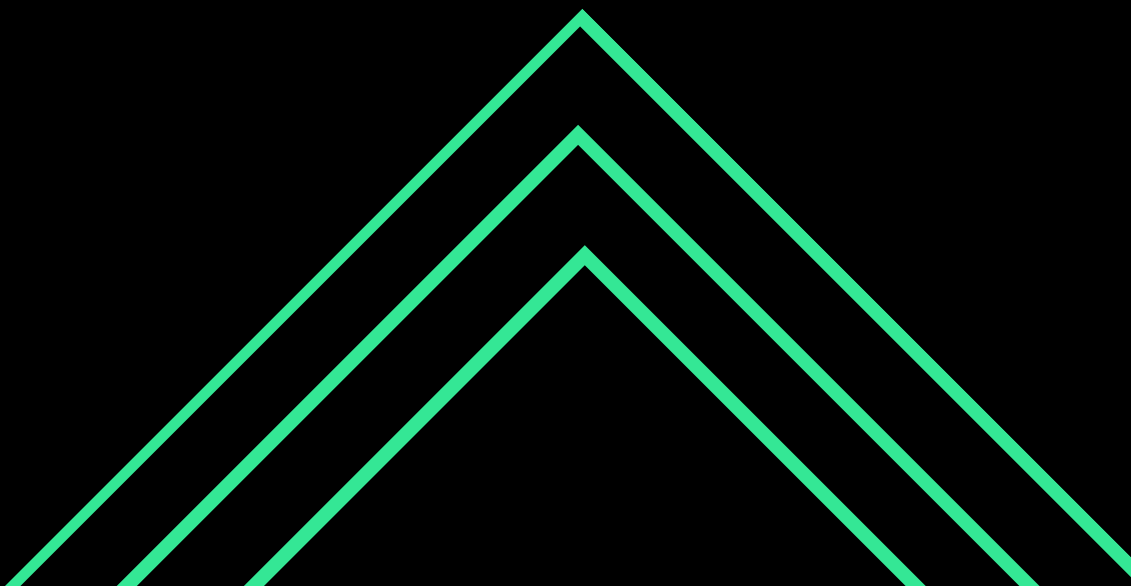
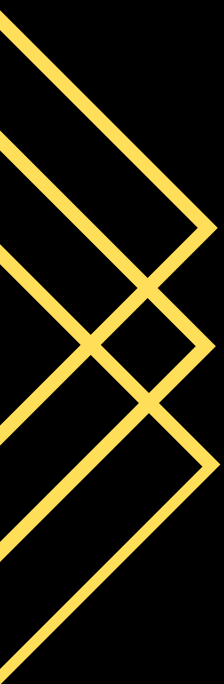


## B.3. A Shift to Virtual:

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the creative sector landscape, forcing many productions to shut down or transition to virtual formats. In response to the limitations of traditional artistic expression, immersive theatre has emerged as a creative solution that allows audiences to experience live performances safely and socially distanced.

Inclusive immersive theatre goes a step further by incorporating elements of accessibility and diversity into the production. This type of theatre seeks to create an inclusive environment for the artists and all audience members, regardless of their abilities, identities, or backgrounds. By foregrounding accessibility and inclusion, inclusive immersive theatre aims to break down barriers to participation and create a more equitable and diverse theatre community and, consequently, a more inclusive society.

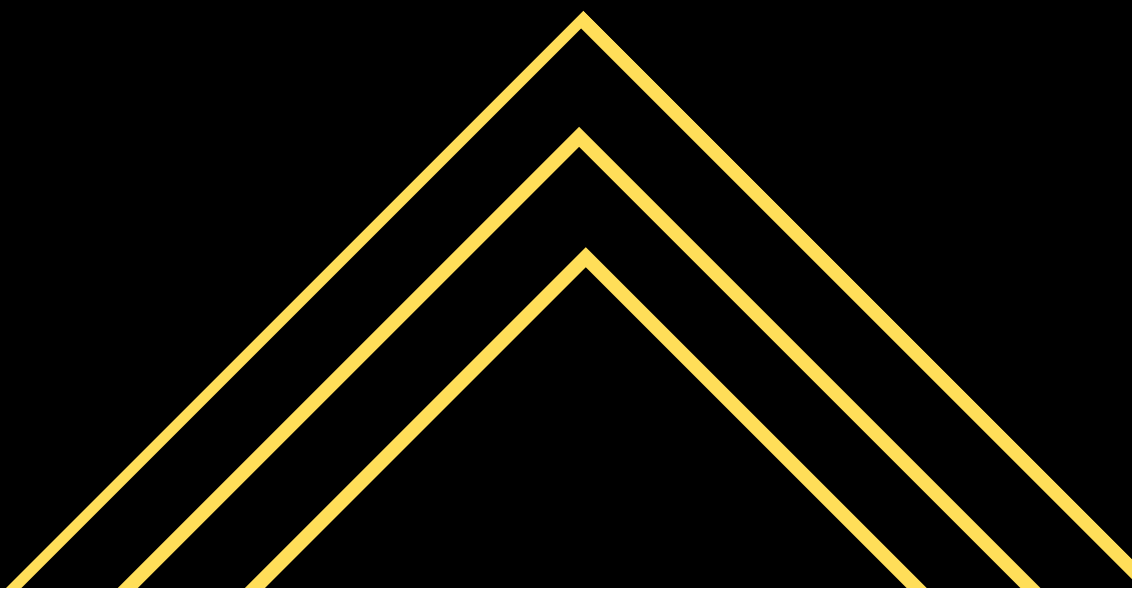
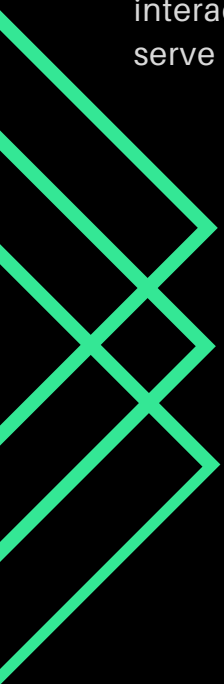
The rapid development of VR technology and the creation of interconnected virtual worlds requires the freedom to express and represent one's identity, the creation of mechanisms to ensure respect among the participants of these worlds, and the introduction of relevant policies or reflexes to protect their rights and values, leading to the creation of safe, inclusive virtual societies that have the potential to bring knowledge into the physical world.



This research project aims to address the current and future impact of the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic on the cultural sector by enabling participation and access with the support of modern technologies for digital and social transformation. This project addresses the following research questions:

1. What tools and resources should be included in a toolkit to enable artists from diverse disciplines to create accessible and equitable VR art experiences?
1. What are the current barriers to disability representation, and how can the cultural sector use its power to facilitate inclusion and access to artistic expression for individuals experiencing disability?
1. What mechanisms can be implemented to ensure safe and inclusive representation and expression of identity in virtual worlds, and how can they be used to uphold fundamental human rights in virtual and physical spaces?

The migration of artistic expression into virtual and extended reality (VR/AR) has become a striking trend in recent years (Hacmun et al., 2018). This transition results from the urge to go beyond established creative bounds, giving creators new exploration horizons. Artists may immerse audiences in engaging, multimodal experiences that blur the boundaries between reality and imagination with VR and AR technology (Extended Reality: What Future Do AR and VR Offer the Art World?, 2020). Since immersive media allow viewers to participate actively and interact with the artwork, this transformation also considers how audiences interact with art (Striner et al., 2021). The transition to VR and AR marks a crucial moment in the evolution of artistic creation, redefining how we perceive, interact with, and interpret art in the digital age, whether it is through virtual galleries showcasing digital masterpieces, interactive installations that respond to user input, or even entire virtual worlds that serve as artistic canvases.



# C. Research Process

## C.1. Becoming Familiar with the Research Topic:

This article results from our close collaboration with THEAMA, Greece's first professional, inclusive theatrical ensemble. The THEAMA ensemble was founded in 2010 as a professional, inclusive theatre group for people experiencing disability or not, operating in Athens, Greece. Their goal was to address a gap in professional training and career-oriented approaches for people experiencing disability who are actively involved in the performing arts. Its members are professional performers who are members of the Greek Actors Association, the regulating body for all actors in Greece. Our cooperation with THEAMA professionals (mentioned in the report as participants) allowed us to work closely with professional artists, who are experts in the topic of disability, and are either familiar with or experts on inclusive theatre and inclusive education. This synergy helped us enrich this research with the team's expertise while experiencing art in their everyday lives, and provided us feedback for their perceived experience.

### C.1.1. Understanding Co-designers' Needs:

For this collaboration, establishing a solid foundation was crucial. Building upon a previous partnership for ethnographic research with the team, we initiated and engaged in extensive discussions as a group. These discussions were focused on understanding disability, exploring inclusion dynamics, and representation within the performing arts sector.

These dialogues were central to our project's success, offering valuable insights and perspectives. However, it was essential to prioritise the comfort and openness of the participants. Drawing from past ethnographic research experiences, where the presence of recording devices had affected the natural flow and openness of conversations, I opted for detailed note-taking instead of recordings.

This decision was a strategic move aimed at cultivating an environment where participants felt at ease expressing their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. This approach upheld ethical considerations and enriched the qualitative aspects of the data gathered. The notes captured during these discussions formed a solid basis for shaping the direction of our collaborative project, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of the THEAMA group were accurately represented in our work.

During those discussions, it became clear that it was a great challenge to win over the participants for our participatory research project quickly, especially during the summer months. Our initial idea of investigating solely the 'inclusive avatars' concept did not have the immediate appeal required within the limited timeframe of the CIRCE project. Recognising the need for a more engaging and tangible project, we focused on virtual reality performances. This innovative idea was relatively new to the team but generated much interest and curiosity. The decision to work with the team on Inclusive Immersive Productions was driven by the realisation that this approach not only caught their attention more quickly but also represented a future opportunity for them.

In our initial gathering to explore this collaborative avenue, a significant concern emerged: the considerable financial investment associated with a project of this scale, especially for a team holding limited resources. Despite the technical and artistic team offering their expertise and services pro bono, the costs related to technology, production, and other essential components posed a substantial challenge.

This financial consideration was a pivotal moment, urging us to critically assess this collaboration's viability and sustainability.

## C.2. A Shift to Participatory Idea Generation and Documentation:

The idea of developing a performance in the Virtual Space with the team was of significant research and artistic interest. Thus, instead of cancelling our plans due to financial drawbacks, we decided to put a collective effort into the participatory drafting of project proposals. This approach allowed us to prepare for future opportunities to secure the necessary resources for this performance while keeping our research activities ongoing and preserving our participants' engagement. This approach aimed to prevent the cancellation of our plans while enabling a participatory process of generating and documenting ideas to bring our vision to life.

We initiated this process through a meeting, where we divided the work needed to be done amongst the team we had just formed, with the artistic team starting working on the creative part of the proposal and the technical team starting collecting information about what is already available, the technical resources needed, the available research related to Virtual Reality performances, and the connections of it with the topics of Inclusion and Accessibility, but also identifying relevant calls for application. Our schedule was to meet once weekly, discuss each team's progress, exchange ideas, and update our documentation.

As our cooperation progressed and we recognised the broader potential within the creative sector, we expanded our focus to encompass equity in experiencing various creative spaces, including exhibitions and museums.

This documentation process led to the creation of an early version outlining our collective vision, the 'Inclusive Glossary' project. This project embodies our participatory efforts, capturing the essence of our shared ideas and goals. The 'Inclusive Glossary' project is envisioned to facilitate a more inclusive and equitable experience within the creative sector, aiming to bridge gaps and provide a platform for diverse voices and perspectives, consequently enhancing the representation of disability in the virtual and physical worlds.

Moreover, this collaborative process lets us collectively explore our views, needs and prerequisites in order to proceed. Thus, although the division of the tasks we initially agreed on was beneficial in allowing our project to move forward, this process revealed that each of the teams had knowledge gaps that should be filled before we proceed



### C.3. A Mutual Knowledge Exchange Process:

In order for both teams to be on the same page and manage our expectations, we organised a series of workshops to create a common ground of understanding. These sessions were designed to introduce the artistic team to Virtual Reality (VR) and simultaneously educate the technical team about the backstage intricacies of theatre performances. This approach helped bridge the gap and allowed the technical team to grasp the artistic team's vision and expectations.

This workshop series consisted of three workshops of a 1-hour duration each. The first workshop was dedicated to familiarising the group of artists, consisting of the theatre ensemble director, the sound director, and the performance director, with the VR equipment and software and discussing their experience. During the second workshop, we did a step further into the virtual world, letting the team experience movies and other artistic experiences created for VR and reflect upon them. Our final gathering focused on discussing our experience, expressing ourselves on artistic expression in Virtual Reality, elaborating regarding the presence and representation of disability in VR, and our thoughts, ideas, perceptions, and expectations regarding the move from the physical to the virtual space.

### C.4. Investigating Perceptions Outside of the Disability-Informed Artistic Community:

The methodology's final step involved four interviews with artists (mentioned as [I1-I4]) seemingly unrelated to disability but connected with grassroots innovation. Each interview, lasting approximately one hour, consisted of 10 questions and an audio-based activity. Participants were asked to engage and reflect upon an imaginative scenario explained through audio in the last part of the interview.

This activity was dedicated to understanding the interviewees' backgrounds and perspectives. Our primary focus was to identify the ideas of the artists regarding accessibility and inclusion, their knowledge and personal reflections on the topic, their will to make their creations inclusive, and the difficulties they are facing with accessibility and inclusion. We initiated our interviews with inquiries about their origins and the influence of their cultural backgrounds on their current viewpoints.

Additionally, we asked them to define their identity and express whether they had encountered disability-related challenges in their daily lives that might affect their sense of inclusion. Understanding their respective fields and how they perceive inclusion and accessibility was pivotal, prompting discussions about the differences between accessible and inclusive experiences.

Furthermore, we delved into whether their creative work aligned with inclusion and whether they believed their art could foster inclusive experiences for disabled and non-disabled individuals. Finally, we explored their willingness and thoughts on embracing inclusion within their creations and any potential barriers hindering this progress. These inquiries were integral in unravelling perspectives and insights, contributing significantly to our first research question on identifying resources to assist creatives in taking a turn on inclusive productions.

# Analysis

## D.1. Multidisciplinary Collaborations:

A harmonious and productive collaboration is essential in multidisciplinary projects. The Learning Exchange workshop series process with our participants taught us the value of respect and understanding as foundational principles. Each team member brought unique skills and expertise to the table. Recognising and honouring these distinct strengths became crucial.

Our interviewees also emphasised the necessity for harmony in these cross-sector collaborations. For I1, it meant broadening horizons in the creative sector while reflecting on their responsibilities and ethics. For I2, it entailed reconsidering their professional approaches and their life perspectives. I3 and I4 saw it as a chance to think of art communication practices. They acknowledged the tendency to overuse terms like 'access' and 'inclusion' in such collaborations, potentially weakening their meaning through miscommunication.

One key lesson was the importance of acknowledging our knowledge gaps. In a project that merges technology with other domains, mainly where team members might come from varied backgrounds, embracing a learning mindset is pivotal. We found that actively seeking to understand and learn from each other filled these gaps, fostered a sense of mutual respect and collaboration, and helped expand our initial planning and develop new ideas.

Moreover, we realised the significance of delineating roles and responsibilities clearly. With technology extending its influence beyond its traditional domains, interdisciplinary collaborations demand a clear understanding of what each team member brings to the project. This clarity helped avoid unnecessary overlaps and conflicts and ensured a smoother collaboration process.

Given the expanding role of technology across diverse sectors, mastering the art of interdisciplinary collaboration is vital. Thus, defining and adopting new professions specialised in topics of access, inclusion and technology that facilitate and nurture such partnerships is essential, enabling a seamless blending of technology with other domains, and has the potential to bring us closer to facilitating access and inclusion by speeding up the development process.



## D.2. Lack of Access & Inclusion Informed Policies:

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Our collaboration with the THEAMA team highlighted a critical issue within the creative sector: the pervasive gap in accessibility policies. Accessibility to artistic expression is not as widespread and inclusive as it should be. It's concerning that this crucial aspect is often treated as a luxury, limited to specific occasions, or entirely unavailable for a significant portion of the population.

This disparity can be attributed to several factors. Amongst those factors, there is undoubtedly the need for more relevant training within the creative sector regarding access and inclusion. As the interviews conducted during this project reveal, artists and creative sector professionals are interested in including more people in their experiences. However, when they are not in active collaboration with people trained on accessibility and inclusion topics, or they do not have the knowledge due to their interest or experience, they are not able to construct a clear idea of the ways that their creation could be a welcoming expression to people experiencing disability.

Lastly, factors such as the high cost, lack of funding, and the tendency to look for immediate results quickly are significant barriers to implementing adequate access services. Creating accessible experiences requires financial resources that may not be readily available, especially for smaller teams or independent artists. As both our participants and all our Interviewees agree, the development of inclusive artistic creations is closely connected with the inclusive practices that the creative team is following. Moreover, the development of inclusion based on their perception needs time, which was a pressing factor in all the projects they were involved in. According to their understanding, the basis of inclusion is like *"a mille-feuille with multiple layers. Starting with the level of empathy and both self and collective understanding that we are all different, [...] and the only knowledge that we do have for the experiences of other people is those that they will choose to share with us, in another layer is the ways and the tools we will choose having in mind the current circumstances, and in the final layer the understanding of the existing systemic inequalities."* [11].

Therefore, the aim is to inform creative sector professionals about access and inclusion topics based on current circumstances through relevant training. Additionally, there's a need to establish a framework that can help professionals incorporate tools for access and design for inclusion in collaboration with access and inclusion specialists from the project's inception. Moreover, securing funding for this purpose and maintaining flexibility in the project timeline are crucial in assisting the creative sector to take a significant step towards inclusion.

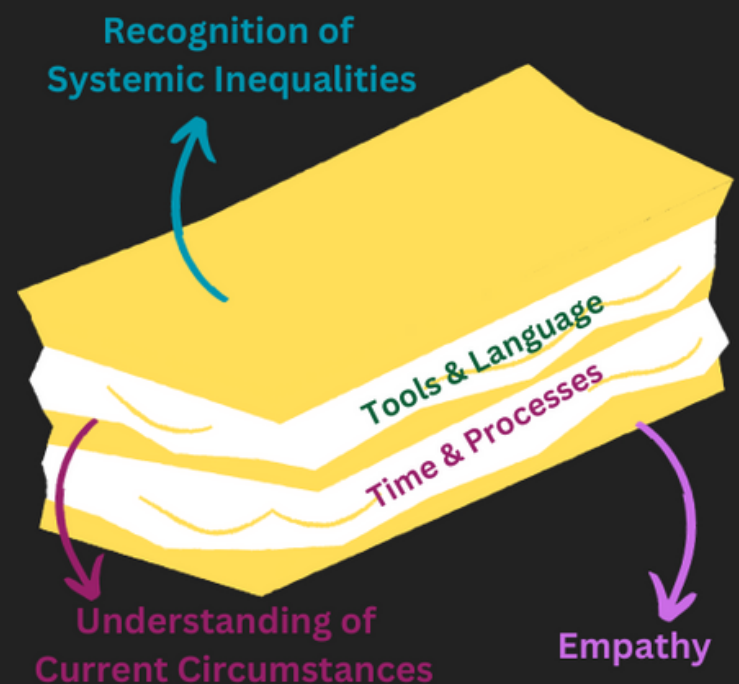
Recent research has shown that assigning responsibility for access to artists can significantly influence their artistic expression (Sullivan & Mauldin, 2020). Such findings make clear that although relevant training and policies are compulsory, they cannot replace the crucial role of access and inclusion experts in the creative sector.

Our interviewees' opinions also underscore the importance of access services providers bearing the responsibility for access, which is closely connected to tools and equality. Still, they also emphasise that inclusion is a vital aspect of artistic creation since, for I1 to I4, inclusion is mainly described as a state of mind connected with equity. Inclusion should be interwoven into the creative process, considering it as a multifaceted factor, as illustrated by the participants in this research, referred to as the '*Inclusion Mille-feuille*' [I1], the constant try to open up narratives and confront their ignorance [I2], or '*the active, conscious exercise or decision, to be aware of certain elements that can create barriers or distances or difficulties for people, regarding, [...] all elements of intersectionality. It's an active trying or a conscious effort of bridging those gaps together*' [I3]. Finally, I4 critiques the term 'inclusion' and its current use, which tends to mean providing extra effort for people being included, while the actual meaning for them would be reconfiguring the existing systems, using inclusion as a framework.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving education and training within the creative sector, advocating for more robust policies promoting accessibility, and launching initiatives to secure funding and resources for making artistic expression inclusive and accessible to all.

While traditional creative venues may struggle to provide simultaneous accommodations for various needs, modern technologies can assist and mediate artistic creations. They can adapt to the unique preferences of visitors, allowing them to experience art collectively, bridging societal gaps, and fostering a broad paradigm of inclusion.

## The Basis of Inclusion mille-feuille



## D.3. Cultural Background & Expandable or Fluid Identities:

The initiation of the 'Inclusive Glossary Project' idea during the cooperative production of ideas led us to construct a new theory about experiences, which was about the experiences that different people experience the same thing. This project's vision is about acknowledging how much more information could bring on how we perceive an experience, the opportunity to experience culture through other people's cultural backgrounds. The immersive nature of virtual reality (VR) provides a unique opportunity to redefine how individuals perceive and present their identities and experiences. This analysis explores the concept of fluid avatars within immersive spaces, combining insights from the inclusive dictionary project and interviews with artists regarding the fluidity of identity.



## D.3.A. Embracing the Fluidity of Identity:

Avatars in virtual environments can represent the ever-changing and multifaceted nature of one's identity. As our identities constantly evolve based on experiences and interactions, avatars can adapt and grow, allowing users to express their true selves within the virtual realm. The inclusive dictionary project, focused on understanding diverse perspectives and expressions, aligns seamlessly with the concept of fluid avatars. The dictionary, providing a plethora of backgrounds and ideas, can inform the creation of avatars that authentically represent various aspects of an individual's identity. Connecting the inclusive dictionary project, our artists' views about identity, and the project for moving into the virtual space brings us close to the work of NFTY collective that we found during our desk research. Usually, when referring to disability representation in the metaverse, we focus on visible impairments and imagine avatars on wheelchairs or avatars with white canes. The NFTY Collective aims to create experiences and pathways for people with disabilities to see and represent themselves in Web3 and the virtual space. Through their NFT project Unhidden Collection, they offer the opportunity to people with visible or invisible disabilities to create their avatars. As the creator of the collective support in an interview in Vogue magazine, when it comes to accessibility and inclusion in virtual worlds, we have a lot to consider, and this requires a shift in mindset, as this time, we might have the opportunity to create a new world in which people experiencing disability feel included (Lye, 2023).

Fluid avatars can bridge gaps in understanding by visually and interactively showcasing users' diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and identities of users. Thus fostering empathy and deeper connections within the virtual community, 'promoting inclusion and appreciation for embracing the uniqueness of human nature' as the director of THEAMA group prefers to refer to diversity. Avatars can convey valuable information about users, acting as educational tools within the immersive space. Users can select avatars representing their identities and beliefs, enabling informative exchanges that contribute to an enlightened and empowered community. Another strong theme that came out of the interviews with the artists was that they all mentioned the topic of invisible disabilities, the ways that systems are not developed to accommodate them, and the ways that physical space does not provide us with the opportunity to be aware and educate ourselves on this topic. This matter could be curated more efficiently by letting people decide the characteristics of the Avatars they use their representation and their development in the digital and virtual space, even by letting people represent themselves in more abstract ways, such as elements of nature, as our participants propose. However, the option to disclose more details relevant to one's identity should still remain available during avatar development, as clearly communicated by our participants.





The integration of fluid avatars in immersive virtual spaces, informed by the inclusive dictionary's ethos and our partners' and interviewees' reflections on the uniqueness of our identities, holds promise for policy-makers aiming to promote inclusion and diversity. By fostering understanding and empowering users to express their identities authentically, policies can be shaped to encourage a virtual realm that mirrors the richness and fluidity of real-life identities. However, through this report, representation presents a complex dynamic in theatre and analogous creative domains. Historically, the norm predominantly involved casting abled-bodied actors to portray disabled characters. While recent times have witnessed a shift towards more authentic representation, wherein disabled actors may play characters without specified disabilities, the overarching theme remains unchanged: appearance and identity are often beyond the actor's authority. This lack of agency emphasises the critical necessity for pertinent policies and mechanisms. These policies will empower individuals to shape their virtual identities authentically and serve as safeguards, preventing the misrepresentation or misuse of an artist's identity when appearances are dictated beyond their consent. As we strive for inclusive virtual societies, policies that navigate these intricacies become foundational, contributing to virtual spaces and valuable insights for enhancing our physical reality.

Our Analysis has unearthed critical insights into interdisciplinary collaboration, accessibility, and immersive experiences. Fostering respect, understanding, and active knowledge sharing among diverse team members is pivotal for success in multidisciplinary projects. Addressing the stark lack of accessibility in the creative sector necessitates a comprehensive approach, including targeted training, informed policies, and secured funding. Finally, leveraging the potential of fluid avatars within immersive spaces, inspired by diverse perspectives from the Inclusive Glossary Project, has the potential to revolutionise representation and promote empathy, education, and understanding, both within the virtual realm and our broader society. Armed with these insights, we embark on a journey towards a more inclusive and diverse creative sector, seeking to influence policies that pave the way for a brighter, more accepting future.

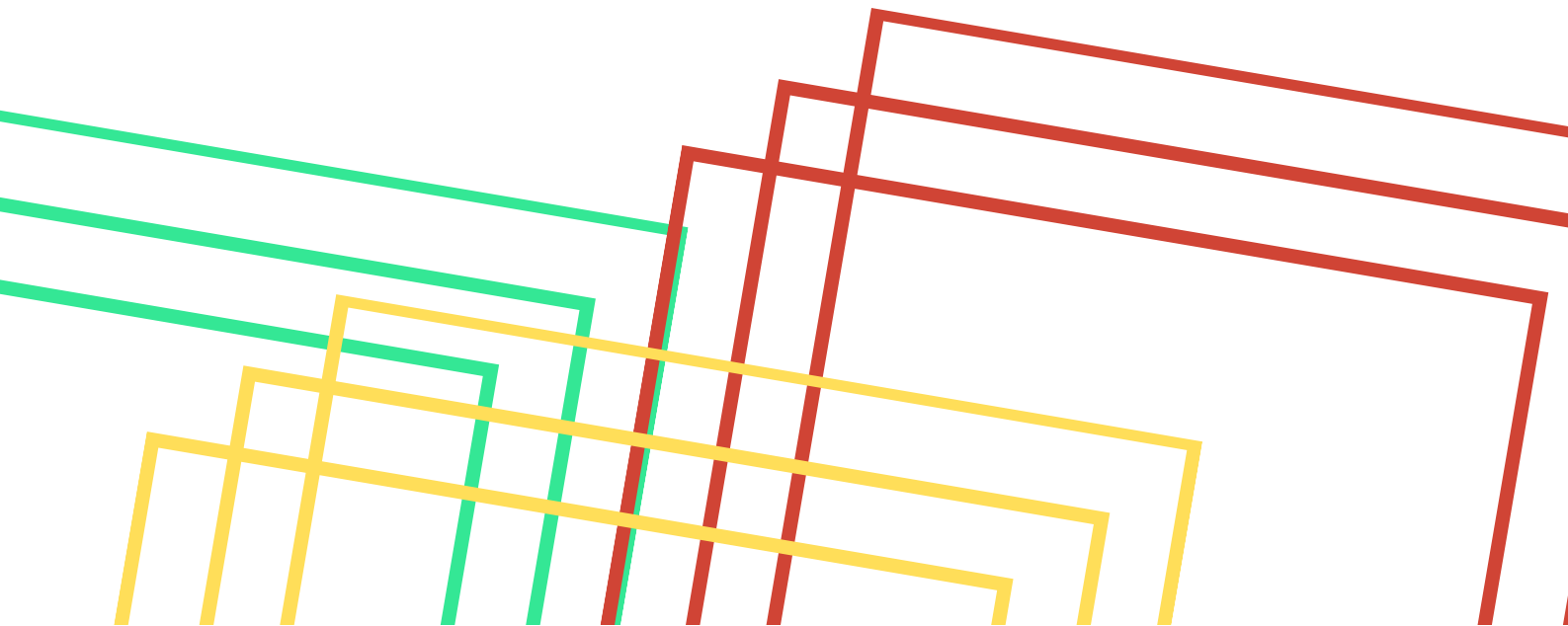


## E. Linking back to



Our research findings and recommendations align with the primary challenges CIRCE outlined. Our collaborative analysis of the subject, which focuses on the inclusion and representation of disability in immersive theatre and virtual reality, directly confronts how policy might assist creative economies. Our findings offer a path forward for more inclusive policies by highlighting the necessity of informed regulations, education, and financing to reduce accessibility disparities in the creative industry. Our emphasis on distinct roles and responsibilities within teams and our interdisciplinary collaboration aligns with practice-oriented science and networked collaboration. Investigating fluid avatars in immersive environments aligns with CIRCE's goal of examining tried-and-true tactics and innovative policy approaches.

The conclusions drawn from our study have encouraging implications for the creative economy of Europe. The cultural and creative industries are uniquely positioned to significantly influence the course of the future as we stand on the brink of profound changes in the social and economic spheres.



### ***E.1. Inclusion as a Pillar of Growth:***

Our research underscores that inclusion should be at the forefront of future strategies for cultural and creative economies. By actively involving individuals with disabilities and promoting representation that mirrors the richness of human experiences, these sectors can tap into a vast reservoir of talent and cater to a broader and more diverse audience. Inclusion fosters societal integration and fuels economic growth through enhanced participation. Policymakers should consider establishing regulations and incentives encouraging organisations to involve individuals experiencing disability in artistic endeavours actively by encompassing financial support, grants, and tax incentives for inclusive projects, fostering an environment where accessibility is not just a moral imperative but a regulated standard. Moreover, policies should encourage and fund training initiatives. Training programs targeted at artists, cultural organisations, and stakeholders can Equip them with the understanding and tools necessary to create truly inclusive and accessible art.

### **E.2. Interdisciplinary Collaboration as a Key Driver:**

In this project, we had to make several adaptations to address our co-designers' needs, as broadening the research spectrum from inclusive avatars' generation to investigation of inclusive productions, and the need for working remotely during summer time to adapt to the ensemble's performance schedule. Although, the success of our collaborative process, blending artistic and technical expertise, highlights the pivotal role of interdisciplinary collaboration in the future of cultural and creative economies. Breaking down silos and encouraging collaboration across diverse domains will be paramount in fostering innovation and tackling complex challenges. By merging creativity with technology and other disciplines, Europe's creative sectors can unlock new avenues for growth and adaptability. Policymakers can encourage and incentivise interdisciplinary partnerships. By offering grants or funding schemes that specifically support projects merging technology with the arts, for instance, governments can stimulate innovation and creative growth. Policy frameworks that facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration between artists, technologists, and researchers can also foster a culture of cross-disciplinary cooperation.

### **E.3. Technological Integration for Enhanced Accessibility:**

The concept of fluid avatars within immersive spaces showcases the potential of technology to enhance access and inclusion. Embracing and incorporating emerging technologies into creative expressions can revolutionise how individuals engage with art and culture. The cultural and creative economies must proactively adopt and adapt to technological advancements to ensure their offerings are accessible to audiences that cannot engage in creative spaces for diverse reasons (e.g. social anxiety, disability, geographical distance, health crisis, disability, parenthood, language, etc.).

### **E.4. Policy and Funding for Sustainable Growth:**

Government bodies and private institutions must collaborate to establish robust frameworks that incentivise and support the cultural and creative sectors. Adequate funding, informed by the findings of research and pilot projects, will be instrumental in realising the full potential of these sectors and mitigating the challenges posed by crises such as Brexit. Policymakers should consider the allocation of funds towards the integration of technology within the creative sectors. Investing in research and development for emerging technologies like virtual reality and fluid avatars can pave the way for a more accessible and engaging cultural experience. Providing subsidies or grants to cultural organisations to adopt and implement such technologies can bring the cultural sector to the forefront of socially responsible technological advancements.

### **E.5. Embracing Change and Adapting to Crises:**

The constantly shifting context requires a resilient and adaptable mindset. The creative and cultural industries need to adapt to the changing geopolitical and socioeconomic landscape by reorienting their strategy and embracing change. These industries will be stronger and able to flourish in the face of uncertainty if they are flexible and willing to rethink current assumptions. Advocates for policy should support studies that are well-informed and draw from the experiences of scholars and professionals. Collaboration between policymakers and research institutions is necessary to guarantee that guidelines are grounded in evidence, practice, and effectively tackle the possibilities and difficulties mentioned in this report.



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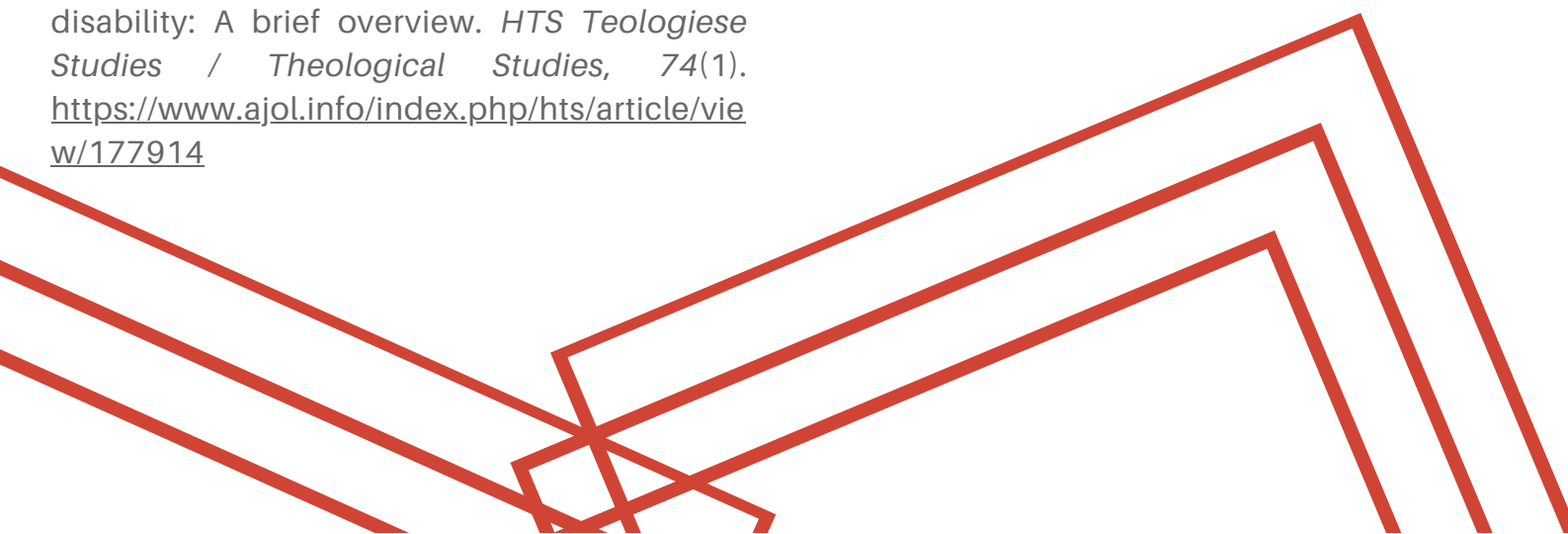
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